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a novel

Keigo
Higashino

translated by Kerim Yasar



N A O K O

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N A O K O

He didn't see it coming. At all.

Heisuke came home from his night shift at exactly 8 a.m., entered the small tatami room, and turned on the television. All he wanted was to hear the results from the big sumo tournament the day before. He would turn forty this year; he believed without doubt that today would be as ordinary, and as quiet, as the preceding thirty-nine-odd years had been. It was more than a belief: as far as he was concerned, it was an established fact. A reality more immobile, more immutable than the great pyramids themselves.

So he couldn't foresee, while he was changing the channel, that the news appearing on the screen would unnerve him in any way. And even if something were to happen that turned the world upside down, he was sure that it would have no direct effect on him.

He switched to the program that he always watched after a night shift, a variety show that covered show business scandals, sports news, and the events of the past day with both breadth and superficiality. The host was a freelance announcer popular with housewives. He had a kindly, avuncular face, and Heisuke didn't dislike him.

What appeared on the screen, however, was not the host's smiling face, but a snow-covered mountain somewhere. The scene was being shot from a helicopter, and the voice of the man giving the report was muffled by the sound of whirling rotors.

"Something must have happened," was all that he thought. Something must have happened, and he had no interest in knowing what. All Heisuke wanted to know at that moment was whether or not his favorite wrestler had won, because this tournament would decide whether he would be promoted *ozeki* or not.

Heisuke put his company jacket on a hanger and hung it on the wall-mounted coat rack. Rubbing his hands, he entered the adjoining kitchen. Since the heat hadn't been on all day the floorboards were freezing cold. He quickly shuffled into his tulip-patterned slippers.

First he opened the refrigerator, where there was a dish of *karaage* fried chicken nuggets and some potato salad on the middle shelf. He took them out, placed the chicken in the microwave oven, set the timer, and pressed the start button. Then he put some water in the kettle and

lit the stove. While he was waiting for the water to boil, he pulled a bowl out of the dish tray and took a packet of instant miso soup from the cabinet. He tore the packet open and poured the contents into the bowl. There was also some hamburger meat and beef stew in the refrigerator, and he decided that he would have the hamburger for breakfast the next day.

Heisuke worked at an automotive parts factory, where he had been promoted to unit leader the year before. Each work unit in his factory worked on revolving schedules of two weeks of day shifts, one week of night shifts. This week was their turn for the night shifts. Working the night shift threw his daily rhythms completely out of joint, which presented some physical difficulties for a man like him just short of forty—but it had its rewards. The first was extra pay; the second was being able to eat together with his family.

That year, 1985, was an extremely good one for his company, as it had been for the Japanese economy as a whole. Their production capacity was expanding smoothly and they were making new capital investments in the plant. Heisuke and his coworkers were getting busier and busier. As a rule work was supposed to end at 5:30, but an hour or two of overtime was considered normal, and even three hours of overtime was not uncommon. The overtime pay was more than just loose change, and sometimes it added up to more than his base salary itself.

Spending more time at work, though, meant spending less time at home. By coming home at 9:30 p.m. on weekdays he couldn't eat dinner with his wife Naoko and their daughter Monami.

With night shifts, however, he could return home at 8:00 in the morning. That was right around the time that Monami ate breakfast. She was his only child and about to enter the sixth grade when the new school year started in April. Sitting at the table with her, chatting and goofing around while eating his wife's home cooking, was one of life's great pleasures for Heisuke, one that he wouldn't have traded for anything. Looking at his daughter's smiling face made the fatigue from the previous night's work evaporate.

If only for that, eating breakfast alone after work was depressing. And the loneliness would continue for the next three days. Naoko had taken Monami back to her parent's house in Nagano. Naoko's cousin had just passed away and she was going to attend the funeral. It had been late-stage cancer and so she had known for some time that the end was near, so much so that she had had time to order a new set of mourning

clothes.

The original plan was for her to go alone, but at the last minute Monami said that she wanted to go too so she could go skiing. There was a ski resort near the family home, and ever since Monami got her first taste of the slopes there that past winter, skiing had become her obsession. Heisuke couldn't honestly say that he wasn't relieved at her decision. It was Monami's spring break. He was going to be very busy at work and so wouldn't have been in the mood to keep her entertained all that time. He had urged Monami to go along with her mother, even though it meant that he would have to endure some loneliness. Besides, if she hadn't gone she would have had to stay home alone while Heisuke worked the night shift.

The water came to a boil; he made his instant miso soup and took the warm chicken out of the microwave. He put everything onto a tray and then placed the tray on a low dining table in the tatami room. The chicken, the potato salad, tomorrow's hamburger breakfast, the beef stew for the day after tomorrow—all of it had been prepared by Naoko. Heisuke himself could hardly cook a thing. Even the rice had been cooked in advance by Naoko. Heisuke had placed it in a thermos and planned to eat a bit of it each day. By the third day the remaining rice would probably turn somewhat yellow, but of course he had no right to complain.

After arranging the food on the table, he sat down cross-legged on the floor and started to eat. He sipped a bit of soup and then, not sure what to eat next, reached out for the chicken. *Karaage* was Naoko's specialty and it happened to be Heisuke's favorite dish as well.

He turned up the volume on the television as he enjoyed the familiar flavor. As usual, the host was talking about something. Differently from usual, he wasn't smiling. His expression was somehow stiff, somehow tense. Even then, Heisuke didn't pay any particular attention. He idly wondered when the sports news would finally come on. Usually he would watch the sumo results during his breaks at work, but last night he hadn't had the chance.

"Let's return to the scene once again for any breaking developments. Mr. Yamamoto, can you hear me?"

The screen cut to the snowy mountain slope. A young male reporter was looking at the camera with a somewhat grim expression. Behind him, men wearing black parkas were running back and forth.

"Yes, yes I hear you. We're here at the accident scene. The search

for the passengers is still underway. So far, forty-seven passengers and two drivers have been found. According to the bus company, there were fifty-three passengers on board, which means that six people are still unaccounted for."

The word "bus" caught Heisuke's attention. Not enough to alarm him unduly, but enough to make him stop eating his potato salad.

"Mr. Yamamoto," the host continued, "any word on the condition of the passengers who have been found so far? Earlier you said it appeared that many of them had been killed."

"Yes, uhh," the reporter replied, looking at his notes, "at the present moment, we have a confirmed total of twenty-six fatalities. The remaining survivors have been taken to a local hospital. However, most of the survivors have sustained serious injuries and are in extremely critical condition. Doctors are currently working intensively to save the injured."

"Let's hope for the best," the host said, his voice full of concern.

In the lower right portion of the screen a caption appeared that read "Nagano Ski Bus Plunges Down Cliff."

Heisuke's hand stopped in mid-air. He grabbed the remote and changed the channel. Every station was broadcasting the same scene. He finally settled on NHK News. A female announcer was about to say something:

"We turn now to the bus accident in Nagano prefecture. This morning at approximately 6:00 a.m., a ski bus headed from Tokyo to the Shiga Highland plunged down a cliff from a national highway within Nagano City, Nagano Prefecture. The bus belonged to Tokyo-based Daikoku Transport..."

Heisuke's head began to spin. A number of significant words had hit him one after the other. Shiga Highland, ski bus, Daikoku Transport.

Naoko had been worried about how to travel home this time. The family house wasn't near any train stations. Whenever they had gone together, Heisuke usually drove them in their ten-year-old car. But Naoko couldn't drive.

They had decided that, inconvenient as it was, the train was the only option. Naoko, however, soon came up with a completely different solution: why not take one of the ski buses that students usually take? During the ski season, as many as two hundred of them left Tokyo Station every day to various ski resorts throughout the country.

As it happened, Naoko had a friend who worked at a travel agency.

Naoko asked her to make the arrangements. Her friend soon found a ski bus with place available: a tour group had just cancelled and the seats had opened up.

"Got 'em! Now I just need to tell my folks to pick us up at Shiga Highland. We won't have to lug around any heavy bags or anything." Naoko had clapped her hands with excitement.

The memory of that moment came back to him; it came back gingerly, as if it were groping its way down a flight of stairs in the dark. Didn't she say Daikoku Transport? Leaving Tokyo Station at 11 o'clock. A ski bus headed for Shiga Highland.

He suddenly grew flush and broke out in a sweat, his heart began to beat wildly, and he could hear the veins pounding behind his ears. It didn't occur to him that a single bus company might send more than one bus to a given destination in a given night. He slid up close to the television, trying to soak in every tiny bit of news he possibly could.

"The following is a list of deceased passengers who have been positively identified at the present time. This information is based on identifying documents the victims were carrying on them at the time of the accident." The names flashed up on the screen. The announcer slowly began reading them aloud. Heisuke wasn't familiar with any of them.

His appetite was completely gone and his mouth was parched. Somehow he couldn't completely shake the feeling that this tragedy had touched him in some way. He feared that the names Naoko Sugita or Monami Sugita would be read out. At the same time, a stronger voice within him told him that it just couldn't be possible. These kinds of things just didn't happen to them.

The announcer's voice stopped. She had finished reading the names of the identified fatalities. Naoko's name and Monami's name were not among them. Heisuke sighed with relief, but he soon realized he had no reason to be relieved. More than ten of the dead had yet to be identified. He wondered to himself whether his wife and daughter were carrying any identification. He didn't know for sure.

He reached for the phone, wanting to call Naoko's parents. Maybe Naoko and Monami had already arrived safely and he was getting himself worked up over nothing. He prayed that it was so.

He picked up the receiver and was about to dial, but the number just wouldn't come to him. This had never happened before. He had invented a code word, a very easy-to-remember mnemonic device for Naoko's parents' number, but he couldn't even remember the code

word. Having no other choice, he began looking for the address book in the magazine caddy next to him. He finally found it under a large, tightly-packed pile of magazines and quickly turned to the "K" page: Naoko's maiden name was Kasahara. At last he found the number he was looking for. The five digits after the local exchange number were 6-2656. Even with the number in front of him, he *still* couldn't remember the code word he had made up to bring that number to mind.

He picked up the receiver. He was about to dial when the woman on the television said:

"We have this just in on the Nagano bus accident. An adult female and one female child, believed to be mother and daughter, were just admitted to Nagano Central Hospital. The child was carrying a handkerchief with the name 'Sugita' embroidered on it. Again, Nagano Central Hospital reports that..."

Heisuke replaced the receiver. He kneeled down on the tatami.

He couldn't hear what the announcer said after that. His ears were ringing. He realized that it was his own voice, screaming.

Yes, that's it.

6-2656 stood for "N-a-o-k-o."

Two seconds later, he sprang to his feet.

Heisuke reached the hospital in Nagano City at a little past 6:00 p.m. His departure had been delayed by having to notify his company that he would be gone, finding the location of the hospital, and also by having to navigate the unfamiliar, snow-covered roads. Although it was already March, huge piles of snow filled the corners of the parking lot. He pulled into a spot and packed some of the snow in with his bumper.

"Heisuke!" somebody called out to him as he entered the hospital. He could see Naoko's older sister, Yoko, rushing towards him. She was wearing a sweater and jeans and hadn't bothered to put on any make-up. Yoko was married and, as the oldest child, had taken over the family business, a soba noodle restaurant.

"How are they?" Heisuke asked without saying hello. He had spoken with Yoko on the phone before leaving home. She had tried calling him at home numerous times after hearing about the accident, but hadn't been able to reach him because he was still at work.

"The doctor says they're still unconscious. They're doing everything they can." His sister-in-law's cheeks, which were normally as rosy as if she were fresh out of the bath, were now extremely pale. He had never seen such creases between her eyebrows before.

Heisuke's father-in-law Saburo stood up from one of the benches in the waiting area. Yoko's husband Tomio was next to him. Saburo approached him, face drawn with pain, and bowed from the waist many times as a gesture of apology. "Heisuke, I'm sorry, I'm so terribly sorry. If I hadn't told her to come to the funeral this never would have happened. It's my fault." Saburo's small, frail body seemed even smaller. He suddenly appeared much older. The beaming smile that usually graced his face when he was busily selling noodles was gone.

"Please don't say that," Heisuke replied. "It's just as much my fault for not driving them here myself. And besides, there's still hope isn't there?"

"That's right, dad," Yoko said. "We have to keep praying that they'll be saved."

Heisuke noticed a white figure in the periphery of his vision. A middle-aged man who appeared to be a doctor had just emerged from around a corner. Yoko recognized him and ran in his direction. "Is there

any word?" she asked. Apparently he was the doctor in charge.

"I'm afraid I can't..." he began to reply, and then cast a glance at Heisuke. "Are you the husband?"

Yes, Heisuke replied, voice cracking.

"May I speak to you in private?"

Heisuke's entire body stiffened. He followed the doctor, who he thought was taking him to see Naoko and Monami, but who led him instead to a small examining room. A number of x-rays, more than half of which were of somebody's skull, were pinned to a light board. Heisuke had no idea whether they belonged to Naoko, Monami, or to somebody else entirely.

The doctor, still standing, turned to face him. "I have to tell you quite honestly," he began in a pained voice, "the situation is dire."

Heisuke, also standing, asked, "Is it my wife? My daughter? Which?"

The doctor didn't answer. He looked away from Heisuke, his mouth slightly open, and remained silent, as if at a loss for what to say. Heisuke gleaned what this meant. "Both of them?" he asked.

The doctor nodded slightly.

"Your wife has terrible external injuries. A large number of glass shards cut through her back, and one of these actually punctured the heart. She suffered severe blood loss in the time that it took to extricate her from the scene. A normal person would have died from that much bleeding. Right now it's a question of how long her miraculous strength can hold out. All we can do is pray that she takes a turn for the better."

"And my daughter?"

The doctor pursed his lips. "Your daughter suffered no external injuries whatsoever. Unfortunately, however, she was pressed so tightly by the weight on top of her that she couldn't breathe at all, and the effect on her brain..."

"Her brain?" Heisuke looked at the x-rays lined up on the wall. "And so what does that mean?"

"Right now she is being kept alive on a respirator and other life support. The possibility that she will not regain consciousness is very high," the doctor answered in a hollow, lifeless voice.

"So you mean, she's in a coma?"

Yes, the doctor answered quietly.

Heisuke felt as if the flow of his blood suddenly reversed direction. When he tried to speak it was as if his face had been stiffened by dried

glue, and yet his lips were trembling. The next moment he collapsed to the floor, the energy draining out of him, his hands and feet as cold as ice. He was unable to stand at all.

"Mr. Sugita," the doctor said, reaching for his shoulder.

"Doctor," Heisuke said, on his hands and knees. "Please, please, save them. I'll do anything if you can save them, anything at all! No matter how much money it costs, whatever it takes to save their lives...I'm begging you, please," he cried, bowing deeply and pressing his forehead against the linoleum floor.

"Mr. Sugita, please look at me."

At that moment a woman opened the door. "Doctor Anzai..."

"What is it?" he answered, going to the door.

"The woman's pulse has suddenly weakened." Heisuke looked up. "The woman" must have meant Naoko.

"I'm on my way," the doctor replied. He then turned to Heisuke and said, "Please, go back and wait with the others." Heisuke bowed once again at the doctor's departing back.

"What did the doctor say?" Yoko asked him when he returned to the waiting room. He tried to appear stoic, but he couldn't hide the pain shrouding his face.

"It, it doesn't look too good..." he said. Yoko covered her face with her hands and murmured, "Oh, no." Saburo and Tomio looked down at the ground.

A nurse emerged from the corridor. "Mr. Sugita! Mr. Sugita! Your wife is calling for you. Please come quickly!"

"Naoko?"

"This way, please." The nurse turned around and began running back the way she came from. Heisuke ran after her. She stopped in front of a room with a sign reading "Intensive Care Unit" and opened the door. "It's the husband," she said to the people inside. "Please come in," she said quietly to Heisuke. He did as he was told.

There were two beds. The person in the right-hand bed was Monami, unmistakably. Her sleeping face looked no different than it had when he had seen it a short while earlier at home. Even now he couldn't help but feel that she would open her eyes at any moment; only the sight of the elaborate machinery that she was hooked up to brought him back to reality.

Naoko lay in the left-hand bed. The bandages wrapped around her

head and torso made it clear just how seriously injured she was. There were three doctors surrounding the bed, who quietly stepped away to clear a path for Heisuke.

He slowly drew closer. Naoko's eyes were closed. Her face was surprisingly undamaged. That's the only thing that was spared, he thought.

Naoko, he said. Her eyes weakly began to open.

Her lips moved faintly, but nobody could hear what she had said. Heisuke didn't need to hear his wife's words: he knew that she was asking about Monami.

"She's fine. Monami's just fine," he whispered in Naoko's ear. He could see relief spread across her face. Her lips began to move again. She seemed to be saying, "I want to see her."

"You can see her right now," Heisuke said. He had been leaning down next to her and noticed that the legs of the bed had casters. He unlocked them and began moving the beds closer together.

"Mr. Sugita," the nurse began, but was cut off by one of the doctors, who told her it was okay. Once he had put the two beds side by side, he took Naoko's hand and wrapped it around Monami's.

"This is Monami's hand," he told his wife, and then took both of their hands in his own.

Naoko's lips suddenly loosened into a beatific smile that reminded Heisuke of paintings of the Virgin Mary. In the next instant her hand grew vaguely warm, and then it suddenly lost its grip. Heisuke was startled and looked at her face. A tear was streaming down her cheek. And then, as if her work had come to an end, she slowly closed her eyes.

"No, Naoko...Naoko!" Heisuke cried.

The doctor checked her pulse and her pupils. Looking at his watch he announced, "Time of death, 6:45 p.m."

"Ah, ah, ah, ah," Heisuke gasped, again and again. He felt faint, and couldn't even manage to cry out. The air seemed to turn terribly heavy; his knees buckled. Still clasping his wife's hand, already grown cold, Heisuke crouched down to the floor. He felt as if he were at the bottom of a deep, deep well.

He had no idea how long he had remained in that state. When he looked around, the doctors and nurses were all gone. Although he still felt as if he had lead in his stomach, he stood up and gazed at Naoko, whose eyes were now peacefully closed.

I can't let myself fall apart with grief like this, he told himself. The

dead won't come back; right now I have to worry about the living.

He turned his attention to Monami, and gently held the hand that had been linked with Naoko's. Even if it means giving my life for her, he thought, I have to protect her, save her, my angel. Even if she doesn't regain consciousness, at least she will be alive.

I'll protect her, Naoko. Don't you worry, I'll protect Monami, I will. He repeated these words to himself as if they were some kind of incantation, and this helped him bear the pain of everything he had lost.

He squeezed Monami's hand with both of his own. He wanted to squeeze tightly, but her eleven-year-old hand was so slender that he was afraid he might break it.

He closed his eyes and countless images flooded his mind. Only happy memories came back to him at that moment, vivid images of Naoko and Monami, all smiles. At some point he began crying, and the heavy tears fell to the ground. A few of them landed on his and Monami's hands.

It happened then.

Heisuke felt something. It wasn't the tears: he felt that something was definitely moving within his grip. He looked at Monami. His daughter, who had been sleeping as lifelessly as a doll, began to open her eyes.

Heisuke Sugita's house was a few minutes by bus from Mitaka Station in western Tokyo. It stood on the northeast corner of a residential block interlaced with numerous narrow streets, and had a plot of land attached of a little less than a hundred square yards. He had bought this small, fairly new home six years earlier. Buying a house, much less a stand-alone house like this one, had been the furthest thing from his mind at the time, but Naoko had insisted. She felt that if they were going to be paying rent anyway, they might as well pay the same amount on a mortgage and get something for their money. "There's nothing wrong with taking out a thirty-year mortgage now, is there? I mean, you'll still be working thirty years from now, right?" she said to Heisuke, who had been unwilling to borrow such a large sum of money.

"Retirement age at the firm is sixty," he shot back.

"Don't worry. The average age in Japan is getting higher all the time. By the time sixty rolls around, the retirement age will probably be sixty-five or even seventy."

"I don't know about that."

"It's the truth! What's the matter, honey, are you not going to feel like working anymore once you hit sixty? You're not going to be such a baby about it, are you?"

Heisuke was cowed into silence.

"Anyway, we *have* to buy now. I think if we don't buy now, we'll *never* be able to buy a house. Do you really want to be a renter forever? Wouldn't that be awful? And you want your own house, don't you? If you do, let's just buy it, and soon."

He found himself nodding his head involuntarily at her relentless prodding. Once the decision was made, Naoko acted with amazing speed. That Saturday the realtor took them around to see a few places, and the next week they put down a deposit. Since Naoko did everything from negotiating the terms of the mortgage to organizing the move, Heisuke felt as if no time at all had passed from the moment when he nodded his head to the moment they were living in their new house. All he did was sign a few forms that Naoko put in front of him.

Yet looking back at it now he was deeply happy that he had given in and bought the house then. He couldn't imagine that their savings

would be any greater today if they had decided not to buy when they did. Most importantly, real estate prices had recently skyrocketed and experts predicted that they would climb even higher. A house similar to theirs just seven hundred feet away had recently gone on the market with an asking price that would have been completely out of range, even at his current salary. "See, didn't I tell you honey?" Naoko always said after that, with a hint of self-satisfaction.

She loved the house. This wasn't surprising since she was the one who had chosen it out. She especially liked the garden, a small plot where she grew potted flowers. While tending the flowers she hummed songs like "The Doggy Cop" and "Badger of Fist Mountain," probably because she had watched a lot of children's programs with Monami. When she picked up the mail from the postbox on the way in from the garden, she liked to hum the tune to "Mountain Goat Mail."

Four days had passed since the accident. Heisuke could see out into that garden as he was placing Naoko's ashes on the funeral altar. A provisional wake had been held in Nagano the day after the accident, with another wake two days after that. The funeral had taken place that morning at a nearby funeral hall. He had really wanted to hold it here, in this house that Naoko had loved so much, but the road in front of their house was too narrow and the number of mourners was expected to be quite large, so he decided against it. It was the right decision. Not only were there many visitors, but the television crews had somehow found out the time and location of the funeral and come in droves. For a while the funeral hall was in a complete state of chaos, and Heisuke later had to go around to the other houses in this usually quiet neighborhood to apologize for all the commotion.

Even after the funeral had ended, the media people wouldn't leave Heisuke alone. No matter where he went or what he did, he was constantly in the glare of camera flashbulbs. He found it all extremely wearying, and in those two days his energy nearly dwindled to zero.

Of the many bereaved that Naoko had left behind, there was a reason why the media hounded Heisuke in particular. He had experienced great misfortune and great good fortune in one fell swoop, and this made good copy. His misfortune, needless to say, was the death of his wife, and his good fortune was the miraculous recovery of his daughter.

"How do you feel now that your wife's funeral is over?"

"How do you feel about the recent comments made by Daikoku

Transport's president?"

"Could you tell us a bit about the many messages of condolence you've received from all over the country?"

There actually wasn't a great deal of variety to their questions, so it sufficed for Heisuke to repeat similar answers over and over again without really thinking about it. He wondered whether the reporters were simply incompetent or if there weren't some kind of cleverness behind their seeming lack of imagination. There was one question, however, that always tripped Heisuke up:

"How do you intend to explain to your daughter what has happened?"

Why don't you tell me? he always felt like saying. Unable to think of anything appropriate to say, he could only reply, "I need to think about that."

It worried him. "What on earth should I say to her?" he murmured to the Buddhist memorial tablet inscribed with his wife's name that sat on the altar. He couldn't remember a time when he had spoken seriously to Monami, father to daughter, and he was completely befuddled about how to tell such a thing to a sensitive, vulnerable young girl. This sensitivity and vulnerability was not something that he had personally witnessed—it was just generally accepted that young girls were that way, and so he took it as a given. But until now he had never even stopped to imagine just how sensitive and how vulnerable Monami might actually be. If *I* had been the one to die, Naoko would surely have known how to talk with Monami about it, he thought. Yet in the end this was pointless speculation: he was not the one who had died, after all.

When he had finished arranging the altar, he changed from his mourning clothes into something more comfortable. The clock on the wall read 5:35 p.m., and he remembered that they would be serving dinner at the hospital soon. Putting his wallet and car keys into his pocket, he prayed that today she would start eating properly.

Even though Monami had miraculously regained consciousness, she was by no means her old self. She had left some things behind in that abyss of death from which she barely escaped. Her expressiveness was one of them, and words were another. She had also lost her girlish reactions to things. She would nod or shake her head to make her feelings known, but she had yet to allow Heisuke to hear her once cheerful, energetic voice. Even when he tried to encourage her to talk, she would just stare blankly into space. The doctor's conclusion was that there was

nothing organically wrong with her; even though they had previously feared the possibility of permanent brain damage, Monami's brain functions were apparently all normal. The doctor felt that the cause must be psychological trauma. The best and only treatment at this point, he added, was a lot of patience and love.

The previous afternoon she had been transferred to the brain surgery clinic in Koganei, and the results of the diagnostic tests there were the same. In fact, the attending physician was astonished that she had escaped such a catastrophic accident virtually unscathed.

Heisuke arrived at the hospital at a little past 6:00. After parking his car he looked around to make sure that there were no media crews around. They had been falling all over themselves trying to get the near-death survivor Monami on tape, but Heisuke had made clear that now was not the appropriate time for such intensive coverage. He asked them repeatedly to leave them in peace. So far, at least, the media had been cooperative.

Heisuke went to Monami's room and was told by the nurse in charge that dinner was just about to be brought in. The menu tonight was fried fish, boiled vegetables, and miso soup. Heisuke took the tray of food and placed it on the table next to the bed. He looked at his daughter. She was asleep. He pulled up a chair and sat down. Over the last few days the fatigue in his muscles had built up like a thick layer of mud.

Monami breathed very lightly as she slept. Her chest and stomach didn't seem to move at all, and from time to time Heisuke worried that she had stopped breathing altogether. The pinkness of her cheeks put him at ease, however, and in fact there had been a marked improvement in her complexion since the day before.

Needless to say, the fact that Monami had been saved was for Heisuke the greatest possible blessing. If he had lost his daughter as well, he had no doubt that he would have gone insane. Yet, sitting here next to this daughter who had miraculously survived, what he felt most sharply was not a sense of good fortune but rather a profound sadness at having lost Naoko. This then turned into an overflowing rage. Why did something like this have to happen to them? No, they were not lucky at all—they were unlucky, colossally unlucky.

Heisuke had loved his wife. She had put on a little weight recently, and some tiny wrinkles were becoming noticeable, but he had loved her round, graceful face. She was a chatterbox, and assertive, and she never let him get away with much male chauvinist stuff, but she didn't make an

issue out of small things and she had an honest, open nature. It was comfortable being with her, it was fun. She was an intelligent woman, he felt, and a good mother to Monami.

Looking at Monami's sleeping face, Heisuke couldn't help thinking of Naoko: the first time they met, the first time he asked her out on a date, the first time he went to her apartment.

Naoko had entered the company three years after Heisuke. After they had been seeing each other for two years, he proposed to her by simply blurting out the words, "Marry me." She fell out of her chair laughing. Once she had gotten a hold of herself, she answered, "Okay." And then there was their life together as newlyweds, Monami's birth, and so much else...

The memories had started flooding back a few days earlier, at the wake in Nagano. Heisuke had been sitting alone when an unknown man approached him. He was well-built, about thirty years old. He had been part of the rescue team that pulled Naoko and Monami from the wreckage at the bottom of the ravine.

Heisuke bowed deeply several times. "If it hadn't been for you and your colleagues, Monami would surely have been lost," Heisuke said.

But the man shook his head.

"No, we're not the ones who saved your daughter."

Heisuke looked puzzled. The man continued.

"When we got there, we found a grown woman sprawled out underneath the wreckage. It seemed that she was the only one there. But when we got a better look, we realized that there was a girl hidden beneath her. She had thrown herself on top of the girl to protect her. She had been cut all over by the glass and metal and was covered in blood, but the girl was practically untouched."

He paused, and continued: "Those two were your wife and daughter. I just felt that I had to tell you this."

Something inside of Heisuke snapped. He began to sob uncontrollably. Remembering that conversation with the rescue worker now, he wept again. These days, in fact, he wept every single night; the only difference today was that he was crying a little earlier than usual. Usually he waited until he was back home, alone. He pulled a crumpled handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes and his nose, which was running profusely. The handkerchief was soon sodden with his tears and mucus.

"Naoko, Naoko, Naoko..." he wailed, doubling over in his seat and

holding his head in his hands.

That's when she spoke.

"...ling."

Startled, he looked at the door. He thought somebody had come in. Yet the door was firmly shut and it didn't seem there was anybody outside in the hallway. Just when he thought he must have been hearing things, she spoke again:

"Darling, here. I'm here."

Heisuke sprang from his seat in shock. Monami was talking. His daughter, who had been sleeping motionlessly until just a moment earlier, was now looking up at him. She no longer had the blank expression she had had until the day before. A powerful, penetrating gleam shone in her black pupils.

"Monami, ah, Monami. You're speaking. Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness." Still standing, he peered into his daughter's eyes, and his already tear-stained face was overwhelmed with emotion yet again. Thinking that he had to inform the doctor of what had happened as quickly as possible, he rushed to the door.

"Wait," Monami said weakly.

Hand on the doorknob, Heisuke looked back at her. "Wh...why? Are you in pain?"

She lightly shook her head. "Come here...listen...to me." Her words were broken despite the fact that she seemed to be saying them with all her might.

"Sure, sure, I'll listen, but just let me get the doctor first."

She shook her head again. "Don't get anyone. Please just...come here."

Heisuke was puzzled, but he did as she asked. He assumed that she just needed some attention, and so he pulled his chair up to the bed again. "Okay, I'm right here next to you. What is it, sweetie? Just tell me whatever you want."

Monami didn't answer right away. She simply stared intently at his face. Looking into her eyes, Heisuke was suddenly overcome by a very peculiar sensation. There was something very odd about the way she was looking at him. It wasn't the look that Monami usually had—in fact, it wasn't a childlike look at all. And what's more, there was something hauntingly familiar about it, yet he couldn't quite place what it was.

"Darling, will you believe what I tell you?" Monami asked.

"Uh, yes...yes I will. I will believe you, no matter what you say," he replied, breaking into a smile. He felt a sliver of doubt, though: "darling"? What was that all about?

Monami continued staring intently into his face. "I'm not Monami."

"What?" he asked, his face frozen into a half-smile.

"Don't you understand? I'm not Monami."

The muscles in Heisuke's face began to cramp, but he tried to maintain the smile. "Quit fooling around, Monami. Hahaha. No sooner do you wake up than you start pulling the old man's leg." He forced out some more strained laughter.

"This is not a joke. I really am not Monami. Surely you see it, don't you? It's me. Me. It's Naoko."

"Naoko?"

"Yes, it's me," Monami said, halfway between laughter and tears.

Heisuke looked at his daughter's face, and turned her words over in his mind. He understood their literal meaning, but when he tried to puzzle out what they actually *meant* he was lost. His first instinct was outright denial. He forced another smile. "Still at it, are we? Come on, I'm not going to be fooled that easily." A few seconds later, however, his smile faded at the sight of the earnest sadness in her face.

He stood up again and stumbled towards the door in a daze. He began to feel that his daughter was coming unhinged and wanted to call the doctor, because if *she* wasn't losing her mind, then he certainly was.

"It's really me, I'm really Naoko. I can understand why you would find it hard to believe, but whether you believe me or not, it's a fact." Monami was crying. Or rather, this girl who looked like Monami was crying.

What is this nonsense? Heisuke thought. It's completely absurd! He was shaking violently now, but not because he didn't believe what he was hearing—rather the opposite: her tone of voice was definitely the same as Naoko's. He looked at her again. Her manner and aura were not those of an elementary school student, they were those of a mature and confident woman. What's more, that manner was one with which Heisuke was deeply intimate.

"No, but...I mean, come on...no..." he said, scratching his head. Looking at her, he began to feel afraid. She was still crying. Hearing the way she sobbed, he looked at her more closely.

She was crying with her left hand over her eyes. Her right hand was lightly covering the left, and she was rubbing the base of her left ring finger with the middle finger of her right hand.

Heisuke gasped. It was uncanny: that was exactly what Naoko did when she cried. Whenever they had a quarrel that left her in tears, that was what she did: she rubbed the wedding ring on her left hand with the

fingers of her right hand.

"Do you remember when I first invited you out on a date?" Heisuke asked.

"How could I forget?" she said, still sobbing. "We saw that movie about the submarine that sank."

"It wasn't a submarine. It was a luxury cruise ship," he said. Even though she had seen that film, *The Poseidon Adventure*, many times after that first date, she always confused the *Poseidon* for a submarine.

"And then we went to Yamashita Park," she added. That was right, he thought. They had sat together on a bench and watched the ships sailing past.

"When did I first go to your apartment?"

"I remember. It was a very cold day."

"Yeah, it was."

"You took your pants off and you were wearing pajamas underneath."

"That's because I was in a hurry to get dressed that morning," he said.

"Liar," she shot back, giggling. "You wore them because you didn't have any thermal underwear."

"No, it's the truth. I don't need thermal underwear now, do I?"

"And you denied it then, just like you're denying it now."

"Of all the things to remember..."

He approached the bed and got on his knees. This girl who looked like Monami was staring back at him. He softly cupped her cheeks in his hands.

"And you held my face that night, just as you're holding it now," she said.

"Yes, I did."

He had kissed her that night long ago, holding her face in just that way. But he did not kiss her now: the face in front of his was not Naoko's.

Instead, he asked: "You really are Naoko?" His voice was trembling.

She nodded, yes.

Naoko didn't realize what had happened to her until some time after being taken to the intensive care unit. Until then her mind had been too disoriented even to comprehend that she had been in an accident or that she had almost died. When she did finally recover full consciousness, she was puzzled by the fact that everybody was calling her Monami.

"No, I'm not Monami, I'm Naoko," she wanted to say, but something held her back. She intuitively felt that she would never be able to take it back if she said it, so she remained completely silent. When she discovered soon thereafter that her own body had turned into that of her daughter, she felt as if it were some kind of bad dream or perhaps that she was losing her mind, and just hoped that things would quickly return to the way they were before. Yet, she told Heisuke, when she saw him crying next to her that day; she had to accept that this was not a bad dream but was, in fact, the reality.

"So that means," Heisuke said when she had finished telling him her story, "that Monami is actually the one who died."

She looked down, saying nothing. The whites of her eyes began to turn red.

Heisuke's head slumped down. "So that's how it is, I guess. Monami's dead."

She—that is to say, Naoko, who now inhabited Monami's body—pulled her blanket over her face and began to cry.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry. It should have been Monami who was saved, not me. I'm not the one who should have survived..."

"What are you saying? Stop talking like that. Many people died, Naoko. Even if you had been the *only* person to be saved, that's better than nothing isn't it?" Heisuke choked on his tears. He was looking at Monami's living body, but in fact his child was dead. The sadness he felt was somehow different from what he would have felt if he had actually seen his daughter die.

The two of them wept quietly for a long time. After their tears had dried, Heisuke kept looking at his daughter's face, or rather, his wife's face, saying, "It's just unbelievable that something like this could happen."

"I can't believe it either," she replied, wiping her tear-soaked face with the back of her hand.

"And it seems that there's no hope."

"No hope?"

"Well, I mean, it doesn't seem to be something that can be recovered from."

"Recovered from? Is this an illness?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"If this were some kind of bizarre illness, if by taking some medication or having surgery I could bring Monami back, I would do it in a second," she said decisively.

"But if you did that," Heisuke asked, "what would happen to *you*? Wouldn't your psyche disappear just like hers did?"

"I wouldn't care if it did. If I could bring Monami back, I would happily do whatever was necessary," she said, fierce determination hardening her face. It reminded him of how Monami looked when she vowed to improve her grades so she wouldn't have to go to cram school.

"Naoko," he said, "don't say that."

"But it's the only thing to be done. *I* was the one who was supposed to die in that accident."

"And what does it mean to say that now? Nothing. Nothing is going to bring Monami back." He looked down at the ground.

They fell into an uncomfortable silence. "So what should we do?" Naoko finally asked.

"That's a good question. Who would believe us if we told them? Maybe if we explained to the doctors they could do something?"

"We'd wind up being committed to an institution."

Heisuke crossed his arms and groaned. "Yeah, you're right."

Naoko seemed suddenly to have noticed something. "Was there a funeral today?" she asked.

"What? Oh, yeah, the funeral. How did you know?"

"You wouldn't be wearing a dress shirt otherwise."

"Oh, yeah," Heisuke replied, fingering the shirt's collar. Although he had taken off his black jacket and trousers, he had left the shirt as it was and just put on a cardigan over it.

"Mine?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Was it my funeral?"

"Ye...yes. It was yours," he said and nodded. "But you're alive."

You're alive."

"So actually it was Monami's funeral," she said, tears streaming again from her eyes. "I stole our child's body. I drove her soul out of her body."

Heisuke grasped her hand. "No, you *saved* her body."

The building was more grandiose than he had imagined it would be. This, indeed, was the kind of thing his tax money was paying for, he reminded himself, but he also felt that a building this extravagant was kind of a waste. At the very least, was it really necessary to have an elaborate courtyard that nobody was paying attention to, or earthenware ornaments and other ostentatious artwork that were probably exorbitantly expensive?

This was the first time Heisuke had entered a library since high school. Even then, he never went to search for books, but rather to study for tests with his friends in the private, air-conditioned study rooms. In other words, this was the first time in his life that Heisuke was using a library for its intended purpose.

He went directly to an information counter where two librarians were working, one a middle-aged man and the other a young woman. The man was busy speaking on the phone, so Heisuke addressed the woman.

"Uhh, where are your brain books?"

"Brain books?"

"You know. The organ. In the head." He pointed at his skull.

"Ah, I see," she replied and told him to follow her.

Well, he thought, they actually take you to the books. Nicer than I thought.

The wing to which she took him was vast, with countless shelves densely packed with thick books, yet with very few people around. This must be some kind of annex, Heisuke thought. The librarian stopped in front of a shelf and said, "They should be in this general area."

"Oh," he replied, looking up at the books. It seemed to be the medical science shelf. The books were divided into specific categories devoted to the digestive system, the skin, the urinary tract, and so on.

"You should be able to find what you're looking for on this shelf," she added, pointing to a row of neuroscience books. Although there were very few people browsing in the other stacks, for some reason there were many in this section. They were all male and, despite outward differences in appearance, they all looked terribly intelligent.

Heisuke scanned the books' spines: *The Limbic System and*

Learning, Brain Hormones, The Brain and Behavioral Science—but none of them gave him any sense of the contents. He pulled down a book that looked promising: *The Brain's Role in Personality and Behavior*:

"The extensive cortical area that is not assigned a specific function has come to be called the association cortex. Classical brain science has deduced that the associative connections among the specialized areas of the cortex take shape and are synthesized here. It is thought that the association cortex is where real-time information is synthesized with emotion and memory, and it is through this process that human beings are able to think, make decisions, and plan. So, for example, information from the somatosensory cortex—in other words, information on the body's position and movement as well as sensory input from the skin, muscles, knees, joints, etc.—will be assembled in the association area of the parietal lobe..."

Heisuke closed the book. Reading even that much was enough to make his head hurt. He returned to the counter, where the young female librarian was perplexed to see him again so soon.

Scratching his head, he asked, "Um, do you have a section devoted to strange stuff?"

"Huh?"

"You know, weird stuff going on in the world."

"Didn't you want to see books on brain science?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm finished with those already. Now I'd like to see books about weird, mysterious events."

"Oh, I see," she said, looking at him now as if he had some contagious disease. "Well, in that case, you may want to look in the 'Light Reading Corner.'"

"'Light Reading Corner'?"

"Over there," she said, pointing somewhere in the distance. "All the way in the back, there's a section devoted to supernatural phenomena, where there should be books on UFOs and the like." For some reason she didn't appear to be willing to guide him there herself this time.

"Okay, thanks," Heisuke said and turned around. He found the area she was referring to, and indeed, there were many books about the supernatural and uncanny: books on crop circles, lost continents, and other things you hear about on late-night television programs. He picked out a book called *The Encyclopaedia of the Paranormal* by somebody he had never heard of named Lynn Picknett. He first looked through the index. He was looking for something along the lines of

“transference of personality” or “exchange of souls” but didn’t find those exact wordings. Instead, there was an entry on “Possession.” He opened to the page and read:

“At some early stage in the development of man, when tribal communities were forming, they found that a few individuals appeared to be able to obtain information of value by entering a trance. In that condition they often spoke in a different voice, as if they had been temporarily taken over by—or so it was assumed—a spirit. They were possessed.”

This is some pretty heavy stuff, Heisuke thought. Yet he couldn’t deny that what was being described in those pages was remarkably similar to what had occurred with Monami. He felt that her body had actually been taken over by Naoko’s spirit. Nonetheless, there was a significant difference: the word “temporarily” didn’t apply in this case. Two days had passed since Monami’s, or rather, Naoko’s astounding confession, and there had been no change in her mysterious condition. She still thought of herself as Naoko.

Heisuke continued reading. The circumstances and significance of possession varied from region to region and culture to culture. Early civilizations attributed possession to divine intervention, but by the fifth century B.C. Hippocrates objected to this view, claiming that “possession was no more divine than any other disorder.” In ancient Israel, however, the belief that “the possessed really were taken over by spirits; and the spirits could be diabolic” had taken hold. Early Christians seemed to share that view. Although “possession by the Holy Spirit...was eminently desirable,” possession in general came to be seen as the work of the Devil and was dealt with through exorcism.

Heisuke recalled the movie *The Exorcist*, which he had seen long ago, and laughed at the implications. He felt no doubt at all that the spirit occupying Monami’s body was not the Devil but rather his own wife, whom he knew so well.

The most famous historical example of possession occurred in the 1630s in Loudun, France, where an entire convent of nuns came to be possessed. The victims “described how they had had the curious experience of watching and listening to themselves, as they mouthed obscenities and blasphemies, unable to stop.”

Heisuke continued reading: “Possession has since come to be commonly regarded as a symptom of dual or multiple personality.” He looked up and cocked his head to the side. Dual personality. Could it be?

That would be the only scientifically acceptable explanation. He considered the possibility that Naoko wasn't actually speaking to him, but rather that Monami was suffering from some personality disorder. There was one problem with that explanation, though, and as soon as that problem occurred to him, the book confirmed his doubts. The multiple personality theory "does not adequately account for what has become the most familiar form of possession, mediumship, in which the 'control' often seems to be a distinct entity, capable of providing information not available to the mediums when they are not in their trances."

Many things that had come out of Monami's mouth were things that she couldn't possibly have known, such as what happened during Heisuke and Naoko's first date. Monami's personality hadn't become "like" Naoko's—Monami had "become" Naoko, and that was all there was to say about it.

Heisuke looked at the next entry, "Multiple Personality." In those cases as well, the psychological approach couldn't be used to resolve the issue every time. There were many instances which could only be thought of as examples of possession.

"One of the most dramatic cases on record is that of Lurancy Vennum of Watseka, Illinois, who as a thirteen-year-old in 1877 became unconscious after an epileptic fit. She then became possessed by various entities, including the 'control'—Mary Roff, who had died aged eighteen, twelve years before. For nearly a year Lurancy was displaced by Mary; she behaved (according to Mary's family) like the dead girl and exhibited detailed knowledge of the Roff family's home and habits. Then Mary announced that she had to return to Heaven; Lurancy became herself again."

Heisuke, eyes wide open, read and reread this section a number of times. What it described seemed exactly the same as what had happened to Monami. There was one more case in the book that caught Heisuke's attention: "When the Hindu boy Jasbir Lal Jat 'died' of smallpox in 1954 his body was apparently taken over by the spirit of a Brahmin boy who had just died. Jasbir 'came alive' as this other personality, recognized his home and family and was familiar with everything about the dead boy. It was only after two years that his 'real' personality re-established itself."

Heisuke sighed. This case also seemed very similar to that of Naoko and Monami. What they were living through was certainly mysterious, but apparently not without precedent in the world. The impli-

cation of these previous cases was clear: sooner or later Naoko's personality would disappear and Monami's would return. When that happened it would be Naoko's true death, and Monami's resurrection.

Heisuke closed the book. His feelings at that moment were difficult to sort out. If Monami's spirit returned she would be restored to her normal self, and that was surely something to be hoped for. And yet if that happened he would have to part with Naoko, forever.

He scratched his head. Enough already! he wanted to cry out. At first he thought he had lost his wife, and he grieved over that loss; then he realized he had lost his daughter, and was just as heartbroken. Yet now it seemed that at any moment the situation could again reverse itself. He wanted somebody, anybody, to tell him once and for all whether he had lost his wife or his daughter. As long as he didn't know for sure, he would be plagued by that feeling of emptiness that comes when you can't grieve properly and slowly free yourself of that grief.

He put the book back on the shelf, and then pounded the frame of the bookshelf with his fist. He heard somebody gasp and turned his head. A woman was standing nearby, apparently startled by his violent outburst.

He recognized the face and quickly straightened his back, trying to appear normal. "Oh, Miss Hashimoto. How long have you been standing there?"

"You looked familiar so I just walked over a moment ago to take a closer look. You seemed to be quite absorbed in what you were reading."

Heisuke smiled awkwardly and shook his head. "No, it's nothing very special. I just noticed they had some pretty strange books here and thought I'd take a peek, that's all."

"I see," she said, glancing at the shelves. She looked as if she couldn't think of anything to say about the vaguely disreputable titles arrayed there, beginning with *The Encyclopaedia of the Paranormal*.

Her name was Taeko Hashimoto, and she was Monami's homeroom teacher. She was still in her mid-twenties, slender, and quite beautiful. Heisuke first met her at Naoko's funeral; until then he had only spoken with her on the phone.

"What brings you here?" Heisuke asked.

"I...I just came to look something up."

"Oh. Well I guess there's nothing unusual about a school teacher coming to the library, is there?" he said and laughed loudly. The people nearby glared at him.

"Oops...hey, why don't we go over there?" he said, pointing towards the entrance. "A lot of seats over there."

"Those seats are for people who want to read," she whispered and smiled uncomfortably. "Why don't we just go outside."

"Oh, yeah, okay."

Once outside, Heisuke stretched his arms and said, "You know, every time I come to places like this I just start feeling nervous for some reason. My neck is totally stiff." He rolled his head back and forth, trying to loosen the muscles. "But some people were actually sleeping in there."

"Weekday afternoons a lot of businessmen go there to take a nap," Miss Hashimoto said.

"Well, I guess that's one of the fringe benefits of being a sales rep or whatever."

"You work in a factory, isn't that right?"

"Yeah," Heisuke replied, and looked at her. "How'd you know that?"

"Monami wrote about it in one of her compositions. She wrote about how her dad works in a factory, how every third week poor dad has to work the night shift when everybody else is sleeping, and so on."

"Is that right? Huh, I never would've figured." Perhaps it was because she was entering that rebellious phase, but recently Monami hadn't made any effort to talk with him, and seemed completely oblivious to his work. As long as he kept them housed and fed and gave her an allowance, it didn't seem to matter to her much whether he even came home or not. Although she probably *did* actually feel that way, the fact that she hadn't been *completely* indifferent to him made Heisuke feel a bit warm inside. Yet now she was gone.

There was a small park in front of the library, with a miniature fountain that wasn't turned on. They sat down together on one of the benches surrounding the fountain. Before they sat down, Heisuke wondered for a second whether he should lay out a handkerchief or something on the spot where Miss Hashimoto was about to sit down, but in the end didn't do anything.

"How is Monami dealing with everything?" she asked once they had taken their seats.

"She's slowly returning to normal, fortunately. Thank you very much for asking." He had already told Miss Hashimoto on the phone that Monami was speaking, but of course hadn't mentioned that

Monami was now Naoko.

"I heard that she'll be released from the hospital next week."

"Yes, she just needs one more thorough check-up, and if the results from that come out normal, she'll be able to come home."

"That'll be just in time for the new school year at the beginning of April."

"Yes. She wants to enter the sixth grade along with everybody else."

"In that case, would it be alright to pay her a visit before she's released? The children in class have also been terribly worried about her, so I was also thinking of bringing a few of them along."

"Well, I don't see why not. Any time would be fine. I'm sure Naoko would also be very happy to see you all."

Miss Hashimoto looked puzzled. Heisuke noticed her expression and realized that he had made a slip of the tongue.

"Ah, I mean, Monami, not Naoko. Monami would be very happy..."

Miss Hashimoto turned to face him. She straightened her back, and her expression was rather stiffer than before. "Mr. Sugita, please accept my condolences during this very difficult time. I can only imagine how painful it must be to have lost your wife. I know there is very little that I can do to make things better, but at the very least, I would like to be somebody that Monami can turn to when she needs to talk. And you as well, Mr. Sugita, if there is anything I can do to help, in any way, please don't hesitate to ask," she said emphatically, with that combination of naiveté and over-earnestness so common among young teachers. She must have interpreted Heisuke's use of the wrong name as a sign of his lingering sadness over his wife's death.

"Thank you," he said, bringing his knees together and bowing his head.

But you know, he thought sardonically, that little girl Monami is now ten years older than you are.

Two days after running into Heisuke at the library, Taeko Hashimoto came to the hospital with five schoolchildren in tow. The three girls and two boys were apparently very close friends of Monami.

"I was watching TV and they said your name and I was like, so surprised. At first I thought maybe it was just somebody with the same name, but then I thought, you know, Monami's not such a common name, and you were the same age, so I thought, yeah, it had to be you. And I just felt so helpless and didn't know what to do, and I cried so much..." The person who was rambling on like this was an indomitable-looking girl named Kuniko Kawakami. Although she was smiling, even Heisuke could tell from the redness in her eyes that the shock she felt at hearing the news for the first time was now coming back to her.

Monami's eyes—that is to say, Naoko's eyes—also began to grow misty. "I know, it must have really been difficult for you. You and she were inseparable," she said while wiping her eyes and sniffing. "And I remember how last Christmas your folks were nice enough to invite her to your house and give her that nice, big cake as a gift to boot. You know, when we were on the bus, she was talking about buying some kind of souvenir from Shinano to bring back for all of you, but then..."

Naoko had slipped back into the role of a mother, one who has just lost her child. Heisuke had also begun to feel the tears welling in his eyes. But he realized just how inappropriate her response was when he saw that Miss Hashimoto and the students were looking at Monami in complete bewilderment.

"Oh, Monami, yes, yes, I remember," he broke in. "Before you left, you told me that you wanted to buy a gift for the Kawakamis, didn't you *Monami*? Right?"

Heisuke's words brought Naoko back to her senses. "Oh, yeah. Yes, that's right. Anyway, thank you all for visiting me," she said, bobbing her head towards her classmates.

"Are you fully recovered now, Monami?" Miss Hashimoto asked.

"Yes, I think I am. Nothing feels out of the ordinary."

"No headaches, or anything? They say that, with traffic accidents, problems can keep popping up for some time afterwards."

"No, I think I'm quite fine, but you're right that one can't be fully

certain yet. I've also heard that many people suffer from the aftereffects of automobile accidents. In any event, I'm rather leery of ski buses now." She was trying to be careful, but nothing she said sounded like what an elementary school girl would say. Miss Hashimoto naturally didn't know quite what to make of it all, but a smile soon returned to her face.

"I'm just delighted to hear that you'll be joining us for the new school year, but don't strain yourself, okay? If you're not feeling well you don't have to force yourself to come to class."

"Thank you so much, Miss Hashimoto, I'm very grateful," Monami said, and bowed her head again. As she did so, a boy stepped forward with a bouquet of flowers.

"Um, these are for your room," he said.

Her face suddenly lit up. Her glance went from the flowers to the boy and she said, "Wait a second, you're the little Imaoka boy, aren't you?"

He nodded, wondering what the hell had gotten into her.

"Oh my goodness!" she shrieked. "Look at how you've grown! Last time I saw you, you must have been in second grade..."

"Those are some big flowers you brought there," Heisuke quickly stepped in again, taking the bouquet in his hands. He had to do something to keep her from letting her mouth give herself away. "We'll be sure to display these at home, too, once Monami gets out of the hospital. They're really fantastic flowers, aren't they Monami?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, they're very nice. We gotta buy a vase for those."

The conversation continued for a while, but Naoko's bizarre way of talking didn't improve very much. When she *did* remember to try to speak like a child, it made her sound even more unnatural: "Countless people have sent gifts and greeting cards, and I feel...like, *totally* indebted to them, and feel that, at some point, I really gotta repay their kindness. Words don't suffice to express the gratitude that I like, feel, you know?"

Would an elementary school student really use the phrase "words don't suffice"? Heisuke wondered to himself nervously as he listened to her natter on.

At long last Miss Hashimoto and the children got up to leave. A short while after they left the room, Heisuke secretly followed after them to listen in on what they were saying. While they were waiting for the elevator, Kuniko said, "Mona was acting a little weird."

"Yeah, she was talking the way my mom does."

"She's just nervous because she's out of practice," Miss Hashimoto said. "She only started speaking again a short while ago, so of course the words won't come out right just yet."

"Oh, wow. Poor Mona," Kuniko said, and the others nodded in agreement.

Heisuke was relieved that they had somehow been satisfied by this explanation, and returned to Monami's room. He felt, though, that he had to remind Monami, or rather Naoko, to speak in a more childlike fashion. He had his hand on the knob and was about to open the door when he heard Monami crying on the other side. He was surprised. He quietly opened the door.

Monami was weeping with her face buried in her pillow, her narrow shoulders heaving slightly. Heisuke drew closer and placed his hand on her back. "Naoko," he said, calling out his wife's name.

"I'm sorry," she said in a muffled voice. "When I saw those children, the sadness was suddenly too much to bear. They don't know...they don't know that Monami is gone...and I just feel so sorry for them, and for Monami..."

He silently rubbed her back. He couldn't think of anything to say.

He stuffed all of her belongings into the duffel bag and tried to zipper it up, but an apple was sticking out of the tightly-packed bag and he just couldn't get it closed. The apple was a present from a relative. He took it out of the bag, rubbed it against his sleeve, and bit into it. A few drops of juice dribbled down his chin.

"Have you got everything?" he asked Naoko after she had finished changing.

Checking around the bed, she answered, "Yeah, I think so."

"Double-check, okay? Remember how you forgot your gym clothes at camp last year?"

"You must be talking about Monami."

"Huh?" He looked at his daughter's face and then smacked his forehead. "Yeah, sorry."

"Try to get used to it, okay? As for me, when I look in the mirror now I don't feel strange at all to have Monami's face staring back."

"Yeah, I know, I'm getting used to it. I just spaced out for a second there."

Somebody knocked on the door. "Come in," Heisuke called out. Monami's physician, Doctor Yamagishi, walked in.

"Ah, doctor, thank you for stopping by," Heisuke said, bowing.

"It's good to be leaving the hospital on such a nice, sunny day, isn't it?" Yamagishi said.

"It is. Well, it's about as good as things can be, considering..."

The doctor nodded slightly. Maybe it was his lanky, middle-aged figure or his round eyeglasses with green frames, but his appearance did not inspire confidence. Yet when Monami had seemed fully recovered, it was he who pushed back her release date from the hospital and tenaciously had her checked and double-checked before he gave her a clean bill of health. Heisuke greatly admired his meticulousness and sense of responsibility.

"Doctor, please accept my profound gratitude for everything you've done for us. Once things have settled down, we'd like to visit you again to pay our respects," Naoko said, bowing deeply from the waist.

Doctor Yamagishi smiled wryly and looked at Heisuke. "Your daughter seems to have made a complete recovery. She's talking like a

grown woman, in fact."

Heisuke laughed nervously. "Oh, no, no, the little rascal is just putting on airs."

"Not at all. You should be very proud of her."

"Please, you're too kind. She's so childish for her age...it's a real pain in the ass," he said and guffawed a few times. Yet he could tell from the perplexed look on Doctor Yamagishi's face that he had gone a bit too far. "I mean, that is to say," he added, shaking his head, "she's going to be in sixth grade this year and it would be nice if she could act just a little more mature."

"I think you're being a little too tough on her, Mr. Sugita," the doctor said, laughing. "But parents always try to be modest about their children, don't they?" He turned to Monami. "And you, little lady, you listen to your father, okay? I wish you the best of luck. If you ever feel unwell at all, you have him bring you right back here, okay?"

"Yes, doctor. I understand. Thank you very much," Naoko said in a slightly trembling voice, bowing yet again.

Once they had said goodbye to all of the nurses who had taken care of Monami, Heisuke took her bag in hand and went out through the lobby into the parking lot. The moment they stepped outside, a large crowd of people came running towards them, men and women, some carrying microphones, some with television cameras on their shoulders.

"Mr. Sugita, congratulations on your daughter's release from the hospital," a woman reporter began.

"Thank you."

"How do you feel?"

"For the time being at least, I'm relieved."

"Monami, look this way," a cameraman said.

"When do you plan to visit your wife's grave to tell her the good news?"

"Well, as soon as things calm down a little."

The reporter nodded once and then thrust the mic into Naoko's face. "Monami, how was life in the hospital?"

"Nothing special," Naoko replied expressionlessly.

"You didn't suffer at all?"

"Not particularly, no. My husba...my father took very good care of me."

