

Confidential

KADOKAWA / Light novel

Three Days of Happiness



Author: Sugaru Miaki

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Translated by Kevin Gifford

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1. A Decade-Long Promise

When I heard about this service that purchased the remaining years of your life, the first thing that came to mind was the social studies class I had to take in elementary school. We were ten years old, still not really capable of reasoning things out for ourselves, and our class teacher—a woman in her late twenties—put it like this:

“Kids, a human life can’t be replaced with anything. It’s the most valuable thing that you all have. But if you were to put a price on it, how much do you think it would cost?”

She then brought a hand to her head, as if pondering the question. Maybe she thought she wasn’t giving us enough information to work with. She stood there facing the blackboard for twenty seconds or so, back turned to the class, as her students all gave this question serious thought. Most of them liked their teacher—she was young, and pretty. They wanted to make her like them and heap praise upon them.

One of the smarter kids raised her hand. “I read in a book once,” she said, “that the average Japanese office worker makes between 200 and 300 million yen in his life, so I think it’d be about that for a normal person.”

Half of the class gave astonished looks at this. The other half looked like they couldn't be less interested. Either way, the majority of the students hated her. She was kind of the teacher's pet.

"That's a good point," the teacher said, nodding and giving the class kind of a wry smile. "I think if you asked most grown-ups that question, they'd tell you the same thing. And you could call that *one* of the right answers—your value is equal to how much money you earned in your life. But let's do away with that line of thinking for a moment. Like... Let me give you this example. It's a little hard to understand, but bear with me."

None of the students could tell what the teacher was drawing with blue chalk on the board. It looked kind of like a person, but for all they could tell, it may as well be a piece of chewing gum stuck to the sidewalk. This, however, was exactly what she wanted.

"Let's say this little blob here has all the money you could ever want. The blob wants to live out a full life, like a real human being. So it tries to use the money it has to purchase somebody else's life. One day, by coincidence, you walk past this blob on the street, and it asks you this question: 'Hey, would you like to sell to me whatever life you wind up living from this point forward?'"

She paused.

One of the more serious-minded students raised his hand. “If you sold it, what happens to you?”

“Oh, you would die, I imagine,” the teacher calmly replied. “So I’m pretty sure you’d turn down the blob’s offer on the spot. But that’s not enough to deter the blob. ‘Okay, let’s go with this,’ it says. ‘Could you just sell me thirty out of the sixty years left in your life? I’ve just got to have it.’”

Huh, I thought to myself at the time, head resting against a hand on my desk. *I see*. If *that* was the offer, I could see a few good reasons to consider it. Nobody can live forever, but if I had it my way, I’d take a short, eventful life over a long, boring one any day.

“Well, here’s the question. If this blob, this thing that looks up to human beings so much, decided to pay you by the year for whatever amount of life you’re willing to sell it. how much do you think the going rate would be? ...And let me be clear; there’s no right or wrong answer to this question. I’m just interested in knowing how you think about it and how you decide to answer it. I’ll give you all some time to talk this over with the people sitting next to you.”

The classroom began to buzz.

I didn’t join in any of the discussions—or, to be more accurate, I

couldn't. That's because I was an outcast in this class, just as much as that teacher's pet who brought up the concept of lifetime wages earlier.

So I waited for time to pass by, pretending not to care about the topic. I could hear the group in front of me say things like "If a whole life is around 300 million yen..." It just made me think that if *they're* worth 300 million, *my* life must be worth a good three billion or so.

I don't remember how their discussion turned out. It certainly didn't result in any meaningful conclusion—besides, it wasn't the kind of simple theme an elementary student could fully grasp. Even if you gave this topic to a high-school class, I doubt it'd result in any productive debate.

One thing I do remember pretty well is one of the girls, someone whom I always thought had a dark future ahead for her, insisting that "you can't put a price on a person's life." Certainly, I thought, if it was *her* life I had to live, I wasn't gonna put an offer in on that. In fact, I'd be asking for some money to take it over from her.

Meanwhile, the class clown—there's always one of them—had the same thought that I did. "But hey," he said, "even if I sold you guys the right to live a life exactly the same as mine, you wouldn't even pay 300 yen for that, wouldja?" It got him the laugh he wanted. I agreed with him,

but I could keenly feel that it was just a barefaced attempt at masochistic humor for yuks. He *definitely* thought he was worth more than all the sincere, honest people around him. I could tell.

The teacher mentioned there was “no right or wrong answer.” There was something that sure *seemed* like a correct response, though. That’s because ten years later, at the age of twenty, I really *did* sell the remainder of my life—and *that’s* how I found out just how much it was worth.

When I was young, I thought I’d become someone rich and powerful. Compared to the other kids in my class, I thought I was an extraordinary talent. Unfortunately for me, I grew up in a neighborhood full of dull, unattractive parents giving birth to unbelievably boring, hideous-looking children, and that only further contributed to the delusions I was placating myself with.

I looked down on all those kids. I wasn’t socially nimble or modest enough to hide my arrogance at all, and so my getting ostracized by the class happened pretty naturally. It wasn’t uncommon for groups to leave me alone, or for people to hide my personal belongings from me.

All my test scores were perfect, but I wasn’t alone on that count. It

was the same for Himeno, the “teacher’s pet” I was telling you about. Thanks to her, I couldn’t *truly* become number one at anything, and thanks to me, she couldn’t be, either. As a result, I guess you could say that we picked a fight with each other, at least on the surface. All we ever thought about was how we could one-up the other.

On the other hand, it was also true that we were the only real conversational partner each other had. She was the only one who took in what I said without getting it all wrong, and I’m sure it was the same the other way around, too. So, in the end, we were together pretty much all the time.

Her house was practically right in front of mine, so we had spent a lot of time together from a tender age. I suppose it’s fair to call her a “childhood friend.” Our parents got along well, and until we were grade-school age, I’d hang out at Himeno’s house if my parents were busy and vice-versa.

We only saw each other as competitors, but we also had a tacit agreement to act friendly with each other in front of our parents. We had no particular reason for this. It just seemed like the best thing for us all. Maybe we’d kick each other’s shins or pinch each other’s thighs under the table, but when our parents’ eyes were upon us, we acted like breezy,

affable childhood friends.

