

Title: #ToTellYouTheTruth

[#Shinso wo ohanashi shimasu]

Author: YUKI Shinichiro



-Over 110,000 copies sold in two months!

- Won the Japan mystery writers' Award

From dating apps and virtual parties to YouTube reality shows, the dark potential of digital communication technology is at the heart of this collection of five mystery stories by Millennial author YUKI Shinichiro.

A salesman visits a house where nothing is as it seems, a group of old friends trade on trust and technology to betray one another, and a boy learns his whole life is a sham...today more than ever, these stories argue, trust can be a deadly mistake.

Yuki keeps readers guessing with twisty plots, complex characters, and inventive takes on what happens when human vice meets a hyper-connected world. Engagingly written and often funny, the book is also sharply cynical about the unsavory appetites driving much online (and offline) activity.

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Reader's report by Winifred Bird

Recommended? Yes

Why I think so: The stories are original, engaging, and wickedly relevant to our technology-driven lives.

General Rating: 3/5

Literary: 2/5

Readability: 4/5

Originality: 4/5

Length: 218 pp.

Negatives: A few of the plot twists are predictable. The author has a habit of explaining the mysteries in concluding monologues that readers may find formulaic or unnatural.

Book to Screen: The stories feature creepy, thought-provoking twists and visually dramatic plots that would adapt well to television, although they lack adequate content for a full-length film.

Market /Comparative Titles: Many contemporary mystery writers incorporate digital communication technology and social media into their plots; examples include Olivia Black's *Killer Content*, Laura Marshall's *Friend Request*, and cyberthrillers like Jeffery Deaver's "high-tech quartet" starting with *The Blue Nowhere*. In flavor, however, the book is closer to the darkly playful thought experiments of speculative fiction and television shows such as *The Twilight Zone* and *Black Mirror*.

Report:

Digital communication technology meets classic mystery in this collection of five whodunwhats by author YUKI Shinichiro. From virtual parties and YouTube reality series to dating apps and online sperm-donor registries, the tools of our connected world function

For further inquiries, please contact: Ken Mori (ken@tuttlemori.com)

here as the source of mind-bending new motives and methods likely to hold the interest of both devoted mystery fans and Millennials who might normally prefer a TikTok video. Yuki's characters are complex and his plots are dizzyingly twisty, but for this reader at least, the most interesting aspect of the book is the questions it raises about trust, privacy, and knowledge in a digitized world.

The first story, "Consultation with a Fiend," follows Katagiri, a smooth-talking salesman for a test-prep company, on an initial home consultation with a family nervous about the tests their son must ace to enter a prestigious junior high. Katagiri notices several strange things as he approaches the home, including garbage scattered on the driveway, an open back door, and a woman's scream. Inside, odd questions from the snappish mother and the ominous silence of her terrified son build tension. Katagiri explains it all away as the typical friction between parents and children trapped in Japan's test-obsessed academic system. The student finally manages to communicate that he is in danger by answering several mock test questions with the number 110, the Japanese equivalent of 911. Ultimately, we learn that the woman was not his mother but rather a feuding neighbor who murdered the real mother moments before Katagiri arrived. The final twist reveals that the boy, too, was an imposter—not the dead woman's son, but a petty thief who broke into the house at exactly the wrong moment. The story differs from others in the collection in that it does not hinge on digital technology. Nevertheless, in probing the fragility of assumptions about identity, it raises troubling questions about services like TaskRabbit that bring strangers into the homes of other strangers. It also slyly critiques the test-prep industry through the cynical thoughts of its narrator.

The next story, "Looking for Fun" unfolds over the course of a first date arranged on a Tinder-like app. We are once again taken inside the mind of a cynical male narrator, this time a married older man maneuvering to get his date to take him home for some action. He observes that the woman looks nearly identical to his beloved daughter, a university student whom he suspects of using the internet to find sugar daddies. During dinner, the narrator mentions he's had success with the dating app six times; later, when his date mentions a serial killer in the news who has killed six women he met through dating apps, readers may guess that the narrator is looking for "fun" of a more sinister sort than casual sex. Further twists await, however. The narrator gets himself invited to his date's apartment with suspicious ease, only to find himself the dupe in an extortion scheme when her burly partner in crime appears on the scene. He turns the tables by slashing the pair of con artists, explaining before he kills his date that he has been murdering women who look like his daughter in hopes of scaring her away from online dating. But the final joke is on him: a text on the dead man's phone tips him off that his daughter belonged to the same

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extortion ring as them, proving her to be anything but an innocent victim in the online dating game.

The collection veers from campy to contemplative with the next story, “Pandora,” about a couple who struggles for years with infertility. The husband, who narrates the story, is tormented by the thought that he might be responsible, but before any testing is done, his wife becomes pregnant. The baby girl brings him great joy. Moved to help other couples facing similar difficulties, he becomes a sperm donor and connects through the internet with a woman seeking artificial insemination. When they meet, she looks haggard and behaves oddly, but quickly asks him to be her donor. The pregnancy is successful. Fourteen years later, the daughter born of this encounter contacts him. He learns that her mother had been married to a notorious murderer of young girls, though she was ignorant of her husband’s criminal actions. The couple had sex the night before he was arrested. Terrified that she might give birth to a child with his genes but unwilling to have an abortion, she arranged to “overwrite” his paternity with a sperm donor, intentionally muddying her knowledge of which man fathered the baby. Her now-grown daughter, however, wants to know. The answer hinges on blood types, which ultimately reveal that the narrator is her father—but also that he is not the biological father of the daughter he raised. He wonders if his wife secretly used a sperm donor to end their struggle with infertility. He chooses not to confront her, however, and their life continues unchanged. Despite a few sensational elements, the story succeeds in insightfully probing the choices people make about knowledge and ignorance for the sake of emotional peace.

