

*Fragments*

by

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SAMPLE

I *need* to lose weight.

I'm already way into the danger zone, and I'm desperate. It's not the first time I've decided to lose weight. I've been through I don't know how many diets, but now I'm at my highest weight. I never dreamed I'd get this big.

For most of my life diets were the furthest thing from my mind. In school the boys would tease me for being so skinny—one of them nicknamed me Chicken Legs. I still remember his name: Genta Horiguchi. He got mad because someone else was calling him Shorty, yet he took it out on me. I didn't even say anything!

"Shorty" was your handiwork, Sano.

No need to be sorry—pretty girls can get away with anything, right? You were the mean one, but people were so scared of you that I got roped into it, just because I sat beside you.

No, no, I know you didn't mean anything by it. Thinking back on it now, kids never flinched when you glared at them, only when you smiled at them. That was much scarier. Petrifying someone with a smile—that's not something your garden-variety cute girl can do.

It took me a while to realize what you were. You and I were joined at the hip, and we had been for as long as I could remember. Doing the math in on our one-stoplight town and our little elementary school I figured that one girl out of every thirty just looked like you did. But I pedaled my bike twenty minutes each way to junior high, I rode a bus two hours to high school, I flew to Tokyo for college, and never have I met a single person as beautiful as you.

Of course there's no point in saying that to you now, Miss Japan.

I'd love to be called Chicken Legs now. My worst enemies could spit out ten thousand insults now, and Chicken Legs would never come up.

The human body is a mysterious thing. Maybe people thought I was so skinny then because we were poor farmers, but that had nothing to do with it.

Can you think of a job that requires more effort for less return than farming? Rarely does so much physical labor amount to so little. Especially if you're a kid who happens to be born into one of these homes and gets put to work with no pay.

And I mean not a cent. Kids are happy when their parents toss them some loose change, but we never got a thing. My grandma would always tell me not to live my life chasing money. She wouldn't let my parents handle it, either—she kept it all. So we weren't poor because we ran a farm, exactly. It's more like the money just never made it into our family.

It was really something. Some kind of abuse, I'm sure. What would you call that, Granny Abuse?

She'd demand my mother cook three square meals a day on the budget of less than 100,000 yen she gave my parents each month. We could have scraped by on our own rice and vegetables, but she'd get mad if we skimmed on the fish or meat, or if the selection wasn't wide enough. So our dining table was always covered with serving plates.

Back then I had no concept of daily caloric intake, but thinking back on it now, I think we must have had 2,000 kilocalories per person at every meal.

A kid can't eat that much, you know? But if I left anything on my plate, my grandma would yell something-or-another at me about life during wartime. Of course when she left food on her own plate, she'd just blame it on my mother's poor cooking—and she was fat anyway!

I don't know—maybe all that talk about keeping up our strength for farm labor and how bad things were during the war was a cover, and she was just self-conscious about being fat. My grandfather died when I was five; he was maybe a medium build. But my grandma? Fat.

Remember that time you came over to our house, and took one look at her, and said “she looks like a pig”? Well, just so you know, she was extra naggy that night.

Actually, now I remember—she could have just warned me not to play with rude kids like you, but she didn't. Instead, she complained about the way I held my chopsticks, and the sound the bathroom door made whenever I closed it, and the way I talked. It got all the way up to my mother. She complained about the way my mother raised me.

She was just jealous of us.

People always say that men are drawn to women who look like their mother, but my father had done the opposite. It was definitely a grass-is-greener situation. I don't know if he dated anyone before my mother, but his favorite actresses were all incredibly slim, as if he paid no attention to their bust or hips and just focused on a slim waist. My mother had gotten more muscular over time, but in her youth she had been a delicate beauty.

You know, I've seen my grandma cry in anger. Only once, when I was in preschool, and never before or since, so it's still clear in my mind. My grandpa had just bought my mom a sweater. Just a normal one, not fancy or expensive.

“You never buy me clothes,” my grandma had whined.

“You'd just complain about what I picked out and never wear it.”

I remember my mother looked uncomfortable as they argued back and forth. But my grandma was a woman, too. Even as a child I knew what that meant, but she was old, so I never imagined her wanting to dress up nicely or look pretty. It was impossible for me to imagine her hoping for a compliment, or wishing to be loved by a man.