Then again, for all I know, maybe we really were.

Himeno was largely hated by the class, for the same reasons I was. She thought she was really smart, she looked down on kids around her, and she made so little effort to hide it that she became a pariah in the classroom.

The two houses we lived in were each near the top of a hill, pretty far away from our classmates. This worked well for us. We could use the distance as an excuse to justify staying in our houses instead of going to play with the rest of them. If things got too boring to endure, we'd visit each other's house and reluctantly play with each other, all but declaring with our facial expressions that we weren't here because we *wanted* to be.

During things like summer vacation and Christmas, we'd go out and kill time together to keep our parents from worrying too much. When they joined us on a play-date or came to school during a parents' day, we acted friendly with each other. I suppose we were trying to act like we wanted to spend all our time together, since it was easiest for us. I figured it was much better to have a childhood friend I hated instead of

trying to force myself into the cliques of the feeble-minded classmates around me.

That elementary school just depressed us. Oftentimes, the harassment Himeno and I had to deal with got to the point where a parent-teacher conference had to take place. That teacher, who handled grades four through six, was canny enough about these sorts of problems that she didn't contact my parents about it unless it got totally out of hand. If my mom and dad found out I was being bullied, after all, my social niche would be pretty well set in stone. My teacher realized—and she was right—that I needed at least one place in the world that'd let me forget about that bullying.

Either way, though, Himeno and I were always frustrated about our plights. The biggest problem, we felt, was that we couldn't laugh right. Whenever the whole class had a belly laugh about something, we couldn't figure out how to laugh together with them. We'd try to force our facial muscles through the motions, but it just felt like I was chipping away at something important inside me whenever I did. Himeno must have felt the same way. Whenever the atmosphere called for us to laugh in time with other people, we could barely even lift up an eyebrow. We just couldn't make it happen.

Everyone else in class picked on us for it—calling us haughty or snobbish. I imagine we really *were* stuck-up bastards. But that wasn't the only reason why we couldn't laugh too well alongside others. The real problem, at the root, was that Himeno and I were chronically *out of sync*, like a flower blooming at the wrong season.

It was the summer of my tenth year. Himeno and I were seated on the stone steps of a sunset-drenched shrine, her carrying a backpack that had been tossed in the trash dozens of times, me wearing shoes that someone had torn up a bit with a pair of scissors. We were waiting for something.

From our positions, we could look down on the site of the summer festival. The narrow road approaching the shrine was packed with stalls, two neat rows of red lanterns coursing down the dimly-lit temple grounds like the lights on an airport runway. Everyone passing by looked to be in happy spirits, and that was exactly why we couldn't walk down the road and join them.

We were both silent, because we knew that if we spoke, our voices would probably crack. So we shut them tight and patiently sat there.

Himeno and I were waiting for something. That “blob,” maybe. Something that would come up and validate our existences. Something that could make us accept all this. With the evening cicadas singing across the shrine, maybe we were praying to God up there by the shrine.

Just when the sun was about to disappear, Himeno suddenly stood up, brushed the dirt off her skirt, and looked straight ahead.

“When we grow up,” she said in the clear, piercing voice that only she had, “we’re gonna be rich and powerful.” She made it sound like this was settled truth.

“...When we grow up?” I countered. “How long will that be?”

“Not too soon, I don’t think, but not that far away, either. Probably around ten years.”

“Ten years,” I repeated. “We’ll be twenty by then.”

To us, at the age of ten, the idea of being twenty meant we’d be full-fledged adults. It made Himeno’s statement seem pleasantly real.

“Yeah,” she continued. “I think that *something’s* gonna happen in the summer. Ten summers from now, something good’s gonna happen to us, and then we’ll think, like, ‘I’m really glad we lived up to this point.’ We’ll be rich, and powerful, and we’ll look back at being in grade school and say ‘You know what? That school didn’t give anything back to us. It

was so full of stupid people, they couldn't even be a *bad* example for us to learn from. What a terrible place that was!"

"You're right. It really *is* full of stupid people. It really *is* terrible."

To myself at the time, this viewpoint was pretty novel. To a grade-schooler, your school means practically everything to you. It's hard for someone that age to think about what's right and wrong about it.

"So that's why we need to be rich and powerful in ten years. Rich and powerful enough to make our classmates so jealous, they'll all have a heart attack."

"Jealous enough to make 'em bite their tongues off," I agreed.

"Otherwise," she smiled, "none of this will be worth it."

I didn't see this as an attempt to console me. The moment I heard it from Himeno's lips, it really *did* feel like the honest truth in my mind. The words rang in my head like a prophecy. Yeah. There's no way we *can't* get rich and powerful. Ten years from now, we're gonna get back at all of them. We'll make them regret using and abusing us so much, they'll just want to die.

"Still, though, twenty's gonna be pretty neat, huh?" Himeno put both hands behind her head as she took in the sunset. "Just ten years from now."

“We’ll be able to drink,” I commented. “We’ll be allowed to smoke. We can get married—oh, wait, I think we can do that before then.”

“Right. Girls can get married at sixteen.”

“And boys at eighteen, right? Something tells me I’m never gonna get married, though.”

“Why not?”

“There’s too many things I hate. I just hate everything that’s happening in the world. No way I can keep going like that.”

“Oh. In that case, me too, maybe.”

Himeno turned her head downward. Her face, bathed in the colors of the sun, looked like a completely different person. She seemed more mature to me—and, maybe, more vulnerable.

“Look, so...”

Before she could continue, she and I looked into each other’s eyes for a moment. We immediately averted them.

“When we’re twenty, and we’re really powerful...and if, by some coincidence, we still haven’t found a marriage partner yet...”

She coughed quietly.

“If we’re still unsold goods by then, why don’t we get together?”

Whenever she suddenly changed the tone of her voice, it meant she

was being shy about something. I could tell that, even back then.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I replied, as politely as I could.

“...It’s just a joke,” she said with a dismissive laugh. “Forget about it. I just thought I’d say it. No way *I’m* gonna stay single.”