“Wicked Triangle” explores the dastardly potential lurking in that cliché of the Covid-19 era, the remote party. The story opens dramatically as one participant in a virtual gathering between three old friends sends a private message to another participant saying he plans to kill the third participant that very night. From there the author rewinds to depict the complicated dynamics between the three men, Ujihara, Mogi, and Kiriya, who met in university but grew apart before reuniting virtually. Ujihara uses private messages to tell Kiriya, the narrator, that his estranged fiancé has been cheating on him with Mogi. When Ujihara shares a picture of the woman, Kiriya realizes with horror she is his own mistress—yet he fails to confess this to Ujihara. After revealing his plan to murder Mogi, Ujihara logs off, leaving Kiriya in a panic. He tries unsuccessfully to warn Mogi, and the party disbands. Soon after, Kiriya’s mistress/Ujihara’s fiancé shows up at Kiriya’s apartment, followed inexplicably by Ujihara, who was supposed to be 500 kilometers away. The virtual meeting turns out to have been an elaborate farce constructed by Ujihara and Mogi to force a confession from Kiriya, whom Ujihara suspected all along. Ultimately convinced of Kiriya’s ignorance, Ujihara spares him but murders the woman. The

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somewhat facile lesson of this complicated story is to never trust a virtual encounter. Nonetheless, the plot is clever and unpredictable.

Perhaps the cruelest twist in the collection comes in “#pleaseshare,” set on an island whose fading community has just four children left. The story is presented as a YouTube episode narrated by one of the children, twelve-year-old Chomo, who announces that he intends to get to the bottom of the murder of his classmate Rinko, the only island native among the four. He begins the story on a day three years earlier when he, Rinko, and their friends Ru and Satetsu were playing with Rinko’s new iPhone. The children had grown up isolated from modern technology, but the new phone sparks the idea of starting their own YouTube channel. That same day, however, they encounter a stranger who is later murdered on the mainland. From then on, Rinko and the other formerly friendly island natives become mysteriously distant toward Chomo, Satetsu, and Ru. Three years later, Rinko is found dead at the bottom of a cliff. It turns out she was murdered because she discovered a secret about the other children: they were the unwitting stars of their parents’ massively popular (and profitable) YouTube reality series. Not only did their parents secretly record their children’s every move, they also invited viewers to vote on key decisions in their lives, such as moving to the island. The ban on technology was meant to keep the children ignorant, but Ru was in on the secret. When she discovered Rinko knew about it too, she killed the girl to prevent her from telling Chomo and ruining the show. Devastated by the truth, Chomo engineers his own final live episode by luring Ru to the cliff where she killed Rinko and letting viewers decide whether she deserves to die as well. The brutal story is a fitting conclusion to a collection that takes a consistently cynical stance toward the internet age.

Author: YUKI Shinichiro



Born in Kanagawa in 1991, YUKI Shinichiro graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo before becoming a writer. His debut novel, *Elegy for a nameless star*, won the Shincho Mystery Award in 2018. He has since published two additional novels and won the Mystery Writers of Japan Award for his story “#pleaseshare,” earning him acclaim as a rising star of the genre. This is his first collection of short stories.

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#ToTellYouTheTruth
(#Shinso wo ohanashi shimasu)
By Shinichiro Yuki
Translation Sample by Winifred Bird

#pleaseshare

0:00

I look up at the overcast night sky and bite my lip.

Come to think of it, wasn't it all kind of strange? My family, my friends, my life on the island. But I never noticed. How could I notice? This island was my whole world.

I can hear the roar of the sea. It's so loud I think it's making the horizon shake.

No.

It's my own fists that are shaking.

Where do I hurl this anger, this hatred, this drive to do something? I don't know. What should I do? What's the right thing to do? I have no idea. But weirdly enough, I never hesitated. I can't go back now, and I don't want to. This is a kind of declaration of war.

The sea stops roaring.

That's my signal to start recording.

"Hey there, it's me. Chomolungma Watanabe, as you know. I'm about to expose the truth about a certain murder. But first..."

I've got to explain what happened.

It all started one day three years ago, in the summer of third grade.

1:07

I'd finished dinner and was curled up on the sofa watching a popular anime on TV.

"Isn't your half hour almost up?"

"I've still got three minutes."

I glanced over my shoulder at my mom, who was wearing her apron. Our eyes met. She looked fed up but indulgent at the same time, like she knew I'd get my way. According to house rules I was allowed to watch half an hour of TV a day, but I usually got away with a couple extra minutes.

"You always say that and end up watching ten more minutes," she said.

"Today it's really gonna be three."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

I think my mom and dad were stricter about studying than the average parents. Video games were banned, and even mentioning the idea of my own phone was a high crime. But the rules never felt suffocating to me. I had everything I needed, and my parents were laid back enough that I didn't feel like they were pressuring me.

Mommy and Daddy got a tiny bit worn out from being so busy all the time.

We decided that when we had kids, we definitely had to live in the country.

That's what they told me. They decided to move here to Monme Island right after I was born.

It was the absolute perfect place.

They were web designers or developers or something, I don't know exactly, but apparently as long as they had their laptops they could work from wherever. I think they made pretty good money, but we didn't live in luxury or anything. They always talked about how priceless "experiences" were. Yeah, I've got weird parents. Although you probably guessed that from my name. Chomolungma means Mt. Everest in Tibetan. They said they named me that because they wanted me to be the best kid in the world.

I went back to watching TV.

"And now for the evening news," the announcer was saying. "Just after seven p.m. tonight, a man in his twenties was stabbed in the stomach outside Nagasaki Station and died from his wounds. The suspected perpetrator, an unemployed male living near the station, was apprehended at the scene of the crime. When questioned about his motives, the man reportedly said that 'Somebody had to do it'..."

"No way!" I blurted out.

I recognized the photograph of the victim.

"I met that guy today," I said.

"What did you say?" my mom asked, frowning as she turned toward the TV.

"...According to the investigation, the suspect, a Mr. Tadokoro, became angry after watching a live feed on the video sharing website YouTube and at the time of the crime was in a murderous rage—"

The TV went black.

"Hey, I was watching that!" I shouted.

"You said three more minutes," she answered.

"But someone I know just got killed!"

"Maybe he just looked like the person you know."