I always thought the lavender knit hat she wore year round was just to keep her head warm, but as I think of it now I wonder whether she was just self-conscious about going bald.

Really, Sano? You get a *lot* of elderly patients here? Of course people want to stay beautiful even as they grow older, but going to a plastic surgery clinic is another level.

It's just—why do they do it? Don't people get plastic surgery because there's someone they like, or they want to get married? Or maybe they have a job that puts them in the public eye, or an audition coming up? I always imagined it was for people who find themselves having to compete based on their looks.

Skin treatment? That makes sense. But if they do it at your place ... isn't that a crazy amount of money? It's not like they can do something like that for 5,000 yen.

Oh, that's even more money than I thought it would be! Sano, is that really the price? I don't want to see you on the news getting arrested, you know.

Oh, so you have counselling sessions beforehand. And you discuss the price there, too. So it's OK?

I guess that means they're fine with the price, if they're paying all that money to have their spots removed and wrinkles stretched back out. But then what? What return do they get from it when they don't even have that much time left?

I'm sorry, you think I'm being mean. But it's nothing compared to some of the things you used to say, Sano! It's amazing to see how you've become an expert at playing the good girl now. I saw you on that show recently. What was it called? Late Night Debate? Boy, you're like a celebrity.

Isn't it silly to ban students from getting eyelid surgery when it helps them come to school every day with their heads held high? Why do education and beauty have to be so strictly detached? Both things enrich a person's spirit.

Don't I sound like you when I say that? You don't have the slightest hint of an accent. People must just assume you're a Tokyo girl.

You come up right away in online search results, and what's cool about you is that you don't try to hide who you are. So many small towns have merged into larger cities since then, but our hometown is still the same district it was back then. Our old-fashioned address is so complicated and long we can't tell which parts of it still need to be included. Can't fit all the lines into the address box when filling out forms.

Anyway—I'm getting way off topic here. So, the diet.

I'm not in any position to point fingers at the elderly, am I? I've got a husband and a kid, I work at home ... I don't have any opportunities to meet someone new. My delivery men aren't even anything to look at.

Nothing like the guys in the ads—it almost makes me wonder if those models even work at the company.

And my husband. I've gained at least 20 kilos since we've been married, and he doesn't even complain about it. He's always been more interested in anime girls anyway. When I hit 50 kilos and started panicking about it, all he said was, "What?"

I started at 42 kilos and reached 50. In that time I got pregnant. I even passed 50 at one point. Any normal person would notice if your partner gained eight kilos, right? They'd at least be supportive about you going on a diet. But if I try my best and manage to lose two or three, he just tilts his head, puzzled, and says I don't look any different. There's no use in trying.

I'd blown past 55 kilos, and not even my daughter said a thing. She's a first-year in junior high right now, as boney as I used to look. Eats like a horse, though. She'll polish off one of those five-piece family packs of chocolate-flavored croissants in the afternoon and then clean her plate at dinner before you can even scold her about ruining her appetite. Even asks for seconds. Then an hour after dinner she'll be back at it with a whole bag of potato chips.

She's in the badminton club at school. She says it's way more strenuous than people think. Maybe if you're playing in the Olympics, but I don't think she needs to down a pound of rice at a time for every single meal.

It's not like I hate cooking or anything, so whatever. And having all those plates lined up side-by-side on the dining table at least makes me feel like I'm used to eating the same amount as her. Ah, that's right, I was trying to get at something.

I don't remember the first time someone called me a skinny glutton. I was eating everything I could, since I'd get scolded if I left anything on my plate, and I guess my body just adapted to doing that after a while. I reached a point where I could finish my plate without feeling like I was about to burst.

My body didn't change a bit, though. I was as boney as ever.

So, you know my little sister? Yeah, Kie. Two years younger. You did the same thing to her—said she looked like a pig and made her cry. Naturally it was my mom, not my grandma, who warned you not to talk like that.

You remember your excuse? That you didn't mean anything bad by it, you just loved the *Three Little Pigs* book that your grandma had bought for your birthday and thought Kie looked like the cutest, littlest pig. You sneak! You even started crying, and my mom just got uncomfortable and took everything back.

