Title: MOTHERHOOD

[Bosei]

Author: Kanae Minato



-No.1 bestseller!

- The film will be released in November 2022!

17-year old Sayaka Tadokoro lies in a coma, supposedly after falling from her fourth-floor apartment. It's unclear whether it was an accident or suicide, at least according to the news. The papers quote the girl's mother, who didn't understand why such a thing had taken place, when she had raised her daughter "giving her all the love I possibly could."

What really happened? Alternating between notes written by the girl's mother, the girl's own reminisces, and the account of a teacher whose suspicion is roused by the mother's phrase "all the love I possibly could", the book slowly progresses closer to the grisly truth. The dynamics of this troubled family transpire to hinge upon one fatal moment when, after a landslide and subsequent fire, the mother is forced to choose between the life of her infant daughter and that of her own mother, whom she idolizes.

An intricately woven thriller revolving around the cloying, sinister and destructive dynamics between two sets of mother and daughters, and the complex business of separating the real truth from the lies that people feed themselves.

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Reader's report by Polly Burton

Motherhood is a page-turning mystery revolving around the dark, entangled dynamics of one particularly troubled family, offering along the way an unflinching examination of some of the most fundamental issues affecting every family. The answers to the deceptively thorny questions it poses—what does it mean to be a loving mother? what *is* maternal instinct? how do family dynamics shape the way that we act, and vice versa?—come, if anything, through counterexample: *Motherhood* hones in on a spectacular breakdown of maternal instinct in Sayaka Tadokoro's mother, and unsqueamishly probes its origin. The author, Kanae Minato, one of Japan's best known and highest acclaimed mystery writers, is known as the queen of "iyamisu" or dark, emotionally taxing mysteries in the vein of *Gone Girl*; *Motherhood* provides a perfect example of her unrivalled mastery of this genre, ideal for readers of Kazuo Ishiguro and Natsuo Kirino.

The narrative thrust of *Motherhood* unfolds around a number of familial triads. At first, the central triad appears to be that of Mr and Mrs Tadokoro and their young child, Sayaka, yet as the mother's account begins to reveal, the core triad psychologically speaking is really that of the child, the mother, and the mother's own mother. This relationship is put to the ultimate test when an avalanche and subsequent fire that breaks out in the house where the three are staying alone that evening. Hearing shrieks, the mother walks into the bedroom to find her own mother and daughter both trapped beneath dressers that the avalanche has toppled. As the flames encroach, the mother is forced to decide between the two lives, and instinctually chooses her own mother. Her mother, however, convinces her that as a mother herself now, she must choose her daughter's life, and raise her "with all the love in the world". The mother does this, but it marks a major turning point in her relationship with her Sayaka: from this point on she resents her daughter for robbing her of her mother, and envies her for having a mother where she does not. Or at least, this remains the story that the mother presents and the reader believes to be true, until the revelation later on in the book that the grandmother actually killed herself by biting through her tongue. It is this information, too—revealed to Sayaka by her father's lover—which eventually triggers the girl's confrontation with her mother and her consequent suicide attempt.

One of the most unique aspects of *Motherhood* is its structure, woven together of three separate strands: an account from the girl's mother, entitled "The Mother's Notes", addressed to a priest; "The Daughter's Reminisces" where the daughter tells her side of the story from within her coma; and the account of a teacher whose suspicion is roused by the mother's testimony that she had raised her daughter "with all the love in the world." Each of

these narrators has their own perspective; in particular, the mother and the daughter's testimony, which make up the bulk of the book, are clearly contradictory. In other words, we have twin, competing unreliable narrators, in the form of two archetypes: the martyr who has staked their identity on being seen as "good", and the wounded child. Reading their accounts back to back, we see clearly that what one has vividly remembered, the other has forgotten. When they do speak of the same events, they do so in radically different ways. In the confrontation before the daughter tries to take her own life, the mother describes herself as "trying to hold back her tears" while the daughter perceives her as being "expressionless"; what the mother describes as "hugging her daughter tight", the daughter describes as the mother "trying to strangle her".

These alternating narratives provide a refreshing variation of voice and perspective, and allow for complex character developments and a clear exposition of the unreliability of the accounts. They also bring up subtle philosophical and psychological questions about the nature of subjectivity. Indeed, the three perspectives recall the Japanese classic *Rashomon*, and the three utterly different views on the same crime found there. The difference between the mother's take on her own parenting—"I couldn't have poured more love into bringing up my daughter" and the daughter's own feelings—"my mother hates me so much that she wants to kill me"—hint towards the subjectivity of narrative, but they also point towards a different and even more wavering kind of subjectivity: that of our emotional and sometimes subconscious truth, and how this shapes our perception of ourselves as well as the people around us. *Motherhood* is determined to examine the stories we tell ourselves, and how these fit in with the eternal desire to please others—particularly our parents, and most especially our mothers.

It's important to say, however, that as "unreliable" as our narrators might be, they are rendered in a way that makes them not only compellingly believable as characters but also to some extent relatable—we, the readers, suffer alongside them as their various trials and tribulations unfold and they are injured by traps of their own creation, understanding that these are people not only trying to make sense of their worlds but also driven forward by unconscious wounds. Indeed, if this is a novel is about what it means to feel maternal, it is also about the nature of childhood need. "The Daughter's Reminisces" section starts with Sayaka noting she is "picturing things from within a pitch-black void", saying, "I don't think dawn will ever come to this darkness." As her account progresses, through the dedication to her mother despite her rejection of her, in her violent behaviour calculated to protect her mother, we come to see clearly the primal force that is the desire for a mother's affection, and the brutal power this has to surpass and warp anything else in her life. This aspect that finds echoes not just in the mother character herself and her relationship with her own

mother, but the other characters in the story, including the protagonist's father. Yet, despite her own pessimism about her prospects, Sayaka eventually awakens: the final account in the book, fifteen years later, tells of her marriage and pregnancy, her own thoughts on what being a mother means—and what seems to have been healing was feeling her mother's hand, hearing her mother call her name. In her description of her own relationship with her mother now we see there hasn't been a radical transformation to her mother's character; rather, her ability to weather a real, flawed relationship appears to stem from a primal wound being healed.

Dotted throughout the book are references to art and poetry, and particularly to Rilke poems, which perform a special function in consolidating the bond between the mother and father in their courtship—via the grandmother's affection for Rilke, and the mother's determination to please her own mother. In fact, it could be said that there is a fourth strand to the book's narrative—the Rilke poems that are quoted in full after each of the daughter's accounts, in addition to being part of the scenes themselves. Not only do these enrich the narrative and add to the dramatic and cloying intensity of feelings, but they seem to add to the bevy of major questions the book addresses as they ask again and again: But what is love? How do romantic love and the love between a mother and a child differ? Is there any recovering from a wounded ego?

When *Motherhood* was published in 2012, its bellyband featured a comment by its author, Kanae Minato: "I wrote this novel thinking that if I could just write this, then I would let myself quit as an author." As it happens, Minato subsequently went on to write many more novels—she is now one of the nation's most popular mystery writers—but the quote speaks to the depth of emotion and investment to be found in this book, which has been made into a 2022 feature film. If it is a novel about generational trauma and the very darkest aspects of human behaviour, it is also about the possibility of healing and change, in spite of a difficult beginning. Even more than its intriguing structure and deftly fleshed-out characters, it is is the urgency of this enquiry which leaves the most lasting impression from the book, and which would make it an ideal follow-up to the Alex-Award winning English translation of her previous novel *Confessions*.

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Kanae MINATO (born 1973) is a Japanese writer of crime fiction and thriller**.**

She started writing in her thirties. Her first novel **Confessions** (Kokuhaku) became a bestseller and won the Japanese Booksellers Award. The movie **Confession** directed by Tetsuya Nakashima was nominated to 2011 Academy Award**.**

She has been described in Japan as "the queen of iyamisu"(eww mystery), a subgenre of mystery fiction which deals with grisly episodes and the dark side of human nature.