"What would you most like to do right now?"

"Just take a nice, long bath and relax."

"Excuse me, but I'd rather you not ask my daughter any more questions," Heisuke cut in. In response the reporter turned the mic on him again and started asking questions about the negotiations with the bus company, which he answered as he and Naoko walked hand-in-hand towards their car. They got into his beloved Toyota Sprinter and drove off as the television crews looked on.

As they were about to enter their house, somebody cried out, "Well I'll be! Monami, it's you!" They turned to see their neighbor Kazuko Yoshimoto walking by with a grocery bag in her hands. "I had no idea you were getting out of the hospital today!"

Great, Heisuke thought, of all times for Auntie Loudmouth to show up. Mrs. Yoshimoto was middle-aged, had one son in college and another in high school, and was the neighborhood gossip. That said, she was well-intentioned and had a nurturing soul.

"Ah, Mrs. Yoshimoto, how nice to see you," Naoko immediately replied. "I heard that you were a tremendous help during the funeral. I'm terribly grateful for everything you've done." This was certainly not something a child would say, and Mrs. Yoshimoto seemed to be caught off guard for a second, but she quickly smiled again.

"No need to be so formal with me, sweetie. Anyway, you all better now?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear it. I was really worried, you know."

"Thank you very much. Well, we still need to settle in first, but we'll come pay you a visit later."

"Okay, sure. Take care."

Naoko rushed to open the door and get into the house. Heisuke recalled what she had always said about Mrs. Yoshimoto: "When she gets started yapping she won't let you go for at least an hour. And if you try to give her the slip she'll follow you right into the house."

Heisuke was also about to say goodbye and go inside when Mrs. Yoshimoto collared him and whispered in his ear, "I don't know, but while I wasn't looking Monami has really grown up. I guess she figures that now that her mom's gone and passed away, she's got to be there for you and be strong, eh?"

"Hahaha, could be, could be," Heisuke smiled amiably and escaped into the house.

Inside, Naoko was about to begin praying in front of the altar. The

photograph in front of her was that of Naoko herself, but of course it looked as if Monami were praying to the spirit of her deceased mother.

After some time, Naoko raised her head and turned to look at Heisuke, a wan smile appearing on her face. "It's a strange feeling, looking at your own picture on the altar."

"We can't very well put Monami's picture there," Heisuke replied.

"Yeah, you're right. What if somebody came to visit?"

"But you know, what you're doing isn't meaningless," Heisuke said, and took the picture frame in his hands. He slid the backing out and removed the photograph of Naoko, behind which was hidden a photograph of Monami. It had been taken the year before during a school field trip. She was smiling at the camera and flashing a peace sign.

"Look," he said, showing the photo to his wife. She blinked a few times and looked at Heisuke with a smile but on the verge of tears.

"I feel like it's been so long since I saw the real Monami's face," she said.

"It's not as if you're a impostor," he replied.

Heisuke prepared a simple lunch of instant ramen with some stir-fried bean sprouts and roast pork on top. Naoko was greatly impressed that Heisuke, who until then had been unable to cook anything, could actually do that much.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea for the man of the house to be left to his own devices once in a while, huh?" she said between slurps of her noodles.

"What are you talking about? I could prepare French cuisine if the spirit moved me."

"Oh my, you've really made progress, haven't you? Well then, go ahead," she teased.

"The spirit hasn't moved me."

They never watched television during meals in the Sugita household, at least not while Monami was there. This was a decision that Naoko had made when Monami was still quite young. Heisuke therefore didn't reach for the remote while they were eating their ramen, waiting instead for Naoko to finish. It was only after he picked up the remote, which had fallen onto the tatami mat, that he realized that his restraint had been pointless: Monami wasn't there.

When he turned on the television he saw a familiar building. It was the hospital where Naoko had been treated. "It's you, Heisuke," Naoko said, pointing at the screen. It was the footage from Heisuke and Naoko's

brief question-and-answer session with the reporters at the hospital a short while earlier. It felt odd seeing something that had barely happened an hour or two earlier broadcast like this.

The screen showed Heisuke leading Monami, or rather Naoko, by the hand, towards the parking lot while the reporters followed.

"What do you plan to do concerning the issue of compensation for your pain and suffering?" the woman reporter asked.

"In principle I leave that to my lawyer to decide."

"Have you expressed any wishes to your lawyer? Concerning the amount, for example?"

"Money is not the problem. What I would like most is for the bus company to show their sincere remorse. Monami lost her life and Naoko was very badly hurt," he said quickly as he opened the door for Naoko and then got in the driver's seat.

The camera followed the car as they drove off and then turned back to the reporter. "Mr. Heisuke Sugita appears for the time being to be relieved that his daughter Monami has recovered and been released from the hospital, but when questioned about the issue of the bus company's responsibility for the accident, he confused the names of his wife and daughter. Although he appears calm and composed, one can discern the psychological scars that continue to haunt him. Reporting from Koganei Hospital in Tokyo, this is Keiko Nakajima."

"I screwed up again," Heisuke muttered. He only realized it now, after having it pointed out for him on national television.

The scene changed to an interview with a television star who had recently been caught having an affair. Heisuke changed the channel to see if any other stations were airing reports about them, but there were none. He turned the television off.

"So," Naoko began, "what should we do now?"

"About what?"

"About everything. How should I live my life?"

Heisuke folded his arms and began to consider the question.

Heisuke, for his part, was getting accustomed to their current, extraordinary circumstances. Naoko also seemed, on the surface at least, to have reconciled herself with her fate. The problem was other people. It was a given that Naoko would be treated like a freak if word got out, and if things went badly Heisuke would be regarded that way as well. Even if the spirit transference could be proven, their lives would surely be ruined, first by the mass media, and then by the hordes of gawking

rabble that would come to get a look.

Heisuke groaned. He had an idea, but he wasn't sure whether to voice it or not. At that point Naoko spoke:

"This is what I think. Hear me out, okay?"

Heisuke sat up. "Sure, of course."

"I think," she said, looking her husband in the eyes, "that I should continue to live as Monami."

"Oh," Heisuke said, leaving his mouth half open. He couldn't say anything.

"It makes me sad to give up being Naoko Sugita, to give up that life. But I really think this is best. It would be next to impossible for me to live as Naoko, to live as your wife. No matter how we try to explain things, it won't be accepted. Your being with me won't be accepted."

"Yeah, you're right."

"What do you think, Heisuke?"

"I think you're right. In fact, I thought of suggesting it myself, but somehow it was hard to get it out."

"Why? Because it would mean that Naoko would be erased from the world?"

"Yeah...I think that's why."

Naoko looked down and pursed her lips. "But you know," she said, looking back up at him, "she'll still be alive for you."

"I know. As far as I'm concerned, Naoko will be Naoko," he said, but immediately thought to himself that he should have said "Monami will be Naoko" instead. He didn't want to spoil the mood, however, and so he didn't correct himself.

Naoko breathed a sigh of relief and stretched her arms. "It feels good to finally get that off my chest. Even though I had decided that's what I wanted to do, it took some time to finally be able to say it."

"I can understand that."

"I want to look towards the future. I've been given a chance to relive my life, even if it is in a different body."

"Yes, but it's not exactly a stranger's body."

"Yeah. People always said Monami looked like me when I was younger."

"And people always said that our daughter was a real beauty."

"Yes, except she has your nose. That slightly upturned nose."

"What's wrong with that? It's a charming nose."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she replied, eyes twinkling under a

knitted brow. Heisuke smiled. It was the first time he had really felt like smiling since the accident.

"I'll make some tea," Naoko said and got up to go to the kitchen. She took a teapot from the cupboard and put some tea leaves inside, with a manner that was unmistakably Naoko's.

She placed two cups on a tray and returned to the tatami room. "Monami's already in sixth grade. I'm really going to have to study. I don't want to embarrass the poor girl by letting her grades slip."

"Monami studied pretty hard, although it seems you scolded her a lot."

"She was good at math and science. Japanese and social studies weren't her strong points. She took after you that way."

"Are *you* good at math and science?" Heisuke asked with a smirk.

"Not really, but I'll just have to try," she replied with a long face, placing a cup of tea in front of him. "Hey, what did she want to do when she grew up?"

"Do...?" Heisuke crossed his arms again.

"I'd like to make that dream a reality for her, if possible. Whatever her goal was, I'd like to work towards it."

"If I," Heisuke began, sipping his tea, "if I remember correctly, she wanted to become a housewife."

"A housewife?"

"Yeah, she wanted to be a housewife like her mother."

"Well in that case I'm fine just the way I am, huh?"

"Actually," he said, still holding his teacup, "I was just kidding."

"What for?" she asked, and then looked down at her hands with something like relief. She looked back at her husband with an awkward smile. "Don't say such foolish things. Don't worry, I'll always be by your side."

Heisuke said nothing, just sipped his tea.

"Oh, wait. Where's my ring?" she asked.

"Ring?"

"My wedding ring. I was wearing it during the accident."

"Oh, yes. I think it's in that drawer in the altar."

Naoko opened the drawer and pulled out a small vinyl pouch that contained her wedding ring. It was a thin, simple platinum band, similar to the one that Heisuke was wearing. Naoko took the ring out of the bag and tried it on her ring finger, but it was too large. It was too large for her middle finger as well. Finally she tried her thumb, which fit perfectly.

Looking at her hand, she gathered her breath and said, "Well, I can't really wear it on my thumb, can I?"

"What does it matter? It would be pretty strange for an elementary school student to be wearing a ring, much less one like that."

"But this ring is the one thing I always want with me."

"I mean, I'm very happy to hear that but..."

"Wait a sec," Naoko said, clapping her hands together. She left the room and up the stairs. When she came back, she had a teddy bear in one hand and a sewing kit hanging from the other .

"What are you doing?" Heisuke asked.

"Just wait and see." She took out a pair of sewing scissors and cut the seams holding the teddy bear's head together. She pulled the head apart. Naoko was skilled at sewing; she had originally made this teddy bear herself as a gift for Monami.

She took her wedding ring and buried it deep in the stuffing of the bear's head. She carefully closed the head back up, sewing it back together with needle and thread. Her handiwork was impeccable.

"It's finished," she said.

"What are you going to do with it?" Heisuke asked.

"This teddy bear was very important to Monami. She always slept with it. I'll always keep it next to me, just like she did, and that way I'll always remember that I'm your wife, and you're my husband."

Heisuke couldn't think of anything to say in reply. He could only wonder whether her remembering that would ever actually mean anything.

"The true meaning of this teddy bear," she said, hugging it against her chest, "will always be our secret."

It was drizzling on Naoko's first day at school. She stood in the doorway wondering whether to put her boots on or not.

"I think sneakers are good enough. It's not raining that hard," Heisuke said from behind her.

"The weather report said the rain would get heavy in the afternoon, and I don't want the sneakers to get all muddy," Naoko said, taking the brand new sneakers in her hands. "We just bought these last month and Monami didn't want to wear them until school started, just so they'd look new."

Heisuke opened the door and looked up at the sky. "Yeah, but it's really not weather for boots, you know."

"If it's raining it is. That settles it, I'm wearing the boots." Naoko pulled the red vinyl boots with white trim out of the shoebox. She had bought them at deep discount from the supermarket a long time before.

"*Those* are the boots you want to wear?"

"They sure are."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Monami hated those boots and never wore them. She said they were 'lame.'"

"I know, but it would be a shame to let them go to waste."

Heisuke shut the door for a moment. "Listen to yourself. Is that Monami talking or Naoko? As far as the world is concerned, Naoko doesn't exist. The clothes you wear, the shoes you put on, everything has to be just as Monami would have wanted it. Don't you think it would be odd for Monami to wear those 'lame' boots to school?"

Naoko-as-Monami stared blankly at her husband for a long time. "I guess you're right."

"Do you get what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah, I get it," she said, pulling one of the boots off her right foot. "I'll wear the sneakers."

"I think that's best," Heisuke said.

"Still," she muttered to herself as she put on the shoes, "such a waste getting them dirty so fast."

Heisuke was going to school with her that day to thank the various

teachers and staff for their concern during Naoko's hospitalization. The homeroom assignments at the school changed only once every two years, so Taeko Hashimoto would still be Monami's homeroom teacher this year.

"You really don't have to come with me," Naoko said after she finished tying her laces. "I'll be fine by myself."

"I'm sure you will, but it's expected that parents come to pay their respects to the teachers on opening day."

"I guess so," Naoko said, looking at her husband out of the corner of her eye. "But are you sure there isn't another reason?"

"Another reason? What other reason?"

"Miss Hashimoto is quite a pretty young thing. And I know you like them thin."

"Oh, give me a break. Come on, let's get going. Remember the saying: 'If you're late on New Year's, you'll be late the rest of the year,'" he said, pushing her forward out the door. Even though her appearance had been transformed, his wife was still as tough as tails. But in fact he *was* somewhat pleased to be seeing Taeko Hashimoto.

He opened the umbrella just in time to see Kazuko Yoshimoto taking out her trash.

"Hey, Monami!" she cried out. "School starting today?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Yoshimoto. Yes, luckily I made it out of the hospital in time for the new school year."

"Great! And you're taking her to school today, Mr. Sugita?" she asked Heisuke.

"Yes, that's right."

"I told Heisuke he didn't have to," Naoko broke in, "but he's so stubborn."

"Oh goodness, really?" Kazuko replied with a puzzled smile, looking back and forth at the two of them.

Once they had walked a distance from the house Heisuke said, "It's really strange for you to be calling me 'Heisuke.' I'm supposed to be your father, remember?"

Naoko put her hand to her mouth. "Oops! Did I say that?"

"Yes, you did, and Auntie Loudmouth looked suspicious. Be more careful, really."

"I'm sorry. I'm still not used to this."

"I understand, neither am I. I'm so nervous that I'm going to let something slip out today."

"Oh, that's right. You have that meeting this afternoon."

"Yeah, in Shinjuku. I'm not sure what time I'll be back, but I don't think it'll be too late."

"Alright. Do your best, okay? For Monami."

"For both of you," Heisuke replied.

The meeting was for families of the victims of the bus accident. The group had already met a number of times in the city to plan their course of action. In general they met on weekends, but because of the lawyer's schedule they would be meeting on a weekday this time. Heisuke had spoken with his superiors at work about it and was allowed to take a paid day off. That was also the reason why he was able to accompany Naoko to school.

The two of them stopped at a major crosswalk and saw a boy across the street waving his hand in their direction. At first Heisuke didn't think much of it, but he soon realized that the child was trying to get Naoko's attention. He was a tall, gangly boy, clean-cut, with a fresh-looking, handsome face.

"Hey, I think that boy over there is a friend of Monami's," he said in a low voice.

"Looks that way, huh?"

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Hmmm..."

"Think fast."

Naoko turned towards Heisuke and pulled a photograph out of his chest pocket. It was a group picture taken during Monami's fifth-grade class field trip. Heisuke knew that she had used this photograph, matching names to faces, to try to remember who Monami's classmates were. She had taken the clever step of writing each student's name and brief background information on the back of the photo.

"Hurry up. The light's turned green. If we don't cross now it'll look strange."

"Oh...okay," she said, thrusting the picture at him as she began to walk. "Hold this, darling."

"What? What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Find that boy's name. Tell me when you've found it."

"Oh brother!"

The boy flashed a friendly smile as they crossed the street towards him. Heisuke thought his smiling face should have graced the cover of one of those free educational magazines like *School Today!* or *Let's Enjoy*

School Life.

"So you're coming back to school today, Monami?" the boy asked.

"Yes, thanks," she replied. She looked up at Heisuke. "This is my dad."

"Good morning," the boy said, bowing his head.

"Oh, morning," Heisuke hastily replied.

The boy started walking and Naoko walked beside him, with Heisuke following behind. While trying not to draw the boy's attention, he stole quick glances at the class photo. The field trip had been to Mount Takao in the Tokyo suburbs, and he could see Yakuo Temple in the background behind the students. The time had been early summer, in other words, ten months earlier.

"I wanted to go visit you in the hospital, but I didn't know how you were feeling and whether it would be alright, so I wound up not going. But I heard from Kuniko and the others that you were feeling okay, so I was pretty relieved," the boy said.

"Oh, thank you."

"But you don't seem too well right now. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, everything's fine," Naoko said, glancing back at Heisuke. She obviously wanted to know the boy's name, and fast.

At that moment Heisuke found a reasonably similar-looking boy in the picture. He looked slightly different from this one, but Heisuke assumed that was just because his hair style had changed. He checked the name on the back. The Chinese characters for his family name were easy enough to read: Tajima. But the character for the first name had more than one possible reading, and Heisuke wasn't sure if in this case it was read Tsuyoshi or some other way.

"Uh, Monami, could I talk to you for a second?" he asked.

She stopped and walked towards him. "What?"

Heisuke blocked the boy's line of vision with his umbrella and showed Naoko the back of the photo, pointing at the name. "I think this is him," he whispered.

"Tajima...Is his first name Takeshi? Tsuyoshi?"

"I'm not sure which."

"Alright, whatever," she whispered, and then, in an unexpectedly energetic voice meant for the boy to hear, said, "Okay, sure dad!" and returned to the boy's side.

"Pardon the delay," she said. Heisuke once again cringed at her grown-up way of saying things.

"What was that all about?" the boy asked.

"Oh, nothing," Naoko said, glancing back at Heisuke. "My dad just wanted to know more about you, and also about the whole Tajima family."

"Huh?" Heisuke exclaimed, eyes wide open, but he soon realized what she was up to. This boy was obviously Monami's good friend and she wanted to find out more about him.

"Uh, why is that, Mr. Sugita?" the boy asked.

"Oh, you know," Heisuke smiled and replied breezily, "I just want to know more about Monami's friends, that's all."

"Oh..." the boy replied, at a loss. Heisuke sympathized with his plight.

"So what's the family do, eh? Dad's a businessman?"

"My dad?"

"Tajima senior, of course."

"Umm, fishmonger."

"Fishmonger, huh? Hey, that's just great!" Heisuke said, without knowing why he was saying it, or what made being a fishmonger so great.

"Where'd you go for spring break?" Naoko asked.

"To the Mishima peninsula," the boy answered, happy to be off the hook. "One of my uncles has a cruiser and we went and did some deep-sea fishing. We caught a lot of big ones. Sea bream and grunt fish. The cooler was stuffed with 'em when we got back."

"Wow," Naoko said, nodding.

He's so excited to be catching fish when he's knee deep in them at home, Heisuke thought. That's a bit strange.

"We especially caught a lot of bream, so we gave some to the neighbors. They were really huge. Everybody was surprised."

"You mean, you gave them away for free?" Naoko asked.

"Of course."

"Why didn't you sell them?"

"Why would we do something as greedy as that?" the boy spat back.

Why *didn't* they sell them? Heisuke thought. A large, freshly caught sea bream could fetch a very nice price at market.

"What subjects is young Mr. Tajima good at?" Heisuke asked the boy, addressing him in the polite third person.

"Gee, I'm not sure..." the boy said, scratching his head. "Math...I

guess.”

“Oh, good grades in math. That’s fantastic.”

“Wait, there’s more...Japanese, science, social studies...” he added, rather arrogantly, Heisuke thought.

“Brilliant,” Heisuke said.

“Yeah, for sure,” the boy replied without missing a beat. “Oh, but weak in P.E.”

“Really?” Heisuke said, but found it hard to believe looking at the boy’s long, fit legs.

As they approached the school, they saw a great many other children walking in the same direction, joking, laughing, horsing around. This was their world.

“Mona!” somebody called out. They turned to see Kuniko Kawakami running towards them, checkered skirt flapping. “If you guys start walking together already on the first day,” she shrieked girlishly as she looked back and forth at Naoko and the boy, “people are gonna start talking, you know.” She turned to Heisuke and dipped her head. “Good morning.”

Before he could even reply she had already turned back to Naoko and begun talking breathlessly about seeing her on television the night before. Naoko listened quietly.

Heisuke began turning Kuniko’s first words over in his head. “If you guys start walking together already on the first day.” What the hell was that supposed to mean? She said it in a teasing tone, which probably meant that whatever relationship the two had was common knowledge. What nonsense! he thought. They’re only elementary school students, for crying out loud!

The school, which was comprised of three faded concrete buildings, came into view. Heisuke of course had no idea where Monami and her friends had their homeroom. He thought Naoko would know since she had come here many times for parents’ open house days.

An overweight boy came up to them. Although the weather was still quite chilly, sweat was running down his temples and cheeks, and Heisuke could only imagine what it was like for him in the summertime. “Wassup you guys?” the fat kid asked Naoko and her friends.

“Hey, Tsu, you look even fatter than you were last year,” the boy next to Naoko said.

“Well, I’m not. I’m the same as before,” the boy grumbled. He glanced at Heisuke and timidly shrugged his shoulders.

Once they had passed through the school's front gate Heisuke said his goodbyes to the children. As she was walking away, Naoko looked back at him and gave him a quick wink, as if to say, "Everything's going to be fine."

Once he was alone, he looked around the school grounds and realized he didn't even know where the staff room was. As he was searching, the overweight boy returned and looked up at him.

"What is it?" Heisuke asked.

"Did I do something wrong?" the boy asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well," the boy said, looking behind his back now and again, "I heard that you were asking all sorts of questions about me."

"What?" Heisuke replied, but then he figured out what had happened. The boy's nameplate read: "Tajima."

"You...you're the Tajima boy?"

He nodded.

"Oh...I see. You're Tajima are you? Your dad's a fishmonger?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is that right?" Heisuke laughed uncomfortably. "Well I'll be. Anyway, don't worry. It's not like I wanted to know anything about you in particular. I just wanted to find out more about Naoko's—I mean, Monami's—classmates."

"Oh. I'm not in trouble, then?"

"No, not at all. Oh, wait a second. What was the name of that boy? The one who was walking with Monami?"

"Naoto Endo."

"Oh, okay. Naoto Endo. Well then, thank you. Study hard, okay?"

The boy gave Heisuke a perplexed look and then started running back to school on his short, thick legs. Heisuke could see why he was no good at P.E.

He took the photo out of his pocket again and double-checked Tajima's name against his picture. It was the same boy all right, only he was much heavier now than he had been then. In these ten months his weight seemed to have doubled. Looking at the back of the picture again, he found the name "Endo, Naoto." He flipped the photo over and looked at the face that corresponded to the name. The boy was standing next to the homeroom teacher, Taeko Hashimoto, but he was much smaller then and still had a baby face, so much so that he looked like he could have been Hashimoto's son. In contrast to Tajima, those ten

month's had made him much taller and much more mature-looking.

Heisuke looked up at the school building that the children had entered. "Naoko," he called out to her silently from the depths of his heart, "be careful, be careful! You're in a strange and monstrous world."

The downpour began in the afternoon. It was cold as well, so Heisuke left the house wearing a blazer underneath his raincoat. There were many puddles along the road that he and Naoko had walked that morning. She actually should have worn those boots after all, he thought with a touch of regret, but he also couldn't help but smile to himself beneath the umbrella.

The meeting was being held in the conference hall of a hotel about a ten minutes' walk from the west entrance of Shinjuku Station. A young woman manned a registration desk in front of the hall, where Heisuke signed in before entering.

Tables and chairs were neatly lined up inside the hall, with room to seat up to a hundred people. About half of those seats were filled. Twenty-nine people had died in the accident, and more than ten were even now in the hospital recovering from severe injuries, so it was reasonable to book a room of this size to accommodate all of the family members. Since this was the most important meeting of all, one could also reasonably expect a high turnout despite the rain and the fact that it was a weekday.

Because this had been a ski bus accident, most of the victims were quite young. A full half of them were college students, and most of the people in the hall that day appeared to be in their mid-forties to mid-fifties. Heisuke was relatively young compared to them. There were quite a few women present, but men still made up the majority. Many of the people looked like they normally didn't go to town meetings and the like, and many of the staid men looked as if they had taken their first day ever off from work just to be here.

There was a couple sitting in front and to the side of him. The man was in his early fifties while the woman looked somewhat younger. The man's elegantly groomed hair was beginning to gray here and there. He quietly said something to the woman, who nodded slightly. She was holding a cream-colored handkerchief in her hand and daubed her eyes with it from time to time. Whether it was a son or daughter they had lost, he or she had been in the bloom of youth with a whole life ahead. The parents' dreams had died along with their child, no doubt. Heisuke's own sadness at having lost Monami came back to him; he tried to imag-

ine what they were going through, but his own sadness drowned out those imaginings. He and they were locked into their own respective worlds of grief that nobody else could ever fully understand.

"You're...Heisuke Sugita, aren't you?" somebody next to him said. He turned to see a deeply tanned man of around fifty smiling at him awkwardly.

"Yes."

The man sighed with a bit of relief. "I thought so. I recognized you from TV."

Heisuke nodded. He had gotten used to this kind of thing. "Those TV people will broadcast anything they can get their hands on," he said.

"It sure seems that way. How is your daughter doing?"

"She's well, thank you."

"I'm happy to hear that. At the very least you still have your daughter," he said, nodding repeatedly.

"I'm sorry, you are..." Heisuke asked.

"Oh, how rude of me," the man said, pulling a business card out of his jacket pocket. "This is me." His name was Kazuro Fujisaki and he ran a limited liability printing business in Kohto ward near the Sumidagawa River. Heisuke gave him one of his own cards in turn.

"I understand you lost your wife in the accident," Fujisaki said as he put Heisuke's card in his coat pocket.

"Yes, I did," Heisuke replied.

The man nodded. "I lost my wife to illness almost three years ago, and now this. Today I'm a 'parent' without any children. I'm completely by myself; it's hard to muster the will to do anything now, really."

Heisuke could sympathize. "So before the accident you were in the same position I am in now, father and child."

Fujisaki smiled faintly and shook his head. "No. Father and *children*."

"Oh? But you said..."

"I had two daughters," Fujisaki said, raising two fingers. "Twins. In matching ski suits. They died together. They faced the same death together," he said, the words of the last sentence getting caught in his throat.

Heisuke could feel something like a cold lead weight form in his chest and then sink to the pit of his stomach.

"If only one of them could have survived perhaps we would have been able to make do together, but no, they both died. God is truly

cruel." His smile twisted into something ugly.

Heisuke found Fujisaki's words all too true. And then a thought occurred to him: if the transference of identities that had occurred between Naoko and Monami had happened with those twins, probably nobody would have noticed, perhaps not even the surviving twin herself. One of them would have survived and that would be that.

Looking around the hall, he could see many people weeping. The pain of this accident is long from over, he thought.

Among the bereaved there were four people who had volunteered during the first meeting to act as stewards. One of them looked like a go-getter division chief at a front-rank company, the second appeared a shopkeeper, the third was an older man around retirement age, and the fourth was a housewife. They were a motley crew, but they all shared a look of resolute determination. From the moment he saw them, Heisuke felt assured that the victims' interests were in good hands.

Mr. Hayashida, the "go-getter division chief"—that's what Heisuke called him at least, whether he was one or not—started the proceedings by reviewing in detail the developments up to that point. The bus company had acknowledged that the accident was due to driver error and seemed as sincere as possible in their desire to rightfully compensate the victims. That said, there was the suspicion that the driver's mistake was due to overwork, and therefore the full extent of the company's responsibility for the accident had yet to be determined. Heisuke had also heard on the news that the Nagano Prefecture Police had raided the company looking for evidence of highway transport law violations.

Next, a lawyer by the name of Mukai came to the front and began to talk. With his stout, powerful body and crew cut he had the appearance of a judo master. In a clear, projecting voice he said that he expected there would be a uniform settlement for all of the victims, irrespective of age or sex. If any individuals were dissatisfied with the individual monetary sum that was agreed upon during the meeting, he requested that they negotiate with the bus company directly.

Somebody asked how much they should ask for. Mr. Mukai replied without a moment's hesitation: "A rule of thumb in these cases is 80 million yen." From the way he said it, Heisuke assumed that figure was actually the upper limit "in these cases."

80 million yen. He couldn't decide whether it was a large number or a small one. Of course, no amount of money could genuinely assuage his grief. Among the bereaved, however, there were some people who

were a good deal more hard-headed than Heisuke was. "Can't we get at least 100 million?" someone asked. Fujisaki nodded at the suggestion, and Heisuke wondered whether there weren't many others who had also come with a specific figure in mind.

"Of course I intend to aim as high for you as I possibly can. But bear in mind that this is a matter for negotiation and both sides must be prepared for some degree of compromise. I assume that nobody here wants this to be drawn out any longer than it has to be," the lawyer answered, and many in the audience nodded their assent, including Heisuke, who wanted this business behind him as soon as possible.

This was not to say that he wanted to forget about it. And he didn't want anybody else to forget about it, either. He didn't want the pain of that accident simply to be dulled by time.

The steward Hayashida stood up again and spoke about the next steps to be taken. He advised everybody to exercise the utmost care in keeping the content of their discussion today secret, and to be especially careful of the mass media. He knitted his brow and continued, "The monetary value of the compensation is what the journalists are most interested in, and they'll have a field day writing about it if we let them." Heisuke could tell that Mr. Hayashida had himself also been stung by the callousness of the mass media.

"Well then, there's one last thing we need to discuss," Hayashida said, his tone of voice changing slightly, his face growing stiff. "Actually, there is somebody who insisted upon meeting with us today." He was having trouble getting the next words out, and so he tried to say them as quickly as possible: "Mrs. Kajikawa."

There was silence for a moment and then a stirring began to ripple through the group.

"Mrs. Kajikawa? You mean..." a middle-aged woman who had spoken earlier asked loudly.

"Yes," Hayashida nodded. "The wife of the driver. She has come here and is waiting outside for us to finish. She says that she wishes strongly to come here and apologize to all of us personally."

The stirring that had started a moment earlier now froze stone cold. Despite the stillness it was clear that those assembled were feeling the blood rush to their heads. Heisuke, for one, felt his face growing warm and flush, while his limbs became cold and numb.

The married man sitting in front of Heisuke suddenly rose to his feet, his chair falling with a thud behind him. "We're going," he said to

his wife. Those short, sharp words pulsed with unspeakable bitterness.

The woman seemed to be in agreement with her husband. She nodded her head and stood up to follow him. They slowly walked towards the rear door while everybody's eyes followed them. Hayashida said nothing. Nobody tried to stop them. A number of others followed suit, all of them wearing cold, blank expressions on their faces.

Hayashida looked around at the people who were left. "So then. May I now invite Mrs. Kajikawa in?"

Nobody said anything. Hayashida waited for a moment, not knowing what to do. Heisuke felt bad for him: after all, Hayashida himself certainly couldn't have been enthusiastic about welcoming the wife of the driver responsible for the accident.

"Mrs. Yamamoto, if you please..." Hayashida said to the lone woman among the stewards. She went out the door at the front of the hall.

There was an awkward silence for a minute or two. The door finally opened again, and Yukari Yamamoto stuck her head into the hall. "Whenever you're ready," she said.

"Ask her in, please."

A thin, small woman followed Mrs. Yamamoto into the hall. She looked pitifully haggard and pale in the harsh glare of the fluorescent lighting. The shoulders of her white cardigan were soaked from the rain.

"I'm the wife of the driver, Kajikawa," she began, in a frail, melancholy tone. Her voice was as thin and reedy as her body. "I have come here today to apologize for my husband's mistake, a mistake that has brought unimaginable suffering to each of your families. Please accept my sincere apologies," she said, bowing deeply. Even from where he was sitting quite a distance away, Heisuke could clearly see her thin eyebrows twitching.

The atmosphere in the hall became unbearably heavy. It seemed to bear down on her small, frail body, as if it were going to crush her. Yet she was able slowly to raise her head. "Although my husband is dead, I have come here to try to make amends, as much as possible, for what has happened. I have come here today, with your permission, to tell you that much, at the very least," she said, her voice trembling, as she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Mr. Hayashida," a man in a suit called out, standing up. "Why did you invite this woman here?"

"Well..." Hayashida began to say, but Mrs. Kajikawa broke in.

"I asked him to. It was all my—"

"I wasn't asking you. I was asking Mr. Hayashida," the man shot back. Mrs. Kajikawa shut her mouth.

"There were two reasons," Hayashida replied. "The first was because it was Mrs. Kajikawa's wish to come here and apologize. The second was because, as I mentioned earlier, there is the issue of overwork, and I believed that she could clarify this for us. Mrs. Kajikawa's testimony could prove invaluable to us, and I felt it would be good for us to come to know each other at an early stage."

The reasoning was sound, and the man in the suit seemed to be appeased, but as he was sitting back down he muttered to himself, "I still don't see why we need to 'know each other.'"

"We don't need your apologies," somebody said. Heisuke strained to get a look. It was an elderly woman sitting in the front row. "You weren't the one driving the bus, so why should you feel responsible? That's what you think, isn't it? You're just here because apologizing is the expected, decent thing to do, but what does it mean? Apologies like that don't make us feel any better, no matter how often you may say them. Keep them to yourself."

"No, that's not true..." Kajikawa tried to object.

"Enough, enough," the old woman cut her off. "Don't say anything else. If you stand there like that, you're just going to get the brunt of our anger and unhappiness. Enough," she said, and sighed with consternation. The hall once again grew silent.

It seemed that the elderly woman had spoken for everyone, because the group soon began to murmur in assent. Heisuke, for his part, agreed with them. Although Mrs. Kajikawa had also lost her husband in the accident, it was impossible to see her as one of them.

"Well, Mrs. Kajikawa, I think that's about all," Hayashida said in a light tone that was oddly inappropriate for the occasion. Kajikawa, whose shoulders were already slumped, nodded weakly. Hayashida looked at Mrs. Yamamoto, who took this as a signal to lead the woman once again to the door at the front of the hall. As she was opening the door, Mr. Fujisaki stood up.

"Your husband is a murderer!" he cried out.

Everyone in the hall froze still and then time began to move forward as if frame by frame. Mrs. Kajikawa was about to burst into tears and Mrs. Yamamoto held her by the shoulders as she led her out the door. A

few people stared at Fujisaki while others did their best to keep their eyes averted.

It was hard for Heisuke to read the mood of the group. One thing that was certain was that nobody felt redeemed at all by Fujisaki's words. He had clearly gone too far. The group's feelings of solidarity had begun to crumble, and a slight chill pervaded the atmosphere. The elderly woman in the front row looked distinctly uncomfortable. Nonetheless, nobody could go so far as to reproach Fujisaki. All they could do was pretend that they hadn't heard what he'd said.

"Well then," Hayashida said as he looked helplessly around the room, "does anybody have any questions?"

The rain was still pounding down as Heisuke left the hotel. He opened his umbrella and started walking alone towards Shinjuku Station.

He loitered around the shops near the station, wondering whether or not to buy Naoko a cake. This came as a surprise even to him because when she was still "Naoko" it had only rarely occurred to him to be so thoughtful. He couldn't find any good pastry shops, so he decided to look instead in the food department of the Odakyu Department Store inside the station.

As he was about to enter he saw a woman crouching next to one of the building's pillars. It was Mrs. Kajikawa. He wondered whether she was unwell, but she was leisurely smoking a cigarette so he decided she must be okay. Every so often she would reach out towards the ashtray next to her and flick the ashes off her cigarette. She kept her knees together, but there was still something unseemly about a grown woman crouching in public like that. She must be very tired, he thought. Even though she looked to be in her early forties, her back was bent like that of an old woman.

He tried to pretend not to have seen her, but he hesitated for a moment. Her eyes were glazed and hollow but they opened widely upon seeing him, as did her mouth. She gasped a bit.

Unable to ignore her, Heisuke bowed his head politely. She had probably recognized him from the television reports. She immediately stood up and returned his bow.

She then turned and started walking quickly in the other direction, but in that instant she began to flutter and twirl as if she were doing a strange dance, and then she grabbed at the sky as her body struck the pavement. She yelped in pain as she hit the ground.

Heisuke rushed to help her. The passersby merely looked on at the spectacle, not wanting to be bothered. "Are you alright?" Heisuke asked, extending his right hand to help her up.

"Oh, yes, I'm okay."

"You seem to have gotten dizzy there for a second," he said.

"Yes, my head was spinning a bit," she said. Probably her blood pressure was weak and she had stood up too quickly.

"Please, let me help you," Heisuke said, extending his hand to her again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to trouble you," she said, taking his hand. As she was trying to stand, however, her face contorted in pain and she fell back down. She rubbed her right ankle.

"Did you sprain it?" he asked.

"No, no, I'm fine, really," she replied, now trying to stand up on her own, even though her ankle seemed to be causing excruciating pain. She was somehow able to stand with Heisuke's help, but it was impossible for her to walk.

"Where do you live?" Heisuke asked.

"No, no, please don't worry about it. I can get back by myself," she said, wincing.

"Is there someone who can come pick you up?"

"That's okay, I'll manage somehow." She seemed determined not to impose herself on Heisuke in any way. He could understand why, and in all honesty he didn't want to be burdened by her either, but there was no way he could just send her off like this.

"Where do you live? You're simply going to have to tell me," he said in a slightly harsh tone.

Taken aback, she replied, "I live...in Chofu."

"Chofu. I live in the same direction. We can share a taxi."

"No, that's okay, really. I can walk back."

"Out of the question. People are staring at us, so please just do as I say." He took her black handbag, department store shopping bag, and folding umbrella in his right hand, while helping her walk with his left. With that extra support she was able to limp to a waiting taxi.

They hardly said anything in the car. She repeatedly apologized, and he repeatedly responded by telling her not to worry about it.

The taxi stopped in front of a pre-fab, two-storey apartment building. Heisuke tried to pay for the taxi, but Mrs. Kajikawa insisted that she would pay; they wound up splitting the fare.

"Okay, here I am. Thank you for everything," she said, expecting him to take the taxi home, but instead he got out to help her carry her things up to her second-floor apartment. After struggling together mightily to get up the stairs, she felt bad about just sending him away without having shown her appreciation, so she invited him in for a cup of tea.

"Please don't go to the trouble," he replied. "I think I'll just be

going home."

"After everything you've done for me it wouldn't be right. I'll have some tea made." Heisuke wondered what she meant by that: "have some tea made." By whom?

There was a nameplate next to the door inscribed with the name Yukihiro Kajikawa, underneath which were the names Seiko and Itsumi. Seiko appeared to be Mrs. Kajikawa's first name, while Itsumi was probably her daughter. As she opened the door, Kajikawa called out "Itsumi! Itsumi!" Heisuke could hear somebody moving around inside and soon a girl in her early teens with short hair emerged into view. She seemed a bit surprised to see Heisuke standing in the doorway.

Seiko Kajikawa explained to her why Heisuke was there while she listened with a bored, teenage look of, "Yeah, whatever..."

"Anyway, make some tea for Mr. Sugita and then put out the sitting cushions." Heisuke began to feel uncomfortable. "I apologize about her," she said, turning to him and bowing once again. "But please do at least have a cup of tea."

Heisuke felt it would be unforgivable to refuse somebody who was so pitiful. "Well, if you insist," he said, pulling off his shoes.

It was a two-bedroom apartment with a dining room and kitchen but no living room. The front door led directly to a bearably roomy kitchen-dinette that was connected to two adjoining rooms, one Western-style, the other a tatami room. Heisuke assumed that Mr. Kajikawa's Buddhist altar was in the tatami room, as he could smell incense floating in through the door.

All of a sudden, Seiko Kajikawa fell to the ground. Heisuke thought she was having yet another dizzy spell, but that turned out not to be the case: she was in fact prostrating herself before him.

"Mr. Sugita. Please, please accept my sincerest apologies. When I think about your poor wife, the words just escape me..." she said, pressing her forehead to the carpeting.

"Mrs. Kajikawa, please stop. I don't want this, please...just stop," he said, pulling her up by her arm, wondering whether the whole point of inviting him in had been to put on this display.

"Ow," she cried, wincing in pain as she put weight on her sprained ankle.

"Are you okay?" he asked, helping her up and into a chair.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "I just feel that it is impossible for me to apologize enough."

"Well, believe me when I say that you've apologized more than enough," Heisuke said.

There was an awkward silence. The tea kettle began to pipe, so Itsumi turned off the gas and started steeping the tea in a pot. She poured some into a cup that looked as if it were some kind of promotional prize, and then placed it in front of Heisuke.

"Thanks," he said. After a pause he continued, "Are you in junior high now?"

"Yes. I'm in the eighth grade."

"I see. You're two years older than my daughter."

There had been no particular reason for him to begin talking about Monami, but once he started, Seiko Kajikawa wasn't content to let the subject drop. "It's so terrible what your daughter had to go through, on top of everything else. If possible, I would like to meet her and apologize to her directly," she said in her grating and relentless way.

My daughter's dead, he wanted to say. Only her body remains. Whereas my wife has lost her body. All of this, because of your husband.

"My father," Itsumi said unexpectedly, "was very tired."

"Is that right?" Heisuke asked, and she nodded.

"He didn't have a single day off from spring of last year until the day of the accident, not even on New Year's Day. He only came home to sleep and then he would be off to work again. He was always beat, and the day of the accident he was complaining about how he didn't even have time for a nap."

Heisuke thought about what he had just heard, then turned to Seiko. "It seems pretty certain then that overwork might have been a cause."

She nodded. "January and February were especially bad. Normally they had a spare room at the ski resort set aside for the drivers to take their naps in, but during the busy three-day weekends and so on that room was used by customers, so I heard that the drivers were dozing off in the cafeteria. There were two drivers to a bus and they drove in shifts, but my husband said it was impossible to sleep very soundly on the bus. Plus the fact that he had to put the chains on the wheels and take them off when they were entering and leaving the mountains. Basically, they hardly had any time to rest at all."

"Sounds pretty tough," Heisuke said, but he found it hard to feel completely sympathetic. It sounded to him as if they were making excuses for something that was fundamentally inexcusable. "But you know,"

he added, "taking proper care of oneself is also part of the job."

Seiko Kajikawa looked as if she had just been slapped in the face. She blinked and looked down.

"We're poor," Itsumi said. "Dad pushed himself as hard as he did to try to make life better for us."

"I don't think you'd be living in a place like this if you were poor, exactly," Heisuke said.

"We're here only because dad tried so hard." She turned around and went into her bedroom.

"I'm very sorry. We've been terribly rude," Seiko said, lowering her head.

"That's quite alright," he replied, sipping the cheap, weak tea. As he stood up to leave, the phone rang. The phone was on a small shelf by the wall.

Seiko reached out for the receiver.

"It's a crank call!" Itsumi shouted out from her room. Seiko hesitated for a moment, but decided to pick it up.

"Hello?" she said into the receiver. After listening for a couple of seconds she began to frown, and then pulled the earphone away from her ear. A few seconds later, she quietly replaced the handset in its cradle.

"So it was a crank caller?" Heisuke asked.

She nodded slightly. "Recently we were getting much fewer of them. But then they start up again, as if whoever was doing it had forgotten about it for a while and then all of a sudden remembered that they have to keep harassing us."

Itsumi's response to the ringing suggested to Heisuke that they'd already gotten a few calls earlier today, and that Itsumi was the one who'd had to field them. A sickening feeling came over him. He tried to dispel it by escaping the cause. "Well, I think I'll be going," he said, standing briskly.

"Thank you for coming," Seiko said.

As he was putting his shoes back on, the phone rang again. Seiko looked at him helplessly, and then once again she reached out for the phone.

Heisuke lightly stopped her hand with his own. She looked at him in surprise as he picked up the phone himself.

"Murderer."

The voice on the other end sounded as if it were coming out of the

bottom of a very deep well. It was a voice so preternaturally deep that it was difficult to tell whether it belonged to a man or a woman.

"How much longer are you going to go on living?" the voice continued. "Why not just hurry up and die? There's no other way to make up for what you've done. You'd better hang yourself by 2:00 a.m. tonight. Otherwise..."

"Fuck off!" Heisuke roared into the phone. The caller was apparently startled to hear a man's voice answer and quickly hung up. Only a dial tone was left. Heisuke replaced the receiver.

"Have you told the police about this?" he asked.

"No. I've heard that they don't really take this kind of thing very seriously."

That was probably true, Heisuke noted silently. It would be difficult for her to appeal to the police with only crank calls as evidence.

Heisuke noticed what looked like a small card next to the phone. He picked it up and looked at it. It was an employee ID, with a small photograph of Seiko affixed, and the abbreviation "SEAS." embossed in thick letters. This probably signified that she was a seasonal employee without benefits, and not a full-time employee.

"Tabata Manufacturing. That's a metal processing firm, isn't it?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"You're one of our suppliers. I've visited your plant many times."

"Oh, do you work for Bigood?"

Heisuke nodded. His company was called Bigood, Incorporated. The founder's family name was Ohki, the Chinese characters for which literally mean "big tree" or "big wood." Thinking of a name for his company, he translated his own surname into English and then collapsed the two words into one: hence, Bigood.

"How long have you been working there?" Heisuke asked.

"Since last summer," Seiko answered. Heisuke was surprised to hear this, as he had assumed that she only started working in order to support herself and her daughter after her husband had died.

"I feel strange to be telling you this, but we *really* don't have any money," she said, guessing at what he was thinking. "Even though my husband worked without a day's rest, we still had nothing left at the end of the month."

"If you spend money it disappears," Heisuke said.

"I don't recall ever having wasted any," she replied.

"If your husband really was working that much, it's hard to imag-

ine that he would be making so little."

"I'm telling you the truth. All of his extra work was just enough to keep us out of debt."

"What kind of slave wages must they have been paying him then?" he wondered out loud.

"I don't know," she replied. "My husband never showed me the details. He withdrew our living expenses from the bank and gave that cash to me. It was hardly enough to make do on, so I started working as well."

"Perhaps your husband was just big on saving. For all you know there may be a large sum waiting for you in the bank right now."

Seiko shook her head. "There are no savings."

Heisuke found it all rather strange. If bus drivers actually made so little money nobody would want to take the job. On the other hand, he didn't believe that Seiko Kajikawa was lying. "Well, the exact nature of the working conditions at the bus company will soon come to light," he said with a somewhat disinterested air as he put his shoes on. He wasn't completely indifferent to her plight, but by the same token he felt it would be a betrayal of his fellow mourners if he began seeing things too strongly from her point of view.

"I'll be going now. Please take good care of your ankle," he said as he departed. Seiko Kajikawa seemed to say something back to him, but he didn't hear what it was.

They had fried rice with bamboo shoots, pot-steamed vegetables, and yellowtail teriyaki for dinner. These were all some of Heisuke's favorite dishes.

"The rice is a bit too salty," Naoko said, but Heisuke didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. Naoko was sensitive to salt and always worried over putting too much of it in her cooking.

"How did things go after this morning's incident?" he asked.

"This morning's incident?"

"When I confused the Tajima and Endo kids."

Naoko laughed. "Oh, that. Yeah, that was a close call, but fortunately I don't think anybody really noticed."

"That's a relief. It's incredible, though, how much kids can change in just one year."

"That gave me a lot of trouble today. Especially when it comes to sixth graders: not only do they grow taller but their faces change so quickly as well. I had to start again from scratch putting the names to the faces."

"Were you able to remember them all?"

"No way, not yet. I'll just have to keep them fooled until I can remember all of them," she said as she ate her rice out of Naoko's bowl. The fact that it wasn't Monami's bowl made him feel that something was out of place.

"By the way, that Endo boy is quite something," Heisuke said. "Where does he get off being so chummy with you?...I mean, with Monami."

"Does it bother you?" Naoko said with a mischievous grin.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Ah, so it bothers you after all. It bothers me too."

"Okay, cut the crap for a second and tell me what it's all about."

"Well, it so happens that Naoto Endo is Monami's Number One boyfriend."

"Number One? What the hell's that mean?"

"You know, like how Arab sheiks have a Number One wife, and a Number Two wife? Like that."

"You've got to be kidding me. Okay, so who are the Number Two

and Number Three boyfriends?"

"Well, I don't think there's a strict ranking of the remainder, but one thing that's for certain is that Naoto Endo is Number One. It seems that they got sweet on each other this past winter."

"What, with that impudent little brat?" he spat out. He turned his attention to his vegetable broth, which Naoko had made with her characteristic touch of using bonito fish stock. It was absolutely delicious.

Naoko laughed and laughed. "You may not be interested in hearing this, but our little Monami was actually quite popular with the boys. When I walk down the hall even the boys from the other grades knock into me."

"They're probably just teasing, that's all."

"Don't be a fool. You know that at that age, when boys like a girl, they actually pretend to dislike her. Don't you remember how it was?"

"I don't remember things like that."

After they finished eating Heisuke helped Naoko wash the dishes. Her job was to rinse them off after he had scrubbed them down. She asked him why he wanted to help her, when he had never wanted to before.

"With Naoko I figured she could handle it, but when I look at those small hands of yours I just can't let you do it by yourself. I'm worried you might break something and cut yourself," he replied.

"But you know it's not like I was that much taller than Monami is now, or my hands bigger. She's just much thinner than I was."

"You were thin too," he said, recalling what Naoko had looked like. She was 5'2" and had weighed 110 pounds plus change.

"You probably didn't know this, but Monami was starting to get really good at housework. She probably could have cooked the meal I made tonight by herself."

"Is that so?"

"And she was good at sewing, too. She's the one who sewed back the button on your charcoal gray jacket, though you probably didn't even notice."

"No, not at all. I really should have..." he said, looking frequently at Naoko, or rather, Monami. He decided then that he would treasure that button as a memento of his lost daughter.

"But she wasn't very strong," Naoko said, rolling her right shoulder. "My arm has gotten all tired out just from wiping the dishes."

That's because your arms are half as thick as they used to be, he thought to himself.

"So how was the meeting today?" she asked.

"Not bad, but we didn't exactly make great progress." He told her that they were looking at 80 million yen per person in compensation, but Naoko didn't seem particularly interested.

"If we aim for 80 million, we'll probably wind up getting less," Heisuke added.

"That's for sure," she replied. They had finished doing the dishes and Naoko was rinsing the dish soap from her hands under the hot water.

"Something strange happened after the meeting, though," Heisuke said.

"Strange?"

Heisuke told her about the run-in with Seiko Kajikawa and the almost surreal episode that took place at her apartment. Naoko listened to his recounting with a somewhat horrified fascination.

"That sounds like it was quite an ordeal."

"It was sort of unexpected, that's for sure."

They went together to the tatami room. Normally they would be turning on the television at about this time, but before they did, Naoko said, "Now that you mention it, I do remember something."

"About what?"

"About the bus that day."

"What?"

"I remember the two drivers were talking about something. I could sort of overhear what they were saying. We were making a rest stop and the other passengers had all gotten out to go to the bathroom or whatever, but Monami and I stayed on the bus. Or rather, Monami was sleeping so peacefully that I thought it would be a shame to wake her. Anyway, while I was wondering what to do, I heard them talking. The seat in front of us was for the reserve driver to nap in, and in front of that was the driver's seat."

"Did they say anything unusual?"

"Not particularly. But the thing that caught my attention was that they were saying things like, 'I wonder if I should have another of those *Junker* stamina drinks,' and 'Is the caffeine still working?' and so on. I'm not sure who was talking to who, though."

That alone was enough to suggest overwork, Heisuke thought.

"Maybe you should tell the police about that," he said. In fact, immediately after the accident the Nagano Prefecture Police Department had approached Heisuke about interviewing Monami. They were assembling the testimony of all of the survivors. At the time, his daughter was still silent from the shock of the accident and so Heisuke refused. A few days later, probably after learning from the newspapers that Monami was speaking again, they repeated their request. Heisuke refused again, explaining that her emotional condition was still unstable, and that she had been sleeping during the accident anyway so there was little point in asking her anything. The real reason of course was that he was jealously guarding her privacy.

"I doubt it's worth it, for something that small," she said.

"Yeah, you're right," he nodded. He still felt strongly about not wanting to put her on a witness stand.

"But that's not all they said," she added.

"No?"

"One of the drivers said something like, 'I'm glad to be able to take the day off today, but you, what are you going to do with all that extra money?'"

"Aha! So he was *deliberately* overworking himself," Heisuke responded.

"There's no other explanation for it, is there? The other driver said, 'What are you going to do with *all that extra money*.' But that Kajikawa woman said that no matter how hard he worked their income didn't go up that much, right?"

"That's what she said."

"But if his income really didn't increase no matter how much overtime he worked, why would that other guy say 'what are you going to do with all that extra money'? That 'extra money' was surely the overtime pay."

"Yeah, but 'extra' money could mean a lot of things depending on the person."

"I guess, but you saw how they lived, right? It didn't strike you as particularly luxurious, right?"

"Not very, no." No living room to speak of. A chintzy prefab apartment building. Promotional prize teacups.

"So what does this all mean?" Heisuke added. "He made a lot of money but the family didn't have any."

"It looks that way."

"Kajikawa wasn't giving his money to his family but using it for another purpose."

"Probably."

"Gambling, maybe?"

"Women?"

So it was that, was it? At least, women were the prime candidate.

"His wife didn't say anything about that."

"Maybe he kept it well hidden. Or maybe she's going senile."

"That just might be," Heisuke replied, thinking back on Seiko Kajikawa's gaunt face. She didn't seem to be the lying type. Either that or she was a very talented actress.

Naoko began laughing hysterically. Heisuke was completely baffled. What on earth could she be laughing about? But it was such a typical Monami laugh: eyes wide open and looking up slightly at a point in space. "What's going on?" he asked.

"God, it's so wretched," she said, that bizarre smile still pasted on her face.

"Wretched? What?"

"Think about it," she said, looking at Heisuke. "Isn't it completely absurd what caused all of this? Some guy, either because he wants to keep a mistress or he wants to bet on the horses, I'm not sure which, but for some totally stupid reason works himself ragged behind the wheel of a bus to make extra money. The result is an accident that kills dozens of perfectly innocent people and that leads to this whole thing that happened with me and Monami. What a shitty way to go," she muttered. Her words were as sharp and as cold as a shard of ice.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," Heisuke said. "We'll find out exactly what he used that money for."

"It's okay, honey. There's no need. What good would it do now, anyway? I'm sorry, I just couldn't help but grumble at the grotesque stupidity of it all," she said, smiling. The smile seemed more real, more natural this time.

"No, I feel the same way as you. I won't have any peace of mind until I know why this happened," he said, looking at the picture of Naoko that sat upon the Buddhist altar.

Although Heisuke enthusiastically promised to investigate the Kajikawa matter further, two weeks had passed and he still hadn't done anything. He simply hadn't had the time. The Japanese economy was heating up and the orders were coming in to Heisuke's plant at a breathless pace; overtime hours increased and the days off were fewer and farther between. His current assignment was in the electronic fuel injector plant. These new, computer-controlled injectors had taken the place of traditional carburetors, and for Heisuke they seemed to symbolize society's extravagant new tastes.

He spent his Wednesday lunch break playing cards with his usual group at the usual place at the usual time. The usual place was the break room near the entrance of the factory, where they sat around a meeting table. The usual group was composed of his friends who worked in the same assembly line. There were veterans who had worked at the same plant for thirty years as well as company freshmen who were not yet twenty years old. The game was bridge for seven and of course they played for money. The winnings and losses were tallied at the end of every month, but Heisuke could remember very few months when he actually looked forward to that day.

"Not *again*," Heisuke groaned as the young man next to him, Takuro, was poised to take the lead. Takuro had entered the company two years earlier. "Take it easy on me, okay?" Heisuke said, slapping his cards on the table. "I won't be working the night shift for a while so my wallet's not exactly bursting."

"Huh? I thought our unit was working the night shift next week," Takuro asked. He always wore his work cap at an angle so as not to dishevel his rigidly moussed hair.

"*You* all are. I'm the only one who isn't. Have fun without me."

"But you're the unit leader. How come you're the only one not working the night shift?"

"Just because."

Not satisfied with this answer, Takuro was about to say something else when the guy next to him, Tatsuo Nakao, punched him on the shoulder as if to say, "Are you dim, or what?"

"Is that cool with the division chief?" Nakao asked. He was two

years older than Heisuke, an eccentric type who had trained as a sushi chef before coming to the firm.

"Yeah. I'll be helping B unit during the day shift next week."

"Oh yeah, that's right, I heard B unit was short of people. It's good that you'll be there to help them out," Nakao said. Young Takuro seemed finally to catch on and nodded silently.

Heisuke had asked the division chief, Kosaka, to relieve him from night shift duty on the first day that he went back to work after the accident. If he worked the night shift Naoko would have to spend the nights alone during that entire week. It was discomfiting enough to leave a grown woman alone at home during the night, to say nothing of the fact that Naoko now had the body of an eleven-year-old.

"Give me some time to think about it," Kosaka had said at that time. His formal reply granting Heisuke's request had just come through a couple days ago. It would be tough to lose the extra night-shift pay, but Heisuke had decided that, when it came to Naoko's safety, he would rather be safe than sorry.

"Oh, speak of the devil," Nakao said, looking at the entrance. Kosaka was walking in.

"So who's winning, eh?" Kosaka asked, looking down at the score sheet. He was short, had a large head, and a neck so stumpy that it looked like his head was tucked into his shoulders. "Takuro, I see. How about you Heisuke?"

"My track record is unblemished," he replied to collective laughter. He was losing as usual. "But I have a feeling things are going to take a turn for the better," he said, turning his cap backwards and reaching out for his cards.