I smiled at this. Great to hear, I guess. But—and I know it sounds incredibly silly—but even as Himeno and I grew further and further apart, I still kept remembering that promise. It made me firmly turn down any attractive girl who expressed a positive interest in me. Even in middle school; even in high school; even in college. I wanted to be sure that, whenever I saw her again, I could prove to her I was “unsold goods.”

It’s just the stupidest thing in the universe, I think. Ten years have passed since then. Looking back now, I can’t help but to think that I spent all my glory days back there.

2. Beginning of the End

On that day, I had apparently lost consciousness after bowing down deeply and saying “I apologize, sir ” for the nineteenth time, causing me to get dizzy and fall on my head.

I had an hourly job working for the waitstaff at a beer garden. I knew exactly what caused this. Work under the blazing sun without eating anything, and it'd happen to anyone. After I all but forced myself to go back to my apartment, I felt like someone was trying to push my eyes out of my skull from the inside, so I wound up visiting the hospital anyway.

Taking the taxi to the emergency room mainly served to further worsen my already-precarious financial situation. My boss also told me to take a few days off from work. I had to find yet more ways to cut expenses, but I had no idea what else I could do without. I couldn't recall the last time I had eaten some meat. I hadn't cut my hair in four months, and since that winter coat I purchased the year before last, I hadn't bought myself any new clothes. Since joining college, I hadn't gone out with anybody once.

I had reasons for not wanting to rely on my parents, so I had to find a way to make some more money. Getting rid of my CDs and books pained me. They were all used, purchased after a strict, exacting

selection process—but in my apartment, which had no computer or TV to speak of, they were the only things worth any cash.

So I decided to listen to all of my CDs one more time, at least, before saying goodbye. I put on my headphones, laid down on the tatami-mat floor, and pressed the play button. Flipping the switch on the blue-bladed fan I purchased at the thrift shop, I paused only to fill a cup with cold water from the kitchen and drink it on regular occasions.

This was the first day off I ever took from college classes, but I doubted anyone would care that I was gone. They might not even notice, for that matter. So, one after the other, I moved the CDs from the tower on my right to a new tower on my left.

It was summer, and I was twenty years old—and just like Paul Nizan wrote, I won't let anyone say those are the best years of your life.

Himeno's prediction—"ten summers from now, something good's gonna happen to us, and then we'll think, like, 'I'm really glad we lived up to this point'"—was wrong. On my side, at least, nothing "good" had happened, and it didn't look like it ever would. I thought about how she might be doing. Ever since she transferred to another school in the middle of fourth grade, I hadn't seen her once.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Still, maybe it's all for the better. It meant that she didn't have to see me go through middle school, high school, and finally college, becoming more and more of an average, boring person as time wore on.

On the other hand, maybe you can think about it like this: If my childhood friend had gone to the same middle school as me, maybe none of this would have happened. When I was with her, I was always tensed up, in a good way. Whenever I acted pathetic, she would laugh at me; when I did something exceptional, she gritted her teeth at me. It was that kind of intensity that let me force myself up to the highest level possible, maybe.

I'd been regretting my past like this for several years now. What would my old self think if he saw me?

After spending three days listening to most of my CDs, I saved only a few really precious ones and put the rest in a paper bag. I already had another paper bag packed to the gills with books. Holding each with both hands, I went out to town. My ears began ringing. Maybe it was a side effect from the cacophony of cicada cries around me. It sounded like they were singing right in my ear canals.

I visited that used bookstore for the first time last summer, a few months after I started college. I didn't really know the neighborhood yet, so I was lost yet again on that day, having no idea where I was going for nearly an hour. I wound up finding the place at the top of some stairs leading out of an alley; I tried going there again several times afterward, but couldn't seem to find it for whatever reason. The name of it was long forgotten, so I couldn't look it up. I would always just kind of stumble across it whenever I got lost, as if the path leading there would appear or disappear on a whim. It was only going into this year that I could find the store when deliberately trying to.

There were some morning glories growing in front of the store. Checking out of habit for anything new in the "last chance" bookshelf out front, I went inside. The building was dim and filled with the scent of old paper. I could hear a radio playing from deeper inside.

Passing through an aisle so narrow that I had to crabwalk through it, I said hello to the shopkeeper. The old, wrinkly man peered out from between several piles of books, looking peeved. He was the owner of this place, and no matter who it was, he never smiled at anybody. He'd just sit there, head down and mumbling the cost of a book when you brought it to the counter.

Today, though, was different. When I told him I was here to sell some books, he actually looked up at me for a change, staring me in the eye. I could sense some surprise to his face, and I thought I understood why. All the books I was trying to sell had real value to me, no matter how many times I read them. Anyone who reads to a certain extent would question my sanity. Getting rid of all these is difficult for them to understand, I suppose.

“Are you moving houses?” he asked, his voice a lot clearer than usual.

“No, nothing like that.”

“So,” he said as he looked down at the stack in front of him, “why are you doing this? It’s such a waste.”

“Because books don’t taste good. They don’t have a lot of nutrients.”

The old man appeared to understand the joke. “Out of cash, eh?” he said, lips curling upward. I nodded, and he fell silent, crossing his arms and pondering over something. Then, changing his mind, he sighed and said “Give me half an hour or so to evaluate these” before taking the books deeper into his office.

Stepping back outside, I looked at an old bulletin board on the edge of the road. There were posters advertising firefly festivals, astronomy

meetups, book clubs. On the other side of the fence was the smell of incense and tatami mats, the smell of trees and people living their lives. It brought back memories. I could hear windchimes from some faraway residence.

After the old man finished his evaluation and gave me about two-thirds the money I was expecting, he paused a moment.

“Say, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“You need money now, don’t you?”

“Um, it’s not exactly *just* a ‘now’ kind of thing,” I vaguely replied. The old man nodded, as if this convinced him of something.

“Well, I don’t care how much in poverty you are, or how you wound up that way. I’m just interested in asking you a single question.”

He clapped his hands once.

“You interested in selling your lifespan?”

The unfamiliar combination of words caused a delayed reaction.

“My lifespan?” I asked, making sure I heard him right.

“Yeah. Your lifespan. I’m not the buyer, but you can make a lot of money off of it, lemme tell ya.”

It didn’t seem like the intense heat was making me deaf or

anything. I thought it over a bit. The first conclusion I came to was that this old man was so scared of aging that it's melted his head like an ice cream cone.