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Motherhood by Kanae Minato
Translation by Polly Barton

湊かなえ『母性』（英語タイトル『Motherhood』）サンプル翻訳

On Motherhood

At approximately 6 a.m. on October 20th, in the courtyard garden of a municipal estate in the town of ------, in Y---- City in Y---- Prefecture, a 17-year old girl was found collapsed by her mother, who reported the discovery to the police.
The ------ Police Department are investing the case, and believe the girl to have fallen from her apartment on the fourth floor, but are as yet unsure whether the fall was an accident attempted or an attempted suicide.
The girl's homeroom teacher at school commented that she was "a serious girl, well-trusted by her classmates, and didn't appear particularly troubled." Her mother commented tearfully, "I cherished my daughter and brought her up with all the love one could possibly give a child. I can't believe that something like this would happen."

A Mother's Notes

"I cherished my daughter and brought her up with all the love one could possibly give a child."
The moment I finished saying these words, the priest turned to me. "Why?"
It was a disarmingly simple question, and yet I found myself unable to give an immediate reply.
"You can give me your answer next time," the priest told me. "I'd like you to go away and think about it."
Why had I brought my daughter up with love? It was the first time that I had ever been asked such a question—so I realize now, as I write in this notebook the priest handed me. Thinking about it, I realize also that it's something of a strange question. When the word "why" accompanies actions, it is, for the most part, applied to malicious deeds:
Why did you lie?
Why did you steal?
Why did you kill them?
As far as lying goes, everyone will surely have either asked that question or been asked it at least once in their lives. There is always a reason behind malicious deeds, and it would seem that it is a kind of human instinct to wish to unearth that reason. As proof of that, you only

need to look at the way that people's interest is piqued by events which they hear about in the papers, or on TV, or in magazines, which have nothing to do with them. Sometimes, when they don't know the reason, people invent one for themselves. Of course, as with all things, there are exceptions when it comes to "why" also:

Why did you pay me a compliment?

Why did you give me flowers?

Why would you be sad if I died?

These usages do not relate to bad behaviour. Yet there is a clear difference between the "why" used here and that applied to the malicious deeds—namely, the fact that the person asking the question has already anticipated the answer. Such a person isn't asking because they don't know. They know the answer, but they want to hear it directly from the other person's lips. They ask in order to make sure.

Because I can see you're trying so hard.

Because I like you.

Because I love you.

From a young age, I would repeatedly ask my mother those kinds of why-questions, because I wanted to hear these words which were so pleasant to my ears, and that would fill my heart with warmth. To check my mothers affection, to check that she loved me more than anybody else in the world. Her answers always either met or exceeded my expectations, never betraying them. Not once.

Oh Holy Father, when you told me to "confront what lies in my heart, and note down the words exactly as they come out," I imagine that this is not what you had in mind. Remembering that day is hard, but I need to calm myself, and tell the story of my daughter and I from the very beginning.

I was twenty-four when I got married. Not long before, I had graduated from a college located in the prefecture's largest city and returned to Y---- City, where I was working in an administrative role at a textile company. A colleague invited me along to an oil-painting class at the Culture Centre, and it was there that I met Satoshi Tadokoro.

I was new to oil painting, but I'd had a talent for drawing pictures since I was a child, and I very quickly found myself absorbed. In class, I would always sit in the middle of the front row, asking the teacher—whose own painting had been awarded a prize in a reputed competition—many questions in my eagerness at learning about the subject matter.

Perhaps my efforts paid off, because the third painting I made in class was chosen by the teacher as one of the three she selected each month to be displayed in the Renoir café, next to the Culture Centre.

The picture was of red roses arranged in a white vase.

Our oil-painting class was made up of ten students. It might only have been an amateur class, for people to whom painting was no more than a hobby, but I was still ever so pleased and proud to have my work chosen. I remember clasping hands in joy with Hitomi Sasaki, who had also had her work selected for the first time.

The third student to have their work displayed in the café was Satoshi. His work had regularly adorned the walls of Renoir from his first class onwards, to the point that the other nine students in the class were always fighting over the remaining two slots.

I hated his pictures, though. I found them so gloomy.

He and I were looking at the very same objects—the same flowers and fruits, the same violin—but both the colours we used and our way of capturing the subject matter were totally different. My pictures were brimming with the freshness, warmth and light that their subject matter exuded, while his pictures give no sense of that whatsoever.

Yet there in the Renoir, after paying me faint compliments about how good my picture was, people would go onto lavish praise on his. This one, they said, was particularly outstanding. It was true that the deep red colour in which the rose petals were rendered, which was something of a trademark for him, had an ardent quality to it, but overall the colour scheme was gloomy as ever, and it was hard for me to see it as anything but depressing. I didn't want him to think I was envious, though, and so I too expressed praise for his artwork.

"It has a sad air about it, but it's full of emotion. It really touches the heart."

Satoshi didn't seem overly pleased by my words. On the contrary, he shot me a scornful look. Refusing to join in the group discussion about art that was carrying on at the tables, he sat alone at the counter, smoking and drinking coffee. It was the first time anybody had treated me in that way before.

What a rude man, I thought. In my life up until that point, whenever I'd given praise to somebody, their faces had filled with joy. Yet those unpleasant thoughts soon dissipated with a comment that Hitomi made:

"You can tell from your picture that it was painted by someone raised with love."

Raised with love. Hitomi had graduated from a prestigious women's university in Tokyo, and now she worked as a civil servant—you could trust a well-educated person to perceive such things, I thought to myself.

I was so delighted by this comment, in fact, that when I returned home, I told my mother straight away about it.

"If your paintings are overflowing with love, that isn't only because your father and I have poured so much love into bringing you up, but because you had the capacity to receive that love so fully," my mother said. The very next day, she came with me to Renoir to see my painting. Seeing my mother, the café owner asked if she was my elder sister. This was hardly

an unfamiliar suggestion – most people would ask the same thing when they first saw us. Yet the owner's comments still pleased us, and we turned to one another and smiled.

Even from some distance, when she couldn't possibly have read the labels on the paintings, my mother knew which of the paintings was mine. Moving over to stand in front of it, she murmured to herself, "I was right, it *is* this one," and then proceeded to study the canvas long and hard.

"I always thought that you had a talent for painting as a child, but to accomplish something of this calibre! I can see you really put your heart and soul into it."

I can see you put your heart and soul into it—this was my mother's preferred way of complimenting me, unchanged since my childhood. My response to it, also, was always of the same nature:

"I painted it for you, mother, because I know roses are your favourite flowers."

I did it for you, mother—ever since I was young, whether it was painting, essays, calligraphy, school studies, sports or whatever else, I wanted so badly to make my mother happy, and for her to praise me, that I would always try my very hardest. This time, though, my words failed to find their recipient. They floated around hollowly before dispersing. My mother should, in theory, have responded, "Oh, that makes me so happy to hear!"

Instead I heard her say,

"And which heavens are reflected within them,
upon the interior seas
of these open roses, these carefree ones…"

Immediately I saw that the object of those poetic words, so pleasant to listen to, and the passion-filled gaze accompanying them was Satoshi's picture.

If it were someone else complimenting his picture, I would have been able to say to myself, Aha! They're operating on the misunderstanding that piling praise on gloomy things will make them appear deep to others. With my mother, though, this wasn't something that I could simply overlook. My mother was my alter ego—it couldn't be that we looked at the same thing and felt differently about it. And yet, oblivious to what I was feeling, my mother went ahead and praised the picture in her own words.

"What kind of person painted this, I wonder? It so perfectly captures that brief moment in time when the roses are in full bloom, at the most gorgeous they will ever be, and all that awaits them afterwards is to wither and die. What a fantastic achievement, to express so palpably the beauty of living things in their final stages. Whoever painted this understands that living things seem at their most beautiful and most noble at the very moment one becomes aware of their death."