"I hate to break your streak," Kosaka said to Heisuke, "but do you mind if we have a word?"

Heisuke clicked his tongue and pulled his arm back. "Aww, just when it looked like I was going to get a winning hand."

"We're the ones who ought to be sorry," Takuro said, smiling. "Our sitting duck is leaving us!" Heisuke laughed and sucker-punched him as he got up to follow Kosaka to a nearby bench.

"I'd like you to go to Tabata this afternoon," Kosaka began. "They've been trying to get the new 'D' injector prototype up and running, but they're having some big problems figuring out how to position the nozzle during aperture opening. Anyway, I'm sending our technical team over to have a look, and it would be a great help for you to go

along.”

“Sure, I’ll go take a look.”

The ‘D’ injector was scheduled to go into full-scale production next year. Right now a prototype was being produced on a limited scale at the Tabata Manufacturing Company. The engineers at Bigood were conducting their final tests on Tabata’s prototype. Heisuke was slated to be in charge of the assembly line for this injector when it went into regular production, so it made sense for him to know as much as possible about the device, including any problems it may have had in the development phase.

It quickly occurred to him that there was another reason for him to go: Tabata Manufacturing was where Seiko Kajikawa worked.

“Thanks a lot. I’ll go inform the technical team,” Kosaka said.

“Alright.”

“By the way,” Kosaka added in a hush, “how’s your daughter doing? Things getting back to normal?”

“Well, little by little I suppose,” Heisuke replied, lowering his head.

“I’m glad to hear that. You can’t help thinking about it, though, I know. It’s a fact of life and it never ends,” he said, then took a breath and continued, “and you’ve got to contend with the fact that being a single dad is tough as anything. Especially with a daughter.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Heisuke replied. In truth, he felt less like a single father than like a man living alone with his wife.

“Well, I know it’s still too early to consider it now, but when it comes time to start thinking seriously about you-know-what, don’t be bashful, just give me a holler. I’d be happy to talk it over with you, help in any way I can,” Kosaka said, slapping him on the knee.

Heisuke did a double-take of Kosaka’s oversized head. “Uh, what exactly are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? Getting remarried, of course. Finding a new mom for your daughter.”

“Oh,” Heisuke said, and waved off the suggestion. “No, that’s not going to happen. I have no intention of getting married again.”

“See, that’s what I mean, it’s too early, it’s unthinkable, I know all about it. But do me a favor and just tuck the idea in the back of your head somewhere, and if you ever decide that now’s the time, you just come and see me, alright?” Kosaka said, slapping him on the back this time.

“Oh...okay.”

“That’s the spirit. Okay, I’m off,” he said, getting up. As Heisuke

watched him leave the building, he remembered two things. The first was that Kosaka just loved helping people out. The second was that he had been the go-between when Heisuke married Naoko.

In the afternoon, Heisuke and two members of the technical team, close colleagues of his, drove together to Tabata Manufacturing. Kishima was a bit younger than Heisuke while Kawabe was still in his mid twenties. Whenever they were getting a new assembly line up and running at the plant, the three of them had to spend so much time together getting everything working and ironing out the problems that it was impossible not to get tired of each other, but they had a good working relationship.

Tabata Manufacturing was located in the suburb of Fuchu. It looked as if it had been plunked down in the middle of farm land. The roof was constructed in a zigzag pattern just like the company logo that adorned their promotional materials and training manuals.

Unlike the neatly arrayed production lines at Bigood, the shop floor at Tabata was cluttered with various machine tools of all shapes and sizes. There was nothing haphazard about the arrangement, however: the system was designed for rapid response to Bigood's ever-changing and often unreasonable demands.

Heisuke went with Kishima and Kawabe to inspect the nozzle aperture process of the 'D' injector, and to speak with the unit leader in charge. The unit leader, who was clearly older than Heisuke, was visibly nervous to be having this visit from the parent company; Heisuke wanted to tell him: "We're not all we're cracked up to be either, you know."

The discussion over the problem lasted for about an hour and a half. The unit leader gave them some very useful information gleaned from his first-hand experience with the device. It seemed that there were still quite a few problems, but solving them was not *his* job, rather that of the technical team. Kishima and Kawabe started hammering out some of the issues over a cup of instant coffee.

"I'm just going to go say hello to a friend," Heisuke told them and ventured out onto the factory floor. The majority of the more than one thousand employees at Tabata were male. The women who worked here were mainly in the administrative staff. The problem with searching there, however, was that Tabata, like Bigood, probably didn't hire any part-time clerical personnel. It was therefore unlikely that Seiko Kajikawa, as a seasonal employee, would be working there. As for the female factory workers, the first place to look for them would be the coil

unit. Every engine has an electromagnet placed inside. The job of winding a lead wire around a peg on that electromagnet was one that was generally given to female workers in these kinds of factories. Following his hunch, he began looking for the coiling machines.

The coil unit was located in a far corner of the factory, with ten women working the machines. They were wearing safety goggles and caps so their faces weren't clearly visible. Heisuke tried to get close enough to see them clearly, so close that it made the women feel uneasy, but he couldn't seem to find her—that is, until one woman stopped her work and looked at him quizzically. She made eye contact with him and at that point quickly bowed her head. Her gaunt face made her cap and goggles look excessively large.

She left her post and went to say something to a man who appeared to be her supervisor. The man looked at Heisuke and then nodded back at her. She ran back to the coil unit and removed her goggles. She was indeed Seiko Kajikawa.

"Thank you for all your help the other day," she said, bowing again.

"How's your ankle?"

"Fully recovered, thanks. I'm very sorry to have put you to so much trouble."

"Not at all. Anyway, is it okay for you to leave your station?"

"Yes. I explained everything to the line chief."

Everything? Heisuke wondered. What on earth did she tell him?

Not wanting to distract her coworkers, she led him to the other side of an electrical high-frequency generator. Roughly the size of a large chest of drawers, the box-shaped device used high-frequency electromagnetic energy to temper metal driveshafts.

"I happened to be here on business so I thought I'd search you out."

"Oh, really?" Seiko Kajikawa replied. She seemed nervous.

"Actually, I've been thinking about our discussion. Something just doesn't make any sense."

Seiko looked up with a wounded look on her face.

"I don't believe that your husband was getting paid so little for all of the work he was doing. I have this on good authority. At the very least, there was no need for you to go to work while he was alive."

"But..." she said, looking down again, "we really had very little money."

"Isn't that because your husband was using the money for other

purposes?" Heisuke said, realizing full well the cruel implications of that statement.

Seiko glanced up at him. "Are you saying he was having an affair?"

"Maybe he was gambling. Or maybe he had debts that you didn't know about."

She shook her head. "That's unthinkable. As far as I know there was nothing of the sort."

Husbands often run up debts without their wives knowing, Heisuke wanted to say, but didn't. "You said you never looked at his pay stubs, right?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Not even once? Didn't you ever wonder what his income was?"

"No. Please forgive me," she replied, lowering her head as if she were being scolded by a teacher.

"This is just unbelievable," Heisuke sighed. He truly couldn't accept what he was hearing. If someone asked Naoko how much Heisuke had made that month she could have answered in a second.

"My husband didn't talk about himself very much," Seiko said.

"But how many years were you two together?"

"Six."

"What?"

"Six. We were married for six years."

"Oh," Heisuke said, thinking of Itsumi. "That means your daughter..."

"...is my child from a previous marriage."

"So what happened? Did you and your previous husband get divorced?"

"No. Itsumi's father died of cancer about ten years ago."

"Oh. I see."

A deep pity for this woman, as well as for the girl Itsumi, overtook him. Had six years been long enough for Itsumi to grow close to her new father? "Was this Mr. Kajikawa's first marriage?" he asked.

"No. I understand that he had been married many years earlier, but he never spoke about it so I don't really know all of the details."

"I see," Heisuke said. What on earth am I doing here? he wondered to himself. This is no place to be interrogating this woman about her past. "Anyway, you feel certain that your husband wasn't gambling or seeing other women?"

"I'm certain," she replied in a quiet but firm voice.

Heisuke realized that he shouldn't spend much more time away from his job and looked at his watch. "I think I should be going. I'm sorry to have disturbed you during work."

"Actually, could you wait here just one moment?" she asked. "I'll be right back."

"What is it?"

"Just a moment," she replied as she rushed off somewhere. She returned a few minutes later with a white package in her hand. "This is for your daughter," she said. "I apologize that it's nothing special, just something I received as a gift."

It was a package about the size of a video tape. One could guess from the wrapper that it was a box of white chocolates, probably a gift somebody brought back for her from Hokkaido. "No, I can't," he said. "Please give this to your daughter at home. That's surely what the person who gave it to you intended."

"That's okay," she replied. "I got two boxes, and anyway these are too rich for Itsumi's taste." She pressed the box upon him with surprising strength. A young worker who was pushing a handcart past looked at them, wondering what they were doing standing there in the middle of the factory.

"Well, if you insist," Heisuke replied. "Thank you."

Seiko Kajikawa returned to her work station. The color had returned to her face, as if she had accomplished some important mission.

As Kawabe drove them all back to Bigood, Heisuke opened the box and gave some of the chocolates to the two other men. He would give whatever remained to his coworkers back at the plant. Naoko liked sweets, but he thought it would be difficult for her to enjoy a gift from Seiko Kajikawa.

"Aren't you having any?" Kishima held the box out to Heisuke.

"I guess I'll have one," Heisuke said as he took a small chocolate wafer out of the box and put it in his mouth. How many years had it been since he last had chocolate? he wondered to himself. Naoko had only rarely bought any. She was worried that Monami would get cavities.

Heisuke got home at around nine that night. He had wanted to return as early as possible, but there were two hours of overtime work that he couldn't get out of.

Naoko was watching television in the tatami room. When she saw Heisuke she got up and said, "Hi, honey. I'll have dinner ready in a jiffy." He went upstairs, changed into a pair of sweatpants and a sweater, and then came back down. There was a pleasant aroma wafting out of the kitchen.

"Eggs and chicken on rice tonight, eh?" he said, sniffing the air.

"That's right. And miso soup with clams."

"Sounds great," he said. As he sat down and opened his newspaper, he noticed a book and notebooks pushed into a corner of the room. He picked them up and saw that they were a math textbook and notes. There was a printed problem set tucked into the pages of the book.

"Were you studying?" he called out towards the kitchen.

"Oh, that's my homework," Naoko replied loudly, trying to be heard over the oven fan. "It's due tomorrow."

"Looks tough. Good luck."

"No luck involved. You'll be helping me with it after dinner," she said as she brought the tray in with only two bowls on it, since that's all her thin arms could carry.

"Me?"

"Of course. Who else?" she said as she placed the tray on the dining table and returned to the kitchen to get the miso soup.

"Aren't you the one who said it's not good for children to rely too much on their parents for their homework?"

"I'm not your child," she said as she brought the soup in. "Come on, help me out. It's really difficult stuff."

"It's just algebra, not that hard. Boy, this sure brings back memories."

"Not hard? Maybe not for a graduate of technical school, but it is for me."

"But surely you can handle sixth-grade math?"

"Nope, I'm hopeless. Simple arithmetic is fine, but word problems and charts and graphs and stuff are beyond me. I was always like that."

Heisuke shook his head. He brought his hands together to give thanks for the meal and then reached out for his chopsticks. The food was delicious. Naoko hadn't lost her touch at all. Who cares whether she can do math or not with culinary skills like these? he thought to himself. The harsh reality, of course, was that she still had to go to school and pass her classes.

"What would Monami have done?" Heisuke asked playfully. "Would she have come crying to me saying she didn't understand?"

"Probably not. She was good at math, like you. To be honest, I'm just about ready to give up," she said, frowning in a way that didn't suit an eleven-year-old at all.

"Did something happen?"

"Did? It *does*, all the time. I feel terrible pressure just trying to keep up. All the kids think I'm supposed to be good at math, but of course that's not the case at all. They want me to show them how to do problems, but I can't just pretend to have gotten bad at math all of a sudden. Even the teacher looks at me like, 'This problem should be easy for you Monami,' and I smile back at her, but I'm actually sweating bullets, you know?"

Heisuke pondered this as he sipped his soup. "But it's elementary school math..."

"Please don't talk to me that way."

"Sorry, but you're thirty-six now..." he said and then fell silent. Looking at her, he wasn't sure how old she was. When she heard the words "thirty-six" she seemed to fall limp.

"It doesn't matter *how* old I am. If I don't get it I just don't get it," she said. "If I couldn't solve these problems in elementary school, I won't be able to solve them no matter how old I get."

"Well, I guess that's true." He reached out with his chopsticks for some pickled vegetables. A two-hour television program was just beginning, and he could guess from the actors that it was going to be a crime drama.

"Okay, give me some time to let the meal digest a bit and then we can begin the math crash course," he said.

"I'm not looking forward to it, either, but it has to be done," she said, reaching for some pickled vegetables as well. They sat together in silence, crunching sounds coming from their mouths.

After they finished eating they cleared off the low dining table and

turned it into a study desk. The lesson began. After about an hour of working together on the problems, Naoko seemed pleasantly surprised.

"They're not so difficult, after all," Naoko said with bright eyes after finishing the entire set. "This is the first time in my life I've been able to do math problems so quickly and easily. You're really a good teacher, honey."

"Nah, I didn't do anything special."

"No, you truly are good at it. I'm really beginning to understand this stuff. It's a mystery why I never did before."

Heisuke looked at her. "You know, it might be because..." he said, glancing up at her forehead, "because your brain has changed."

"Really?" she said with great surprise, placing her palm on her forehead.

"You have the consciousness of Naoko, but the brain of Monami. It's the brain that determines what you're good at, what your talents are, so it makes sense that you have the same abilities that Monami had."

"Aha, could be," she replied, as if it all suddenly made sense.

They should have realized it earlier. It was perfectly reasonable that her mental faculties would change along with her physical constitution.

"But I'll never actually learn to *like* math and science the way Monami did," she said.

"I wonder about that. I really wonder about that. Don't you feel a bit differently about math after this lesson than you did before? Do you still dislike it as much?"

Naoko looked at her hands resting upon the table through her long, drooping eyelashes. "I'm not sure," she said and looked up. "Now, when I think about the fact that I've got math class tomorrow, I don't even get cramps in my stomach."

"You did before?"

"Yes, really bad ones," she said smiling. "Anyway. Want me to make some coffee?"

"Yeah, that would be nice."

Naoko started getting to her feet by resting her weight on one knee, but her face suddenly clouded over. She frowned and tilted her head. "That's strange."

"What is?"

"Strange..."

"What's strange?"

"Hold on..." she said as she slowly stood up. She looked down at

Heisuke and blinked several times, then went to the washroom in the hallway. He just assumed that her stomach had begun to cramp and turned on the television. The news had started. They were announcing the baseball scores. Heisuke was a big Tokyo Giants fan and so listened intently, forgetting all about Naoko's complaint.

She still hadn't come out of the toilet by the time the sports news was over and the commercials began. She finally emerged when the weather report started. She had a complicated look on her face, as if she had been thinking deeply about something and had made a startling discovery.

Heisuke had never seen her look quite that way. "What happened?" he asked casually.

"Uhhhh..." she began.

"Something bad?"

"Uhhh...not *bad* exactly," she said, sitting down on the spot where she was standing. Yet there was still something unsettled about her. She stared intently into his face. "I think it's going to be 'red beans and sticky rice' tomorrow."

For a second Heisuke had no idea what she was talking about, but that was only because he was never quick on the uptake. A moment later, he understood. He leaned back as he opened his eyes wide and said, "Oh, *that*."

"Yes," she nodded. "She hadn't had hers yet, even though a lot of her friends were having theirs in fifth grade."

"Hmm..." Heisuke replied, as it was something he wasn't really qualified to comment upon. "So, how is it?"

"What do you mean, 'how is it?'"

"I mean...will it cause you a lot of trouble...you know, now that it's starting?"

"Oh. No, it won't be any particular trouble. I'm used to it. After all, I've been having my period for over twenty years, and there isn't going to be that much anyway since it's only the first time."

"So, what now?"

"Now? I'm wearing a pad, one of the ones I had from before. It's a little too large, though."

"Oh," he said, wondering what else he *could* say under the circumstances. Then he thought of something: if it had been the real Monami going through this experience, they certainly wouldn't be responding to it in such a dazed manner: they would be celebrating. So he said: "Well

then. Congratulations!"

"Thank you," Naoko replied, bowing slightly and smiling. "Monami's body is becoming more like a grown woman's every day. I just hope her menstrual cramps don't become as unbearable as mine were, but I suppose that's the one thing that it would be impossible for her to take after her father in."

"Yeah," Heisuke said, unable to laugh much at her joke. He was still thinking about what she had said earlier: "Monami's body is becoming more like a grown woman's every day." The personality, because it was Naoko's, was already that of a grown woman. He could only wonder what would become of them once her body caught up.

The bathroom in the Sugita home was relatively large compared to the rest of the house. The bathtub was long enough for an adult to stretch his legs out, and the rest of it was just as luxuriantly spacious. Whoever had lived in the house before must certainly have loved bathing, as did Heisuke himself. The bathroom was the thing he liked most about this house.

He took a look around. A shower cap was hanging from a small hook suction-cupped to the wall. He wondered whether Naoko had used it recently. He could see a pink safety razor on the soap caddy. It certainly wasn't Heisuke's: he had long ago switched to an electric razor. Naoko had used it to shave her armpits, but she certainly wouldn't have any need for it now, he thought.

They generally bathed every day in the Sugita household, but since Naoko's period had begun, she wouldn't be entering the bath that evening. Heisuke had been bathing alone since Naoko's hospitalization. Before the accident though, unless he was working the night shift, he had usually gone in together with Naoko or Monami. Bathing together was common practice in Japan, and it also allowed them to take full advantage of the bathroom's sheer spaciousness.

Yet he realized that the day would eventually come that he would no longer be able to bathe together with Naoko. If they were a normal married couple, of course, there would have been nothing wrong with their bathing together until death did them part. But now, she was Naoko and then again she wasn't. On the outside, at least, she was his daughter Monami.

Heisuke had a number of acquaintances with daughters around Monami's age, and they had all begun to moan over the fact that their daughters no longer wanted to bathe with them, saying that their fathers were "gross" and so on. Had Monami still been Monami, she would surely have started doing the same thing. Even though nobody would ever know the difference, Heisuke couldn't help but feel that it would be bad for Monami, or Naoko, to behave differently from others her age. The more he thought about it, the more vexing the problem became, and his mind quickly grew numb. He dipped his wash towel in the water and held it to his forehead as he stepped out of the tub.

Naoko was in the tatami room preparing for the next day at school. She was looking at her class schedule as she packed her textbooks and notes in her bag. Heisuke took a small can of beer out of the refrigerator and sat down next to her. "I meant to ask you this earlier, but why do you do all your work in this room?"

"Why? You don't want me here?"

"No, it's not that. It's just that Monami has her own room and I just thought it would be good to use it." Monami's bedroom was a small Western-style room on the second floor.

"That's true, but, well..." she replied, trying to evade the issue.

"Is there some problem?"

"No, no problem in particular. I just don't want to use that room," she said.

"Why not?"

"Well, I know you'll think it's stupid," she said, looking up at him. "But I want to keep it exactly as it was when she was alive."

"What?"

"I want the stuff on the desk, the position of the comforter on her bed, everything to be as much as possible like it was before. Necessary stuff like textbooks and notes are an exception of course, but everything else I try as hard as possible not to touch," she said, looking at her hands.

Heisuke had been about to open his can of beer, but now his hand was frozen holding the tab. He didn't question Naoko's way of thinking at all; rather, he was disgusted with himself for having been so oblivious to the question of what they would do with Monami's room. In addition to going to school and pretending to be Monami, Naoko also had to clean the house and there was no doubt that the problem must have bothered her every time she came home.

"I see," Heisuke said.

"I'm sorry. I know it's stupid but..."

"Can I see it?" he asked, sitting up.

"Monami's bedroom?"

"Yes."

"Sure," she said. They both stood up and went upstairs.

The second floor of their house had two rooms. The door to the right of the stairwell was Monami's room, while the door to the left was the master bedroom.

When Naoko slowly opened the door to Monami's room, they could smell the faint aroma of shampoo. It was pitch dark inside. Naoko

groped around for the light switch. When she finally found it and flipped it on, the fluorescent lamp flickered for a second and then bathed the room in a strong, white light.

"You're right: nothing's changed," Heisuke said.

This was Monami's room, without doubt. On her desk next to the window there was a magazine with the smiling faces of a boy band on the cover. There was a poster of the same band on the wall. Monami had told Heisuke only a few weeks earlier that they were called "The Boy Squad." The small bed was covered with a comforter with a checkered gingham pattern and had a teddy bear—the teddy bear—sitting next to the pillow. The surface of the bed was slightly indented, as if Monami had just been sleeping in it. He imagined that if he reached out and touched the bed it would still be warm.

"Have you done anything to the room?" he asked.

"I vacuumed the floor. That's about it."

"It's going to get very dusty, though."

"I know," Naoko replied, nodding. "I guess we can't really keep it this way forever."

"No, we can't," Heisuke sighed deeply. His eyes wandered to the chair with the strawberry-patterned seat cushion that Monami always sat on. He remembered that when she was younger the seat was too low for her so Naoko made the cushion to boost her up.

"Naoko, could you sit there for a second?"

"In the chair?"

"Yes."

Trying not to touch anything unnecessarily, Naoko carefully pulled the seat out and slowly sat down in it. She looked at Heisuke. "Is this alright?"

He put his hands on his hips and looked at her carefully. At that moment, it seemed as if Monami was back in his life. He felt the same longing for the past that he felt when he looked at old photographs. "Monami..." he whispered.

Naoko understood. "Could you do me a favor?" she asked. "Could you bring a mirror?"

"A mirror? Which one? Where?"

"Just bring the biggest one you can find."

"Okay," he said, an idea occurring to him. "Wait a second."

He rushed to the adjoining bedroom, a Japanese-style tatami room. There were two chests of drawers next to the wall and Naoko's dresser

was next to the window. All of the furniture had been hers before they got married. Heisuke went to the dresser and used a knife to dislodge the mirror from its frame. He had discovered that you could do this during the move from their last home to this one.

He carried the mirror back to Monami's room. "Good thinking," Naoko said.

Heisuke rested the mirror on the ground and directed it at Naoko. "How's that?"

"Point it up a little more. Now a little to the left. Yes, that's good." Naoko could now see her daughter's figure in the mirror. After looking at the image for a while, she looked up at Heisuke with moist eyes. "It sort of makes me want to take a picture," she said.

"Should I bring the camera?"

"No, there's no point," she replied, and looked once again at her daughter in the mirror. From time to time she would change the angle of her face or move her arms and legs.

"Let's just use the room," Heisuke said. "Clean it properly...what do you say?"

Naoko looked down for a moment, and then looked up. "Yes, you're right," she said, smiling sadly.

They went back to their bedroom, spread out their futon, and got ready for bed. They had slept together on a double futon since getting married and that still hadn't changed, at least not yet.

As Heisuke grew sleepier, he closed his eyes and slowly pounded his shoulders and trapezoid muscles. When he opened his eyes, he saw Naoko staring at him intently. "What's the matter?" he said in a drowsy voice.

She fidgeted uncomfortably for a couple of seconds, then said, "What are we going to do? You know. About *that*..."

"About what?"

"*That*. You know. Doing it."

Heisuke was puzzled for a second, but as soon as he caught on his sleepiness deserted him. His eyes opened widely. "Ah. *That*."

"Yes. What are we going to do?"

Heisuke shrugged. "Nothing. With you like this, there's nothing we can do."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"You 'guess' not? Of course we can't. Don't be foolish...with my

own daughter? Who's in elementary school no less?"

"But honey, how are you going to be able to stand it? Won't the pressure just build up if you can't do it at all?"

"Regardless of whether I can stand it or not, regardless of whether I know in my heart that it's actually you inside, it's out of the question. I'm not some kind of pervert."

"Yes, I know. So...does that mean you'll sleep with other women?"

He sat up on the futon and crossed his legs. "I actually haven't thought about it. Why are you bringing all of this up, anyway? Do you have...you know, the urge?"

She had often had it before the accident. There were times in those days when she had poked his side while he was sleeping. "Wake up," she'd whisper, "I want you..."

She replied, "Now it's just impossible. I can't even bring myself to imagine it. My body just doesn't respond."

"Hmm...Well, that's only natural," Heisuke said. There would be real problems if she were an elementary school student whose body *did* respond to thoughts of sex. "Anyway, there's nothing we can do. Let's just forget about it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Naoko said, pulling a long face. "I mean, I could just use my hands or mouth, but...even that would be bad, right?"

"Are you out of your mind? I'm begging you, just drop it, please. I know you're only talking the way you normally would, but coming out of Monami's mouth it's too much to take."

"Okay, I'm sorry. So, from now on it's off limits."

"Right," Heisuke replied, tucking his legs into bed. Before covering himself with the comforter, he added, "Can I also make a suggestion?"

"What's that?" she said.

"When we're at home I'm calling you 'Naoko' and you're calling me 'honey,' and 'darling,' and so on. I feel we ought to change that."

"You mean, call each other the way we do outside?"

"Yes. I really think we need to get into the habit of doing that. This is how our life is going to be from now on."

"I know," she replied, looking up at the ceiling and thinking. Heisuke looked at her pajamas, which had cartoon cats on them. There was an angry cat, a crying cat, a smiling cat, an aloof cat, and so on.

"You're right. I agree with you," she finally said.

Heisuke nodded.

"From tonight on, I won't call you 'honey' anymore. From now on, you're 'dad,'" she said.

"Yes. I think that's best."

"Well then, good night, dad."

"Good night...Monami."

Heisuke covered himself with his futon, but his drowsiness had completely dissipated. After a while he could hear from her slow, rhythmic breathing that Naoko had fallen fast asleep. Children really do sleep easily, don't they? he thought.

Heisuke stared into the darkness, wide awake. Did I lose my daughter, he wondered, or did I lose my wife?

You could make out the man's fleshy jowls from quite a distance away. His thinning hair looked like dried *nori* seaweed that had been pasted on his head. Maybe he was a golf addict who spent a lot of time under the sun; his whole body, including his wide forehead, was tanned a golden brown. Despite that, his face looked oddly bloodless at the same time.

"Somewhere between 40 and 44 million yen..." he said in a somewhat pinched voice. The words shattered the silence, a signal that the battle had commenced. Heisuke didn't want to be here, but escape was out of the question.

"...would be an appropriate sum for compensation, I believe," the man continued. "The amount would vary within that range based upon the sex and age of the deceased."

The speaker was General Manager Tomii of Daikoku Transport. Although he was Heisuke's putative opponent in this process, Heisuke couldn't but feel bad about the utterly thankless task this man had to face. After all, he wasn't the one personally responsible for the accident.

The negotiations between the survivors' association and Daikoku Transport were taking place in the same conference room at the same hotel in Shinjuku. Three months had elapsed since the accident. It was a Saturday, and almost all of the members of the association were present. Daikoku had sent five representatives and a legal counsel in addition to Mr. Tomii. The seven of them were sitting in a row at the front of the hall facing the assembled survivors. It reminded Heisuke of a press conference.

"What exactly is the basis for that figure?" the association's lawyer, Mr. Mukai, asked.

Tomii, who had just sat down, stood back up to reply. "The figure was calculated in accordance with precedents set in accidents of this type. I would also like you to understand that this amount is very close to the upper limit that our company can reasonably disburse. Even the Transport Ministry has indicated that our offer demonstrates the utmost good will."

The steward Hayashida raised his hand. "That amount is the maximum liability set by your company in cases when the accident is caused

by unforeseeable factors and not by company negligence. Such cases might include, for example, sudden changes in weather or being hit by another car through no fault of the driver. But this case is different."

"What exactly are you implying?" Tomii asked.

"We believe that this was not simply an unavoidable accident, but rather a case of human negligence. To put it another way, we consider this equivalent to involuntary manslaughter. Is this not the case, after all? If you take a fatigued, overworked driver who hasn't had a day off in months and put him in front of the wheel of a ski bus—a vehicle that is difficult to operate even under the best of circumstances—it's patently obvious that you will have some sort of accident. To place paying passengers on a such a vehicle in such dangerous circumstances is nothing short of criminal. I can only think of it as sheer and utter disregard for the lives of those human beings. It's nothing more than an evasion of responsibility to compare something that amounts to murder with previous traffic accidents."

Hayashida delivered his speech with breathless agitation, and then sat back down. A few people quietly clapped.

The company representatives looked miserable. They hadn't expected to hear words like "manslaughter" and "murder," but given the situation their company was in, it would be difficult for them to deny it: just the previous day, the Labor Standards Bureau had sent papers to the Tokyo District Court charging two Daikoku executives with violations of labor law. Just prior to that, the Kanto Region Transport Bureau suspended eight of Daikoku's tourist buses from operation for fourteen days after a surprise safety inspection irrefutably revealed that the company had violated safety rules by overworking their drivers. As many as four drivers hadn't had a day off in nearly a month, which constituted illegal overwork according to the laws regulating transport industries. In addition, the Nagano Prefecture Police's search of the Daikoku premises in search of evidence of traffic violations was continuing and could potentially yield additional sanctions against the company. All of this gave the survivors something of a tail wind, which no doubt allowed Hayashida to speak as forcefully as he did.

"The fact that you won't admit your crime just stinks to high heaven," the man sitting next to Heisuke called out. It was Mr. Fujisaki, the man who had lost both of his twin daughters in one blow. "And I just read in the paper the day before yesterday that you were blaming the driver for his overwork."

"No, actually..." another of the company representatives stood up to speak. His name, as Heisuke had learned for the first time earlier in the day, was Kasamatsu and he was the Route Operations Manager at Daikoku. "The driver was not ordered by the company to do the extra work nor was he coerced in any way. The fact of the matter is that Mr. Kajikawa personally requested the scheduling manager to give him as much work as possible."

Heisuke looked at Kasamatsu's face.

"That's baloney..." Fujisaki shot back. "Is there really anybody in this world who would *want* to work without a single day's rest, even if he desperately wanted the money?"

"It's the truth. We conducted an internal investigation of the matter and that is what we found," Kasamatsu replied heatedly.

Heisuke was inclined to believe him. After all, Naoko had heard the replacement driver ask Kajikawa, "what are you going to do with all that extra money?" This clearly meant that Kajikawa had deliberately *chosen* to work excessive hours. There was no doubt about it, Heisuke thought: Kajikawa needed money. But what did he need it *for*?

"Even if we accept that as the case," the lawyer Mukai broke in, "that still doesn't absolve you of responsibility. The Labor Standards Act stipulates that even when the employee himself requests to work excessive hours, it is a violation of the law to allow him to do so."

"Yes, we understand that," Kasamatsu replied, bowing his head. "And that is why we are not trying to run away from our responsibility. I just wanted to clarify what seems to be a misunderstanding concerning the newspaper article from the other day. Insofar as Mr. Kajikawa is concerned, he was *not* coerced or forced into—"

"But how is it any different from coercion?" Hayashida broke in. He was holding what looked to be some notes in his hand. "These figures are two years old so perhaps somewhat dated, but it says here that bus drivers work over sixty hours *more* per month than the average worker in other industries. They work an average of 50 hours of overtime per month—that's three and half times as many overtime hours as the average worker in other industries. The reason for this is obvious: bus drivers have relatively lower wages than other workers, and therefore have to make up for it with more overtime. This tendency is especially common among drivers in their thirties and forties who are trying to raise and educate children. This was also the case with drivers at Daikoku, was it not?"

The Daikoku executives were unable to refute these words and sank into silence. One of them was even nodding.

The General Manager, Tomii, felt the conversation was swerving off track and tried to bring it back under control. "At this point, perhaps it would be appropriate to ask the members of the association what kind of compensation you have in mind," he said.

The four stewards, led by Hayashida, began to confer quietly with the lawyer Mukai. Their seats were all arranged in a row apart from the other members, which signified that the group had entrusted them with their collective voice in these negotiations.

After a considerable wait, Mukai finally spoke. "There is a consensus that there should be uniform compensation for all victims, irrespective of age or sex. With regard to the monetary sum, we have discussed the matter repeatedly and have agreed upon a figure below which we do not wish to go. The figure we have agreed upon is 80 million yen per victim."

The words, so lightly spoken, hit the Daikoku Transport representatives like an anvil. Their heads sank down as if from the weight. General Manager Tomii, the leader of the delegation, held his graying head in his hands. Although he was about to take over the reins of the company from the former president, who had just resigned, it was clear to Heisuke that the man was absolutely miserable. It was clear that it would take a long time to reach a compromise, and this realization made Heisuke's spirits sink.

The proceedings ended with the Daikoku Transport team promising to consider the matter further. Heisuke couldn't be sure whether things were working to their advantage or not, but the mood of the stewards and Mukai suggested that they had taken a significant step forward.

When Heisuke stepped out into the hallway, he saw the Daikoku representatives putting away their paperwork and making ready to leave. Kasamatsu was standing slightly apart from the rest, writing something into a file. Heisuke approached him. "Excuse me," he said.

Kasamatsu was caught off guard. He was clearly surprised that a member of the association was talking to him. He looked Heisuke over from top to bottom and then warily replied, "May I help you?"

"It's about what you were saying earlier about Mr. Kajikawa, about how he actually wanted to do all of that extra work."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any idea why he would do that? I mean, have you

heard anything about him needing money for some special purpose?"

"No, I haven't heard anything about that from his supervisor, I'm afraid," Kasamatsu replied, somewhat puzzled. It made no sense to him why one of the victims would want to know that.

"Mr. Sugita," somebody called out.

Heisuke turned to see Hayashida standing some distance behind him. He bowed to Kasamatsu and went to speak to Hayashida.

"Mr. Sugita, having personal conversations with representatives of the other party is not a good idea. Please don't do that," Hayashida said, frowning severely.

"I'm terribly sorry," Heisuke replied, even though it wasn't a personal conversation at all but rather an attempt to understand the cause of the accident.

It made no difference to Heisuke how much they got in compensation. Needless to say, he expected to get something rather than nothing, and the more the better, but he had no desire to spend time or energy worrying about it. What rankled him, rather, was the fact that the cause of the accident was not yet clear. The consensus seemed to be that the driver had made a mistake due to fatigue, but it was still vague exactly *why* the driver had put himself into that position. Because he wanted money, of course, but for what? Did he want a life of luxury? Did he have debts? Was he keeping a mistress? Was he a gambling addict? Heisuke wanted at least to know that much, and there was no way he could accept *not* knowing, no matter how he tried.

He caught sight of Fujisaki buttonholing the lawyer Mukai, and could make out parts of the conversation. Fujisaki seemed to be telling Mukai that under no circumstances should they go any lower than 100 million yen. The lawyer looked perplexed and tried to explain to Fujisaki that the group had already settled upon 80 million.

As he was about to buy a ticket at Shinjuku Station, Heisuke realized he didn't have any change. He found a newspaper kiosk and considered buying a newsweekly, which would allow him to break a large bill and would also help kill time on the train ride home. The only problem was that he couldn't find the magazine he normally read. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the cover of a men's weekly. To be more specific, he was drawn to the photograph of a woman striking an erotic pose. One could tell just from the title of the magazine—*Celestial Pleasures*—exactly what kind of periodical it was.

Heisuke had never bought one of these so-called erotic magazines before. He had seen them strewn about the locker room at work, but he had never actually picked one up and read it.

He decided to buy it, but it wouldn't be easy. The shop clerk was a fat woman around fifty, and he didn't want her to think that he was some kind of lecher. The whole idea suddenly became more troubling than he had anticipated. He decided to give up and instead picked out a normal newsweekly that he wasn't even that interested in reading. He opened his wallet.

At that moment a young businessman came up next to him. After looking around a bit, the man quite nonchalantly reached out for *Celestial Pleasures* and handed the clerk a thousand-yen bill. The woman indifferently handed the man his change, not paying the slightest attention to the magazine's title.

That's it! Heisuke realized. All he had to do was be completely natural about it.

He pretended as if something had caught his attention and then decisively pulled *Celestial Pleasures* off the rack, holding it in one hand together with the newsweekly he had just picked up. He unwisely handed the clerk a ten-thousand yen bill. He was hoping to walk away as quickly as possible, but the woman insisted on counting the bills carefully, one by one, to make sure she was giving him the correct change.

Heisuke read the newsweekly on the train ride home. *Celestial Pleasures* was packed away in his briefcase along with the documents pertaining to the settlement negotiations. He felt as excited as an elementary school boy who has just bought a long-desired toy and is taking it

home.

After he got off the train and was nearing his house, he saw Taeko Hashimoto walking towards him. Her long, chestnut-tinted hair was flowing in the breeze. She noticed him as well. She stopped and a spontaneous smile lit up her face.

"Oh, Miss Hashimoto, how nice to see you. I apologize for not having been in touch," he said in greeting, bowing slightly.

"Well it's quite a coincidence because I was just coming back from your house. Nobody was home so I was planning to call another time," she said.

"Oh, really? Well, in that case, why not come visit now?"

"But if you're just on your way home you must be very tired."

"No, it wasn't such a tiring day actually. Please, do come."

"Well, if you don't mind, I think I will make a short visit," she replied. She turned around and the two of them walked side by side back towards Heisuke's house. She said, "Monami wasn't home either. I guess she went off to play with her friends?"

"No, I don't think so," he said, looking at his watch. It would soon be 5:00 p.m. "I think she went out to buy groceries for dinner. It's about that time."

"Oh, I see," she said, nodding. "It looks like Monami has taken over all of her mother's responsibilities."

"Well, she does what she can, and she's been a great help."

"I'm very impressed. I mean, I still eat my mother's cooking."

"Oh, so you still live with your parents?"

"Yes. But they're telling me to leave the house as soon as I can."

"Well I'm sure there are many men who would be happy to take your hand in marriage."

"No, not at all," she said, shaking her head and turning unexpectedly serious. "One doesn't meet many new people working at a school. It's a small, little world unto itself."

In that case maybe I'm the man for the job, Heisuke thought to say as a joke, but decided it would be rather tactless.

When they arrived at the house, Heisuke first rang the doorbell to see if Naoko was home, but there was no reply on the interphone speaker. "Well, it looks like she's not home yet. Perhaps it would be better if she were here?" he asked, thinking that Taeko Hashimoto would be uncomfortable entering a man's house alone, even in her professional

capacity as a teacher.

"No. In fact, you're the one I wanted to see," she said.

"Oh, I see. Come on in, then. The house is a bit small, but..."

Heisuke unlocked the door and opened it for her. "Thank you," she said, completely at ease. As she passed by him the faint aroma of her shampoo drifted under his nose.

He led her into the first-floor tatami room, then went to look inside the refrigerator to see if there was anything to offer her. All he found was beer and barley tea. It would be nice to have juice for times like these, Heisuke thought, but Naoko had stopped buying juice a long time ago saying it was bad for Monami's teeth. She continued that policy even now that she *was*, in a sense, Monami.

He poured some of the cold barley tea into a glass and brought it out for her. "I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble," she said, bowing politely. She was sitting in front of the television on a guest cushion that Naoko had brought when they got married. They had hardly used it until the accident, after which there were so many well-wishers bringing gifts and condolences that he took it out of the closet and left it there on the floor. If that hadn't been the case, he would have had to ask Miss Hashimoto to wait at the door while he frantically searched for it.

"So then, what brings you here today?" he asked. "Is Monami having problems at school?"

"No, no, not at all," she replied, shaking her head. "Nothing unpleasant like that. There was just something I wanted to ask you about."

"Oh," Heisuke said, scratching his forehead. There was something unsettling in her tone of voice. "What is it?"

"I had a conversation with Monami the other day."

"And?"

"She told me that she wanted to go on to a private junior high when she graduates next year."

"What?" Heisuke said, nearly spilling his tea. "A private junior high school? You mean, like Azabu or Kaisei or one of those places?"

"Yes, those are some of the more prestigious prep schools for boys, but in this case I think she meant someplace a bit easier to get into."

Heisuke understood this to mean that Azabu and Kaisei were difficult schools to enter. He himself didn't know the first thing about such matters. The only reason he even knew the names Azabu Junior High and Kaisei Junior High was because Naoko had mentioned them at

some point.

"Are there schools for girls?"

"Of course. There's Ouin and Shirayuri, among others."

"Just from the names alone they sound like pretty high-level schools."

"They are indeed, very high. A student needs to get a T-score of at least 60 on the entrance exam to get in."

"Oh, really," he mumbled, not knowing how to reply. Everybody was obsessed with these "T-scores" but he wasn't quite sure what they meant. He paused a few seconds and then opened his eyes wider. "So, Monami says she wants to go to one of those schools?"

"She doesn't seem to have decided on a specific school yet. She hasn't spoken to you about this at all? I just assumed that she would have discussed this with you already."

"I didn't know anything about it," he replied.

"Oh, I see. It seems then that she came to this decision by herself," Taeko said, and took a sip of her tea. Heisuke looked closely at her mouth, wondering for a second whether she would leave lipstick traces on the rim of the glass. She placed the glass back on the table, lipstick-free.

Heisuke looked away from the glass and crossed his arms. "Hmm, you'd think she would have said something."

"She told me that it's what she's decided for her future."

Heisuke pondered that word "future" as he pictured Naoko's face in his mind's eye. He began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. This was a problem that required some serious attention. Not only was she Monami, sixth-grader, but she would have to be Monami in the future as well. She would no longer be Naoko Sugita in that future existence, and her life would no longer have a close connection with Heisuke's. This was something he had always understood but had never really confronted until today, simply because it was something he didn't want to think about. He just thought that they could indefinitely postpone that moment. Now he realized that Naoko didn't share that way of thinking. Given that it was *her* life that was at stake, that wasn't surprising.

"So, in terms of her future, she thinks the best thing would be for her to go to a private school?"

"Yes, that seems to be her point," Taeko said, looking directly at Heisuke and taking on the earnest, responsible air of homeroom teacher. "Monami says that, taking everything into consideration, working hard

to enter a private junior high school would greatly broaden her range of options."

"Range of options?"

"Yes, that was her exact wording. Her way of speaking these days is extraordinarily mature. She talks as if she's forgotten that she's a child."

Of course she does, Heisuke thought to himself, but right now he had to keep up the charade. "She's just trying to be precocious," he said.

"No, in her case I don't think so. It doesn't seem that it's pretended at all. It all just comes naturally and freely out of her head. Just the other day, some of the boys in the class were making a racket during cleaning period and the way she brought them back in line was enough to put me to shame..." she said, but then stopped suddenly. "Oh, I apologize. I got a bit carried away."

"No, that's quite alright. Well then, what do *you* think she should do, Miss Hashimoto?"

"I personally don't think that there is a necessary link between going to a private school and having greater opportunities in the future. Public schools have their own special merits. In this particular district, Monami would be going to PS 3 Junior High School, which is fairly orderly and has relatively high academic standards. But if Monami is absolutely determined to go to private school, I can respect that. That's why I came to see you today, in order to gauge your feelings on the matter."

"This is the first I'm hearing of it. It's hard for me to say..."

"Yes, I understand. I was surprised when she first told me, as well."

"So, if she wants to go to private school, are there any special steps to be taken?"

"Oh yes, there are many. First you have to compare the various schools and choose the one that's right for you. Monami will also need to receive special instruction in order to prepare for the entrance exam. There are also public practice exams that it would still be a good idea for her to take..."

"Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh," Heisuke nodded at each of the items she had ticked off. "Wait, you mean they have to take a test to get into *junior high school*?"

"Yes," she replied, surprised that he didn't even know that much.

"So, what, are they like intelligence tests?"

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. "There are some schools that

only ask for an essay, but those are a very small minority. Most schools test Japanese and math along with having the students write an essay. Some schools also test science and social studies in addition to what I just mentioned."

"So they're basically no different from high school entrance exams?"

"Yes, that's right. And there's a very important benefit: most private schools encompass the grades from junior high through high school, or have affiliations with other private high schools. Once a student enters a competitive private junior high school, she doesn't have to take the high school entrance exam to continue on at the same school or its affiliate. I think that's one of the things Monami meant when she said it would 'broaden her range of options.'"

"Ah, I see." Heisuke wondered when Naoko had had the time to think all of this through. Probably during the countless hours he was at work.

"However," Taeko Hashimoto continued, "it is difficult for me to approve of students entering the so-called 'exam hell' at such a young age, and, for that reason, I asked Monami to think it over very carefully."

"I see, okay. I'll do my best to discuss this with her."

"It would be great if you could. It's a bit selfish of me to say this, I know, but I would hate to lose a great class leader like Monami. If she begins studying intensively for this entrance exam, she will likely spend much less time with her classmates. That would be a real shame," she said with a slight smile.

As she got up to leave, they heard the front door opening. Naoko said, "I'm home." Taeko was a bit startled and looked at Heisuke.

Naoko continued, "Hey, what are my shoes doing out?" She started walking down the hall towards the tatami room. "Hey, listen, I got something special from the supermarket—taro stalks. Remember we had them about ten years ago at your aunt's house in Osaka? It's quite unusual to find these in Tokyo..."

She froze stiff when she saw Taeko Hashimoto. She looked like a moving doll whose batteries had suddenly died.

"Miss Hashimoto. What are you..." she said, looking back and forth at her and Heisuke.

"I just had a matter to discuss with your father," Taeko replied, looking at the supermarket bag that Naoko was carrying. Red stalks, an inch in diameter, were sticking out of the bag. "So are *those* the taro

stalks?"

"Yes, they are."

"Oh, I see..." Taeko replied, not knowing what else to say.

"No, actually it was a year ago..." Heisuke suddenly broke in. "It was *one year* ago that we had taro stalks with my relatives in Osaka. Don't be so absent-minded, Monami. You said it was *ten* years ago."

"Oh, did I say that? I'm sorry. It was a year ago. Yes. One year."

"Oh, last year then," Taeko said. "How do you prepare it? Do you make a salad out of it or something?"

"No, you boil it," Naoko said. "You have to cook it long enough to get the bitterness out, but other than that it's quite easy to prepare."

"Can you make it all by yourself, Monami? That's wonderful!"

"When we visited our relatives ten—a year ago—they showed me how. I think there's a recipe lying around here somewhere."

"My goodness, that is very, very impressive. I'd like you to show me how to make it some day."

"Any time. Young people today—myself included, well, people these days in general—don't make this kind of food anymore." Now that they were talking about cooking, Naoko's way of talking was leaping years ahead of what one would expect of somebody her age. Heisuke got nervous.

"Monami, Miss Hashimoto was just about to go home now. Let's not keep her too late, okay?"

"Oh, of course," Naoko replied as she walked back towards the front door, bags still in hand.

As Miss Hashimoto was putting on her pumps she said, "What were you saying just then about your shoes, Monami? It was a bit odd."

"Oh, that. I actually said 'my *mom's* shoes.' Your shoes are just like my mother's. I thought dad had left my mom's shoes out, that's all."

"These shoes? Really? I had no idea."

"Is that right?" Heisuke also asked.

Naoko nodded. "Yes. Mom really liked those shoes. But they look much better on you, Miss Hashimoto. They looked a little too flashy on her, and her legs weren't as slender as yours."

"Please, Monami, you're making me terribly self-conscious," Taeko said. She took a step back and bowed to Heisuke. "Good night, and thank you for everything."

"No, not at all. Good night," Heisuke replied.

She then left the house. Heisuke closed and locked the door after

her. When he turned around, Naoko had disappeared. He finally found her in the kitchen, taking the vegetables out of her shopping bag.

"How come you didn't tell me you want to go to a private school?" he asked, looking at the back of her head.

She turned to face him. "I thought of telling you many times."

"So why didn't you? How could you decide on something like that without talking it over with me first?"

"It's not decided yet. I was planning to talk to you about it."

"Well, tell me the reason why. Why do you want to do that?"

"First of all, this is something I've sort of had in the back of mind for a long time."

"What do you mean, 'a long time'?"

"Before all of this happened," Naoko said, spreading her hands out. "Ever since Monami was born. I wanted to send her to a private junior high that would be a feeder school to a good high school and good college. I didn't want her to go through that whole, grueling exam process."

"So in other words, you, Naoko, don't want to suffer in the future so you're taking the easy path now," Heisuke said, loading the words with as much sarcasm as possible.

"Just hear me out to the end, okay? When I realized that I would be going on to junior high next year, the first thing I thought of was a private junior high school because that's what I had been hoping for all along, ever since Monami was born. But once I started really thinking about it, I realized that there was another, completely different reason why *I*, in particular, had to go to a private high school. It's my life too now, you know."

"Completely different reason? What's that?"

"Put simply," Naoko said, leaning against the sink and crossing one leg over the other. "I want to study."

"What?" He hadn't expected this reply at all. After the surprise wore off, he began to find the whole thing rather amusing. He began to laugh. "You can't be serious. What, you think you're going to get into Tokyo University just because you solved some elementary school math problems?"

Naoko's face was completely motionless, completely expressionless.

"I'm totally serious." Her voice was cold. That they were coming out of the mouth of a child made the words feel even colder. Heisuke

quickly stopped laughing.

"Look," she continued, "it's been three months since this whole thing happened. And how do you think I feel now? Do you think I spend every single day just thinking about how terrible it is, why did this have to happen to me, and so on?"

Heisuke shook his head no.

"Of course," Naoko continued, "there are times when I get sad. I never thought of myself as anybody special, but I tried to live my life as best I could anyway. I would continue living that life if it were possible. I would like more than anything to return to the life we had together, the three of us. But I can't. And since I can't return to that life, I have to think about how best to live this one. Every single day I've been asking myself: what should I do? And this is one of the answers I came up with. I don't want to have the same regrets."

"Regrets?" Heisuke asked. Naoko smiled, a sad and gentle little smile.

"You've said you have them too, haven't you? 'I should have studied harder when I was younger' and things like that. Do you think that I don't feel the same way sometimes?"

"I guess you do."

"They say that people try to live out their dreams through their children. I don't know about you, but I had dreams for Monami. Not specific dreams, like I wanted her to be a pianist or a stewardess or whatever. All I wanted for her was to be an independent woman. Emotionally *and* economically, a woman who could support herself without having to depend on a man. A strong woman and, as much as possible, a really first-class woman," Naoko concluded firmly.

"Were you..." Heisuke began, pursing his lips, "...unhappy depending on me? Did you have regrets about that?"

"No, not at all. I was happy and fulfilled being your wife. I'm glad I was with you. I'm not saying that I wanted to throw off the housework and burn myself out in some career."

"But you didn't want Monami to become like you, right?"

Naoko slowly shook her head. "That's not what I'm saying. If a woman who *can* be independent chooses to be a homemaker, there's nothing wrong with that. What I dislike is when a woman becomes a housewife because she isn't independent and so has no other choice. Even if she comes to dislike her husband—and don't misunderstand me, I'm just speaking hypothetically—even if she doesn't want to be with

him anymore, she can't leave because her future would be uncertain. There are a lot of women like that in Japan, aren't there? I simply didn't want Monami to become one of them. Don't you think it would be a miserable life to be shackled to a man you don't even love? In my own case, I was lucky: I had you for a husband. But what if I hadn't been so lucky, what if I had gotten a truly hateful man? Anyway, all the happiness I've had in my life revolved completely around you, all of it."

"Did that fact ever upset you? Make you unhappy?" Heisuke asked.

Naoko took a deep breath and looked directly at her husband. "I can't pretend anymore so I'll just tell you plainly: yes. It made me unhappy. Many times."

"I see," Heisuke said, sighing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. It's not your fault. It's mine. I lived an aimless life, always taking the easy way, and so my life was neither here nor there. Not miserable, not terribly happy either."

"You were average. That's normal."

"That's right. There was nothing especially unhappy about my life. It was just average. It just depends on the person whether being average makes you unhappy or not."

Heisuke tapped the table with his fingertips. He didn't know how to answer her.

"But that's why I've decided to become an independent woman in Monami's place. I've been given a chance to relive my life, knowing what I now know. Nobody ever gets a chance like this in life. I don't want to let this miracle go to waste."

Naoko's impassioned speech reminded Heisuke of a girl he knew once, his classmate in junior high school who became president of the student body. "I understand what you mean," Heisuke said, sorry that he couldn't think of anything better to say.

"Thank you. So you see, what this means is that, if I really seriously want to study, I have to be someplace where that will be possible."

"In other words, at a private junior high," Heisuke said.

"That's what I'm thinking. And not just *any* private junior high school, but one that has high standards. And even if that school is affiliated with a good high school or university, I don't just want to ride up the escalator. Every step of the way, I want to try for the best school that I can possibly get into."

"You've really got a fire in you, don't you? I feel like you're just

going to leave me behind in the dust," he said, smiling and scratching his head. He meant it as a joke, but in fact that's how he really felt. And he knew it.

"I have to have that fire. After all, getting into these schools is a battle."

"But do you really have to begin with junior high? Couldn't you just start working towards this goal with the high school exams? Miss Hashimoto says that PS 3 isn't bad at all."

Naoko firmly shook her head a single time. "No. Miss Hashimoto is still too young to know what she's talking about."

"Too young? She's been a teacher for a few years already."

"It doesn't matter. She's a nice person, but she's got this 'little princess' mentality that she'll never get over with. Her view of the world is too rosy." Though she looked like an eleven-year-old, Naoko spoke from the experience of thirty-six years. Her tone of voice as she criticized the young school teacher was harsh and unforgiving.

"Don't be so hard on her. She came all the way here because she was concerned about you."

"What?" Naoko said, tilting her head to one side. "Why are you taking *her* side?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Naoko said, looking away. She turned her head back to face him and said, "Dad, she just came here to get your approval for me to go to a private junior high. Private school costs a lot more than public school, so of course you have to understand and support the decision, that's all."

Until that moment she had continued to call him "Heisuke," but now it was suddenly "dad." He began to think that she only used "dad" when it served some purpose, but he didn't say anything. "Well, if that's what you really want, it's okay with me," he replied, unable to think of much else to say.

"Thank you," Naoko said with sincere happiness. "I'm going to work really hard, you just wait and see." She paused a few moments. "Anyway, I think I should start boiling the taro stalk." She turned back towards the sink and reached for the chopping board.

In addition to the taro stalk, they had broiled mackerel and kidney beans. Everything was delicious, particularly the taro stalk, which was soaked in soup broth. Heisuke was very impressed at her ability to

expertly prepare a dish she had eaten only once, ten years earlier, and wondered why it was necessary for her to study like mad and go to a good school.

After they finished eating, Naoko began cleaning up. During a break in the ballgame on TV he could hear her washing the dishes. "Hey, you don't have to get everything done right now, you know. Let's just relax together for a while."

"No, I really don't have the time," she said, not stopping for a second. He didn't understand what she meant by that until she was done and started climbing the stairs without even taking a moment to sit down.

"Where are you going?" Heisuke asked.

"To my room," she replied. "From today on, I'm going to study at least two hours a day."

"From today on? Already?"

"Procrastination is the thief of time,' you know," she said. It was bizarre to see an eleven-year-old mouthing such old-fashioned platitudes, but there it was. She climbed the stairs.

Heisuke looked back at the television. The Giants were putting up a poor fight against Hiroshima. Hiroshima had only one out and runners on second and third. The batter was Koji Yamamoto, up against the Giants pitcher Egawa. Normally, Heisuke would be as absorbed in the game as if he were right there at the stadium, but today he couldn't quite concentrate.

His eyes wandered over to his briefcase in the corner of the room. He took it and undid the clasp. He gently pulled out his copy of *Celestial Pleasures*.

He opened the cover to see a pair of breasts suddenly looking back at him. They were nice breasts, round and firm like a couple of upside-down rice bowls side by side. The nipples were a light pink. The model had a svelte body with long legs; she couldn't even have been twenty years old.

Her layout extended for six pages. Each of her poses was calculated to kindle male desire, and the expressions on her face made it seem as if she were in the throes of sexual ecstasy.

Heisuke felt himself growing erect. Without his even being aware of it, his hand slowly found its way to his crotch.

It sure has been a long time, he thought. The last time he had sex with Naoko was the day before the accident. "This is so you don't stray

while I'm gone," she had said to him jokingly as she slipped under the covers that day.

He stood up with the magazine still in his hand. Being careful not to make any noise, he went into the washroom.

He began to masturbate, his eyes fixed on the girl's sleek, beautiful form. In his mind's eye, he superimposed Taeko Hashimoto's face atop the model's nude body.

It was the beginning of July. The endless showers of the June rainy season were tapering off, and that morning was the first clear day in a long time.

"It looks like it's going to be hot today. That'll make everyone happy," Naoko said, pausing from her breakfast and looking outside. They were eating leftover tempura from the night before. Normally they would be having miso soup along with it, but Naoko had slept in that morning and hadn't prepared anything. Heisuke didn't want to make a fuss about it because he knew that she had been up late, studying.

"They'll be happy because it's hot?" he asked.

"Yeah, you know," she said, making a crawling motion.

"Oh, nice. The pool will be open."

"It's been so long since I went swimming. I wonder if I forgot how," Naoko said.