"You might think I'm lying," he said, apparently sensing my apprehension, "and I wouldn't blame ya for it. I wouldn't blame ya if you think I'm going senile, either. But why don't you just play along with this senile old man and visit this place I'm gonna tell you about? Then you'll see if I'm telling the truth or not."

I listened, with a grain of salt. The story basically went like this: On the fourth floor of a building not far from here, there was a place that would purchase years off of your life. How much it paid for them depended on the individual person, varying quite a bit based on how fulfilling a life he or she was likely going to lead with those years.

"Now," he added, "I don't know you too well, but you don't look like that bad a guy to me, and you certainly have good taste in books. You could probably expect a fair bit of cash."

Just like that question in social-studies class, I wistfully recalled.

As the old man put it, this shop also purchased time and health from people, not just lifespan. "What's the difference between lifespan and time?" I asked. "I'm not sure how health is different from lifespan,

either.”

“I don’t know too many of the details myself. Never sold anything to ‘em myself, you see. Still, y’know how some people can be sick with all sorts of diseases and keep living for decades with ‘em, while some people are the perfect picture of health until they just keel over one day? That’s your difference between lifespan and health right there, I’d say. *Time*, though, I sure couldn’t tell ya.”

The old man provided a handwritten street map and phone number. I thanked him and left the bookstore. Still, though, a store that purchased people’s lifespans? I wouldn’t exactly be the only person to hear that and imagine it’s just the ravings of an old man who wants his youth back. He must be terrified of how close to death’s door he is, and this delusion is the only thing that keeps his hands clutched around his sanity.

I mean, what else could it be? If something’s too good to be true like that, it pretty much always is.

My thoughts about this, it turned out, were half right. It really *was* too good to be true. But I was also half wrong—there really *is* a store that purchases people’s lifespans.

After selling the books, I moved on to the neighborhood music store. The asphalt below me was baking as the sweat poured down my forehead. I was thirsty, but I didn't have enough "fun" money to spend on something from a vending machine. It'd have to wait until I was back home.

Unlike the bookstore, the music shop was well air-conditioned from the moment you stepped inside. The blast of cold air that greeted me when the automatic doors opened made me want to stretch out my body and take it all in. I took a deep breath as I let myself bask in it, down to the roots. There was a summery tune playing on the speakers, one that came out around the time I entered middle school.

Heading for the counter, I greeted the blond-haired clerk who always sat there and used my left hand to point at the bag of CDs in my right. He gave this a funny look, one which quickly grew dour, as if I had just betrayed him and everything he stood for. A face like—*man*, someone like *you* of all people, letting go of this many albums?

"What's the story with all this?" he asked. He was a thin man in his late twenties, eyes drooping downward, dressed in a rock band T-shirt and a pair of faded denim jeans. His fingers were always in motion, in a

sort of nervous tic.

“Well,” he said, “I got good news for you. I really shouldn’t be telling you this, but, like, I *really* dig the kind of music you like, so I’m just gonna tell you.”

That line’s straight from the textbook on how to rip people off, I thought.

“So it’s like this: There’s actually a store here in town that’ll buy your lifespan offa you.”

“My lifespan?” I fired back. It was the same thing all over again. I couldn’t help but parrot the word back at him.

“Yeah, your lifespan,” the clerk deadpanned.

Is this some fun new way to pick on the poor around here? Before I could figure out how to react, he kept on going. The gist of his story was basically identical to the bookseller’s, but apparently this blond dude actually sold some of his life off. I asked how much he got for it; he brushed it off with “ooh, ‘fraid I can’t tell you.”

He, too, gave me a hastily-drawn map and phone number. These were identical to what the old man provided. I perfunctorily thanked him and left. The moment I was back in the sun, I felt the hot, heavy air latch itself on to me again. *C’mon*, I thought at I stuck a few coins into a

nearby vending machine, *let me do this today, at least.*

After a few moments of thought, I went for an apple cider. I held the can in my hands, enjoying how cold it felt, before pulling the tab, waiting a moment, and drinking up. A unique soft-drink sweetness filled my mouth. It was the first carbonated drink I had enjoyed in a while, so my throat felt a little prickly with every gulp. Quickly, the can was drained to the last drop and tossed inside the garbage.

I took out the two different maps I kept in my pocket. It wouldn't be a far walk at all—off to that building, with the shop that bought people's lifespans, time, and health. It was so incredibly ridiculous. I rolled my eyes, wadded up the slips of paper, and tossed them aside as well.

But, in the end, I found myself standing in front of that building.

It was an old building, the outer walls so blackened with pollution that I couldn't imagine what color it originally was. I doubt the building itself even remembered. It was narrow from the front, as if the adjacent buildings had compacted it. The elevator didn't work, so I had to climb up four flights of stairs, trudging up each step as I sweated in the moldy-smelling air, illuminated only by a set of yellowed fluorescent lights.

It wasn't that I believed the story about exchanging years of my life for money. I was just thinking—maybe those two people were being deliberately obtuse with me. Maybe there was a part-time job they were obliquely introducing to me, one that paid a ton of cash but might have long-term effects on my health. That sort of thing.

The first door I saw upon reaching the fourth floor had nothing written on it. I was positive, however. This had to be the place. I spent five or so seconds staring at the doorknob, holding my breath. Then I bit the bullet and grasped it.

On the other side was spread out a wide, well-cleaned space, one hard to imagine from the building's exterior. That much wasn't enough to faze me. The middle of the chamber held an empty showcase; equally empty shelves lined the walls. Even that seemed natural enough to me—but from the average person's perspective, however, it must've have been an incredibly bizarre sight, like a jewelry store without any jewelry or an eyewear shop without any eyewear. A book-free bookshop. You get the idea.

Until I was spoken to, I didn't even notice there was someone right next to me.

“Hello.”

Turning toward the voice, I found a woman in business attire sitting there. She was looking at me through her slim-frame glasses, sizing me up. I was saved from having to ask what kind of place this was, because she spoke up first.

“What will it be? Time? Health? Or lifespan?”