With this single comment from my mother, my way of seeing the picture in front of me underwent a 180°shift. That was when I realized: my mother is seeing my father in this picture.

My father had died of cancer three years previously. At the time, I had been in the second year of junior college, living in a dormitory away from home, so I hadn't been able to attend him in the final days his life as my mother had.

According to my mother, my father had writhed all night long from the pain of the cancer that had spread across his whole body, crying out in agony. Yet when dawn came, he calmed down, as if the pain had subsided, and looked at my mother with a lucid gaze as he said, "I was so lucky to meet you. Thank you for everything." Then he closed his eyes, as if falling into a peaceful sleep.

I imagined that it was because that image of my father was so strongly etched upon my mother's eyes as the beauty of a beloved in their final moments that she had such a different interpretation of the painting.

How happy my mother would be if I were to give her this picture, I thought.

The following week, after the painting class had finished, I invited Satoshi to Renoir and asked him if he might consider letting me have the painting once the exhibition was finished.

"Well that's unexpected. I didn't think you much liked my paintings."

I saw now that Satoshi had seen through my compliment.

"I did think it was gloomy when I first saw it, you're right. But as I went on looking at it, I came to realise that that it has a beauty that can only be expressed by those with an awareness of death. From that point on I haven't been able to get it out of my head."

My mother's exact words were too good to waste on him, I thought, so I altered them slightly.

"I'm taken aback that anyone would notice that. It makes me want to know more about you."

To my surprise, Satoshi then invited me out on a date. I was used to such requests, however, and just as used to turning them down, so it didn't disturb me too much.

"With me? Are you sure?" I bowed my head as I spoke, as if in embarrassment, but inside I was thinking that I would go on one or two dates with him and, once he'd given me the picture, tell him that I had no intention of embarking on something serious with him.

You couldn't have called Satoshi's handsome even in flattery, but there was something about his slightly sunken eyes with their clear, dark irises that reminded me of my father, and I didn't altogether dislike the way he looked. Yet, although he had graduated from a prestigious university in Tokyo, he was now working in a steel factory, which meant he didn't fit in with my wish to marry someone from one of the learned professions—the kind of professions where people would be referred to as "sensei". My father, after all, had worked as a high-school English teacher.

Why, then, did I marry him?

I now don't know whether this "why" belongs to the good-deed or the malicious-deed kind. I decided to marry him because my mother encouraged me to do so.

When we said our goodbyes after our first date, Satoshi presented me with his painting, along with a collection of poems by Rilke. On the date, we had been for a drive in his car to a park full of hydrangeas. Yet even seeing those beautiful flowers and eating a local delicacy for lunch wasn't sufficient to make the conversation between us flow, and nor did I feel any kind of frisson between us. It was all very dull.

Since he had brought the painting along already, I thought to myself, this would likely be both our first and our last rendezvous. When we parted, he didn't ask to see me again, despite having given me the presents, so all I could do was thank him.

I had told my mother about my date, not omitting to mention that the man in question was the painter of the picture she'd been so fond of. I have not ever hidden a single thing from my mother.

When I got home, and my mother saw the canvas and the collection of poetry, she let out a shriek of delight, her cheeks flushing with pleasure, just like a maiden from a poem herself.

"So he does like Rilke, as I thought! You know I once gave this collection to your father as a present, before we were married."

Saying this, my mother started reciting *The Inner Rose*. The line she had murmured when first looking at Satoshi's picture had apparently come from this poem:

"They can hardly hold themselves
erect; many allow themselves
to be filled all too full and flow
over from inner space"

As she was reciting this, the phone rang. It was Satoshi.

"Did you like your presents?" he asked. I glanced over at my mother, who looked so happy, and the only answer I could give was, "Yes." When he asked me if I would meet him again, I felt I couldn't refuse.

For our second date, we went to the cinema. I had decided that, even if he didn't ask to see me again when we said goodbye, I would tell him that this was the last time that we would meet, yet in the end I was unable to go through with it. I was deeply affected by the film, a Western love story whose main character is a woman living a life of great upheaval. In the cafe we visited afterwards, I spoke with passion of my feelings about it.

"What did you think of it?" I asked afterwards.

"It moved me as well, but I thought the subtitles in that final scene were badly translated. When she jumps aboard that train and says it's the 'point of no return', that doesn't mean

literally or geographically, as the Japanese subtitles suggest. It's more metaphorical than that, she's talking about her emotions.'

There might be some people who would have found this comment pretentious and objectionable. For me, however, there was something very familiar about it. Whenever I had been to the cinema with my father, he would unfailingly make a similar sort of comment. The way Satoshi sang along to the jazz number playing in the café, pronouncing the English words properly, also made me think of my father. Even if our conversation wasn't he kind to make me burst out laughing, I felt perplexed that the space between us felt so comfortable. When he asked for two slices of the cake they served in the café to be boxed up to take home, and gave them to me to eat with my mother, all I could do was bow my head and thank him.

It was on our third date that he proposed.

"Shall we get married?"

When he came out with this apropos of nothing, sitting in a restaurant where we'd taken shelter when it had started raining mid-drive, I responded by saying,

"I'd like you to meet my mother first. Can I give you my answer after that?"

I'm sure that some people would have found this reply disheartening, thinking that it was hardly appropriate to propose a parental consultation after one person had made their feelings clear, but Satoshi nodded and agreed, saying that he wanted me to meet his parents also.

I had no concerns about meeting his parents. I had total confidence that they would like me. I had, in fact, never met an adult who disliked me.

It was Hitomi who warned me. She invited me to Renoir after class, and her first words to me were,

"I don't think you should marry Satoshi. You'll suffer if you do."

Hitomi and Satoshi had been in the same year at school, and had grown up near to one another, so she knew both him and his family well. I found it curious that she knew we were seeing one another when I hadn't told anybody in the class about our meetings, but it wasn't as if we had been in disguise on our dates. Assuming that she must have seen us together, I listened to what she had to say.

"He was involved in the protests back in his student days, you know. He's not got a criminal record as such, but he was so defiant toward his superiors at his first workplace that he got made redundant in six months. He seems to have learned from that because he's calmed down significantly, but you never know when things might blow up again. He's something of a difficult personality."

Hitomi was talking about the student uprising. Several of my friends from my dorms had taken part in assemblies and demos, but I had never taken the slightest bit of interest in such affairs. I didn't have sufficient dissatisfaction with the way things were in the world to raise my voice and argue about it, and I didn't want to do anything involving carrying weapons, or

getting into scuffles – anything that stood to make my parents worried or sad. Yet, although this clearly indicated a difference in values between Satoshi and I, it seemed to me that this was something that was to be discussed between the two of us.

"I think he's a very loyal person," I replied. Yet Hitomi's words of warning still weren't over.

"There's more. His family used to be landowners in the area, so they're not short of money, but his father's eccentric and narrow-minded, and his mother's a real troublemaker. It's the mother you have to really watch out for. She's mean-spirited and is forever accusing others of this, that and the other. She's had a go at me in the past, too. Marry into a family like that and you'll see no end to her complaining. It's bound to send someone with a cosseted upbringing like yours out of their mind."

"I'll think about what you've said. Thanks for the warning."

I pulled an expression of gratitude, but inside I was thinking that she must have done something wrong to be told off by Satoshi's mother. I was the kind of person who worked out what the other person wanted from me and did it. There was no way she would find fault with me.

As it turned out, when Satoshi took me to his house, I wasn't upbraided for anything. Hitomi's warning proved futile—in fact, if anything it only spurred me on. For at the time, I was so desperately to act perfectly so as to avoid reproach that it quite escaped my notice that Satoshi's mother didn't compliment me once. The usual me would certainly have remarked on such a thing. I would have confided my worries in my mother before taking the decision to be married, and had her meet his parents.

As it was, I felt cheered by the situation, and thought to myself that all that remained was for my mother to screen Satoshi.