Was she crazy? No way could I mistake that eccentric-looking guy for someone else. I didn't say that to my mom, though, because I caught a shadow of fear in her eyes as she stood there gripping the remote.

"I wonder why they killed him," I said instead.

"If you have time to think about things that have nothing to do with you, how about doing some homework? Anyway, it's time for your daily report."

My daily report was when I stood in front of my mom and "reflected on what happened that day."

Hearing about all the wonderful things you did is my favorite part of the day, she used to say.

This weird family "tradition" took place every night in the living room. I used to think it was annoying, but I guess you get used to anything eventually.

My mom took off her apron, sat down next to me, and signaled with her eyes that it was time to start.

"Well, first..."

I looked at the ceiling and thought back on the day.

“Hey, do you want to be a YouTuber with me?” Rinko Tachibana had asked just after lunch.

Rinko had skin the color of wheat, long arms and legs, and huge eyes. She was the only pure islander among us, born and raised here, so at first when she said it, I thought it was another island word I didn’t know.

“What’s a tuber?” Satetsu Kuwajima asked dopily, rocking his big body back and forth. I’m hardly one to talk, but he has a weird name. It means magnetic sand. He was wearing a white tank top, blue shorts, and a straw hat with a stretched-out chin strap. By now he’s part of the island scenery, but like me and Ru, he’s an “outsider” born in Tokyo. In other words, if the three of us hadn’t moved here, Rinko would have been the only kid in the elementary school. Maybe that’s why the islanders used to fawn over us. Mr. Shibata would give us piles of veggies from his garden whenever we ran into him, and Granny Crane from the corner store always gave us popsicles or gum that we were supposed to keep secret from our parents. *Isn’t it nice you have so many friends, Rin? The more children the better. You’re the treasure of this island.* That’s what the islanders used to say.

“Look at this,” Rinko said.

She held out an iPhone 7. It was a metallic black color with rows of bright icons on the screen. The model was a couple of generations old, but since none of us had ever had any kind of cell phone before, it felt like a piece of the future had dropped from the sky into our lives.

“Wow!” Satetsu sighed as he carefully took the phone from Rinko. “This is so cool.”

“My parents actually got it for me last month, but they wouldn’t let me take it out much ‘cause they were afraid I’d break it,” she said.

We were sitting next to each other on the cliff at the southern tip of the island. You get there by going through the bushes on the right side of the old lighthouse, past the parking lot. It was our secret place. The cliff was maybe thirty meters high, and from the top we could look out on the East China Sea.

“Chomo, check this out,” Satetsu said, passing the piece of future over to me. It felt more solid in my hand than I’d expected, but not especially heavy. Apparently, you could use it to make phone calls, take pictures, and even watch movies. On something this thin and small? No way. I desperately tried to find some connection between myself and this piece of future, but the only familiar thing was the digital clock on the screen.

“Do you set the time yourself?” I asked.

“Of course not!” Rinko laughed. “I mean, you can, but it uses radio waves to set the time automatically.”

Of course. I bet the old-fashioned alarm clock in my room was the only clock in the world that still had to be set by hand. I was embarrassed that my question was so behind the times, but I felt better when Satetsu peered over my shoulder and said, “Hey, that symbol looks like a calculator.” Whew. He was basically on my level.

“Honestly?” Rinko said, smiling wryly. She must have been fed up with our questions about clocks and calculators in the face of this cutting-edge technology, because she proceeded to proudly show us its terrible powers.

“See, this is the camera,” she said.

“Wow!”

“And there’s something called Siri.”

“Theory?”

“And look...”

More than anything else, what gripped Satetsu and me and wouldn't let us go was the fingerprint login. Rinko said that if you registered your fingerprint ahead of time, all you had to do to activate the phone was press your finger on a round button on the login screen.

“Register my fingerprint!” I begged.

“Why?” she asked.

“I want to try it.”

She looked reluctant, but I kept begging until she gave in.

“That's incredible. I feel like a spy,” I said.

“Right?”

“Let me do it again.”

“Sure, whatever.”

As we were talking, I sensed something to my left. Ru, who normally talked our ears off, was being weirdly quiet. I made Satetsu take the phone and said, “Hey, Ru.”

“What?” she asked without taking her eyes off the horizon. She had a long, straight nose, a sharp chin, and skin like porcelain. Her standoffish expression was like the definition of grumpiness. She probably didn't like Rinko stealing the spotlight.

Ru was short for Rouge Anzai. I'd heard her family was rich, and considering she bragged about it herself, it was probably true. Her house looked like a castle with a garage full of sports cars. Not just one or two, either. Apparently they brought them over from the mainland, although I doubt they had much chance to drive them on an island. But just like me and Satetsu, Ru didn't have a cell phone, which was kind of funny. Even though she seemed like the pampered type, I figured maybe her family was into education like mine.

I wasn't sure if she was some sort of aristocrat or a commoner like the rest of us, but somehow, I always felt like she was posing. It was like she was acting, or aware of people watching her. I can't really describe it, but that was how I felt.

One thing that especially bothered me were her constant “photo shoots.” According to her, her parents wanted to “capture every second they can of my life on the island,” and sure enough, she always had their GoPro with her. “Debauched rich girl,” Satetsu used to say smugly, although I'm pretty sure “debauched” wasn't in his vocabulary, so he probably copied that line from his parents. But I couldn't stand the way she made us go along with her debauchery or whatever it was. What did we have to do, you're wondering? Take the videos the way she wanted. At certain picture-perfect moments she would come begging us to “Take a cute shot of me.” She'd been doing it all morning that day. While the rest of us busted our butts making a raft to paddle into the open sea, she'd spent the whole time filming us and not helping. Then the second we were done, she came running to ask if I'd take her picture with the raft, acting all excited and silly.

“Watching weird videos all the time will make you stupid, you know,” she spit out, not bothering to hide her disgust. It was like the silly stuff that morning had never happened.

“But they're so funny,” Rinko said, swiping the screen before turning it horizontally and flipping it toward us.

A video of a boy around our age opening a brand-new toy started to play.

“Look guys, isn't this dope? I wonder how you operate it. These must be the instructions. Anyway, here I am at the park...” he was saying.