This was all starting to tire my mind. But if they wanted to mess around with me, go ahead. Mess around all you want. “Lifespan,” I immediately replied. *Let’s just see where this all goes for now*, was my take on it. *Not that I have much else to lose.*

I had only the vaguest idea of how much my life was worth. Assuming I had sixty or so years to go, I figured I could ask for 600 million-ish yen. I wasn’t as confident about it as I was during that grade-school class, but I still thought I was worth higher than the average going rate. That meant ten million yen per year I felt like selling off to this place.

Even at this age, I still couldn’t abandon the idea that I, and I alone, was special. There was nothing in particular supporting this confidence of mine. I was just dragging along all the glories of my past. My reality betrayed no sign of changing for the better, and I averted my eyes to it, just telling myself that someday—*someday*—I’ll score a win so huge that

it'll let me write off every aspect of my meaningless life and start over.

The more I aged, the larger the scale of the successes I dreamed about. If someone's chased to the corner, they'll always place more and more hope on turning it all around in one shot. You couldn't blame them. No point going for a sacrifice bunt if you're down ten runs at the bottom of the ninth. No, the only way out of that is by swinging for the fences, even if you know that boosts the chance of a strikeout.

Somewhere along the line, I had even started fretting about the idea of eternity. The vast reaches of time, and my place in it. Once your mind starts thinking along those lines, I thought, the only way to save your sanity is to secure for yourself *eternal* success, the kind of golden legend that will stand the test of time.

Maybe, if I wanted to get my life back on track, I needed someone willing to fully repudiate me, from start to finish. I needed a situation where there was no escape, nothing to defend myself with, and I needed to be thoroughly destroyed.

Thinking along those lines, selling my lifespan seemed like the right choice. What better way would there be, after all, to not only repudiate my life up to now, but turn away from the *rest* of my life too?

Looking more closely, the woman in the business suit seemed young to me. In terms of looks, somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four sounded about right.

She said to give her approximately three hours to evaluate my offer. Her hands were already typing away at a computer keyboard in her hands. I had expected a lot of annoying paperwork, but I guess they didn't even care to know my name. Three hours, it seems, was all it would take to estimate the value of one irreplaceable human life. That estimate was strictly their business, of course, not the final review score for my entire life. But it *did* form a baseline.

Leaving the building, I wandered around, no particular destination in mind. The sky was starting to dim. My legs were tired. I was hungry. I wanted to chill out at some nearby restaurant, but I didn't have the financial security for that.

I was walking around an outdoor shopping mall when I spotted a pack of Seven Stars and a cheap 100-yen lighter sitting on a bench. I looked around, but didn't see anyone claiming them. So I sat down, nonchalantly put them in my pocket, then raced down a side alley, where I lit a cigarette up next to a pile of scrap wood and took a deep drag. It was my first smoke in ages, and it seared my throat from the first puff.

Putting it out with my shoe, I headed for the rail station. I was starting to get thirsty again. I sat down on a bench in front of the entrance and stared at the pigeons. A middle-aged woman seated on the opposite fence was feeding them. Her clothing was a little too “young” for someone her age. There was something furtive, almost frenetic about the way she tossed the food out; it filled me with foreboding. Looking at the pieces of white bread the birds were pecking away at stimulated my hunger. It made me hate myself. If I was starving any more than I was, I’d be right there with them, maybe.

...Hopefully, I thought, I get a good price.

Like I suppose a lot of people do in similar situations, I was starting to mentally lowball my worth as the seconds ticked on. I was picturing 600 million yen at first, but now I was trying to picture the worst-case scenario, so I wouldn’t be too disappointed at whatever they offered me. That lowered my prediction to around 300 million.

As a kid, I estimated it at more like three billion; maybe it was going way overboard to discount myself that much. But, if anything, I was still giving my value too much credit. I recalled Himeno’s piece of trivia, about how the average salaryman earns between 200 and 300 million in their lifetime. But when I first considered my value in grade

school, I had an ear turned toward my classmates—all these kids with dark futures ahead, I figured. *If it was her life I had to live, I wasn't gonna put an offer in on that. In fact, I'd be asking for some money to take it over from her.*

I had forgotten all about that.

Heading back to the shop early and nodding off a little on their sofa, I was woken up by the female employee calling me by name. My estimate was complete.

She definitely called me “Mr. Kusunoki.” I didn’t recall giving her my name at all, or showing her an ID. But they found out anyway, somehow. There really *was* something going on here. Something that went beyond common knowledge.

By the time I paid my second visit to this building, I was starting to think this whole fishy story—selling my lifespan—was actually worth believing in. This was due to many different reasons, tangled together into a single conclusion, but if you asked me about the most convincing factor, it’d have to be that woman. Maybe it’s weird to have an impression of someone like this on the first meeting. But...nothing this woman’s involved with could ever be a lie. That was how I really felt. It

wasn't a matter of logic, or right or wrong. Some people just had a natural aversion to doing things dishonestly. She kinda felt like one of them.

Of course, looking back, it just makes it all the more obvious how unreliable my instincts are. But let's get back to the evaluation.

When I heard the words "three hundred" from the woman, I suppose there must have been all kinds of hopes and expectations on my face, my psyche still unable to dispose of my own self-confidence. Reflexively, I thought the 300-million-yen figure I settled on as a kid was right on the money after all.

The woman, realizing this, gave me a somewhat awkward face, scratching her cheek with her index finger like she couldn't bring herself to give me the news. Her eyes turned toward a window on her computer screen. A few lightning-fast keystrokes, and soon she had a single page printed out and placed on the counter.

"These are the evaluation results. What do you think?"

At first, I thought the number "300,000" written on the sheet was the amount they were offering per year. If you lived eighty years, that amounted to 24 million yen. I repeated that figure in my mind. Twenty-four million. It drained the energy from my body. That's really

far too little, isn't it?

Here, at this point, I started to have my doubts once more. This might be some kind of hidden-camera reality show, or maybe a psychological experiment. That, or maybe it's just a mean-spirited prank. It was possible. But there was just no kidding myself. It was only my common sense that wanted me to leave. All of my other senses were telling me that *this woman is right*. And in crazy situations like these, it was part of my values to trust in my gut feelings over my common sense.

