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Andres Oliver

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The Margin

by

Andres Oliver

Jim Grimsley
Adviser

Creative Writing Program

Lynna Williams

Adviser

Dr. James Morey
Committee Member

Dr. Julia Bullock
Committee Member

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By

Andres Oliver

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

The Margin

By Andres Oliver

A young Japanese man named Yuto goes to work at a publishing house one morning to find that his perfectionist supervisor has made a mistake in his correction of a manuscript. This mistake is only the first in a series of strange events that lead him to believe he is being given a second chance with Shiori, a friend from high school whom he dated and broke up with in college due to a mysterious physical condition that becomes his obsession. Though Yuto is given clues to Shiori's presence in his life—she leaves him notes and various dishes of food, and his parents and others comment on the progress of their relationship—Yuto can find no trace of her as a tangible entity. In other words, their relationship seems to exist only in the realm of theory. Yuto becomes increasingly disconcerted by an assortment of mistakes in his surroundings, and he finds himself assailed by the same doubts about his condition that led to his first break from Shiori. This torment culminates in his being replaced by a theoretical Yuto as the lover of the theoretical Shiori.

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The Margin

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“I could use a pair of young eyes on this one,” said Mr. Fujimori as he handed me the stack of pages. “Everything starts blending together after looking at it for the hundredth time.”

After my three years at S Publishing, this preamble had already become something of a formality, like saying words of thanks before a meal. Mr. Fujimori was a shy, bespectacled man who could root out typos and faulty indentation with a precision approaching the mechanical. Age had not taken away this gift, and I expect that many years hence if his body had been donated to science after his passing, some stupefied scientist would have sliced into the man’s head to find a collection of cogs and wires.

“Will do, Mr. Fujimori,” I said.

One time I was almost certain I’d found a mistake in a manuscript he handed me. I rushed over to his cubicle with the page in question like the archangel swooping down to announce the birth of Christ. When I pointed out the offending line—*see how an extra space has been inserted after the second period? You see it, don’t you?*—Mr. Fujimori smiled at me for a moment before taking out a ruler to measure the space.

“No,” he said. “Just the right spacing. Don’t let it get to you—the eye gets tired after a while.”

So you can understand if by the time the twelfth of January rolled around, I started on the manuscript with something less than the naïve enthusiasm of the me from three years past. It didn’t help that I awoke with a restlessness that my morning tea had been unable to calm.

I couldn’t explain it. The knot of my tie felt sloppy. I tied it and untied it three times before realizing I was going to miss the train, upon which I rushed out of my apartment with the thing half done. On the train, I found a seat at the end of the middle bench. I was just beginning to let my mind wander as I stared out of the opposite window when a middle-aged man came and took the seat directly across from me. I seethed inside as he settled into it. Why didn’t he take any of the other spots on the half-empty bench? My gaze flickered back to the window. A moment later, I found our eyes meeting in that brief and indecent communion that is the dread of many a morning commuter. The man seemed to be beaming out polite apologies at no one in particular, as if he didn’t know, as if he didn’t see, damn him, as if inside he wasn’t saying,

“Oh, you were looking out this window? This *particular* window?”

Conceding defeat, I pretended to take an interest in the frayed ends of my shoelaces. It was in no good mood that I walked into the office of S Publishing at five past eight.

#

I flipped perfunctorily through the first few pages. My mind was so distracted that I had to go back to the beginning after the twentieth page or so to see what the story was

about—something to do with a man who returns to the countryside to care for his mother. What was this restlessness? This unease? I checked the folios. Page one. Two. Three. Four. My foot was tapping a nervous beat against the floor. Page twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Did I see twenty-two twice? My already wandering attention was broken around the fiftieth page as Jun, one of my coworkers, sidled over to my desk. I endured his lurid anecdote about Masaru, the copy editor, for a good twenty minutes before I was able to wave him off with some excuse.

The rest of the day was exquisite torture. Even as I tried to force my mind to think about margins and indentation, I kept glancing either at the clock or at the window, though I couldn't think what it was that I was looking forward to. Surely it wasn't the prospect of going home and watching a movie with a beer that was making me feel so out of sorts.

I was forced to spend a couple of hours at our weekly meeting, where the marketing team updated us on strategy for our new season of books. After that Mr. A called me into his office to discuss some issue with the production of a couple of foreign titles we were publishing the next month. It wasn't until around six o'clock that I had a chance to get back to the manuscript I had begun that morning. I flipped through the last few pages and brought the whole thing over to my supervisor.

Find anything, Mr. Iwada? Of course not, Mr. Fujimori.

It took all my determination to start on another manuscript. I found myself in a universe where the long hand of the clock took a year to make its revolution. Night had already fallen thick and silent when my eye suddenly snapped back to a page. I blinked hard to make sure I wasn't just imagining it.

There it was. A mistake.

Not a missing character or faulty punctuation. The author had somehow begun the rightmost line a full half-inch nearer the margin, so that the words seemed almost in danger of falling off the page.

Mr. Fujimori had missed a mistake. The biggest of them all.

I stared down at the accused for several seconds. A sort of euphoria was at work filling my head with a hysterical lightness. This was soon replaced by such a feeling of dread as I had never known before. The floor seemed to be crumbling and falling out beneath my feet. If it had been any other day but that day, I would have run to Mr. Fujimori's office to declare my triumph. He would stare grimly at the mistake for a moment before turning to me with a smile that said the pupil had finally surpassed the master.

But not today. Today the mistake felt like the death knell of an old religion. For in a world where a line could hang thus on the margin, so precarious... why, in such a world, nothing was certain.

#

It might have had something to do with the puzzling events that took place the day before. Sunday unfolded with a brilliant sun that brought the first real warmth all month. Feeling unusually cheerful, I opened the window of my room that had been languishing musty through the winter like the interior of a cardboard box left in a corner of the closet. Even the shrill whistle and the cry of

“Okay! Okay! Okay!”

(My building sits next to the bus Terminal in R) failed to put a damper on my spirits. I ate a strong breakfast of pancakes, eggs, and miso soup, topped off with a couple of persimmons that must have ripened to perfection overnight. Sweet and firm. Fleshy. Not only did I wash my breakfast dishes, but I also tackled the pile that had been sitting in the sink collecting soap and scum for days and days. No problem at all. I finished off the lot and got dressed before nine o'clock.

I had no particular plans for the day, in much the same way that I never had any plans, particularly, so I walked out of my apartment and hopped onto my bike, letting the wheels take me down the alley and past the pachinko parlor to whichever destination they deemed best. I soon found myself turning westward across the Kamo River, the wispy clouds of winter-spring reflected in its glassy surface, then south along the side streets, until I turned again onto the little alley that separates the northernmost wall of the M Junior High campus from the gates of the surrounding residences. Winding carefully between these, I came out onto the tree-lined path that runs parallel to the grounds of Shimogamo Temple.

There is a certain house in this location. I used to pass it on my bicycle while on the way to the university. The architecture itself is probably nothing extraordinary. The garden in the front is reasonably large by Japanese standards, and on the right side of the walkway leading up to the door you find a set of swings and a small slide. It sits partially obscured by a rectangular border of trees, coming into view only a few steps after you've rounded the corner onto the street.

It's no English castle, but standing before the iron gate that separates the house from the street, one can almost imagine that the happy couple of some fairy tale has come

here to enjoy the middle years of Happily Ever After. The illusion is supported by the fact that the place exhibits every sign of being comfortably occupied without ever revealing its inhabitants. Imagine if you saw them quarreling in the doorway or storming off and driving away. The whole effect would be quite spoiled.

For some reason, it was before this house that my bicycle finally stopped its course. I dismounted, and walking slowly toward the left so as not to appear as if I were staking out the place, I took the garden in with something approaching bliss. The perfect house on the perfect day. I was just turning around to take another pass in the opposite direction when I heard female voices coming from around the corner. Perhaps it was embarrassment at being caught staring at this fairy house. In any case, I quickly began walking my bike away from the approaching voices.

“Really? What’s all that about?” one of the girls was saying.

“I don’t know,” said the other. “It’s just this thing he has.”

My head whipped around in spite of myself. That voice! That husky, honeyed inflection. Surely Shiori wasn’t...

I just had time to catch the back of the two girls on bikes before they passed out of sight. Even her hair was the right length, coming down to somewhere around the bottom of her shoulder blades. All thought of escape suddenly abandoned, I jumped on my bike and made to follow. I had to be sure. I rounded the corner and followed the dim sound of voices coming from the street ahead. Again, the girls eluded me just as their receding figures came into view. I pedaled on, not so urgently as to cause alarm, but quickly enough to keep the voices within earshot. However, the girls seemed to be moving further and further away even as I quickened my pace. I glimpsed their backs another two times,

by which time I could see them several streets ahead of me, their voices barely audible in the crisp air.

Suddenly I brought my bike to a screeching halt. The certainty that had possessed me was beginning to give way to doubt. Could it really be her? The last I'd heard, she'd moved away to Kobe. Then again, that was three years ago, and even then the report had been little more than speculation on the part of a mutual acquaintance. Yet how many girls had that voice? Not five in five thousand, surely. Perhaps only one in seven billion.

Taking one last look ahead for any sign of the two girls, I turned my bike in the opposite direction and rode away.

By the time lunch rolled around, I had put this incident largely out of mind. Sitting in my favorite curry restaurant on I Street, I decided that a husky voice and hair of a certain length were hardly unique traits. Rather, I had thought them unique to Shiori in the same way one thinks the peculiar curve of one's nose to have no equal in all the world. I polished off the last of the sauce on the plate, paid, and hopped back on my bike, upon which I headed to the mall above Y. Two of my sweaters were beginning to look a little threadbare around the edges of the sleeve, and I spent several hours walking in and out of stores looking for suitable replacements.

It was already growing dark when I exited the mall with a new sweater in hand. Thirty minutes later, I was turning at the pachinko parlor onto the alley leading to my apartment, where I entered, deposited my bag against the wall, and grabbed a towel and shampoo from the bathroom. I lived in an old, concrete block of a building that housed a number of students from nearby Kyoto University, though I only knew them in passing. One of the many sad peculiarities of this establishment was that it was cursed with a

defective hot water mechanism. I hardly minded in the summer; coming home after a day of work with my shirt plastered to my chest, I welcomed the geyser of cold water that came spewing from the showerhead. However, this amenity became a punishment in the wintertime, when sitting under the showerhead for longer than a minute amounted to nothing short of masochism. Using the bathtub anytime between the months of November and March was entirely out of the question. As a result, I had long since become a regular patron of the neighborhood bathhouse, one of the last outposts of that fading tradition that had begun to die out with the invasion of the home bath. Thus, hitching the towel over my shoulder, I made my way out of the building and down the street.