Satoshi showed up at my house in a suit, carrying one of his paintings. The canvas showed a picture of some hydrangeas. He told my mother that it was the flowers that he and I had seen on our first date, but the flowers I had seen on that day, shining a vivid violet in the bright sunlight, seemed nothing to me like the sad creations on that canvas, the only spot of colour under a dreary, overcast sky. I felt slightly irritated that he'd brought along such a thing, which seemed inauspicious on the occasion of a wedding proposal, but my mother lavished praise on the picture.

She then went on to speak of my father, saying how much he had liked hydrangeas, and recited a Rilke poem: *The Pink Hydrangea*.

"Who thought such pink could be? Who knew it there
Accumulating in each blushing cluster?
Like gilded things which by and by unluster
They gently grow unred as if from wear."

When she broke off, Satoshi picked up the next line. They spoke animatedly for some while about Rilke, and how much his poetry had impressed them.

It seemed as though there was much overlap in their tastes in music and films also, and my mother seemed to be greatly enjoying their conversation, but I couldn't tell what she thought of Satoshi himself. I could usually tell what my mother was feeling without asking, simply by being with her, but this time I had no idea at all. I sensed that her feelings towards him as a person were favourable, but what she made of him as a potential marriage partner for her daughter was harder to say.

After he had left, I asked her impressions.

"He reminds me of a lake. I sense that his great passions, his most important feelings, are hidden deep beneath the surface. If I'm being honest, it did occur to me that someone who's the very embodiment of sunlight like you might prove too dazzling for him, but maybe the fact that he wants to marry you shows that he wants to bring everything sunken at the bottom up to the light, and allow it it sparkle."

The sun and a deep lake—hearing these metaphors made me concerned that if I turned down his hand in marriage, he might have to live the rest of his life without sunlight.

"Do you think I can do that, though?"

"Of course! Look how happy you've made me, after all! If someone wants you, there's no way you'll fail to make them happy."

It was my mother who was truly the embodiment of the sun—the person who always made me feel brave.

The following day, I met Satoshi and asked him, "What kind of family do you want to create with me?"

I felt I wanted to know what it was that Satoshi wanted from me. I had decided that if he replied, "A partner to take on society with", or, "Someone to understand me and assist me in my activities", I would turn down his offer of marriage. It would be a shame that all that positive encouragement on my mother's part would come to nothing, but it was better than making her sad further down the line.

"I want to build a beautiful home with you," was Satoshi's answer.

Hearing those words, the feeling rose up from deep inside me that my mother's impressions had been right after all, and I decided to marry him.

Holy Father, what do you picture when you hear the phrase "beautiful home"?

When Satoshi said those words, an image rose to my mind, like a single photograph lit gently by the sun. The image was of me, Satoshi, our children and my mother standing in a garden full of flowers, smiling peacefully at one another.

What made it beautiful was that the members of the family loved one another, and their happiness was naturally spilling out from the inside. Of course, it would be wonderful if the flowers and the house, the clothes, and the child were all beautiful in and of themselves. You can enumerate such things individually—beautiful flowers, a beautiful house—but a beautiful home isn't just the accumulation of those things.

There was no doubt that Satoshi and I were picturing the same image. I believed that, and I also believed that between us we could create a beautiful home.

A year after we met, Satoshi and I began our life together as newlyweds in a small house. He was the oldest son in his family, which meant he would usually be expected to live with his parents, but as his younger sisters were still students, his parents conceded that there was no need for us to live with them, and instead arranged a house for us to live in.

This house was perfectly placed, some way from his parents' place, and just an hour's bus ride away from my mother's. It was an old wooden one-storey house, built twenty-five years ago, with white walls and a green roof, like something you might expect to find in the middle of the English countryside. I was very fond of it.

The location of the house, high up in the foothills of a mountain, was particularly wonderful. It backed onto a slope filled with sawtooth oaks, while the front windows gave a marvellous view of the setting sun staining the town below orange.

In the flowerbeds of the garden I planted roses, lilies, pansies, and marigolds. Saying that the picture of the red roses that Satoshi had given me had been what brought us together, my mother insisted that we hung it in the entranceway to our house, in a new frame that matched the decor.

I gave up work on getting married. I wanted to be a housewife, like my mother had been before me. In the morning, I would get up half an hour before Satoshi and prepare breakfast and a lunch box for him. Then I would wake him, help him get ready for work and send him off. Afterwards, I would go to visit my mother. That was how I spent my weekdays.

My mother reproached me faintly for this habit, saying that although I might not be living with Satoshi's parents, it didn't do for a married woman to be returning so frequently to her own house. Yet I had a decent reason. I had been married without mentally preparing for my marriage, before I really knew what was happening, and so I hadn't absorbed all of the things that one standardly would have learned from one's mother before going off to be a bride.

This explanation of mine seemed to satisfy my mother, and with each visit, she taught me something new: cooking, sewing, knitting, putting on a kimono, how to write thank-you notes. A mother teaching her daughter important life-skills—the time we spent together back then seemed even richer and more fulfilling than that before I was married. Whenever I

mastered something new, my mother would pat my head and compliment me, saying how well I had done, in just the way she had before I'd left home.

In three months, my repertoire of meals which had previously consisted of two dishes—a tricolour rice bowl topped with meat, eggs and vegetables, and the hamburger patties that I'd been taught how to make in home economics lessons at school—had increased to number more dishes than I could count on my fingers and toes, and even Satoshi, who immediately after we married had complained that he didn't realize I had lived such a cosseted lifestyle, had stopped making sarcastic comments.

And yet, he never once complimented the food I made. Not once, when I changed my hairstyle or bought new clothes, had he told me that I looked beautiful or that it suited me, and when I cleaned the house or decorated the rooms with flowers, he would invariably say nothing.

Compliments were not part of the vocabulary of the people in Satoshi's family. It wasn't until much further in the future that I would realize this, though. At that point in time, it still didn't bother me that much if Satoshi didn't praise me. I had my mother instead, who would praise me for making such an effort with the difficult character whom I had married. That was enough for me, especially since Satoshi didn't get angry with me.

At the weekends, Satoshi would paint. Sometimes I would model for him; at other times he painted the town at sunset, or the flowers in the garden. His colour schemes were as dreary as ever, but when my mother looked at his paintings and exclaimed, "You can see that he really loves you," I would feel a blossoming sense of satisfaction that I was really loved by my husband, even if he didn't express his love in words.

Those were very happy days.

Six months after our wedding, I realized that I was pregnant. When I got up in the morning I felt feverish, and the smell of the steam rising from the rice cooker that I'd set on a timer the night before brought on a wave of nausea. The moment that it occurred to me that I might be pregnant, I felt my feet grow unsteady beneath me, and I ran into the bedroom and dove inside the covers.

When in the past fatigue or a cold had left me feeling unwell, Satoshi had been oblivious, but this time my behaviour was extreme enough that he noticed, asking me with a concerned expression what was wrong.

I didn't want to tell him that there was a possibility I was pregnant. I couldn't think that he'd do anything about it if I did. I told him I wanted my mother.

My mother came rushing over to our house, and the moment she laid eyes on me, she said with a soft smile,

"So the baby has come." Then she added, "Congratulations, my darling."

Seeing her smiling face, tears came spilling from my eyes. They weren't tears of joy. Rather what rose up in me was a sense of terror.

A living creature now existed inside me. It would carry on growing, stealing away my flesh and blood. Then it would rip open my body in order to make its way out into the world. Would I manage to hold onto my life after that? Once the creature had stolen everything away from me, would I not be left just an empty shell? Such thoughts overtook me, I found myself shaking uncontrollably.

With great kindness, my mother held the body of mine so wrought by fear.