“People who make interesting videos for other people to watch are called YouTubers,” Rinko explained.

The boy pulled a radio-controlled model (a “drone,” he called it) out of the box as poppy background music played and animated effects floated on and off screen. The video ended with an aerial image taken by the drone. I was sucked in before I knew it.

“That was amazing,” I murmured.

Rinko cheerfully told us all about YouTubing. You could do it alone or in groups. The boy we’d just watched had a channel called “All Me TV” with about 300,000 fans, making him a mid-ranking YouTuber. There were all kinds of genres. The Mellow Brothers streamed themselves playing nail-biting video games against each other. The Rude Dudes, a couple of pranksters always on the verge of breaking the law, were Rinko’s favorites. The reigning king of all channels, Full House Days, had been formed ten years ago by a group of six YouTubers. Rinko said their channel had 20 million registered viewers and made several hundred million yen a year just from advertisements.

When she was done explaining, she turned to us with a scheming grin.

“Don’t you think a channel about four kids raised on an island would be popular?”

Monme Island, where we live, is a little island eighty kilometers west of Nagasaki. It’s only about ten kilometers around. There are some hills, but you can still get around the whole thing on bicycle in an hour. It’s shaped like a long, thin egg with the top, where the harbor is, pointing north. About a hundred and fifty people live in a village surrounding the harbor. Most of them are fishermen or farmers with fields up in the hills. The lone elementary school has four students total. Us, of course. No one is following behind, so when we graduate, the school will probably shut down. It’s not like we don’t have TV or radios, but there are hardly any cars on the streets, and the only thing the policeman seems to do is go around chatting with people and calling it a “patrol.” Rinko was probably right that to city people, ordinary life on the island would be super interesting.

“The videos on the Full House Days channel, are they like hilarious or something?”

The sea breeze brushed our cheeks as we rode toward home on our bicycles, our brakes screeching. Leaving a tractor in the dust, we chased after the airplane trails far overhead. It was just after four in the afternoon. Rinko was leading the way, and I was talking to her back as I wiped the sweat from my forehead. You can get from the southern tip of the island to the northern tip where the village is in half an hour if you ride fast, and forty minutes if you ride slow, so I figured I’d make my five-o’clock curfew with time to spare.

“I can’t watch it because it’s 18 and over,” she called back.

“Does it have X-rated stuff on it?” Satetsu interrupted.

“No idea,” Rinko said.

“Speaking of X-rated stuff,” Satetsu said, turning to me. “What’s in that room, anyway?”

I snickered, wondering what exactly the connection was.

He was talking about the other weird rule in my family, right up there with the “daily reports.” There was a locked room on the right side of the second-floor hallway, toward the back, that my parents said I wasn’t allowed to go into because it was dangerous. It had been off limits ever since I could remember, but a few nights earlier, I had woken up in the middle of the

night unable to resist my curiosity. I tiptoed down the hallway, held my breath, and gripped the doorknob. The door made no sign of opening. I could hear my parents inside, rustling around and whispering to each other. Suddenly, the door opened and my mother, dressed in a nightgown, thrust her head out.

“What are you doing!? Go to bed this instant!” she snapped. Her face was flushed bright red and I’d never seen her look so fierce. I tried to peek into the room, but it was too dark for me to see anything.

The next morning, when I told everyone about it, Rinko and Ru exchanged knowing looks—but only for a second.

“Have your parents been saying they want you to have a little brother or sister lately?” Rinko asked me.

I looked at her, confused.

“I heard it’s a lie that storks bring babies,” Satetsu explained.

“Anyway. Next time we’ll make the raft better,” I said, changing the subject to escape the awkwardness.

“Yeah,” Ru said from behind. “Next time it’s definitely gonna work.”

Our project that afternoon had ended in failure. Either we’d been too heavy for it, or the waves had broken it up, but less than ten seconds after setting sail our raft of dreams had fallen to pieces.

“Next time? All you did this time was watch,” Satetsu complained without missing a beat.

“Girls shouldn’t have to do hard labor,” she whined.

“That’s called reverse discrimination.”

By then we were almost back to the village.

“Hey, you kids! Come over here!”

A man was walking toward us, yelling excitedly. He was thin and had a pink mohawk. You could tell at a glance he wasn’t from the island.

“I finally found you!”

What a wacko. That was my first thought, but I was so overwhelmed by his enthusiasm that I hit my brakes before I realized what I was doing.

“Can I take my picture with you? As a souvenir,” he said, opening the camera on his phone and holding it in front of his face. Satetsu and I looked at each other.

Satetsu hesitated for a minute, then said, “It’s fine, right?”

He stood next to the man and flashed a peace sign at his camera. I didn’t know what was going on, but I figured it was no big deal. The man didn’t seem dangerous. I was just about to get into the frame when Ru suddenly screamed, “Don’t do it! Let’s get out of here!”

She took off on her bike at full speed.

“Wait!” Rinko yelled, following her.

Stunned, I looked at Satetsu again. We must have realized something was wrong at the same moment, because we both shouted “Bye” and followed the girls.

“Hey, wait!” the man called.

I could feel his eyes on my back for a long time as I pedaled furiously away.

“...And that’s the man I saw on the TV news. There’s no way it was someone else. I mean, how many people have a pink Mohawk?” I said, wrapping up my “daily report.” I’d left out the part about the X-rated stuff, but that was probably fine.

For some reason, my mom kept frowning silently after I finished, but she didn’t seem like she was trying to make up her mind about something. More like she knew what she had to say but not how to say it. I got more and more nervous, wondering what was wrong. Finally, she broke the silence with something I was not expecting at all.

“I think you should reconsider your friendship with Rinko.”

“What, why?”

“I’m of the same opinion as Ru. Why live on a wonderful island like this if someone’s just going to show you silly videos? I think I’ll have a talk with Rinko’s mother.”

I thought her reaction was weird. She had never said anything like that before. Always value your friends because island friends are friends for life. That was one of her favorite sayings. Now she was changing her tune because of a few little YouTube videos?