#

I pushed aside the blue curtains as I stepped into the lobby.

“Ah, Yuto!” said Mr. Sasaki, waving from where he was sitting on a chair reading the newspaper.

“Evening,” I said.

“Guess how much she’s at now?” he said.

“How much?”

“Guess.”

“I dunno... two kilos?”

“Three!” he said excitedly. “Three whole kilos! Just weighed her last night.”

This lady of three kilos wasn’t Mr. Sasaki’s growing daughter, but his prized squash.

“Really?” I said. “That new formula must have worked.”

“I’ll say. It’s amazing what you can find on the Internet these days.”

Mr. Sasaki was the ancient owner of the bathhouse. He’d lived in the area long enough to see the others close down one by one, only to later lose his wife in his twilight years. The two had run the place for over forty years before her passing. They lived in a little room in the back—no children, just the two of them, and a garden behind the building where Mrs. Sasaki grew an assortment of radish and squash and other vegetables. Apparently her last words before giving up the spirit had been something along the lines of, “The squash... will need watering.” Imagine that. Eighty years on this earth and her last regret had been that her squash might not be getting enough water.

In any case, Mr. Sasaki took these words to heart like divine commandment, and he began looking after his wife’s beloved garden in her absence. He soon discovered he had something of a green thumb, and the vegetables he grew sprang up at two times their normal size. They’re for Mrs. Sasaki, he once told me. What this meant I could only imagine. Perhaps when the things reached full maturity he carted them over to her grave, where the unfortunate deceased was given her fill of squash and leafy produce.

Mr. Sasaki handed me the key to a locker. Thanking him, I was just about to head down the corridor to the changing area when the man’s voice called me back.

“You two have a fight or something?”

“Sorry?” I said, walking back to the lobby.

“You and Shiori,” said Mr. Sasaki with a gum-filled smile. “I don’t mean to pry. It’s just you two always come here together.”

I froze, searching the old man’s face for some trace of a joke.

“Me and... Shiori?” I said slowly.

“It’s all right. It’s normal for people your age to have a little fight now and then. Boy, I could tell you stories about Mrs. Sasaki—there’s a firecracker for you. One time she made me spend the night on the doorstep of my own apartment! And all because I’d said that Michiko had good hips, can you believe it? Michiko was Mrs. Sasaki’s co-worker at the library. What a figure, that one, you can’t blame a man for—”

I only dimly registered Mr. Sasaki’s words as he carried on about the big-hipped Michiko. The incident from earlier in the day was suddenly recalled to the front of my mind from where I’d stowed it away.

“You say we always come here together?” I interrupted.

“A-ah, yes,” said Mr. Sasaki. “Why, you two were in here just yesterday, weren’t you? I remember because I had a nice conversation with Shiori about how she’s taking classes at the art school. Bright girl. I’d hold on to her if I were you.”

If it had been anyone but that old widower, I might have demanded an explanation for this cruel joke. But there was something so utterly, pathetically guileless about the man’s face that I couldn’t help but believe him. He actually thought that Shiori and I were together. Perhaps he’d finally gone around the bend. But what about the girl from earlier?

I thanked Mr. Sasaki and walked down toward the changing area in a high state of nerves. Even the calming fumes of the bath failed to wholly clear my mind of the confused and restless fancies that were beginning to take shape.

#

I had known Shiori since my second year of junior high. Though we sat next to each other in the same homeroom, it wasn’t until Yusuke, a mutual friend of ours,

introduced us that we became friends. She was a tall, spindly girl with a very pale face that made the tiny mole above her lip look like a spot of stray ink on a blank canvas. She had, as I've said, an utterly captivating voice, though I'm unsure whether the other students appreciated its charm to the same degree that I did. Indeed, looking at her from as detached a viewpoint as a love-struck youth could manage, I recognized that she was not, perhaps, a beauty. Some might have thought her jaw too square and her forehead too broad. Some might have said it changed from above-average to thoroughly mediocre when turned up at a certain angle. But when I heard that voice, the infinitely alluring intonation of someone recovering from a bad head cold, her jaw became quaintly chiseled, her forehead full of character.

Yusuke, Shiori, and I ate lunch around the same desk, and when the three of us went on to the same secondary school, we would often see each other after hours at the film club.

Yusuke and I had been friends for some time before I met Shiori. Both of us shared a deep and probably not wholly unpretentious passion for classic film (and later, for Shiori), a passion that manifested itself in weekend marathons of everything from Ozu to Lumet to the French New Wave, until none of our friends could escape mention of the latest action thriller without incurring a knowing smile of smug superiority from the two of us. How ridiculous we were in those days.

For all our snobbery, I often felt as if Yusuke and I had been born into separate classes of society. Though not particularly attractive by even the generous estimation of a friend—he had a peculiar habit of moistening his weak bottom lip with his tongue, like a salamander testing the air—he seemed to carry the sort of weight in important social

circles of which I could only dream. Nothing baffled me more than his popularity with our female classmates. Did they recognize his value as a social mover? Could it be that he possessed some quality that rendered him irresistible to women? I never heard anything to confirm my suspicions that his friendships with members of the opposite sex were anything more than that, but they nonetheless became a deep source of jealousy. No doubt a large part of it was what I eventually came to perceive as competition for Shiori's affections. Yet I expect that even without Shiori's entry into the scene, my confusion at Yusuke's popularity would ultimately have turned to jealousy all the same; my condition would have seen to it.

I first became aware of my condition in my ninth year. Consultation with a slew of doctors failed to discover either a cause or even a means of mitigation. Don't worry, they all said. It's not life threatening. Thus my condition became my twin joined at the hip, sharing a heart and major organs. If I turned, so did it turn with me. If I walked, so did it trudge on behind me, a weight on my footsteps. Moments of happiness became tinged by its presence. Moments of sadness exacerbated by the same. But jealously—yes, as jealously as if it were a secret lover did I guard it, and if there was shame, it was known only to the two of us.

My envy of Yusuke's standing thus had a deeper cause than he might have guessed—did he guess? I wondered for many years. In any case, those feelings that had once been but an innocent shadow came to full and hideous life the moment I began to doubt Yusuke's intentions toward Shiori. Though they had always carried on what at first seemed to be a contentious relationship, with the one teasing the other mercilessly at every chance, I was too naïve in the beginning to see what any schoolyard observer could

have spotted. Indeed, I took their incessant bickering to be the surest deterrent against their developing any romantic feelings for each other. However, by the time we entered secondary, I had begun to ask myself whether the opposite wasn't true. I recall one incident in particular.

Tuesday and Thursday afternoons were always reserved for Film Club. Though the club leader usually began the semester with a rousing speech about the "cultivation of the filmmaking spirit" and "pushing the boundaries of the screen," most of the old members knew that this would translate into sitting around watching movies on a couple of crowded couches. The exception to this routine was the yearly film project, which involved a bunch of amateur filmmakers trying to "push the boundaries" through the unconventional use of cheap microphones, shaky camera handling, and long shots of birds and rocks. The final products were almost uniformly terrible, but it was in the midst of all this foolery that Yusuke, Shiori, and I spent some of the happiest days of our youth.

Yusuke's teasing of Shiori continued uninterrupted all throughout our time in the club. What began as offhanded ribbing often devolved into what I perceived as meanness, and had anyone less strong-willed than Shiori borne the brunt of it, I expect there might have been tears on several occasions. Even as I remonstrated with Yusuke for his caustic remarks, a part of me rejoiced at his every comment. While he persisted in his teasing of Shiori, I maintained an air of empathy and understanding that could only serve to underscore the contrast in our treatment of her. In this way I convinced myself that I was every day growing in Shiori's estimation.

One day near the end of the semester all the members of the club were in a frenzy making preparations for the screening of the yearly film project at the campus festival.

No one except the leader expected it to be a success, which is perhaps the reason that they went about the business of making flyers and posters with redoubled vigor. I was teamed with Yusuke and Shiori drawing up posters. While Yusuke and I scribbled away on one, Shiori was drawing quite deliberately on another. She had always had a gift for drawing, and as I looked over periodically I saw a spectacular picture of S Station taking shape on her paper (the station figured prominently in our film).

“Wow, pretty good, huh?” I murmured to Yusuke.

“Hm,” he said, his eyes flicking over in Shiori’s direction only for a second.

I knew we were both thinking the same thing as we looked down at our own poster. The words were badly misaligned, with *Film Club* looking like it was positioned on a downward slope.

“You think we should add some pictures or something?” I said.

“Yeah, I think we should.”

This was probably a bad idea, as our combined efforts resulted in a band of faceless stick men looking as if they’d been put on the page without a clear explanation of their purpose. Every now and then I caught Shiori looking over at our poster with a barely concealed smirk. Having no pretensions to artistic merit, I grinned back and gave a self-effacing shrug. However, Yusuke drew on, and as his stick men became more and more deformed, I felt a cloud begin to grow over him. At some point Shiori got up from the ground where she’d been working, dusted off her pants, and said she was going to the bathroom. Seizing our chance, Yusuke and I hurried over to survey her work.

I gave a low whistle as I stood before the poster. Depicted in its full artistic glory was a scene straight out of the film where the male lead says goodbye to the girl at the

train station. Shiori had even managed to capture the guy's thick eyebrows and the point of his chin.

"No joke," I said admiringly.

"Hm," said Yusuke again. He stood there staring at it for several minutes after I'd gone back to see if I could salvage anything on ours. At one point I thought I saw him crouch over Shiori's poster with a pen.

"What was that?" I said as he came back and sat next to me.

"What? Nothing," he said. "Listen, I'm heading out a little early. I need be home for dinner."

"All right. See you."

He walked away just as Shiori returned.

"Nice work," I said. "Nothing to do with this mess here."

Shiori laughed as she took in that very mess. However, as she turned back to her poster, I heard her give a gasp.

"What's up?" I said.

She was pointing at something on the face of the male lead.

"What?" I walked over to get a better look. The next second I understood what Yusuke had been doing. Drawn over the guy's lip was a thick, black moustache.

"He didn't..." I whispered.

"Yusuke?" said Shiori.

"I can't believe him." I felt the flame of righteous anger licking at my chest. Now, at last, he'd crossed the line.

“That’s Yusuke for you,” said Shiori, with a forced chuckle. I saw a moist glimmer in her eyes.

“No,” I said, pushing my advantage. “That’s low, that’s... Shiori, I would never do that.”

She merely shrugged and gave another laugh.

“I’d better head home,” she said, collecting her things from the ground. “Can you hand in my poster with yours?”