"There's no need to be frightened, my darling. I feel such gladness that I was born into this world. I felt the same when I had you, but right now I feel that joy twofold. Now I know for certain that my own life is connected up to the future. As I child, I always wondered about why I'd been born. I even thought that, if I couldn't find an answer, I'd be better off just to die, right then and there. I'm not particularly intelligent, and I wasn't born with any special talents. The world would be no different if I weren't in it. My life had no meaning—so I thought. But when you were born it struck me—maybe if I myself can't leave behind anything in this world, my child might. And if that does happen, then it will only have happened because I myself existed. Because I got married and had a child. It's about existing in history not as a point, but as a line. There's nothing more wonderful, more blessed than that."

When my mother came to the end of her speech, I realized that I had stopped crying.

I visited to the hospital with my mother, and learned that I was in my third month of pregnancy. On the way home, my mother brought me some grapes, my favourite food, to celebrate the good news, even though they were out of season and very costly.

When Satoshi returned from work and I told him the news, he was kind enough to say that from tomorrow on I didn't need to get up so early, and that I could be a bit less scrupulous with the cleaning and other housework. I imagined this meant he was happy. The following morning, he got up thirty minutes before usual and prepared us breakfast.

The breakfast he made was rice and miso soup, the same as I would give him for breakfast. In the evening, though, he cooked spaghetti Napolitana and mixed fruit juice with ingredients he'd bought on the way home from work. With my morning sickness, the tomato sauce was less than ideal, but it I could tell that it was cooked well enough that I would have enjoyed it under normal circumstances.

It surprised me that someone who had been brought up in a traditional household, who never even cleared the table, would be so good at cooking. Satoshi told me that during his student days he had had a part-time job in a café and sometimes worked in the kitchen, so had learned to make the full repertoire of the dishes they served.

When I pulled a sulky face and replied that I wished he'd told me as much before, he responded that he'd been so happy to see me trying my best with the cooking that he hadn't been able to say it, words that ensured that not only my stomach but my heart too was filled to the brim.

When I told my mother of this, she exclaimed in amazement, and then told me that I must be sure not to take advantage. So it was that I came to rely on Satoshi's cooking skills only on those occasions when my physical condition was so bad that I couldn't make it to the kitchen. I took care to ensure I ate the right nutrients, and rested often. I went for occasional walks, listened to classical music, and read poetry. Each time I memorized a new Rilke poem, I felt that I was helping imbue my unborn foetus with a rich sensitivity. It struck me that bringing up the creature inside me with care resembled painting pictures and growing flowers. I would pour all my affection into the task and bring forth a high-quality work of art, so that my mother would be pleased. I planted cosmos seedlings in the garden so that the new life inside me would be welcomed by beautiful flowers.

Some hospitals permitted family members to be present during the birth, but our nearest hospital did not. I didn't want Satoshi to be there during the birth, so that wasn't a problem, but when I found out that the only person allowed to enter the delivery ward after the birth was the husband, I regretted choosing this hospital.

I wanted my mother to see my baby straight after I'd given birth to it.

I didn't mind if they didn't show me the baby, so long as my mother was permitted to see it.

After withstanding the pain that felt like it would rip my body in two, a screaming reddish-purple mass was held up to my face. Even when they said to me, "Congratulations! It's a healthy little girl!" all I could think was, So what? You would be hard-pressed to call that ugly, snub-nosed face covered in wrinkles "a high-quality work of art". I was close to tears with the thought that my mother would most likely be disappointed.

"I'll go and get Daddy shall I?" the nurse said, and for a second, I wondered who on earth "Daddy" was. Satoshi referred to his parents as "Mum" and "Dad", while I called mine "Mother" and "Father". Even knowing that a child was on its way, we had never referred to one another as "Mummy" and "Daddy."

Neither had we discussed what our child should call us. I had vaguely thought that I would have it call us "Mother" and "Father" as I called my parents, but then it struck me that that wasn't what I wanted.

I didn't want to be called "Mother". The word "Mother" referred to my beloved mother, and to her only. I didn't want to go tossing it around like that.

Just then, Satoshi came in. He held the baby the nurse handed him with great trepidation for a few seconds, then hurriedly thrust it back. Turning round to face me, he thanked me, slowly stroking my head with his large palm. As I was thinking up what to say in return, feeling my

chest twinge with emotion, I made out the shape of my mother from within my tear-blurred vision.

"Mother!" I called out plaintively. My mother handed back the baby to the nurse and came to my pillow.

"I know I'm not supposed to be in here, but the nurse saw me peering in desperately through the door and allowed me to enter, saying she'd make an exception for me. Thank you, my darling, for giving birth to such a gorgeous healthy daughter. This is the happiest day of my life!"

"Why?"

"Why, because my beloved daughter has been blessed with such a wonderful treasure. What a huge effort you must have made!"

The hand that my mother now placed on my head was so much warmer than Satoshi's, and her kind voice went seeping warmly into my hollowed-out body. I had been brought up receiving my mother's affection, had shared out that affection with the new life inside my stomach, and when I had given it everything, borne it into the world. But I wasn't an empty shell. Through bringing a baby into this world, my body had once again been filled with my mother's affection.

It was the happiest day of my life.

Even though really, it marked the beginning of my unhappiness.

When dawn came, and my mother looked at my daughter through the glass window of the room with all the newborn infants, she let out a cry of joy.

Immediately after being born, my baby's face and body both had been engorged with blood, so that it had had the reddish purple skin of a monster, and its nose had seemed terribly squashed, but now that the night was through, the baby had transformed into a beautiful child whose skin was whiter than any of the other babies, her nose now standing up beautifully. Of course my mother would be overjoyed. Seeing the happiness of Satoshi's parents when they arrived before noon, though, I was filled with the sense of satisfaction of a job done well.

"She looks just like Ritsuko when she was a baby. Although her mouth is maybe more like Noriko's."

It brought me a wave of displeasure to hear my mother-in-law bringing up the names of my sisters-in-law like that, but after the family had gone home, my mother said,

"What on earth were they talking about? Anyone can see that whole bloodline has dumpling noses! No darling, she has the exact same face as you and I."

Laughing at this together, my mother-in-law's comment immediately ceased to matter to me.

The one thing that I didn't like about the whole affair was that it was my mother-in-law who chose my daughter's name. I had made several suggestions myself, saying that if it were a girl I'd like her to be named after a flower, and Satoshi had bought a naming book and had been

researching names, but when his mother-in-law said she had paid a famous Buddhist priest 50,000 yen to select the baby's name, we had no option but to go along with her choice.
"This name borrows one character each from the names of two of my closest friends. Both of them are pretty, clever and kind, so I've no doubt she'll turn out just the same."
We took my daughter back to the house on the hill, and those days that we spent the three of us, and with my mother, were the most blissful of my entire life.
Come the weekends, Satoshi would paint pictures of my daughter.
His renditions of her as she grew – sleeping, lying face up, sitting up, standing – all showed her with white skin, rosy cheeks, and pale pink lips. For the first time ever, his canvases boasted bright colour schemes. Even their backgrounds were full of warmth. My mother lavished praise on these, too.
"Satoshi knows how to differentiate between those things that are going to live and those things that are going to perish.'
When my mother uttered these heartfelt words, it seemed to me as though Satoshi understood everything—the nature of the world, the very source of humanity. Yet it didn't stop me from thinking that if he really had understood that our young daughter was a creature who was going to live, he could at least have changed her nappy now and then.
For all his skill in preparing meals, Satoshi was incapable of drawing close to our daughter, and as a result, I raised her single-handedly.
I was producing no shortage of breast milk, but for some reason, my daughter didn't take to it. When she got even a little in her mouth, she would spit it out, and turn her face from my breast. It wasn't that she was full. When I gave her formula milk from a bottle, she would gulp it down with relish. This meant that several times an evening, I had to stand in the cold of the wintertime kitchen and make formula.
I suppose you could say that my daughter rejected me even before she was conscious of doing so. Yet I didn't dwell on this thought, vowing instead to do all that I possibly could as a mother.
My mother bought me a beautiful photo album with French embroidery on the cover, and I began taking photographs of my new baby on a daily basis. Whenever I added photographs to the album I would append them with quotes from Rilke's poetry collection, or sentences that I myself had written, to convey the joy of a mother graced with a child:

"Ah, a smile
The first smile
A smile for us"

"My sweet angel,

What whispers in the wind do you hear
That makes you smile so?"