How were you able to just barely cry like that? No ugly hiccupping, no runny nose, speaking perfectly clearly. The tears you get from that

section in the *Evening Times* where a viewer writes in about the time their dog came across an injured cat on the street and started taking care of it by licking it.

I always thought I'd be able to cry like that someday, but I was never able to pull that off—not in junior high, not in my twenties. I still can't, and I've hit 40.

It's not that I think you were faking it.

When I became an adult and made my way into society, I would cry a lot whenever someone gave me some gentle criticism. Not everything made me cry, though. If I saw a TV show about a cute animal or a little kid doing its best I wouldn't feel a thing. I was sure the hosts on the show were forcing themselves to tear up.

But I got married, and time passed, and one day I suddenly realized that I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried at all. I had to really dig back into my memories. It was like I'd toughened up. If my husband or mother-in-law got angry with me, or if someone said something mean to me, it just went in one ear and out the other. I started to feel like a passive listener, hearing some radio program in a foreign language.

And that was embarrassing, too. It made me sad to imagine my life would dry up like that as more and more as time passed. But when I had my child, my tear ducts opened up again.

I don't cry at all for myself any more, but when I saw *my* little kid doing her best... before I knew it the tears were rolling down my face.

I got teary-eyed when I saw her running in the sports day event at kindergarten, or singing in the school play. She didn't have to overcome a scary illness or a trying situation to make me proud.

But that doesn't last forever—just when they're small. When you come to expect things of your child, you just kind of stop crying.

I was worried that my eyes would dry back up after that, but once I turned 40, the tables turned. Things that had never moved me before—animals or other people's children—would give me that feeling at the back of my nose. All of a sudden I couldn't watch a baby calf standing up for the first time without a box of tissues in my lap.

What's going on, Sano? What kind of weird system is this—is my brain changing?

Yes, that's not your specialty, of course. You're a cosmetic surgeon, and that would be what, dermatology? You're right, I should get back on track. The diet! Sorry.

So where was I? Oh yeah, Kie.

The beanpole and her chubby little sister. Someone was fascinated at how different we were and guessed she must be the spoiled one, eating sweets all the time. Who was that again? Oh yeah, the man at the bike shop, when we went to get her training wheels taken off.

He got uncomfortable as soon he realized that remark was all it took

for her to turn bright red and start crying. My sister was always shy.

I remember he tried to cover for himself and add, "Hey, I like big girls!" But it was hard to buy that when his young, skinny wife had just brought us a couple of sodas.

I didn't say anything. It was too troublesome to try to sort that out.

The truth is that Kie was my grandma's favorite, but I was the one who ate all the time. Grandma never yelled at Kie for leaving food on her plate. When the neighborhood boys would tease Kie, and she came home crying, my grandma would tell her that round girls are more beautiful and popular. Her face looked just like Grandma's, too. That really sealed the deal.

None of that would have bothered me, except that I was always the scapegoat. I was accused of being too thin. I was the embarrassment. It was always my fault that people misunderstood our family. But what was I supposed to do about all that? It made me so upset; I'd go hide away in our house and cry.

As wide and varied as the world is, I still feel like I'm the only person on earth who ever got yelled at for *not* being fat.

Fad diets weren't as big then as they are now, but we had them. The grapefruit diet was all over TV, and every time my grandma saw it she would scoff and then turn to me and pester me to gain weight. It wasn't like I was dieting!

But you know? No matter how often I got scolded or ridiculed, not once did I actually find myself wanting to gain weight.

It was clear to me that weight did not make beauty. Sure, some people might think that way if they were overprotected and holed up in their house and never went outside. And maybe some other countries already think that way. But this is Japan, and rural Japan at that. You could be as holed up and brainwashed as you please, but the moment you set foot outside that house you'll realize how odd it is to think that way.

Plus, Grandma was the only one who really got mad at me for my weight. The other kids were just jealous.

Back in sixth grade I had to borrow a band uniform from school, you remember that? There were five smalls, ten mediums, and five larges for the girls. I got the first small, and then the other girls had to fight over whether they were a small or a medium. But even the small was too big on me! My mom had to attach an extra fastener around it to keep it tight. The other girls wanted to try it on for themselves, but none of them could get it to close.

Not even you, Sano!