Apparently I'd need to accept that 24-million-yen figure. Even that required a lot of courage. But the woman just turned to me and gave me the cruel truth.

"Regarding the yearly rate, after careful analysis, we've decided to offer you the minimum purchase value of ten thousand yen. The evaluation stated that you have thirty years and three months left to live, so you'll be able to leave here with approximately three hundred thousand yen."

I laughed. Not because I took what she said as a joke, but because, from an impartial perspective, having this horrible truth thrown at my face was just too comical. My prediction was literally *orders of magnitude* off from the final appraisal sheet.

“Of course,” the woman said, as if trying to justify herself, “this does not reflect one’s value in every facet of their lives. It simply reflects the results of our evaluation, based on our unique standards.”

“I’d like to know more about these standards,” I said. She sighed and rolled her eyes. I couldn’t guess how many hundreds, how many thousands of times she had been asked that question.

“I’m afraid I don’t know the specifics myself. We have a separate advisory committee that handles the details behind each evaluation. However, I’m told that one’s value can vary heavily depending on how high they score in factors like happiness, goal fulfillment, and contributions. In other words, we use standards like how happy you’ll be, how happy you’ll make other people, how many dreams you fulfill, and how much you contribute to society. We evaluate these factors for the rest of your remaining life, then decide upon a suitable offer for you.”

The impartiality of it all made me wince all over again. If I was *just* unhappy or *just* couldn’t make others happy or *just* couldn’t make my dreams come true or *just* was a drag on a society—if I was deemed to be worthless in any one of those things—I could deal with that. But if I’m doomed to be unhappy, *and* make everyone around me unhappy, *and* let

my dreams go to waste, *and* disappoint the rest of society... I wasn't sure how I was supposed to recover from that.

That, and thirty years left to live? As a twenty-year-old, that seemed kind of short. Did I contract some kind of fatal disease? Was I in an accident?

"Why do I have so few years?" I asked, figuring I'd give it the old college try.

"I apologize," said the woman, bowing her head a little. "Any further information, I am only allowed to provide to customers willing to sell time, health, or lifespan to us."

I thought about this, eyebrows pointed downward.

"Can I have some time to consider this?"

"Certainly," she said, but the tone of her voice told me to make up my goddamn mind already.

In the end, I left just three months for myself and opted to sell off the remaining thirty years. The roulette wheel of part-time jobs I was taking, combined with my experience at the bookstore and music store earlier, meant I no longer had any opposition to selling off the things and time on my hands for cheap.

The woman took out a contract and began to go over it with me, explaining every article of it in detail. I just nodded and said “okay” a lot, not really thinking. She asked if I had any questions. I said that I didn’t. I just wanted it to end, so I could get out of here.

“You may engage in business with us a total of three times,” she said. “That means that you may sell time, health, or lifespan to us a total of two more times.”

With that, I accepted an envelope containing 300,000 yen in cash and left the store.

I couldn’t even begin to guess how they collected on this. But it really felt like they did. I had just shortened my lifespan by over half. Something wrapped up deep in the core of my body now felt like it had been peeled off, ninety percent of the way. They say a chicken will sometimes run around like mad for a while even after its head is chopped off, and that’s kind of how it felt like. It was like you could call me a corpse already.

Once, I figured I’d probably see my eightieth birthday. Now that I knew my body wouldn’t see its twenty-first, there was an odd feeling of impatience welling inside of it. Each passing second took on new weight. Back when I was expecting to see eighty, I had the unconscious conceit

going in my mind that, hell, why worry about things? I still have sixty years to go. But three months? The concept immediately made me fret. I had to *do* something!

I had to, but for now, I just wanted to go home and sleep. All this walking around had exhausted me. I could think about the future once I slept all I wanted and woke up nice and refreshed.

On the way back, I ran across a guy who kind of freaked me out. He appeared to be in his early twenties, and he was walking alone down sidewalk, grinning from ear to ear like life was just so incredibly ecstatic for him. It pissed me off so much.

I stopped by the liquor store back at the mall and picked up four cans of beer, followed by five yakitori skewers at a street stall I chanced by. I got to work on both as I walked on. Three months to live. No point watching my budget any longer. It was also the first alcohol I had tried in a while. It calmed me, which I suppose might not have been such a good thing, and I got flat-out drunk in the blink of an eye. It wound up making me puke not even half an hour after I made it back home.

So began the last three months of my life. It was probably about the worst possible way to cross the starting line.

3. Observer Against the Wall

I already felt sick, but the heat of the night made it hard to sleep. It also allowed me to have an incredibly vivid dream, right up to the end. Even awake, I sat in my futon for a while, chewing over it. It wasn't a bad dream. If anything, it was a happy one. But some of the happiest dreams

are also the cruelest.

The dream featured me, in my high-school years, at a park. No park I was familiar with. There I found some classmates from my elementary school; I guess the dream had them holding a reunion out in the park.

They were all having fun, holding fireworks in their hands. The sparks they let out turned the clouds of smoke red around them. I was standing outside of the park, looking at them.

How's it going in high school? asked Himeno, who had appeared next to me out of nowhere. I tried sneaking a look out the corner of my eye, but she was all fuzzy. She was ten the last time I saw her, so I guess my imagination couldn't quite conjure up her appearance. But myself in the dream thought her face was beautiful, right down to my heart. I was proud to be an old acquaintance of hers.

I can't say I'm enjoying it, I said, being honest with her. *But it's not terrible.*

Yeah, nodded Himeno, *it's pretty much the same with me.*

Internally, I was secretly happy that her youth had been as miserable as mine.

And you know, she said, *it makes me think. I'm starting to think*

we had a lot of fun, back then.

Back when? I shot back.

Instead of answering, she crouched down and looked up at me.

Kusunoki, are you still unsold goods?

Yeah, I replied, eyes trained upon her facial expression as I gauged her reaction.

Oh, she said, a half-amazed smile on her face. *I guess I am, too.*

Then, giving me a bashful look, she added: *I'm glad, though. So far, so good.*

Yep, I agreed. *So far, so good.*

That kind of dream.

It wasn't the kind you wanted to experience at the age of twenty.

What a childish dream, I thought, chiding myself over it. But here I was, trying my hardest to remember every detail. It'd be too much of a loss to forget.