But something even stranger was about to happen.

From that day on, the islanders started treating us coldly. Even Mr. Shibata who used to give us vegetables and Granny Crane at the corner store. It wasn’t that they gave us disgusted looks or jeered at us. But something had obviously changed. Even my young heart understood that. They pretended everything was the same as always, but I could tell that deep down, they didn’t want anything to do with us. The most unbelievable part was that Rinko was just like the rest of them—she grew apart from us like all the other islanders.

That was the day that everything started.

Some gear in the universe got warped and threw our lives off course.

6:46

“The point is, everything changed on that day. Strange, isn’t it?” I say to the camera.

The man who was killed that night outside Nagasaki Station was a somewhat famous YouTuber who posted provocative videos under the name *WithdrawalSymptoms*. The murder happened just after seven, and the last ferry from Monme to Nagasaki left at five, meaning he must have returned to the city right after running into us, and been stabbed.

“YouTubers have it hard, don’t they?”

Not many YouTubers are actually murdered, but tons of them are sued for property damage and slander. Even if the law isn’t involved, flaming is routine, and plenty of YouTubers tank after their supposedly genuine pranks are exposed as fake.

But I still loved them.

Hey, do you want to be a YouTuber with me?

The videos Rinko showed me that day—those people were doing things I could never have come up with, and even if I could, I wouldn’t have the guts to go through with them. I thought they were so cool for doing that crazy stuff. My mom would probably lose her shit if she heard me say this, but if it was possible, I wanted to be a YouTuber myself. I wanted to make people laugh like they did.

“But before I had a chance to make that dream come true, she ruined it.”

8:18

It was March of sixth grade. Graduation was around the corner, and Satetsu and Ru had been given cell phones. Just basic ones that could be used for phone calls and texts, not surfing the net. Their parents probably figured that was all they'd need in April when we started commuting by ferry to the junior high on Tsukuda Island, which is next to Monme Island. Rinko still had the same iPhone 7, leaving me as the only one without a phone, but I knew complaining was futile. It didn't matter if everyone else had one. Our family has our rules, their family has theirs. I knew that's what my parents would say.

Things were still awkward with Rinko. It wasn't that we fought or ignored each other. We hung out at school and after school just like before. But I felt it in unexpected moments. The distance, the wall. For some reason, ever since that day, she hadn't taken her phone out around us, and she was less likely to start a conversation. Sometimes she would clam up like she was brooding over something and stare at me pleadingly with her big eyes.

"It's because we're outsiders."

Every time I heard Satetsu grumble that, I couldn't help looking at the strap on his backpack. I think it was last year that Rinko gave them to us. A green one for me, a blue one for Satetsu, a red one for Ru, and a yellow one for herself. The colors were different but the star shape was the same on all of them. I knew she still had the yellow star attached to her phone cover. It was my only reason for believing we hadn't drifted apart completely. Unfortunately, I couldn't have been more wrong.

"Hi!"

Ten days ago, Ru came to my house around sunset.

"Why'd you come over so late?" I asked her.

"Don't worry, it's fine," she answered.

My parents were out—they'd been invited unexpectedly to Ru's house, which meant the two of us were alone in my house. Sure, we were old friends, but it was impossible for me to ignore her strong thighs sticking out below her short skirt and the increasingly curvy lines of her body. I took her to my room, but I felt so uncomfortable I told her to sit wherever she wanted and turned toward my desk so I didn't have to look at her.

"Can you at least get me some tea?" she asked.

"Oh, right," I said. I felt bad for being a rude host, but at the same time, two things bothered me. First was the way she glanced quickly at my wrist. Second was the point of her visit. When we were in the lower grades, we'd played at each other's houses all the time, but not recently. I felt like she had an ulterior motive.

When I got back to my room with a glass of barley tea in each hand, she was sprawled face-down on the bed. Her black hair hung to her waist and her legs were kicked out defenselessly. But what drew my eye more than that was the phone in her hand.

"Ta da! I stole my mom's phone," she said.

It was a silver iPhone 8. I couldn't help gasping.

"Let's try some stuff," she said.

I sat down next to her on the bed. A faintly sweet smell and the sound of breathing came from her direction. Pushing those things out of my mind, I focused on the phone. She was just placing her thumb on the log-in screen to unlock it.

“Wow, I’ve never even touched my mom’s phone before. That was so easy!” she said, starting it up with practiced motions as she smiled innocently.

“Won’t your mom be mad if she finds out?”

“It’s fine, don’t worry. Hey, what’s this? It looks cool,” she said, opening a photo editing app. Apparently if you took pictures with it, it would make you look like an alien or a cat or whatever.

“Want to try it?” she asked.

For a while, we took pictures of ourselves on the app. That was fun enough. But the truth is, something about the whole thing made me uneasy. I couldn’t figure out what she was after. I doubted she came over just to play with an app.

After a while, she tossed the phone on the bed and sat up.

“So, what were you and Rinko talking about today?” she asked.

So that’s why she was there. Earlier that day, after school got out, Rinko had asked me to meet her behind the gym.

“Sorry to ask you out of the blue,” she’d said when I got there. She was already waiting. I said “hi” casually, but I couldn’t help thinking: when was the last time the two of us were alone together?

We chatted about random stuff for a few minutes. The clubs we wanted to join in junior high, popular TV shows, the top YouTubers lately. When I asked about Full House Days, she said they seemed to have run out of material. The channel was losing steam as new stars rose. It was fun to talk to her after such a long time, but I sensed she hadn’t gotten to the main topic yet.

“I’ve been trying to decide if I should tell you this for a long time,” she finally said, chewing her lip and staring at the ground. “We’re starting junior high soon. I wanted you to know before then.”

I thought she was going to say she liked me.

That’s the only reason I know of that people ask you to meet them behind the gym—that, or to fight.

“It’s probably easiest if you look at this,” Rinko said, holding out her iPhone 7. I looked at her questioningly.

“Ever since the day I showed you my phone, you’ve wanted to become a YouTuber, right?”