"The flowers are blooming for you,
The birds are tweeting for you,
All the joy in this world is all
For you…"

As she turned the pages of the album, my mother would compliment me, saying, "I can see you've put your heart and soul into creating this! What a wonderful mother you've become."
I also sewed a number of clothes for my daughter. This came about because I found a magazine article discussing the European countryside custom where young brides would take the clothes that their mother had sewed when they themselves were babies when they went to be married, to dress their own children in, and it had struck me how wonderful it was. When I told my mother about it, she commented in a very regretful tone,
"Oh, and I made you so many clothes! I only wish that I'd kept them."
So I suggested that we made clothes as a team. Together she and I selected the fabric, and I would sew them in the way that she taught me, casting a wish with each stitch:
"May my daughter turn out to be the kind of child loved by everyone, just like me."
I knew that in order to produce a daughter like that, I had to love her above anybody else, just as my mother had done with me.
As my daughter grew, I taught her to show consideration for others. When we came across a child crying in the park, I would say to my daughter, "I wonder why she's crying?" When my daughter responded, "Maybe she's lonely," I would teach her the most appropriate response, saying "Why don't you go over and say, would you like to play with me?"
What should you do if you see a person looking cold?
What should you do if a person is hungry?
How should you treat an angry person?
As I gently put these questions to my daughter as part of our daily lives, she learned to pick up my feelings, and to give me the answer that I most wanted.
You should hold their hand to warm them up.
You should share your snack with them.
You should ask them why they're angry.
I recall an event at my daughter's class at nursery, when she was still just three years old. On Grandparents' Visiting Day at the nursery, my mother had an arrangement she couldn't get out of, and so Satoshi's mother went along instead. I wasn't allowed to accompany her. As I was waiting at home, worrying about what would happen if something displeased my

mother-in-law and she flew into a rage at the nursery, she came home holding my daughter's hand, looking very pleased. Without me having to asking anything, she informed me of what had happened.

When she had arrived at the nursery, the children—including my daughter—had been in the classroom, she said. The other children were so immersed in their play that, when they noticed their grandparents had arrived, the very most they did was to wave. When my daughter saw her grandmother, however, she came out of the classroom and got out a pair of the slippers for guests that were kept outside the door, arranging them in front of her grandmother and saying, "Here you are, grandmother." Then she bowed her head and said, "Thank you very much for coming to Grandparents' Visiting Day." With that, she showed her inside the classroom.

"I felt ever so proud that she was a Tadokoro," my mother-in-law concluded.

I should say that I hadn't instructed my daughter to behave like that—she'd done it of her own accord. The thought that my daughter would behave like that even when I wasn't there moved me greatly. Yet it had nothing to do with her being a "Tadokoro". On the occasions when I went to visit the Tadokoros' house, they would rarely serve me so much as a cup of tea, despite the fact that the house was full of women. Still, my mother-in-law went onto say, "It's because you've brought her up so well."

This was the first time that my mother-in-law had ever complimented me.

She was certainly hard to please, but if I lived up to her expectations then she *would* praise me. She would love me. How happy my mother would have been, I thought, if she had been here to hear those words. More to the point, how fervent would the praise heaped on me have been if it had been my mother, rather than my mother-in-law, who'd been to Grandparents' Visiting Day!

These were my thoughts at that time. On several different occasions, though, my mother told me of similar situations:

"When we went shopping and I offered to buy her a cake, she asked me straight away which flavour I liked best. Then she told me that her mother liked chocolate and her father liked coffee the most, and generally seemed more concerned with choosing cakes for me and you than for herself."

"A child fell over while we were playing in the park. It wasn't someone she was playing with, but she was the first to run over, ask them if they were okay and wipe their knees with a handkerchief. Her favourite rabbit handkerchief no less, and yet she didn't hesitate."

"You know when Satoshi brought her over in the car recently? When she left, what do you think she said? 'It's cold, grandma, so make sure you don't catch cold!'"

I knew that it wasn't just my daughter's considerateness that my mother was praising.

There were lots of mothers amongst those I'd met at nursery who sent their children to cram schools and English classes, but I wasn't so zealous when it came to education. For girls, there were more important aspects to securing the love of others than academic ability. And yet, my daughter was a very bright child. From the books we gave her as toys, she learned both the hiragana and katakana scripts, all the numbers up to 99, and some English words. I believe this was nothing to do with the Tadokoro bloodline, but my father's.

"We'll have to take her to the zoo soon! She can say 'elephant' and 'hippopotamus' in English."

"She could read the labels to all the cakes! The woman in the cake shop was so impressed that she gave us a crème caramel for free!"

"At the butcher's, she managed to calculate even before I did that with four croquettes at 60 yen each, it'd be 240 yen."

My mother seemed genuinely elated when she spoke about my daughter. Her expression brimming with joy, she would say to me,

"You've brought up our treasure into such a fine little girl. You're doing such an excellent job! That's the part that makes me the happiest."

How happy I was, loving my daughter, being loved by my own mother! I savoured that happiness.

The garden was full of flowers in bloom. Satoshi sat my daughter in a small chair and painted her, while my mother and I smiled and recited Rilke poems from time to time as we watched. The sparkling sunlight softly enveloped the four of us. It was just like in the image of the "beautiful home" that I'd imagined.

Yet that happiness did not last for long.

Holy Father, I've written everything about the happiest time of my life, and yet I couldn't find the answer.

Why did I bring my daughter up with all the love I could possibly give her?

Does the answer really exist? Did you not give me this notebook not really to discover the answer but rather to restore a sense of peace to my heart?

Or else, having read this far, do you now know the answer?

Did you know the answer from the very beginning, and are leading me towards discovering the answer myself, waiting for me to discover it?

I will hand this notebook back to you here, so if you do know the answer, be so good as to tell me.

What follows from this point on is so hard that I barely trust myself to write about it.

Motherhood by Kanae Minato
Translation by Polly Barton

A Daughter's Reminiscences

What I end up imagining, from out of this pitch-black darkness, is always the same.
How would things have been if we'd continued living in that dream house?
There are some evenings when, despite there being nothing particularly out of the ordinary about the weather or the humidity level, all the sound seems to vanish, and only the sound of the air drifting around slowly echoes deep inside one's ears. Those are the times when you recall your happiest memories. Those are the joyful times steeped in reminisces.
From within that place, I search desperately for something. What? Yet because I know somewhere inside that morning will come soon and I'll have to confront reality, I can't immerse myself fully. Nor do I know the true nature of the "something."
In all likelihood, what I'm searching for is me. But morning will never dawn on the darkness I'm now immersed in. Which is why, now, I steep myself in memories to my heart's desire, appending all the things that were missing from my life as I remain in this deep sleep.
From one particular moment on, the land of my memories became a world devoid of colour and scent. Even there, though, very rarely, there will be a flash of colour or fragrance, that show me which the happy memories are.

Unloved children don't understand what it is to play.
Is "play" the right word, here? Maybe you could substitute that word with "to have some slack", or "to have a margin for error". In any case, that quality of not understanding what it means to play is often labelled, by people on the outside, as "being serious", which is generally taken as a compliment. As a result, the person in question is unlikely to notice that something is missing. Even if they're aware of the playful quality in others, they tend to feel that it is not something that they themselves need.
Yet that quality of "having some slack", which is necessary in machines and clothes is, of course, also needed by people. It is not something that you can acquire through effort. It's something that people should have as a matter of course—why, then, do I not have it? Was it something I was born with, which withered as I grew?
That's the question I want to think about first, although I know that for the most part, by the time that you come to understand the answers to the questions that pop up when you look back on your life, it's too late.
As I child, I paid great attention to the reactions of the people, and especially the adults, around me.
How am I coming across to that person? Am I a nuisance to them? Do they think I seem friendly? Is what I'm saying and how I'm acting pleasing them?… Now it seems utterly pathetic.

