

Confidential

KADOKAWA / Light novel

Even If This Love Vanishes from the World Tonight



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The girl, nothing but beauty, someone who should have had no meaning to me, spoke.

“We can be a couple, but on three conditions.

One, we don’t talk to each other until after school.

Two, we keep our phone contacts as brief as possible.

And three, don’t *really* start to fall in love with me. Can you stick to that?”

To me, at the time, there were a few things I didn’t really understand. In terms of the people around me, how to fake a love confession the right way. In philosophical terms, death. In more poetic terms, love. And now, there was something new I couldn’t comprehend—myself. For some reason, I looked at this unknown woman—and said “okay.”

The Oblivious Man’s Unknown Girlfriend

1

I always believed I’d live my life without ever really surprising myself. I didn’t think I’d ever do anything out of character or unbelievable for me—nothing that I’d look back on afterward and be shocked about. My grades and test scores were the same way—no real surprising results or achievements. I was never disappointed in myself, but I never thought “Wow, you really hit it out of the park today” either.

On that day after school, however, I really *did* surprise myself.

A little while after the new school year began in April, a group of boys in class began picking on another one of the boys. No doubt, I’m sure, they were frustrated at being put in this also-ran class in year two after working hard to get into this college-track public high school and needed someone to work out their frustration on. I could understand that, even if I didn’t agree with it.

Their target was the student seated in front of me. I didn’t really interact with a lot of people in school—it wasn’t like I was shunning friendship, but I just spent a lot of time in class reading books. Still, I couldn’t put up with what seemed like a decent enough guy get tormented like this.

“Look, what does this even accomplish for you guys?”

They were carrying on with their usual crap in front of me that afternoon. When I said it, time froze for a moment in the classroom. The group’s ringleader turned at me and grinned—and from that moment forward, I was the new target. *Ahh*, I thought coldly in my mind, *I figured this would happen*.

But that was all right enough. Childish harassment, unjustified gossip and scorn—it was nothing. But when I ignored all of it, they must have grown bored, because their target went back to the first student.

Now some of their harassment went undercover. Apparently they started hitting him up for money, and thanks to that, the student started missing class pretty often.

I told them to knock it off, a quiet anger in my heart. “Okay,” their ringleader said, “do just one thing we tell you, and we’ll stop.” I accepted the offer, figuring I knew what I was getting myself into. But their order was middle school-like in its immaturity: “Go tell Maori Hino in Class 1 that you love her by the end of today.”

So after class ended, I stopped her in the hallway, inviting her behind the school as they instructed me to, and executed the order under their surveillance. I intended to come back later to her, explain things, and apologize.

“We can be a couple,” she said, “but on three conditions.”

I never expected in a million years that she'd say yes.

She proceeded to lay out her rules, lifting one finger into the air for each one. I was almost too surprised to answer her, and I'm sure the boys watching us in the shadows were too.

I didn't really know the person in front of me—Maori Hino, part of the “academically talented” Class 1. She was seen as attractive by a lot of male students, it seemed; I had heard several classmates talk about her before. I took another look. She was nothing but beauty, someone who should have had no meaning to me. If I said “no” to her now, would she reply “Okay, never mind then” and leave me, hair waving in the air as she turned away? Would that harm either of us? Would that wrap everything up well enough?

“Okay.”

My voice seemed like it didn't belong to me. It took a moment to recognize it, and then I started to wonder why I said that.

I couldn't believe myself. I was sure Hino realized I wasn't seriously thinking about this—but she relaxed her stiffened expression and, amazingly enough, smiled.

“All right. In that case, we'll be a couple starting tomorrow. Thanks.”

Then she turned around and left, her work apparently complete—but not before looking back one more time and giving me a thin smile. It was natural, not contrived or something she had to psyche herself up for, and it felt like the smile reflected her inner nature.

“By the way, I forgot your name. Can you tell me one more time?”

“Oh... It's Toru. Toru Kamiya.”

“Got it. Toru, right? My name's Maori Hino. Let's talk after school tomorrow, okay? Oh, and if you don't mind keeping my rules a secret from other people, that'd probably help. See you.”

With another smile, Hino left and didn't turn back. The boys, waiting to see me get turned down like a chump, reluctantly filed out of their hiding places.

“Dude, who *are* you?”

The ringleader, eager to make a laughingstock out of me, practically spat out the question.

“Just did what you told me to do, man.”

The mood was strained as he stared at me. Then he snorted and bumped my arm as he stormed past my side. The rest of the group looked ready to say something, but just followed him off instead.

Watching them go, I turned toward the direction Hino went. I had never had feelings for a female classmate in my life. As a kid, I obsessed over my older sister, loving her like a mother and patiently waiting for her to come back home, as I mentally pictured myself living with her and Dad forever. That's what I believed my life was.

Due to the way our family was, we had decided I'd take a job after high school instead of going on to college. I got assigned to this class of also-rans in part because that's what I told the counselor, I suppose. So while it wasn't because we'd be taking different paths in life or anything, I never really thought about girls in my class since getting into high school. That also applied to Maori Hino, the girl from before.

Would it be better to chase her down and explain that I was lying about all of that? But I had already said “okay” to all her rules, so it was kind of hard to say that now. She said we'd talk again after school tomorrow, so maybe I ought to wait until then to work all this out. Maybe my thoughts would be more arranged by that point.

Such was my thinking as I looked up at the sky—it was still well before sunset—and headed home.

So that's how we met.

The next morning, the first thing I did when I woke up was attend to the laundry.