"That'd be so nice," they'd say in dreamy voices, and ask me if I was eating right. Nobody questioned it when I replied that yes, I was.

After all, no one had ever seen me leave food on my tray at lunch. I didn't have to worry about my grandma at school, but by then I think I was

just taking after my mom.

You remember the volunteer group my mom joined when we were in elementary school—it was something about raising money for poor kids in other countries. They met at your house and made paper flowers or something—those little roses they'd craft into bouquets and give to people who donated.

My mom is really good with her hands, and she tends to get really absorbed in whatever she's doing, so she spent a lot of time at home making bouquets. Sometimes she made me help her, but the petals were too tricky for me, so I just wrapped green masking tape around the wires that would eventually become stems. Even though the part I was working on wasn't visible in the finished product, my mom would scold me like my grandma to make sure the tape was applied perfectly evenly, and I'd mutter under my breath.

It was around then that I came across the newspaper clipping.

It wasn't a paper that our family read regularly; it must have been published by the group my mom worked with. Some kind of activity report. I don't quite remember the contents, and my mom didn't ask me to read it. But the tiny photo in the report really popped out at me.

It was a picture of starving children dressed in white raggedy undies. I think it was somewhere in Cambodia. There was a boy—five years old, maybe? I couldn't actually tell how old he was, but somewhere around there. Anyway, he was nothing but skin and bones. You could see each and every rib through his skin. I was really skinny, sure, but it was nothing like this. But skinny as he was, his belly was still swollen.

My mom told me that's what happened when you consumed nothing but water, and that there were lots of kids suffering like that around the world. Grandma would always tell us awful stories from the war. But I never really retained anything anyone told me.

There was no ignoring the picture, though. That image was burned into my brain. Just seeing it was enough to cement my reaction to it, but you know what my mom did? She cut it out, pasted it onto a square of posterboard, and hung it up on my bedroom wall, right next to my favorite Thunder Boys poster.

I didn't have a lock on my door, and my room had the best window for hanging the futons out in the sun, so she was always going in and out of there when I wasn't home. Because I didn't have any real privacy, I had no way to secretly pull the picture down.

My mom was always my favorite, so I don't want to speak ill of her, and I don't think she was a bad parent or anything. But putting that picture there where I had to keep seeing it was borderline harassment! I don't know what kind, but harassment nonetheless.

Have you seen that picture, Sano? Didn't you know about those paper roses? I guess your house was pretty big. I think I remember them



all gathering in some separate room detached from the main house.

I'd hear all about your Wedgewood-brand strawberry-patterned tea set and Fortnum & Mason English tea while my mom dropped a tea bag into a mug we'd gotten for free somewhere and poured hot water over it. She'd tell me how the snacks were always homemade, and every once in a while she'd bring me back a raisin cookie wrapped in a little paper napkin decorated with pictures of roses. That was delicious.

You hate raisins, Sano? If you'd said so in front of my mom, she'd have dragged you to that picture of the little boy in my room and given you the sternest lecture.

Wait, my mom hates them, too? How'd you know that, did your mom tell you? Oh. So that's why she brought those cookies home.

I wonder why I never noticed. They always had scones and donuts and treats that I've only ever heard of.

I mean, I don't hate raisins, so it's fine. For better or worse, there's nothing I can't eat. Kie's the picky eater. Come to think of it, though, I never saw my mom lecture Kie about that. I guess you can't get away with as much when you're the older sister. Oh, you've got two older sisters, I remember. That explains why you can say such hurtful things so casually.

Hey, I'm not dissing you—I'm just jealous.

Anyway, that's how I lived my life: Skinny as a pole and eating constantly. Remember that girl who wasn't even all that fat, but still brought a little container for lunch with nothing in it but some fruit? She'd suck on a cherry pit and eye my two-layer bento, musing wistfully at the way I never gained weight after eating all that food.

I was used to people calling me skinny, but when she stared like that every day I felt criticized, somehow. It was different from the way my grandma criticized me. Sometimes I got really depressed at lunchtime.

I had my troubles, of course. We had those four clubs to choose from in junior high: tennis, volleyball, track and field, or guitar. I remember you were in tennis, Sano, because they nicknamed you Madame Butterfly after the top player in that old tennis comic. I bet we're the last generation to have nicknamed someone from that, huh?