“Sure,” I said. “Shiori, listen, I would never—”

“See you tomorrow, Yuto.” She walked away, leaving me standing with two posters and a black moustache, scribbled in pen.

If I thought that Yusuke had crossed an invisible line between playful teasing and intentional meanness with his actions, I was mistaken. Shiori confronted him about it the next day, but she did so with a laugh as if Yusuke had pulled a good one on her, and by the end of the day the two were back at their jokes.

How long did I consider confessing to Shiori? There were times when the urge was so overwhelming that I might have dug a hole and yelled it into the ground. But then the next moment the usual doubts would set in: Could she favor Yusuke over me? Was their bickering a mask for mutual affection? And then, of course, there was the issue of my condition. In every scenario that I envisioned for the two of us my condition intruded like a stranger in a photograph.

The years of secondary came to a close. Yusuke and I had grown apart even before we went our separate ways. Though the fact of our often running in different circles might have ultimately caused our estrangement on its own, I recognized that I’d

made no great effort to maintain our acquaintance. Possibly sensing my growing coldness without understanding its root, Yusuke gradually cut off contact from his end, and by the time our graduation rolled around, we greeted each other with the awkwardness of people who have known each other intimately in some past life.

As I feared, estrangement from Yusuke led to my losing touch with Shiori. Perhaps the absence of the person who had linked us from the beginning was too strong for either of us to overcome on our own. I left school without a word of goodbye.

#

I returned to my apartment on the evening of the twelfth with my mind made up to drink a glass of beer and go to bed early. I was sometimes given to nervous, even neurotic episodes, of which there was no greater trigger than a disruption of my routine. Like an animal at the zoo who gets into the habit of pacing so many times before the glass, then cleaning himself for an hour, and finally taking his lunch at the appearance of the feeder, only to one day find that his designated human has neglected his duties, thus throwing off an entire day of predetermined motor activities, the appearance of the Shiori-like girl, Mr. Sasaki's mention of our being in a relationship, and last, the glaring error in Mr. Fujimori's corrections had all conspired to put me badly out of sorts. It was with a full determination to put these irritations behind me with a good night's sleep that I pulled open the door and entered.

While some might know their home by a particular ingredient stored in a kitchen cupboard, or by a combination of air freshening products and a mother's cuisine—in other words, things pleasant to the nose—I had come to know my apartment by the scent of something initially off-putting. Being one of the older establishments in the area, my

building still retained the original rush-covered flooring in each of the apartments. Whether all of these possessed the same peculiar odor as mine I cannot say, for mine was not the warm, straw and spice-like smell of good rush, but a sort of unpleasant must that sometimes made me think the previous owner had made a regular habit of lying there oozing person smell onto the floor. This smell was compounded by that of the low, futon-covered tabletop in the center of the room. It didn't take long for me to discover that this kotatsu carried its own olfactory history. The apartment manager had thrown it in for free with the rent, saying he'd gotten it from a friend who moved to Kanazawa the previous winter. I soon came to understand the real reason behind the man's generosity; apart from failing to warm my lower body in the slightest—the heating mechanism on the underside of the wooden frame seemed to be broken—the kotatsu left a curious smell of shrimp clinging to whichever piece of clothing had the misfortune to go under the blanket.

Unusual as these odors were, after only a few weeks of habitation they had come to signify home and safety; I knew them as well as an animal might know the scent of his urine in a corner of his cage. It therefore took me only a moment to recognize an unfamiliar intrusion upon the welcoming odor of my apartment. The moment that I stepped through the doorway and untied my shoelaces, my nostrils flared as they picked up two foreign scents. I couldn't place the second just yet—something flowery and fruity. The first I recognized instantly as the smell of pork cutlets.

Having never cooked pork cutlets myself, I was reasonably shocked at finding this smell wafting toward me. I pulled off my shoes and walked over to the kitchen, where I found—what else?—a couple of breaded pork cutlets sitting on the counter. I felt a chill as of a trickle of egg yolk down my spine. Had someone broken in and cooked

himself pork cutlets on my stove? But I didn't even have pork in my fridge to begin with. Tiptoeing out of the kitchen, I reached gingerly for the closed umbrella that stood propped against my dresser and brandished it before me as I began my inspection of the premises. I first searched every corner of the main room—behind the dresser, under the bed, under the kotatsu. This last one caused my heart to jump up into my esophagus as I lifted the cover over the tabletop, but all I found was the familiar smell of shrimp. Last I came to the bathroom, where I steeled myself outside the door before throwing it open and rushing in with a yell. The place was cold and deserted. Had the intruder left without enjoying his cooking?

I returned to the scene of the crime in the kitchen. It was only then that I noticed a piece of paper sticking out from under the plate upon which the cutlets had been placed. Pulling it out, I read

Hey. I made you some pork cutlets. Don't worry about me, I already ate. –Shiori

Immediately I threw the note down as if it had scorched my hand. Backing away slowly from the counter, I felt my back come in contact with the cold exterior of the refrigerator. Was I being haunted by the shadow of Shiori? Picking the note up gingerly from where it had fallen, I brought it over to my bed and was about to lie down when my nose caught the second of the foreign smells I'd noticed upon entering the apartment. What had been unclear before finding the note was now terrifyingly obvious. There had been a time when I knew that perfume like a mother's scent. How many times had I known her approach before she even came into view, the fruity fragrance wafting toward me like her personal herald? Even as I was taking in the implications of this scented

presence in my apartment, my gaze caught something on my pillow. On the right side nearest the wall was the small impression of a head.

#

I could never have foreseen the way in which our relationship unfolded after parting ways for the first time. By the time I entered college, I had already given up all hope of so much as the most passing of friendships with Shiori. I devoted myself to my studies with an almost spiteful fervor, rejoicing in the knowledge that I had spared her from ever coming to knowing the true and hideous nature of my condition. This knowing full well that we were separated by only a few miles; she was attending the nearby D University. Yusuke, meanwhile, went off to study economics in Tokyo.

I had gone about my lonely student life for three years when I received a message from Shiori. I spent almost twenty-four hours thinking feverishly over her every word.

Hey Yuto. You're at K, right? Want to meet up for coffee sometime?

No detective could have inspected these words with more care than I did. I deconstructed them for tone and punctuation, at first finding in them anger, then feigned indifference, then coquetry or casual concern. For all my analysis, my response consisted of only a few words.

Sure. When and where?

When: three days later. Where: the B Café overlooking the Kamo River. I was surprised to find a complete absence of embarrassment in the way she greeted me. Her message might have come after one of our nights at the film club, rather than on the tail end of a three-year estrangement. We each ordered a parfait: chocolate and banana for

me, green tea and peach for her. She whittled away at the green-dusted scoops of ice cream as she spoke happily about her time in college.

“I’m looking into the visual arts at the moment. I know what you’re going to say—there’s no money in that—but I’m going to make it work. By the way, do you remember the time Yusuke drew that moustache on my poster? I don’t know why, but I was thinking about it the other day.”

“Yeah,” I said through a mouthful of ice cream. “That was pretty awful of him.”

“He used to be so mean to me.” She said this with a breathy laugh that made my head spin. “Remember that time he locked me out of the club room? Oh, and that time he bought us all dinner at the ramen place on Kiyamachi?”

My eyes narrowed. I probed her laugh for some hint of affection toward Yusuke.

“But you were always nicer,” she said.

Suddenly the room seemed much brighter.

“You know, I was talking to him the other day. Yusuke, I mean.”

Darkness once more.

“Oh yeah?” I said, trying to keep my tone indifferent. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s good,” said Shiori. “Do you two even talk anymore?” She spared me having to answer as she went on about Yusuke’s hopes of joining one of the big companies in Tokyo after graduation. Apparently the two had kept in touch a good deal over the years, and as Shiori spoke I felt something raising its hackles inside me.

We agreed to meet again for coffee in a few days.

#

I reached with shaking fingers for the mark left on the pillow. The scent of her perfume filled my head, and as my fingers moved closer I almost expected them to brush against an invisible strand of hair. However, they met no obstacle until they came in contact with the pillow. It was still warm.

I paced before the bed for what seemed like hours that night. Occasionally I would glance back over at the bed as if expecting to see Shiori poking her head out sleepily from under the covers.

Mr. Sasaki. The girl by the house. Shiori. Pork cutlets.

Sure I had secretly wished. Certainly always regretted. But how could I regret, when I had been the instigator of our separation?

Pork cutlets. Shiori. The missing indent. Mr. Sasaki.

Was I projecting my hopes onto my environment, seeing what I desired to see? But those are the things of madness, of a world unfettered by natural laws. She was in Kobe. A rumor, perhaps, but—no, not in Kyoto. Not in my apartment.

At some point I must have given in to my mental and physical exhaustion, and falling into bed, I slept with the scent of a thousand gardens beside me.

I awoke the next day to what I first thought to be the usual cries of the bus station attendant outside my window. I was about to go back to sleep when I noticed my phone about to cast itself from my desk.

“Mnello?” I said groggily.

“Yuto?”

“Mom?”

“Yes. Yes, hi, how are you?”

“What—I—I’m—”

“You’re not just now waking up, are you? It’s already seven o’clock.”

“Seven?” I said. “Oh. I have another fifteen minutes.” Half asleep, I was about to dive back into my pillow when my mother’s voice came through the receiver once more.

“Yuto? Yuto, are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“Listen, I just wanted to catch you before you head off to work. Your father and I never got a chance to talk to you after you left on Saturday.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I hadn’t seen my parents for a couple of weeks.

“After you came to visit with Shiori.”

I shot up as if I’d been electrocuted.

“What?” I said. “Shiori? Me and her?”

“What? Yes, don’t shout. I can hear you just fine.”

“Sorry. I mean—what the—I visited you guys with Shiori?”

“What are you talking about? Of course you did. Are you still asleep or something?”

I slapped myself. Hard.

“What was that?” said my mother. “Yuto, what was that noise?”

“Reality...” I said absently.

“You need to drink some coffee before you head out. Anyway, both of us just wanted to say—yes, Hiroji, I’m telling him—yes, yes, from you too—we just wanted to say that Shiori’s a lovely girl, and we hope that you’re taking good care of her at that place of yours and—oh really, Hiroji—all right, fine, I’ll tell him—and your father says

you're an adult now and you can do whatever you want, but that a man always takes responsibility—”

“Responsibility?”

“Yes, look, I know you've already been together for a few months, so whatever goes on between the two of you is your own business, I'm just—”

“Mother!” The next second I was marveling at the ridiculousness of the situation. I was feeling embarrassed about a girl whom I hadn't seen for well on three years.