"Nah, it's like riding a bicycle," Heisuke said, heaping some rice into his mouth. Then something occurred to him and looked up. "Wait a sec. Could Monami swim?"

"Oh, yes. She even went to swimming school. She could do the crawl, the breaststroke, just about anything..." she said and stopped in mid-sentence, growing pale. "Oh, breaststroke."

"You can't do the breaststroke, can you?" Heisuke asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Uh-oh, what should I do?"

Heisuke knew that Naoko couldn't do anything except the crawl. When they were younger and went to the beach, she didn't even want to get her hair wet. Once she finally got in the water she splashed around doing her awkward freestyle. Her body had been so young and fresh then, so different from what it later became.

"Now that you mention it, I do remember that Monami competed in the school swim meet last summer. In the breaststroke no less," Heisuke said.

"This is bad. I can't just say that I suddenly forgot how to do the breaststroke. Well, there's no other choice: I'll just have to pretend to be having my period. And it's such a perfect day to go swimming too," Naoko said, irritated. At times like this she really seemed like an elementary school student.

Heisuke left the house a little before she did. As he was putting his shoes on, Naoko suddenly clapped her hands. "Oh, sorry, I forgot to tell you. There was a call for you last night."

"Who was it?"

"Mrs. Kajikawa. The bus driver's wife, I guess."

"Must be. That's the only Kajikawa I know. What did she want?"

"I didn't ask. She just said she'd call again."

"Hmm..." What could she want? he wondered. They hadn't spoken since that day he went to Tabata Manufacturing.

"Maybe you should call her tonight," Naoko said.

"Did you ask for her number?"

"Oops. I didn't. I thought you knew it."

"I don't. Well, no matter, she'll probably call again soon," he said, still unable to think of a reason why Seiko Kajikawa would have called him. It just so happened, though, that when he went to work that day, division chief Kosaka asked him to visit the Tabata plant again.

"They say that they've solved the positioning problems with the 'D' injector prototype so I'd like you to go check it out. They say they're using some special kind of jib, so while you're there I think you should get a copy of their blueprints for that. Of course, if you're too busy I can send someone else..." Kosaka said.

"No, I can go. I want to hear all the details first hand."

"Great, that would be a big help. I'll tell them you're on your way," Kosaka said, looking relieved. Then he suddenly seemed to remember something and grinned mischievously. His face suddenly turned from that of a boss to that of a kindly uncle. "By the way, I've got something you might find interesting."

"Interesting?"

"She's thirty-five years old. A little younger than Naoko, bless her soul. Never married. I saw a picture of her: *pretty good*," he said, shaking his hand as if to say "too hot to handle."

Heisuke shook his head and waved him off. "I'm still not thinking about that."

"*Of course* you're not. That's why you need people like me to think about it *for* you. Why not just meet her once, you know, see if you hit it off?"

"No, no, it's still much too early."

"Really? Well, if you say so. I'm not going to try to force it on you."

But you know," Kosaka said, leaning in to whisper in Heisuke's ear, "it can't be too easy on the family jewels, if you catch my drift. I mean, if things go on like this it's going to be major blue ball time."

"Look," Heisuke replied, "don't worry about it. It hasn't come to that. I don't have those feelings."

"Aw, come on, who's kidding who?" Kosaka said, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Well, anyway, I'll be heading over to Tabata now. See you later," Heisuke said, awkwardly trying to escape.

Heisuke borrowed the company service car and headed for Tabata Manufacturing. He liked making these visits to subcontractors. More correctly, he simply liked to be moving. Doing the same work at the same place with the same people all of the time made him feel as if he were being left behind by the world. It was at such times that he appreciated leaving the factory, even for a short period, to find himself in a new place.

The meeting at Tabata took a little over an hour. The work was relatively relaxed since they weren't trying to solve a problem but rather discussing how a problem had already been solved. The young engineer who was responsible for the project looked rather proud of himself.

After the meeting, Heisuke remembered the call from Seiko Kajikawa and decided to take a walk over to the coil unit. Once there, however, he couldn't find her at all. He went to the man sitting nearby who appeared to be the supervisor and was wearing a badge that said as much. The man had a tough, square face but friendly eyes. Those eyes probably kept a very close watch on the women working under him, else he probably wouldn't be in this position.

"Oh, her. Yeah, she hasn't been in to work in a long time," the supervisor replied when Heisuke asked about Seiko Kajikawa. "Some kind of health problem, I hear. We've been worried about her."

"Is she in the hospital?"

"That I couldn't tell you. Don't know," the man replied. "Uh, did you have some business with Mrs. Kajikawa?"

"No, I'm just an acquaintance," Heisuke replied. He thanked the supervisor and left.

He recalled Seiko's emaciated body and anemic complexion. She must have worked herself too hard, he thought. On top of everything else she had to cope with all of the ostracism and the threatening crank calls. If she were in fact ill, though, why would she be calling me? he wondered. The question started to bother him more and more.

He left the factory and got into his car. As he turned on the engine and was about to shift into first gear, he noticed a road map stuffed into the door's side pocket. He opened it and looked at the detailed map of western Tokyo. Seiko Kajikawa's house in Chofu was right around the corner from Tabata. He looked at his watch. It was a little past 11:00 a.m. Even if he rushed back to work now he would simply get back in time for lunch break.

He put the car into gear and slowly drove off. He had no trouble finding her street since he had seen it before. He stopped in front of the apartment building.

He found her apartment on the second floor and rang the buzzer. There was no answer on the interphone. He was about to press the button again when he heard a voice from behind the door: "Yes?"

It was the daughter's voice. Her name was Itsumi, Heisuke recalled.

"Hi, sorry to barge in on you like this without calling ahead. It's Heisuke Sugita."

The door opened a crack, with the chain still on. Itsumi peered out with a stiff look on her face, looking like a typically ill-tempered teenager.

"Good morning. Is your mother home?"

"Wait a second," she said and quickly shut the door. He was expecting her to take off the chain but she didn't. He could hear some clanging sounds inside.

After some time Itsumi finally opened the door. "Come on in," she said, her expression as flat as ever.

"Thanks," he replied. Just as he walked through the threshold, Seiko Kajikawa emerged from behind the tatami room's sliding door. She had a faint smile and a look of surprise on her haggard face. She was wearing a long, terrycloth dress.

"Mr. Sugita, what brings you here?"

"I was in the neighborhood, at Tabata Manufacturing in fact, so I decided to drop by since I had heard you had called me. Unfortunately I didn't know your number here so I couldn't tell you ahead of time that I was coming."

"Oh, really? Well, actually I knew *your* number because it was on the registry I got from the survivors' association."

"I see," Heisuke nodded. "So I understand you've taken some time off work."

"Yes, that's right. I haven't been feeling so well...please, please do come in. I'll get you something cool to drink."

"No, don't go to any trouble. Actually, I'd just like to know why you called," Heisuke said, rushing into the matter at hand. Before he arrived, he had sworn to himself that he wouldn't go inside.

Seiko Kajikawa could tell that he was in no mood for small talk. She looked down. "Just one second," she said and went back into the tatami room.

Itsumi, who had been washing something in the sink, suddenly appeared with a glass of barley tea on a tray. "Here you go," she said.

"Oh...thanks," he replied, taking the glass. "So, what is it actually that's giving your mother trouble?"

Itsumi hesitated for a moment, then said, "It's...her thyroid gland."

"Oh," Heisuke replied, not sure what to say. He just nodded and drank his barley tea. She must have gotten a diagnosis at the hospital for them to know so specifically what the cause of the trouble was. Heisuke, for his part, had no idea what kind of symptoms thyroid trouble caused or the names of thyroid disorders. He didn't know where the gland was in the body, or what it did.

"Thanks for the tea. So, do you have the day off from school today?"

"No. It's just that she's feeling especially bad today."

"You mean you stayed home just to look after her?"

Itsumi nodded slightly.

He sighed without being aware of it. Some families really did seem cursed. This mother and daughter would certainly qualify as two of the unluckiest people in the world. Heisuke felt a painful heaviness in his heart when he thought of Itsumi: her stepfather, the pillar of the family, is killed and then her mother is incapacitated by disease. How would this child be able to make her way in the world?

Seiko Kajikawa came out again from the tatami room. She was carrying some slips of paper in her hand. "I found these among my husband's things," she said.

Heisuke took the bundle of papers. They were receipts for registered money orders. The recipient in every case was the same: somebody named Noriko Negishi. The mailing dates were almost all at the beginning or end of the month. The amounts ranged from 100,000 to 200,000 yen each time, sometimes even more. The oldest was dated from January of the previous year. There was a piece of note paper

mixed in among the receipts, with a Sapporo, Hokkaido address written on it.

"What is all this?" Heisuke asked, looking at her.

She opened her mouth slowly. "I've heard the name Negishi only once from my husband. I believe it was the maiden name of his first wife."

"So this person is his ex-wife?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Your husband was sending the money to his ex-wife?"

"That's correct," she said, nodding. Heisuke thought he could understand the desolate half-smile that was pasted on her lips. The knowledge that her husband's feelings were divided between his new family and his first wife must have broken her heart.

"When, approximately, did your husband divorce his ex-wife?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think it was about ten years ago."

"Was he sending her an allowance that whole time?" If that were the case he was certainly a very conscientious man, Heisuke thought. In Japan, where alimony laws were lax to the point of nonexistence, even those men who promised to pay alimony and child support usually stopped after a year or so, practically without exception. That, at least, was what Heisuke had heard.

"I don't think so. As far as I can tell, it's only been for the last year or two."

"He never said anything about it to you, right?"

"That's right, nothing at all."

"His first family was more important to him than we were," Itsumi unexpectedly said from behind them in a dark, sharp tone.

"Itsumi, stop it!"

Itsumi was sitting in a chair in the dining room. She stood up in a huff and went into her room, slamming the door behind her.

"I'm sorry about that," Seiko said.

"That's okay," Heisuke said.

"Anyway, I think this explains why my husband was working himself so hard. I just thought I'd let you know. You seemed to be so eager to know why my husband was so obsessed about making money."

"I see. I apologize for assuming that it must have been something like gambling or womanizing."

She shook her head no. "Actually, it would have been better if it were something like that."

Heisuke was struck dumb by the grindingly painful honesty of what she had just said. She bit her lip, as if reproving herself for a lapse in self-control.

"Do you have any contact with this...ex-wife?"

"No. I assume now that the payments have stopped she must be in a bad way herself."

"I wonder if she knows about the accident."

"I would think she has probably heard about it."

"But if so, the only decent thing would have been to come and at least light an incense stick at his funeral. After all, he had done so much for her."

"But it would have been difficult for her. I'm sure she knew he had remarried."

"Still..." Heisuke said, feeling himself growing angry, but then suppressing that anger. It was rather odd for him of all people to become indignant at a disservice done to the driver of that bus, but somehow it was hard for him to accept. He felt a lump in his stomach.

He looked down at the batch of receipts in his hand. "Do you mind if I take one of these?" he asked.

"What?" Seiko replied, somewhat alarmed. "Well, I guess I don't see why not..."

"I just want to show it to my daughter, nobody else. She's been wondering all this time what caused the accident."

"I see. Okay."

He took one of the receipts and then copied the Sapporo address onto the back. He returned the rest to Seiko.

"How are you feeling, by the way? I hear that your daughter stayed home from school today to look after you."

"Oh, it's not that bad. Itsumi just worries too much," she replied, shaking her head without much conviction.

"If I can do anything to help, please let me know. Shopping for groceries and such must be pretty difficult, right? Do you have what you need for dinner tonight?"

Seiko Kajikawa began shaking her head in earnest. "It's really not necessary. But thank you for your concern," she said, looking deeply conflicted. This just reminded Heisuke of the wall that was dividing them, a wall that she couldn't forget. For her, just standing there face to face with one of the relatives of the dead was painful in itself.

"I see. Well, please take good care of yourself, and give my regards

to your daughter," Heisuke said, bowing slightly. He opened the door and stepped outside.

"Thank you for going to the trouble to stop by," she said, bowing profusely with a pained smile on her face. The image branded itself in Heisuke's memory.

When he returned to the car and started the engine he realized that he had forgotten again to get her phone number. He decided, however, not to go back: he didn't expect that he would ever see them again.

Heisuke told Naoko about this meeting after they finished dinner that night. She listened to him as she stared at the money order receipt.

"So you see, it wasn't gambling or women after all that made him push himself like that," Heisuke said, resting his chopsticks on their holder and crossing his arms.

Naoko placed the receipt on the table. "So this is what it was all about..." she said. Her response was somehow sluggish. Heisuke assumed that the unexpectedness of the revelation had blunted her senses.

"But it's kind of odd that there's been no contact from this Negishi woman. You'd think that if she had heard about the accident she would have at least gone to the funeral."

"Yeah, you'd think," she replied, tilting her head as she ate what was left of her rice with green tea.

"I really think I should send this person a letter," Heisuke said. "That's why I asked you for a piece of paper earlier."

Naoko stopped eating. She had a strange look on her face. "What kind of letter?"

"First of all, telling her that Kajikawa died in the accident. She may not even know what's happened. Second, asking her to at least come visit his grave. There has to be a clean resolution to this whole thing."

"But why do *you* have to get involved, dad?"

"I'm already involved. I have to see this through to its conclusion if I'm ever going to get a decent night's sleep."

Naoko put her chopsticks down and turned on her knees to face Heisuke. "I don't think it's necessary for you to do that. Look, it's a pity about Mrs. Kajikawa, losing her husband and being sick and everything. But at the same time it's hard for me to completely sympathize with her, as bad as that sounds. I mean, we've had more than our own share of misfortune too, you know."

"That's true. But at least we've found a way to keep going."

"How can you be so matter-of-fact about it? Do you think it's easy for me to let go of those painful feelings and just move on?"

Naoko's words made Heisuke feel as if he'd just been slapped with an invisible hand. He looked down, at a loss for words.

After a moment's pause Naoko said, "I'm sorry. I know it's just your personality. You can't bear to see people in pain."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, there isn't. You have a sense of balance about these things. You don't harbor unreasonable grudges against people. Unlike me, you don't get angry at little things," she said, sighing. "To tell the truth though," she added, "I was a little disappointed by what you found out today."

"Disappointed?"

"Yeah. Actually, I was hoping that Kajikawa caused the accident over something stupid like women or gambling. I know that may sound strange, but in a certain sense I honestly feel it would have been better that way."

"Why? Didn't you say before that such a thing was completely unforgivable?"

"Yes. That's exactly the reason why," Naoko replied, smiling sadly. "If that were the case I could just hate the man to my heart's content and not have to justify it to anybody. Whenever I got sad I could strike that sadness away with my anger. I know it may be hard to understand, but when I find myself in unbearable circumstances, I just want somebody to blame, somebody to hate."

"I...I can understand that," Heisuke said hesitantly.

"But I can't work up that kind of pure hatred for somebody who was just trying to support his ex-wife. The anger has nowhere to release itself. So I guess I just took it out on you."

"That's okay."

"So how about that letter, dad?" Naoko said. "If you want to write it, please go ahead. Who knows, maybe she really doesn't know that he died."

Heisuke shook his head. "Nah, there's no need. Now that I think about it, it's really none of my business," he said, crumpling the receipt in his hand.

He could begin to hear children singing as he approached the school. Occasionally a woman's voice would blare out from the speakers, and then the famous can-can tune from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* would come back on. These school sports days haven't changed one bit, Heisuke thought.

He arrived at the school at a little before noon. One of the grades was engaged in a tug-o-war, the combatants crying out "Heave ho! Heave ho!" just as they did in Heisuke's day.

Most of the seats were already taken by parents, almost all of whom were carrying cameras or video cameras. Heisuke only had a camera.

He slowly walked around the playing field looking for Naoko. The sky was somewhat cloudy, perfect weather for sports. Despite that, Naoko had spent the entire morning trying to think of excuses not to participate. She thought the whole thing was a waste of energy and wanted no part of it. "These sports days should only be for kids who actually want to join in. It's stupid to force kids who don't want to," she was muttering to herself as he left the house.

He knew why Naoko didn't want to: she was exhausted from her marathon studying sessions of the last few days. It was torture for her to drag herself out of bed early on a Sunday morning.

He found the area where the sixth graders were assembled. He kept searching for Naoko, but instead noticed Taeko Hashimoto rummaging about in a large cardboard box. She was counting how many balls one of the teams had managed to toss into the box in a previous competition.

Taeko raised her head and looked around, sensing perhaps that somebody was looking at her, and soon caught sight of Heisuke. Her face brightened into a lively smile and she walked over to greet him. While the other female teachers were wearing long sweatpants that hid their legs, she was wearing white shorts.

"Is it okay for you to be here? Monami said that you often have work on weekends and might not be able to make it."

"Today is okay," Heisuke replied.

Whenever he masturbated these days he always thought about Taeko Hashimoto. In his fantasies he made her act like a real whore, which is perhaps why when he met her now he couldn't look her straight

in the eyes.

"The tug-o-war should be over any minute now and then we have lunch break," she said, looking at his empty hands. "Did you bring a box lunch with you?"

"No, unfortunately I didn't think of that. I think I'll join the others for lunch." Many of the parents generally went out to a nearby restaurant to eat together during the lunch break.

"Sure, that's fine too I guess," she said, touching her chin as if thinking about something. At that moment the tug-o-war was finally over. Somebody came on to announce that lunch break would last until 1:00 p.m.

"Mr. Sugita, when you find Monami please come back here together, okay?"

"Uh, sure," he replied reluctantly. Taeko ran off somewhere. Not knowing what else to do, he simply stood there with his hands in his pockets.

"Dad," Naoko called out, waving her hand and walking towards him. She had a red headband around her forehead. "What are you doing spacing out over there?" she asked.

Heisuke told her that they were supposed to wait there for Miss Hashimoto. Naoko replied with a look of impatience.

Taeko finally returned, a white convenience store bag in her hands. "Please have this if you like. I made it myself so it's nothing special, but anyway..." she said, handing over the bag with a box lunch inside.

"No, I really couldn't. This is your lunch, isn't it?" Heisuke replied.

"I have my own. I just had a feeling there might be need so I made extra. Please, take it."

"Oh, I see. Well, what should I do?" he said, looking at Naoko.

"Makes no difference to me," Naoko answered.

"I guess in that case we'll accept your very kind offer. Thank you very much."

"There's a can of tea in there as well," Taeko said, and then walked back to sit with the other teachers.

"Gosh, it must be a tough job being a homeroom teacher. You've got to be prepared for anything," Heisuke observed.

Naoko rolled her eyes. "Don't be an idiot. She didn't 'make extra'—that's her own lunch."

"But she said—"

"She knew you wouldn't take it if she didn't say that. Right now she's probably eating the bread in the staff snack box."

"In that case I've done something very bad. I'll go return it to her."

"No, dad, that would be even weirder. It's done. Just eat it."

They went together to the back of the school building and sat down side by side on the steps of a small stairway out of view of the playing fields.

"It doesn't feel like a sports day around here at all. Let's go over to the parents' seating area," Heisuke said.

"No, here is fine, it's not as dusty. Can I have that tea, by the way? I'm so thirsty."

Heisuke reached into the bag and handed her the can of Japanese green tea. Then he opened the plastic lunch box. There were rice balls and a colorful array of small dishes inside.

"Mm, this is good," Heisuke said, taking a bite of a rice ball filled with fish roe.

"It just looks so-so."

"I wonder why she would give me her own lunch."

"Well," Naoko said, gulping down the tea. "I'd say it's probably because she's got a thing for you, no?"

Heisuke nearly choked on his food. "Cut it out. Some things are not for joking about."

"Who says I'm joking? You seem to be on her mind a lot. She asked me so many times whether you were coming today or not."

"But I'm a father for crying out loud."

"A single one. There's an age difference, but not enough to be a big deal. As for your looks," she said, peering at his face, "well, it doesn't surprise me that she'd fall for you."

"Oh, give me a break, Naoko. Here, try some," he said, thrusting the box at her.

"Call me Monami. At least for today," she said under her breath, looking around to see if anybody was there to overhear their conversation.

"Sorry," he said. No matter how much time passed he still couldn't bring himself to call her by that name.

She reached out, took a small egg roll, and popped it in her mouth. "The flavor's a bit rich. I wonder if she was brought up in the old district downtown."

Heisuke was secretly exhilarated by the thought that Taeko had

been asking about him. So there's hope after all, he thought. At the same time, though, he had his doubts about her, and there was also Naoko to consider. He definitely had to hide his excitement. "So do you want to go with me after these festivities are over?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"What was it again? The signing?"

"Yeah, at the usual hotel in Shinjuku."

The survivor's association and the bus company had reached a settlement. They would be signing the formal agreement that afternoon. Heisuke had suggested the night before that Naoko come at least to the last meeting.

"I don't think I want to," she said, handing him the unfinished can of tea.

"Oh, okay."

"I don't want to be there to witness the moment when a price tag is put on my life. No matter how high the price is."

"I understand," he said, taking the can. He took a sip of the cool tea.

The announcement that lunch break had ended was broadcast on the PA and Naoko rushed back to her place. Heisuke went to look for Taeko Hashimoto to thank her for the lunch. She was near the front gate. When she saw him coming she rushed over to him. "How was the lunch?"

"It was absolutely wonderful. Thank you very much," he replied, bowing repeatedly.

"I'm very happy to hear that. Here, let me take the tray," she said, reaching for the bag.

"No, I'll wash it first and then return it to you. My daughter tells me that's the proper etiquette."

"Monami? Just as grown up as ever, I see," Taeko said with a smile.

It would be a good idea to come up with something else to talk about, Heisuke thought. Miss Hashimoto would probably like that. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of anything. While he was racking his brain another teacher called out to Taeko, who replied that she would be right there.

"Well, take care," she said.

Heisuke stared at her calves as she walked away.

The third event after lunch was the sixth-grade footrace. Heisuke

sat in the front row of the parents' bleachers. The event was the fifty-yard dash, which the children would run in separate groups of five, one after the other. The parents were seated front and center on the section of the track being used for the race so that they would be able to cheer the kids on. Heisuke noticed that Taeko Hashimoto was one of the people holding the finish line tape. She would greet the children with a friendly smile as they ran their hearts out across the tape.

Probably because she was one of the taller children, Naoko was in one of the later groups. She didn't seem nervous at all, just annoyed to be forced to run in the first place.

The pistol fired. Two of the kids got off to a strong start, with Naoko right behind them. She held that position for the entire fifty yards, finishing third. Heisuke snapped two photos during the race. He recalled that Monami had always been right in the middle of the pack in every race. Even though she was psychologically a woman now, her physical abilities hadn't changed, which was only to be expected.

After crossing the line, Naoko saw Heisuke and waved at him, a pained smile on her face. He waved back.

He lifted the camera to his eyes once again. The image in his viewfinder this time, however, was that of Taeko Hashimoto holding the finish line tape. The autumn wind was covering her face with her chestnut-tinted hair, which she gracefully brushed away with her free hand.

He released the shutter.

52 million yen.

Heisuke numbly looked down at the number written on the document. A five and a two followed by six zeroes. That's all it was. Try as he might, he couldn't sense any meaning in that number. He did realize, though, that it was a victory of sorts. It was higher than the settlements in previous cases, and higher than the figure spouted out by the Revised Hoffman Formula, a method commonly used to calculate compensation settlements.

Heisuke certainly didn't have any feeling of victory, though. After all, the whole point of this money was to reconcile him to the fact that he had lost somebody he loved.

"Is everything acceptable?" the man sitting across from him asked. Heisuke had never met him or the man sitting next to him before. When he had entered this special side room, the two of them had stood up and bowed, very slowly and politely. This was obviously meant to be a sign

of remorse, but Heisuke couldn't imagine that there was truly any sincerity there. Many months had passed since the accident and the president of Daikoku Transport had changed many times. The two men in the room with him that day were merely employees of the corporation who had no direct connection to the accident at all.

Heisuke realized that the forgetting was already beginning. This piece of paper would become the only remaining record of the tragedy that had occurred.

Heisuke signed on the dotted line and then pressed his official seal to the document in the spot that Mukai pointed out for him. Finally, he wrote down the number of the bank account to which the money was to be transferred.

"Thank you very much. We're finished," Mukai said to Heisuke, smiling a bit with relief. This case had been a major undertaking for him as well, Heisuke thought. It made sense for him to be relieved now that it was coming to a close.

"Thank you very much for all you've done," Heisuke replied, bowing.

The two company representatives stood up in unison and said, "Please accept our sincere apologies," also in unison.

What's there for you to apologize about? Heisuke thought. You had nothing to do with it. He said nothing though, simply nodded his head and left the room.

When all of the members of the association had finally signed their forms, they assembled in the main conference hall. Mukai gave the group a detailed explanation of some final details that needed working out, after which a few people asked again about how to deal with the press.

"I think what they'll want most to know is the exact monetary sum," Mukai said.

"Would there be any benefit in telling them?" the steward Hayashida asked.

"Well, the settlement amount in this case would probably set a precedent for similar cases in the future. This amount is certainly more than one could currently expect to get in court."

"But it doesn't help *us* in any way to reveal the amount, does it?"

"No, you're right. It doesn't."

They took a vote and a majority opted not to make the figure public. This decision would be binding for the whole group.

"Are there any more questions?" Mukai asked, looking around.

There was something that Heisuke wanted to know, though he wasn't sure if this was the appropriate place to ask. In the final analysis, though, there *was* no other place for him to ask.

"Since there don't appear to be..." Mukai began to say when Heisuke raised his hand. Mukai looked surprised. "Yes?"

"Did Mr. Kajikawa's family receive any compensation?" Heisuke asked.

"Mr. Kajikawa?" The lawyer didn't seem immediately to recall the name.

"The driver. Of the bus."

"Oh," Mukai nodded. The room began to stir.

"I have no idea," Mukai said. "That issue is unrelated to the survivors' association."

"I see," Heisuke said.

"I would assume that the bus company gave them some token sympathy money, but I don't really know. Why do you ask?"

"Oh. No special reason," Heisuke replied, still standing. The others in the group eyed him suspiciously.

"He's the one who caused the accident. Why should his family get anything?" somebody said.

With that, the seven-month settlement negotiations had officially reached a conclusion. The survivors said their thanks to Mukai and to the stewards, said goodbye to the others in the group whom they had come somewhat to know, and began filing out of the room in twos and threes. Nobody looked particularly happy or fulfilled. It seemed to Heisuke that they regretted having to sheath the swords of their anger. He remembered what Naoko had said about needing somebody to blame, somebody to hate, when circumstances became unbearable.

It was completely dark outside when he left the hotel. He felt like going drinking, but it was out of the question since Naoko was alone, waiting for him at home.

He walked back to the station. "Maybe I'll buy her some cream puffs," he thought.

His breath was visibly white in the frigid air. He had his hands deep in his pockets and was stomping his feet, both because it was cold, and because he was nervous.

I never thought I would have to go through this so soon, he complained to himself. He had thought that, at the earliest, they wouldn't have to endure a trial like this until Monami was applying for high school.

He looked around at the other parents and children. The parents looked wealthy and well-educated and the children looked clever. We're the only ones who seem to be in any doubt about the outcome, he worried to himself.

A packet of pocket tissues was thrust in front of his face. "Your nose is running," Naoko said, holding the tissues in her red-gloved hand.

"Oh," he said, taking a tissue and wiping his nose. There wasn't a trash can nearby so he stuck it in his coat pocket. "You certainly look calm," he said, looking at her.

"Nothing left to do now but wait. The hard part is already over, and the results will be posted soon."

"Yeah, I know, but still..."

"And," Naoko continued, "I think it'll be okay, probably."

"Just bursting with confidence, aren't we?"

"If I can't get in, nobody can. And that's a fact."

"Well, if you don't get in it'll probably be all my fault, what with the way I screwed up the admissions interview." When he was asked why he wanted Monami to attend that particular school, everything went well as he recited the various scripted reasons that they had prepared beforehand, but at the end of the speech, when he was supposed to say, "This is the decision my daughter and I came to in the course of our discussions," he accidentally substituted "wife" for "daughter." The interviewers, who knew that Heisuke and Monami lived alone together and that the mother had passed away, were quite puzzled, to say the least.

"I don't think that'll hurt us," Naoko said.

"No?"

"In fact, it might unexpectedly work in our favor. You know this school is star-struck, right?"

"Star-struck?"

"Yeah, they have a soft spot for the children of famous writers, artists, intellectuals, and so on."

"So what?"

"Well, when you had that little slip of the tongue it reminded them that we were the victims of a well-known accident. Maybe they'll feel sorry for us and deign to give us a chance. They might also be concerned about how the press will react if I don't get in."

"But you can't be sure things'll turn out that nicely."

"At the very least it won't work against us. Everything will be fine, don't worry," she said, punching him lightly on the arm.

Today was the day her first-choice private school was posting its admissions decisions. The entrance exams had finished the day before. Naoko's expression was no different now that the exam was finished than it was in the days leading up to it. All she had said to Heisuke was: "Get the tuition money ready."

At last the results, printed on a large sheet of white paper, were posted on the announcement board. A series of numbers written with a black felt marker was packed tightly onto the page. Clusters of parents and children moved in towards the board.

Heisuke began searching for Naoko's number, 236. He had memorized it as " $2 \times 3 = 6$."

"Found it," Naoko said nonchalantly, as if she were talking about somebody else's future.

"Huh? Where?"

"Where are you looking? It's further to the left." His eyes followed where her finger was pointing, and there it was: 236.

"Oh, there it is. That's it. You did it! You did it!" Heisuke exclaimed, pumping his fist in the air.

"Isn't that what I've been telling you all along? Come on, let's go fill out the entrance forms and go home," she said and then turned away, walking briskly towards the school office. As Heisuke followed her, he couldn't help but feel that something was not quite right. If the real Monami had passed a test like this, the real Naoko would have been weeping for joy.

She's really changed, he thought.

After they finished the matriculation paperwork, they went to the nearby suburb of Kichijoji to do some shopping and have something to

eat.

"It's been a long time since we went together to a proper French restaurant, hasn't it? It's been years, at least," Naoko said from across the table.

"Yeah, ever since Monami was born we've only gone to family restaurants."

"That's because she liked hamburger so much."

After Heisuke's carafe of red wine arrived, Naoko said she wanted to drink some as well. "But I thought you didn't drink alcohol," Heisuke said.

"Yeah, I know, but for some reason I want to. I guess it's because my body is different now. Nobody on my side of the family could drink alcohol, but now that I have some of your genes I suppose I can."

"Even though you're in elementary school?"

"Junior high school, now." She took a wine glass in hand and thrust it out to him. "Wine, please."

"I don't know about that," he said. He took a look around to make sure nobody was watching, then poured a tiny bit into her oversized glass. Naoko put the glass under her nose, copying a gesture she had learned somewhere, and swirled the wine around. Then she drank the dark red liquid. Her face looked as if she had just sucked on a lemon.

"How is it?" Heisuke asked.

"It's not very sweet," she said.

"Of course it's not. It's not juice, you know."

"But," she added, splashing it around her mouth a bit to gauge the flavor better, "it's not bad."

"Well then, have some more." In the end she wound up drinking over a third of the carafe that Heisuke had ordered for himself.

She fell asleep in the taxi on the way home from the restaurant. No doubt the wine was taking its effect, but despite that it was also clear that she now had a tolerance for alcohol that she hadn't had in her previous body. Heisuke felt a complex welter of emotions as he looked at her sleeping face; although she had Naoko's personality, his own blood was clearly running through her veins.

It was a little past 9:00 when they arrived home. He carried Naoko up to the second floor, had a lot of trouble changing her into her pajamas, and then tucked her into bed. Either she was drunk or foggy with sleep, but she kept saying, "Sorry, honey, I'm sorry, honey..." as he was helping her change. Once she got into bed, though, she was out in a sec-

ond.

Heisuke got into the bath, taking as long as possible to warm his chilled body. After that, he watched a news report about the Giants training camp while drinking a can of beer.

He peered into Naoko's room before going to sleep. Her comforter was crumpled up in her embrace. He adjusted it to make sure that it covered her shoulders and then turned off the light as he left the room.

He went to his own bedroom, got into bed, closed his eyes, but did not feel at all sleepy. He turned on the bedside lamp and reached out for the paperback laying right next to it, but then pulled his hand back in the same motion. The book he was reaching for was a mystery that he had already finished a couple of days earlier. The bookshelf was right next to the bed, but he couldn't find anything there that he felt like reading.

He lay back down and rested his face on the pillow, staring at the tatami mats. When they first moved here the mats were brand new and pale green. Now they had turned rather brown from the sunlight. A lot of time had certainly passed since then, and would continue to pass. The tatami would grow a deeper brown, and he himself would grow older.

He was unexpectedly overcome by a dispiriting sense of loneliness. He felt like somebody who had been abandoned, all alone, in the middle of a dark tunnel, unable to see where he was going. Naoko, who had walked together with him this far, was gone; all he had left was the melody of her speech. Yet she had entered a different world, and he was here by himself.

At the same time he felt himself growing angry. He felt that he had become the victim of an outrageous injustice. What has happened to my life? Will I have to endure this forever?

He reached out with his right hand for a book on the lowest shelf entitled *Quality Control* and opened it. This was a manufacturing-related textbook, but he wasn't taking it out because he wanted to read it at that moment: he was taking it out because there was a photograph hidden inside. He took the photograph in his hand. It was the picture of a smiling Taeko Hashimoto, the one he secretly took during sports day.

His hand slowly crept to his crotch. His penis gradually began to swell as he fondled it.

Why can't I be allowed to love? he thought. It's my right. I have nothing, after all: I have no wife, I have nobody to share the pleasures of the flesh with. All I have is this totally warped destiny.

He conjured up all sorts of obscene images as he peered at Taeko

Hashimoto's visage, and began to masturbate. In fact, he had already done so many times while looking at this photo. Tonight, however, his hand and his heart quickly lost their enthusiasm and he gave up. He put the picture back in the book, then buried his face in his pillow.

He awoke to the sensation of cold air against his skin. He opened his eyes to see Monami's. She was smiling at him, her face illuminated by the light of his bedside lamp.

"Sorry for waking you," she said. She was under the covers with him.

"What time is it?"

"It's three in the morning."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know. I just woke up all of a sudden. How long did I sleep?" she asked.

"Since we got in the taxi, so six hours at least," he replied, yawning.

"I feel like this is the first restful sleep I've had in a long time, even though I always sleep around six hours."

"Of course. The test is over and now you can truly relax."

"Yeah, you're probably right," she said, snuggling close to him and pressing her cheek against his chest.

"Hey..." she purred, looking up at him with a hint of mischief, "...shall I do it with my hand?"

Heisuke was startled. For a second he thought that maybe she had seen him trying to service himself earlier.

"I told you not to joke about that kind of stuff," he said.

"I'm not joking. If you don't want to see my face while I'm doing it I can hide it from you."

"Impossible. No, I'm serious. It's out of the question."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, positive."

"Okay, if you say so," she said, bringing her face closer to his. Monami's dear, familiar face was in front of him. This was his daughter's face. The face of the girl he had loved as a daughter for years.

She stared at him. She seemed to be brooding over something, as if she were about to make a momentous confession. Heisuke's body stiffened.

At that moment, however, her eyes flitted upward and she suddenly reached for something. "What's this?" she asked. "You read stuff like

this before going to sleep?"

Quality Control. He had forgotten to return it to the shelf. Shit, he thought.

She started flipping through the pages. He couldn't tell what parts of the book she was looking at.

"It's all just a bunch of numbers," she said.

"Yeah. Pretty boring, isn't it?"

Naoko's face suddenly froze. Her eyes focused on a single point, her mouth half open. Heisuke could see those eyes growing redder by the second.

There was no doubt: she was looking at the picture of Taeko Hashimoto. His brain leapt into action, trying to generate excuses, explanations. He didn't remember exactly when it was taken. He had been meaning to give it to Miss Hashimoto as a gift but had carelessly left it there. He needed a bookmark when he was reading the book and the picture just happened to be lying handy.

None of those excuses was necessary. Naoko said nothing, just closed the book. She rested her cheek on his chest again.

A minute later, she crawled out of the futon. A smile returned to her face. "Sorry for bothering you while you were sleeping."

"Are you going?"

"Yeah. Good night."

"Good night."

After she left, he looked at the book. *Quality Control* was closed, but the corner of the photograph was sticking out a bit from the pages.

He returned the book to the shelf and turned off the light.

The driver drove extremely carefully, his incredibly keen concentration extending even to the simple act of pulling the parking brake. If only Kajikawa had been this careful, Heisuke thought, but of course it was too late for that now.

Exactly a year had passed since the accident. It was the stewards of the survivors' association who had suggested that they all meet to commemorate the anniversary. They had spoken with Daikoku Transport and convinced them to drive the group to the scene of the accident. The bus company agreed to this, and even offered to pay for everybody's accommodations for a night in Nagano.

The door opened and the Daikoku employee who was serving as their guide got off the bus. He soon returned and took the microphone in his hand.

"Uh, yes, we've arrived. Everybody please disembark from the front door in an orderly fashion. We ask that you please take care not to rush. There is snow on the ground so it's very easy to slip. Please hold the handrail and step down one step at a time."

Following his directions, the passengers started to disembark in order from the front rows moving back, and soon it was Heisuke and Naoko's turn.

Naoko was sitting next to the window. "Let's go," she said, and they began making their way towards the door. She was wearing a black, hooded coat. The wind was blowing gently outside, and it felt good at first since the bus had been somewhat overheated, but after a while the cold made Heisuke's cheeks hurt.

"Wow, it's pretty cold after all," Heisuke mumbled. "I feel like my ears are going to fall off."

"You feel cold already?" Naoko asked incredulously. She had grown up in this climate.

The scene of the accident had been completely repaired: the twisted guardrail that was displayed countless times in the newspapers and on television had been replaced. Heisuke walked up to the new guardrail and peered down the ravine into which the bus had rolled down.

The angle of the incline was actually only between thirty and forty degrees, but to the eye it appeared to be much steeper than that. The

slide down to death was a few dozen yards. At the bottom of the ravine was a small river that seemed to be right underneath them.

It was around noontime, so the sunlight reflecting off the snow was painfully bright and the river sparkled brilliantly. The accident had occurred, though, in the early hours of dawn, so the forest below must have been almost pitch black at the time. Heisuke pictured the bus rolling down the ravine in the darkness. Just the thought of it was enough to tie his stomach in knots. He couldn't even begin to imagine what the people in that massive coffin must have been thinking as they faced death.

People around him began to sob. There were those who put their hands together in prayer as they faced the ravine. Naoko simply looked down the incline.

A young priest who had accompanied them from Tokyo began chanting a Buddhist sutra. The relatives all lowered their eyes, lost in thought, many of them still weeping. An elderly couple next to Heisuke began weeping.

After the sutra was completed, they all threw bouquets of flowers or objects that had been treasured by the deceased into the ravine. One person threw a rugby ball, whose dead owner must have been on the college rugby team. The group found this especially poignant.

Naoko looked up from the ravine and turned to Heisuke. "Can I tell you something? Will you believe me?"

"What is it?"

"At the moment the bus began rolling I knew I was going to die. Somehow I was able to guess exactly how I was going to die. I know that I would get cut up, that my head would be sliced open like a watermelon."

"Please, stop it," Heisuke said.

"But you know, it didn't bother me. What bothered me was that Monami was going to die too. If that happened, you would be all alone and it wouldn't be fair to you. Kind of strange, huh? Even though I was going to die, that's what I was worried about. Anyway, I felt I had to save *her* at least, even if I had to sacrifice myself in the process," she said. Then she asked. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes," he replied. "That's how you saved Monami."

"Only by half, though," she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

And the rest is my responsibility, Heisuke thought. Protecting Monami's body and Naoko's soul has become my mission...

"You son of a bitch!" somebody shouted out. Heisuke turned to see Mr. Fujisaki, the father of the twins, using his hands to amplify his voice. "You goddamned son of a bitch!" he shouted out again.

This started a chain reaction, and many others began shouting as well, each saying something different. One woman cried out, "Goodbye! Goodbye!"

There was something Heisuke wanted to call out as well: "Rest in peace." Seeing nothing wrong with it, he stepped towards the guardrail and took in a deep breath. As he was about to shout, Naoko tugged at his sleeve.

"It's completely tasteless," she said.

"Oh...it is?"

"Yes. Come on, let's go." She walked towards the bus and he followed her.

Naoko's graduation from elementary school took place the day after they returned from the memorial journey. The ceremony was conducted in an aging auditorium. Heisuke sat in the back with the other parents, watching as the graduates received their diplomas one after the other.

The name "Monami Sugita" was announced. "Present," Naoko replied crisply, standing up to receive her diploma. Like everybody else, she climbed up the stairs to the podium, received her diploma, and bowed to the principal. Heisuke watched all of this avidly.

After the commencement was finished, parents, students, and teachers assembled on the playing fields to say their farewells. Naoko was surrounded by a particularly large group of friends from her class, since she wouldn't be going to the same public junior high school as the rest of them. Heisuke looked on from a distance as she shook hands and signed yearbooks. One of the other girls was even crying, and Naoko rubbed her shoulders trying to console her. She looked more like a mother than a classmate.

Taeko Hashimoto was surrounded by even more people than Naoko was. Not only many children but their parents as well had come to say goodbye to her. Her normally pure white skin seemed to be blushing a bit, but she didn't let herself shed any tears.

After everybody spent some time saying their goodbyes, the graduates and their parents slowly began wandering towards the school gate. A few of the teachers seemed quite emotional while others just appeared

relieved that another year was finally done and over with.

In time Naoko came back to be with Heisuke, her diploma rolled up in a faux-leather carrying tube colored a burnt umber.

"Sorry that took so long," she said.

"Your hand must be all shook out," he replied.

"More than that, it's hurting actually," she said, turning to look again at her friends. "So, did you say goodbye?" she added.

"To whom?"

Naoko frowned a little. "To *her*. You know who I mean," she said, gesturing with her head towards Taeko Hashimoto.

"Oh," he replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess I should, shouldn't I?"

Naoko sighed. She looked away. "Go on, go ahead. I'll wait here."

"Huh? By myself?"

"Yeah," she replied, looking down and kicking at the dry dirt of the playing field. "You've got a lot to tell her, don't you? This is your last chance to talk with her openly, you know, let it all out."

He suddenly understood. Naoko had indeed seen the photograph that night. She never said anything about it, but it was clear that she had been worrying about it all along. She actually accepted his feelings for Miss Hashimoto?

"Okay," he said. "Come on, let's go together."

"What?" Naoko said, looking up.

"Let's go say goodbye to her together," he repeated.

"Is that alright?" she asked.

"Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

He extended his hand to her. "Come on," he said. She hesitated, but then slowly reached out to take his hand. They went to say goodbye to Taeko Hashimoto.

Heisuke uttered all of the usual pleasantries—thank you very much for everything, please stay well, etc.

"Please also accept my thanks. And you, Monami—take good care of yourself, okay?" Taeko replied, smiling. There was nothing special in her manner towards Heisuke—it was simply that of a teacher towards a parent.

Heisuke and Naoko returned home from school walking hand in hand. When he thought about it, he realized that it had been a very long time since they had walked together this way. It was odd because, before the accident, he had always walked hand in hand with Monami but never

with Naoko.

Naoko didn't say anything about Taeko Hashimoto.

As they were arriving home, they saw the postman about to put something in their mailbox. Heisuke said hello to the man, who handed him an express delivery postcard.

He was a bit surprised to see the name of the sender.

"Who's it from?" Naoko asked.

"Itsumi Kajikawa."

"Itsumi who?"

"The bus driver Kajikawa's daughter," he said, turning the card over to read it.

He began to feel light-headed. His skin sprouted goose pimples.

"What's the matter? What happened?" Naoko asked.

He showed her the postcard. "Seiko Kajikawa has died."

Seiko Kajikawa's funeral took place in a meeting hall in the town where she had lived. It was an old, small, single-storey building. A pitifully small number of funeral wreaths were lined up along the passage into the building.

It was the day after Heisuke had received the postcard from Itsumi, which read simply: "My mother died this morning. The funeral will probably be on Sunday. Thank you for everything you've done for us." There was nothing written about what time or where the funeral would be.

Heisuke drove to the Kajikawa apartment right after getting the postcard. There was no response when he knocked on the door, but a neighbor downstairs heard him knocking and told him the time and location of the funeral. When he asked the neighbor whether she knew the cause of death, she frowned and answered, "I hear it was heart failure. She was about to walk out the door to go to work and she just collapsed right there on the spot."

"Where was she working?"

"Oh, something like the cleaning staff for an office building."

He wondered for a second whether she had quit the job at Tabata, but decided that the more likely possibility was that she had been fired.

When he got home, he asked Naoko if it was okay for him to attend Seiko's funeral the next day. "Why are you even asking? Of course it's okay," she answered.

The entrance to the meeting hall was somewhat removed from the main street. Standing in front and to the left of the entrance were a small man of about seventy and Itsumi. Heisuke had no idea who the elderly man was; although he was about the right age to be Seiko's father, his face didn't resemble hers very much.

Heisuke got in line to enter the building and offer his respects. It didn't take long for him to reach the entrance as there weren't many other mourners.

Itsumi was wearing her junior high school uniform, silently staring down at the ground. She was carrying a white handkerchief which he assumed she was using to wipe away tears, although he didn't see any tears to speak of. As he was about to pass her, she suddenly looked up as

if she had felt something in the air. She looked surprised when her eyes met his. Heisuke paused. She bowed politely, but didn't raise her head back up. He continued moving forward into the building. The hall was permeated with the smell of incense.

The next time he heard from Itsumi Kajikawa was the Saturday of the following week. He had gone to the factory that day to work some overtime and didn't get home until almost 7:00 p.m. The telephone call came at around eight, almost as if she knew his schedule. Maybe she had heard from her mother at some point that workers like Heisuke often worked overtime on Saturdays.

"Thank you very much for coming to the funeral," she said stiffly. She's just as tense on the phone as she is in person, Heisuke thought.

"Don't mention it. It was the least I could do. You've really been through a rough time," he said. He was glad she called. Although he went to the funeral, he hadn't had a chance to talk with her at all and was still in the dark about many things.

"I would like to give you the, uh, *koden*...what was it called again?"

"*Kodengaeshi*?" *Koden* were the monetary gifts that mourners offered to the departed spirit during a funeral. *Kodengaeshi* were the gifts that the family of the deceased gave in return as a token of appreciation.

"Yeah, yeah, *kodengaeshi*. I wanna give it to you," she said brusquely. She seemed to be irritated at her own inability to express herself well.

"No, that's quite alright," Heisuke said. "I didn't give very much. It's really not necessary for you to give anything in return."

"They were all saying that—" she stammered back. "They" must have meant the adults who had arranged the funeral. They were probably relatives, although Heisuke hadn't really noticed any at the funeral.

"It's really not necessary, Itsumi. It's the thought that counts, and I thank you for that."

"But I want to give it to you. There's something I want to give you."

"Give? To me?"

"Yes," she replied. She sounded very determined.

Heisuke was about to ask exactly what this "something" was, but he held back. If he asked it would seem as if he were trying to decide whether it was worth accepting or not.

"Okay, well, if you insist, I'll gratefully accept whatever it is. So tell me, how should we do this? Shall I go to your place to pick it up?"

She paused a beat. "There is no 'my place.'"

"What?"

"I left that apartment yesterday. I'm at my relatives' place now."

"Oh, I see. Where do your relatives live?"

"In Shiki."

"Shiki? In Saitama?" No particular image came to mind when he thought of Shiki. He had heard the name before but had never had any reason to go there. He pulled out a road atlas with one hand as he held the phone in the other.

"Whereabouts in Shiki? Are there any landmarks nearby?"

"I don't know...I just got here myself," she answered.

Heisuke was able to gather from that last remark that these were relatives who hadn't had much contact with Itsumi's parents until now. He grew sad at the thought of the difficult life that awaited her.

They decided to meet at the station and left it at that.

The next afternoon, a Sunday, Heisuke and Naoko took the Tobu Tojo line to Shiki Station. He had originally intended to go by himself, but Naoko suggested they go together. Heisuke didn't ask why she wanted to come along; he had a feeling it would have been a difficult question for her to answer.

Itsumi Kajikawa was leaning against a wall near the ticket gate. She was wearing a red stadium jumper with white sleeves. When she saw Heisuke she bowed quickly. She looked startled for a second to see Naoko.

"Shall we go somewhere? Are you hungry?" Heisuke asked.

Itsumi seemed at a loss for how to answer. She just tilted her head to the side a little. Naoko said, "Of course you're hungry. Let's go somewhere we can get a bite to eat."

"Oh, okay. Let's find a good place, then," Itsumi hesitantly replied.

The area around Shiki Station was more developed than Heisuke had imagined it would be. There was a broad avenue with many buildings lined along it, foremost being a massive supermarket. There was also a family restaurant next to the station, which is where the three of them went to eat.

"Don't hold back, eat as much as you want," Naoko said to Itsumi, then looked at Heisuke and added, "Dad just won big on a long shot at the horse races."

"What?" Heisuke blurted out, looking back at her. He had never been to the races in his life. But then he saw her give him a quick wink out of Itsumi's view and caught on: Naoko didn't want Itsumi to feel

guilty about ordering as much food as she wanted.

"Yeah," Heisuke replied, playing along, "I just placed the bet as a goof, you know, and then next thing I know I've got this red hot winner. So let's have a big feast to celebrate."

Itsumi's stony expression loosened up a little. She finally looked at the menu. Even with all of their encouragement, though, she ordered nothing more than an inexpensive rice curry. She had probably picked out the cheapest thing that appealed to her. It was Naoko's turn next, and she ordered some hamburger and fried chicken and a few other things that kids usually like. She then turned to Itsumi and asked, "Do you want any ice cream or some other desert?"

"Uhh...anything is fine," Itsumi stammered. Naoko added two chocolate parfaits to her order.

Heisuke began to understand one reason why Naoko wanted to come along. Heisuke by himself would have had no idea at how to ease Itsumi over her shyness and reticence.

"It's really terrible about what happened to your mother. How are you feeling these days?" Heisuke asked.

"Yes. It was definitely a shock," Itsumi said, nodding.

"I heard that it was heart failure," he said.

"Yeah. The word they used for it was more technical than that, but I guess it was something like heart failure."

"I see," he replied, drinking his water. Even he knew that "heart failure" wasn't an exact medical diagnosis.

"I was cleaning up after breakfast when I heard something at the door. I went to look and saw mom just lying there. She only had a shoe on one foot. She didn't even have a chance to put the other one on."

"Did the ambulance come quickly?"

"I called them. But they didn't come in time. It was probably already too late by the time I called," Itsumi said, looking down. "She just looked like she was sleeping."

Itsumi opened a small pocket on her jacket and pulled out something wrapped in tissue paper. She placed it on the table.

"Here it is," she said.

"The *kodengaeshi*?" Heisuke asked.

She nodded.

He picked it up and unwrapped the tissue paper. An old pocket watch was inside.

"Oh, goodness. This looks like a valuable antique."

The cover was two inches in diameter, made of gold with a winding stem to the side. He pressed the latch to open it but it didn't seem to be working, so he tried to pry it open with his fingers, without success.

"The lid seems to be broken."

"Yeah, it looks that way," Itsumi replied. "Dad...I mean, my father, always carried that. He was carrying it when the accident happened. I guess that's why the cover doesn't work."

"I see," Heisuke said, turning the watch over in his hands.

"Dad said it was worth a lot. He said it was the most valuable thing he owned."

"You should keep it then, if it's something so valuable."

Itsumi shook her head. "If my relatives find it and figure out that it belonged to my dad they'll just throw it away."

"What? That's terrible."

It didn't seem that Itsumi was exaggerating. "It's the truth," she said sadly.

Heisuke's mood grew dark. Those relatives, most likely on her mother's side of the family, must have thought of Kajikawa as a bringer of the plague.

"Also," Itsumi added, looking up and brightening her face a bit, "I wanted to give you something. You made me very happy by coming to the funeral."

"No, but something like this..." he started to say, but Naoko hit his thigh under the table. "Just accept it and shut up," she seemed to be saying.

Heisuke held the pocket watch in his hands. "Is it really okay for me to take it, Itsumi?" he asked.

She nodded briskly.

"Okay. I will. I'm very grateful for this. Thank you," he said, wrapping it again in the tissue paper and putting it in his pants pocket.

After they finished their meal, Itsumi walked with them back to the station. Heisuke wanted to say something appropriate as a farewell, but as usual the words escaped him. If he put on airs, tried to declare his sympathy for her plight or anything of the sort, Naoko was sure to tell him later that he was being "tasteless" again. So he took the safe route and just said, "Take care, okay? Good luck with everything."

Itsumi nodded slightly. Her lips were tightly closed.

After Heisuke and Naoko went through the ticket gate, he asked

her, "How did you know she was so hungry?"

Naoko looked up at him and sighed in disappointment.

"She's living off of her relatives, right? Don't you know the saying, 'A freeloader is afraid to ask for thirds'? I bet that poor girl can't even ask for seconds where she's living right now."

"Oh...I see."

Heisuke turned to look back at Itsumi. She was still there, on the other side of the ticket gate. She was looking at them with pathetic earnestness.

Heisuke waved goodbye. Naoko did the same.

Tears began to roll down Itsumi's face.

As far as Heisuke could tell, Naoko's life in junior high school was going smoothly. Even the mismatch between her body and her psyche seemed to be coming under control. Her grown-up way of talking no longer seemed so out of place among the intelligent and mature students at her famous private school.

The only concern was her grades. They weren't bad. Quite the contrary: she suddenly shot to seventh in her class after the first midterm exams, and never fell out of the top ten. After the final exams for the third quarter she was third in her class.

"Which cram school are you sending her to?" her homeroom teacher asked Heisuke during a parent-teacher conference. He was clearly astonished that Monami, who looked like any other normal girl, had such remarkable academic abilities. When Heisuke replied that she wasn't going to cram school, the teacher was even more amazed. He persisted in asking about her study methods, how she had been taught, and he even went so far as to ask whether there were any prominent scholars in the family.

"She seems to study a lot, but it's not something I pay that much attention to. I don't push her to study, and we almost never talk about her grades at home," Heisuke said to everybody who asked, but nobody completely believed him. They all seemed to suspect that there was some secret behind her academic ability—some special study method or an extraordinary private tutor or something of the sort. Whenever he went to the parent-teacher conferences, the education-crazed mothers of Monami's classmates all bore down on him with questions, trying to root the secret out. It was the truth, though, that Monami had no special secret. She just studied furiously, never allowing herself the least bit of slack. When she wasn't doing housework she was studying, and if she grew tired of study she would take a break from it by doing more housework. Of course she also watched some television and enjoyed herself now and then, but she only did these things briefly, as a way to relax. She limited herself to an hour and a half of television a day, even if there were some program on that she especially wanted to watch.

Heisuke asked her once why she studied so hard. As she skillfully peeled an apple with a kitchen knife, she replied, "If you fall behind

once, it becomes easier to fall behind a little more every quarter. Next thing you know, it's too late. My former life was ■ textbook example of that. For fourteen years, from elementary school to junior college, I went to places called schools, but in all that time I didn't master a single skill that would allow me to make a living. I don't want that to happen again. Feeling that kind of regret again would be worse than death."

She cut the beautifully peeled apple in quarters, stuck a fork in one of them, and handed the plate to Heisuke. He wondered to himself as he ate whether her former life had really been such a disappointment.

It's not as if study consumed her whole life, however. She seemed to be aware that other things were important as well. She read many more books than she used to, and she dusted off the unused mini-component set and began listening to music. Whenever she came across a book or piece of music that moved her in some special way, her eyes would glow and she'd say things to Heisuke like, "You know, there are so many wonderful things in this world. Things that can make you happy without costing much money, things that can totally change the way you see things. How come I never realized this before?"

She actively sought out new friends at school, even if they were psychologically much less mature than she. She earned good grades and was considerate of others, all of which made her popular with her classmates. On Sundays she invited groups of them to the house. She would cook food for them, which impressed them all greatly.

"You're amazing, Monami. Where'd you learn how to do that stuff?" one of them asked.

"It's not that hard. If you all put your minds to it you could do the same. There are so many convenient appliances these days. In the old days they didn't even have microwave ovens. You had to cook everything in pots. Housewives today are really lucky."

"Ugh, cut it out Monami. You sound like my mother."

"Well, I cook too, so of course I'm grateful for all of these conveniences," she said. She had learned now how to save the situation whenever she let her tongue slip.

"Those kids are my teachers," Naoko said one day after her young friends had left the house. "And I don't just mean that they teach me how to act like a junior high school student. When I'm with them, I feel like all of my old-fashioned values are being revamped. Not only that, but it's almost like there's this little bud in my nervous system that I didn't even know about, and it's getting ready to sprout. When I'm with them, even

the colors of the world really begin to look different."

Heisuke had a vague idea of what she meant, but he couldn't grasp her words in any concrete way. "Well, that's nice," was all he could say.