There's another mom I meet up with who's three years younger than us. We got together for lunch the other day, just a casual thing, but she still showed up with her hair curled into these fancy ringlets. I said, "Who are you, Madame Butterfly?" and she gave me a blank look.

"Who? You mean Cio-Cio-san?"

This time I gave her the blank look. "Who?"

Either one of us could have seen either show in late-night reruns, so maybe it was a regional difference rather than an age difference.

Anyway, generation gaps aside, back to the clubs. I'm not good at ball sports or instruments, and I'm not at all athletic, so I ended up in the track and field club. Remember how surprised you were, Sano? "But you're

so slow!” you told me. The least you could have done is giggled while you said it, but that flat expression of yours hurt pretty bad.

I figured I might have some jumping ability, light as I was, so I tried out for the long jump first. Then the coach stuck me in long-distance running. It scared me—I have to run? Even though I’m this slow? I thought I’d have people lapping me.

But once I was on the track, it wasn’t too bad. In fact, every lap I took brought me closer to the girl in front of me, and by the time I passed her I didn’t even know what was going on. All I knew was that every time I passed another girl, she was panting like crazy and I was not.

No matter how much I ran, I didn’t get tired. I ran the 1,000 meter at the same speed I ran the 50 meter dash. It was all endurance. Whatever happened to all that food inside me, I had certainly stored a great deal of energy.

It was like an unexpected gift. But there was one problem: The more I practiced, the better my time got. This got the coach excited, so I’d practice more, and I’d end up losing weight. I lost a kilo a day in the two weeks leading up to the big tournament.

I felt fine physically, but the coach got worried about how I looked. By the time I hit 35 kilos my practices were canceled. Eating more wouldn’t have helped me gain weight quickly enough to matter. Practices got moved around so that I would never go below 38.

That was the first time I got mad about not being able to put on weight.

But still! You know what I’m talking about, Sano. Don’t forget—I was just talking about it a few minutes ago. That one lunch break.

That girl with nothing but fruit in her lunch box asked me really critically why I was so skinny, and I smiled and said, “I think that’s just the way I am.”

But what do you think she said to me after that?

“That’s just cruel. So you don’t even have to try?”

The way she stuck out her chin and glared at me just got me so mad. I said, “Hey, I *want* to gain weight. If you’ve got time to sit there sucking on a cherry pit you’ve got time to work out.”

Those were our rebel years, weren’t they? You were in a different class then, Sano. So hey, congrats to us on having two different classes per grade once we hit junior high. I was in B class, the popular one. Remember that homeroom teacher? That girl and I were just being snappy with each other, but someone went and told the teacher on us. When she asked us what we were fighting about, neither of us could bring ourselves to admit that we were talking about dieting.

We were embarrassed because the teacher needed it way more than either of us. The boys in class used to tease her by saying she was blocking the blackboard. She would yell back, “Hey!” and laugh it off because she

was that kind of woman, but thinking back on it now she must have still been in her late twenties then. It must have hurt to deal with that.

Or maybe not. The year we graduated, she married your homeroom teacher. The two of them looked good together, like they'd enjoy a nice date at a dessert buffet on their day off. Not everyone feels like their weight is a handicap, I guess.

It's good to be able to talk openly about being fat or skinny. I don't think that ever could have come up in the class you were in.

But Sano, I really do want to ask you about my body. How long does stamina from youth last? I exercised so much when I was a student, more than I needed, I guess.

I kept up with track and field in high school, and practiced even harder than I had before. The coach was just as skinny as I was and didn't see a problem when I lost weight. I felt like I'd finally found a kindred soul who understood how annoying it was for other people to worry about you just because you're thin, even though you're healthy.

I got down to 35 kilos again, even though I was 155 cm tall, but that seemed to be as low as I could get. When I went back to training normally, I'd hover around 40.

What club did you join in high school, Sano? I can't remember if there was an astronomy club. But you were much more into studying, right? In junior high you always said you wanted to be an actress, and everyone was so convinced it would come true that they'd already started asking for your autograph. But after our first summer break in high school you surprised us and declared you were going to be a doctor.