I definitely didn't like Himeno's company very much when I was ten. I had only the tiniest bit of interest in her. The problem is, I couldn't will myself to demonstrate even *that* much interest in anyone I met afterward. Maybe that tiny bit was the most I'll ever be able to drum up in my life—but by the time I realized it, she was already long, long gone.

After making sure I had every detail of Himeno's dream embedded in my brain, I thought over yesterday's events, still lying in my futon. I had sold out my lifespan up there, in that dingy building; everything except three months. It didn't seem like a passing daydream or anything. Everything about it was reality, coursing through my veins.

It's not like I had any regrets about selling most of my life on a whim. It wasn't one of those "you never know how much you'll miss it until it's gone" type of things. If anything, it felt like a heavy weight was lifted from my shoulders, to my great relief. The one thing that had kept me going in life was the shallow expectation that maybe, just maybe, something nice will happen someday. Even with the total lack of proof I had for that conviction, disposing with it was something I found profoundly difficult. No matter how worthless you are, there's never any guarantee that you *won't* be blessed with happiness someday, life's equivalent of a do-over. It was my salvation, but it was also a trap. That's why being able to lie down and declare to myself "*nothing* good will happen going forward" was a godsend, if you looked at it the right way.

Now I can die in peace. And if that's how it'll go, I at least wanted to have some fun with my remaining three months. At the end of it all, I

wanted to say to myself “Sure, it was a dull and dreary life, but at least the final three months were pretty decent!”

I had just decided to head to the bookstore, read some magazines, and figure out what I should do from here on in when the doorbell rang. I wasn’t planning on any visitors. I didn’t have any in several years, and I wasn’t expecting a flood in the next three months. Either mistaken identity, a bill collector, or a salesman. Either way, I didn’t like it.

The bell rang again. I left the futon and stood up—and when I did, I was greeted with the same intense nausea that I faced last night. A hangover. I somehow fended it off as I walked to the front door and opened it, only to find some woman standing there, a wheeled suitcase by her side.

“...Um, you are?” I asked.

She rewarded me with a dubious look as she reluctantly took a pair of glasses out of her bag and put them on. She then looked at me again, as if the glasses would somehow give me the answer.

Then I realized it.

“You’re the girl who evaluated my life yesterday...”

“That’s right,” she said.

Her business attire had made such an impression upon my psyche

that being dressed in street clothes made her look completely different. She had a cotton blouse and an almost teal-colored dungaree skirt on. Her black hair was tied back yesterday so I didn't notice, but it went down to her shoulders, softly curling back toward her neck. Her eyes, through the glasses she just put on for me, had a sort of gloomy air to them, I thought. Turning my eyes to the legs extending out from her skirt, I noticed a large bandage on her right knee. The wound was deep enough that I could even see how it looked from the outside.

I had only a vague 18-24 range for her age when I first met her, but looking at her now, I had a much better idea. She was probably as old as I was—nineteen or twenty. But why is she here? My first guess was that she was informing me of a mistake in the evaluation results. They forgot to add a zero to the end of their quote, or they mixed up my results with someone else's, and now she was here to apologize. I couldn't help but let my expectations run wild for a moment.

The woman took her glasses off again, methodically putting them back in her case, then turned her emotionless eyes back at me.

“My name is Miyagi, and I'll be working as your observer starting today.”

She gave me a nod of greeting. An observer. I *totally* forgot. We *did*

talk a little about that. I thought over yesterday's conversation as I ran back to the toilet, finally succumbing to my nausea.

Once I left the bathroom, stomach newly emptied, I found Miyagi standing right by the door. Maybe this was work for her, but she should *really* show some more restraint. I brushed her off as I made a beeline for the sink, washing my face and gargling, then gulped down an entire glass of water in one swig and laid back down in my futon. I had a skull-splitting headache, and the heat and humidity were making it worse.

"As I explained to you yesterday," said Miyagi, who was now standing right by my side, "you have less than one year to live, so starting today, you have been assigned an observer. As a result..."

"Uh, can we talk about this later?" I replied, making sure the irritation was clear as day in my voice. "I'm not feeling too good right now."

"All right. Later, then."

With that, Miyagi wheeled her suitcase over to a corner of the room, then sat against the wall, hands on her knees. Then she just stared at me. I guess she was going to "observe" me as long as I stayed in here.

“You can pretend that I’m not here,” explained Miyagi from her corner. “Just go ahead and live your normal life. Not a care in the world.”

Her saying this did nothing to change the fact that a woman at most a year or so away from my age was watching me in my own room. No longer able to stand it, I gave a glance at Miyagi’s direction. It looked like she was writing something in a notebook—an observation record, maybe. Being visually prodded like this made me supremely uncomfortable. The half of my body visible from her vantage point felt like it was being cooked alive by her gaze.

We *did* discuss this observer stuff in detail yesterday. According to Miyagi, most people who sold their lifespan at that shop would fall into violent despair when they had less than a year left to go, leading to what she called “problematic behavior.” She didn’t expand on this, but I could picture it well enough. People follow the law because as long as you live, you rely on a sort of common trust about almost everything you do. If you know for a fact that your life’s almost over, that stops applying. You can’t take that trust with you.

In order to prevent people from going out of control and hurting others, they adopted this observer system to watch over customers. Everyone with under twelve months left had one; if the customer started

engaging in inappropriate behavior, the observer would immediately contact headquarters and have them burn out the rest of the subject's life, no matter how much was originally left. This girl sitting on the floor, legs in front of her, could snuff out my life with a single phone call.

However—and this was apparently something backed up by the statistics they collected—when it came down to several *days* to live, people generally lost interest in bothering anyone else. As a result, when the clock spun down to three days, the observer would leave, their business done. For those three days, at least, you'd be alone.

Reportedly I had fallen asleep for a while. When I woke up, the headache and nausea were gone. The clock was reading around seven in the evening. I don't think I could've spent the first day of my precious three months in any less constructive a way.

Miyagi was still there, watching me from the corner of the room. Trying my best not to think of her, I attempted to keep things going as normal. I washed my face with cold water, removed my bedclothes, put on a totally faded pair of blue jeans and a frayed T-shirt, and went out to buy some dinner. Miyagi, my observer, followed about five steps behind me.