“Well anyway, I'll let you go now. Drink some coffee.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Did she say anything?”

“Who?”

“Shiori?”

“When?”

“When she was over at our place.”

“Really... were you not paying attention to your girlfriend at all?”

“Well did she?”

“She said your kotatsu smells like shrimp. Poor girl, living in a place like that.”

#

Shiori and I began meeting regularly after that first reunion at the café. She would call or send me messages at random hours of the day. *Hey, let's go biking. Do you know how long fish lasts in the fridge? Have you been to the Noh mask exhibit at the university? Yuto?* Though these often came at inconvenient times, I would always

respond with a casual answer in the affirmative to any invitation, and with a detailed answer to any question. In fact, the word casual might have best described our relationship at the time. Despite the fact that we were growing closer than we had ever been during our days in secondary, there was an air of almost affected lightheartedness about our meetings. Whereas I was naturally reserved due to a combination of shyness and insecurity born of my condition, Shiori's reserve took a different form altogether. Rather, it was that of a carefree spirit to whom emotional disclosure was a foreign and distasteful custom. To an observer we might have been not two old friends who met up for sundry activities, but two people of amenable dispositions who became friends over the course of an afternoon's acquaintance.

She had, however, an uncomfortable habit of bringing up Yusuke during our time together. The comments would often arise without any sort of preamble. Hopping across the Kamo River upon the backs of the turtle-shaped stones, she might turn around and say,

“Yusuke fell in once. Just there. It was the funniest thing.”

Stopping for tayaki at a street cart, she might say through a mouthful of the piping, fish-shaped dough,

“Yusuke tried to eat two of these at once one time.”

And wasn't it just the funniest thing?

I began to wonder if she was toying with my affections. Yet I could neither confess my feelings nor confront her about her flippant treatment of me. I knew that with my condition I had no right to expect anything more than what had already been given.

This torment went on for several months before we began dating.

#

Reality quickly began upon a downward spiral in the days following the phone call from my mother. I was confronted with the following impossible facts: Shiori and I were in a relationship; Shiori was nowhere to be seen; I was the only one who was oblivious to her presence.

I would come home from work every day to find the apartment smelling of a different cuisine. Pork cutlets became curry rice. Curry rice became handmade sushi. Handmade sushi became any number of other dishes. Though I initially avoided the cutlets out of fear that even a taste would somehow bind me to world of the supernatural, my curiosity eventually won over, and the shadow-Shiori's cuisine proved to be far superior to my usual scrambled eggs and frozen vegetables.

Her activity was not limited to the kitchen. Indeed, I found that Shiori and I had been carrying on quite a lively courtship for some time, though I heard all of it secondhand. My mother and father would often wax lyrical about her virtues, and they made no great effort at concealing their desire for our eventual marriage. For all my assurances of carrying on a lively social life, they had perhaps not been entirely oblivious to the deep loneliness of my existence. I wonder if they might have even guessed at the real cause of my separation from Shiori so many years ago.

Mr. Sasaki of the bathhouse made a habit of updating me on his latest conversations with Shiori. Through him and other sources I began to piece together a picture of her life. She was working toward a higher degree at the art school down in R. Nights were often spent in the dim light of the studio. While initially hesitant to condone the renewal of their daughter's relationship with one so flighty as myself, her parents

were slowly warming to the idea. They would be coming down to Kyoto in April and were hoping to meet my parents. Upon hearing this, I did what I could to prepare my parents for this meeting, warning them against revealing any embarrassing details of my youth. I waited in nervous anticipation until one day in early April, when I received a call from my father saying that Mr. Nakano, Shiori's father, was a delight and that he'd commented favorably upon me after Shiori and I left. I never met the man.

We weren't, of course, without our troubles. I found myself trying to guess at her emotions through the little information I gleaned from the words of others and the messages I sometimes received from her. The latter were often as mundane as *Should we stay in or eat out tonight?* or *Did you hear that Masako is getting married?* Then there were also those of the secret, playful kind one might expect between lovers.

I'm wearing that pair—the one with the red fringe.

Everyone's been asking me if something bit me on my neck...

In an attempt to somehow anchor all these hints of the girl I had once known as Shiori to some tangible object, I bought a collection of clothing such as she might have worn. This I placed on a chair in my apartment facing the door. With a long red sweater propped against the back (she had always loved the kind that came down almost to the knee) and a pair of jeans upon the seat with one leg crossed over the other, Shiori might have merely stepped out of her clothing for a moment in the act of surveying the room.

"I'm home," I would say to this charming figure as I came home after a long day at the office.

"Welcome home," she'd say, smiling at me from her chair.

“Omelets today?” I would say from the kitchen. “You know, I was thinking about omelets all the way home.”

“There’s some ketchup in the fridge.”

“I’ll just have mayo.”

“No, put ketchup.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

“Okay.”

And similar banter.

Of course I knew this was all a farce. There was no more life among the folds of the clothing than there was under the covers of my bed, where every night I would curl up next to that body-shaped impression. But it was only by this playacting that I was able to maintain a tenuous hold on my sanity. In a world that gave me every indication of my being in love, I had only to give form to this love’s object. Even so, my belief in the illusion sometimes wavered, and I began to yearn for some objective assessment of the strange universe into which I’d been thrown.

I decided to send a letter to Hajime Nonoguchi, an old friend and colleague of my father’s who had at one time taught philosophy at M University. Having never married—he was “married to truth,” he’d sometimes say, with a self-deprecatory chuckle that made his moustache come to life—he lived alone in a rural corner of Shiga, where his only company was his work and an impressive collection of foreign wines that he had begun collecting since a trip to Spain back in his younger years. Perhaps due to an understanding of the ease with which a combination of loneliness, cynicism, and

intellectual ennui might lead to an affair with the bottle, as well, I'm sure, from genuine feelings of affection and friendship, my parents would often invite him for afternoon tea. In fact, his face was such a familiar fixture around the house that he became something of an uncle, and in some ways more of a blood relation than either of my father's two brothers. In my third year of college, he moved away from that old house in Shiga to accept a post at S University in Yokohama. Since then, I'd only heard of him from time to time when I dropped by my parents' place.

The idea of sharing my misgivings about Shiori with my father or mother was unpleasant to say the least, especially considering their obvious enthusiasm about our relationship. Yet given the events of the past few months, I felt that unless I was able to confide in some pillar of truth and reason, those hints of insanity that I felt coming on like the first warnings of a cold would grow into a full-blown flu from which there would be no recovery.

At first I considered calling him. I dug up his number from among a mess of papers in a drawer and dialed. I realized suddenly that I had never spoken to him over the phone. What would I say? Small talk to begin, but after? I could think of no proper segue between the details of my mundane life and a discussion of the physical laws that govern our universe, and that had of late been thrown out the window. In the end I put my phone back in my pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper and pen. I had never been in the habit of writing letters and, like most members of my generation, considered it to be an outdated method of communication. Yet it seemed somehow a fitting medium in my predicament, for was it not through quill and ink that the philosophers of the West had

discussed the great questions of religion and the human condition? I nibbled on the end of the pen for a moment before beginning.

Dear Hajime,

How are you? It's been a long time since we spoke, hasn't it? My dad said you might be coming down to visit in the spring. I'd love a chance to catch up if you do. How's the university? Do you like your students? I don't know if my dad told you, but I'm working at a publishing house down in Shijo. The pay isn't great, but I like the work for the most part. Actually, we just published a couple of texts that might interest you. I'll bring them by if you ever come down to Kyoto.

I know this probably seems random, but I was actually hoping I could discuss a philosophical question with you. My friend and I got into something of a debate about it the other day over drinks, and I couldn't think of anyone better to consult than you. I don't know why I got so interested in the topic except that I think I might have been wondering about it for a while. Anyway, here's my question:

Do you think the universe is a self-correcting machine? Has it been programmed to bring about such and such results, and does it weed out those mistakes or "errors" that run contrary to them? Moreover, do you think any given event is either a correct or incorrect implementation of this code, and if such a thing as a "wrong" event exists, does the universe take steps to correct it?

I stopped writing at this point to read back over the last paragraph. Its meaning was unclear, even to myself. I continued.

Sorry, I don't think I'm making much sense. I guess what I'm trying to say is... Let's say that a man is "meant" to wake up one morning and eat breakfast. For some reason he oversleeps and doesn't have time to eat, so he leaves the house hungry. So to correct the

error, the universe rewrites itself to bring about the desired result—namely, the eating of the breakfast by this man.

I looked back at the paper once more. I felt like I was approaching some sort of truth, some essential thing that would vanish the moment it was put into words. I knew I hadn't explained myself clearly. For a moment I even considered telling him everything that had occurred since the twelfth. Instead I merely wrote,

Are certain things meant to be?

How cliché.

Cliché, right? If none of this makes any sense then don't worry about responding. It's just something I've been wondering about. Anyway, I hope you're well. Please come down and visit us soon.

Sincerely,

Yuto

#

To say that Shiori and I began dating would be to imply some degree of fanfare at the outset, or at the very least a declaration of intent. In truth, it was only in retrospect that we realized our eminently casual acquaintance had at some point adopted the more formal guise of romantic attachment. One day in the summer before my fourth year of college, we were walking back to the train station after meeting up for drinks with some friends. We were both slightly drunk—not to the point of stumbling, which might have been perilous as we walked along the moonlit Kamo River, but just enough so that any foolish comments could be chalked up the next day to alcohol's disregard for social graces. At least, I imagined this to be the case. When drinking with Shiori I often felt that I was the one who was descending into foolish intoxication, while she somehow rose to

new heights of perspicacity and beauty. As we cut silently through the thick soup of night, I occasionally turned to see her looking at me as if I were evincing an unexpected, though entertaining response in an experiment of her creation.

A wild tomcat was licking its frazzled fur amid the tall grass. We locked eyes for only a moment, in which I felt a kind of primitive male bond pass between us before the beast returned to its bath.

“I wonder what Yusuke’s up to right now...” said Shiori contemplatively.

She hadn’t mentioned him for several weeks. Her comment struck me then as the weapon of a calculating caprice. The almost after-fever cool of the summer night. The lilted waters of the Kamo River. Shiori walking beside me with the silent footfall of a river sprite come to amuse herself. All of these combined to form a sort of tunnel of the fantastic through which Shiori and I were walking, and I found that even the name of Yusuke in that space rang inside me with the force of sacrilege. Imbued perhaps with the reckless energy of saké or the tomcat’s primal hiss, I turned to Shiori and said,

“Why is it always Yusuke this, Yusuke that? The way you bring him up, it’s like...”