I thought you couldn't do it. Sure, our school was called a prep school, but we were still a public school in the boonies. It'd been five years since anyone at our school made it into med school, and that kid had been the local prodigy since the age of three with parents from Tokyo who were doctors. That whole family was only in town to help improve the local medical care system.

Sure, you were in the top ten in our class, but people still had their doubts. Even so, we were impressed. You were more than just a pretty face. It was a miracle that a town like ours could produce someone with your beauty and your brains.

Oops, I'm getting off track again. Or maybe not. When you got serious about your studies it permeated the rest of us. We were all able to focus on our own work, even if the high school itself was kind of lax. It's usually embarrassing at that age to admit you're going to work that hard, but for us it was a completely comfortable thing to say.

I think it's really important to be able to express your determination to do something. Sometimes that's what it takes to get that extra push of motivation.

That's what this diet declaration is for me.

Thanks to your attitude, Sano, I was able to go to college in Tokyo, too. Nothing like yours, obviously, but I was at least able to get a test result that probably exceeded my actual ability. And I'm really thankful to you for that. I wanted so badly to get away from my family.

Getting told to eat more in my house wasn't much different from being told to brush my teeth when I was a little girl. But my grandma was just so persistent about it. After I won the track tournament in high school and came home, she chastised me for running myself to a skeleton just to get some scrap of paper. She'd forgotten I had been thin before I started running.

When I was finally on my own, I joined the mountaineering club. I wanted to see things I hadn't been able to see back home, and I was confident I had the energy to do it. No one would yell at me to eat or use pictures to lecture me about wasting food. I could eat whenever, whatever, and however much I wanted. I was finally living the dream.

As a result, I ended up eating even more than I had back home. The mountaineering club was full of big appetites, as well as people like me who ate as much as they wanted and never gained weight. But I ate so much I surprised even them.

When we were up on the mountain, half of my backpack was filled with snacks. I'm not talking nuts or dried fruits or some other healthy workout snack. Sure, I had those on hand too, but most of it was junk food. Chocolates, potato chips ... I loved instant ramen, too. I used to crush it up in the bag and sprinkle the soup powder over the pieces.

I was up in the mountains every weekend, so as skinny as I was, I had quite a bit of muscle on me as well. My normal weight balanced out at 40 kilos, and by the time I descended the trail I weighed 42. One time I made it all the way to 44 by the time I reached the public bath at the foot of the mountain. I yelped when I saw what I looked like in the dressing room mirror.

I realized how much weight I'd gained.

That was the last time in my life I was really active. I saw a help wanted ad for a printing company at school, and I thought that would be perfect for keeping my weekends open to go climbing. But that wasn't the case at all. I was as busy as ever, and the only walking I ever did was to and from work and to and from lunch. Other than that I was propped in front of my computer all day.

I worked on instruction manuals. I'll bet you thought the manufacturers were the ones who made those, right? It surprised me, too.

What kind of TV do you have, Sano? Kingdom? Yeah, that makes sense—everyone does. I'll bet you didn't know I'm the one who wrote the instruction manual for it. We did most of the manuals for Taiyo Electronics, too, so I know a fair bit about home beauty appliances.

But reading a guide about massagers isn't going to get the knots out

of your muscles. Now you can search online for “text neck,” that’s how sitting in front of a computer all day has me hunched over. But I’ve been that way for ten years. My neck and shoulders are hard as a rock, and my blood flow stops around my thighs. All the joints that move when I stand up to put on a pot of coffee creak when I get up out of my chair. They don’t pop, they actually creak.

I’m like an old robot, just dug up out of the earth, that’s trying to move again for the first time. Maybe that’s a weird analogy, but my husband and daughter love anime. They’re always watching shows like that, and the underground robot always shows up in the first episode or the penultimate episode.

Sorry, sorry—anyway.

All I did at work was move my hands, but I’d get exhausted anyway, and I always crave sweets, so I’d eat a chocolate bar or a cookie to get some energy back. My big desk-drawer was filled to the brim with snacks. Everyone around me did the same work, and both the men and women were stiff as a board like me, so I often ended up sharing my snacks.

After a while everyone started bringing snacks of their own. The snacks would always reflect the person’s personality, like a spring-exclusive strawberry-flavored snack or something from a department store’s special event with a famous pâtissier. But whenever people brought snacks, they’d put them in *my* desk drawer.