The powerful western sun blinded me as I walked. The sunset was pretty yellow on that day, the cries of the evening cicadas audible from the far-off woods. A lone rail car slowly sputtered on, down the tracks next to the sidewalk.

I arrived at an “auto restaurant,” a former highway rest stop that offered a large number of vending machines to choose from. It was a low, wide building, trees growing from out back and hanging over the roof. From the signage to the roof to the outer walls, it’d be hard to find someplace where the colors *weren’t* all faded. Ten vending machines were lined up in a single row inside, a pair of narrow tables adorned with ashtrays and bottles of chili pepper in front of it. The music from an arcade cabinet in the corner, over ten years old, brightened up the otherwise deserted landscape a bit.

Approaching an automatic noodle machine, I tossed three hundred yen inside, having a smoke while I waited for it to cook. Miyagi sat at a barstool, watching a flickering fluorescent light on the ceiling. How was she gonna eat while she was observing me? She couldn’t go without food or drink forever—but something about her was fishy enough that I could almost believe she could. She was just so...mechanical. She didn’t seem human, sometimes.

After finishing off the blazing-hot, thin-tasting tempura soba, I bought a cup of coffee from the drinks machine and sipped at it. The sickly-sweet ice coffee felt utterly refreshing to my parched body.

I was here, enjoying the alleged “food” from this line of vending machines instead of enjoying the last three months of my life, because this was really the only place I knew. Up until now, I never really had the option of taking an extended trip out to some fancy restaurant. The past several years of poverty had all but robbed me of my powers of imagination.

Back at my apartment, I grabbed a ballpoint pen, opened up my memo pad, and decided to write out a list of things I wanted to tackle. It was easier at first to think up things I *didn't* want to do, but as my pen kept moving, my mind began to come up with stuff I definitely wanted to cover before I died.

THINGS TO DO BEFORE I DIE

- Don't go to college
- Don't work

- Don't put off my desires
- Eat tasty stuff
- Look at pretty stuff
- Write a will
- Meet up with Naruse and talk
- Meet up with Himeno, state my feelings

“...I don't think that's a good idea.”

Turning around, Miyagi—sitting in the corner a moment ago—was now right behind me, looking at the memo pad. She was pointing at “Meet up with Himeno, state my feelings.” Of *course* she was.

“Do observers have the right to peek at stuff like this and offer running commentary on it?” I asked.

Miyagi ignored the question. “Regarding Ms. Himeno,” she instead said, “following assorted circumstances, she became a mother at the age of seventeen. She dropped out of high school and got married at eighteen, but divorced a year later. Right now, at age twenty, she's raising her child at her parents' house. Two years from now, she's set to jump off a building and kill herself. The note she leaves is going to be one of the saddest things you've ever seen. I...will tell you that going to see her now will

result in nothing good. Besides, Ms. Himeno hardly even remembers you at this point—and that *includes* the promise you made at the age of ten.”

I had trouble finding my voice. It felt like the air had instantly thinned out within my lungs. “...You know that much about me?” I finally managed to gasp out, trying to hide my shock. “The way you’re talking... Do you know everything that’s going to happen in the future?”

Miyagi blinked at me two or three times. Then she shook her head.

“What I am aware of, Mr. Kusunoki, is what *may have happened* in your life and the lives of those around you. Most of that information is rather pointless at this point, however, because once you sold your lifespan, the future changed drastically for you. Even what I know is limited mainly to the most important things that *may* have happened.”

She slowly lifted up her right hand, eyes still on my memo pad, and ran her hair back behind her ear.

“Ms. Himeno was someone very important to you, wasn’t she? The synopsis of your life I read was filled with nothing but things about her, Mr. Kusunoki.”

“That’s all relative, isn’t it?” I attempted to counter. “It just means that everything else was just too unimportant to me.”

“Perhaps,” said Miyagi. “What I can say for now, though, is that

going to see Ms. Himeno right now would be a wasteful use of your time. All it will do is ruin your memories of her.”

“Thanks for the advice. You pretty well ruined them already.”

“I did save you some time, though, didn’t I?”

“Maybe. You sure it’s okay for you to tell people about the future, though? Just like that?”

Miyagi frowned at this. “Not to answer your question with another question, but why did you think it wouldn’t be okay?”

Putting it *that* way, I didn’t know. If I tried to use knowledge of the future to pull off some kind of heinous act, Miyagi would just have HQ snuff out my life anyway.

“Basically,” she continued, “it is our sincerest hope that you will live a peaceful and quiet rest of your life. That is why I am here to offer advice, and warnings, based on your future.”

I scratched my head. I wanted to say something back at her about this.

“Look... Maybe you said that just now because you wanted to keep me from getting hurt or disappointed. But don’t you see what you did? You robbed me of the *freedom* to get myself hurt or disappointed. Like, if I’m gonna be hurt anyway, why would I want to hear that *indirectly* from

your mouth, rather than *directly* from Himeno's? Because if that's how I feel, then you're just meddling with my freedom."

Miyagi gave me a heavy sigh. "Do you think? I certainly did not say that with bad intentions in mind...but if that's how you feel, perhaps I was a little rash. I apologize."

She readily bowed her head to me.

"...But, allow me to say this. It would be better for you not to expect a great deal of fairness, or consistency, to the things slated to happen to you. You have sold the remainder of your life. What that means is that you've chosen to jump off of this world—this absurd, irrational world, free of all logic or reason. Talking about your rights or freedoms at this point is mostly going to be a waste of time. You're the one who chose to take the plunge."

Then she returned to her corner and sat back against the wall.

"Of course, out of respect for your 'freedom to get hurt or disappointed,' I will attempt not to comment further on the other items written in your list. So please, go right ahead and do what you want, as long as it doesn't harm others. I won't stop you."

I don't need you to tell me that, I thought to myself. And I didn't let escape the fact that Miyagi looked a little saddened, somehow, to me. I

didn't, but I also didn't try to think too deeply about what that sadness meant.

(To be continued.)



KADOKAWA

Contact:

KADOKAWA CORPORATION

International Publishing Sales Section

(Ms.) Shiki SOMA

soma-sh@kadokawa.jp