An invisible gulf was growing between them. It was impossible to ignore. Although her personality was still that of Naoko, he began to suspect that her sensibilities, like her academic abilities, were a product of Monami's young brain. She was a teenager after all, so it was only natural that she was picking up on things that an older person would no longer notice. The danger was that these changes in perception would not remain completely within Naoko's control. Needless to say, it would be painful for him to accept those changes. In his mind, Naoko—despite the fact that she looked like Monami—was still his wife.

Heisuke was later than usual coming home from work. He and his coworkers had gone out for drinks to welcome two new employees at the plant. Although he left in the middle of the after-party, it was already 11:00 p.m. by the time he got home. He was just drunk enough to feel comfortably numb.

"I'm home," he said ■■ he took his shoes off at the door, but there was no answer. He was on his way to the washroom when he saw the light was on in the adjacent bathroom. He heard the shower running inside.

He opened the door and saw Naoko's slender back. She was sitting on a stool in the tiled shower area of the bathroom. She was in the middle of washing her hair and was so startled by his abrupt entry that she dropped the handheld shower nozzle, which sprayed water in all directions. She quickly turned the water off.

"Don't you knock? You scared me."

"Oh, sorry," he replied. "I just got home. Mind if I get in the bath too?"

"Umm...sure, I'll be right out."

"But I want to get in right now. I stink of tobacco," he said, already taking his clothes off. They hadn't taken a bath together in a long time. She was usually studying whenever he felt like taking his.

Completely naked now, he entered the bathroom. Naoko was still sitting on the stool, washing her face. Heisuke poured water over himself to wash away the grime, and then got into the tub.

He let the water come up to his chest. "Ah, today was just too much," he said, producing a deep diaphragmatic groan peculiar to mid-

dle-aged Japanese men. "The division chief is sulking on and on about how nobody invited him to the party even though he's right there in the middle of it. It's not like we were leaving him out of anything. Everybody's kissing up to him and he's playing the victim. Jeesh..."

"Hmmm...sounds like a real pain," she replied absently. She wrung out her wet hand towel and then started wiping her hair and face with it. She turned so that her back was facing Heisuke.

She started wiping down the rest of her body. This struck Heisuke as a little odd. "What's up? Aren't you getting in? You always get in the tub a second time after washing your hair," he said.

"Yeah, but I don't need to today," she replied, her back still turned to him.

She got up to leave the bathroom. He caught a glimpse of something for a split-second.

"Wha? Hey!" Heisuke called out from the bathtub. She turned only her head to look back at him, eyebrows raised.

"Down there. It's growing," he said, pointing towards her lower body. "Show it to me." He started to stand up in the bathtub.

"What do you need to look at it for?" she replied, turning her hips in the other direction.

"What's the matter with showing it to me?" he asked, reaching out for her waist. He grabbed a hold of her hip bone and started spinning her around to face him.

"Don't touch me," she said, slapping his hand away and pushing him back by the shoulders. He lost his balance and his butt landed with a thud back in the tub. Hot water rushed into his nostrils.

Naoko left the bathroom and slammed the door.

Heisuke was stunned. What the hell just happened? he thought. What's going on? I'm her husband. She's my wife. What's wrong with a husband seeing his wife naked? Even if her body is Monami's, so what? Monami is my daughter. God knows how many times I changed her diapers.

Feelings of righteous indignation coursed through his body for a time but eventually passed. He was somehow able to come to terms with the situation. Exactly what that "situation" was he couldn't express in words, but one thing he understood was that he seemed to have stumbled over some hidden tripwire in Naoko's heart.

Not having had a chance to wash himself properly, he stepped out of the tub only to realize that he hadn't even prepared a clean change of

underwear and pajamas to put on after the bath. He had taken his clothes off in the assumption that he would ask Naoko to prepare those things for him. With no other choice now, he put his underwear and pants back on and left the bathroom.

Naoko was nowhere to be found downstairs. He went up to the second floor and changed into his clean underwear and pajamas. Then he went to Naoko's room and quietly opened the door.

She was wearing her red pajamas, sitting on the floor in the center of her room and hugging her knees. Her teddy bear was enfolded within her embrace. Her back was turned to him, and even though she surely must have heard him enter, she didn't move at all.

"Uh, I'm not sure what to say. I'm sorry about what happened just now," he said, scratching his head. "I was a little drunk. I don't know, I just haven't been good at holding my liquor these days," he added, laughing awkwardly. Naoko showed no response.

Seeing it was useless, he started to leave the room when Naoko finally spoke. "You think it's strange, don't you?"

"What?"

"You think it's strange, don't you? Getting angry over something as trivial as that."

"No..." he replied, unable to say anything more.

Naoko raised her head, but since she was facing in the opposite direction, Heisuke couldn't see her expression. "I'm sorry," she said. "Somehow it just really bothered me."

"Being touched?"

"Being touched and..."

"Being seen, as well?"

"Yeah. And being seen," she replied, nodding.

Heisuke sighed. He scratched his temple, then stared absent-mindedly at his finger. The nail was shiny from the oil on his face. He hadn't washed himself properly in the bath. The filth of a middle-aged man, he thought to himself in a fit of self-hatred.

"I'm sorry, dad," Naoko said again. "I don't even understand myself what's happening to me. It's not that I don't like you anymore, but somehow it just feels weird."

Heisuke wasn't in the mood to say anything in reply. He couldn't figure out whether the person in front of him was his wife or his daughter. Regardless of which choice he made, however, he was going to have to choose who she was to him and embrace that choice without equivo-

cation.

"I understand. Look, don't worry about it. From now on we'll bathe separately. And I won't open the door on you again."

Naoko slowly began to sob. Her narrow shoulders trembled.

"Why are you crying? It's nothing to cry over," he said, trying to make his voice as cheerful as possible. "This is only normal."

Naoko slowly turned around to face him. Her eyes were red. "Is this...is this going to tear us apart?"

"Nothing's going to tear us apart. Don't talk like that," Heisuke replied, a hint of anger surging through his voice.

The pocket watch that Heisuke received from Itsumi Kajikawa spent a year and half in a drawer in the tatami room credenza. When he was ordered to go to Sapporo on a business trip, Heisuke took it out of the drawer.

As a unit leader on the assembly line, it was very unusual for Heisuke to be sent on business trips. It only happened when he needed to observe new production technologies, and this trip was no exception.

Heisuke's unit built computer-controlled fuel injectors. A new device that could instantaneously measure whether or not the injector was releasing the correct amount of fuel had just arrived on the market, so Heisuke, along with the engineering duo of Kishima and Kawabe, were being sent to take a look. The manufacturer of the device was located in Sapporo.

"If you want, you could go and come back the same day, but seeing how it's a Friday it doesn't make much sense to rush back. Besides, you haven't taken a trip in a long time, Heisuke. I hear Hokkaido's real nice in the fall, what with the leaves changing color and all," the division chief Kosaka said. Then he lowered his voice and continued, "Plus, they've got you-know-where in Sapporo."

"You-know-where?" Heisuke asked. Kosaka frowned at his obtuseness.

"Yeah, you know. *Susukino*," Kosaka whispered. *Susukino* was a famous red-light district.

"Oh, yeah, right."

"Come on man, your lack of enthusiasm is killing me. Ever since your wife passed away, bless her soul, you haven't been getting any play. Am I right or am I right? Once in a while a man's gotta refresh his weary bones in a place like that, know what I mean?" Kosaka said, and then lowered his voice again. "I hear they got a lot of lookers in the soap land parlors over there." Kosaka smiled, revealing his yellowing teeth.

Although *Susukino* hadn't crossed his mind, Heisuke had been looking forward to the trip. He had never been to Hokkaido before.

His only concern had been leaving Naoko alone, but that was conveniently taken care of by the fact that Naoko's older sister Yoko would be visiting Tokyo at exactly the same time. Yoko's daughter had just

entered a university in Tokyo that spring and Yoko wanted to see how she was getting on. "It's sure going to be fun to be able to call my older sister 'aunt' now," Naoko had said with a grin.

When he found out that he was going to Sapporo, Heisuke went to look through the credenza. The first thing he found was a small piece of paper folded into a tight wad. It was Kajikawa's money order receipt. Heisuke had intended to throw it away, but for some reason he had wound up leaving it in the drawer.

The address was in Toyohira ward, Sapporo. On the map it didn't look to be too far from Sapporo Station.

Heisuke still hadn't forgotten about Seiko Kajikawa and her daughter. Even though they had lost a loved one just like every other victim of that accident, nobody had been willing to give them a helping hand, including himself. Even now, the thought of it made him feel unforgivably petty.

Kajikawa had worked himself to the bone in order to send his ex-wife money. The result was a catastrophic accident. Yet after he died, his ex-wife made no effort to contact his family or to attend his funeral. It was still unclear whether she even knew of his death.

Heisuke regretted the fact that he hadn't contacted the ex-wife, Noriko Negishi, after he learned about the money orders. At the very least he should have checked to see whether she knew about the accident. He decided therefore that he would take advantage of this trip to meet her. It was the only way to clear up this mystery.

At the same time, he wondered what difference it would make now that two and a half years had passed since the accident. Probably no difference at all. Seiko Kajikawa wouldn't come back to life, and Itsumi wouldn't be made any happier. The only difference would be that Heisuke himself would be able to rest a little easier.

Holding the receipt in his hand, he remembered the pocket watch. He searched through the drawer until he found it.

Thursday, the day before his trip, Heisuke left work in the afternoon and walked to a watch store in Ogikubo.

"This is a very rare timepiece you've brought in," the owner of the store, Kozo Matsuno, said as he examined the watch. His loose jowls were covered with a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard.

"It's probably worth a bit, huh?" Heisuke asked.

"Oh, yes. Where did you get this?"

"Somebody gave it to me."

"You certainly couldn't have bought it."

"You're right, I didn't buy it. What makes you say that, though?"

"Ah, nothing...wait, the cover won't open," Kozo said as he examined the watch through his loupe. "The latch is broken."

"Yeah, I'd like you to fix that if you could," Heisuke said.

Kozo was Naoko's distant relative. Heisuke had heard that when Naoko came to Tokyo from Nagano to look for work, Kozo had done a lot to help her out. Needless to say, he was one of the first people in line at Naoko's funeral in Tokyo. Heisuke still remembered how his shaggy, heavily wrinkled face looked that day as he loudly sobbed with grief.

Kozo didn't have any children. He lived here, along with his elderly wife, on the second floor of his shop a few minutes from Ogikubo Station. Although the sign outside read "Watch Sales and Repair" he seemed to do much more business with eyeglasses. He also dealt in precious metals, out of which he created made-to-order jewelry. A person could come to him with a picture of a ring from Tiffany's and say, "Make this for me," and he could do it. In fact, Heisuke and Naoko had had their wedding rings made here.

Heisuke had come to find out the value of the pocket watch. He intended to give it to Noriko Negishi if it was worth anything. He needed an excuse to go see her, so he was planning to say, "I felt that it would be wrong to keep such a valuable heirloom. That's why I've come here to see you." Such a pretext was just as much for his own benefit as it was for hers. It was the spur he needed to overcome his hesitation.

"Ah, finally," Kozo said as he got the cover open after struggling with it for a while. His experienced hands had done the job much better than Heisuke ever could.

"So is it worth something?" Heisuke asked, leaning eagerly over the display case.

"Hmmm..." Kozo said, tilting his head. He smiled a bit. "I'm not sure I could really say."

"What do you mean? Would it fetch a good price?"

"Price? Well, as far as prices go, I'd say it'd run about 3,000 yen."

"What? That's all?"

"This was a very common model back in the old days. Besides which, it's been broken and repaired several times. It doesn't really fall into the category of valuable antique."

"Oh. I see."

"But it seems to have a value of a different sort. There's somebody out there who must be very sorry to have lost this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it has sentimental value. Look," Kozo said, standing up. He placed the open pocket watch in front of Heisuke.

Heisuke took it in his hands. There was a small photograph pasted to the inside of the cover. It was a picture of a child about five years old. It didn't look like Itsumi. It was a boy.

Heisuke looked out the window, wondering to himself how many years had passed since he last rode an airplane. He had been looking forward to seeing the ocean, but all he could see was snow. He was also sitting over the wing, which obstructed most of his view.

Kawabe, who was sitting next to him, asked, "So what will you be doing over the weekend?" Kawabe was in the middle row while Kishima was sitting in the aisle seat.

"There's a place I want to visit. I'll go there and then head back to Tokyo the day after tomorrow, in the morning. How about you two?" Heisuke said.

"We plan to spend the whole day tomorrow doing some sightseeing around Sapporo. We'll head back Sunday night."

"Perks like this trip don't come along that often," Kishima added.

A shiny black limo was waiting for them at Chitose Airport in Sapporo. It could seat three people in the back with room to spare. "I feel like a politician," Heisuke quipped, and the two engineers laughed, as did the company representative sitting in the front with the driver.

They carried out the tests on the fuel measuring device at a laboratory near Hokkaido University. These were relatively simple tests that would have quickly been completed had all went well, but it was common in this kind of work that some unexpected trouble would arise, and sure enough there were problems with the data yielded by the test. Heisuke and the two engineers grew silent, while their hosts then set about preparing a luxurious full-course meal for them, perhaps to try to assuage their misgivings about the product. Needless to say, the three men from Bigood couldn't be expected to be pacified that easily. "French cuisine without wine just tastes too rich, don't you think?" Kawabe complained.

Around six in the evening, after countless adjustments had been made to the device, the desired results were finally obtained. The three of them were treated to dinner at a sushi restaurant in the city center and then taken to a club near Ohdori Park for the evening's entertainment. The liquor was particularly fine, meant as it was to celebrate the completion of an important job. A young hostess sat next to Heisuke, asking

him about this and that. Her conspicuous cleavage and full thighs drew his attention and frequently made him lose his train of thought. He felt the excitement that comes with enjoying a pleasure long denied.

He returned to the hotel a little after midnight, and decided to call home even though it was somewhat late. Naoko quickly answered the phone. She apparently hadn't gone to sleep yet.

"We're fine here. I was just chatting with Aunt Yoko," Naoko said playfully. "Hold on. I'll hand her the phone."

Yoko came on the line. Heisuke thanked her for looking after Monami, to which she replied that there was no need. Although she didn't seem to have the slightest inkling that the young girl next to her was in fact her younger sister, she did say the following: "Monami's really become a lot like her mom, don't you think? Her way of talking, her gestures, they're all the spitting image of her mom. Just a little while ago I asked her to give me a massage and even *that* she did exactly the way Naoko used to. It's amazing!"

Naoko had often mentioned giving backrubs to her sister. Heisuke could just imagine her suppressing her laughter while listening to Yoko speak now. After exchanging a few more pleasantries he wished them a good night and hung up the phone.

He ate a late breakfast the next morning, checked out of the hotel, and hailed a taxi. He gave the driver the address written on the money order receipt. The driver seemed to know the way there, which wasn't always a given in Japan's labyrinthine big cities.

"Is there anywhere nearby where the leaves are especially pretty?" Heisuke asked.

"Moiwayama is nice, but it's still a little early. Around the tenth of October is always the best time."

"Ah, too bad. Just a week too early."

"Yeah. If you'd have come next week, the colors'd really be getting ready to explode."

It was unusual for Heisuke to spark conversations with taxi drivers. He wasn't even particularly interested in seeing the fall colors; he just wanted to talk to ease his anxiety.

"It's somewhere around here," the driver said when they arrived at Heisuke's destination. Heisuke got out of the taxi to find himself in a quiet neighborhood filled with small shops. He walked down the street looking at the nameplates on the doors and finally stopped at a small

ramen shop. A sign with the name of the restaurant was out front, but right next to it hung a sign that read "Sorry! We're Closed." Heisuke looked at the upper portion of the locked storefront shutter and saw a nameplate that read "Negishi."

He knocked on the shutter a couple of times, but there was no answer. It looked as if the living quarters were on the second floor, but the windows up there were closed as well.

There was a phone number written in small print underneath the restaurant's name. He took a notepad out of his bag and wrote the number down.

He hailed a taxi that was passing by and gave the driver the name of the inexpensive hotel where he was planning to stay that night (the previous night's hotel had been paid for by the company), but then realized that there was still some time before he would be allowed to check in.

"Is the Sapporo clock tower far from here?" he asked the driver.

"Clock tower?" the driver asked, blinking twice into the rear-view mirror. "No, not far at all."

"Okay, let's go there. I need to kill some time."

"Oh," the young driver said, scratching his chin. "You won't have much fun at the clock tower, though."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Haven't you heard? The clock tower is the most disappointing of all of the famous sights in Sapporo."

"Well, I had heard that it wasn't anything particularly special, but I don't see what there is to lose."

"Okay, I'll let you see for yourself," the driver replied.

They soon stopped at the side of a wide road. Heisuke was trying to figure out why they had stopped there when the driver pointed across the road and said, "There it is."

Heisuke smiled wryly. "So that's it, huh?" It looked completely different from the pictures. It was just a white, Western-style house with a clock mounted on the roof.

"If you have time to spare, I recommend taking a look at the old capitol building. If you just take a left on that road over there and walk straight ahead you'll see it. And if you still have time after that, you can keep walking straight down the road until you get to the Hokkaido University Botanical Gardens," the taxi driver said as Heisuke handed him the fare.

The advice was helpful. Heisuke spent ten minutes at the clock tower, twenty minutes at the old Hokkaido capitol building, and thirty minutes at the botanical gardens, after which he got into another taxi and went to his new hotel, where he arrived just as check-in began.

As soon as he had settled into his room, he picked up the phone and called the number he had written down earlier. The phone rang twice on the other end and then somebody picked up.

"Hello?" It was the voice of a young man.

"Uh, yes, hello. My name is Heisuke Sugita. I'm here visiting from Tokyo. I was wondering if Ms. Noriko Negishi is in."

"My mother is out right now," the young man replied.

"Oh, I see. Would you happen to know when she'll be back?"

"Probably in the evening some time. May I ask why you're calling?" There was a note of suspicion in his voice. He had clearly never heard Heisuke's name before, and the fact that he had said he was visiting from Tokyo must have put him on his guard.

"Actually, I'm calling concerning Mr. Yukihiro Kajikawa," Heisuke said candidly.

The young man was silent. Heisuke could almost sense his facial expression change. "What about him?" the young man asked, his voice deepening a register or two. "We don't have anything to do with that man anymore."

"Yes, I know that. Nonetheless, I would very much like to meet with you and discuss a few things. Uhh...I'm not sure how to ask this, but are you aware that Mr. Kajikawa passed away?"

The young man didn't answer right away. He seemed to be deliberating over what to say. "Yes, we know," he finally said. "But that's no concern of ours."

"Oh, is that right?"

The young man paused. "What exactly are you trying to imply?"

"I would simply like to meet with your mother. There is something I need to give to her. You said she would be returning this evening, right? I'll call again then."

"Wait a minute," the young man said. "Where are you now?"

"I'm staying at a hotel near Sapporo Station," Heisuke replied, giving him the name.

"Okay. We'll call you. Will you be at the hotel the whole time?"

"Yes. If you're willing to call me back, I'll wait here as long as I have to," Heisuke replied. He had already had his fill of sightseeing in

Sapporo.

"Alright. When my mom comes home I'll tell her to call you. It was Mr. Sugita, right?"

"Right. Sugita."

"Okay. Goodbye," Noriko Negishi's son said, and abruptly hung up the phone.

Heisuke dozed off. He had already had a number of surreal dreams by the time the ringing phone woke him up.

"Hello, is this Mr. Sugita?" a voice on the other end said.

"Yes, it is."

"This is the front desk calling. There is a visitor for you here, someone by the name of Negishi. Please hold while I hand over the phone."

Heisuke could hear the phone changing hands. He was surprised that Noriko Negishi had come here directly to see him.

"Hello?" It was Noriko's son.

"Hello. Thanks for getting back to me. Did your mother come home?"

"That's what I'd like to talk to you about. Would you mind coming down?" His voice was harder than it had been earlier. Heisuke gripped the receiver tightly and wondered what the young man had in mind.

"Ms. Negishi didn't come with you?"

"No, my mother didn't come. I'm here alone."

"I see...okay, I'll be right down. Where are you?"

"At the front desk."

"I'll be there in a bit," he said and hung up the phone. He rushed to the bathroom and washed his face to try to wake himself up a bit.

He went down to the first floor and looked around the front desk. A number of guests were lined up to check in, but there was a young man standing alone somewhat apart from them. He was wearing a white polo shirt and jeans. He was in his early twenties, tall, with a narrow face and a deep tan that made him look very athletic. Heisuke had no doubt that he was the one he was looking for. The young man slowly turned his head towards Heisuke and froze still when he saw him approaching.

"Are you...Mr. Negishi?" Heisuke asked.

"Yes. Nice to meet you."

"Very nice to meet you too," Heisuke said, bowing his head and producing his business card. He had written his home address and phone number on the card before coming down. "I'm Heisuke Sugita."

The young man looked down at the card. "Oh, you work for Bigood?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Wait a moment, please," the young man said and went to the front desk. He borrowed a piece of hotel stationery and a pen and wrote something down. He returned and handed Heisuke a piece of paper with the address and phone number of the "Kumakichi" ramen shop. He had also written down his own name: Fumiya Negishi.

"Sorry. I'm still in school so I don't have a name card yet."

They went to a tea lounge in the hotel lobby, took their seats, and ordered two coffees.

"I came to Sapporo on business and thought I'd take advantage of the opportunity to get in touch," Heisuke said.

"What do you do at Bigood? Are you in R&D?"

"No, no, not at all. I work on the factory floor. We make ECFIs, a type of fuel injector."

"ECFI...Electronically Controlled Fuel Injector?" Fumiya asked without missing a beat.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"I'm in the automotive engineering department at school."

"No kidding? Where do you go?"

"Hokusei Institute of Technology."

"What year are you?"

"Junior."

"Wow, that's great." HIT was one of the best engineering universities in Japan.

Their coffee arrived and they began sipping it almost in unison.

"So tell me, why couldn't your mother make it?"

Fumiya pursed his lips. "Actually, I haven't spoken to my mother about you yet. First of all, I want to hear what you have to say before I decide whether to tell her or not."

"Is that so? And why is that?"

"Because you're here concerning that man." The words "that man" were tinged with an almost visceral hatred.

"But Yukihiro Kajikawa is your father, isn't he? At the very least he was married to your mother."

"That's all in the past. I don't think of him that way now. He may as well be a complete stranger as far as I'm concerned," Fumiya said, clenching his jaw a bit. His eyes narrowed in anger.

Heisuke reached out for his cup of coffee. He wondered how to lead the conversation ahead from there, since this young man obviously had very negative feelings towards his father. Heisuke had assumed that this might be the case, but he was still unprepared for it.

"What exactly is *your* connection to him, Mr. Sugita?" Fumiya asked.

"That's kind of difficult to explain," Heisuke said, putting his cup back on the table. "You said you know that Mr. Kajikawa had passed away, so surely you must know how he died."

"Of course. That ski bus accident was all over the papers."

"So you knew right away that your father was the one driving the bus?"

"There was no doubt. It was the same full name, and he had worked as a bus driver when he lived here as well. It couldn't have been anybody else."

"I see. So he worked as a bus driver here too," Heisuke said, nodding. Then he looked directly into the young man's eyes and said, "Well, my wife was killed in that accident."

Surprise and bewilderment flashed across Fumiya's face. He looked down at the ground, then looked up at Heisuke. "I'm very sorry to hear that. But, as I said before, we no longer have any connection to that man at all..."

"No, no, you misunderstand," Heisuke said, shaking his head and smiling. "I'm not here to throw stones. Like I told you on the phone, I'm here to give you something."

He took the pocket watch out of his jacket's inner pocket and placed it on the table. He then proceeded to recount how that watch had come into his possession. Fumiya listened silently to the entire story, stopping Heisuke only when he heard that Yukihiro Kajikawa had been sending money to his mother every month. He was plainly surprised. It seemed he didn't know about that at all.

Heisuke opened the watch and placed it on the table so that Fumiya could see the photograph pasted inside.

"I recognized you immediately when I saw you at the front desk," Heisuke said. "This boy in the picture is you, isn't it? Mr. Kajikawa never stopped thinking about you; he never allowed this photograph to leave his side."

Fumiya looked at the photograph for a long time. "I think I understand. Thank you for coming so far and going to such great trouble."

"No, not all. Here, please," Heisuke said, pushing the watch towards Fumiya.

"However," Fumiya said, "I can't accept this. I don't want it."

"Why not?"

"That man and everything about him is something we would much rather forget. Even if you gave this to me I would just have to throw it away. Better for me not to take it."

"It seems you really dislike him."

"To tell you the truth, I despise him," Fumiya answered flatly. "When I was still very young he suddenly dumped my mom and me and ran off with a younger woman. When I think of how my mother suffered after that, it's very hard for me to forgive him. Right now we've got the little restaurant going, but for years my mother had to work in a factory. I was planning to go straight to work after high school, but somehow she managed to scrape the money together to send me to college."

Heisuke felt disturbed at hearing all of this, bothered by the question of who this young woman was that Kajikawa had run off with. It certainly wasn't Seiko Kajikawa.

"But your father officially divorced your mother, right? What I mean to say is, a formal divorce requires the consent of both parties, so your mother must have accepted it to some extent."

"Why on earth would she accept it? One day the divorce papers just showed up. Sure, maybe she could have fought it in court, but what purpose would that serve? She just gave up and gave in to his wishes. I'll tell you this much, though: if I had been a little older then, I would have *never* let him get away with what he did to my mother. You can be sure of that."

It was a heart-wrenching story, and Heisuke couldn't blame Fumiya for hating his father. "Well, at the very least he tried to make up for it with those monthly payments, didn't he?" Heisuke asked, grasping at anything he could.

"This is the first I've heard of that. Still, it's too little, too late. He had a much larger responsibility than just paying money, and he ran away from that responsibility."

"Does your mother feel the same way?" Heisuke asked. "Does she hate him as much as you do? Is that why she didn't even go to his funeral when he died?"

Fumiya looked down. He sat silently in thought. Then he looked up. "When we found out about the accident, my mother wanted to go to

the funeral. She said that, even though they had broken up, it was the least she could do for the man who had once been her husband. Who knows, maybe she felt that way because he had been sending her the money. At any rate, I'm the one who stopped her from going. I thought it was complete foolishness."

"Complete foolishness?" I wonder about that."

Although Heisuke could understand Fumiya's feelings, he wanted to make clear to him that Yukihiro Kajikawa had not only sacrificed himself to keep making those payments, he had sacrificed his own wife and daughter as well. Yet he remained silent. None of that was Noriko Negishi's responsibility. What's more, Fumiya hadn't known about the payments at the time of the accident. Noriko apparently hadn't told him.

"Anyway, that's why I can't accept this," Fumiya said, pushing the pocket watch back towards Heisuke.

Heisuke looked at the watch, then back at Fumiya.

"Wouldn't it be possible for me to speak with your mother? Just for a short while?"

"I'm sorry, but no. I don't want anything having to do with Kajikawa coming anywhere near my mother. We've forgotten all about him, and that's the way I want it to stay."

Heisuke could tell from Fumiya's tone that he had intended from the very beginning never to let Heisuke meet with his mother. "I see," Heisuke sighed. "If that's the way you feel, it's clear to me that there's nothing more I can do."

"Can I ask you something?" Fumiya said.

"Sure."

"Why is this so important to you? Yukihiro Kajikawa caused the accident that killed your wife. You are his victim. Why are you doing this?"

Heisuke scratched his head and smiled sadly. "You know, I'm not so sure myself. You know the saying, 'Once you get on a boat, you can't get off'? I guess it's something like that."

Fumiya didn't seem to understand what he meant. Heisuke would have had to explain everything that had happened between him and Seiko and Itsumi for Fumiya to understand. Yet this wasn't the place for that, and Heisuke knew that he would never be able to tell the story properly.

"I think you should get off that boat now," Fumiya said bluntly.

"Yeah. You're probably right." Heisuke took the pocket watch in

his hand and was about to close the cover when he thought better of it and looked at Fumiya. "Would you mind at least taking the photograph? It would be meaningless for me to keep it, and of course it feels uncomfortable to throw away another person's picture."

Fumiya looked flustered. Perhaps he had caught onto Heisuke's innocent little ploy.

"Okay, fine. I'll dispose of the picture."

Heisuke used the corner of his own business card to pry the photo off the back of the watch's lid. The photo wasn't pasted there after all, but actually had been cut to fit snugly into the cover.

He handed the circle-shaped photograph to Fumiya.

"I don't think Mr. Kajikawa ever forgot about you for a second," Heisuke said.

The young man shook his head sharply. "That doesn't free him of his guilt. Not for a second."

After parting with Fumiya Negishi, Heisuke returned to his room and lay down in bed. He stared at the ceiling and absent-mindedly kept opening and closing the pocket watch. Kozo had repaired the latch mechanism perfectly.

He went over the conversation with Fumiya again and again in his mind. There were many things Heisuke felt he had to tell him. Even though he would probably never meet the young man again, he still wanted somehow to express all of the tangled thoughts and feelings within him.

He still didn't understand why Kajikawa had been sending that money to Noriko. According to Fumiya, the divorce wasn't an amicable one. It was hard in that case to believe that they would have reached some sort of agreement about alimony and child support.

Heisuke couldn't help but come back to the conclusion that the payments must have been a kind of atonement for what he had done. He was sending money to the woman and child he had once deserted. It certainly wasn't an unthinkable possibility.

So then what did Seiko and Itsumi mean to him? It seemed as if the two people with whom he was planning to spend the rest of his life were little more than roommates in his eyes. Heisuke felt especially bad for Itsumi. What did Kajikawa think of her? Was she nothing more than some unwanted stepchild who was just part of the package when he married Seiko? How did he manage to balance his feelings towards the biological son he had once run away from and the stepdaughter whose care was now his responsibility?

All of these questions floated in Heisuke's mind like thick, acrid smoke, unable to find themselves articulated in words. He sat up in bed and scratched his head vigorously with both hands.

The phone rang. It was Kishima calling to tell him where he and Kawabe were staying that night. He also invited Heisuke to go out to dinner with them and then maybe go out for drinks around Susukino. Their hotel seemed to be near his.

Heisuke snapped shut the pocket watch in his hand shut. "Sure, sounds good," he said.

After eating their fill at a restaurant known for its *Ishikari-nabe* fish stew, a Hokkaido specialty, they went to a club that a friend of Kawabe's had recommended. "If you carelessly walk into the first club you see," Kawabe said as they were walking along, "they can clean you out before you even know what hit you."

Kishima and Kawabe had spent the day sightseeing in Sapporo. When Heisuke mentioned the clock tower they both laughed. "That place really sucked. It would have been better just to look at the pictures," Kishima said. Kawabe added, "It's like a low-budget movie set. The part you see on screen is fine, but if you see the whole thing you can't believe how flimsy it is."

They said the best thing they saw all day had been Mount Okura, where they rode the lift up to the ski jumps. As they were talking about their day, they entered the Susukino district, but couldn't seem to find the club they were looking for. At some point they made a wrong turn and found themselves in a dark thoroughfare.

"Uh-oh, not good," Kawabe said in a low voice.

The street had a strange ambience. A number of sleazy-looking men were milling about. They didn't seem to be part of a group, as they were all standing at some distance from one another.

The three of them had walked halfway down the road when one of the strange men suddenly approached them. He was wearing a thin, white windbreaker. "Business trip?" the man asked. Nobody answered. "If you have time," the man continued undeterred, "I'll show you a very nice place. We've got nice girls. The best. This time of night you can have your pick."

Kishima said nothing and shook his head. The man gave up and walked away. Two other men took his place, however. Heisuke found it interesting that all of the men's voices were dripping with exactly the same kind of sleaze.

"You can tell from the way they approach you that they must suck in a lot of guys on business trips," Kishima said.

"Yeah. Actually, everyone was making fun of me back at the office," Kawabe said, laughing. "You're planning to go to the sex parlors, aren't you?" they kept saying."

Heisuke realized then that the men who had approached them were touts. He was reminded of the conversation he had with Kosaka back in Tokyo.

At last they found the club they were looking for and went in. It was

a cozy little place with five young hostesses working the floor. Although Heisuke was in a more relaxed mood than he had been the night before, he still found himself getting light-headed whenever he looked at the super-mini-skirt of the girl sitting across from him.

The life of the party that evening was Kawabe. He stoked the hostesses' curiosity by telling them all about the Roppongi entertainment district in Tokyo. Heisuke felt as if he had discovered a whole new dimension to this usually very serious engineer.

"So do you have any children, Mr. Sugita?" the hostess in a tight-fitting cocktail dress next to him asked.

"Yes," he answered, holding his whiskey and water in one hand.

"A boy? A girl?"

"One daughter."

"How old is she?"

"She's in her second year of junior high."

"So, the most difficult age to handle then," the woman said, grinning.

"Yeah, you may be right about that."

"Of course I am. Second year of junior high, that means she's about fourteen, right? That's the time they hate their dads the most."

"Really?"

"Sure. Even so much as standing next to their dads annoys girls that age."

Another hostess piped in. "I was like that too, at that age. Just seeing my dad's boxer shorts hanging out to dry was so disgusting it gave me goose pimples. I would never go into the toilet if my dad had just been in there, and I hated taking a bath after he had used the tub."

The other hostesses joined in the conversation: they had hated the way their dads smelled, they had been horrified by their dads' beer belies, just looking at their dads' toothbrushes had made them want to throw up. There was no end to their complaints. When Heisuke asked them why they had hated their dads so much, they replied that they did not know themselves why. It was just an uncontrollable physiological reaction.

"It stayed that way until I was about twenty," the hostess next to him said. "But then he started getting older, and I began to feel sorry for him. I started wanting to be nice to him."

"What a bummer," Kawabe said in a somewhat deranged tone of voice. "There's nothing to be gained by being a father. I've decided

never to get married.”

“You don’t become a father because there’s something to be gained from it,” Kishima said. He himself had two children. “One day all of a sudden there’s a kid around who’s calling you ‘dad.’ And there’s no going back after that. You just have to do your best to be a father. Isn’t that right, Mr. Sugita?”

Not wanting to disappoint him, Heisuke answered vaguely, “Yeah.”

“Becoming a father is easy. *Being* a father is a killer. It wears you out,” Kishima mumbled. The alcohol was apparently going to his head.

After leaving that club, Kishima and Kawabe wanted to hop over to another place to keep on drinking even though they were already pretty far gone. Or perhaps that’s precisely the reason they wanted to keep on drinking. In any event, Heisuke wanted only to go back to his hotel, so he wished them a good night and went on his way.

After walking a while he realized that he was lost. The streets of Sapporo were laid out in a grid so it should have been easy to find his way around, but no matter which way he turned he couldn’t recognize anything. He walked around aimlessly for a while until he finally made his way to a familiar street: the road where the brothel touts were hanging around.

A man quickly approached him. Heisuke shook his head slightly to display his lack of interest and kept on walking. He felt somewhat more uncomfortable than he had when there were the three of them.

Another, smaller man came up beside him. He whispered close to Heisuke’s ear, “We’ve got really nice girls. You won’t regret it, believe me.”

Heisuke shook his head, said no, and kept walking.

“Why not just come and have a look? Everybody’s gotta recharge their batteries once in a while, pops,” the man said.

That word “pops” rankled. He stopped for a moment and looked at the tout’s face. The tout, supposing that there was some hope, drew closer and said quietly in Heisuke’s ear, “25 thou and you get your pick. Our girls are *hot*.”

“No, I really have to—”

“Look, you came all the way here to have a good time, pops, so why not *really have a good time*?” the man said, slapping him on the back.

Heisuke halfheartedly began walking in the direction that the man was leading him. He wanted to refuse, but the words wouldn’t come out. At that point the man asked him for 25,000 yen.

I don't go to places like that, Heisuke kept repeating to himself in his head. Yet the words didn't form. Something else in his mind was keeping his mouth shut.

What's wrong with being freed from this prison of being a "pops," a "dad," a "father"? he thought.

He pulled out his wallet.

There was a gaudy sign in front of the building. The man went down the stairs to the basement door and Heisuke followed him down. The door opened up to a cashier's window. The man called out into the window, after which a door next to the window opened and a fat, middle-aged woman came out. Heisuke looked around while the two of them exchanged a few whispered words. There was a badly-lit hallway to the right. The place was completely quiet.

The tout finally left and the middle-aged woman asked him, "Bathroom?"

"What?"

"If you'd like to go to the bathroom, please go now," she said.

"No, that's okay."

"Are you sure? Are you really sure you don't want to go?" she pressed. Heisuke wasn't paying attention: he was overcome with the thought that he was about to do something completely against his character.

The woman took him first to a small waiting room. He would have been very uncomfortable if anyone else had been waiting there, but fortunately he was alone. There was a large nude poster pinned to the wall.

The woman soon returned. "Please follow me," she said, and led him down a hallway lined with doors. She stopped in front of one of them and opened it. A young woman in a red bathrobe was sitting on the floor waiting for him. Her long hair was tied into a tight bun. She had a soft, feline face.

Heisuke entered the room and the Madame closed the door behind him. The young woman stood up and went behind Heisuke to help him take his coat off.

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asked, putting his coat on a hangar.

"No. I'm from Tokyo. How'd you guess?"

"Your coat is so thick. You must have thought that since this is Hokkaido it would be very cold."

She was absolutely right. In fact, he even had a sweater in his bag back at the hotel. "You're sharp," he said.

"Just because we're in the far north doesn't mean we're at the North Pole, you know. May I help you undress?"

"No, no, that's okay. I'll do it myself."

There was a bed near the entrance of the room, and a large bathroom right next to the bed, with no wall or partition of any kind. As Heisuke awkwardly removed his clothes, she drew the bath and meanwhile took off her bathrobe. Her body was lithe and firm.

She urged him into the tub and began working up a lather with her sponge. He caught glimpses of her petite breasts as she worked. Although her skin was somewhat tanned, it was young, tight, and smooth.

It had been years since Heisuke had seen a naked woman in the flesh. The last time was Naoko's body, right before the accident two and a half years ago.

I haven't been a man all this time, he thought. What on earth have I come to?

"This is my first time at a place like this," he said.

"Oh, really? I guess the guy outside brought you in."

"Yeah."

"So you paid around twenty-five."

"Yes. 25,000 yen."

The woman laughed. "He takes 9,000 out of that as commission."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah. Next time, just come here directly and ask for Erika. You'll only have to pay 16,000 yen that way."

"Oh, I see," he said, nodding. He wondered why the tout's commission was 9,000 yen and not a rounder figure like, say, 10,000 yen.

He lay back on an inflatable mat as she washed him from head to toe. She then covered him with lotion and rubbed her body against his. There were times when her crotch came within inches of his face. It had also been a long time since he had seen a woman's genitals. He grew dizzy for a moment. At the same time, he was able to observe to himself quite soberly, "Ah, so that's what they looked like."

"You don't seem too virile," she said.

"Oh, sorry."

"You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Okay, let's go to the bed."

There was a mirror running along the length of the bed. Seeing himself naked like that made Heisuke self-conscious. There was also a small alarm clock at the head of the bed, which he supposed was there to tell her when the time was up. He suddenly began to worry over how much time he had left. That anxiety probably wasn't a good thing. No matter how hard Erika tried, she couldn't seem to get him erect. "This always happens with customers who've been drinking," she said. She applied a cold, wet towel to his testicles, but this too had little effect.

"Now, what did you go and do to yourself?" she asked, amazed that her ministrations didn't have their desired effect.

"I'm sorry. I think it's hopeless," he said.

"I mean, didn't you come in here because you were horny?"

"I *am* horny," he said. Two and a half years I've been waiting for this, he thought, but didn't say.

"What should I do? There isn't that much time left."

"No, it's okay. It's a lost cause. I'm sorry," he said, getting up. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Mind bringing my clothes?"

"Are you sure it's okay?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Erika" sulked as she put his clothes next to him on the bed. He slowly put them on, one layer at a time.

"Are you married?" she asked.

He wanted to say no, but thought better of it. For a single man his age to come to a place like this and not be able to perform was just too pathetic. "Yeah," he answered.

"In that case," she said, a derisive smile spreading across her face, "maybe you should just stick to making love with your wife."

He could feel his face flush in humiliation. He wanted to slap her across the cheek, but of course he couldn't do that. "I guess so," he muttered.

As he was about to leave, the middle-aged woman appeared and led him to an elevator. "When you get off on the ground floor, you will exit from the opposite side of the building that you came in from," she said. This system was arranged in consideration of the fact that it would be even more uncomfortable to be seen walking out of such an establishment than to be seen walking in.

Heisuke got off on the ground floor as instructed and emerged into a desolate street that didn't have the feeling of a red-light district at all. A

stray cat was foraging for food in a garbage can at the side of the road.

There were few street lights and the moon wasn't out. The darkness was a welcome relief. He slowly started walking.

What do I do now? he wondered. How do I live my life? I'm a father who isn't a father, a husband who isn't a husband. I can't even get my dick up. I'm a man who isn't a man.

His wretchedness shook him to the core.

Naoko made her announcement on New Year's morning. Her own home-cooked dishes were neatly lined up on the tatami room table. "Happy New Year!" they said as they toasted one another with plain saké instead of the spiced *toso* saké normally served on New Year's Day. Naoko had been an occasional drinker ever since the day she got into junior high school.

The usual New Year's programs were being shown on television. Celebrities had put on their New Year's finery and assembled in studios to play games and sing songs. Stand-up comics were made to play The Penalty Game while athletes were challenged with trivia quizzes. Throughout Japan the feeling prevailed that today, at least, was not the day to trouble oneself with difficult thoughts. That had been the feeling in the Sugita household as well, at least until Naoko dropped the bomb.

"The high school entrance exam?" Heisuke asked, trying to make sure he heard correctly. He had been watching television and laughter was still resounding in his mind.

"That's right," Naoko said, sitting up straight. "I want you to let me take the high school entrance exam. Next spring."

"Wait a minute. I thought that you could automatically proceed to the high school division at your school as long as your grades weren't terrible? Why do you have to take an entrance exam?"

"Because I want to go to a different high school."

"A different high school? You're not satisfied with your school now?"

"It's not a matter of being satisfied or not. This school just doesn't suit my goals."

"What goals?"

"I suppose you could call it the path I want to follow in life."

"Path you want to follow in life?"

"Yes."

"What path is that?" he asked, turning off the television.

Naoko answered crisply. "Medical school."

Heisuke stared at her. Naoko stared right back at him.

"Medical school? You want to become a doctor?"

"I'm not certain about that yet. At any rate I want to study medi-

cine. Unfortunately, the university affiliated with my school doesn't have a medical department."

"Medical school..." Heisuke said, rubbing his chin. The words themselves didn't have much of a concrete meaning for him. "Why do you want to go to medical school?"

"I've been thinking a lot about what I really want to do with my life. It was hard to come up with a specific answer, so I asked myself what kinds of things I'm interested in. The answer came unexpectedly easily. What I'm most interested in is how this mysterious thing happened to me and Monami. What does it mean to be alive? What's the connection between body and mind? These are the kinds of things I want to understand. And it seems the best way to do that is to study medicine."

"Mind and body?" Heisuke was reminded yet again of just how preoccupied Naoko was with this mysterious state in which she found herself. He could readily understand why this was the thing that interested her most.

He crossed his arms as if deep in thought, but in fact he wasn't thinking about very much in particular. His mind was simply in a fog. "But that's something to worry about when it comes time to go to college. What's wrong with just moving ahead to the upper division now and then worrying about the college exam when the time comes?"

"That's no good," Naoko said. She explained that although the academics were fairly rigorous at her school, the students weren't terribly motivated to work hard since they were guaranteed a spot all the way through college. If that tendency continued through high school, they would become even less driven with time. She was afraid that such a lax environment would sap her will to study hard and get into a good medical college.

"But that all depends on you, doesn't it? If you want to do it, you can do it, I think," Heisuke said without much confidence in his own words. He went straight from junior high to a technical high school and so never had to take the infamous university entrance exams.

"And there's one more thing," Naoko said.

"One more thing?"

"I want to go to a co-ed high school."

Heisuke was speechless. Not that he was completely surprised: when she said that she wanted to take the high school entrance exam, somewhere in the back of his head he suspected that this would be part of the bargain. That may be the reason why he first resisted the idea.

Naoko had persuasive reasons for this preference as well. The majority of the students aiming for medical school were male, and the presence of like-minded students would spur her on to study harder. It would also allow her to gauge where she stood against the competition.

Heisuke couldn't deny that. In any kind of competitive enterprise it was always better to have your rivals right next to you, driving you to work harder and do more. Yet he couldn't dispel all of his doubts. He just couldn't accept the idea of putting Naoko in an environment where she would be surrounded by boys her own age. He wanted to ask her whether medical school was really the *only* reason she wanted to go to a co-ed school. Or was she just coming up with nice-sounding explanations to hide the real reason: that she wanted to fool around with boys? Didn't she just want to enjoy her blossoming adolescence (yet again) through the vehicle of Monami's borrowed body?

He didn't come out and say any of this. He wouldn't have known how to reply if she had accused him of being paranoid. If she only wanted this out of an innocent desire to study as hard as possible, she would only feel contempt for his impoverished intellect that simple-mindedly equated coeducation with copulation.

Naoko's contempt was the thing he feared most in the world.

"Okay, then. Looks like it's another year of study madness," Heisuke said as he calmly poured saké into his cup. He wanted to play the understanding father, the understanding husband.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish. It's just that I think we're in a position right now when aiming for medical school isn't out of the question for us," Naoko said, somewhat hesitant in her choice of words.

But Heisuke understood. She was talking about the settlement money. As was usual in such cases, the money wasn't disbursed in one lump sum but rather in a series of installments. They had discussed how best to use that money, in a way that would do service to the memory of Monami's deceased psyche and Naoko's deceased body, but they hadn't been able to reach a conclusion. It seemed now that Naoko had found the perfect solution.

"I'm sure Monami would approve," Heisuke said, drinking his saké in one gulp.

It was no surprise after how she threw herself into studying to get into junior high school that Naoko would spare no effort to prepare for the high school exam. Saturday and Sunday were no longer days for

relaxation. Her friends stopped coming over to the house. Naoko said, "Once they hear you're studying for an entrance exam, they pretty much leave you alone." This made life easier since that way she didn't have to refuse countless invitations to play.

It was time to put aside all luxuries, she said. She stopped buying novels and instead packed her bookshelves with study guides and books of practice problems. The only enjoyment she allowed herself was music. Listening to Led Zeppelin for some reason helped her solve math problems. Mozart was helpful when studying English, social studies was benefited by the East-West fusion group Cassiopeia, Queen was good for Japanese, and science got a boost from the music of pop singer-songwriter Yumi Matsutoya. Heisuke could always tell what Naoko was studying at a given moment by the music coming out of her room.

She could have taken the easy way, but chose instead to sacrifice the bloom time of life on the altar of study, and it was only to be expected that she would be rewarded for it. The next spring, she was admitted to the elite prep school of her choice. Like the last time, Heisuke went with her to find out the results.

When she found her number on the list of students who had been admitted, Naoko looked quite a bit happier than when she had gotten into junior high school.

He hadn't set foot in the injector plant in a long time. The air-conditioning was running—not for the sake of the people, but for the sake of the many high-precision instruments in the building.

When Takuro saw Heisuke walk in, he nodded in greeting without taking his hands away from the conveyor belt for even a moment. As usual he was wearing his work cap at an angle. Even his safety goggles weren't the standard issue model but rather a fashionable pair he had special-ordered from a supplier somewhere.

"Are you here for an inspection?" Takuro asked.

"Something like that," Heisuke replied, laughing. "I just came to see whether our newlywed Takuro wasn't playing hooky to spend the day in his love-nest."

Takuro cringed. "Man, I'm really getting fed up with all this 'newlywed' business. That's all I hear these days."

Tatsuo Nakao was walking by and noticed Heisuke. His eyes opened widely in surprise and he said, "Is something wrong Mr. Sugita?" Ever since Heisuke was promoted to group leader, Tatsuo referred to him by his surname, at least when other people were around.

"No, nothing wrong. I haven't been here in a while so I felt like taking a look."

"Oh...well then, how about a cup of coffee?" Tatsuo said.

"Sure, why not?"

They bought some coffee from the vending machine and took a seat in the break lounge. It was after normal working hours and the windows were already dark. Heisuke had already punched out for the day and was coming here on his own time.

"You know, it looks to me like you want to come back to the floor," Tatsuo said. He used to wear a work cap with a red brim, but now it was navy blue. Heisuke had once worn the same cap: it signified the unit leader.

"It's not that," Heisuke replied, taking a sip of his coffee. As always, he couldn't find the right words. Nonetheless, he was happy to be taking a break here, drinking coffee with his friend.

"How's the new job treating you? Gotten used to the work yet?"

"It's nothing special, really."

There had been major personnel changes that April. The division had been separated into various sub-divisions that were now called "groups," and this prompted a major reorganization of the workforce. At that time Heisuke was suddenly promoted to group leader, much to his own surprise.

The work was very different. Heisuke had taken over most of division chief Kosaka's responsibilities. Kosaka, in turn, took a position overseeing a number of groups.

Until now, Heisuke had only had to worry about building something flawlessly according to specifications that came from above. Now he was a manager, keeping track of various units and trying to guide them towards maximum efficiency. When problems arose, his job wasn't to get in the trenches and start working on a solution, but rather to diagnose the problem, try to predict when it would be resolved, adjust the production schedule accordingly, and then make a report to his superiors.

One of Heisuke's primary tasks was to prepare the sites where new assembly lines would be set up. Every day, the minutes from countless meetings would land on his desk, and he himself had to draft reports as well.

He passed on reports from his subordinates to his superiors. He met with managers in other groups and then reported the substance of those meetings to various third parties. A flurry of documents passed under his eyes each day, but this felt completely different from the parts and products that had passed under his gaze on the conveyor belt when he worked the factory floor. Documents are essentially information. Information isn't concrete, isn't tangible, and if only for that reason, dealing with information was harder for him than dealing with objects. He didn't enjoy his work.

"When you've been working on the floor a long time, it doesn't really feel like success to be promoted to management, does it?" Tatsuo said. "Being a unit leader, now *that's* success. You go higher than that and your overtime pay disappears and the work changes completely. There's no good to be had from it."

"You could say that," Heisuke replied honestly.

"But I guess there's no choice, huh?" Tatsuo said, looking inside his paper cup. "Society is just one big game that people play. Saying you don't want to 'succeed' is like saying you don't want to grow up."

"You think so?"

"Sure I do. We all want to stay children forever. We want to be irresponsible, immature, *free*, know what I'm saying? But there's no way in hell other people will let us get away with it. 'You're going to be a father soon, so pull yourself together,' they say, or 'You're a grandfather now so it's time to settle down, act dignified.' Even if you try to say, 'No, that's not true. I'm just a man and that's all,' they won't hear of it. You have kids and that makes you a father. You have grandkids and that makes you a grandpa. There's no running away from it. Even if you tried, all you'd be able to think is, 'What kind of father have I become?' or 'What kind of grandfather am I?' Eh, anyway. Don't mind my grumbling."

"Do you always feel that way, Tatsuo?"

"Nah, not really. It was just a thought. Just the words of the eldest son."

"Eldest son?"

"Yeah. The unit leader is the eldest son. The group leader is the father. The division chief is the grandfather. I don't know what you are above that. Some god, I guess." Tatsuo threw his empty cup into the trash can.

Heisuke arrived at his front door around 7:00 p.m. and was surprised to find the lights were off. He could feel brows knit together as he turned the key. It was stuffy inside so, after taking his shoes off, he went to the tatami room to turn on the air conditioner.

He changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants, turned on the television, and started watching the night game between the Giants and the Yakult Swallows. Yakult's batter suddenly hit a home run, and Heisuke slapped the edge of the table in frustration.

That was about all of the game that he really paid much attention to. After that, he spent more time staring at the clock on the wall.

7:30 came around. Naoko still wasn't home. What on earth is she doing? he wondered.

Naoko had begun her new life as a high school student at her elite prep school that spring. One thing that Heisuke hadn't anticipated was that she would enter the tennis club. He had assumed that she wouldn't squander any time on clubs since her goal was supposed to be entering medical school. Yet the tennis club took up hours and hours each day. There were days when she didn't even get home until 8:00 p.m. In fact, the reason Heisuke had stayed late to visit the factory floor was that he didn't want to return early and get irritated waiting at home for her to

come back.

He looked at the clock again. It was 7:55. He began to fidget.

Naoko didn't talk much about the tennis club. Heisuke didn't know what kind of people belonged to the club or what their practice sessions were like. All he knew was that there were a lot of members: one day Naoko had to type out a membership roster on her word processor and the final list included dozens of people. At the time, Heisuke made note of the fact that more than half of them were boys.

He thought of how Naoko looked in her tennis outfit. It drove him crazy to think of how the boys would stare at her long, slender legs. Her body—that is to say, Monami's body—had recently gone through a sudden spurt of development.

At 8:00 exactly Heisuke heard the front door opening. "I'm home," Naoko called out.

Heisuke stood up and waited for her near the door of the tatami room. Naoko walked in, a big backpack slung across her shoulder, her tennis racket in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. "Hi, dad. What are you doing standing there?"

"You're very late," he said, not trying to hide his displeasure.

"Am I?" she said, putting her backpack and racket down in the hallway and carrying the shopping bag into the tatami room. She sat down and stretched her legs out. She started rubbing her thighs and calves. "Man, I'm tired. Practice today was rough. Give me ten minutes, okay? Then I'll start making dinner."

Her tanned legs were practically radiant. He averted his gaze and sat down next to her. "It's eight o'clock. What were you thinking?"

"What? But we've had dinner after nine o'clock before, like on those days you came home late."

"I'm not talking about dinner. What I'm trying to say is that it's not right for a high school student to be coming home at this hour."

"But I've got practice. They make us freshmen do all the cleaning up afterwards, and then I have to go to the supermarket. It's impossible for me to get back any earlier."

"It's still very strange for you to be coming home this late. What on earth do you do at that club over there?"

"Nothing special. It's just a normal club," Naoko said, standing up and taking the shopping bag to the kitchen. She washed her hands, filled a pot with some water, and placed it on the gas range.

"Whatever happened to medical school?" he asked.

"What about it?"

"You're going to try to become a doctor, right? Isn't that the reason you chose your high school?"

"Of course I am," Naoko replied, beginning to prepare the fish on the cutting board.

"How the hell are you going to do that when you spend hours a day for this club?"

Naoko stopped moving. She turned around to face him, kitchen knife still in her right hand.

"Taking an entrance exam is a grueling experience, both mentally and physically. I have to be prepared for that, especially as a girl who is going to be competing against boys. Maybe you didn't know this, but the students at my school who participate in club activities get accepted to their first-choice universities at a higher rate than those who don't participate. Do you know why?"

Heisuke remained silent.

Waving the knife to emphasize her point, Naoko continued, "People who are active in clubs have greater powers of concentration, that's why. People who don't do clubs may get a head start on those who do, but they know they have plenty of time and get lazy because of it. They lose their edge halfway through. Having a demand on your time like a club forces you to work full steam right up until the day of the test. It becomes a flat-out sprint from start to finish. That alone gives a person greater stamina. The end result is that people in clubs study much more effectively."

"Yeah, well I wonder if things'll actually work out like that."

"At the very least, this idea that joining a club is somehow going to distract me from my studies is totally groundless," Naoko said, turning back again to the cutting board and resuming her work.

From the back she looked exactly as Naoko had looked when she was young. There was something feline in the rustling of her back as she used the knife. Her right shoulder lifted slightly.

"You make it sound like you're doing this just to improve your chances on the entrance exam. Sounds like a convenient excuse to me."

"I'm not doing it *just* for the entrance exam, but that was certainly one of my reasons."

"But isn't it the truth that there's another reason, one that's even more important?"

"What 'other reason'?"

"There are a lot of boys in that club. You wanted to join that club and be the center of attention."

Naoko's hands stopped again. She turned on the gas range and turned to face Heisuke.

"Good lord, Heisuke. Is that what you were thinking? What foolishness."

"What's foolish about it? Boys and girls are tossing balls around together, am I right?"

"Look, the upperclassmen in the club are extremely strict. We don't get any special treatment because we're girls. Now it's true that there were some girls who joined up for the reasons you're talking about, but those girls couldn't hack it and quit the club a long, long time ago. This is not like those social tennis clubs they have at the universities. We're a serious athletic team."

"Serious athletic team or not, boys have designs on young girls. If they get a chance they'll act on them. That's the way of the world."

"I don't believe this. You're full of these paranoid fantasies, aren't you?" she said, shaking her head. She shoved her hand into a bag of dried bonito flakes, grabbed a handful, and tossed them into the boiling water. Her movements were stiff with anger.

"When young men look at young women, they only think of one thing. Do you understand that?"

She didn't reply. Her motionless back made it clear that she didn't want to.

Heisuke picked up the newspaper next to him and opened it up. "Land Prices Continue to Rise" the headline read. He couldn't focus on the article. Self-loathing radiated from the center of his chest, but not because he was as angry at Naoko as he made it seem. In fact, he hardly felt any anger at all. He felt this way because he knew that the reasons Naoko gave were overwhelmingly reasonable.