I'll give an example. In middle school, I took the bus to school.

I didn't want people thinking me antisocial, so when there were kids from my year in the bus shelter, I'd join in their conversations. In this way, I made four or five new friends, in addition to the friends from my class and club activities. The buses in that part of the countryside only came twice an hour, even at the times when kids were travelling to or from school, and if you got the timing wrong, you'd sometimes have to wait for close to half an hour. Chatting away with the others in the shelter, though, the time passed in a flash.

"You know that X fancies Y?" "But Y's got the hots for Z…!" I joined in the others and spoke excitedly about such things, even if they had no relation to me. Maybe it was precisely because this stuff was unrelated to me that I could talk about it without thinking too much about the people around me.

The bus shelter was full of mint-coloured air. Maybe it just seemed that way to me because at the time, there was a craze for choco-mint ice cream. I don't know if it was a nationwide craze or not, but it was the favourite food of the main character of a girls' manga that was popular back then, and the word "mint" was used a lot in titles for things. The girls who'd tasted choco-mint ice cream before it made its way to our part of the countryside would boast about how delicious it was, but as soon as it started appearing in our local supermarkets, they quickly changed their tune, saying it was just like toothpaste and they couldn't understand the obsession with it at all.

That fickleness was another quality that I just didn't have. But I could still laugh along with the others, saying "You're right, it looks like it'd be so bad for you!" Back at this time, the only building close to the bus stop was the school.

Towards the end of my second year of middle school, though, a private clinic opened up in front of the bus stop. From that point on, you started to see lots of elderly people and mothers with their children sitting on the bench in front of the bus stop, and the mint-coloured zone became just one small part of the shelter, confined to space we occupied. But no, I shouldn't say "we". It's more accurate to say that I myself was outside of the mint-coloured space.

One day, while joining in the same sort of airy, superficial conversation as ever, I darted a glance at the corner of the waiting room and noticed an old woman looking toward us with a frown. Next to her, a young mother sat with her child slumped on her lap, stroking his sweaty forehead. I imagined that our high-pitched voices must have been irritating for people feeling poorly.

"Hey, we should speak a bit quieter so as not to cause a nuisance to people," I said to my friends.

At that instant, the talk of the battle being waged between a new teacher and a person in the year above over the school's most popular teacher was dropped, as though it had instantly become the most insignificant subject in the world. Everyone pulled bored-looking faces,

moving outside to stretch or opening up their pocket mirrors to arrange their hair or search for split ends. It seemed 99% certain that they wouldn't now resume the conversation in hushed voices. Quiet spread through the waiting room, and the mint-coloured air vanished. In order to crush the sense of loneliness rising up inside, I murmured to myself,

"I've not done anything wrong."

Now I can see it: what I did was pointless. The waiting room was silent, but nobody was grateful to me for what I'd done. If it had bothered me that the people around us were finding our behaviour was disagreeable, then I should have thought a bit harder about the words I chose.

I had several chances, into high school, to realise that. Tōru Nakatani had said it to me, not after we'd started going out:

"The things you say are right, but they're lacking feeling."

From the start, Tōru and I had never been enveloped in that rosy pink-coloured air I noticed with other couples, but it still bothered me that my boyfriend would say something that cutting.

"If what I'm saying's right then why do you have to attack me? What's this *feeling* that I'm lacking, anyway? Who decided that you have to have that? If I'm telling someone that they've done something wrong, I don't see why I should go pulling a hurt face as if I'm the victim in the situation! It's pathetic."

I was so frustrated by the thought that even Tōru couldn't understand me that tears came spilling from my eyes. If I'd just cried then he might have found that adorable in it's own way, but instead, as I wept, I channelled my rage onto him.

Tōru pulled a face that said, here we go, and changed tack.

"Sorry. I didn't mean that. The teacher is forever changing their tune according to their mood that particular day, and sometimes the points you make are right on. There's been times in the past when I've clapped. I'm not saying that you need have more feeling with everything you do. But is there really such a need to set right every tiny wrong? You're still a teenager! This is the time of your life when you're allowed to get away with things. It's a waste not to take advantage of that."

"The privilege of being a teenagers, eh? So long as people go around flouting that as an excuse, underage crime will continue to thrive," I retorted.

Tōru seemed to have given up on the idea of arguing back. Instead he smiled wistfully and scratched his head, saying, "It doesn't matter."

Now, finally, I can see what he was saying.

When arguing back, people without the concept of play tend to give extreme examples. Tōru wasn't saying that you'd be forgiven for crimes as a minor. He was telling me that there were more opportunities for play as a teenager than there were in adulthood.

The people in the bus shelter might have been finding us loud, but only enough to make them frown a little. If we had truly been bothering them, then, given that we were wearing the local uniform, they could have reported us themselves. Even as they felt irritated by us, they had most likely been forgiving us in their hearts, remembering that they themselves had been school kids like us once, or thinking about the joys of youth. Maybe they had been enjoying eavesdropping on the kind of gossip that was generated in school, a place to which they themselves no longer had any direct connection.

Everyone knew all that; it was only me who didn't know. Was it that I didn't have the capacity to realise something that obvious on my own? No, it was rather that I couldn't believe that I'd be forgiven if I did something even slightly wrong. I was terrified of not being forgiven.

To be forgiven = to be loved.

This was an equation that existed only inside me. In order to be loved, I had to do the right thing. I had to do things to please other people. *Just your presence is enough*—those words had no place in my life. Or rather, they had done, a long, long time in the past. Now I finally understood the true nature of that which it was I was seeking in the darkness.

Unconditional love.

If what I was trying to imagine was the kind of person that I would have become if I'd grown up with unconditional love, then the place I needed to set out for the answers was the house of dreams, with all its roses and lilies. I needed to go back to those days enveloped in vivid colours and scents.

My earliest memory is from when I was three, and standing in the garden to my house. It was a small house with white walls and a green roof, standing on top of a hill that looked down over our countryside town. In its garden full of lilies, roses and other seasonal flowers, I was sitting in a white wooden chair, while my father peered at his canvas with a look of concentration. The smell of oil paints. My mother pointing a camera at me.

"Smile, darling! Smile so you outshine the sun!"

I remember thinking that my mother's face, as she said this these words to me, itself wore a smile like that of the sun. When she had finished photographing me, my father, and the flowers in the garden, she set the camera down on the white table. She looked at my father's easel and smiled in satisfaction, then still standing, looked up at the sky and began to recite in a sing-song voice these beautiful words:

"How shall I hold my soul that it may not
Be touching yours? How shall I lift it then
Above you to where other things are waiting?"

When the words ceased to come out of my mother's mouth, my father, who was silently moving his brush on the canvas, continued without removing his gaze from the easel:

"Ah, gladly would I lodge it, all forgot,
With some lost thing the dark is isolating
On some remote and silent spot that, when
Your depths vibrate, is not itself vibrating."

It was only recently that I came to know that this was a Rilke poem.

Later I listened as sitting on his white chair, looking out at the sunset, my father strummed his guitar, and my mother, sitting next to him, sung a song called "The Little Nut". The calls of the crows garnished the melancholy melody as it travelled out into the orange sky and vanished. Feeling a little anxious that I too might be swallowed up by that sky, I ran over to my mother and father. They weren't an especially attractive couple, but to my eyes, their faces illuminated by the setting sun seemed ever so beautiful.

If I were to say all this to someone, they'd doubtless laugh at me, and think I'd lost my senses. They'd worry that I was a fantasist, the kind of girl who believed in a prince on a white horse was coming to carry her away. Yet these are real memories that exist inside me.