“Like what?” said Shiori, who looked quite as surprised as I was at my show of anger.

“Like... I mean, what’s with you talking about him around me, when you know... when I...”

“When you what?”

“Even I can only take so much.”

“What are you talking about? It’s not like you and I are dating.”

“Aren’t we?” I said, in a sudden suicidal charge.

Shiori had stopped walking and was surveying me with a curious expression. “Me and you?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Me and you dating?”

She said this with a sort of polite incredulity that nettled me even further.

“Yeah, so what?” I blustered. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” she repeated. She started back down the path.

I stared at her back in astonishment for several seconds before falling back in step. When I caught sight of her face, she was looking as if she was trying very hard to contain a laugh. Sure enough, after about five minutes in which I walked beside her stiff and soldier-like, my mind in a haze independent of the drinks I’d had earlier, Shiori burst out laughing. The next second she grabbed my hand, and we continued toward the station as if nothing had happened.

I won’t go into any detail about the bright months that followed. Even now I find that every happy moment bleeds into another, so that all the hours that we spent in each other’s company might have amounted to no more than a day. Suffice to say, our relationship unfolded for me with a sensation of complete unreality about it, as if I had stumbled into a storyline that had up to that point been only a suggestion. Those months we spent together presented a glimpse into an almost frightening possibility of the normalcy I had so desired since the onset of my condition. I pushed my secret to the back

of my mind. I didn't need to tell her. It would work out, somehow. The problem would solve itself.

Was I myself the cause of our doom? I wonder now if it wasn't my growing certainty of our eventual separation that brought the separation about. Then again, perhaps things would have ended regardless.

Looking back, my doubts may have begun as early as that first plate of scrambled eggs.

#

Only a few weeks into our relationship, I invited Shiori over to my place for dinner. She stood to one side of the stove as I placed a pan upon the flame and pulled out a couple of eggs.

"You know, the thing about eggs," I said, whisking them with some salt and pepper in a bowl.

"Hm?" said Shiori. She was licking thoughtfully at a spoonful of peanut butter that she'd gotten from my refrigerator, her hair done up in a high ponytail.

"I always set out with the intention of making omelets," I said. "I whisk the eggs and pour them into the pan. I wait for them to harden."

"Do you have any jam?"

"What? Oh, yeah—check the door of the fridge."

"I'm listening, go on," said Shiori as she located the jar of blueberry jam and twisted the lid.

"It's the flipping part that gets me," I said, now watching the mixture as it hissed and popped in the pan. "Whenever I try to flip the omelet it always breaks apart on me."

And once that happens, there's really nothing I can do except settle for scrambled. In probably five—no, more—seven years since I started cooking, I haven't once successfully made an omelet."

Sure enough, as I gave the pan a flip, trying to do so with as quick and assertive a motion as I could manage, half the semi-hardened mixture landed outside the pan. By the time I'd salvaged it, a long tear had formed down the middle of the circle.

"See?" I said, turning to Shiori. "You don't mind scrambled, do you?"

Though I expected her to laugh or throw out some sort of teasing jab about my cooking skills, she was staring at me almost thoughtfully with the spoon just resting on her bottom lip. A thin film of blue jam was oozing over the lump of peanut butter.

"What?" I said.

"Just thinking," she said slowly.

"About what?"

"I don't know, it's just... I don't think that I can be with someone who settles for scrambled."

I gaped at her. "Ha," I said finally, forcing a laugh. "Good one."

"I'm serious," she said. Indeed, she looked as serious as the time I'd made a deprecatory joke about one of her friends. "Don't you see what that means?"

"What what means?" I was feeling truly unsettled now. Forty-year marriages had disintegrated over less than a plate of eggs.

"Well, it means..." She seemed to be struggling to find the right words. "It's like... millions of years ago a woman might have chosen her mate by how much meat he brought home, or how big his arm muscles were. Well, we don't do that anymore—or

most of us don't—because that kind of stuff doesn't matter these days. A man's not more likely to survive or be extra fertile just because he has big arms, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So we have to look at the little things. How a guy dresses. Whether he irons his shirts or not. Whether he walks hunched or with his back straight."

"And?"

"And whether he settles for *scrambled*," she said, looking as if this was the logical conclusion of her thesis. Saying this, she grabbed a fork and scooped up a bit of the now-scrambled eggs in the pan. I waited for some sort of outburst as she brought it to her mouth—she seemed to be in a mercurial mood of the kind I had never seen before—but after taking several seconds to ruminate upon the eggs, her eyes fixed in concentration as if she was trying to decode a hidden message in the flavors she was savoring, she gave a little sigh through her nose and turned back to the peanut butter.

I didn't know what to make of this except to wonder not for the first time who this girl I knew as Shiori was.

#

Whether it was the Affair of the Egg that seeded my doubts or my condition began to claw jealously at my breast for my attention, I took to probing Shiori for hints of uncertainty. My skirmishes took the form of questions regarding some theoretical intrusion of the undesirable into my appearance.

"What would you do if I lost a leg?" I asked one day over lunch.

"What?" said Shiori, looking up from her plate.

"Just hypothetically. If I lost a leg, or an arm. What would you do?"

“What do you mean what would I do?”

“Would you be okay with that?”

“What on earth—”

“Actually, forget that. They make good prosthetics these days anyway. What would you do if I was disfigured?”

Shiori stared at me as if I’d gone insane.

“Are you trying to be funny?” she said.

“No, I’m serious. Like if my face got burned or something. Would you leave me?”

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“Well would you?” I pressed.

“Don’t be stupid.”

I also listened closely whenever she happened to point out some negative trait in a person’s appearance.

We were discussing two friends of ours who had recently begun dating when I brought up a young man named Kouki.

“What do you think of Kouki?” I said.

“Hm?” said Shiori.

“Well,” I said casually, “it’s just that a lot of girls seem to like him.” This was a shameless lie. The poor guy had been cursed with a pointed chin, high nose, and slightly sunken eyes that gave him a decidedly rodent-like appearance.

“Kouki?” said Shiori laughing. “He looks like a weasel.”

I pounced at her response.

“He can’t help how he was born,” I said. “And he’s a really nice guy.”

“I never said anything about his being nice or not,” said Shiori bristling. “I think he’s great.”

“But you also think he’s hideous,” I said, a sort of manic righteousness illuminating my face.

“Your words, not mine.”

We fell into an uncomfortable silence.

I think Shiori must have eventually begun to tire of my clandestine attacks. As I’ve said, she was, in general, a carefree type of spirit, the result of both a natural optimism and the advantages of a comfortable upbringing. It took much to rouse her to anger. However, I soon noticed an unexpected coldness beginning to creep into the cracks of our relationship. Our third year of college came to an end. Not long after the beginning of our final year, both of us grew occupied with endless interviews and job applications, and we often went several days without seeing each other. I became convinced that this estrangement was the result of Shiori finally discerning my condition. If she contacted me after a week’s separation, I imagined that she did so out of pity. Any feelings of tenderness she might have had toward me had changed to revulsion, and our acquaintance thereafter was merely her attempt at assuaging her guilt.

Almost at the moment that I came to this realization, I entered into a frenzied state of panic. What if Shiori decided to end the relationship? I knew that we were already doomed to fail—perhaps had known it since the moment my fingers twined themselves about hers; our coming to an end was not what troubled me most. No, the thing that was making my heart shudder was the thought that I might not be the one to sever ties. So

terrifying was the prospect of having another express disgust at my condition, a bastard child as yet unknown to anyone but myself, that I could very well have screamed at the thought of it. I had to preempt her revelation.

One week in January, we went without seeing each other for longer than we had ever before. Up until then, I had never been the instigator of renewed contact. Even if several days passed without my hearing from Shiori, I would wait for her to message me so as to not impose upon her gentle, pitying heart. A week went by. No word from Shiori. Two weeks. My chest began to alternate between a heady lightness and unbearable weight—the one from finally being free of the daily agony that had been the fear of Shiori’s rejection, the other from the still only half-imagined thought of what the future held. At two and a half weeks, I concluded that the relationship had finally fizzled to its death. And truly, with what ease! No cataclysmic event. No tearful exhortations. Only through time and mutual silence did our estrangement come about. So it had been with Yusuke. So with Shiori.

Then I received a message from her.

Want to get dinner?

I waited several days before replying, during which I attempted to distract myself by going out on my bike about the city. Though I turned off my phone so as to the deepen the impression of a final break between Shiori and me, I found myself returning to it with a compulsive energy every few hours, at which point I would tap my foot impatiently as I waited for the screen to come to life once more, expecting, now even past all hope, the appearance of some sort of dramatic declaration of love and loss. I endured in this way for some three days. On the third day since receiving Shiori’s message, as I was sitting at

the kotatsu trying to force myself to concentrate on a book I was reading, I suddenly lunged for the phone that I'd hidden under the covers of my bed. I pounded feverishly at the ON key like the worst of addicts, and the moment that the phone awoke, I found her Shiori's and hit reply.

Okay. Where do you want to meet?

A few minutes later, I received a response. A restaurant near M Street. I knew the location, though I had never been to the place itself.

For a moment I considered ignoring her. Surely then she would understand that things had come to an end. I hid my phone under the covers of my bed and tried to busy myself making dinner.

Oiling the pan, I stared at the stove for several minutes in a kind of stupor. While the oil was heating up, I grabbed two eggs and whisked them together with a fork, mixing in some salt and pepper. I placed a hand over the pan to test the heat. Good enough. The mixture slid into the pan with seductive ease. I waited with my hands propped on the counter as it hardened. When the yolk had ceased to run, I grabbed the pan firmly and prepared to flip it. One. Two. Three. Instead of flipping over entirely, about half of the circle overlapped the other. As I tried to correct my error with a fork, the circle tore down the middle.

I stared at the long, violent tear. The pan hissed. Time passed.

I turned off the flame and walked over to my bed, where I fished out my phone from under the covers. *Want to get dinner?* I hit reply.

Okay. Where do you want to meet?

Some minutes later, I received a response. A restaurant near M Street. I knew the location, though I had never been to the place itself.

#

The outer curtain of the restaurant—one of those Kyoto-style home cooking establishments—featured a hippopotamus stitched in white upon a blue background. Passing under the belly of the yawning beast, I entered. Shiori was seated at a table near the right wall, her head resting in one hand as she played with the saltshaker. She didn't notice me until one of the servers came to seat me.

“You came,” she said, smiling slightly as I sat across from her.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I thought you wouldn't.”

I said nothing.

We exchanged a few words about the progress of our job hunt. She was thinking about graduate school, though her parents wanted her to go straight into the workforce. I told her I'd been overwhelmed with applications and interviews. Our two-week estrangement thus explained away in trivialities, we ordered.