She was so late that day not because of the tennis club but because she had to go grocery shopping afterwards. He realized that it would take an iron will for her to continue with the tennis club on top of everything else she had to do. She wouldn't be able to fall exhausted into bed when she came home, the way normal high school students did. Nobody was there to cook dinner for her. No matter how weighed down with fatigue she might be, she wouldn't be able to escape the housework. If she stuck with the tennis club even in spite of all that, she was doing it because it was something she *had* to do.

Even though he understood all that, he had still made accusations. Why? he wondered.

I'm just jealous, he thought to himself. I'm jealous of the youth she's regained. I'm jealous of the boys who are enjoying their adolescence at the same time she is. And all I can do is sit here and curse this fate that stops me from acting on the love and desire that I feel for her.

Dinner that night was the unhappiest meal they had ever had together as man and wife. Neither of them said a word. What made *this* fight crucially different from all the others was the absolute awkwardness of being, not angry, but deeply sad. He wasn't angry: he was heartbroken because a gulf that could never be bridged had opened up between them. He could tell from her mood that she had the same realization. It was only at times like these that the vaunted "unspoken communication" between husband and wife became a palpable reality.

Naoko kept going to school for tennis practice even after summer vacation began, but since practice only lasted until the early evening, it was rare for Heisuke to come home to an empty house. Even when he did, it was usually only because Naoko had forgotten to buy something for dinner and had just popped out to the supermarket. There was no practice on Saturdays and Sundays so Heisuke practically never had to spend time alone.

In other words, there was little for him to complain about. It bothered him a little that the hamper near the washing machine was always overflowing with her tennis clothes, or that her skin was progressively tanning into a light chocolate color, but he didn't even dare mention the word "tennis." If she talked about it, he was invariably reminded about all of the young male members of the club, and invariably got into a sour mood because of it. And of course he didn't want to say anything at all to Naoko when he was in one of those moods. The air grew uncomfortably heavy at such times. He knew from previous experience that once that happened, it could take days for things to return back to normal.

Naoko seemed to be walking on eggshells as much as he was. She never spoke about the club. Even though she used to watch a lot of tennis on television, she never watched it again after that momentous argument. She occasionally left her club practice schedule on the dining table, but she made a point never to leave her racket in open view.

For all that, they did enjoy some good fortune. Heisuke got an extended vacation during mid-August for the *Obon* festival, and it just so happened that the tennis club would go on break at the same time. Heisuke suggested that they take a trip back to Nagano, which they had not done in a long while. They never went to visit Naoko's family after the accident. Even when they went to Nagano on the Daikoku Transport bus for the memorial visit a year after the accident they didn't have a chance to visit Naoko's family.

After that, Naoko was so busy studying for her junior high and high school entrance exams that they didn't have the time to go. That was one reason, anyway. The main reason, though, was that Naoko was afraid to see her father again. Of course he didn't know about the metempsychosis that had taken place and would treat her as if she were Monami.

Yet seeing his granddaughter would probably bring back memories of his daughter and move him to tears. Naoko wouldn't be able to tell him not to cry, wouldn't be able to tell him that she was right there in front of him. If she did, the shock of that revelation would probably make the frail old man drop dead. Naoko doubted her ability to keep the secret from him.

It was no problem when Naoko's older sister came to look after her during Heisuke's business trip to Sapporo. Naoko seemed to take pleasure in deceiving her older sister. She didn't think she would feel the same way about deceiving her father.

"You can't keep saying that, Naoko," Heisuke argued this time. "If you do that you'll never see your dad again."

Naoko thought about it for a long time. Finally, one day at dinner she said, "Okay. Let's go to Nagano for *Obon*."

It was ten years since they last visited Nagano during the summertime. The holiday traffic was even worse than expected, so they arrived completely exhausted. Even though they had left Tokyo early in the morning they didn't arrive in Nagano until late that night. Naoko's family skipped dinner to wait for them at the station.

Naoko's father Saburo looked even tinier than he had last time. His thin, wrinkled throat reminded Heisuke of a plucked chicken. Saburo's face broke into a beaming, crinkled smile when he saw Monami.

"Hey, look at you!" he said. "What a fine young lady you've turned into. And so tall! Taller than your grandpa. Already in high school, eh? Well I'll be."

Looking at his granddaughter constantly, heart bursting with happiness and surprise and memories of Naoko, Saburo released an endless stream of exclamations. Everybody could tell that Monami reminded him of his own lost daughter, but nobody dared mention it.

Heisuke was worried about how Naoko would react to all this. He thought about ways to salvage the situation if she broke out crying, for example. Fortunately, nothing of the sort happened. She did a good job of playing a granddaughter seeing her grandfather again after a long time. She was so calm and assured that she was even able to signal to him with a subtle glance that everything was going to be just fine.

This fine start didn't mean that the entire visit went off without a hitch, though. In reality, she was still trying to maintain a very precarious emotional balance.

She lost that balance as they were having a late supper together that night.

Dinner had been prepared by Saburo's eldest daughter Yoko and her husband Tomio. The fact that they had kept the soba noodle restaurant thriving all this time was a testament to their culinary skills. They had prepared a full tray of luxuriously delicate traditional Japanese dishes worthy of a first-class catering business.

Saburo excused himself from the table in the middle of the meal. Everyone thought he had just gone to the washroom, but he was a long time in returning and they began to worry. When he finally came back, he was carrying a tray with two bowls of noodles.

"Dad, what are you doing?" Yoko asked.

"What do you mean, what am I doing? I promised this to Monami a long time ago," he replied.

Naoko began to look a little anxious. She didn't know anything about any promises.

"Did you forget, honey? You told me a long time ago that you wanted to try my soba at least once."

"Oh, yeah," Naoko said, looking visibly relieved.

"What, you mean Monami has never tried grandpa's soba?" Tomio asked, looking puzzled.

"That's right. Isn't it, Monami?"

Naoko nodded since that's what Saburo seemed to expect.

"Well that's strange, having to make such a big fuss over something we've been selling here for decades," Yoko said, giggling.

"I always tried to give her some," Saburo said, "but Naoko was so sick of soba that whenever I offered them some, she always asked for something else. And what do you know but because of that, Monami never, ever got to eat any." This was the first time Saburo had mentioned Naoko's name since they arrived. Nobody said anything, but Heisuke could tell that Naoko was a little shaken.

"Anyhow, please give it a try, Monami honey. I made it fresh just for you. You too Heisuke, please have some," Saburo said, pushing the bowls of soba and the dipping broth in front of the two of them.

"So *this* is why you were fiddling around the shop all day, dad," Yoko said. "I was wondering what you were up to in there."

Heisuke dug in to the noodles. He hadn't had a chance to eat Saburo's soba that many times, either.

The noodles were firm, elastic, and had a fine texture. The delicate

buckwheat aroma filled his nostrils. "These are delicious," Heisuke spontaneously enthused.

Saburo looked pleased. He turned to Naoko and asked, "How is it, Monami?"

His face suddenly lost its brightness. Heisuke looked at Monami. She had dipped her noodles in the broth but her hand had just stopped in that position. She was looking down and crying. Plump teardrops rolled down her face and landed with a little splash on the tatami mat.

Normally someone would have cracked something like, "What, did you put too much wasabi in the broth?" But they didn't. They sensed that this was different. They silently stared at Naoko.

"What's wrong?" Heisuke asked.

Naoko forced herself to smile. She pulled out a handkerchief from the backpack next to her and wiped her tears.

"I'm sorry," she said, and bowed her head slightly.

"What happened? Did I say something?" Saburo asked, bringing his fingers to his pale cheek.

"No, it's not that," Naoko said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I just remembered my mom. She loved your noodles so much. I was just wishing that she could be here to enjoy this with us, and then suddenly I couldn't help crying."

Now Yoko started to sniffle and sob. Saburo tried to hold himself back, contorting his face into a pained grimace.

The family had set aside a medium-sized tatami room next to the living room for Heisuke and Naoko. It had been used for storage in the past, but now it had been completely cleared out. Yoko and Tomio brought in two futons and spread them out.

After they left, Naoko said, "I'm really sorry about that."

"You mean the crying?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. "I was perfectly fine up until then. There was nothing to set me off. When dad looked at me and called himself grandpa it was even kind of funny, in fact. But it was the soba..." she said, wringing her hands together, "that soba. Dad's soba. That flavor I've known ever since I was a little kid. So many memories came flooding back. Before I knew it I was crying my eyes out and there was nothing I could do about it."

A single tear left its trace as it rolled down her cheek. Heisuke went next to her and hugged her. All of a sudden the front of his shirt was

soaked with her tears.

"Dad," she said, face buried in his chest, "let's go back to Tokyo soon. Being here is just too much for me."

"I know," he said. It occurred to him that now there were two people she called "dad."

Many relatives came to visit the next day, even more than had attended the memorial service after the accident. Heisuke and Naoko were exhausted just from greeting them all. Seeing Naoko, most of them exclaimed something like, "You look *so* much like your mother." One of her aunts even said, "It's like she's come back to life," through her tears.

After they all went together to visit Naoko's grave they had a huge banquet in the living room. The sliding doors to the connecting room were opened up, giving them nearly twice the space.

"Do you have a boyfriend, Monami?" one of Naoko's cousins asked. She was a tubby woman with a ready smile.

"Oh no, no way," Naoko said in a high-school-girlish voice.

"Now that's hard to believe. A cute girl like you, I'll bet the guys never leave you alone."

"She's still a child," Heisuke broke in to say. Naoko's uncle heard that and broke out laughing.

"You're the only who thinks that. Fathers *always* think their daughters are so innocent. I remember my brother Saburo used to think that Naoko had nothing to do whatsoever with the male sex. But you know better than I do, Heisuke, just how wrong he was about *that*. No sooner does she arrive in Tokyo than she gets married. I remember Saburo crying in the antechamber during the wedding banquet."

Saburo overhead this and said, "What kind of nonsense are you talking over there? I wasn't crying."

"Oh you were, you were. And you were saying how much you wanted to knock the living daylight out of the groom."

"What?" Heisuke said, unconsciously bringing his hand to his cheek.

"I didn't say that, I didn't say that. Stop making things up."

"Well well now, who's making things up, eh?"

The gathered relatives all laughed at the silly quarrelling of the two aged brothers. "Break it up, you two," they said, which calmed things down, although Saburo kept muttering to himself for some time after that.

The banquet went on until about 8:00 at night. The designated driver wives packed their drunken husbands into their cars and drove back to their respective homes. A few of the guests lived near enough to walk back.

After taking a bath Naoko got into bed and started reading a boring paperback to help put her to sleep. It didn't take very long for her to doze off: she was exhausted.

Heisuke watched television until about 9:30 then took his turn in the bath. They still used a wooden bathtub in this house, and it was quite large. If you rested your head on one end you could stretch your legs out fully, which was quite unusual for Japanese tubs that were typically only about four feet long.

He slowly submerged himself into the water and thought about the first time he ever came to this house. Just then somebody knocked on the bathroom's inner window.

"Yes?" he responded.

Naoko opened the window a crack and peeped in. It seemed she had woken back up.

"How's the water?" she asked.

"Perfect," he answered.

"That's good. If it gets too cool let me know and I'll put more wood on the fire."

"What? You still use a woodstove to heat the water?"

"Yup. This bathtub is like a national cultural treasure," she said, and closed the window.

Heisuke got out of the tub, washed his body and hair, and then got back into the tub to soak. He called out to Naoko, who he expected would be nearby, asking her to add more wood to the fire since the water was only lukewarm now.

She didn't answer. "Hey! He—y!" he called out numerous times. When he was about to give up, he noticed a heater switch on the wall. All that business about a woodstove was pure baloney, he thought. This tub uses a normal gas heater! A little practical joke, which he should have realized if he had thought about it even a little bit. Who on earth still used woodstoves in this day and age? he thought as he rinsed his hair with the shower head. He didn't say anything to Naoko about it after that. She didn't say anything either. She had probably been holding back her laughter as he called out over and over again from the bathroom, asking for more wood to be put on the stove. He would never know.

As he walked down the hallway from the bath to their room, he heard somebody call out "Heisuke?" from behind a sliding door. He slid the door open to see Saburo sitting alone, nursing a whiskey and water.

"Drowning your sorrows?" Heisuke asked, half in jest.

"No, no. Just a nightcap. Care to join me?"

"Sure, I'd be happy to," Heisuke said, taking a seat across from him.

"With water okay?"

"Sure."

Saburo started mixing the whiskey and water. He had nice glasses and plenty of ice ready, which made Heisuke suspect that Saburo had intended to invite him for a drink all along. There were some dried sardines on a plate on the table.

"Cheers," Saburo said.

"Cheers."

They clinked their glasses together and Heisuke drank the whiskey and water his father-in-law had prepared for him. Not too strong, not too diluted, it was a perfectly judged mix for drinking right after a bath. People who work with food for a living really have a good sense for these things, Heisuke thought.

"Thank you for coming to visit us. It's made us all very happy," Saburo said, bowing his head.

"Please think nothing of it," Heisuke replied.

Heisuke and Naoko were planning to return to Tokyo the next day. Saburo had already been told this.

"Monami has truly grown into an impressive young woman since I saw her last. That really puts my heart at ease. If a mother dies, it's natural to worry about what's going to happen to the child, but you've done a great job as a single father, raising her over there all by yourself. I know it may sound strange for me to say this, but I'd like to thank you on Naoko's behalf."

"I didn't do anything special. I just did what any normal father would do."

"No, no, there's nothing normal about it. As busy as you were at work, you still managed to provide for her in every way. That's a big deal."

Saburo chewed on the dried sardines and kept repeating the words, "it's a big deal, it's a big deal." Heisuke began to feel a little awkward.

"But still, there must be special problems raising a child alone as a man."

"Not really. Nao—Monami helps me out a lot around the house."

"Ah, but things are going to get tough from here on. I didn't get all the details, but I hear she's shooting for medical school. Once she's knee deep in that, you can forget about her helping out with the housework."

"Yeah, that's probably true," Heisuke replied, staring down at the pale amber liquid in his glass. He began to understand what the old man was driving at.

"Heisuke," Saburo said, taking an earnest tone, "You're not bound by duty to Naoko anymore, you know."

Heisuke looked at his father-in-law's face. Just as I expected, he thought.

"You're still young, my son. You have decades to go before you get to be as old as I am. Don't be a stubborn fool about it and force yourself to live alone. If you want to get married again, don't hesitate. You have my blessing."

"Thank you for saying that, but I'm really not ready to start thinking about that yet."

Saburo shook his head two or three times. "You say that, but time flies by, you know. I know I just said that you're still young and all, but that doesn't mean you have all the time in the world. I think it's time to get serious about this."

"I see," Heisuke replied, smiling vaguely.

"Not that I'm trying to force you or anything." Seeing that Heisuke's glass was empty, Saburo began preparing a refill.

"Thanks, thanks, but one glass is enough," Heisuke said meekly.

When he went back to their room his body was completely dry even though the air conditioner wasn't turned on, no doubt because of the cool, dry Nagano mountain air. He put on his pajamas and got into his futon.

Naoko rolled over to face him. Her eyes were open.

"You were talking with my dad, weren't you?"

"Yeah."

"He was talking about getting married again, right?"

"Could you hear him?"

"Dad has such a loud voice."

"It was a pretty awkward discussion," Heisuke said, smiling wryly.

"Have you ever thought about it?" Naoko asked, growing serious.

"Getting remarried, I mean?"

"Not seriously. Maybe it's crossed my mind a couple times." The image of Taeko Hashimoto's face flitted across his mind and quickly disappeared. "Just idle thoughts, that's all."

"Do you try *not* to think about it?"

"No. I just don't feel like thinking about it. I have you, after all."

Naoko closed her eyes. She rolled over again so that her back was facing him. "Thank you," she said softly. "But is that enough for you?"

"It's enough," he said.

Naoko said nothing in reply. Heisuke closed his eyes. This is enough, he thought, confirming it for himself. I have Naoko. Even if other people can't see it, I at least know that I have a wife. That's enough. I have enough, and I'm happy.

His consciousness grew dim.

It's enough, he thought. It's enough. I have enough.

He was lulled to sleep by waves of those words.

Heisuke and Naoko began to prepare for their return early the next morning. Like other times they'd visited Naoko's family, they were given heaping piles of Nagano specialties and souvenirs to take back home, and these completely filled the trunk of Heisuke's Toyota Sprinter. Paper bags and cardboard boxes were packed into the back seat.

"Be a good girl and listen to your father, Monami. Come back for New Year's, okay?" Saburo said through the passenger side window.

"Okay, we'll come again. Take care of yourself, grandpa," Naoko said.

"I will, I will, thanks," Saburo said, nodding.

Heisuke started driving. He could tell from how brightly the asphalt was reflecting the sunshine that today would be another hot day. He had also heard on the news that morning that the massive end-of-holiday migration back to Tokyo was beginning today. He had to brace himself for the traffic jam he knew was waiting for them ahead.

After they had driven a ways, Naoko said, "Stop the car."

Heisuke pulled over to the side of the road. "What's the matter? Forget something?"

Naoko looked back at the house and sighed loudly. "I'm sad. I know I'll never come here again."

"What? Why? If you want to come, you can come any time."

Naoko shook her head. "I won't come here again. It's just too

painful to face them. I'm already dead as far as they're concerned. I don't exist, and that's the end of the story for them. When I'm there it's as if I'm some sort of ghost," she said, her eyes growing moist. She took out her handkerchief. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to cry a little. I'm not going to turn into a blubbering idiot. It's okay. Let's go."

Heisuke said nothing. He put the car into gear, and drove off.

I'm this woman's only family, he felt in the depths of his heart. We're all alone in this world, just the two of us.

The call came on a Sunday evening. Naoko was out doing the grocery shopping. Heisuke had just finished doing some work in the little garden and was sitting on the porch looking absent-mindedly at the western sky. It was a glorious sunset framed by bright red cirrocumulus clouds.

It was a perfect autumn day, the first truly relaxing day off he'd had in a long time. He knew he would be able to face work the next day with renewed enthusiasm, and he was satisfied.

It was all the more unforgivable, then, that the phone had to ring and shatter his pleasant mood. He knew it couldn't be anything good. The phone rarely rang at the Sugita house. When Naoko had still been Naoko there had been many calls from her family in Nagano or from her friends, but those had ended long ago.

Maybe it's a real estate agent, Heisuke thought. They called every so often trying to sell him single-bedroom condos.

He picked up the phone. "Sugita residence," he said.

The person on the other end paused. That brief silence confirmed Heisuke's premonition that nothing good would come of this call. It wasn't the circumstances that tripped up the caller, rather surprise at hearing Heisuke's voice instead of Monami's.

"Uh, yes," the young man on the other end said. "Um, is Monami there?"

Must be a boy from school, Heisuke guessed. In a split-second his bright and cheerful mood had drowned in a black morass.

"No, she's not," he replied, audibly irritated. This was half intentional, half spontaneous.

"Oh, I see." The young man replied, seemingly shrinking back in fear. If he tried to hang up now, Heisuke intended to flay him alive for calling somebody's home without even giving his name. But it turned out that the young fellow wasn't quite *that* much of an idiot.

"Um, my name is Soma. Could you please tell Monami I called when she gets home?"

"Soma? From where?"

"We're in the tennis club together."

The tennis club again. Heisuke had a bad taste in his mouth. "Is it

something urgent?"

"No, nothing urgent."

"Well, if you're calling on a Sunday it must be because you have some business to discuss. If you want I can pass a message on to her."

"No, that's okay. It's sort of complicated so it would be easier just to speak to her directly. Please just tell her I called."

"Alright."

"Thanks. Goodbye," Soma said and quickly hung up the phone.

Heisuke put the phone down and felt a lump forming in his stomach. He looked at his watch. Naoko had just gone out, and if the shopping took her as long as it usually did, she wouldn't be home for another hour.

He turned on the television. NHK News was on, but he just mindlessly stared at the screen without absorbing anything that was being said.

Leaving the television on, he went up to the second floor. He quietly opened the door to Naoko's room and stepped in.

It was neat and tidy inside. Only the top of the desk was somewhat messy. A physics study guide was laid out on the desk. It looked like she was in the middle of studying physical mechanics: there were problems about applying force to objects on a plane, coefficients of friction, action and reaction. Heisuke still remembered the meanings of some of the terminology.

Notebooks, file folders, and dictionaries were lined up between two bookends against the wall. She had five file folders: one red, one blue, one yellow, one green, and one orange. They didn't have anything written on the spines, but they probably reflected some sorting system.

Heisuke had once seen Naoko talking to one of her tennis club friends with one of these file folders open next to her. That folder probably contained all of her materials relating to the tennis club. He remembered that it was either red or orange. Feeling somewhat guilty, he slowly pulled out those two folders. He opened the red one only to find recipes inside. Naoko had clipped them out of magazines and bound them neatly together.

As he expected, the orange folder was devoted to the tennis club. A copy of the autumn match schedule was the first thing he found. He rifled through the rest and stopped at the last page: it was a directory of all the club members.

He ran his finger down the list of names, looking for the family

name "Soma." There he was: Haruki Soma. He was a second-year student.

Heisuke opened the desk drawer and took out a notepad covered with cat designs from Naoko's neatly organized stock of stationery. He wrote down Haruki Soma's address and phone number. Just in case.

He tore the page off the pad and stuck it in the pocket of his sweatpants. He put the file folder back where he got it. Having some information about this boy put him somewhat at ease.

He opened the door and left the room. As he was about to close the door behind him, he saw Naoko walking up the stairs. She stopped in her tracks.

"What are you doing in my room?" she asked indignantly.

Heisuke felt a mix of emotions. On the one hand he felt guilty about violating Naoko's privacy, but on the other hand he wondered what was so terrible to her about the simple fact of his going into her room. He panicked and tried to come up with an excuse.

"Oh, I just wanted to borrow something, but I couldn't find it."

"What did you want to borrow?"

"Umm...that book."

"Book? What book?"

"You know, the one by Natsume Soseki." He had no idea what kind of books Naoko read, so he just blurted out the first thing that popped into mind.

"The cat book?"

"Cat?"

"*I Am a Cat*. That's the only Soseki book I have."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. They were talking about that book on TV. I thought I'd give it a try."

Naoko started climbing the stairs again. "Well, that's certainly ■ first," she said, walking past him into her room.

He stood at the door, watching her as she went to the bookshelf and pulled out ■ thick paperback.

"Where were you looking? It's right here," she said.

"Oh. Must have missed it."

"Here," she said, sticking the book out towards him. He reached out and took it.

She took ■ look around the room as she was about to leave. "Huh?" she said, frowning a bit. She walked to her desk. "Did you touch my things?"

"What? No..." he replied. He was startled, but managed to regain his composure.

"That's odd."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, as long as you didn't touch it, I guess it's okay," she said, exchanging the positions of the red and orange folders.

Heisuke wound up not telling her that night that Haruki Soma had called. He wanted to ask her about the boy, of course, but there was a good chance that, if he did, Naoko would immediately make the connection between that and the misplaced file folders. She was pretty sharp that way.

After dinner, Heisuke picked up *I Am a Cat*, which he had no desire whatsoever to read, and made a point of opening it in front of Naoko. After about two pages he found himself getting drowsy and only pretended to read after that.

The next day, Heisuke came home somewhat late. His watch read 8:15. He was relieved to see the lights on at home. If Naoko hadn't been back yet, he would have been climbing the walls.

There were still times when she came home late, but after their major fight he made a point never to complain about it. Naoko, for her part, seemed to make a special effort never to come home later than around eight o'clock.

Heisuke opened the front door and walked inside. He took his shoes off and was about to call out "I'm home" when he heard whispering. It sounded as if Naoko was talking on the phone. He could here her giggle now and then.

He walked slowly down the hallway, muffling the sound of his footsteps. Her voice was coming from the tatami room.

"Well, Arikawa said that you were laughing at my backhand. You're so *naughty*."

The voice was unmistakably Naoko's, but the tone was completely different from the one she used with Heisuke. It wasn't just her slangy, sloppy teenage girl way of talking. There was something playful, almost *coy* in her voice.

"Oh *really*? I kinda find it hard to believe. Well in that case, will you play doubles with me next time? *Really*? Awesome! Huh? What? No. I don't want to. Why do I have to do *that*?" she said, giggling. She seemed to be having the time of her life.

Heisuke took a few steps back towards the front door, then started walking again, this time deliberately making as much noise as possible. "I'm home!" he said.

He could hear her scurrying. "Oh, okay, see you tomorrow. Okay...okay...bye."

He walked in just as she was pulling her hand away from the phone. "Welcome home," she said. "Do you want to eat right away?" she said, walking to the kitchen. Her voice was back to normal.

"Were you on the phone?"

"Yeah, with a friend from school. We were going over the English homework."

Heisuke's stomach sank. Liar, he thought. That's not how you talk to somebody who's just a classmate. And you weren't talking about English. And what's more, it was a boy you were talking to.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "There was a call for you yesterday from somebody named Soma in the tennis club."

"Oh...really?" She was at the sink with her back turned to him, but he thought he could see her shoulders tremble a bit.

"He asked me to tell you he called, but I completely forgot about it. Didn't you meet him today? Didn't he tell you about it?"

"Well, he talked to me about preparations for the freshman tournament. That's probably what he called about yesterday. He didn't say anything about having called me, though."

"Well I thought it must have been something urgent since he was calling on a Sunday."

"I don't think it was urgent. He probably just wanted to tell me before he forgot."

"I see. Well, anyway," he said, heading towards the stairs. He went up to his bedroom to change his clothes, but kept thinking about what he had just overheard. First of all, there was no doubt that she had been talking to Haruki Soma. The question was why she lied about it. Why couldn't she just have said, "I was talking to this guy a year above me from the tennis club"?

Clearly she wanted to avert his suspicions. After all, why would she be talking with somebody from the tennis club when she was just *with* the tennis club? It would be an obvious giveaway that the person she was talking to was special in some way.

No doubt Soma had called her. Naoko wouldn't have called him; she knew Heisuke could come home at any moment.

He reached into the pocket of his sweatpants and felt the folded notepaper with his fingertips. Soma's address and phone number.

Maybe I should call him, he thought. A call from a girl's dad saying, "Don't call my daughter anymore unless there's a damn good reason," would be enough to put most young men off.

"Dad, dinner's ready," Naoko called from the first floor.

"I'm coming," he shouted back, and pulled his hand out of his pocket.

During dinner, Naoko said, "I just want to let you know that I'll be coming home late all next week." It seemed difficult for her to get the words out.

"Tennis club again?"

"No. We're preparing for our school culture festival. A sort of bazaar. It's next Saturday."

"Why do you have to come home late for that?"

"Well, we're going to put on a 'Video Café.' We'll use a darkened classroom and show videos that we made ourselves, and also sell coffee and juice. Anyway, we have to make the videos and decorate the classroom next week."

"Does *everybody* have to participate?"

"Yes, everybody. You know that's how it works."

"When you say 'late,' how late do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. The class officers usually have to pull a few all-nighters."

"All-nighters? They sleep at school?"

"Yeah."

"Good grief. Please don't tell me that you're one of those class officers."

"I'm not. People in clubs don't get chosen to be class officers since it would be impossible to juggle all the responsibilities. People who aren't in clubs, whether they're officers or not, have already started working on the preparations. Those of us in clubs only have to help out during the final week, so next week all the clubs at school have the week off."

"That's a big pain in the ass just for some culture festival. Does it really make sense for a school that wants to send its students to Tokyo University to waste their kids' time on something like that?"

"Play hard, study hard. Even the school understands that we need

a break now and then. You can't get into Tokyo U. by just nailing yourself to your desk," Naoko replied, slightly irritated.

Just as she warned him, Naoko came home later on Monday than she ever had before. She called around 7:00 to tell him that she would be late and that he should go out to eat. Having no other choice, he went to a nearby ramen shop and had a vegetable stir-fry dinner.

She got home at a little past 9:00. He wanted to say something but when he saw how tired she looked he kept silent. She said that she had eaten dinner at an *okonomiyaki* place near school.

It happened a little while after Naoko had finished taking her bath and had gone upstairs. The phone rang. Heisuke was startled: it was already almost 11:00 p.m.

He was about to pick up the phone when it stopped ringing. For a second he thought it must have been a wrong number, but it soon became clear that he was wrong.

A small light on the phone was illuminated. Under the light were the words "Handset In Use." In other words, Naoko had answered the phone. The Sugitas had switched to a cordless phone that spring. Naoko had suggested it, saying that it would be convenient to be able to use the phone on both floors. The remote handset was normally on the second floor, where they had put up a wall mount for it.

Heisuke looked at the light for a long time. If it were a call about some school or club matter, he felt it should only last about two or three minutes. The light, however, stayed lit much longer than that. He turned his attention back to the television. He took another look at the phone after the weather report had ended. The light was still on.

What kind of fool would be calling this time of night? he fumed.

The light finally went off nearly an hour later. During that time Heisuke watched some television and read the newspaper a bit, but needless to say he didn't retain a single thing he had seen or read.

The next day Naoko came home after 9:00. This was the second day in a row he had eaten dinner at the ramen shop.

What the hell is going on? he thought, growing even more suspicious. Can it really take this much time to prepare for some stupid culture festival? They're just going to pretend to run a café, for crying out loud.

The phone rang, yet again. Heisuke reflexively looked at the clock.

It was 10:55, almost exactly the same time as the night before.

The phone rang only once before Naoko picked it up and the little red light came on again. She was already in her room and hadn't gone out to the wall mount at the top of the stairs to get the phone. Obviously she had been expecting the call and so had taken the handset into her room ahead of time. In short, somebody must have told her, "I'll call you around 10:50 tonight."

Who was that somebody?

Heisuke was sitting on pins and needles. His glance shot from the television to the clock to the phone in an endless round. The baseball news was on. The Giants had already secured their place in the Japan Series and were now waiting to find out who would take the Pacific League title and become their competitors in the national championship. Kintetsu, Seibu, and Orix had been playing musical chairs at the top for the last few days. This year, at least, die-hard Giants fans like Heisuke had good reason to take an interest in the Pacific League results. Yet, now, he could barely even focus on what the announcer was saying.

When the minute hand passed 11:30, Heisuke went out into the hall. Walking as quietly as possible, he went to the base of the stairs. He looked up and saw that Naoko was in her room with the door closed. Slowly, stealthily, he crawled up the stairs like a gecko. He could just barely hear Naoko's voice through the door, but couldn't make out what she was saying at all.

The name Haruki Soma bounced around in his head. He was surely the person on the other end of the line. What kind of boy was he? Why was he calling Naoko?

He couldn't hear her voice any longer. He crawled closer to her door, resting his belly on the top step.

Her door suddenly opened. The corner of the door was about to slam right into Heisuke's face when Naoko saw him and shrieked in surprise.

"What on earth are you doing there?"

"Uh...nothing," he said, sitting up on the top step. He was in a cold sweat. He couldn't come up with any kind of explanation.

Naoko was holding the handset in one hand. As she walked to replace it on the wall mount she looked down at Heisuke. "Were you eavesdropping on me?"

"No. But...I mean, both last night and tonight you've been getting calls at strange hours of the night. I was concerned, and came up here to

see what was going on."

"And how is that different from eavesdropping?"

"I didn't hear anything you said. Anyway, what were you on so long for?"

"It was a friend from the tennis club," she replied brusquely.

"It's that guy Soma, isn't it?"

Naoko grew silent and began to sulk. It appeared Heisuke had hit the bull's eye.

"He's a second-year, right? He wouldn't be calling a freshman like you just to be friends, you know."

"How did you know Soma's a second-year?"

This time it was Heisuke's turn to be silent. Naoko's mouth twisted in anger. "So you were looking through my files, after all, weren't you? I knew something strange was going on."

"What's wrong with looking?"

"Have you ever heard of the word 'privacy'?"

"Who is this Soma? Why is he calling you?"

"I don't know. He's the one calling me, so there's nothing I can do about it."

"Of course you know. If a guy calls a girl without any special reason there can only be one reason," he shouted up at her.

Naoko sighed. She looked down at him. "Okay, the truth is that he probably likes me. He's probably calling me because we don't have practice this whole week and he doesn't get a chance to see me. There, are you happy?"

"Tell him to stop calling you."

"Why should I do that? It's not like he's asked me to go out with him."

"Sooner or later he will."

"And if he does I'll refuse."

"You're really enjoying it, aren't you? It feels good, doesn't it, flirting with a young buck?" Heisuke could feel his cheek begin to twitch.

"Yeah, I enjoy it," Naoko said. "Am I not allowed to enjoy anything? Am I not entitled to just this much? I can't enjoy a change of pace once in a while?"

"You enjoy talking to him more than you enjoy talking to me, don't you?"

Naoko didn't reply to Heisuke's question. She grasped the door handle. "I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. Good night."

He was about to tell her to wait, but it was too late. She was already in her room and the door was closed.

Even after getting into his futon, Heisuke couldn't fall asleep. On the one hand he was disgusted with himself for being so narrow-minded as to make such an uproar over a simple phone call. On the other hand, he was angry at Naoko for being so indifferent to his own suffering.

Heisuke obsessed over the fact that Naoko had referred to Haruki Soma as "Soma." By all appearances Soma was older than she was, but from a psychological standpoint of course he was still a child compared to her. When Naoko had been in elementary school, alone with Heisuke she had always referred to Taeko Hashimoto as "Taeko," or "that girl." Yet now it seemed that she really *had* become psychologically like a freshman in relation to Haruki Soma, and so referred to him deferentially by his family name. *She looked up to him.*

Heisuke prayed that this was only temporary. That night in Nagano when he said that she was enough for him, she said "Thank you." Those two words now became the only thing keeping his heart and soul in one piece.

Naoko said nearly nothing for the next three days. She continued coming home after 9:00 each day. After she came back she would lock herself up in her room and only come out to go to the toilet or take a bath.

The phone only rang once, on Wednesday. There were no calls on Thursday or Friday. She must have said something to Soma.

Saturday morning, the first day of the culture festival, Naoko rushed into Heisuke's bedroom, where he was still in bed. "Here," she said, putting a piece of paper next to his futon.

He picked up the sheet of pink paper, rubbed his groggy eyes, and read it. "How About Enjoying a Refreshing Drink While Watching Some Cool Videos? Please Visit Us at The Ando Video Bar." A map of the school campus was printed underneath.

"What's this?" Heisuke asked.

"Come if you feel like it."

"Do you *want* me to come?"

"Like I said, come if you feel like it. Okay, I'm off," she said and left the room.

Heisuke sat up in bed and looked at the advertisement for a long time. He felt like going. He wanted to see Naoko's school life with his own eyes. Come to think of it, he hardly ever saw Naoko outside of the house.

At the same time he didn't want to go. He was afraid.

It's not that he was worried about whether she was getting along well at school or not. He no longer had any worries about that. Quite the opposite. What he feared most was that Naoko had become, both physically and psychologically, a perfectly assimilated high school girl. If he saw her like that he would feel only loss, loneliness, and irritation.

He debated with himself back and forth, but in the end decided not to go. When Naoko came back home at around 8:00 that night, he didn't mention anything about it. He didn't even feel like asking her how it went.

The second day of the festival she left the house without saying anything, probably assuming that he didn't want to go. Heisuke stayed in bed until noon reading magazines, then watched golf and baseball on

television. The Central League was just crunching the leftover season.

He began to feel the urge to go see her when he saw a famous restaurant on television. It was a simple, straightforward program that featured two celebrities, a man and a woman, rolling their eyes in ecstasy and praising the food as they ate the restaurant's specialty dishes.

Actually, last night was the first time in a few days that Heisuke and Naoko had eaten together at home. Most of the dishes, though, were prepared foods that Naoko had bought at the food market in the basement of a department store. Heisuke was afraid the same thing would happen tonight. If he went to the culture festival, though, there was a chance that he and Naoko could eat dinner together.

It was a little past 2:00 in the afternoon. According to the ad, the culture festival would go on until 5:00. He rushed to get ready.

This was his first time at Naoko's school since the day they went to find out the results of her entrance exam. The school looked completely different from how it had then. There were huge signs lined up along the front gate and posters on the walls. The biggest difference, though, was among the students. When they were admitted to the school there were still a few babyish faces, but now they were all beginning to look like adults.

Middle-aged parents were wandering here and there around the campus. They didn't seem to have much interest in the shops and displays, though. They were here more to check out the place where their children spent half their waking hours.

Naoko's homeroom was decorated with painted cardboard and colored paper. A girl wearing an apron saw Heisuke and smiled brightly. "Welcome!" she chirped.

"Uh, hi..." he said, scratching his head as he looked around the room. Desks had been brought together to make tables where customers were supposed to sit. There was a partition in the back of the classroom which blocked his view. He assumed that it was hiding the kitchen area. A girl carrying a tray walked through a square opening in the partition. "Is Monami Sugita around?" he asked the girl at the front.

"Oh, are you her dad?" the girl asked, looking him up and down.

"Yeah."

"Oh wow! Hold on," the girl said, and ran to the screen through which she disappeared to the other side.

Naoko soon came out, wearing the same type of apron as the other girl. Her long hair was in a ballerina-style bun.

"So you came today," she said. She didn't look particularly happy, but she didn't seem displeased either.

"Well, just thought I'd take a look."

"That's cool."

She led him to a seat near the window. There was a video monitor next to the seat, one of four monitors in the room, all of which were connected to VCRs. He wondered how much trouble they would be in if one of those expensive pieces of equipment happened to fall to the floor.

"Something to drink?" Naoko asked.

"Oh, yeah. Umm...I'll have a coffee."

"Coffee it is," she said and disappeared behind the screen. He noticed then that the skirt of her school uniform was much higher than he had ever seen it. The "waitresses" all had their skirts high. What's the big idea? he thought. Won't people see their panties when they bend over? It was not a comforting thought.

Their homemade video was playing on the monitor. It was pretty juvenile stuff: images of cats and crows hunting for food while subtitles in Kansai yakuza slang rolled by at the bottom of the screen. Heisuke found it mildly amusing.

"Do you like it?" Naoko asked as she brought his paper cup of coffee on a tray.

"The absurd parts are good."

"I heard the boys in the class really went to a lot of trouble making it," she said, sitting down next to him. She took a little container and poured milk into his coffee. She stirred it a little and put it in front of him.

He took a sip. It tasted good, but perhaps that was just because his mood had lightened a bit.

"Did you make all of these decorations by yourselves?" Heisuke asked, looking around at the colored paper and cellophane ornaments on the walls and windows.

"We sure did. They're not that great but they took a lot of time."

Heisuke nodded. Everything was pretty elaborate and he could see how working on it had kept her late all those days.

A group of kids was staring at them from behind the partition. When he turned his head they all scrambled to hide their faces.

"It looks like we're being watched," he said.

"No surprise there. My dad is here, and they're curious. I don't talk about my home life much at school."

"Why not?"

"Well, I can't very well tell them the truth, can I? And I'd rather not lie."

Heisuke nodded his head in agreement and drank his coffee.

"The festival ends at five, right?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What do you say we go out to have dinner together? It's been such a long time."

He thought she would be happy but she just looked flustered.

"The festival ends at five but there's a lot to do afterwards," she said.

"A lot to do?"

"Cleaning up, and then the campfire..."

"Campfire?" He recalled that Naoko had mentioned something about that a long time before. "So you'll be coming home late tonight?"

"I don't think it'll be that late, but I don't know the exact time."

"I see."

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down.

"No, that's okay, Naoko, I don't mind. I'll pick up some sushi on the way home. That way, if you're hungry when you get back you can eat right away."

She nodded slightly and then whispered in his ear, "Don't call me Naoko."

"Oh, sorry," he said, smacking his forehead.

The girl Heisuke had spoken to earlier approached them. "Monami? Do you have a minute?"

"What is it?"

"We're out of coffee filters."

"I *knew* they wouldn't be enough. Okay, use paper towels instead."

"I don't know how."

"Alright, I'll come do it." She stood up and followed the other girl back behind the curtain.

Heisuke got up and took a peek behind the screen. Girls were making sandwiches, cutting oranges to make juice, and so on. Naoko had torn off a piece of paper towel and was showing the others how to place it into the coffee maker. Although they all looked physically to be the same age, everything else about her made it seem as if she were their mother.

As he was about to return to his seat, a young man came up next to

him. He was tall, with a tanned, chiseled face. At first Heisuke assumed he was just some student hanging out around the café, but even after Heisuke sat down the boy wouldn't leave his side.

"Um, excuse me..."

Heisuke's heart began pounding wildly as soon as the boy spoke. He had heard that voice before.

"You're Monami's father, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Heisuke said, voice cracking. The blood started rushing to his head and he began to feel hot.

"I just wanted to apologize about the other day. I'm Soma from the tennis club." The young man bowed politely.

"Oh..." Heisuke couldn't come up with a quick reply. He looked around, trying to think of something to say, and noticed that others in the room were looking at them.

"Why don't you have a seat?" Heisuke asked.

"Oh, sure," Soma said, sitting across from him.

At a loss, Heisuke looked behind his back and made eye contact with Naoko. She was peeking out from behind the curtain. Her mouth was gaping in surprise. She certainly hadn't been expecting Soma to come here.

"I'm sorry for calling late at night so many times. I didn't mean to disturb you," Soma said, bowing his head again.

"Did Monami say something to you?"

"Yes. She told me that you get up early in the morning so it was a nuisance for you to be getting calls at the house late at night."

"Oh, I see," Heisuke replied, realizing now why the calls had stopped.

"I'm really very, very sorry."

"No, that's alright. I wasn't that upset about it," Heisuke said. That's about all he could say with Soma apologizing profusely right in front of him. He didn't want to seem like an unreasonable lout.

"Thank you. It's a big relief to hear you say that," the young man said, relaxing a bit.

"Did you come all the way here just to apologize?"

"Yes. One of the freshmen told me that you were here."

"Ah..." What was this all about? Heisuke wondered. Why would someone go find Soma to tell him that? That would mean the whole phone incident was common knowledge around here.

"Well then, I think I'll be on my way," Soma said, standing up.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Soma faced the back of the classroom and raised his hand a little. He silently mouthed some words, then grinned broadly. Heisuke didn't need to look to know whom he was smiling at. Soma then left the room.

Naoko quickly came to Heisuke and quietly asked him, "What did he say to you?"

Heisuke recounted the conversation for her. "The whole thing was kind of like one of those teenager soap operas on TV," he added, only half ironically.

"He's a pretty earnest guy," Naoko said.

"I think he thinks of himself as your boyfriend," Heisuke said.

"No he doesn't. Cut it out," she said, hardly moving her lips at all.

The school bell suddenly rang. An announcement came on that the culture festival would end in fifteen minutes. Everybody in the room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief and began talking animatedly.

Heisuke stood up. "Okay, I'm heading home."

"Thanks for coming."

"Try not to be too late, okay?" Heisuke said as he left the classroom.

He left the school a little before 5:00 but didn't feel like going straight home. He got on the train and went to Shinjuku. He looked at appliances for a while and then was about to head to the bookstore. At that moment, he saw a young man and woman walking out of the electronics shop and immediately stopped in his tracks.

They looked like high school students. The boy had longish hair, the girl was wearing makeup, but they were both wearing school uniforms. The boy had his arm around the girl's shoulders while the girl had her arm around the boy's waist. They seemed completely oblivious to the world around them, and their faces were close together, as if they were about to kiss.

They looked exactly like Naoko and Soma. Goose pimples broke out all over Heisuke's body.

Heisuke realized something in that instant: when Haruki Soma was about to leave the classroom, he had mouthed some kind of message. Heisuke suddenly figured out what that message was.

"See you later."

That's what he had said. There was no doubt about it. Heisuke

recalled that moment as vividly as a scene out of a movie.

See you later. To do what?

He couldn't stand still. Something inside impelled him to rush back to the station.

What am I doing? What am I doing? he kept asking himself. But he couldn't stop moving. Before he knew it, he was back at Naoko's high school. He stood in front of the gate.

The sun had completely set. Normally the entire school would be enveloped in a silent darkness at this time of night. Today was different. There were many students gathered in the school courtyard, and music and voices could be heard. A band was playing.

Heisuke walked through the gate. As he walked towards the sports fields the campfire came into view. Some students were standing around the fire, some were sitting down.

The band was playing on a makeshift stage that had been erected in one corner. A girl was singing. Her patent leather outfit reflected the light of the fire. She looked like an adult, but of course she was just one of the students there.

Campfires are strange things, Heisuke mused. They made him think of things like folk dancing.

Everybody there except for Heisuke was a student, but nobody seemed to notice him standing there. It was dark and their attention was focused on the band.

He looked for Monami, working his way through the crowd as if pushing through thick vegetation. Some of the boys were taller than Heisuke, and when he found himself in the middle of a group of them he couldn't even get a clear view of the surroundings.

The band started a new number and the mood of the music changed. Until then they had been playing slow ballads, but now they started playing something more up-tempo. The mood of the audience changed along with the music. People who had been sitting stood now, and practically everybody started clapping and dancing.

The concerted movements of the crowd made Heisuke dizzy. He felt as if the air had grown thin. Gasping, he started walking back the way he came.

His tripped on something, probably somebody's foot, and fell to the ground. Unable to get back up in the middle of the thronging crowd, he started crawling on all fours. People were stomping their feet in time to the music and wound up kicking a lot of dirt into his face.

Finally he made it some distance away from the stage where the students had thinned out. He stood up, finding himself closer now to the campfire. He brushed the dirt off of his clothes and looked up.

That's when he saw Naoko.

She was standing a few yards away from the fire, visible only in profile. She wasn't clapping her hands, although her eyes were focused on the stage.

Haruki Soma was standing next to her. They weren't more than a couple feet apart. For a second Heisuke thought they were holding hands, but that was just his imagination. Naoko had her hands clasped together in front of her.

All of the other students were dancing and clapping while only Naoko and Soma didn't move an inch. They seemed to be frozen in time and space.

Heisuke stayed absolutely still. He said nothing.

The campfire blazed, its deep red light flickering in Naoko and Haruki's faces. Their shadows swayed along with the dancing of the flames.

A package arrived at the Sugita home on the second Saturday of December. The return address was in Nipponbashi in Osaka. Naoko was at school. After that she had tennis practice and wouldn't be home until the evening. Heisuke carried the package into the tatami room, peeled off the tape, and opened the cover. There were two smaller boxes inside, the larger of which he opened.

Inside was a tape recorder, small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand, which had a voice-activation record function. When the microphone detected noise above a certain threshold, the machine automatically began recording, and stopped recording when the sound level fell below that threshold. That way you didn't have to record silence during meetings or lectures.

Heisuke, however, hadn't ordered it to record meetings or lectures.

The second box contained a device about the size of a matchbox. It was a telephone wire tap with a phone jack at one end and short cord with an output plug extending from the other. A phone cord and a double-headed jack adaptor were also included.

While reading the operating instructions, Heisuke first looked for the house's modular plug, which he found on a wall in the tatami room next to the credenza. There were some old newspapers piled up in front of it. He removed those and plugged the phone cord into the plug. He suddenly reconsidered, pulled it out, and then plugged in the double-headed jack adaptor instead. He then plugged the phone cord into one of the two jacks on the adaptor.

He put batteries and a cassette into the tape recorder, then plugged the wire tap plug into the recorder's microphone jack. He had already connected the wire tap to the phone cord. The setup was now complete.

Heisuke picked up the phone and dialed 177. The telephone weather report came on.

"This is the weather report of the National Meteorological Agency for December 10th at 1:00 p.m. In the Tokyo metropolitan area there are currently no special weather advisories in effect..."

When he saw that the voice-activated tape recorder had automatically started recording, he hung up. He rewound the tape and then played it. The weather report was reproduced through the speakers

exactly as he had heard it. Satisfied, he rewound the tape to the beginning.

He pushed the credenza away from the wall a little bit and hid the recorder and wire tap between it and the wall. He replaced the pile of old newspaper next to the credenza so the gap couldn't be seen. Throwing away the old newspapers was his job, so there was no chance that Naoko would touch them.

He gathered all of the packaging together. He didn't need to imagine what would happen if Naoko found any of it.

Heisuke realized that he was doing something despicable. Yet when he saw this wire-tapping set in a magazine, there was no way he could not order it. Perhaps it was something of an exaggeration, but he went so far as to believe that this device would be his salvation.

He couldn't help wondering what Naoko did when she was out, whom she saw, what she talked about. The Naoko he knew, the one who shared his home, hadn't changed very much. But he knew that this was only one side of her.

This made sense. The personality she took on with him was for him and nobody else. The second she took one step out of the house she had to become Monami Sugita.

Until now he hadn't been very concerned about what that public persona was like. He had believed that, even if she pretended to be Monami, in reality she would always be Naoko, and always be his wife.

That belief was beginning to crumble. Or rather, it had collapsed entirely. He was terrified that he was going to lose her.

He cut up the cardboard boxes into little pieces then covered those with newspaper. As he was tossing that bundle into the trash, he heard something at the front door. It sounded as if the mail were being delivered. He rushed to the front door to check.

There were three pieces of mail. The first was junk mail addressed to him, the second was his credit card bill, and the third was a letter addressed to Monami.

He looked at the back of that letter. The sender was a class reunion organizer from Monami's elementary school. He didn't realize that the school had such class reunions; he assumed this must be some kind of invitation.

He went back to the tatami room, put the mail on the dining table, and turned on the television. But the letter to Monami soon began to intrude on his thoughts. Was it really an invitation to a class reunion? He

never knew elementary school reunions to be such large-scale affairs. Usually they were just informal gatherings of close friends.

He looked closely at the writing on the letter. It was clearly a man's handwriting.

What if this were actually an invitation to some wild teenager party, under the guise of a "class reunion"? Some boy fondly recalls his elementary school days, or maybe looks at his yearbook and sees girls that he guesses must be beautiful high school students by now, and so shoots off one invitation after another. Just the kind of thing a sex-obsessed teenage boy might do.

Once Heisuke got started with this line of paranoid speculation, he could think of nothing else. He went to the kitchen and started boiling some water in the kettle.

What the hell am I doing? he thought, yet he couldn't stop himself.

The kettle started to spout hot steam. He held the envelope's seal up to the kettle's spout. The paper quickly grew moist. Once he thought it was ready, he used the tips of his fingernails to carefully pry open the flap.

There were two folded pieces of B5-size paper inside. One of them was a photocopied map with directions to a community center somewhere. The second was in fact an invitation to a class reunion, but not what Heisuke had imagined. It was a formal reunion of the school's 55th graduating class. The invitation said that many teachers would also attend the event.

Well, I guess that's okay, Heisuke thought, putting the papers back in the envelope. He held the envelope up to the steam again to moisten the glue, and then resealed the envelope.

This wasn't the first time Heisuke had opened Naoko's mail. It was the third time, in fact. He was often the first one home on weekdays, so he was able to intercept the mail then as well as on weekends.

The first letter he opened was from one of Naoko's friends from her junior high school days. The friend was female, and there was nothing worrisome about the letter's contents. It was pretty much along the lines of, "How are you getting along at your new school?"

It had been obvious from looking at the envelope that the sender was a girl, yet Heisuke was convinced that there was something suspicious about it. The pretty stationery, the girlish handwriting: it all seemed somehow fake. It's from a boy isn't it? he had thought. It's from that Haruki Soma, isn't it? Looking back with the cold eye of reason, of

course, such suspicions were patently absurd, but when it came to Naoko, Heisuke had lost all reason.

In any event, he opened up that first letter, read the contents, and realized that his suspicions were groundless. He felt like a cretin, but more than that, he felt relieved.

The second incident was even more ridiculous: he opened up a piece of junk mail advertising an encyclopedia. The envelope was made out to look like a personal letter in order to draw attention. The name of the publishing company's president was handwritten in the return address. Needless to say, the name of the company was written down in the return address as well, but Heisuke didn't notice. All he saw was a letter from a man addressed to Naoko, and the blood surged to his head as he tore open the envelope. When he saw the flyer for a full-color encyclopedia inside, all he could do was laugh at the depths of his own stupidity.

And now this.

He felt guilty, yet it was nearly impossible for him to allow anything meant for Naoko to go unopened. In fact, he had come to enjoy it. He couldn't resist. It had become a kind of drug for him—and his addiction wasn't limited just to letters.

He had entered Naoko's room countless times when she wasn't home. He checked inside the drawers of her desk, he opened all of the notebooks on her bookshelf. He did all of this for the same reason he opened her letters: he was obsessed with knowing everything about her.

The thought that perhaps she was keeping a diary was what set him searching. He had this idea in his head that teenage girls all kept diaries. Once this thought took hold of him, he became frenzied in his desire to find hers, and that was why he kept sneaking into her room.

Although he never found a diary, he came to know her room so well that he knew where everything was. He copied the contents of her address book onto a separate piece of paper, and copied all of the engagements written on her calendar into his own appointment book. He knew when her next period was supposed to start, and he even knew where she bought her sanitary napkins.

None of this did anything at all to relieve his anxiety. The thing that worried him the most, in the end, turned out to be the telephone calls.

They always came before 9:00 and always ended before 10:00. The caller, no doubt, was Haruki Soma. He had apologized for calling late, but apparently he didn't think that there was anything wrong with

the act of calling itself.

And there was something else that bothered Heisuke. It seemed that Naoko was calling Soma as well. The monthly telephone bill proved it, although there was something of a paradox. On the days that Soma didn't call them, it would make sense for the "Handset In Use" light to come on when Naoko called him. The problem was that Heisuke never saw that light come on except when Soma called. The larger telephone bills remained something of a puzzle. Heisuke for his part hardly ever placed any calls.

The only explanation was that Naoko called Soma when Heisuke wasn't home: when he was working overtime, when he was working weekends, when he was at the barbershop, and so on. And then there were the occasions he *was* home but wouldn't notice: when he was in the bath. He loved taking long baths of at least thirty to forty minutes. She could easily carry on a conversation in that span of time.

So he gave up his long baths. As soon as he soaped and rinsed himself, he would just take a quick plop into the tub and then come right out.

This didn't solve the problem, of course. What bothered him was not that she was talking on the phone but that he didn't know what she was saying. His heart was literally drowning in anxiety. This was why, when he saw the wire tap set, he felt he had found his salvation.

He looked at the clock. It was 4:30 in the afternoon. Tennis practice would soon finish.

It's kind of cold today, wonder if she'll go to "Yukinko"...

He was thinking of the restaurant that specialized in Sapporo ramen near Naoko's school. He knew from the receipts he had found while rummaging through her trash can that she went there a lot. In addition to "Yukinko," she frequented an *okonomiyaki* place called "Ajifuku," and a coffee shop called "Kururu." She probably went a lot of other places as well, but since the cashiers at those stores were teenagers who didn't bother to give receipts to other teenagers, he would never know.

If she went to "Yukinko," she would probably order the roast pork ramen in miso broth, he guessed.

He knew that she liked that dish. He also knew that it cost exactly 660 yen.

He slowly lowered himself into the tub, hummed a short tune, and then got out. He squeezed the excess water from his hand towel, scrubbed down his entire body, then dried himself carefully with a bath towel. After this, he applied some hair tonic, dried his hair with the blow drier, and then changed into his pajamas. He went to the tatami room and looked at the clock. He had spent roughly forty-five minutes in the bath.

He looked at the phone and saw that the "Handset In Use" light was off. But when he took the cassette out of the recorder hidden behind the credenza, he could tell that something had indeed been recorded. Naoko must have hung up when she heard him getting out of the bath. He had recently noticed that the sound of the bathroom door opening and closing was remarkably loud. The door was also close to the stairwell, the acoustics of which amplified the sound even further.

Heisuke took the cassette up to the second floor. He didn't hear any sound coming out of Naoko's room. She was probably studying at her desk now that she had finished her call.

He went into his bedroom and took his Walkman from the bookshelf. Listening to these conversations had become one of his daily pleasures. He had been doing it for a week already, and it had become clear to him, more or less, what she talked about and with whom.

He was relieved. During that one week, at least, Haruki Soma hadn't called once and Naoko hadn't called him either. The most frequent caller was one of Naoko's classmates, Yurie Kasahara. She seemed to be Naoko's best friend, and most of Naoko's outgoing calls were to her as well.

Heisuke wondered why she went to so much trouble to hide the calls when they were only from her classmates, but he soon realized that it was probably because Naoko didn't want to worry him too much.

Naoko and Yurie's conversations were highly entertaining. Yurie would complain about teachers and boys while Naoko laughed at her grouching. Yurie was a virtuoso at spinning out caustic criticisms of just about anybody, and although listening to her could be discomforting at times, it was also highly stimulating.

Their conversations taught him a lot about their school life, as well.

Heisuke learned, for example, about a male lecturer named Sugahara who was almost sadistic in his zeal to make students abide by school rules, but who turned right around and often got fresh with the cute girls in his class. Then there was the student Morioka, who according to the grapevine had gotten a girl at a different high school pregnant. It all just reminded Heisuke that even an elite prep school that sent quite a few students to Tokyo University every year could have its share of festering sores.

Once the tape was rewound, Heisuke was so excited to hear what today's conversation was about that he played the tape at double speed.

"Hello, Sugita residence..."

Naoko's voice. This time it was an incoming call.

"Hi, it's me, Haruki."