It was a reasonable thing to say, and it was true. Even after she grew apart from us, I kept begging her to show me videos for a while. She would just smile like she didn’t know what to say and refuse to show me.

“That’s exactly why you need to know,” she said, unlocking her phone.

As she did, Ru stepped out of the gym’s shadow.

“What are you guys doing?” she asked. She glanced back and forth between Rinko and me, then giggled knowingly. “Wait, *that’s* what’s going on? Sorry for interrupting.”

For some reason, though, she didn't leave. I almost felt like she was guarding us. Rinko pressed her lips together and was silent for a moment, then half-smiled.

"Let's forget about it for today. We'll meet another time."

All I could do was watch in a daze as she jogged off.

"She didn't say anything," I told Ru in my bedroom.

"I can tell you're lying," she said teasingly, but her eyes were piercing.

"Am not. You showed up, so she didn't tell me."

"What, you're blaming me? But I saw you two go behind the gym, so—"

Just then, her phone buzzed on my bed.

"Shit, it's my dad!"

We both held our breath, and the phone stopped buzzing.

"It's late, I should get going," she said.

Above the notification saying "1 missed call," big numbers read "6:12." For no real reason, I glanced at the alarm clock by my pillow. The short hand was near the 6 and the long hand was just past the 2. I walked Ru to the entryway and raised my hand.

"See ya," I said.

"You're not going to walk me home? You're abandoning a girl alone on the street at night?" she asked.

"I didn't ask you to come over," I said. Still, I saw her point. "You're so annoying," I grumbled, pushing my sneakers on.

Just then, she seemed to remember something.

"Shoot, I left my glass of tea in your room."

"It's fine," I said.

"No, I asked you for it, I should put it back."

She took her shoes back off and ran to my room. I smiled cynically, thinking that she was oddly conscientious about things like that. A few minutes later she came back holding the two glasses. I thought she was taking forever, but one of the glasses was empty. She must have finished it to be polite.

"Just put it wherever," I said, gesturing with my chin.

"Sorry to make you wait," she said.

"It's fine, let's go."

Shortly afterwards, I learned that Rinko was dead.

"Believe me, I didn't do it."

"Then why did they find your—"

"It went missing. I swear, I'm not lying!"

It was three days after they found Rinko's body, and I was bearing down on Satetsu behind the gym. Not to tell him I liked him, of course. It was more like a fight.

The body was discovered at the bottom of the cliff on the southern tip of the island—thirty meters below our secret place. They said she'd fallen to the rocky shore below. When she didn't come home that night and didn't answer her phone, her parents got worried and went to the police station. That was at 6:15. The police announced they'd found the body sixty minutes later. Her bike parked in the lot near the old lighthouse was what led them to her body.

Her death was attributed to a blow to the head caused by a fall, and the time of death was determined to have been between 5:52 and 7:15 that night. The reason the earlier time was so specific was that there were records of calls on her phone until 5:52. That last call was with Rouge Anzai—in other words, Ru had been talking to Rinko just before she came to my house. One person had seen Rinko bicycling through the village. That was at 5:20. Since it took at least half an hour by bike from the village to the cliff, the times matched up. There was no sign of a struggle at the cliff and no basis for declaring it a murder. Suicide was a possibility, but no note was found, and the only object left at the top of the cliff was a strap with a blue star on it. Of course, no one knew if it had been dropped that day, so unless some other evidence turned up, her death wasn't likely to be investigated further.

"I heard they found your strap there," I said to Satetsu.

"You're so suspicious of me, but did you ask Ru what that phone call was about?"

"Obviously!"

Ru said she'd wanted to ask Rinko if she was going to tell me she liked me. She said the same thing to the police. The dead can't talk, of course, but considering Ru came to my house afterwards and asked me the same thing, her story seemed consistent. And more importantly—

"Ru has an alibi."

Her dad had called her mom's phone at 6:12. I'd seen that myself. I didn't know exactly what time she came to my house, but it must have been at least fifteen minutes before the call. But to get from the cliff where Rinko died to the village where we live takes at least half an hour by bike, pedaling hard. Even supposing Rinko died at 5:52, it would have been impossible for Ru to push her off the cliff and get to my house when she did.

After listening to my argument, Satetsu slumped his shoulders.

"Then she must have killed herself."

The back of the gym flashed through my mind.

It's probably easiest if you look at this.

She'd held out her phone, but Ru had shown up, cutting off our conversation.

Let's forget about it for today. We'll meet another time.

I had a feeling she didn't kill herself. I mean, she still wanted to tell me something. But what was it? The answer had to be hidden in her phone. The iPhone 7 she had been using all these years.

The second that thought hit me, a shiver ran down my back.

We might be able to find out.

The chances were slim, but worth betting on.

"Let's go to her house right now," I said.

"Why the big rush?" Satetsu asked.

"There's something I want to check out."

14:45

"It turned out I was right," I say to the camera on Rinko's phone, the phone that's now a memento of her life.

Satetsu and I had gone straight to her house, and when we explained the situation to her parents, they let us borrow the phone.

"Maybe she'll be able to rest in peace this way," they said.

This is her iPhone 7.

"So how was I able to get into her phone?" I ask the camera.

Because my fingerprint was already registered in it.

Register my fingerprint!

Why?

I want to try it.

Because she hadn't gotten a new phone since that day, I figured my fingerprint might still be registered. I bet on the possibility and won bigtime. I started up the phone and peered at the screen with Satetsu. Controlling my impatience, I touched my shaking finger to the phone. And then—

"We're finally in on the secret," I said, laughing self-mockingly. "Full House Days is our parents."

A group of six people ruled the YouTube world. As far as I could tell, those six people were Satetsu's, Ru's, and my parents. You might describe their channel as a supposedly true-life, viewer-participation documentary about raising kids. The second I saw the episode titles, I understood everything.

The Perfect Name: Announcing the results of the baby-naming tournament!

Where to? M. Island wins the vote for our new home

A Ten-Year Experiment: Does banning smart phones and video games really make kids smarter?

New Car: Touring the island in a sportscar

First Day of School: Thanks to your support, the little ones are starting the next phase of life!