Shiori seemed determined to gloss over that distance that had formed between us in the past few weeks. She spoke cheerily of this and that, and if I failed to laugh at the appropriate points in her conversation, she changed to another topic with an almost trained rapidity. I found myself looking down at the two of us as if from a point just above the ceiling light. On one end of the table: a lowly creature slunk out of the depths

to presume upon a sprite's affections. On the other end: the sprite herself, her pale face illuminated not by the light but by an internal glow, her every word a gift and a mercy.

"Isn't that strange?" said Shiori.

"What?" I said, coming back to my corporeal body. The slight contraction of her brow and half-open mouth told me that she had just finished speaking on some topic and was waiting for a response.

"Yeah," I said. "Strange." I wasn't sure if this was in answer to her question or to the portrait hanging on the wall a few feet to her left. The figure staring out at me might have been the very girl from *Girl With a Pearl Earring* had her face not been replaced with that of a hippopotamus. The obviously female face with its marble-like eyes above a graceful snout seemed to be turned in the act of asking,

"Isn't that strange?"

Shiori was looking at me as if I had suddenly broken an unspoken rule of a game we were playing. For a moment I thought she was about to speak. Then the words were locked within her mouth once more with a quick inhalation. Some minutes later, we paid and exited the restaurant.

"Want to go for a walk?" she said.

"Sure."

We walked on in silence down the emptying streets, our hands nestled inside the pockets of our coats against the cold. I felt a great, nostalgic sadness in our every footfall, as if it was but an echo reaching me forty years hence. Glancing over at Shiori, I found I couldn't read anything in her expression. The corners of her mouth were slightly raised, though whether this was in response to the chill breeze that was pushing against our

bodies or to my continued, obdurate silence, or, in fact, the natural curve of her lips, a sort of default state of agreeableness that I would never possess, I did not know.

Lost in these musings, I had failed to take any notice of the direction of our stroll or even wonder at its ultimate destination. I suddenly found that Shiori had stopped outside the door of a nondescript building on one corner of the street. I only vaguely remembered the area as having a good bakery some blocks away.

“Want to go up?” said Shiori, her voice slightly strange after such lengthy silence.

“Where are we?” I said.

“Love hotel.”

A woman passed behind us holding her daughter by the hand.

“Daddy will be so happy when he sees your present.”

“Can I give it to him? Can I?”

“Of course.”

“What?” I whispered, after the two figures had moved several feet away.

“It’s a love hotel,” she repeated. There was a new kind of seriousness in her voice now, as if she was asking me to pay a last visit to a dying relative.

Every gear inside my brain was suddenly working at double speed. A love hotel? Now, of all times? Now, when I had expected her to turn to me at any moment and finalize our separation?

“Okay.”

The moment I’d said this, I lurched forward slightly as if bowled over by the force of my own voice. *Okay? What are you thinking?* Was Shiori’s capacity for pity so great that she would save me from my misery through her own bodily sacrifice? And yet at

hearing my response, I couldn't help but think I saw a stirring behind her eyes: not pity, nor the resignation of the martyr as she goes to the flame, but some other emotion entirely.

#

The room was dark except for a faint light from under the door to what I assumed was the bathroom. I just had time to make out a queen-sized bed in the center before Shiori closed the door behind us. In the time it took for my eyes to adjust to the heavier darkness, I felt Shiori press her body up against mine so that my back was to the wall. Her lips brushed by my own so close that individual atoms conversed. A faint smell of barley tea hung upon her warm breath as it drifted up into my nostrils. For a few seconds nothing happened. A few seconds so pregnant with potential they could birth a miracle at any moment. Then Shiori's lips closed about mine—between them. Until then, I had always imagined kissing as involving a complete envelopment of the lips, as if the lips of one could somehow close about those of the other with such a fullness as to draw in their possessor's very life force. In the dark, with the cavernous damp of Shiori's mouth about my lower lip, I realized one could only take a half of the other at a time.

I found that I was shaking slightly. I tried to think the thoughts of a stone as Shiori increased her pressure upon my mouth. She was arguing eloquently, making subtopics of her topics as she traced the gullies of my inner lip. Somewhere in a corner of my brain, an alarm was growing in intensity. I knew where the argument led from here. If I let it run its course, at any moment Shiori might stumble upon my condition in her explorations. I would be laid bare in a nakedness the likes of which surpassed that of uncovered skin.

I felt her slim fingers pulling up my shirt.

Suddenly my condition roared with a green flame inside my chest.

“No,” I said, the sound muffled against the barrier of her mouth.

“What?” she whispered.

“No, I—sorry, I can’t.” I took her hands and freed them from my shirt. Her mouth dislodged itself with the sound of a shower plug being pulled.

“Why not?” she said. The darkness was so absolute that I could judge the position of her upturned face only by the direction of her breath.

“Sorry, I just can’t,” I repeated.

She said nothing for several seconds.

“Is there someone else?” she said at last.

I’ve wondered for a long time what possessed me to say what I did. Jealousy, insecurity, a cynical outlook—all these I had in equal measure since an early age. But cruelty? Deceit? Sensing in the warmth of Shiori’s embrace the threat of discovery, did my condition introduce these traits in one last effort at the preservation of its secret name?

“Yeah,” I said. “There is.”

Silence.

“Who?”

“We haven’t—I didn’t cheat on you or anything like that,” I said, as if these words would lead me back over the bridge I’d already crossed. “It’s just... I’ve been thinking recently.”

“About?”

“I guess I’ve just been wondering whether you and I are really compatible.”

Silence again. I pressed on. Now I'd begun, I felt as if my words were flowing under the influence of some terrible muse of night, as loquacious in her counterarguments as Shiori's lips had been in theirs.

"You're a very bright person," I said. "Personality-wise. And I'm... well, you know how I am. It's like night and day, the way we are. And then a few weeks ago I met this girl—just a friend, I promise—and I couldn't help feeling like we understood each other in a way that... She's really into old movies, and our sense of humor is very similar."

At the same time I was speaking, I was marveling internally at these lies that were spilling from my mouth. I had never met such a girl.

"And I know this is sudden, and I probably should have told you before that I was having these doubts, but I suppose it's something I've been thinking about for a while."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" said Shiori quietly.

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

"I see."

We lingered there in the darkness, only a few inches of breath between us. To this day I can't imagine what the expression on her face must have been at that moment. Surely there were no tears. Was this not the very outcome she desired, even if she was too kind to say it outright? Yet as we stood there, I felt as if there was a sort of building up of momentum in the body across from me, whether to raise a hand in force against my cheek or shout an exhortation or to bring its lips against mine once more. Yes, even as I reached the depths of my villainy, this last hope still dared to burn with a weak flame.

“I see,” she said again. She turned and walked over to the door. My pupils contracting against the intrusion of the light from the hallway, I could barely make out the back of Shiori’s head as she shut the door behind her.

#

Time froze. The cogs of destiny ground to a halt as the storyline came to an end. Or more to the point, it continued on its happy way while I was written out of it. Since that night of our separation, Shiori and I had become characters in two parallel universes. In hers, she might go on with her life and career, maybe marry someday and have children. In my universe, there was no forward motion. Rather, I existed. No promise of future happiness presented itself to me. Go to work, bathe, brush my teeth, go to the supermarket, visit my parents. While the scrapbook of Shiori’s life might fill up with births and weddings and in-laws, mine became cluttered with the mundane milestones of existence, those chemical phenomena and biological processes that enable a man to breathe and eat and sleep.

Ever since that great rift in the fabric of nature that occurred three years ago, no amount of yearning or of scientific tampering could have brought our two universes together, for mine had curdled, hardened, floated to the top. I, the fat, and Shiori the milk. We would not mix again.

#

Four months after the (theoretical, implied, suggested) return of Shiori into my existence, I came home one night wishing nothing more than to enjoy a warm dinner and an early bed. It had been a particularly trying day at the office, topped off by something I had seen on the way home. To get to my apartment, I had to walk past a Nepalese

restaurant that had been a fixture in the neighborhood since the day I moved in. Though the food was far too spicy for my frail constitution, over the years I had developed a certain tenderness for this foreign establishment. Just outside the door of the restaurant there stood a wooden elephant—no doubt an appeal to man’s exotic sensibilities on the part of the owner.

I had long since made a habit of acknowledging this wooden idol with a little nod upon my return from work. Superstitious though it was, I developed in doing so the kind of rapport one might enjoy with an old gatekeeper. In this, like everything else, I relished the establishment of a routine, and in approximately three years I never once failed to greet the venerable elephant with my customary nod.

That day I passed by the restaurant with my head already in preparation to make its familiar downward motion when I stopped in my tracks. I blinked in the direction of the statue for several seconds.

Had it always been a monkey?

The longer I stared, the more I became convinced that it had not always been so. Was this the figure I had nodded to so amiably every day for three years? Surely there was something too forbidding in the monkey’s gaze, too rigid in the way he held his hands before him. I would no more have nodded toward him than a child would to one of those teachers with a reputation for discipline. But what could it have been instead? My head throbbed dully as I tried to think back to the day before, and then to all the days before that. It was like trying to recall a word that I had once known all too well—a terrible itch I could not scratch. And that was not the first time.

Ever since stumbling upon the mistake in Mr. Fujimori's manuscript several months back, I had begun to notice certain peculiarities in my everyday life that had a troubling effect on my nerves. The first of these were hardly worth mentioning. A slight change in a song that I had once known well. An irksome misalignment of things that should have been uniform and regular, like bricks in a wall or a tile pattern. Sometimes I would go to the supermarket and find that the name of an old brand of soap or shampoo had changed, often by just a letter or two. While a part of me was highly unsettled by these changes, another part couldn't help wondering whether these things hadn't always been so, and whether it wasn't, in fact, me who had somehow changed over the course of time. I developed an almost compulsive habit in response to these mundane aberrations. Every time my eye caught something that triggered a sense of wrongness in my mind, I would give my head a shake and walk quickly in the opposite direction.

Apart from attracting unwanted attention from the passersby, this habit proved troublesome in other ways. For example, one morning I rushed onto the train platform after a late start and was about to step into the car when I noticed that the electric signboard that should have read *The Next Station is Shijo* instead read something more like *Tie Shjo Nexis Stition*. I spent several minutes staring at the words trying to figure out what was wrong with them. Some fundamental sense of right and wrong inside me was telling me that there was an error in the spelling, and yet every attempt at discovering the precise nature of the error caused a blinding pain around my temple. In the end I was left watching as the train gathered speed and disappeared down the tunnel. I was forced to run back outside into the torrential rain and hail a cab, which set me back four thousand yen and resulted in my being late to work.