A flash of heat rushed through Heisuke's body. So the boy has called at last. He didn't actually stop calling after all.

"Oh, hi."

"Can you talk now?"

"Yeah, it's fine. My dad's taking a bath."

"Just like you said he would. Your accuracy is unbelievable."

"That's been his habit for years. I bet he's not even aware of it."

"What, that he always takes a bath at 9:30?"

"Yeah. During the baseball season the night games always end around 9:30, right? I mean they're supposed to end around 9:00 but usually they drag out or there are extra innings or whatever, so they wind up finishing around 9:30, and then he always take a bath after the game. That's how the habit started."

"Huh. That's pretty interesting."

Heisuke realized she was right. He always took his bath around 9:30, and just as Naoko pointed out, he always took a bath right after the night games. Once it became a habit, he did it even in the off-season. He had been completely unconscious of it. At any rate, this made it possible for Naoko to instruct Soma to call a little after 9:30.

The conversation shifted to the tennis club. Heisuke thought it was kind of odd that Soma had gone to the trouble to call to talk about that stuff when they met at tennis practice almost every day.

Even though Naoko was younger than Soma and would therefore be expected to use polite language with him, she did not. This apparent intimacy made Heisuke boil.

"So...have you thought about that thing we talked about?" Soma

said, turning serious.

"About Christmas Eve, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I thought about it, but..." Naoko said, stammering. Heisuke covered his other ear to focus on what he was hearing through the earphone. This was a vital conversation. In modern Japan, Christmas Eve was generally considered a time for young couples to find a nice hotel room and express their affection in ways that went beyond words.

"Do you have other plans?" Soma asked.

"No, it's not that."

"So what's the problem, then? You've always excuses not to go out with me. Can't you at least do me this much? We're talking about Christmas Eve!"

The blood rushed to Heisuke's head. What nerve! Who do you think you are, you juvenile delinquent! His heart began to pound.

"But we see each other every day," Naoko replied.

Yeah, that's right, Heisuke thought. That's *more* than enough.

"What is it? Don't you like me?"

"It's not that. But I told you before that I can't be out of the house that much."

Why don't you just tell him you don't like him? Heisuke thought.

"I understand that. I know it's tough for you having to do all that stuff around the house. But come on, it's just one day. You've got a right to have some time for yourself."

Heisuke's hand clenched into a fist. What the fuck are you talking about, you stupid piece of shit?

"I mean, everybody thinks we're going out," Soma continued. *"Sometimes they ask me stuff like, 'where do you go on your dates?' and 'what do you two guys do for fun?' When I tell them we don't go on dates, they just look at me funny. That kind of stuff makes me miserable."*

Who gave you the right to be miserable about anything?

"Look, I told you before," Naoko said, *"if that's the kind of thing you want, you should ask some other girl out."*

"Oh, not that again. One day you say one thing, the next day something else, just leading me by the nose back and forth. I'm serious about you, Monami. You mean so much to me."

Naoko grew silent. That silence drove Heisuke to distraction. It seemed as if Soma's words were getting through to her.

"I already made all the plans. Where we're going to go, what we're

going to eat, it's all decided. You have to reserve all that stuff way in advance, you know."

"I'm just not sure..."

"I'm never going to give up. Just think about it, please. Be a little more open-minded."

"Okay. I'll think about it."

What? Why don't you just refuse outright? fumed Heisuke, grinding his teeth. Just tell him not to call you anymore, that'll take care of it. Problem solved.

"By the way, I saw this totally weird-looking animal on TV today..." Not wanting to end the conversation on an awkward note, Soma changed the subject. Naoko also took on a lighter tone, oohing and aahing at his various comments. They continued like that for a few minutes until Naoko said *"I think my dad's finished with his bath"* and they both hung up.

Heisuke spent the week leading up to Christmas Eve unable to concentrate on anything, including his job. While everybody else at work was working hard to bring the year to a productive and profitable conclusion, Heisuke was in a fog. His supervisor Kosaka even complained to him about his lack of focus.

All he could think about was Naoko. What would she do? Haruki Soma didn't call again after that night, so Heisuke didn't know whether they had reached some kind of an agreement. He considered the possibility that they had spoken about it in person, but then ruled it out. He could tell from their previous conversation that they didn't have the time or opportunity to talk freely during tennis practice.

His hunch was supported by the fact that Naoko behaved strangely all that week. She was often lost in her own world, wouldn't answer when called, and so on. She was clearly worried about how to handle Soma's invitation.

Heisuke believed that Naoko had become a delicate synthesis of her former self and a 15-year-old girl. The adult side of her could look at reality rationally and decide on the proper course of action. The adolescent side of her, however, was no different from any other teenage girl and thus prone to the same psychological instability. He imagined that the struggle between these two elements had left Naoko completely confused.

Soma called again on the day before Christmas Eve, December

23rd. Heisuke went to his bedroom to listen to the recording on his Walkman, just as he did last time.

"Tomorrow in front of the Kinokuniya bookstore in Shinjuku at four. Agreed?"

There was something coercive in Soma's brooding tone.

"Hold on a minute. It turns out that I can't go," Naoko replied.

"Why not? If you need permission from your dad, I'll ask him for you."

"You'd be wasting your time."

"You don't know until you try."

"Anyway, tomorrow's no good."

"You can't possibly have other plans."

"I do. I can't leave the house under any circumstances."

"That's a lie. You're lying. You can't fool me, you know."

Naoko didn't know how to reply. This tweaked Heisuke's already frazzled nerves even further.

"I'll be waiting," Soma said, seizing the opportunity. *"Four o'clock in front of Kinokuniya. If you don't want to come, don't come. But I'll wait there all night if I have to."*

"You're putting me in a really tough position by saying that," Naoko said.

"I'm putting you in a tough position? What about me? I have no idea what you're thinking, so I've given up trying to figure out. I've decided to do things how I want to."

"I told you, I can't go."

"That's fine, but I'm going. I'll be there at four."

Soma hung up without giving Naoko a chance to reply. Heisuke kept listening to the tape, thinking that maybe Naoko would call him back, but nothing further was recorded.

He put away his Walkman and stepped out of his room. He hesitated a bit and then knocked on Naoko's door. "Yes?" she answered. She sounded awful.

"Can I come in?" Heisuke asked, peeking in. Naoko was sitting at her desk in front of her notebooks and study guides, but clearly she had more on her mind than her studies.

"Do you still have a lot of work to do? Want to have a cup of tea downstairs with me?" Heisuke asked.

"Uhh...not right now. That's something new: you've never asked me to have a cup of tea with you this time of night before."

"Oh...really? I just sort of felt like it, that's all."

"There's some Baumkuchen cake on top of the microwave. I got it as a gift, but help yourself if you want."

"Okay, thanks, maybe I will," Heisuke said, turning around. He paused, and added, "So, tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

"Sure is," she replied. She had already turned back to her desk.

"Any plans?"

"No, nothing in particular."

"In that case, do you want to go someplace good to eat tomorrow night?"

"It'll be packed anywhere we go. It's Christmas Eve and it's a Saturday."

"Well, let's get some sushi take-out then. Make it a Japanese-style Christmas," Heisuke said. He was about to leave the room when Naoko said, "Wait a second."

"What?"

"I might be going out tomorrow night," she said hesitantly.

"Where?" Heisuke's cheek began to twitch.

"A friend asked me to go shopping with her. I'm still not sure yet whether we'll go or not, but anyway it's a possibility..."

"Oh." Heisuke knew what she was thinking. She wasn't sure herself what she was going to do, but she wanted to leave the possibility open just in case she decided to go with Soma.

"Will you stay out late if you go?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll only be gone an hour or two."

"Okay," Heisuke replied and left the room.

He was somewhat relieved to hear her say "an hour or two." That would be just enough time to meet Soma and talk things through with him at a coffee shop, nothing more.

Nonetheless, he found it hard to sleep that night. Letting Naoko go to meet Soma carried huge risks. Something suppressed in the depths of her heart could come bursting to the surface if given a chance.

No, it wouldn't be correct to say that Heisuke "found it hard to sleep" that night. Better to say he sleeplessly awaited the dawn of the day before Christmas.

The sky was clear all that day, as if to give its blessing to the many couples who had planned dates for that evening. Heisuke watched the small garden bask in the strong sunshine as he ate the fried rice Naoko

had prepared for him. This meal was both his breakfast and lunch. Even though he couldn't sleep the night before, he did doze in and out after sunrise and didn't get out of bed until past 10:00 a.m.

"I want to clean out the closet today if possible," he said to Naoko as he was drinking his after-meal tea. "There's a lot of stuff in there we don't need anymore. They'll only be collecting non-burnable garbage one more time this year, so I think we should put it all together today."

"But the stuff in the closet is mainly oversized garbage, isn't it? They won't take that stuff on a non-burnable garbage day. You have to wait until oversized garbage day."

"Well, there's still no harm in doing the cleaning today, is there? That way we can take it easy when the oversized garbage day comes around."

"It's disgraceful to put things out on the street if they're not going to be picked up right away. How will it look to have all that garbage sitting in front of our house on New Year's Day? Besides, just because it's the end of the year doesn't mean we have to do such a massive cleanup right away," Naoko said and poured some more hot water into his tea cup.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he replied, sipping his tea. Of course he had no particular desire to clean out the closet that day; he just wanted a reason to keep Naoko in the house. At that moment another bright idea popped into his head.

"Hey, where did we put the tree? You know, the fake Christmas tree we bought when Monami was little?"

"Oh, that. It's in the small closet, isn't it?"

"Here?" he asked, standing up and sliding the closet door open.

"What are you doing? Why are you taking that thing out?"

"Why not? It's Christmas Eve, isn't it? Let's get it out and set it up."

The closet was a jumble of cardboard boxes, garment bags, suitcases, and shopping bags. He pulled them out, one by one, and put them all on the tatami mat. Naoko stared at him in disbelief.

He finally pulled a long, thin box out of the closet. A shiny piece of paper was jutting out from the top. "Found it!" he said, opening the box. There was a small, artificial fir tree inside, along with decorations.

"You're not seriously going to decorate that thing, are you?"

"Yeah, I am. Anything wrong with that?"

"Well, no, I guess..."

Heisuke noticed that she kept glancing at the clock. It was a little past noon.

He spent about an hour setting up the diminutive tree and then placed it on top of the credenza. "Now this is what I call Christmas!" he announced proudly.

"Uh-huh," Naoko replied, glancing at the tree and then turning her attention back to the dishes she was washing.

"Hey, you want to go out?" Heisuke asked.

He could see her back suddenly tense up. "Go out? Now? Go out where?"

"Let's go shopping! You haven't bought any new clothes recently, have you? I'll buy something for you. It'll be your Christmas present. And let's buy a cake while we're at it. I went to all that trouble to decorate the tree, so let's make this a really Christmassy Christmas!"

Naoko said nothing. She just stood there, staring into the sink for a long time. At last she turned around, slowly, and went to the tatami room.

"Well, like I told you last night, I have plans for today."

"But you said you weren't sure yet. You didn't hear from your friend, did you?"

"She's waiting to hear from me. I was planning to call her soon."

"Well, just tell her you won't be coming."

"But she's counting on me to go with her."

"It's just to go shopping. She can invite somebody else to go with her."

"But...well, anyway, I'll call her and see." Naoko left the room and went upstairs to make a phone call.

"Why don't you call her from here?" he asked, but she was already halfway up the stairs. She obviously didn't want him to hear the conversation. He looked at the phone. The "Handset In Use" light came on. Who is she calling? he wondered. Soma?

The call only lasted a few minutes and then Naoko returned. "Dad, she *really* wants me to go with her. Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

"Who is this friend?"

"My friend Yurie. Yurie Kasahara."

"Where are you going?"

"Shinjuku. I'm meeting her at three."

"Three?"

"Yeah, so I should be getting ready," she said, and went back

upstairs.

Heisuke was confused. Soma had told her the day before to meet him at four in front of the Shinjuku Kinokuniya. She must have called him to change the time.

Heisuke was sorely tempted to take out the tape recorder and listen to the conversation right away, but he couldn't risk Naoko catching him.

She left at a little past two. She was wearing a black hooded coat over a red sweater. Heisuke noticed that she was wearing a light layer of makeup.

He took out the recorder a little while after she left. He rewound it right there in the tatami room and pressed the play button.

"Kasahara residence."

"Hey, Yurie? It's me."

"Oh, Mona, hi. What's up? You usually don't call in the afternoon."

"Can you do me a favor?"

"What? Did something bad happen?"

"Not yet, but it might."

"Huh?"

"I need to get out of the house, so I need you to pretend that we went shopping together."

"Ah, I see. You need an alibi."

"Yeah. I'm really sorry about this. I don't think my dad's going to call you, but just in case, you know?"

"Okay, no problem. I won't pick up the phone today, and I'll make something up for mom to say in case your dad calls. She's pretty understanding about stuff like that."

"Thanks, Yu. I'm really sorry to bother you with this."

"Treat me to dinner next time and we're even. And good luck!"

"What? What do you mean?"

"You don't have to play dumb with me, Mona. I know what's going on if you need an alibi for Christmas Eve. I just wish I was the one in your shoes!"

"I'm really sorry."

"No need to apologize. Now hurry up before you're late for your date!"

"Okay. Bye. And thanks."

The call ended there.

Naoko knew that Heisuke would be suspicious about her going out

today, yet decided to go out anyway. He wondered whether it was because she really wanted to see Haruki Soma or merely because she was worried he would wait there all night. What Heisuke *did* know with certainty was that, for today at least, Haruki Soma commanded a greater share of her heart than he did.

He looked at the clock and began to feel an ominous foreboding. The fear that he would lose Naoko enveloped him like a black cloud.

He sat there like that for almost an hour. Even though the heat was off he didn't feel cold at all; in fact, sweat was running down his face.

He quickly stood up and ran to his bedroom to change.

He arrived at Shinjuku Station at 3:50 and walked in a hurry to the Kinokuniya bookstore. He couldn't take any comfort in the fact that it wasn't yet 4:00 because, if they met early, they probably wouldn't be there anymore and there would be no way for him to find them.

It was 3:55 when he got to Kinokuniya. He took up a position on the other side of the street where he had a good view of what was happening. Kinokuniya was a popular meeting place, and today, in particular, the sidewalk in front of the store was packed with young people.

A familiar-looking young man was standing next to a square pillar in front of the building. His dark blue parka suited his tall frame nicely. He was holding a shopping bag, which no doubt contained a present for Naoko. He seemed vaguely discouraged, as if he wasn't sure whether the person he was waiting for would even show up.

Soma lifted his head a little bit. His narrow eyes seemed to have caught sight of something. His face suddenly brightened.

Heisuke followed Soma's line of sight directly to Naoko. She was bashfully walking towards him. She looked like a typical 15-year-old high school girl.

Heisuke began walking. Taking large strides, he walked a straight line aimed directly at Haruki Soma.

Soma took a step forward. Naoko picked up her pace, now rushing towards him. The distance between them was about five yards, then four, then three.

Naoko was about to speak, maybe to say something like "Did you wait long?" but the words didn't come out. Before she could say anything Heisuke entered her line of vision.

Naoko froze completely still, as if time had stopped. Her entire body and face seemed petrified.

Heisuke quietly drew closer, until Soma, too, finally realized something was wrong. His head rotated like a robot's to face Heisuke. Shock and surprise slowly rippled across his face.

Heisuke felt as if he were inside a movie. He had the illusory sensation that he wasn't actually living through these events, but rather that he was the objective witness to somebody else's life. Everything seemed abstract and unreal.

There were many people around them, but the only people whom Heisuke saw were Naoko and Soma, and perhaps the only person they could see was Heisuke. Both of them were completely motionless, eyes fixed on the middle-aged man who was walking towards them.

Heisuke stopped. The relative positions of their three bodies now created an equilateral triangle.

Naoko was the first to speak. "Dad...how...why..." Those words were shorthand for a couple of pressing questions: "How did you know I would be here?" and "Why are *you* here?"

Heisuke didn't reply. He just looked at Haruki's face. "Your name's Soma, right?"

Soma moved his lips to reply "yes" but the word didn't issue forth.

"Thank you for inviting my daughter out on a date for Christmas Eve," Heisuke said, bowing his head lightly. "I realize that you've gone to a lot of trouble, but I'm afraid Monami can't be your girlfriend. And that also means she can't accompany you tonight."

Soma's eyes opened wide and he looked at Naoko.

Heisuke turned to look at her as well. She looked at Soma, and then at Heisuke, and then she looked down, biting her lip.

"I'm very sorry, but Monami is coming with me," Heisuke said. He walked behind her, put his hand on her hips, and lightly pushed her along. She didn't offer any resistance. She started walking in the direction he was leading her.

"Wait a minute," Soma called out. "Why? Why can't I see her?"

Heisuke turned to look at the young man. He wanted to explain everything, but of course he couldn't. Even if he told him the truth, Soma would never be able to believe it. He would think that he was being mocked.

"We come from a different world," Heisuke said, having no other choice. "The world that my daughter and I live in is completely different from the one you inhabit. People from our two worlds cannot mix."

Heisuke returned his hand to Naoko's back and started walking. She was as soft as cotton candy. He couldn't imagine the expression on Soma's face at that moment. Was he stunned? Was he angry? Had he even grasped what had just happened? Whatever it was, Heisuke knew that the best thing was for them to get out of there as soon as possible.

Naoko was like a sleepwalker. She didn't seem to be conscious either of walking or of stopping; she just followed Heisuke, even while they were on the train. She said nothing and merely stared down at the ground, unable to focus her eyes on anything in particular.

As they were approaching their station, Heisuke noticed that she was carrying a package from a department store. He realized now why she had left the house early enough to get there an hour ahead of time: she wanted to buy a present for Soma.

He led her back to their house. Her face was still completely blank. Their neighbor Kazuko Yoshimoto noticed them coming in and said hello. Heisuke smiled back at her, but Naoko didn't even so much as look at her. Kazuko looked puzzled.

Once inside, Naoko listlessly pulled off her shoes. She dragged her feet as she walked down the hallway and headed towards the stairs. She obviously intended to go and lock herself in her room. Heisuke wasn't going to stop her. He could see that she needed some time alone.

She didn't go up to her room, however. She stopped in front of the stairwell and suddenly looked up as if she had just thought of something.

Before he could say anything, she threw her bags down to the ground and rushed into the tatami room.

He followed her and saw her standing in the middle of the room, looking down at the credenza. He didn't guess what she was about to do.

She went to the credenza and picked up the telephone, which caused the cord to slide out from the gap between the credenza and the wall. She put the phone down, and then violently pulled the old newspapers away from the credenza, letting them spill all over the tatami mat.

Heisuke dreaded what he knew was coming. Yet he didn't move and simply watched her get closer and closer to the hidden recorder. He knew it was too late now to do anything.

Naoko finally found what she seemed to be looking for. She stuck her finger in the gap and pulled out the tape recorder.

"What's this?" she spat out, holding the black device in her hand. Her face gradually twisted with rage and she shouted now, "What is this?"

Heisuke couldn't answer. He stood still.

Naoko pressed the rewind button and allowed the tape to spool back to the beginning. She then pressed play.

"Kasahara residence."

"Hey, Yurie? It's me."

"Oh, Monami, hi. What's up? You usually don't call in the afternoon."

"Can you do me a favor?"

"What? Did something bad happen?"

"Not yet, but it might."

Naoko pressed the stop button. Heisuke saw her hands trembling.

"How long have you been doing this?" she asked, her voice also trembling.

"About two..." he started, then cleared the phlegm from his throat.

"About two weeks."

Naoko looked disgusted. "I knew something was going on. There's no other way you could have known about today. I just couldn't believe that you would stoop so low."

"I was worried about you."

"So you tapped my phone?" she shouted, and threw the recorder to the floor. The cover popped open and the tape flew out. "I have a right to something called 'privacy' you know. How could you do something so despicable? Don't you have any shame?"

"Tell me this, is it *not* despicable for you to lie to me and then go see some guy? Is *that* supposed to be okay?"

"I said that because I didn't want you to worry."

"Give me a break. That's like saying cheating is okay so long as you don't get caught."

"I *wasn't* cheating on you. I didn't even *want* to meet Soma today. If you've been listening to my conversations you know that as well as I do. He said that he would stay there all night, so I decided just to go, give him a present, and then come right back home. He would have gone bonkers if I hadn't at least done that much."

"Why didn't you just stand him up? That would have solved the problem much more easily."

"I couldn't just let him wait there like that."

"Why are you so concerned about him in the first place? That just shows how close you've become to him. You led him on, you gave him hope...of course he fell for you. You should have just ignored him from

the beginning."

"I just did what everybody else does. If he said something to me, I answered. If he called me, I spoke with him. What's wrong with that?"

"You don't have the right to do what 'everybody else' does," Heisuke burst out.

She recoiled in shock. He could tell from the tremors going through her shoulders that she was beginning to hyperventilate.

He looked her straight in the eye and said, "Let's make something absolutely clear: you are my *wife*. You may look like Monami, but you cannot escape from the reality that *you are my wife*. You may think that you can use this new, young body of yours to live your life all over again, but don't you ever, *ever* forget that you can only go as far as I say you can."

Naoko squatted down on the tatami mat, tears rolling down her face. "I haven't forgotten!" she cried.

"Yes, you have. You're *trying* to forget. But me, I can't. I'm still trying to be a good husband to you. That's why I haven't betrayed you, that's why I haven't cheated on you. I don't even *think* about getting remarried. Do you remember your teacher from elementary school, Miss Hashimoto? Do you remember her? Well guess what: I *liked* her. I wanted to start seeing her. But in the end I didn't even so much as *call* her. And do you know why, Naoko? Because I didn't want to betray you. Because I *never* forgot that I was your husband."

He looked down at her, hands clenched. A thick silence filled the small room. He heard a strange sound, like the roaring of wind through a tunnel, and realized that it was the sound of his own breathing.

Naoko slowly, clumsily stood up, like a marionette being pulled up by its strings. She quietly left the room and climbed the stairs with steps even more sluggish than before.

Heisuke sat down. A feeling of emptiness filled his chest like rain clouds. He was overcome with hopelessness. There was no going back now to the way things had been, yet at the same time he had no idea where to go from here.

He picked up the now-useless tape recorder and stuck his hand into the gap to pull the plug out from the jack.

A peculiar noise floated into the room. It sounded like the plaintive tones of a bamboo flute. He went out into the hallway to hear better.

It was coming from the second floor, but it was no bamboo flute. It was the sound of Naoko weeping.

The New Year came and went, and they were more than halfway into January when Heisuke decided to pay a visit to the injector plant. He ran into the unit leader, Tatsuo Nakao, in the break lounge.

"You've lost a lot of weight, Heisuke," Tatsuo said with concern.

"Really?" Heisuke asked, feeling his own cheek.

"Oh yeah. Hey guys, hasn't he lost a lot of weight?" he asked the others, who all nodded.

"And you're looking pale as a ghost. Are you feeling okay? I think you ought to go see a doctor."

"Nah, I feel just fine."

"Hold it right there, Heisuke. It's when you start feeling symptoms that it's all over. You gotta catch stuff before it reaches that point. It'll be fine, trust me. Just go see the doctor. Besides, we're both at the age when we should get regular checkups no matter what."

"Yeah, I know that," Heisuke replied, still feeling his cheeks.

Maybe he's right, maybe I have lost a lot of weight, he thought. But it's not because I'm ill, it's simply because I haven't been eating well recently.

It's not that there wasn't enough to eat. Dinner was always waiting for him when he got home, and he always had three square meals a day on weekends. The problem was that he just couldn't get the food down. Whenever Naoko was with him his appetite disappeared entirely.

Naoko rarely said anything after that Christmas Eve. Even her face remained almost completely blank. When she wasn't doing housework she was locked up in her room, and didn't come out for hours at a time.

Heisuke wondered whether she was like that all the time or only with him. He found out when he received a call from her homeroom teacher asking whether Monami was feeling ill. It seemed she was just as listless at school as she was at home. What's more, she quit the tennis club when the new year began.

He realized that the events of Christmas Eve were a tremendous shock for her. He could tell just how deeply his words and actions had hurt her, yet he couldn't imagine anything else that he could have done.

He left work as soon as the shift ended. He had made every effort to avoid overtime as much as possible the last two weeks. He was wor-

ried about Naoko and wanted to be home as much as possible.

When he got home and opened the door, he was relieved to see Naoko's shoes next to the door. It looked as if she had gotten home safely enough.

He often worried that one day she would leave the house and never come back. She would go someplace where he couldn't follow her and live the life of a normal 16-year-old. She would fall in love and get married. She would live a completely different life.

The fact that she hadn't left yet probably meant she still hadn't made up her mind about what to do. She had to worry about finding a place to live and money to live on. Then again, maybe she *had* already made up her mind and was just waiting for the most opportune moment to make her escape. He could come home tomorrow and find that her shoes were gone.

She wasn't in the tatami room. He went up to the second floor and knocked on her door. "Yes?" she answered in a weak voice.

Heisuke breathed another sigh of relief.

There was another thing he worried about besides her running away. He was afraid she might commit suicide. He was afraid that she saw it as the easiest way to escape her present suffering. Today, at least, she still hadn't been snared by that dark temptation, she still hadn't broken Heisuke's heart.

He opened the door. "I'm home," he said.

"Welcome home," she said without looking back at him. She seemed to be reading a book. That was all she did these days.

"What are you reading?" he asked, coming closer.

Instead of answering him, she held the book out behind her. He could read the title on the upper-left-hand corner of the open page.

"Anne of Green Gables. Is it good?"

"S'okay. Doesn't matter what I read..." she said in a tone of voice that implied "as long as it lets me forget the tragedy that is my life."

"I'll start getting dinner ready," she said, closing the paperback.

"No need to rush." He noticed a crumpled piece of paper next to her trash can. He picked it up. "Oh..." Naoko murmured.

He opened it up. He saw the words "Freshman Homeroom Number 2 Ski Trip" written at the top.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It says right there if you bother to read it. The kids in my class are planning a ski trip for spring break. They're recruiting participants."

"It's not an official school trip, is it?"

"No, it's not, which is why I'm not going. It's better that way, right?" she said, then took the piece of paper from his hands, tore it into little pieces, and threw them into the trash can. "I'll go make dinner," she said, and stood up.

"Naoko," he said, stopping her in her tracks, "do you hate me?"

She lowered her head. "No, I don't hate you," she replied, almost in a whisper. "It's just that, I have no idea what to do."

He nodded. "I know how you feel. I feel lost, too."

They were both silent. The air in the room seemed suddenly to get much colder. They could hear the winter wind blowing outside the window. Heisuke felt as if they were standing alone in the middle of a vast, wild plain.

He suddenly had a recollection of Naoko, the way she used to be in her own body. She was a woman who loved to laugh, to talk. There was no laughter in this house now.

"Heisuke..." she began, "should we...do it?" She was looking down at her feet. He could see the white nape of her neck through her long, shining hair.

"Do it?" he asked.

"I'm starting to feel that it's the only solution. There are times when emotions alone aren't enough to keep a relationship together."

"Maybe you're right..."

"So...shall we try?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's all so sudden. How do you feel about it, honey?" He was surprised to hear himself call her "honey," a word he hadn't used with her in ages.

"I...I don't know. Only my body can tell for sure," she said, resting her hand on her heart.

"Yeah, it's the same for me," he replied, scratching the back of his neck.

There was no doubt that Naoko now looked like a grown woman, and one beautiful enough to drive Haruki Soma, at least, to extremes of longing and anxiety. But this didn't mean that Heisuke wanted to have sex with her. Not only had he never thought about it, he had always subconsciously rejected the possibility outright.

"Should we...try?" he finally asked.

Naoko, saying nothing, slowly walked to the bed, and sat down. "Turn off the light," she said.

Heisuke went to the wall and flicked off the switch. The fluorescent lamp was extinguished and the room was enveloped in darkness. There was still a bit of light coming in through the window, so his eyes quickly adjusted.

Naoko started undressing. He could barely make out her white back for a moment in the dim light, then she covered herself with her down comforter. "I'm ready," she said.

What now? Heisuke wondered. I guess I should take my clothes off too, he decided. One he had stripped down to his underwear, he groped his way towards the bed, bumping his foot on her chair on the way.

Naoko had the comforter pulled up to her neck. He lifted up the comforter and could feel her body grow tense.

"Uhh..." she began hesitantly, "I know it's kind of a cliché, but be gentle okay? Don't forget that this is going to be my first time."

"Oh...yeah, right." Not sure how to proceed, he took off his underwear. He wasn't erect yet, but he could sense that he would be soon.

"Wait," he said, "I don't have any protection..."

"Huh?"

"Rubber. A condom."

"Oh," she said, facing the other way. "It should be okay. I'm having my period soon."

"Oh, okay." Heisuke recalled that they had often had conversations like this one.

Still standing at the edge of the bed, he reached out and lightly touched Naoko's skin with his fingertips. She trembled lightly at his touch. He took her upper right arm in his hand. Her skin was amazingly smooth, and the perfection of her form simply took his breath away. If she weren't so soft and warm, he would have mistaken her for a marble statue.

Something started to come alive in his lower body. He was suddenly hard.

His palms began to sweat. Naoko's body became even more rigid as he started to move his hand toward the center of her body.

Yet his arm refused to budge. Something inside was stopping him. "Turn back, turn back, turn back," a voice in his head kept shouting.

Time passed. They remained completely silent in the darkness.

"Naoko," he said, "we can't. We just can't."

She breathed deeply. "I know."

He pulled his hand out from under the comforter. He searched in

the darkness for his underwear, picked it up, and carefully put it on.

Outside, the wind continued to howl. He heard an empty can roll down the street.

The phone on Heisuke's desk rang. The special ringing sound indicated that it was an outside call. He was waiting to hear from one of Bigood's suppliers, so he assumed that it must have been them, and was surprised when the operator said, "It's a call from a Ms. Negishi in Sapporo."

"Uh, sure, put her through," he replied, wondering for a second whom he knew named Negishi. It didn't take long for him to remember reading the characters of that name on a nameplate above a ramen shop in Sapporo.

"Hello? Is this Mr. Sugita?" a middle-aged woman asked.

"Yes, speaking. Ms. Negishi?"

"Yes. This is Noriko Negishi calling. You may not remember, but you met with my son Fumiya some time ago."

"Yes, yes," Heisuke said, switching the receiver to his left hand. "Of course I remember. That was quite a while back."

"Well, you see, I understand that Fumiya was terribly rude to you at that time. Please accept my sincere apologies. I only learned of it recently."

"Don't worry, he wasn't rude to me at all. So he told you about the conversation we had, did he?"

"Yes, yes, I was very, very surprised."

"I see."

Fumiya had sworn never to tell his mother about his meeting with Heisuke. Maybe he had changed his mind over the course of time, or maybe he'd just let it slip out one day.

"So, actually, there was something I very much wanted to discuss with you," Noriko continued. "I realize you must be very busy, but I was wondering if you could spare me a bit of your time."

"Sure, I don't mind at all. But you're in Sapporo, aren't you?"

"No, actually I just arrived in Tokyo. I'm here for the wedding of an acquaintance."

"Oh, I see..."

"Thirty minutes is all I ask. Today or tomorrow, whichever you prefer. Just tell me where to go and I'll meet you there."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm staying at a hotel near Tokyo Station," she said, and gave him the name. She said that the wedding reception would be held at the hotel in two days and that she wasn't really supposed to arrive until tomorrow, but that she had come a day early to contact him.

"In that case I'll meet you at your hotel. How does tomorrow afternoon sound?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Are you sure that's okay for you? I can go meet you near your workplace, if you prefer."

"No, I'm not sure how late I'll be working tonight, and it would be difficult for you to find your way here."

"Okay, then. I'm very sorry to put you to the extra trouble."

They made an appointment to meet in the hotel tea lounge at 1:00 the next afternoon and hung up.

So what is this all about, now? Heisuke wondered. Fumiya had said that his mother wanted to forget all about Kajikawa, so why did she want to talk to him so badly that she was going to so much trouble now?

Heisuke had never allowed himself to forget about the accident, but with the passage of time it came to occupy less and less of his consciousness. He would never have been able to go on living otherwise. Even though he had once been obsessed with finding out the cause of the accident, in truth he didn't let it bother him anymore. He, personally, was satisfied with the explanation that he had heard: Kajikawa literally worked himself to death in order to send money to his son and ex-wife. Although there were still many mysteries to be unraveled, although he sometimes worried about what would become of Itsumi Kajikawa, he essentially considered the case closed.

What's more, he thought, I have even bigger things to worry about now.

He didn't tell Naoko that he was going to meet Noriko Negishi. It would only bring back memories of the accident, which would surely set off a chain reaction of thoughts about Monami's death and their current predicament. It would only start yet another awkward period between them, which he very much wanted to avoid.

Saturday was clear with a chilly wind. Heisuke wrapped his neck in a scarf and left the house, telling Naoko that he had some business to take care of at the office. She was sitting under the kotatsu heater, knitting something. Her school was celebrating the anniversary of its founding, so she had the day off. Knitting had been one of her hobbies for a long time. He noticed that she wasn't studying much these days. She

also never mentioned anything about medical school. He didn't ask her about it; he already knew her answer.

The wind was even colder than he had imagined. He felt as if his ears were about to fall off as he walked to the station, and was relieved to board the heated train. The only problem was that it was a several-minute walk from Tokyo Station to Noriko's hotel. He wished then that they had decided to meet someplace else.

It was only when he walked into the open and roomy tea lounge that he realized for the first time that he didn't know what she looked like. A waiter in a black outfit asked, "Just one?"

"No, I'm waiting for somebody."

A thin woman sitting in a chair nearby looked at him and hesitantly rose to her feet. She was dressed in a pale purple knit outfit and a cardigan of the same color.

"Excuse me, are you Mr. Sugita?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, turning towards her.

"Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet me," she said, bowing repeatedly.

"No, not at all. Please, have a seat."

She already had a milk tea in front of her. Heisuke ordered a coffee.

"How is your son doing?"

"Not badly."

"I remember he was a junior in college when I met him. I assume he must be out in the workforce by now."

"No, actually he started graduate school last year."

"Oh really?" he replied, looking back at her. "That's terrific."

"Well, he still seems to have some studying he wants to do. He pays for his tuition by working a part-time job."

"A very impressive young man," Heisuke said, sincerely.

The coffee arrived. He drank it black.

She must have been in her early fifties to have a son in graduate school. She had a large number of wrinkles, that was true, but she also had a special manner about her that made her seem younger. He guessed that she must have been very beautiful once.

"I came here, you see, because the other day I chanced upon a photograph in my son's drawer. It was a picture of him, taken when he was four years old, cut into a circle centered around his face."

"Oh, yes," Heisuke nodded. He knew the photograph well.

"I asked Fumiya where it came from. At first he said that he found it in an old album, but I knew that he was lying because we don't have *any* pictures left of him from that age. When I pressed him on it, he reluctantly began telling me the story of his conversation with you. I was very surprised, very surprised. I had no idea that such a meeting had ever occurred."

"Yes, he told me that he would never tell you about our meeting."

"I'm very sorry about that. If we had been able to meet then, we could have discussed these matters much sooner."

"But your son told me a lot that day. Why he hates his father, for example..."

"But that's not the whole story, you see. Actually," Noriko said, shaking her head and sighing, "what he told you is the exact opposite of the truth."

"What do you mean 'the exact opposite of the truth'?"

Noriko looked down at her lap and then lifted her head to face him. "You lost your wife in that accident, didn't you, Mr. Sugita?"

"Yes. Yes I did."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am. Half of the blame for that accident rests on our shoulders. I don't even know how to begin to apologize."

"Do you say that because Mr. Kajikawa caused the accident by trying to send you money?"

"Yes...At that time, I had just started my business and it wasn't going terribly well. We were in very dire straits financially. We barely had enough to scrape by, and I certainly didn't have enough to spare to send my son to college. That's when Mr. Kajikawa called me. He had been keeping track of Fumiya's age, and he asked me whether it wasn't time for Fumiya to be taking his entrance exams. He asked me whether Fumiya was planning to go to college, and whether we had the money to pay for it. Now, I had no intention of depending on him for anything, but by and by I wound up telling him about all of our troubles."

"And that's when he offered to help you."

"Yes. After that, he sent me at least 100,000 yen every month. Anyway, I also wanted to send Fumiya to college, so I accepted the money. But then he failed his entrance exams the first time around and spent a year cramming to give it another try. Kajikawa kept sending money for over a year. In the end, Fumiya tried to get into the least expensive university he could find, and got accepted to a state school."

"I understand all of that. But I still don't think you have to apolo-

gize to me for the accident. After all, Mr. Kajikawa was sending that money to you as a kind of penance for what he had done, right?"

"Penance?"

"Yes. He wanted to make up for the fact that he had abandoned the both of you. At least, that's the impression I got from what your son told me."

Noriko Negishi slowly closed her eyes.

"You see," she said, opening her eyes, "that's exactly the part that's the opposite of the truth."

"What is? Okay, maybe the word 'penance' is sort of an exaggeration. Call it parental responsibility if you want. I think it's only natural that a father should pay for his son's education."

She shook her head. "No. It wasn't his responsibility at all."

"It wasn't?"

She pursed her lips. She seemed to be hesitating, not knowing what to say. She finally let out the deep breath that she had been holding in. "Fumiya...is not his son."

"What?" Heisuke's eyes popped open.

She nodded.

"Then whose son is he?" Heisuke asked. "I assume you know for a fact that he's *your* son."

"Yes, of course. I gave birth to him," she said, her face easing a bit.

"So is he your child from a previous marriage? Fumiya didn't say anything about that to me."

"Fumiya's birth certificate lists Yukihiro Kajikawa as his father," Noriko Negishi said.

"His 'birth certificate' says that? So what are you trying to tell me? The birth certificate is incorrect?"

She nodded.

"Before I married Kajikawa, I worked as a hostess in Susukino. Fumiya's father is a man that I was dating at that time."

"Oh, goodness," Heisuke said. She had once been a hostess. That explained her refined manner. "So you married Mr. Kajikawa while pregnant with this other man's child?"

"It's not quite as simple as that," she replied, taking a handkerchief from her bag and pressing it delicately to her mouth. "I had left that man a long, long time ago. Just as the wedding was approaching, though, he suddenly reappeared in my life. He said he wanted to get back together. Somehow the thought of me taking up with another man suddenly made

him nostalgic for how things had once been."

Heisuke nodded. Things like that did happen.

"When he realized that I had no intention of going back to him, he asked me to give him one last night together. Of course I realize now that I should have just refused, but he said that if I did that for him he would never bother me again. I thought it would save me a lot of trouble in the long run just to give him what he wanted."

"And that's how Fumiya was conceived."

"Yes," she sighed. "I think it was about three weeks before the wedding. Fortunately, that man kept his word and never came into my life again. But I was pregnant. I had no idea what to do when I found out, because I wasn't absolutely sure who the father was. I even thought about getting an abortion..."

In other words, there was still a chance at this point that the child belonged to Kajikawa.

"...but when I saw how happy my husband was, I just couldn't bring myself to go through with it. I pinned my hopes on the chance that my husband was in fact the child's father."

At some point she had started calling Yukihiro Kajikawa "my husband." It seemed to Heisuke, as well, that it was the natural thing to do.

"When did you realize that Mr. Kajikawa *wasn't* the father?" he asked.

"I think it was around the time Fumiya entered second grade. My husband had taken a blood test at work, and he came home with this horrible look on his face. He asked me what Fumiya's blood type was. That's when I realized that he wasn't the father after all. I'm type A, and Fumiya is type O. Until he took that test, my husband wasn't really sure what his blood type was. Both of his siblings were type B, so he assumed that he was type B as well."

"But he wasn't type B, was he?"

"No. He found out from that test that he was type AB. And, somehow, he also knew that a type A and a type AB can't give birth to a type O."

"And that's when you found out the truth yourself?"

"Yes. But, to be honest, I wasn't really surprised. Looking back, I had a feeling from the moment I found out I was pregnant that the child wasn't my husband's. I pretended that I didn't really know, but I knew. I mean, Fumiya didn't even look anything like my husband."

"So did you tell Mr. Kajikawa the truth after that?"

"Of course I did. There's no way I could have kept on hiding it."

"And then I guess Mr. Kajikawa left the house in a fit of rage?"

"That was the reason why he left, yes, but he wasn't angry, exactly. In fact, he never said a single angry or accusatory word to me. He just listened as I told him everything and seemed to sink deeper and deeper into depression with every word. He never got drunk and turned violent, or anything of the sort. And he treated Fumiya exactly as he had before. But he stopped talking to me, and when he was at home he just sat there, staring out the window, thinking. He left the house exactly two weeks after I told him everything. He took the smallest suitcase possible and an album filled with pictures of Fumiya. And he just disappeared."

"Did he leave a note?" Heisuke asked.

"Yes," she said, taking a white envelope out of her bag. She placed it on the table.

"May I look at it?"

"Yes."

He picked up the envelope and took out the letter inside. Scrawled in big letters were the words:

"I'm sorry. I can't pretend to be his father."

"When I saw that letter, oh...how I cried," she said. "He stayed for two weeks, and never in that time did he blame me for anything. He stayed to see if he could bring himself to be a father to Fumiya. Even when I think about it now, years later, I can't forgive myself for what I did to him. There's nothing I regret more than having deceived him for all those years."

Heisuke nodded slowly. He wondered what he would have done in Kajikawa's place. If Naoko had made a similar confession to him, the first thing he would have done was scream her ear off. He might have even turned violent.

"So wait a minute. Even though Mr. Kajikawa knew that Fumiya wasn't his son, he was paying for his education?"

"Yes, that's right," she said, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes. "That why I said the truth is the exact opposite of what you heard. If there was anybody who needed to make atonement for something, it was I. And yet he did everything he could to help us."

"But why? Was he still in love with you?"

She shook her head. "He had a new wife then. And he told me that he loved her."

"Then why?"

"This is what he told me: what Fumiya needs now is a father; if his mother is in trouble, the father has to step in and do something to help. 'But you're not his real father,' I said, to which he replied, 'Well, which would make Fumiya happier?'"

"Which what?"

"He asked me: 'Would he be happier if I weren't his father, or would he be happier if I were?'" I thought about it for a while, and then I answered that it would be better for him to be the father. Then he said, 'That's right. I think so too. That's why I'll be his father. If he's in trouble, I want to help him out like a father would. When I found out that Fumiya and I weren't related by blood, all I could think about was whether I would be able to make myself feel like a father towards him. It never occurred to me to choose the path that would bring happiness to the person I love. How could I have been so stupid to leave you both?' That's what he said to me on the phone. He was crying the whole time."

Noriko Negishi straightened her back. It was as if such a painful, heavy topic demanded a show of respect, a dignified posture. Her voice quavered, but she didn't cry. He could tell from the look on her face that she was determined to say what had to be said before she would allow herself to break down.

Heisuke had trouble breathing. He could feel his heart race, and felt a slight pain in his chest.

"When I heard about the accident," Noriko continued, "I wanted to rush to Tokyo. At the very least I wanted to pay my respects at his funeral. When I heard on the news that the accident was his fault, I wanted to shout out at the top of my lungs that he wasn't the only one to blame. I wanted to say that he worked himself to death for us. But with Fumiya I just acted as if our hands were clean of the whole thing. Even though he had done so much to help us, I decided to play dumb."

She took a deep breath, and then had a sip of her now lukewarm milk tea.

"But when I heard from Fumiya about his meeting with you, I decided that I couldn't hide this forever. Three days ago, I told Fumiya everything."

"Was he shocked?"

"A little, I suppose," she said, smiling wanly, "but I'm glad I told him. And I felt that I had to tell you everything as well, which is why I called. I hope I didn't bore you with my story."

"No, no. I'm very glad you told me all of this."

"If you're kind enough to think so, then perhaps this meeting was worthwhile." She took the envelope from the table and put it back in her bag. "Actually, I also have a favor to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"I heard from Fumiya that Kajikawa's wife passed away."

Seiko Kajikawa. "Yes. Some years ago."

"She had a daughter, right?"

"That's right. Her name is Itsumi."

"Would you happen to know how I can contact this girl? I would like to meet her and tell her about her father. I would somehow like to make it up to her in any way I can," she said, looking earnestly in his eyes.

"I think I can help. I'm pretty sure we received a New Year's greeting card from her. I'll contact you once I find it."

"I'm sorry to trouble you, but thank you very much." She pulled out her name card and placed it in front of him. The name of the ramen shop, "Kumakichi," was printed on the top. She closed her handbag with a firm click and then, as if remembering something, looked out at the garden outside the window.

"Ah, it's snowing. I had a feeling it would."

Heisuke turned to look outside. The snowflakes fluttered in the sky like white flower petals.

Heisuke left the hotel and walked the long road back to Tokyo Station. The snowflakes fell slowly to the ground.

He couldn't stop thinking about everything Noriko had said. Even though he had never met him, he felt as if he could almost hear Yukihiro Kajikawa's voice: "to choose the path that would bring happiness to the person I love."

I'm not like you, Kajikawa. To be in your position and still have such pure and noble feelings. Just look at what I've been up to...

He began to feel short of breath again. Something seemed to be trying to work its way out of him. It was painful to remain standing, so he crouched down. The scarf that had been wrapped around his neck slithered down to the ground.

The falling snowflakes dissolved on the wet concrete. Even though they would just dissolve and fade away on that hostile expanse, they paid no heed and kept on falling. They reminded Heisuke of naïve, innocent children.

"Are you okay?" a young man walking by asked him.

Heisuke didn't look up, just waved him away. "Yes, I'm fine, thanks. I didn't mean to alarm anybody," he said. He stood up and put his scarf back on. He saw the young man, a short businessman in a beige overcoat, looking at him. "You're sure you're okay?" he asked again.

"Yes, I'm fine, really. Thank you."

The businessman smiled at him, then walked off in the opposite direction. After watching him leave, Heisuke started again towards the station.

I've known all along, he thought.

Nobody ever had to tell me, I just knew. I've known for years already what I have to do.

The snow had stopped by the time he got home. Either that, or it hadn't snowed in this part of town in the first place: the streets weren't very wet.

The front door wasn't locked. Naoko's shoes were still there, but she wasn't in the tatami room. Without taking off his scarf, he went up to the second floor and knocked on her door. There was no answer.

He had a bad premonition. He opened her door.

She wasn't there. A book was lying open on her desk. Maybe she's in the bathroom, he thought, but if that were the case her slippers would be outside the bathroom door, and he didn't recall seeing them there.

He went down to the first floor and checked the bathroom and washroom. As he had guessed, she wasn't there either. He went into the tatami room and peeked into the kitchen. She wasn't there, but he saw some movement in the garden through the kitchen window.

He took a look into the garden and saw Naoko squatting down in a corner of the small plot of land. There was a cat in front of her. The cat was pale brown with stripes, and must have been somebody's pet because she was wearing a collar with a small bell attached. Naoko had some bits of fish paste in her hand that the cat was eating with obvious relish.

Heisuke tapped on the windowpane. Naoko looked toward him. The expression on her face was much more relaxed than he had seen it in a long time. That's right, he thought, that's what you really used to look like. That's the real you.

It didn't last, however. When she saw his face her gaiety withered like a bud caught in a spring chill.

Heisuke opened the window. The cat was startled and grew tense.

"Who's cat is that?" he asked.

"I don't know. She's been wandering in here from time to time recently."

The cat wandered away through the hedge, perhaps put off by Heisuke's voice. All that was left of her were the bits of fish paste she had left on the grass.

Naoko took off her sandals and went back into the house almost like she was trying to get away from Heisuke. She wrapped the remaining fish paste in some tissue paper and put it on the dining room table.

"I've been thinking about that ski trip," he said, pursing his dry lips. "Why don't you go?"

She stopped moving, surprised and confused by his words. She looked back at him, frowning a bit. "What?"

"The ski trip. You know, the one you got the flyer for. I think you should go."

"What makes you say *that* all of a sudden?"

"I just think you should go. You want to go, don't you?"

"Are you just saying whatever pops into your head now? Are you

going to change your mind again?"

"No. I really think you ought to go."

She blinked a few times and looked down at the floor. She seemed to be trying to figure out whether he had some ulterior motive.

She looked up at him and shook her head. "I'm not going."

"Why not?"

She didn't reply. Her face was as impassive as a Noh mask. She started to leave the room when Heisuke said, "Monami."

Naoko stopped moving. The heaving of her shoulders gave away the violent tumult of emotions within her. She turned around, eyes turning red. "Why?" she whispered.

Heisuke closed the window and turned to face her. "I was wrong to make you suffer all this time. That's all I can say right now."

He knew this wouldn't suffice. He lowered his head.

He felt as if the world had stopped. Everything was completely silent. But this too was only momentary, and he soon heard the sounds of many, many things: cars passing, children crying, a neighbor's stereo.

A sound like hiccupping soon mingled with those other sounds. He looked back up and saw Naoko crying. Her face was streaming with tears.

"Monami..." he called out to her.

She covered her face with both hands and then ran out of the room and up the stairs. He heard her door slam shut.

He grew weak in the knees and sat down. He crossed his arms and legs.

He saw something moving in the corner of his eye. It was the cat again. She had come back to finish off the fish paste that had been left in the grass.

There was nothing he could do now. A new chapter had begun in their lives.

Naoko had locked herself in her room in the early evening, and still hadn't come out hours later. Heisuke began to worry about her and went to her door a few times. When he heard her crying inside, he felt a bit of relief and walked away.

He only spoke on one occasion. "What do you want for dinner?" he asked.

"I don't want any," she replied in a broken voice.

When 8:00 p.m. came around he made some instant ramen for

himself and ate it alone. I'll probably be hungry like this in the future, too, he joked to himself. Better learn how to cook.

After dinner he took a bath and then passed the time reading the newspaper and watching television. He realized that he felt strangely calm, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He was learning to let go.

He put two large pieces of ice into a glass, poured in about an inch of whiskey, and then took the drink up to his bedroom. Sitting cross-legged on top of his futon, he sipped at his whiskey and tried to clear his mind as much as possible. He didn't want to think of this as a too significant day. Perhaps he was successful in banishing all worries, because once he finished the whiskey he felt a very timely drowsiness creeping up on him. He turned off the light and crawled under the covers.

He hadn't seen Naoko at all that night. Not only had she not eaten dinner, but strangely she didn't even come out to go to the bathroom.

He remembered the dates they had gone on together long ago, before they got married. From the time they met in the afternoon to the time he said goodbye to her at her door, she didn't go to the bathroom once. This happened *every single time*. Heisuke would usually go to the bathroom at least once during each date. He went to the bathroom in the movie theater, in the restaurant, and so on. Perhaps she went too, at the same time, and got out sooner than he did, but that was hard to imagine. Usually it's the man who finishes first.

When they had become more intimate with each other, he asked her about this. She was somewhat embarrassed to answer such a question, but it turned out that the answer was simplicity itself:

"I just held it in," she said.

When he asked her why, her answer was very concise: "Because, going to the bathroom is just so mundane."

The question still remained what was so bad about doing something mundane, but Heisuke didn't press any further. She probably had some private rule about things like that.

He closed his eyes in the darkness. Perhaps he was closing them to the past. Behind his closed eyelids, black particles drew strange zigzag patterns. The world began to rotate in the opposite direction.

It was a peculiar awakening. He was staring at the ceiling, but he couldn't for the life of him recall having opened his eyes. It was as if his spirit had wandered out of his body and had now suddenly returned.

He sat up in bed and shivered a bit. He realized that it was a cold morning. He quickly changed out of his pajamas into a polo shirt and sweater. "Man, it's cold," he muttered as he pulled his pants on.

He walked out of his bedroom and noticed that Naoko's door was ajar. He paused a moment, then took a look inside. She was neither at her desk nor on her bed.

He went down the stairs. One of her slippers was resting on the third step from the bottom. He found the other slipper upside down in the middle of the hallway.

He looked into the tatami room. Naoko was there in her pajamas, looking out into the garden.

"Monami," he called.

She slowly turned to look at him. "Dad..."

"You'll catch a cold standing there like that," he said. He noticed there was something different about her.

Naoko was leaning her head to one side and rubbing her temples with her fingertips. "Dad, what happened to me?"

"Huh?"

"I was on the bus. With mom. We were on our way to Nagano. Why am I here?"

At first Heisuke didn't understand the meaning of what he had just heard. He understood the words but couldn't digest their significance. He took a few steps closer to her.

"What did you say?"

Naoko's face suddenly twisted with pain. She clamped her head with both of her hands. "My head hurts so much. Dad, what happened to me? I feel sick."

"Monami..." he cried out, running to her and grabbing both of her arms. "Hold on," he said, shaking her back and forth. "Don't let go."

Naoko looked vacantly at his face. She frowned. "Dad, you look different. You're skinnier."

My god, he thought. Can this actually be happening? He swallowed the saliva in his mouth. "Monami."

"What?"

"How old are you? What grade are you in?"

"Me? What are you talking about? I'm in fifth grade, going on sixth. You know that."

Heisuke's body grew hot and his heart began pounding wildly. He started hyperventilating.

He understood. She had come back. Monami's spirit had returned. But why now?

"Monami, listen to me very closely. You can understand my words, right?" he said, gripping her shoulders tightly with both hands.

"Yeah."

"Good. You just woke up, right? You woke up and came downstairs, right?"

"Yeah, but I feel groggy, like I'm still asleep."

"I understand. Anyway, just do what I tell you, okay? First, sit down. Good, slowly." He helped her sit down on a cushion. Her big eyes were slowly rolling in circles.

Countless thoughts filled his brain, jammed together like cars on the Capitol Expressway. His first concern was where Naoko had gone, but if he started thinking about that, it would only confuse him further; instead, he tried to place worry aside and focus on dealing with the situation at hand.

"Okay, good. Now, Monami, I want you to look at your hands. And then I want you to look at your feet."

She did as she was told.

"Do they seem strange to you?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"How?"

"They're big. Big...my nails are long."

"Yes, that's right," he said, grasping both of her hands. "Just now you said you were on the bus. Monami, that bus had an accident. You were very badly hurt in the accident. You've been asleep for a long time...I mean a *very* long time. Just now you woke up from that sleep. But while you were asleep your body grew bigger."

"What...?" she gasped. Her eyes opened widely as she stared at her body. "How many months was I asleep?"

Heisuke shook his head. "Not months, sweetie, years. To tell you precisely it's been almost...five years, I guess."

She gasped. She pulled her hands away from his and felt her face.

"You mean...I was in a coma?"

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that," he said, stammering. He had no idea how to explain what had happened.

Monami started asking questions again. "What about mom?"

Heisuke was thrown into a wild confusion. He had to say something, but he couldn't find the words. He just kept moving his lips but nothing came out.

"What happened to mom? What happened to her in the accident?" Monami asked again. Seeing that he couldn't answer, seeing the look on his face, she assumed the worst. She brought her hands to her mouth. "Oh, no...no!" she cried and fell face down on the tatami. She started wailing.

"Monami, Monami, listen to me. Your mother's spirit is still alive," he said, rubbing her back. She kept crying, however. She must have assumed that Heisuke was repeating the usual empty words of consolation uttered at times like these.

"Monami, come here," he said, taking her by the arms. She shook her head and childishly cried, "No! No!"

"Monami, come here. Do you want to meet your mother?"

This got her attention. She stopped howling. "But she's dead, isn't she?" Monami objected.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Her body is dead but her mind

is alive," he said, taking her hands and forcing her to stand up. He took her upstairs to Naoko's room.

"This is your room, isn't it?" he asked.

She timidly looked around the room and nodded quietly.

Heisuke walked to the desk and pulled out two books. "Look at these. These are high school study guides and textbooks. You're a first-year high school student now."

She looked blankly at the books he had placed in her hands. Fear started to spread across her face.

"It's strange, isn't it? Monami, the fact is that something very mysterious happened while you were sleeping. Your mother's body died, but her spirit stayed alive in your body. She took your place. You could say she lived your life for you."

"She took my place?"

"Yes," he said, then started scanning the bookshelf. He found a small photo book that contained pictures from the tennis club. He found a close-up of Monami's face and pulled it out. Then he opened one of the desk drawers and took out a round hand mirror. "Look at your face. Then compare it with this photograph," he said.

"I'm scared..."

"It's okay. Just look."

She put the books down on the floor and took the mirror and photo. She hesitantly peeked at herself in the mirror.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"What's wrong?"

"Well..." she said, looking at the mirror, "I'm actually...sort of beautiful."

Heisuke laughed. "Yes, yes, you are. Now look at the picture."

She compared the two faces and then looked up. "It's unbelievable..." She crouched down, hugged her legs and buried her face in her knees.

"Your mother carried on your life for you while you were gone," he said. He took out the tennis racket that was put away between the desk and the wall. "She studied incredibly hard and got you into a good school. She joined the tennis club. She made the most out of those years, living life to the fullest. That's why..." he said, looking back at her, but stopped mid-sentence. Monami was crouched down, completely motionless.

"Hey, Monami...Monami!" he said, shaking her.

She raised her head, eyes still closed. Then she slowly, slowly opened her eyes. She focused on his face.