Popular Series: Island Playtime / Let's build a raft!

Daily Report: A day in the life of Chomo vol. 56 / Rebellious phase?

The show got rave reviews online. "These guys are too much! LOL" "Hot new YouTubers on the block!" "Chomolungma?! Think they went too far with that one..." "Hope those kids don't turn bad :P"

All the content was designed to rack up playback numbers. Everything was a strategy to get more registered viewers. Our weird names, moving to an island cut off from the modern world—all of it was determined by viewer votes. I realized that when Rinko first told me about Full House Days three years ago, she said the channel had been created ten years earlier. It didn't click back then, but the channel was the same age as us.

"Looks like they beat Rinko to it with a show about life on an island. I knew it was a good idea."

Of course it was interesting. You'd have to be insane to go through with such a reckless idea.

"At least now I understand the weird rules my family has."

When I worked backwards from the angles of the videos and searched the living room, I found a camera hidden in a plant on top of the sideboard. My daily reports were the fodder for "A day in the life of Chomo," designed to let viewers watch me growing up. That's why I always had to deliver them in the living room. When I took a chair and threw it furiously at the door of the locked room, it broke open and cleared up a few more questions. On the far wall was a

green screen for putting in fake backgrounds, and on the table was some recording equipment. No wonder I wasn't allowed in there.

"The ban on smart phones and video games was part of the show, and it also kept us from discovering the truth. It didn't have anything to do with studying or education. And there's more."

I think you should reconsider your friendship with Rinko.

"That's why they tried to keep her away from us."

The channel was rated over-18, but all you had to do to get past that was change the age on your account settings. My mom must have been afraid that at some point, Rinko would figure that out, learn the truth, and tell us. And sure enough, the Full House Days videos we hadn't been able to watch on her phone three years ago were viewable now. Which meant that obviously, Rinko must have watched them and realized the truth.

Yup—everyone knew.

Rinko, and the other islanders, and viewers all over the country who were total strangers to us. They knew, and not one of them told us. It was possible that at first the elderly islanders didn't know about the channel, but relatives on the mainland must eventually have told someone, and from there the rumor would have spread. *Watch out, getting involved with the kids on the island is dangerous.*

"Why would it be dangerous, you ask?"

It had to do with the murder outside Nagasaki Station.

"Because the YouTuber WithdrawalSymptoms was killed by a viewer."

Can I take my picture with you?

He had a reputation for posting provocative videos, and he came up with the wild idea of livestreaming a video with the most famous kids in Japan. That was dangerous because if he took one wrong step, we might find out the truth. Some people made fun of Full House Days fans for being cultish, and for them, stepping foot on the island was an unbreakable taboo.

"But WithdrawalSymptoms broke the taboo, and that rubbed viewers the wrong way."

That was why one of those fans, Tadokoro, decided to bear the cross for his twenty million "friends" and kill WithdrawalSymptoms. The YouTuber's barbaric behavior couldn't go unpunished. To prevent the story of the century from going up in smoke, and to make sure no one ever tried the same thing again, someone had to make an example of him.

"That was the day the islanders changed, and Rinko changed."

If they weren't careful, they might turn the whole country against them, and they might even be killed by some fanatical viewer. That fear had to be the reason why the kindly islanders grew cold and Rinko put up a wall.

"It wasn't because we were outsiders. It was because they were terrified their own careless actions would tip us off to the truth and viewers would come after them for it."

That was why Rinko stopped using her phone in front of us and stopped talking much. I was sure of it. This explained all the strange things. The truth was finally exposed, and everything was cleared up...

"Not exactly."

I switch the direction of the phone camera so that the video shows Rouge Anzai standing on the edge of a cliff. Resentment, fury, and fear are mixed in her contemptuous gaze. But she must realize that now is not the time for stupid stunts. Her hands are tied and Satetsu is

standing next to her. A single push from him will send her plummeting to the same fate as Rinko.

“Everything I’m about to say is speculation,” I say.

It’s also the main point of the video. I pause for a long time, then smile boldly.

“I think some faking has been happening on this channel.”

I imagine the viewers going mad with fury on the other side of the screen. Full House Days has dominated YouTube from the time we were born twelve years ago until now. But there’s a secret behind the “perfect show” that some people have called the greatest entertainment in history.

“You knew everything, didn’t you?” I ask Ru, whose image in the screen is glaring at me.

“Don’t make crazy accusations!”

“It’s not a crazy accusation. I’ll explain why I think it’s true.”

First, there’s the GoPro she used to carry around all the time. One of the popular series on Full House Days is called “Island Playtime.” Our parents at least had the decency to blur out Rinko’s face, but there’s no denying it—the videos of us making up our own games out in unspoiled nature were definitely shot by that GoPro.

“Of course, you might have just been following your parents’ instructions to shoot video of us.”

But think about the way she’d beg us to take pictures of her at the most photogenic moments. I’d always felt like she was acting, or that she was conscious of people watching her, or something like that.

“You knew the videos of you would be on YouTube, didn’t you?”

“I did not!”

“And that’s not all. Remember the first day Rinko showed us her iPhone 7?”

Ru had thrown cold water on my and Satetsu’s excitement about what Rinko told us.

“You said watching weird videos all the time would make us stupid, remember? Then tell me this. How did you even know that was a video sharing site?”

I clearly remembered her saying “video.” I, on the other hand, didn’t even understand the word “YouTuber,” since I didn’t have a phone. I thought it was some strange island word.

“And you were the one who told us to run away when WithdrawalSymptoms tried to take our picture. How did you know that would be bad?”

“You’re just picking on me. None of that is real evidence.”

“But the icing on the cake,” I said, ignoring her protests, “is what happened on the day Rinko died.”

The blood drained from her face.

“On that day, you told me you stole your mom’s iPhone 8.”

When I sat down next to her on the bed, she’d started up the phone with practiced movements.

Wow, I’ve never even touched my mom’s phone before. That was so easy!

How did she start it? By using fingerprint login.

“You were obviously lying when you said you’d never touched the phone before. I mean, you have to register your fingerprint before you can use it to unlock a phone.”