If I had hoped to find refuge from this barrage of misspellings and mistakes in the monotony of the office, I was wholly mistaken. Indeed, it was at the office that my faith in what had once seemed almost trivial in its solid correctness was most shaken. After that first error with the margin, I found several more in the manuscripts I received from Mr. Fujimori. At first these were still few and far between, no more than one or two per month—this from a man who had once purged typographical and grammatical transgressions with the zeal of an inquisitor. As time wore on, however, these began to increase at an alarming rate, until the job of correcting Mr. Fujimori’s corrections wholly overtook my other responsibilities. People began to whisper around the office. *Mr. Fujimori is getting on in age. Well, what can you expect, after such a career? He burned twice as bright for twice as long. But really, how can anyone get any work done with such ineptitude? Perhaps it’s time for him to enjoy retirement...*

#

“At least Shiori’s waiting for me,” I thought wearily as I turned the key to my apartment.

For the first time in many months, the smell that greeted me was not that of Shiori’s cooking, but the once familiar must of the old rush floor.

“Hello?” I said, removing my shoes at the door and peering in.

The room was cold and silent. I walked over to the kitchen expecting to find a dish of food waiting for me on the counter. Instead, I found a short note.

Staying late at the studio. You can cook for yourself?

I felt a stab of annoyance. The day seemed determined to put me thoroughly out of sorts. Shiori had never failed to leave me with dinner before. Of course, I knew her

schedule only from the occasional hints I gathered from her messages, but I found it odd that she would stay at the studio so late into the night. And what about the message? I gave a snort as I looked back at the note. Not *You can cook for yourself, right?* Not *Do you mind cooking for yourself tonight?* It was as if she didn't think me capable of cooking.

The next second I was filled with remorse. Was Shiori my wife, to wait on me hand and foot when I came home? Who was I to expect anything of her, when she had returned to me despite my condition? When I couldn't even show her the smallest token of appreciation?

My head began to ache once more as I pulled out a couple of eggs and oiled the pan. That was precisely the problem. I couldn't do anything for her.

#

Everything pointed to our being perfectly happy. For four months, I heard nothing to make me believe that any problems had arisen between us. Mr. Sasaki would often compliment me on the glow that Shiori seemed to exude every time we (apparently) dropped by the bathhouse.

"That's the glow of a happy woman," he whispered in his shaky voice, as if the woman in question was just out of earshot. "Mrs. Sasaki used to be the same way. Poor Mrs. Sasaki."

My apartment had begun to take on the appearance of being comfortably inhabited by a young couple. New curtains went up one day while I went to the supermarket. A pale blue toothbrush worked its way into the cup next to my red one. Periodically I would find women's clothes strewn across my bed, among them an

assortment of undergarments and long sweaters. The latter of these became part of the ever-changing outfit upon the chair, so that Shiori would have cut quite a fashionable figure in public.

But to all this I was no more than a passive observer. At times I attempted to define my presence in the relationship. One rainy Saturday morning I sent Shiori a message telling her to meet me at the Kamo River in twenty minutes. I packed a basket with an assortment of snacks I had bought at the nearby Seven-Eleven, folded a checkered towel under my arm, and picked out a particularly scenic spot under the cherry trees in full bloom. To the left and right there were the usual blue tarpaulins with groups of young people sipping beers and trading jokes. I felt as far removed from them as if I'd travelled from a distant galaxy.

Two hours passed before I was suddenly struck by the stupidity of my plan. Had I really expected to see Shiori walking up the path with the same smile of three years past? A smile that I had not seen once since the beginning of the anomaly that was our implied relationship? People had begun to stare at me with a mix of confused and pitying looks. Grabbing the unopened blanket and picnic basket, I walked back to the apartment.

As if to emphasize the pointlessness of my gesture, the next day I received this message from Shiori while I was out:

Do you remember the name of those little candies you got me yesterday? I'm trying to find them at the store.

It seemed that on the day I'd arranged for us to enjoy a picnic under the cherry trees, I had actually gone out and bought Shiori sweets.

On another occasion, I learned that we had spent the weekend in Ishinomaki after finding a bundle of souvenirs upon the kotatsu, in addition to a bill for an upscale hotel in the area. Apart from my annoyance at having to pay for a trip that I had only theoretically enjoyed, I found myself growing increasingly disquieted by a thought that had not fully occurred to me until then. Not only did my every gesture have no effect whatsoever on our relationship, but there was, in fact, another Yuto who was winning Shiori's favor.

It should have been obvious from the beginning. If Shiori was operating within the bounds of some unseen realm, leaving only small tokens of her existence upon the world like footprints in snow, what law was there to prevent there from being another Yuto to do the same? Once this idea entered my head, it came to consume almost my every waking hour. Since Shiori's return I had been so comfortably convinced that the reports of my interaction with her were, in fact, based in my own behavior. The lapses in my memory of these events I accounted as one of the conditions set down by whichever god had moved heaven and earth to reunite us. But now it became painfully apparent that the one enjoying Shiori's continued affection was not me, but some theory of me as elusive as Shiori herself.

I have said that I am of a naturally jealous disposition, made all the worse by my condition and its effect upon my personality. Confronted with the situation as I'd come to understand it, a man with a comparable capacity for envy might have been driven mad by the pain of it. He may have waged war against the phantom-Shiori, or, finding this impossible, against the phantom-self who had been Shiori's true object from the beginning. Who knows if he might not have been driven to some terrible end, perhaps seeing no other means of destroying his phantom than the destruction of his own body?

But for every degree that such a man would be driven to desperate action, I was driven to desperate inaction—not passive indifference, but a frenzy of destruction taking place within my breast. Though my condition never left me, for several months I had taken refuge in the illusion of its resting dormant and docile. Never again would I let it guide my hand to the preemptive stroke that had been the death of my relationship with Shiori all those years ago. In this assumption I proved wholly mistaken.

Did things begin to deteriorate on their own, as the experiment entered the early stages of failure? Or did this phantom Yuto sense the onset of catastrophe within me and redouble his efforts with our phantom woman? Several months passed in which the only sign of any trouble was the occasional absence of Shiori's cooking upon my arrival from work. Even this I could have overlooked in the absence of other signs. Since her first message telling me that she would be staying late at the art studio, these had steadily increased, and the pieces of school paperwork that I sometimes found around the apartment led me to believe that she was busy with her last year of education.

At first, I tried making the best of things. I would take whatever dish she had prepared and pull up a chair across from the one with her empty shell of clothing. In this position, I would give every appearance of enjoying a pleasant dinner with her, during which I took the opportunity to update her on various parts of my day.

“You know, I don't think Mr. Fujimori's well at all. I'm starting to think he's sick or something. What's that? No, I couldn't do that. I mean, sure, there've been more mistakes than usual, but the guy's been there so long... I couldn't say anything, not when he's looking so ill. This guy isn't a man, he's an institution.”

Or

“I was watching this show the other day about the physics of noodles. Hm? I dunno, Saturday, I think it was. Anyway, they were talking about the difference in the noodle-to-splash ratio between udon and ramen. I don’t remember the exact math, but it’s a big difference. That’s why I always make a mess with the udon.”

After only a few attempts at conversation, however, my voice would trail off into silence. I began imagining that inside the clothes there sat the actual body of Shiori, so lifelike that I sometimes apologized if a bit of stray food came flying out of my mouth as I spoke. Far from proving a reassurance, this implied presence seemed to be staring at me with the beautiful, yet terrible coldness of a queen. I took to looking down instinctively when I walked through the door so as to avoid the expression of disdain that I imagined to be etched upon her face. My usual “I’m home” was soon swallowed by the thick silence that had taken up residence in a corner of my apartment, and sometimes at night I even turned the chair away from my bed so as to dispel the impression that Shiori was looking down upon me in judgment as I slept.

Neither in the realm of sleep did I find comfort. Of course, I had never for a moment expected sexual fulfillment from my second time around with Shiori—or at least, not in any more than a secondhand way. Yet I might have at least found refuge in dreams, where the frustration that I kept carefully concealed during the day was sure to come bubbling up. For is not the meanest among us capable of the most astounding conquests under the cover of night, when imperfection is cast away like a second skin?

#

A man’s been eyeing the woman at the bar for almost twenty minutes. She sits alone, sipping on her drink while looking bored in the most attractive way. He knows he

has no chance with her, but he's feeling bold this night. For this night anything might happen. He's back five beers, and the mysteries of the universe are ready to be revealed to him. He approaches her from behind, leans casually against the counter, and sends his best pickup line flying like a winged prayer.

It takes a few seconds for the woman to turn. When she does, it's with an almost unconscious upward tilt of her right shoulder. That prayer he sent her way, she shrugs off. Literally sends it falling to the floor from where it's landed on her shoulder. Her eyes are contempt. Her very lips protest at being roused to a response.

"Yeah, in your dreams," she says.

In your dreams, you and I leave this bar together. In real life, no chance.

In my dreams, Shiori and I always left together. Sometimes we started off at a gathering of old high school friends, and then we ended up in a room alone. Sometimes we were just talking, being friends, and then we ended up in a room alone. The dreams didn't concern themselves with things like storyline. No rising action. No building the mood. We were suddenly in bed together with our clothes off, as if we'd fallen through the ceiling right into the climax of the story.

First we kissed, softly. Softness pervaded her, and she pervaded me. I, too, was softness. There was always something strangely chaste about the affair. No ravishing or ripping off of clothes. We weren't stars of an erotic film. This kissing and caressing had nothing of the consummation and everything of first meetings. We were just getting to know each other.

"What are your hobbies?" my lips asked.

"I like bad nineties movies. Is that strange?" her lips responded.

“Not at all.”

“Do you remember that time in first year when—” said her hand upon my back.

“Just like it was yesterday,” my hand said laughing.

We’d made our introductions, and her body asked, “Would you like to come up for a second?”

“You sure?” my body said.

“If you want.”

“Yeah.”

In my dreams, I never came up for a second. Or rather, I accepted. I followed her to the doorway. But just as I was about to pass the threshold, we decided to call the thing off. It was always for some silly, unknown reason. Probably something like,

“Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“Our friends are listening. Behind the door.”

At this point I would feel a sort of presence just out of sight, at the edge of the dream where the door might have been. Eyes straining, ears listening, every muscle of that being exerting its will against the union of my body with Shiori’s. Then an overwhelming sense of dread would come welling up inside me, and turning to Shiori, I’d say,

“You’re right. Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“Well. See you later then, Yuto.”

“Yeah. Later.”