"Dad?...What happened?" she groaned, looking around the room. Then she turned her attention back at him. "Did something happen?"

Heisuke could tell from her expression and manner what had happened. This was Naoko now. He felt a wave of relief come over him. He had been afraid that she would never return.

"What happened?" she asked again.

Heisuke answered. "Monami just came back."

Heisuke was glad that it was a Sunday. If Monami had reappeared while he was at work, the situation could have easily gotten out of control.

He explained everything to Naoko as they sat in the tatami room drinking tea. Naoko started getting excited halfway through the story. "That means that Monami didn't actually die. Somehow her consciousness was in a kind of slumber that whole time."

"It seems that way."

Naoko clasped her hands together in front of her chest. "It's just unbelievable. You don't know how happy I am...it's just so wonderful."

"But she disappeared again."

"If she can appear once she can appear again. It'll be okay. It'll absolutely be okay," she insisted. The look on her face was completely different from the one there yesterday.

"But it's going to be very difficult to explain everything to her. I think I covered the most important points already, but..."

"It's not the kind of thing where you can just say, 'Here's how it is, now get used to it.'" Naoko grew silent as if deep in thought, then raised her head and said, "I really think it would be best if I explained things to her. After all, I'm the one who understands her best."

"But that's impossible," he replied. "When she's here, you're not."

"I'll write her a letter. It'll be enough for you to have her read it the next time she appears."

"Ah, I see. That makes sense, I guess."

"I'll write it as soon as possible. And then I'll be sure to always keep it on me, since it's impossible to know when she'll come back again."

"Wait a minute, though. What happens if she appears when I'm not around? What if it happens when you're at school?" Heisuke worried that even if she had a letter, she wouldn't know about it, and if his daughter returned to find herself in the middle of a high school classroom she might fall into a terrible panic.

"There's nothing we can do about that, is there?" Naoko said. "I mean, it's not like you can stay home from work and be by my side all the time."

"Yeah...that's not realistic," he replied, scratching his cheek.

"Of course not. Anyway, if worse came to worst we can just tell people afterward that she had some sort of neurotic episode."

Heisuke frowned. "That wouldn't be much fun. I pray it doesn't come to that."

"Well, I think we probably don't have to worry about that."

"Why not?"

"It's okay so long as I don't go to sleep. I think she can only come back as I'm waking up. That's what happened this time, right?"

"Hmm. You're probably right."

"I just have to be careful not to doze off during class."

"Definitely," he said, looking at her and smiling. It had been months since they were able to be this comfortable with one another.

Naoko's face became serious again. She turned her teacup around in her hand and said, "But you know, it just doesn't seem right."

"What doesn't?"

"For Monami and I to be sharing her body like this. To be taking turns in her body."

"Oh..." Heisuke nodded. "That's how it'll have to be, I guess."

"Actually," she said, looking him straight in the eye, "I'm going to have to go. No doubt about it."

Heisuke looked away. "Don't say that kind of stuff," he said, finishing off the remains of his tea.

They had a little celebration that night. Naoko made *karaage* fried chicken and hamburger, while Heisuke went to a nearby pastry shop and bought the best shortcake they had. Monami's favorite foods.

"Welcome home, Monami," they said, clinking their wine glasses together.

Monami didn't return again for some time. Every time Heisuke got home from work he would peer into her face wondering who was looking back at him, but every time the answer was the same: "Sorry, it's just me."

Naoko, who had been despondent enough that Heisuke thought she would commit suicide, was now in high spirits. He wasn't sure whether that was because Monami had returned or because he had made the effort to let Naoko have her life back, but in the end it didn't matter what the cause was. Seeing her this happy, he almost felt that he wouldn't mind even if Monami by some chance *never* came back.

Naoko was convinced that she would, though. She said that she

was making progress finishing her letter to Monami.

"If she appears when you're around, tell her to look inside her sock."

"Inside her sock?"

"I keep a little note in there telling her where to find the letter."

Heisuke understood. It would be difficult keeping a thick letter with herself at all times.

Six days passed this way, and then it was Sunday again.

Heisuke had a feeling that morning that something had happened. He put a cardigan over his pajamas right after waking up and went to Naoko's room to knock on the door. There was no answer.

He quietly opened the door. Naoko was sitting on the bed, back turned to him.

"Uhm..." he said.

She suddenly sat up straight and looked at him. There was something vacant in her expression. Must be Monami, he guessed.

"How do you feel?"

She looked at the palms of her hands and then pressed them against her forehead, as if trying to relieve a headache.

"I feel like I was asleep for a long time again."

"Well," he said, entering the room, "it wasn't that long this time. About a week."

"Was I asleep that whole time?"

"Well, not exactly. Like I told you before, your mom was in your body."

Monami looked puzzled, as if she still hadn't quite grasped the situation. She tilted her head and said, "Give me a mirror."

Heisuke took the hand mirror out of the desk and gave it to her. She timidly peered at herself. "So it wasn't a dream after all. I really *have* grown up."

"Do you remember all of the things I told you the last time you woke up?"

She nodded. "But I thought it was all a dream."

"It wasn't a dream. Oh, there's a message for you from your mom."

"From mom?"

"She asked me to tell you to look in your sock when you woke up."

"Sock?" She looked around. There was a pair of white socks on the edge of the bed. She picked them up and looked inside. She stuck her fingers in one of them and pulled something out. "This?" she asked,

producing a folded piece of paper.

"Yeah. It's from your mother."

Monami unfolded the paper and read it. She handed it to Heisuke. It read, "Bottom shelf of the bookcase, notebook farthest to the right. Read it alone."

He looked at Monami's face and then at the bookshelf. She looked in the same direction. She got off the bed and knelt down in front of the bookshelf. She found the notebook and pulled it out. "Here it is," she said, showing the cover to Heisuke. It had cat illustrations on the cover, along with the words "To Monami" written in pink, with a felt-tip pen.

"She told you to read it alone, right?" he said.

She nodded silently.

"Okay, I'll be downstairs. Call me if you need anything." He left the room and closed the door.

Heisuke was desperate with worry as he sat downstairs waiting for her to finish. He wondered what Naoko had written in the letter. How would Monami take it? He tried to brace himself for the worst possibilities.

For two hours, though, he didn't hear anything. The worry was getting to be too much to handle and he decided to go upstairs to see what was happening. Just as he stood up, however, he heard her bedroom door open.

Her footsteps coming down the stairs sounded like the falling of raindrops. She entered the tatami room. Her eyes looked as if they were having trouble focusing.

"Are you okay?" Heisuke asked.

"Yeah," she said, flopping down on the floor. She stared at the tatami mats. "There was a lot of stuff in the letter."

"It's been five years," he replied. "Five years' worth of stuff."

"Yeah. It was too much to put in one letter so she only gave me the highlights. Even just reading those took forever, though."

"I'll bet." It must have taken even longer for Naoko to write all of that, Heisuke thought.

"It's just so weird. All this time I've been asleep, she went to junior high, graduated, and then started high school."

"Your mom took two entrance exams."

"I know. That was sure a big surprise," Monami replied.

"She wanted to live your life so that there would be no regrets later on, she told me."

"Oh..." she said, her eyelids suddenly drooping. Her head began to sway back and forth. "I'm really sleepy all of a sudden."

"Are you going to doze off?"

"Yeah. I can't seem to stay awake. Will mom come back if I sleep now?"

"Yes, she will."

"Okay. Say 'hi' for me. And tell her thanks..." Her eyes closed and she lay down on the tatami mat. She was soon asleep.

Thinking that she would catch cold if he left her like that, he put his arms under her shoulders and legs to carry her back to her room. As he was about to lift her up, though, her eyes popped open.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

"Ah!" he echoed.

She looked around restlessly and then peered up at him. "Did Monami come back?"

"Yeah, just now. Then she fell asleep. Now you're here."

"Oh, sorry."

"No, it's good you're back," he said, taking his arms out from under her and sitting back down. "She read the notebook."

"And what did she say?"

"She was surprised. And she thanked you."

"Thanked?"

"Yeah." Heisuke recounted the conversation for her.

Naoko blinked a few times. "I have to write a follow-up letter as soon as possible. There's still a mountain of things she doesn't know."

"Don't write anything that'll gross her out."

Naoko understood. She smiled wryly and replied, "Relax. I won't."

"Good. That was my only worry."

"Dad," Naoko said, "you're happy that Monami has come back to us, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. It's like a dream come true."

"It is, it is. I'm just ecstatic," she said, peering out at the garden. Heisuke looked out as well, thinking that maybe the cat had returned. But there was nothing there: only the tall weeds swaying in the wind.

One could say that their family life was, in a word, bizarre. From the outside the Sugita household didn't look any different than it did before: a middle-aged father, whose wife had died in an accident, living happily together with his daughter. But in fact they were a family of three.

It was now March. Exactly one month had passed since Monami had suddenly returned to their lives.

"I think Monami will probably come back tomorrow morning," Naoko said during dinner. She seemed nervous.

Heisuke stopped eating. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I said 'probably.'"

He nodded. Whenever she said "probably," Monami invariably appeared. Naoko had said that she could always somehow feel it coming on.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Send her to school. I've already told her that's what she has to do if she wakes up during a weekday. I don't think she'll panic."

Naoko and Monami had taken to using the notebooks as a kind of shared diary, where they would write down everything that happened so that the other could have a pretty good grasp of the current situation in their common lives.

"So she knows the way to school, and the location of the classrooms, and the names and faces of her classmates?" he asked, wanting to make sure.

"I think I told her everything. At any rate, she tells me she's memorized it all."

"What about the classes?"

"I think she'll be okay there, too."

"Yeah, I suppose she will. It's a real mystery, isn't it? She was doing your math homework here the other day, and getting the problems correct. She doesn't know how she manages to do it, either, but not only does she know how to solve the problems, she even knows the meanings of mathematical symbols that I'm sure she'd never been taught."

"It's really amazing, isn't it?"

It was no surprise that Monami had no knowledge whatsoever of

the events that had taken place over the past five years. What was astonishing was that her academic skills and intellectual abilities were exactly the same as Naoko's. Despite the fact that she had only finished fifth grade, she was able to solve high-school-level math problems with ease. Even though she had hardly studied any English, she was even able to do the English homework. "I don't know how I'm able to do all this, but for some reason I just can," she said.

They had their own ideas about how this was possible. They thought that Naoko and Monami's personalities were generated in different parts of their shared brain, which allowed them to sense one another as distinct people. Thus they remembered their personal experiences separately. At the same time, however, they shared a common fund of knowledge that was fundamentally disconnected with personal, physical experience. What Naoko had learned, Monami could use.

When Monami heard this hypothesis from Heisuke, she said, "Great. I'll let mom do all the studying. I'll be in charge of playing." It wasn't clear what Naoko had written about that in the notebook.

"I wonder if you'll ever switch places while at school," he asked Naoko one day.

"It could happen. The amount of time that Monami stays in the body is slowly getting longer and longer. I don't see why she wouldn't be able to stay awake until the end of sixth period. Just to be safe, though, I should tell her that if she *has* to sleep she should do so during lunch break, and to be sure to write everything down before she does. Otherwise, I'll have a really hard time catching up when she hands me the baton."

"What a tough way to go through life. It's like that notebook has become an additional brain that you two share."

Naoko nodded, looking serious. "That's really true. It's just like Korsakoff's Syndrome."

"Like what?"

"Korsakoff's Syndrome. It's a complete absence of short-term memory. People with the disease have to rely on notes to lead their lives. They have to write down everything they do, see, and hear. They have to check their notes whenever they do the simplest things. If they walk out of a bathhouse, they have to check for a note that says, 'I just took a bath,' and then they can go home. If they don't do that, they may forget that they took a bath and go in to take another one. It's a lot like what Monami and I have to do, though it's far easier for us since at least we

know where we are.”

Then she added, “But you know, I don’t think we’re going to have to keep this up for very much longer.”

“Why not?”

“Oh...just a feeling I have.”

She put the dirty dishes on the tray and went to the kitchen. Heisuke felt conflicting emotions as he watched her wash the dishes. He understood what she meant, even though she was reluctant to come right out and say it.

Monami’s time awake was getting longer. This meant, in turn, that Naoko’s time awake was getting shorter. Monami now spent several hours at a time fully awake. She and Heisuke passed that time together as a true father and daughter, and of course he took pleasure in this. At the same time, though, he realized that he was losing someone else. He didn’t want to lose either one of them, but he knew that that was simply selfish.

Monami’s first day of school seemed to pass without incident. When he got home, Naoko was preparing dinner. She told him that Monami had gone the whole day at school without falling asleep. She was exhausted when she got home and so lay down to take a nap. Naoko woke up in her place.

“She writes that her classes went well and that she was able to talk with her classmates just fine. She says it was a lot of fun,” Naoko reported, glowing with happiness.

After that, Monami started going to school every three or four days. The ratio slowly increased to every other day. By the time spring break approached, Monami was going to school practically every day. Still, it seemed enough of a psychological burden to her that she would inevitably fall asleep as soon as she got home. This meant that whenever Heisuke got home from work it was always Naoko who was waiting for him. He only spent time together with Monami for a short period in the morning, on Saturday evening, and all of Sunday.

When he mentioned that this routine wasn’t all that different than it was before Monami had come back, Naoko knitted her eyebrows and said, “Maybe for *you* it isn’t, but it’s driving *me* crazy. The first thing I have to do when I wake up is make dinner. Then I have to do Monami’s homework. Then I go to sleep and it’s the same thing all over again, every day. I wish she would help me out a little bit. She should at least try to do her own homework.”

Monami, of course, had her own grievances.

"Well, I want to watch TV once in a while, but I have no time for that at all. The second I wake up I have to go to school. I come home and go straight to sleep. Then I wake up and go to school again. It's like my *whole* life is school! It's like I think maybe I should sleep at school and save myself the trouble. I mean, I feel bad that mom has to do my homework for me, but I don't think she has it so tough, really. I mean, I'm like *totally* focused on my classes when I'm at school. All mom has to do is fill in the stuff I learned on the homework answer sheet."

It was certainly a most unusual situation, but Heisuke had to admit that he enjoyed listening to them complain about the difficulties of their respective lives. Even though there was physically only one other body in the house with him, he was able again to feel the pleasures and warmth of a family of father, wife, and child.

When spring break started, the two of them—that is to say, Naoko and Monami—embarked on an adventure: the class ski trip. Four days and three nights long, the trip was scheduled to begin on the fifth anniversary of the accident in Nagano. They all made a point not to mention that eerie coincidence to one another.

Heisuke spent the four days alone. Although he worried about them, he had no fear whatsoever that anybody would discover their special secret; he had complete faith in their teamwork. Rather than feeling like Monami had gone on the trip by herself, he felt Naoko was accompanying her as a guardian. He laughed gently when he imagined Monami complaining about how she couldn't do the things she wanted with her mother watching over her. They called every night from the ski resort, but usually it was Naoko who did the calling.

"That girl is out of control. Every night my body is sore all over. And on top of that, she wastes money like crazy. I have to write in the notebook for her to cut it out before our purse is completely empty."

I'm sure Monami has a lot to complain about as well, he thought to himself with a smile.

Heisuke was on his way home from a meeting with a supplier in Chiba prefecture. He remembered that there used to be a good soba restaurant near Monzen-naka Station and decided to get off there to see if it was still in business.

It was May. The weather was beautiful and the asphalt roads reflected the sun's bright glare. Before going to the soba shop he stopped to pay his respects at the Tomioka Hachiman Shrine. This was where they had brought Monami for her third, fifth, and seventh birthdays, important childhood milestones in Shinto tradition.

He then walked from the shrine compound to a street lined with shops and noticed a familiar-looking man walking on the other side of the street. The man was in his mid-fifties, well-tanned, and had an oily face. He was wearing a baggy white jacket that seemed to be floating on air. He was the kind of guy that Naoko or Monami would take one look at and immediately categorize as being "creepy."

He looked closely at Heisuke with a glimmer of recognition. They seemed to realize who the other was at exactly the same moment.

"Hello," Heisuke spoke first.

"Well, well, well," the man said, extending his right hand. "It's been a long time. How have you been?"

"Oh, well enough," Heisuke replied as the man shook his hand violently.

He was Kazuro Fujisaki from the survivors' association, the one who ran a printing company and had lost twin daughters in the accident. The last time Heisuke had met him was four years earlier, and the man seemed to have put on a lot of weight.

"Do you come here often?" Fujisaki asked.

"No. I'm on my way back home from a business meeting."

"I see. In that case, you want to join me for a while? My company's right nearby."

"Oh...uh, I have to..."

Although Heisuke was hesitant, Fujisaki beckoned for him to follow. Seeing no other choice, he did so. So much for the soba, he thought.

Although Fujisaki had said his company was "right nearby," he got into his car and opened the door for Heisuke. It was a brand-new

Mercedes-Benz and still had that new-car smell. A small doll was hanging from the edge of the window.

"My company is near Kayaba-cho. We'll be there in five minutes."

"Uhh...didn't you once say your company was in Kohto ward?"

"We still have a branch there, but our main shop moved about three years ago."

The Mercedes entered the underground parking lot of a building next to the Kayaba-cho subway station. Fujisaki parked the car and led Heisuke up to his office. Heisuke could tell from the way he swaggered that he was full of self-assurance.

The name of the company was "SafePut" and it was located on the first floor. The office had a bright, polished atmosphere, with computers and peripheral devices neatly arranged on the desks. There seemed to be quite a few employees.

Fujisaki led him to a leather-covered sofa and invited him to sit.

"Our main business these days is computer-aided design. We also have an output service," Fujisaki said, crossing his legs.

"Output service?"

"Let's say you have something on the computer you want to print, but you wouldn't be satisfied with a normal printer because the colors wouldn't look nice and the details would be smudged. You just bring in a floppy or an MO and we'll give you a perfect printout. That's what an output service does. But the English word 'out' has a bad ring for me: it just makes me think of baseball outs. So I decided to replace it with 'safe' instead."

"Hence 'SafePut.'"

"That's right. So what about you, Mr. Sugiyama, where do you work?" he asked, draping his arm over the back of the sofa. Heisuke paused a few seconds before answering, wondering whether to point out that his name was actually Sugita. Too much trouble, he decided.

"I just work at a manufacturing company."

"Ah, manufacturing. Times are getting tough in that field as well," Fujisaki said, affecting the manner of major industrialist.

Heisuke sat silently, drinking his coffee, as Fujisaki spent a long time recounting his many successes in various undertakings. Heisuke waited for an opportune moment, then slowly began to stand up, saying "Well, I think I should be on my way about now."

Fujisaki accompanied him to the entrance. He took Heisuke's hand in his own and said, "You and I have got to be tough. Never forget what

we shouted into that ravine in Nagano," and then, for some odd reason he squeezed Heisuke's hand very tightly. This was the one and only time he had even mentioned the accident. Heisuke recalled that during the memorial trip Fujisaki had shouted "You son of a bitch!" into the valley.

He left the building and started walking towards the station. As he was waiting at a crosswalk for the light to change, a small, balding man came up next to him. Heisuke had seen him working in Fujisaki's office.

"You were talking with him for quite a long time," the man said, smiling.

"Yeah," Heisuke replied, awkwardly smiling back at him.

"President Fujisaki just loves to gab. I always keep my mouth shut when he starts talking, so as not to drag things out. So, you were also part of the survivors' association, is that right?"

"Yes," Heisuke replied. The fellow must have overheard their conversation as Heisuke was preparing to leave.

"You know," the man said, glancing behind his back, "after that accident, President Fujisaki's luck took a complete turn for the better."

"Is that so?"

The man nodded. "Oh yeah. Before that, the printing company was deep in debt, on the verge of collapse. And then the accident happened. Since both of his daughters died, he got double the compensation money, over a hundred million yen. That turned everything around in one fell swoop. The company got back on its feet, and now it's booming, as you can see."

"That's quite something..."

The light turned green. Heisuke started to cross, and the man crossed with him.

"Sometimes he even talks about it to us. He says that he'd been disappointed at having two girls, but at the very end they showed true filial piety to their father. He says it was tough raising them alone after his wife died, but at least they were able to make it to an age where they finally managed to do good by him. Man, we were stunned speechless the first time we heard him say that."

The entrance to the subway station came in view. The man didn't seem to be headed inside. "Well, this is my stop," Heisuke said in the way of taking leave, and went down the stairs.

Heisuke wanted to tell the bald man that a person's sadness didn't always take a form that others could see. Yet he had said nothing, because he suspected at the same time that the last thing Fujisaki want-

ed was to plumb the depths of his own soul. Heisuke could still see that doll hanging next to the window of the Mercedes.

It was shaped like a cute little girl. And there had been a second one, exactly like the first, hanging from the driver's side window.

Heisuke smelled curry when he opened the door. This was unusual because Naoko only rarely made curry, especially after the accident.

He went through the tatami room to take a look in the kitchen. Naoko was standing in front of the gas range in her white apron, stirring something inside a big pot.

"Oh, you're home," she said, still stirring.

"Haven't had curry in a while," he said, sniffing at the aroma. "We should save some for tomorrow so Monami can have some too. She'll be happy, for sure."

She looked back at him and sulked, blinking indignantly. He didn't immediately understand what that was supposed to mean. Then she started pouting.

"Oh...Monami?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. "Sorry, mom's not home."

"You haven't fallen asleep today?"

"Nope. For some reason I'm not sleepy at all. Anyway, there was no food ready so I rushed to the convenience store to get some curry mix."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, that's right...curry was your specialty, wasn't it?"

"What? You don't like curry?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I like curry."

Heisuke went upstairs and changed into his usual sweat pants and sweat shirt. A murky foreboding was building within his chest. He knew what it was, but thinking about it was so depressing that he tried to block it out of his mind.

They watched a musical variety show on television as they ate Monami's curry rice. It was well made, good enough to stand comparison with Naoko's own. Monami looked very happy when he told her so.

"I'm pretty good at cooking, you know. I've got mom's recipes so it's not a problem," she said, giving him a thumbs up. "But now that I think about it, you and I haven't eaten dinner together in like, forever. It's a strange feeling."

"That's because you're always asleep by this time."

"Yeah," she said, and stopped eating. "You want mom to come back soon, don't you?"

"No, I'm not saying that," he answered, shaking his head. "But you

better not tell her that, or else she'll start giving me flak."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll just pretend I never heard that," Monami said with a smile, and went back to eating her curry rice.

Monami stayed glued to the TV set even after dinner was finished. She was watching some trendy prime-time soap opera that her mother had told her was pretty interesting. Heisuke went to the kitchen to wash the dishes. "*Thank you,*" she said in English from the yonder side of the TV set.

After he finished he went back to the tatami room and found Monami slumped over the dining table, sound asleep. The ending credits were rolling by on the screen.

He sat down next to her and her eyes opened. For a few seconds she simply stared blankly into the distance. Then she slowly sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Around nine."

"Oh. I slept a long time."

"Monami was still here when I got home. I was a little surprised. To be honest, I'm also worried."

"You think I won't come back anymore?"

"Yeah."

She looked away. "There's always a period of time when I'm exactly halfway between being asleep and being awake. That's when I give myself a little push and come back to consciousness. But this time, for some reason, I couldn't force myself to wake up. I got pulled right back into the dream world. That's why I was late."

"Oh..." he answered vaguely, nodding as if he understood, but in fact he had no idea what she meant.

"Heisuke," she said, turning to him, "I have a feeling that, sooner or later, we're not going to be able to meet again."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's happening, I can feel it. I feel I'm disappearing little by little."

"What are you talking about? That's not going to happen."

"But you know, the strange thing is that I don't feel sad at all. I feel it's inevitable. It's abnormal for things to go on as they've been lately."

"Who cares if it's abnormal? I like the way we live now, I do. Monami seems to enjoy it too. Let's just keep on going like this..."

"Thank you for saying that. It would be nice if we could." She took a few whiffs of the air. "You had curry tonight, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Monami made it."

"That's her specialty. But she can make other stuff too, you know. She's been helping me ever since she was small."

"That's what she told me. And she says she has all your recipes."

"That's right, the recipes," she said, nodding. "I'd better write down as many as possible while there's still time."

"Stop talking like that. Right now, you two are able to both be here," he said, getting angry.

"Sorry," she replied, grinning.

Heisuke wanted to stay up late that night, spending as much time as possible with Naoko, but she started yawning at around midnight, and was soon yawning continuously. "I'm so sleepy, I feel like I'm going to pass out," she said and went up to her room. When she came out of that room the next morning, she would no longer be Naoko, she would be Monami.

Three hours: that's roughly the amount of time he was able to spend with Naoko that day.

He took a bath, then drank some whiskey in the tatami room. He held back tears as the powerful liquor warmed his throat and stomach.

An unexpected visitor came to Heisuke's workplace in early July. The news that the rainy season had already ended in Kyushu was corroborated by the fact that Tokyo had enjoyed clear weather for the past few days as well. The visitor appeared in the Bigood visitor's hall, wearing a navy blue suit despite the heat.

They sat facing each other at one of the long tables that were lined up in the greeting room.

"I'm very sorry about my mother calling you so abruptly this past winter," Fumiya Negishi said, bowing his neatly groomed head. His hair was parted at the side and nicely complemented his dark, well-cut suit.

"Not at all. We had a very valuable discussion, and I was very happy she came. It cleared up a lot of things."

Fumiya looked somewhat uncomfortable. "I feel very bad about that talk we had a few years back. I drove you away while being myself ignorant of the facts. Please accept my sincere apology."

"No, listen. It wasn't your fault that you didn't know everything. Let's just forget about it. And please stop bowing so much."

After repeated reassurances from Heisuke, Fumiya finally nodded and said, "Okay. Thank you." He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off of his forehead.

"There's also something that my mother wanted me to tell you. She's been in touch with Itsumi Kajikawa."

"Oh, is that right?" Heisuke had given Itsumi's address and number to Noriko over the phone, but he hadn't heard anything more about it after that. "What's she doing now?"

"I hear she's training to be a beautician. She's living on her own but she seems to be having a hard time of it, so my mother is helping her out a little financially."

"Well I'll be..."

"Just returning the favor, you could say."

"Indeed." He looked at the face of this young man who had once secretly been helped by Itsumi's stepfather, and nodded his head repeatedly. "Anyway," Heisuke said, changing the subject, "I still can't begin to tell you how surprised I was to hear that you'll be coming to work here at Bigood."

"It's not that surprising, really. I've always wanted to work in the automotive industry."

"That's right. You were in the automotive engineering department, weren't you?"

"Yes."

Candidates who had made the final round at Bigood had already started making courtesy calls to the factory. They were generally science majors with bachelor's degrees who had been recommended by their respective universities. Assuming no unexpected problems, a record like that resulted in a tentative offer of employment. Fumiya, who was scheduled to earn a master's degree before starting the job and was therefore far more qualified than the rest, was more or less guaranteed a spot.

"But was it really just a coincidence?" Heisuke asked.

"Well, there were not that many other auto-parts companies out there to choose from, that's true," Fumiya said, fingering his necktie, "but actually, I don't think I would have chosen Bigood if I hadn't met you."

"Oh, brother," Heisuke said, holding his head in his hands, "that's a massive responsibility! I never guessed you would come to a crazy place like this. I hope you don't hate me for it afterwards." A bright smile spread across his face.

Fumiya said that he was staying at a hotel in Shinjuku and would return to Sapporo the next day. Heisuke invited him to dinner at their house that night.

"Would...would that be okay? I would hate to impose..."

"If I thought you would be imposing on us, would I have invited you in the first place? So we'll see you tonight, right?"

"Well, okay, if you say so," Fumiya answered, straightening his back.

Before they parted, Heisuke asked Fumiya to call him at the end of work. At around 5:00, Heisuke called home. Monami was already back from school. He could tell that she was a little panicked when he told her he was bringing a guest over that night.

"How can you just spring that on me at the last minute? What am I supposed to do about dinner?" she complained.

"We can just have some eel. Call the 'Yajirobe' restaurant. They're the best. They'll include some broiled fish and eel liver soup."

"Are you sure that'll be enough?"

"I'm sure. Don't worry about the food. Just make sure the tatami

room is clean.”

After hanging up, Heisuke realized that it had been years since they’d had a guest at the house.

Fumiya called once the shift ended and they made plans to meet at a bookstore near the station. It didn’t take long for Heisuke to spot him once he got there: he was the only person wearing a dark blue wool suit in the stifling heat. He was buying a map of Tokyo.

“If all goes well and I get the final offer of employment, I’m going to start living in Tokyo next April. I just thought I’d better start learning the city now,” Fumiya said, smiling.

“You’ll be living in the company dorm. If you have any problems, just let me know.”

“Thank you.”

“And if you’re feeling underfed over there, come over for dinner whenever you want. Try to remember the way to my place so you’ll be able to come by yourself next time.”

“Okay, I will.”

Heisuke realized that he had unconsciously started taking a familiar tone with Fumiya and worried whether he felt uncomfortable with that. But Fumiya didn’t seem to mind at all, so he decided there was no harm in keeping it that way.

Coming from the less-crowded city of Sapporo, Fumiya looked miserable on the jam-packed commuter train back to Heisuke’s neighborhood. Sweat was dripping down his temples despite the train’s air conditioning. He took a deep breath once they were finally able to get off the train.

“People in Tokyo have a lot more stamina than we in Sapporo. Definitely.” For a second Heisuke thought this was a joke, but Fumiya seemed quite serious.

When they got home, Heisuke opened the door and called, “Hey! We’re here!”

He could hear Monami’s pitter-patter as she rushed to the front door to greet them. He saw that she wasn’t wearing her slippers when she appeared. She had an apron on over a black T-shirt. “Welcome!” she said.

“This is the guest I was telling you about, Fumiya Negishi. Fumiya, this is my daughter Monami.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, bowing his head.

“Nice to meet you, too,” she replied, bowing in kind.

There was an awkward silence of two or three seconds as the two of them looked away from one another, not knowing where to rest their eyes. The whole time that Heisuke was taking his shoes off, it seemed they were trying hard not to look at one another.

Heisuke entered the tatami room and was astonished. The dining table was covered with food: salad, *karaage* fried chicken, sashimi, and so on.

"Did you make all this?" Heisuke asked.

"Yeah. We haven't had a guest in such a long time, I thought I should do something special," she said, glancing briefly at Fumiya.

"That's amazing. Still in high school and you can do all this. I'm impressed," Heisuke said proudly.

"But don't look at the food too closely. If you do, you'll see that I took a few shortcuts."

"Okay, let's eat quickly then. I'm starving. Monami, bring us some beer."

"Sure," she said, going to the kitchen.

"Uh..." Fumiya said, "Do you always leave it like that? Closed, I mean?"

Heisuke saw that Fumiya was pointing at the Buddhist altar, and didn't know how to reply. It was shut closed. Since Naoko and Monami were now both, in a sense, "alive," there was nobody for them to commemorate. At least, that's how Heisuke felt.

"Oh, that," Heisuke replied, scratching his head. "That's for my deceased wife, of course, but recently we've just been so busy and all..."

"Would it be okay if I lit a stick of incense for her?" Fumiya asked, looking at both Heisuke and Monami.

"Uh, sure, I guess..." Heisuke stammered. He would feel very uncomfortable performing memorial rites for his wife, whom he still considered to be very much alive.

"Yeah, why not?" Monami chimed in, still holding the beer bottles in her hands.

"Yes...that's right. We don't mind. Okay. So, you'll light a stick of incense, then?"

"I would very much like to, if it's okay with you."

The altar had been closed shut ever since Monami's return, but now it was open once again. Fumiya lit a stick of incense and put his hands together in prayer; he stayed that way for a very long time. The incense smoke rose to the ceiling in a single, straight thread. Heisuke sat

in the same formal, upright posture as Fumiya while waiting for him to finish.

Fumiya finally lifted his head and lowered his hands. He looked at Naoko's photograph once more, then turned to face Heisuke and Monami. "I'm sorry for having inconvenienced you."

"Not at all. But you certainly seemed to be praying for a long time."

"Yes. I just felt that there were so many things for which I needed to ask forgiveness."

"Well then, let's have a toast," Monami said, still standing with the beer bottles in her hands. "To Mr. Negishi's employment."

"Yes, let's do that," Heisuke said, taking a glass from the dining table and putting it in front of Fumiya.

"Medical school, huh? That's fantastic," Fumiya said.

"There's nothing fantastic about it. It's just a goal. I don't even know if I'll get in," Monami answered.

"No, for a girl to have that kind of ambition is fantastic in itself. Wait, I guess that sounded kind of sexist...Anyway, I really think it's fantastic." Fumiya had drunk a lot of beer, and he was beginning to trip over his words.

"But you're in graduate school at Hokusei Tech, right? That's nothing to sneeze at."

"Nah...it's nothing special at all. Anybody could get in if they wanted to."

"I think it's very special. Hey, if you're in the engineering department, you must be good at math? Would you mind helping me with this one homework problem I've been having trouble with?"

"What? Now? My brain's pretty fuzzy from all the beer...but I guess I can give it a try."

"Okay, wait a minute," she said and left the room.

"Sorry my daughter's chatting your ear off," Heisuke said. He was sitting a little apart from them, nursing his whiskey and water.

"Oh, don't be sorry, please. Talking with her is a lot of fun, a lot of fun. But really, Monami is an incredible girl. Medical school..." he said, shaking his head with wonder.

"That was her mother's dying wish."

"Oh, is that right?" Fumiya said, looking at the Buddhist altar.

"Well, it didn't necessarily have to be medical school. It was just her dream that her daughter would live a life without any regrets or

missed opportunities."

Fumiya stared at Naoko's picture, nodding. "That's wonderful."

Monami came back downstairs and placed her worksheet in front of Fumiya. "This one," she said.

"So what is this? Oh, proving an integral." Fumiya looked up at the ceiling, face flush from the alcohol. "Haha, this is actually pretty hard. Okay, first you have to make x -square equal to t and then differentiate t in relation to x ."

Even though his eyes were glassy from drunkenness, he was able to take the ball-point pen in his hands and start solving the problem. Monami stared at his profile as he worked, her face radiant.

Fumiya left at a little before 11:00 that night. His gait was a little dubious, but his head appeared to be clear. The proof was that he had solved three of Monami's math problems, as if by magic.

"He's so honest and direct. He doesn't seem to have a crooked bone in his body," Monami enthused with glowing eyes. Heisuke had a little premonition somewhere in the back of his mind, but he didn't say anything.

They washed the dirty dishes together. It was almost midnight by the time they'd finished all of the cleaning. They both had yet to take a bath, but they sat down facing each other in the tatami room. There was something they both knew they had to discuss.

"You must be tired," he said.

"A little."

"Thank goodness tomorrow's Saturday. But you actually have school, don't you?"

"Yeah, but it's only a half day." She looked closely at her father. "Dad, I don't think mom is going to appear tonight."

"Oh...you're sure?"

"Yeah. She's not coming tonight."

"I see," Heisuke said, and looked at the altar. The picture of Naoko was smiling back at him.

"Dad, I have a favor to ask you."

"What is it?"

"After school, there's someplace I want you to take me. In the car."

"You want to take a drive? Sure. Where to?" This was the first time Monami had ever asked this, and he was a little puzzled.

Monami paused a moment. "Yamashita Park."

"Yamashita Park? In Yokohama?"

She nodded.

A cold breeze engulfed his heart. He could feel himself sinking.

"You want to go...tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes. Tomorrow."

"Okay," he said, nodding. "I understand."

Monami's eyes started to get red. Covering her mouth with her hand, she stood up and ran upstairs.

Heisuke crossed his legs, and turned to look once again at the picture on the altar.

Yamashita Park. That was where he and Naoko had their first date.

He was very busy the next morning. First he went to the gas station. He had the tank topped off and then asked them to wash the car. The old-model Sprinter had dents here and there, but with a thorough cleaning it came to look presentable.

Next, he drove to the record store to buy some CDs. The young female clerk had to hold back her laughter, as his selections were the last thing one expected a middle-aged man to buy. After that, he went to a nearby electronics shop to buy a portable stereo.

Then he went to the barber shop.

"Try not to make it look too much like it was just cut. Make it look as natural as possible."

"What's all this about?" the owner said, making a strange face. Heisuke was a regular customer. "What, you've got an arranged marriage interview today or something?"

"No, not that. Just a date."

"Oh, *really*?" the barber moaned. The grin on his face seemed to say, "You've got to be kidding!"

"Yeah, really. I've got a date with my daughter."

"Ooh, that's a tough one," the owner said, getting serious all of a sudden. "It's not very often that daughters let themselves be seen with their fathers. You've definitely got to look your best."

Heisuke left the barber shop just in time to pick up Monami at the end of her school day.

This was the first time he had been there since the culture festival. The flames of the campfire still burned in his mind's eye. And yet, even though less than a year had passed since that day, it seemed like an event from the distant past.

The final bell had rung and the students were filing through the school's front gate. Heisuke parked his car on the side of the road and searched the faces of the girls pouring out onto the sidewalk.

Monami finally emerged, walking side by side with two of her friends. He considering honking the horn to get her attention, but she noticed the car before he had to do anything. She said something to her friends, and came running over.

"The car looks clean," she said, sitting in the passenger seat.

"It should."

"Oh—and your hair looks good, too."

"Just a clean-cut style."

"It looks pretty nice. Makes you look like I should be calling you 'Daddy' instead of 'Dad.' You know, makes you look younger."

"'Daddy,' eh? Not bad." He put the car into gear and started driving.

Monami was in a joking mood when she got in the car, but she soon grew silent and just stared out the window. Heisuke didn't say anything, either. The weather was beautiful, but that did little to relieve the somber mood in the car. They stopped at a drive-thru on the way. Monami silently ate her cheeseburger and drank her cola. Heisuke nibbled on a burger as he drove.

They arrived at Yamashita Park, and he parked the car in a nearby lot. He took his things out of the trunk.

"Hey," she said, pointing at the boom box, "you're not actually going to walk through the park with that thing, are you?"

"Why not? Is there something wrong with it? It's brand new."

"There's nothing wrong with the boom box, it's just that you'll sort of look like a fool lugging that big thing around."

"Oh...should I just leave it in the car?"

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter. You need it, right?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"Okay. No other choice, then."

It was a clear, sunny Saturday and the park was filled with families and couples. Heisuke and Monami started walking towards the rows of benches that faced the sea. Only one of the benches hadn't been taken yet.

"It was a little bit closer to the pier, though. Oh well..." Heisuke said.

"What?"

"The bench your mother and I sat on during our first date. It was over that way."

"It's probably taken already, so it looks like this is our only choice," Monami said, sitting down. Heisuke took a seat next to her. There they were, a teenage girl wearing her school uniform and a middle-aged man carrying a boom box. Heisuke worried a bit what people might think.

They sat side by side, looking at the water for a long time. The sea was calm. Every so often a ship passed by.

"Your mother gave you instructions to come here?" he asked, still looking straight ahead.

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning. It was written in the notebook."

"Come here on Saturday, it said?"

He could see her nod out of the corner of his eye. "She told me that I should ask you to take me to Yamashita Park on Saturday. This is the place where she would..."

"Where she would what?"

Monami shook her head. She didn't want to answer.

Heisuke sighed.

"Dad," Monami said, "are you glad I came back?"

He looked at her. She seemed on the verge of crying.

"Of course I am," he replied. "And so is your mother."

Monami nodded, looking slightly relieved. Suddenly her eyelids began to droop, her head started to sway and then fell back to rest on the back of the bench. She was asleep, as lifeless as a doll.

Heisuke picked up the stereo set and turned on the power. The CD by Yumi Matsutoya, a.k.a. "Yumin," was already inside. He pressed the play button.

She opened her eyes almost exactly as the music started playing. She didn't start talking right away, however. She just watched the sea as Monami had.

"Yumin was a good choice," she said, finally. Her voice was calm.

"I was so embarrassed buying it that I thought my head would catch fire."

"But you did it anyway."

"Because I know you like it."

They stared silently at the sea again. The surface of the water sparkled so brightly in the sun that it hurt their eyes. Time passed.

"Thank you for bringing me here one last time," Naoko finally said.

He turned to face her. "So...this is really going to be the last time?"

She nodded, looking him directly in the eye. "Everything has an end. The day of that accident should have been the end for me. All that happened was that the end was put off until today." Then she added quietly, "You're the one who made that possible for me."

"But can't you stay just a little longer?"

"No, I can't," she said, smiling gently. "I can't really explain why."

But I know it's happening. This is the end for me."

"Naoko..." He grasped her right hand.

"Heisuke," she said, "Thank you. Goodbye. Don't forget me."

Naoko, he wanted to say, one last time. But his voice was gone.

A smile spread across her face. Her eyes quietly closed. Her head slowly bent forward.

He looked down at the ground, but no tears came from his eyes.

You can't cry, you can't cry, a voice inside of him kept repeating.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Monami looking at him.

"Is she gone?" she asked.

Heisuke nodded.

Monami broke down and buried her face in his chest. She wailed through her tears.

Heisuke looked out at the sea as he gently rubbed his daughter's back. A white boat was visible in the distance.

Yumin was singing "Shadows in a Darkening Room."

"You're going to cry. I'll even bet money on it. You're *definitely* going to cry." His brother-in-law Tomio's voice was brimming with self-assurance.

"I'm not going to cry. No father cries at his daughter's wedding these days," Heisuke argued back, shaking his head.

"Even guys who talk like that cry. Take pops here, he was going on and on about how he wasn't losing a daughter but gaining a son-in-law, and then he's bawling his eyes out at the wedding banquet. Isn't that right, dad?"

"Gee, I don't remember," Saburo said, scratching his cheek. He had already put on his formal crested *hakama* and was ready to leave the house. Tomio had also put on his formal wear, while Heisuke was still in his pajamas. All he had done so far was wash his face.

They heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Heisuke's sister-in-law Yoko appeared. She was dressed in a formal *tomesode* kimono.

"Heisuke, what on earth is the matter with you? Please hurry up and get dressed. Monami has already left," she said impatiently.

"That means we still have plenty of time. It takes around two hours to prepare the bride, doesn't it?"

"Well, the father of the bride has responsibilities, you know. You have to greet the guests and so on."

"No, no," Tomio said, shaking his head, "all that the father of the bride has to do is whimper like a little baby, that's all."

"Give it a break, Tomio. I told you I'm not going to cry."

"Oh, you will. You will cry. Won't he, Yoko? Don't you think he'll cry?" Tomio asked his wife.

"Who, Heisuke?" Yoko said, looking at Heisuke's face. She puffed out a mouthful of air as she tried to hold her laughter. "Of *course* Heisuke will cry."

"What the hell is going on here? Even my sister-in-law is conspiring against me."

"Okay, okay, we've had our fun. Let's go," Yoko said. "Heisuke, please leave within half an hour *at the latest*. In all my life I've never heard of a father being late for his own daughter's wedding. Come on,

dad, Tomio, let's go." The three of them scuttled out one after another.

Naoko's family had spent the night at Heisuke's place, and from the moment they arrived Yoko was issuing orders and running the whole show.

Heisuke was left alone in the now silent room. He sat there for a while, staring at the walls, then lumbered to his feet and slowly started changing into his formal wear.

Time had flown since they had set the date for the wedding. He hadn't even had a moment to wallow in sentimentality. But that was always the way, wasn't it? When you knew you were about to lose something, it always happened sooner than you hoped.

Monami was now twenty-five years old and doing her residency in neurology at a university hospital. She had been so immersed in her studies that Heisuke had worried that she would miss her chance at marriage, but his fears had been groundless.

He only rarely spoke with her about Naoko these days. Monami's thoughts on the matter had changed considerably since she'd last woken up. As a college student, she'd even said:

"I think it was basically a type of multiple personality disorder. The shock of the accident caused a second personality to form inside of me. It just so happened that this second personality thought that it was my own mother. I think most of those previous cases of 'possession' can also be explained in the same way. And you have to be suspicious of those claims about knowing things that only the dead person could have known, or being able to do things that only the dead person could have done. Those are purely subjective judgments. In my own case, I was always together with mom, ever since I was very small, so it wouldn't have been that difficult to pretend to be her. As the months and years passed, I grew more psychologically mature, and my real self began to show its face, while the false personality gradually disappeared. Don't you think that's a far more reasonable explanation than some occult talk about possession?"

Heisuke didn't dare to argue with her. He quietly listened to what she had to say. If it helps her come to terms with what happened, he thought, far be it for me to tell her otherwise.

Under no circumstances, however, would Heisuke ever accept that this was merely a case of multiple personality. He had five years of life together with her to detect any false move, any missing bit of shared knowledge, anything that would suggest that she was a fabrication, and

yet there had been nothing of the sort. If anybody had been in a position to tell whether she was the real Naoko or not, it was he.

In any event, he thought, she's gone now. She only lives in my heart.

The waist on his trousers was tight. I'm getting fatter, he thought as he rubbed his belly.

After he finished tying his tie, he opened one of the drawers in his chest of drawers and pulled out the pocket watch. He had decided earlier that he would take this memento of Yukihiro Kajikawa to the wedding with him.

He wound the spring, waiting for it to start ticking, but nothing happened. He held it to his ear but couldn't hear anything.

He clicked his tongue. Of all times for this to happen.

He looked at his alarm clock to check the time. He calculated how long it would take. Nothing to lose now. Might as well give it a try.

He rushed out of the house, broken pocket watch in hand.

The wedding hall was in Kichijoji, not far from Ogikubo. He had decided to go to the Matsuno Watch Store in Ogikubo on the way to the wedding. That was where he had gotten the watch fixed.

When Kozo Matsuno saw him walk in, his eyes opened wide. "Oh ho, today is Monami's wedding, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" Heisuke asked.

"Why, I made the wedding rings right here."

Heisuke smiled. "I didn't know that." He had taken no part in the wedding plans. Monami had decided everything herself.

Heisuke showed him the watch. The experienced craftsman knitted his brows.

"Hmm...this won't be an easy job. It'll take at least a day."

"I was afraid you'd say that. I just wish I'd noticed earlier."

"Are you saying you wanted to take this watch to the wedding today?"

"Yes. Actually, the owner of this watch was the father of the groom."

Kozo's mouth formed into a nice, round "O."

"He passed away," Heisuke continued. "I wanted to bring this watch to be there in his place. I guess I'll just have to take it as it is."

"I'm afraid so. But bring it to me after the wedding and I'll fix it for you."

"I'll do that," Heisuke said, taking back the broken watch.

"I guess that means both of you will be there with mementos, eh?"

"What?" Heisuke asked. "What do you mean, both of us?"

Kozo frowned a bit and pursed his lips. "Okay, Monami told me not to tell you this, but it's just too good to keep it a secret."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mentioned the rings, right? The wedding rings."

"Yes."

"Well, it's true that she came here to order the rings, but I also got something from her when she came in."

"What 'something'?"

"A ring. The ring that matches the one you're wearing right now."

Heisuke looked down at his own hand. He was wearing the ring with which he had married Naoko, a ring that had been made right here in this shop.

"Naoko's ring?"

"Yes. She brought it here. She wanted me to use the metal from that ring to make a new wedding ring for herself. She said it would be a memento of her mother."

"She gave you that ring?" Heisuke's chest heaved. His heart began pounding wildly and his entire body felt hot.

Monami, how could you? he thought.

"Of course I made the ring just as she told me to. It was really very moving. The only thing I couldn't understand is why she didn't want me to tell *you* about it. But she never told me the reason. All she said was that I wasn't supposed to tell you, under any circumstances. She said you would resent it. But you don't really mind, do you? It doesn't bother you, does it?"

Heisuke didn't remember how he answered. He only came back to his senses after he had fumed out of the store.

"How could you? *How could you?*" he kept muttering to himself as he hurried down the street.

That ring was supposed to be inside a teddy bear, where Naoko had hidden it. Why did Monami take it out? *How* did Monami take it out? There was no way for her to know that it was there. That was his and Naoko's secret.

Did Naoko tell Monami about it in the notebook? Even then, why did Monami have to make a new ring out of it? And why did she hide it from him?

He hailed a taxi, and told the driver the name of the hotel where the

wedding was to be held.

He felt the ring on his finger. His heart began to burst with emotion.

Naoko...

Are you still here? Are you just pretending to be gone?

Heisuke recalled the first day that Monami reappeared. The day before she came back, he had made a resolution to treat Naoko as if she were Monami. He had resolved to start acting like her father instead of her husband. Calling her "Monami" was his way of showing that intention.

But how did Naoko take that? Did she make a decision of her own in response to the change that she sensed in him?

That is to say...Did she decide to *pretend* that Monami had come back? Did she decide to pretend to be Monami?

Of course that wasn't something she could just begin to do all of a sudden. She had to make it seem as if Naoko were disappearing little by little.

Nine years—that's how long she had kept up this charade. And it seemed she intended to keep it up for the rest of her life.

He remembered that final day in Yamashita Park. So that wasn't the day that Naoko died—it was the day that she completely cast off her life as Naoko. Those countless tears she shed when she reawakened as Monami came from the sadness of giving up her selfhood.

Naoko, are you still alive?

He arrived at the hotel. He quickly pulled out his wallet, tossed some barely counted bills to the taxi driver, and ran inside. He found the concierge and impatiently asked him where the wedding was being held. The aged hotel employee answered very slowly, as if trying to irritate him.

He took the elevator to the floor where the wedding hall was located. He saw Saburo and Yoko.

"Finally you're here!" Yoko said. "What on earth took you so long?"

"Where's Monami?" Heisuke asked, out of breath.

"I'll take you there," she answered. He followed her to the door of the bride's dressing room. Yoko knocked on the door and took a peek inside. "I think it's okay for you to enter," she said. It seemed that she had the good sense to give them some privacy, as she returned back to

the group.

Heisuke took a deep breath and opened the door.

The image of Monami in her wedding gown filled his eyes. It was actually her reflection in a large mirror. She looked at Heisuke through the mirror, then slowly turned to look at him directly. The aroma of flowers filled the room.

"Oh wow, you look...wow."

A vision from nearly thirty years ago flooded his mind. Naoko had once looked like that in a wedding dress.

The dressing room attendants left the room. The two of them were alone, looking at each other.

Naoko...

At that moment, Heisuke knew.

It would have been meaningless to say it. There was no point in asking. She would never admit it. She would never admit that she was Naoko. And as long as she refused to say otherwise, she was Monami. Heisuke had nobody in his life except for his daughter.

"Dad," she said, on the verge of tears, "thank you for everything you've done for me all these many years...all these years."

Heisuke nodded firmly. The gesture was his promise to protect her secret, forever.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," Heisuke said.

Fumiya Negishi peeked in through the door. His eyes sparkled when he saw the bride.

"Man, you are *beautiful*. *Beautiful*. There's no other word to describe you." Fumiya looked at Heisuke. "Isn't she beautiful, dad?"

"I've known that for at least thirty years," Heisuke answered. "Fumiya, come here a second."

"Sure. What is it?"

Heisuke led Fumiya to a separate antechamber. Fortunately nobody else was there.

He looked at the face of this man who, in a few minutes, would be joining Monami in wedlock. The groom looked a bit tense.

"I have a favor to ask you," Heisuke said.

"Sure, anything."

"Nothing too difficult. You've heard about this, right? It's the one thing the father of the bride wants to do most to the groom. Will you please allow me the pleasure?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"This," Heisuke said, making a fist in front of Fumiya's face. "Let me punch you."

Fumiya flinched. "What? You mean...here? Now?"

"Do you mind?"

"No...it's just that...I mean...damn, we have to take the wedding photograph in a few minutes and..." the groom fretted, scratching his head. But after a bit of temporizing, he finally nodded and said, "Okay, alright. I'm asking you for the hand of such a beautiful daughter, so I guess I have to give you at least that much. Right, then...I'm ready for the punch."

"No. Two punches."

"*Two* punches?"

"One is for taking my daughter. The other is for...someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Never mind. Just close your eyes."

Heisuke clenched his fist, but now the tears started flowing down his cheeks before he could even lift his arm. He fell to his knees and, covering his face with his hands, began to sob himself hoarse.

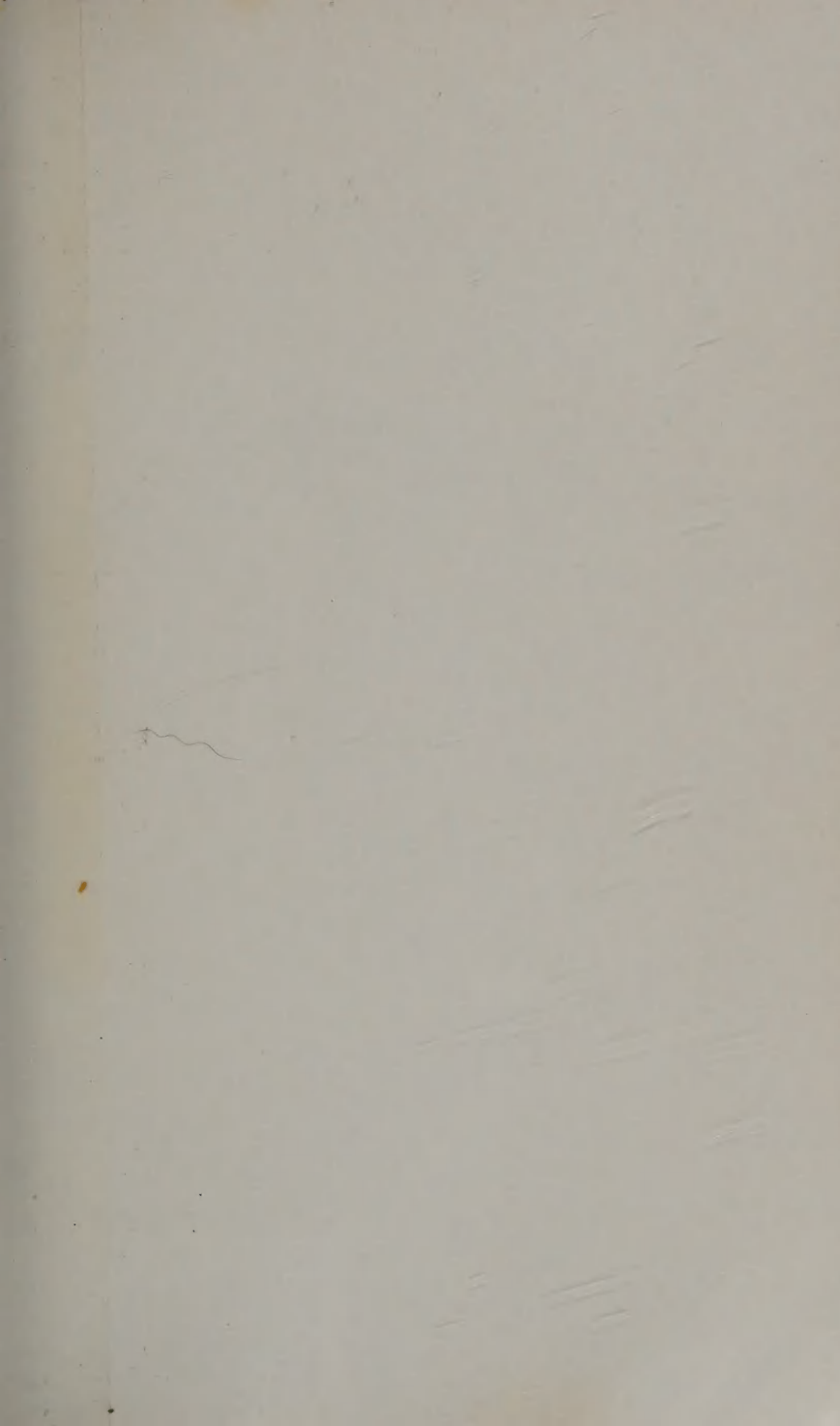




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Winner of the Japan Mystery Writers Award, *Naoko* is a black comedy of hidden minds and lives. Navigating the interstices between the real and the unreal with perfect plot twists, this page-turner is also a critique of gender relations by a male Japanese writer, one of their best-selling.

An everyman, Heisuke works hard at a factory job to provide for his wife, Naoko, and young daughter, Monami. He takes pleasure from the small things, like breakfast with both of them after a night shift. His placid life is rocked when, looking up from his microwave dinner one evening, he realizes that the TV news

that he wasn't paying attention to is reporting a catastrophic bus accident and the names of his loved ones.

When Monami finally wakes up from a coma, she seems to think she's Naoko, who has died protecting her daughter. More disturbingly, the girl knows things only Naoko could know. The family life that resumes between the modest man and a companion who looks like his daughter but seems like his dead wife is ticklish-funny until it begins hurtling toward a soul-shattering end.

In addition to winning Japan's top mystery prize, *Naoko* inspired a blockbuster movie. Read this work, a match for the later Buñuel, to find out why Higashino is considered the most ambitious and versatile mystery hand at work in Japan.

Born in 1958, Keigo Higashino studied electrical engineering and worked as a salaryman until he won the Edogawa Rampo Mystery Award in 1985. Originally a detective novelist, he has branched out to other genres, including science fiction. *Naoko* is his first work to appear in English.

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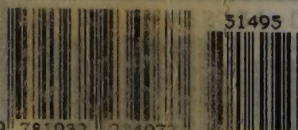
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