I tried to tell them I wasn’t the office pantry, and to keep their snacks to themselves. But you know what they said?

“I’ll get fat if I keep it by me.”

I gave them a dubious look. If they were to eat at the same time I do, they said, then even if they couldn’t have my body, they could at least maintain their current figure.

In other words, nothing had changed. Everyone around me still assumed I couldn’t get fat, even though I ate so much. And I’d leveled out at 42 kilos after I started work there.

But I think I must have just saved something up from when I was a student—like I was withdrawing from some kind of muscle savings account to stay that way. Or my metabolism.

That wasn’t just in my first or second year at the company.

Even in my fifth year I had to attach a fastener to my new skirt so I could tighten the waist.

I ran into a groper on the train once on my commute. You know how those train gropers aim for your chest or butt during the summer? Someone actually went for my waist! You know that pose you liked so much, Sano? Where you put your hands on your hips with your thumb pointing away from your other four fingers? That’s what he did. I was so caught off guard. It only happened for a second or two, so I ignored it. I couldn’t even tell if that counted as groping.

Then something happened again the next day. It wasn't hands I felt this time, but some kind of string being wrapped around me. What do you think it was? No, not a belt. It was a tape measure! That was beyond surprising. I was absolutely stunned. I wanted to ask him what size it showed.

Men must assume women have their own measurements memorized. When your superiors dig their graves by asking about that over drinks with every girl—oh, wait. You don't have superiors like that in your clinic, huh?

Either way, I didn't know mine. I had my bust measured at a department store one time, when I was getting fitted for lingerie, but my waist and hips were just a size two, or a size small, or whatever generic size they had. My jeans measured at 58 cm, and I had to pull them tight with a belt.

It's not hard to figure out your own measurements, of course. It made me wonder why I never bothered to all this time. I even had a sewing kit at home. Yeah, the one from elementary school! I got the case with the cats on it. Which one did you get, Sano? Dogs? Oh yeah, with the Malteses on it. The cats on mine were white, too—Persians. I wrapped the orange measuring tape from that kit around my waist and checked.

Fifty one centimeters. Someone who saw that without knowing me would probably want to feed me something. My husband was one of those people. He worked at a publishing company. My coworkers knew I was a big eater, but visitors didn't, and when we first ran into one another by chance in the lobby, he invited me out to go eat some meat.

I suppose he was technically hitting on me—but to suddenly bring up meat like that? And it was on a grill. And on top of that, it wasn't just meat, but grilled offal, with tasty-smelling smoke pouring out from the grill at our table. It was so good. Yeah, really.

You know how oil and salt can be addictive? Like how potato chips are hard to stop eating once you've started? The fat in our food was like that. I couldn't believe how sweet the fat tasted in really high-quality meat. There were sauces if you wanted them, but that place was famous for its salt. They soaked the meat in grated garlic, and then you grilled it and ate it with salt. Rock salt from Pakistan, they said.

I was so moved that the world had food this delicious—or maybe it was just the smoke from the grill—that my eyes watered. He offered to feed me like that every day, so of course I ended up marrying the guy.

Was my wedding dress pretty? Well, my husband picked it out. It's still sitting around in our house. It's in a vacuum-sealed bag, but it's just taking up space. I took it out the other day and it looked just like one of those traditional *koinobori* streamers before it's been colored in. You can't tell from the picture, but the pleats along the bottom hem were really cool.

I wish you could have seen me in my dress. I sent you a wedding invitation, but you were in Africa at the time. I thought you were on

vacation—I didn't know it was volunteer work until I saw it in your Miss Japan profile. That's what's so good about you—the way you don't brag about the good things you do. Were you digging wells out there or something?

Oh, powdered milk to remote villages. I see.

No, I'm listening, I'm listening! I just blanked out for a second piecing everything together. Forget what I said earlier about that photo from when we were kids. You've met those suffering children firsthand, so it was wrong of me to talk about that like it traumatized me.

It's embarrassing to talk to someone about dieting when they've been through that. What do you think when you interact with your patients, Sano? Because they're not even necessarily sick! They just have no self control. They want to get slim after they've let themselves get fat.