Then I would wake.

#

Shiori and I continued in this fashion for some two years. The situation between us deteriorated to the point where I stowed her clothes away on the top shelf of the closet.

The smell of her perfume did not disappear. In fact, I sometimes imagined that I smelled a new scent mixed in with that of Shiori—something different entirely, with a sort of sweet earthiness that I couldn't place but surely guessed at. This would at times be accompanied by snatches of distant conversation. The voices seemed to laugh and tease, a husky female voice and the deeper tones of a male, always carrying on until I walked into the apartment. The moment that I turned the handle, the voices would cut off abruptly, as if I'd walked in on a private conversation.

I began to look around feverishly for a sign of these two speakers in my daily life. Just as I had seen the Shiori-like girl that day before the fairy house, I expected to be able to catch her in the act of fraternizing with this mysterious male. At first I became obsessed with the idea that Yusuke had come back to steal Shiori from me after all those years. Instead of pondering the landscape outside the train as had been my custom, I spent every morning and afternoon commute craning my neck above the sea of people for a glimpse of that familiar weak lower lip. Every young man of such description became a Yusuke, intruding on my happiness. Every young woman with a pale face and a slightly square jaw line became Shiori, moving further and further away from me for the second time. My vigilance arose not from any desire to somehow confront Shiori about this other male. Rather, I felt a twisted need to have my condition confirmed as the cause of our unhappiness by the plain sight of unfaithfulness. The only sweetness left to me would have been to have her look upon me as she would upon a spider in its death throes. First with disgust, then as the convulsions melted into a placid stillness, with the cold interest

of one surveying the grotesque. How greatly did I desire that coldness from her now so as to cultivate it in myself.

When all my efforts proved fruitless, I came back to the truth that I had always known but recently kept out of reach for reasons of self-preservation: this “other” was no Yusuke, but a Yuto. A Yuto different from myself, who even in the midst of my misery was growing fat on the fruit of happiness with Shiori, with my parents, with the world, all of which began to appear to me as if from across a chasm that was forming down my brain. Was he perhaps healthy and whole, a sort of Yuto recalled and cleansed of defects? Even as my everyday life was becoming increasingly disjointed—I was now beset at almost every waking hour by some mistake or omission in my surroundings, though I could no more describe the change than I could before—this other Yuto moved calmly and inexorably down the path I might have envisioned for myself.

Even at the very nadir of my unhappiness, the universe teased me with a newfound hope. I learned of our wedding through a collection of photos, congratulatory notes, and the white wedding gown that draped itself across my bed. This last covered the length of the mattress, with two buttons open at the neck. That night as I dreamt next to the perfumed cloth, I heard Shiori ask me if I wanted to come up. I followed her into the bedroom.

Since our ethereal wedding night, I felt a life begin to grow in my apartment, as if we’d seeded a new happiness amidst the misery of the past two years. For a time I imagined that the universe had finally accepted our relationship. Through various sources, I discovered that we were set to move into a home nearby, made possible largely through the generosity of Shiori’s father. I began packing my few possessions into boxes.

In the midst of these preparations, one day I came into work to find the office in a mild state of confusion. People were whispering to each other in tight circles, and when I approached one of the junior staff concerning the cause of the disturbance, he told me that Mr. Fujimori had been found slumped over his desk in the early hours of the morning by one of the cleaning staff. Apparently the man had stayed late to work on a manuscript and expired on the job.

Some weeks later, after Mr. Fujimori's flesh and bones had been reduced to a fine dust, I was handed the very manuscript that he had perished correcting. Upon inspection, it proved to be so dense with his notes that the original text was almost illegible. The notes themselves seemed to have been written in a sort of frenzy, and all my attempts at deciphering their meaning proved fruitless. Mr. Fujimori had evidently gone to his death in an editorial ecstasy.

#

The day for the move came. Until then, I had been wholly in the dark as to the location of our future home. I called my father under the pretense of confirming the address, which I took down on a sheet of paper. After loading about half of the boxes into my parents' car—it would take multiple trips to get everything moved—I stared sadly at the emptying apartment, a truer friend, perhaps, than I had ever known. How welcoming had been the smell of that rush floor since our first acquaintance! How familiar, like an old mutt barking hoarsely at his master's return.

I followed the address toward the edge of Shimogamo Temple. Even before nearing the street, I began to guess as to the real location of the house. Had I let Shiori in on the secret of the fairy house? It seemed that I had, for it was before the iron gate and

tree-lined border of that very house that I pulled up. This, more than anything, confirmed my hopes for the future. Opening the gate that I had until then considered as the doorway onto other-world, I felt my feet begin to carry me into the heart of destiny. Who knows if I did not even then expect to open the door of that house onto the figure of Shiori, fully formed and radiant, a matter-of-fact greeting on her lips as if nothing had ever come between us since that day by the river?

Just as my fingers found the door handle, I heard a murmur of voices. Were the previous owners still inside? I listened for several minutes without being able to make out anything in particular. I edged around the doorway toward a window from which the sounds were emanating. A man and woman. They seemed to be laughing and joking. As I inched closer, I felt a clammy tremor work its way up my spine. I had heard those voices—only a suggestion once, though now clear enough to belong to flesh and bone. The interior of the house was hidden from view only by a thin curtain, through which I discerned the shapes of the speakers. A young woman was embracing a man about the waist as she stared up into his face. The shadows were too indistinct to make out any features, but the next second I heard the man’s voice—my voice—say,

“I guess we should be happy now, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Shiori. “Guess so.”

“Let’s not hear any more about Yusuke.”

Shiori laughed.

“Do you remember the time—” she began, but then her words were silenced by the kiss of Yuto’s lips.

#

I ran back to the empty apartment as if by doing so I could outstrip even sight. The world seemed to be melting away like one of Dali's landscapes, buildings curling in on themselves as the sidewalk turned to a gray slog of quicksand. It was only once I had run back into my apartment that I found a haven of stability. No mother's embrace could have been more comforting in that moment than the oceanic underside of the kotatsu. I curled up under it, my cheek against the cold wooden surface of the tabletop. A lifetime passed in silence.

One day in the midst of this near-coma I dragged myself like a dying beached creature toward a box in the corner. I rummaged through it without any real desire or interest. I found a stack of bills and letters. I made a habit of keeping every bill that came in the mail for future reference or in case of a mistake in a transaction. As I was flipping through these perfunctorily, finding an odd degree of warmth in the sight of *To Iwada Yuto* written on the envelopes, I found one letter stuck between two others. It was unopened, dated several months back; I must have missed it as I went through the surrounding bills from the phone company.

From Nonoguchi Hajime

My brain took several seconds to remember the significance of this name. Once it did, I tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was written in a neat, though not fastidious script. I began reading.

Dear Yuto,

Thanks so much for your letter. I'm glad to hear that you and your parents are doing well.

I still keep in touch with Hirokazu every now and then, so I've been able to hear how you're doing.

Publishing, huh? It seems like you guys are doing better than most. Do you know, these days you can't even get the students to buy the real textbook anymore. They come in with those iPads or whatever you call them... I wonder if their children will even know the smell of an old book.

It's good to hear you're taking an interest in philosophy. Then again, you were always a quiet, thoughtful sort of person—which can make for either a terrific philosopher or a brooding alcoholic. Be careful with that. Anyway, as to your question:

It's interesting, isn't it, this question of whether the universe is run according to some sort of plan? Of course, the Christians and the Jews and Muslims will tell you the plan-maker is God, which I guess can be comforting in some situations as much as it can be terribly depressing. One could certainly think about it in terms of a computer, as you said, the computer being the universe and all creation being the result of chemical events as they are implemented by the computer's "code" (we'll leave out the question of who made the computer).

If one follows this analogy—and I should warn you at this point, I know next to nothing about computers—then one could ask whether such a program would share a computer code's susceptibility to error. Certainly humans have yet to create a perfect machine of any sort. I have some friends in the faculty of T who might be of more use to you on this topic. In any case, I think the really fascinating question in such a scenario would be what happens in the event of an error occurring in the code. Would the computer merely weed it out, or would the entire program be corrupted to such an extent that the only solution is to recreate the program (i.e. the universe) from scratch? Who knows? Maybe the universe has been reborn any number of times since I first sat down to write this letter.

Definitely an interesting question... now you've gotten me thinking on a Sunday afternoon, which I as a rule set aside as a no-thought day. Well, even if the universe is

being created and destroyed at any given moment, we obviously aren't aware of it, so I think we can rest easy on that point. But even so, you begin to wonder what might become of all those "wrong" universes—those timelines that have somehow become corrupted due to an error in the coding. Are they obliterated in the blink of an eye, so quickly that their human actors don't even notice the change? Or maybe they are only slowly phased out, their erroneous events continuing for years and years until some catastrophic event.

You know, I sometimes wonder if I didn't make a mistake in not marrying. I promised myself if I could just make it to forty as a single man, after that it would be easy. But who knows? Maybe certain things are, in fact, meant to be. Maybe the "correct" universe is one in which I marry at thirty and have three girls and two boys with some homely girl called Naoko. How sad to think I might be living out a faulty line of code!

There, now I've made myself gloomy, and that, most of all, is forbidden on a Sunday afternoon. I hope my musings have at least provided you with some insight into this question. If it's still troubling you, I can refer you to those friends I mentioned.

By the way, I heard that you and a certain Shiori are back together. I'm very happy for you, Yuto. Hirokazu seems to think you two are going to be married within the year. A father's optimism, maybe, but give it some thought, won't you? Anyway, you'll have to introduce me next time I'm in Kyoto. Take care of yourself.

Sincerely,

Nonoguchi Hajime

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I finished reading the letter. Through my window came the sound of two young men singing in drunk, off-key voices, cut off occasionally by the odd stumble. I realized

in a detached sort of way that somewhere laws of time and space might be unraveling at the edges, somewhere distant, as yet only the rumor of war. There were thoughts that would need to be addressed, questions asked, decisions made, but I—I moved toward the kitchen, where I lit the stove and grabbed two eggs from the refrigerator.

Oiling the pan, I stared at it for several minutes in a kind of stupor. While the oil was heating up, I grabbed the eggs and whisked them together with a fork, mixing in some salt and pepper. I placed a hand over the pan to test the heat. Good enough. The mixture slid into the pan with seductive ease. I waited with my hands propped on the counter as it hardened. When the yolk had ceased to run, I grabbed the pan firmly and prepared to flip it. One. Two. Three. Instead of flipping over entirely, about half of the circle overlapped the other. As I tried to correct my error with a fork, the circle tore down the middle.

I stared at the long, violent tear. The pan hissed. Time passed.

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