“But—”

"You use a smartphone all the time at home, don't you? I bet it wasn't even your mom's, it was your own phone."

"What's your point?"

"Your alibi doesn't stand up. If you were able to mess with that phone before you came to my house, you could have changed the time on it."

Do you set the time yourself?

You can, but it uses radio waves to set the time automatically.

People tend to assume that since phones can set their own time using radio waves, the time on the screen must be accurate, but obviously you can set it manually if you want.

"For instance, you could set it half an hour slow."

I'd seen the time on her phone myself. 6:12. But what if it was actually 6:42?

"But..." she started to say, then stopped. I felt more certain than ever.

"Were you going to say that the time was the same on my own alarm clock?"

I remember glancing at my clock and seeing that the time was the same as on her phone.

"That's an easy one. You could have changed it when I was out of the room."

Can you at least get me some tea?

She'd said that to get me out of my room, and the strange way she'd glanced at my wrist? That was probably to make sure I wasn't wearing a watch. Everything she did was part of a scheme to change the time on my clock when I wasn't there.

"But you must have realized that at some point I would notice the time on my clock was wrong."

Shoot, I left my glass of tea in your room.

She returned to my room alone to change my clock back to the right time. And when she innocently asked me to walk her home? That was to lower the risk of me going back to my room right away and noticing that time had skipped forward suddenly. It all made sense.

"You saw Rinko trying to tell me something behind the gym. Or did you hear what she said? Either way, you panicked."

Ever since the day I showed you my phone, you've wanted to become a YouTuber, right?

That's exactly why you need to know.

Her conscience must have been tormenting her for a long time. For knowing the secret and keeping quiet. That day, she got up the courage to tell me the truth.

"If we found out, the true-life documentary about raising kids couldn't go on. Popularity would crash and the enormous income from advertisers might dry up. Worse—the show might become the laughingstock of the whole country. How awful! Something had to be done!"

She was always boasting about how rich her family was. They lived in a luxurious mansion with a garage full of sports cars. All of it was thanks to that "true-life" show. Viewers probably wouldn't be happy if it abruptly ended because a classmate gave away the secret. Anyone could predict that the channel would probably lose most of its viewers.

"So you killed her to shut her up. And that's not all. Ever since WithdrawalSymptoms was killed, Full House Days had kept its content safe and proper. Everyone on their best behavior, right? But that made it boring."

Rinko had said it herself behind the gym. Full House Days seemed to have run out of material. The channel was losing steam as new stars rose. That was because it had come under public criticism after the murder of WithdrawalSymptoms.

“You thought you’d bring it back to life with some tear-jerking content about the death of a classmate, didn’t you?”

Rest in Peace: Mourning a classmate’s death. I was speechless when I found that title in the list of episodes. It got more than five million views in two days. Viewer ratings appeared split, but that only made it more of a homerun in overcoming the channel’s recent slump. I watched it, and as expected, it was full of closeups of Ru sobbing theatrically.

“I’ll never forgive you.”

I planned to keep my cool until the end, but tears are pouring down my cheeks.

“Rinko died for *this*? You’ve got to be kidding!”

Still, secretly killing someone on a small island where everyone’s paths constantly cross isn’t easy. The solution Ru came up with was to push Rinko off the cliff at our secret spot. No one would be able to rule out an accident or suicide. She didn’t need to be particularly strong or have any special equipment. The only challenge was how to lure her victim there.

“You couldn’t think of anything clever, so you had to call her.”

I don’t know what they said to each other on that call, but Rinko probably had no reason to turn down an invitation from her life-long friend. So she went out to the secret place where we all used to play and was pushed off the cliff.

The final problem was the record of the call just before her death. So Ru engineered her alibi and took Satetsu’s strap off his backpack and left it by the cliff. That way, even if the death was investigated as a murder, she would have a way out.

“But I don’t think you came up with all of that on your own. Someone gave you some ideas, didn’t they?”

Who? Her parents, of course.

On the day of the murder, Ru’s parents unexpectedly asked my parents to come over, leaving me home alone just when she happened to come by. Why? So she wouldn’t have to tamper with as many clocks. If other people were home, she would have had to change the time on all the clocks in the house for the trick to work, and that would have been impossible.

“That’s not true! Believe me! I didn’t kill her, and the show isn’t fake!”

“Unfortunately, it’s not up to me to decide that,” I spit out, directing my next words to the twenty million people who were probably watching the livestream. “The viewers of Full House Days are going to decide. Doesn’t that sound like a good idea? After all, they’re used to playing with people’s lives.”

We’re sorry! Please, calm down!

I’m begging you! You’re not the kind of boy who would do something like this!

I think back to what Ru’s parents said earlier, when I threatened them with the knife I took from the kitchen. It was almost sad how their usual cheerful on-screen personas were replaced by endless apologies and pleas.

Tell us what you want!

That was how I got the login ID and password for the Full House Days account. From their house I went to the southern tip of the island and met up with Satetsu, who had already

gotten Ru to meet him there. I held the knife to her just like I held it to her parents and tied her hands before starting to livestream.

I've spent the week since I learned the truth mastering the YouTube app. The ID and password I forced out of Ru's parents worked to get me into the Full House Days account.

Everything is going according to plan.

Hey, do you want to be a YouTuber with me?

I'll get revenge for you, here and now.

"Everyone who thinks my reasoning is right, please click the 'like' button. Those of you who think I'm wrong, click the 'dislike' button. If you think this livestream is being faked to get attention, that's fine. Go ahead and press the 'dislike' button."

I can hear the sea roaring again. Or is it the taunts and jeers of the viewers on the far shore?

"In five minutes, if we have more likes than dislikes, I'll push her off this cliff."

We're on the southern tip of the island. There's no way anyone can get here in five minutes. Our families, the islanders, the police, the viewers—all they can do is wait on the edge of their seats to see the results.

So go ahead, make your choice. It's the ultimate in viewer participation entertainment.

What's it gonna be, like or dislike? Or maybe you're too scared to click either one?