You have to hear about that a lot, I'll bet. And then you've got lazy people asking for liposuction so they don't have to work out or watch what they eat.

I mean, I'm aware of my own state. I know I've fallen as low as I can go. I haven't told anyone that I've come here—not even my husband or daughter, even though I've never hidden anything from them before. My dumbbells and my resistance bands and my diet books are all out where they can see them, and I've never been secretive about taking supplements.

Honestly, Sano, if you didn't happen to be a cosmetic surgeon, I probably wouldn't be thinking about liposuction at all. But as soon as I got off the subway and started walking here, I regretted choosing your clinic.

I shuddered when I saw my reflection in the window against a slim designer dress. I didn't even recognize myself. I haven't necessarily been avoiding mirrors, but I never stand in front of a full-body mirror, and I've never looked at myself from the side like that.

My waist is the same whether you're looking from the front or the side. I look like a barrel. The shame I felt looking at myself was overwhelming, and I realized I should have chosen a doctor who doesn't know me. I don't know why I thought to show someone from my past what I look like now so you can look down on me.

But it's not like I decided on liposuction right away. I quit my job after I had my daughter, and a while after that I started doing data-entry from home. I'd type up handwritten novel drafts, consolidate essays into single books, things like that, because I'm a crazy-fast typer.

And I was sitting even more all day, not even commuting to and from work. I could tell I was getting fatter. My size four and medium outfits were all getting tighter.

So I cut back on sugar and started walking. I started working out my muscles, too. Up until that point in my life that would have been enough for me to drop three kilos in a week. I'd always gain it back, of course, but I figured my body could still do it.

I assumed I just had a body type that matched my age; I didn't expect to get any compliments if I changed it. I figured if anyone said anything about how I looked, I could just go on an actual diet. Our scale at home was broken, but I figured I didn't need it.

Lately, my daughter's been starting to worry about her weight, so we went to buy a new one. I said a cheap one would be plenty, but my husband picked one out that shows your body fat percentage and muscle mass. "It's better to know your stats," he said. I figured it might be interesting to know my body age.

What I found out made me feel faint.

My husband had input my height and my age for me, but could this number possibly be right? Was there some kind of miscalculation? Was the scale broken? I thought maybe the ground was a bit off, and tried moving the scale around to make sure it was level.

But no matter how many times I tried, the number stayed the same. My husband and daughter said theirs were right based on annual measurements from work and school, anyway.

I knew I had to start losing weight, so I started on my usual regimen and diet. But a week passed, and I didn't even lose half a kilo. Sure, people fluctuate a few hundred grams over the course of a day, but a week later I weighed exactly as much as when I started.

I wondered if this was the new normal at forty years old. I thought back on what the older mothers had talked about—eyesight getting poorer, exhaustion creeping in faster, weight staying stubborn when you diet and exercise and immediately shooting up with everything you eat.

So I intensified my diet and workout regimen. I didn't just lower my sugar intake, I cut it off completely. I stopped walking and started jogging. I added squats to my workout.

On day one I ran three kilometers. I was immediately out of breath, and I felt like I was going to puke, but I pushed on. The next day all of my muscles screamed in pain, and I was shocked at the amount of strength I'd lost. But I could finally see why I had gained weight and couldn't lose it again: my body's savings account had been wiped out, and walking a few kilometers hadn't refilled it.

You know what's scary, Sano? Not knowing the reason something is happening. It's like ghost stuff. If you hear water dripping at night, it's creepy—unless you know the pipe is a little loose. If you know the reason behind something, you know the solution to it.

On the third day my muscle pain subsided and I started running again. I didn't suffer from muscle pain after that, and by day five I wasn't so out of breath, so I ran five kilometers. By day seven I'd lost a kilogram, and I jumped for joy.

I continued the same regimen the next week, and do you know how much I weighed? I gained a kilogram and came out even. Is that even



possible? I was trying to lose weight, and instead I was just an athletic fatty.

I went from being able to eat endlessly without gaining weight to being unable to lose weight no matter what I ate. Can a human body really transform this much at forty? Isn't that too strange?

You know what this is, Sano? It's a curse.

I think I'm being punished for all my luck when I was young.

By who? You know—our old classmate the “Yokozuna of Stable 64” herself, Yaeko Yokoami?

SAMPLE