Of course this wasn't how we spent our every waking moment. Working outwards from the paintings and the poems and the guitar-playing, you might imagine that we breakfasted each morning on croissants and café au lait, but in fact, our breakfast was always a humble one of rice and miso soup. Every morning, my father would don his grey overalls every day and set out to the steel factory where he worked on his Honda Super Cub, coming home in the evening smeared all over with grease. When he'd had a bath, changed into shirt and trousers and eaten dinner—hamburgers and tricolour rice bowls made frequent appearances in the menu—he would lie on the red velvet sofa in front of the TV, absorbed in the evening baseball matches. He never forgot to check the results of the horse races in the paper, either.

He always had both a beer and a nutrition drink beside him, and would take sips from each in turn. When I showed curiosity about the nutrition drink in its small brown bottle beside him and asked him about it, he held it out to me and said, "You can have up to three sips."

When I'd taken two, my mother came dashing out of the kitchen, "You shouldn't give that stuff to kids!"

From that point on, my father would let me have sips of his nutrition drink when my mother wasn't looking—as many sips as my age at the time.

My mother looked like the sort of person who would make homemade apple pies and so on, but in fact she wasn't much good at baking, aside from pancakes. When people from charities and so on came by selling cookies, she'd get carried away and buy up a whole load. I remember one time she tried to use them up by serving them t us with curry, in place of rice. My father rarely got angry, but that was one of the occasions when he did have a go at her.

Eighty per cent of my life was like that—and yet it's the special twenty per cent that remains in my memory.

Two or three times a month, my father would turn off the TV, put on a record of one of his favourite pieces of music, and listen as he drank whisky and snacked on chocolate. My mother and I would lean up against the sofa, drinking cocoa and enjoying the music. Those are my beloved night-time memories. Back then, when I would watch the smoke rising up from his cigarette and drift around in time with the music, I didn't dislike cigarettes in the way I do now.

Some Sunday afternoons, we would do something we called Satoshi's Diner, where my father would rustle up a light meal for me and my mother. My mother liked his Spaghetti Napolitana, whereas my favourite was his Seafood Pilau. The fact that the first chocolate creme brûlée I ever ate was homemade was a point of pride with me for some time.

But no, I should stop remembering my father.

I suppose something else that goes along with the twenty per cent is my memories relating to clothes. My mother with her back to me, facing the sewing machine. As I sat there drawing pictures in time with the rhythm of the sewing machine, she would occasionally call out to me, "Come here a minute!" When I went over to her, she would hold up her creation to my body, nodding in satisfaction and saying "Yes, very nice." My mother held the same fabric up to her own body too. Whenever a piece of clothing was finished, she would tell me that I should take it with me when I got married.

I remember the two of us, dressed in matching outfits, getting on the bus to visit my grandmother. On the way, my mother said,

"I want you to do your best to please your grandmother, okay? Ask her, 'Are you well?' and 'Aren't you cold?' Try to think about what she would want you to say, and say it."

"Okay, mummy," I answered. All the while I was on the bus I thought about what I would to say to my grandma. Yet when we saw her, my mother got in there first.

"It's been so chilly of late, you've been worried about whether grandma has caught cold, haven't you? Oh, and you were saying to me that the roses in our garden are so beautiful, that grandma should come and see them! And you wore the sweated grandma knitted you to nursery and everyone complimented it, didn't they? You were so happy, weren't you?"

I didn't remember saying any of those things to my mother, but I didn't correct her, and I didn't find her words strange, either. I understood very well that my mother wanted me to say those kinds of things to my grandmother.

Starting with the next visit, I became able to say those kinds of things without being prompted by my mother. And yet the things that I said to my grandmother weren't the words that my grandmother wanted to hear, but the words my mother wanted to hear. Of course, I also said things that I truly felt.

"I love you granny."

I noticed that it was when I said those words that my grandma looked the most pleased.

"And I love you too, my darling."

When she said that, I felt the joy filling my whole body, right to the tips of my fingers and toes.

I have many happy memories of the time I spent with my grandmother, like the two of us going to buy sweets hand in hand, or doing origami together. What my grandmother gave me was unconditional love. I can say that with conviction.

What my mother gave me, on the other hand… Even at that time, I don't know if I can say whether it was unconditional love. She definitely took good care of me. But I never got the sense that simply my presence was enough for her.

Imagine, for a moment, there was a picture in my mother's mind of that which was most important to her. The picture wouldn't be a portrait of me, but the image of a beautiful home with a garden full of flowers, where three people lived happily. The title would probably be something like "All The Love Possible" or "My Angel" or "My Treasure" or one of the phrases that my mother used when talking to other people about me. The picture was of the house as whole, and what it represented—"A Place of Great Happiness". Or else, it was an image of my grandmother holding me like a doll and smiling.

In other words, my presence was just a constituent part of the happiness my mother envisaged. Yet that was enough. I could see the same picture, after all.

Maybe if we had continued living inside that picture, I wouldn't be left all alone inside that darkness like this. The idea of the approaching dawn bringing with it the need to confront reality is tough for me, but the idea of no dawn whatsoever is in itself unspeakably sad. So I'll continue to paint for myself a continuation of that picture of happiness.

When I started primary school, I set off to school with a brand new rucksack on my back. I still scolded the boys who were fooling around, but I'd decided not to take their words too deeply to heart, so I no longer went off on one and raised my voice, or gave them irate lectures. At the very worst, I'd puff out my cheeks in frustration.

Then I'd go home and report on all the things that had happened at school while I drank milk and ate the pancakes my mother had made.

"The boys are so mean."

My mother would smile at me and my grumpy face and say, "Oh dear, oh dear," as she laid more freshly made pancakes on the plate. As I inhaled the smell of vanilla deep into my belly, it started to seem stupid to be so wound up about it, and as I was eating the pancakes slathered with honey and butter, I would forget about all the bad things that had happened and think, Ah, it doesn't matter.

Then I would talk to my mother about inviting my friends over at the weekend.

Motherhood by Kanae Minato
Translation by Polly Barton

Even when I told my mother that one of the people I wanted to invite was Mako, whose mother had run off with a younger man, my mother wouldn't hesitate to give her consent. She would be even more welcoming to Mako than to my other friends, thanking her in an earnest tone for being my friend. Then, after Mako had gone home, she would pat my head and say, "You're such a good girl for being so kind to that poor little child."

My mother would tell my father about it, and though my father wouldn't say much to me in terms of praise, he'd let me have a square of the chocolate he ate with his whisky as a treat, and two additional sips of his nutrition drink. Then he'd turn off the TV and the two of us would listen to music. After a while, my mother would come to join us. Before she could tell me to get to bed, I'd pretend to fall asleep on the sofa, and after that I really would fall asleep, so that my father would carry me to bed. From within that hazy state somewhere, between dream and waking, I'd realize that I hadn't brushed my teeth, but as he laid me down and covered me with the blanket, I'd think to myself, never mind.

Ah, never mind. This is fun. Never mind, I'm happy. Never mind, I'm loved.

Is that what I'd think? Wasn't the desire to use the word "love" a sign that you're not loved? A sign, also, that you yourself don't know how to love? Ah, never mind.

The missing part of me, the playful part, was the part that was able to think that pet phrase of Tōru's: Ah, never mind.

That was the thing that vanished from inside me, along with the house of dreams on the hill. I'm pretty certain that my mother and my father lost it too. It's too late now, though, to realize that. It was me, after all, who broke it all apart.

The house that has disappeared will not return. My beloved grandmother won't come back. I am not loved by anyone. My life will soon end. My imagination is no help to me either…

Who now cries anywhere in the world,
causelessly cries in the world,
cries over me.

Who now laughs anywhere in the night,
causelessly laughs in the night,
laughs at me.

Who now walks anywhere in the world,
causelessly walks in the world,
walks to me.

Motherhood by Kanae Minato
Translation by Polly Barton

Who now passes away anywhere in the world,

causelessly passes away in the world,

looks at me.