I lived in public housing, just me and my dad, and for the most part I was in charge of things around the apartment. Two men, perhaps, didn't generate enough laundry to have to do it every day, but even after it became just the two of us, there's one rule I always wanted to stick to—like my sister always used to say, hygiene is important. As poor as we were, she always gave me and Dad carefully-ironed handkerchiefs paired with blindingly white shirts, not a fray or wrinkle in them.

Instead of focusing on surface-level cleanliness, you needed to think about rooting hygiene in your daily life. My sister said that all the time, and looking back, maybe it was to protect our family from looking all shabby and poor.

As I hung the clothing to dry and prepared breakfast, Dad woke up and poked his face into the living room the kitchen overlooked.

"Morning, Toru. Oh, what's for breakfast?"

"Hi, Dad. Make sure you shave before breakfast today, okay?"

At a glance, Dad didn't look too hygienic to me. All the stuff around him was, but his prominent stubble ruined the effect. He worked on the assembly line at a nearby auto factory—it didn't pay much, but it didn't have to do any night shifts. My mom passed away when I was little, but when she was still around, I feel like Dad seemed more like, well, a dad—full of aspiration and everything. Not any longer. A lot of people in the family sighed over how Dad changed after she passed.

So Dad and I sat at the table and enjoyed our steaming breakfast, me wrapping up ahead of him. I cleared the table, putting a few sides and some white rice into each of our lunchboxes. Picking my box and schoolbag up, I said goodbye to him, not forgetting to take my handkerchief, and left the apartment.

The sky in May seemed so blue, extending high upward. It'd be ending soon, but I liked the month of May. I think that has a lot to do with my sister lying to me about the "May blues" a while back. In Japan, April's a time for cherry blossoms, new school years, and people starting their jobs after graduation—once the blossoms leave and the novelty wears off, though, people often start feeling down. Japanese people call that the May blues, but my sister described it as a time when people finally relax after the busy April, watching new buds grow and kicking back a little. I always thought that was an elegant way to describe the month.

My sister was a quiet woman, much like the plants and trees themselves. Sometimes, though, she'd tell me little fibs like that with a straight face.

I reminisced about the past as I walked to the station. On the way, I noticed some bushy green leaves on the vegetation in a park I always walked past. Their beauty struck me a bit. I wanted to leave my mind there for a while. The May blues really *are* a nice thing to have. Elegant.

"Um, sorry to interrupt this fascinating conversation, but is Wataya looking at us?"

I was talking about the May blues with Shimokawa, the guy in front of me, during our second-period break when he asked me that out of nowhere. "Look out at the hallway," he said, and when I did, I spotted a beautiful if moody-looking girl. This was Wataya, Hino's friend, and she was curiously looking into our classroom through the hallway window. A few of my classmates were giving her strange looks back.

Wataya and I had never spoken; like Hino, I had only the barest of relations with her. She was apparently pretty smart, and a lot of guys fostered a secret fondness of her cool, bracing looks. She was next to Hino when I caught her in the hallway yesterday. When I asked her to join me out back for something, she didn't join us, but she *did* flash me a

baffled look.

"I didn't mention it yet," I muttered as I looked back at Wataya now, "but after school yesterday, I asked Hino in Class 1 if we could be a couple."

"Huh? Y-You did? What do you mean?"

Shimokawa, also looking at her, sounded surprised. He was here in school today, fresh from yesterday's absence.

Before I answered him, I shot a look at the main boys' clique in the class. The ringleader noticed me, then scowled and looked away. They hadn't bothered Shimokawa at all this morning; I guess they were keeping their promise. Turning back toward the hallway window, I made eye contact this time with Wataya. Her short hair suited her well, and her well-formed face gave her an inscrutable feel, although I guess being called "inscrutable" wouldn't please me too much.

"Um..."

Wataya's lips moved. If she got along with Hino, maybe they talked about our thing yesterday. I didn't want to stand out too much, so I stood up before she could say anything else.

"Can you wait here a bit, Shimokawa? I'll be right back."

"Oh? Uh, sure."

I walked out and past Wataya. She looked quizzically back at me, apparently getting the message, because she followed me to the corner of the hallway I had pointed at.

"Sorry," I said, turning back toward her once nobody was near us. "Did you need something?"

"You're Kamiya, right?" she said in her refreshing voice.

I nodded. "And you're Wataya?"

"Yeah. I guess we never talked much before. I was looking for you."

She gave me another curious look. Common sense dictates that in real life, if you don't perform any action, you can't expect any reaction in return. I was stricken by the feeling of watching something that used to be immobile, but now was starting to move out of nowhere.

"So what did you need?"

"Oh, um... I wanted to ask about Maori Hino. Is it...true you wanna be with her?"

That was the question. I found my mind groping for a response. I fully expected this coming, but I couldn't find the words.

"Yeah, pretty much," I said, affirming it.

Wataya looked surprised. "Wow, so it's true? But, like, where did this *come* from? You weren't acquainted with her before, right?"

"Well, you can't see into a person's heart, so..."

"So kinda like love at first sight?"

"Um...yeah. That kind of thing."

Wataya thought for a moment about my vague responses.

"Like," she said, "I know this might leave a horrible impression if I say it out of nowhere, but..."

"Uh, what?"

"Um... If you're not being serious about Maori—like, if this is all spur-of-the-moment or you just playing around—and you wound up being a couple with her like that, would you mind knocking that off for me?"

I looked at Wataya, not expecting this at all. Did she already find out about something? But only a very certain guy in my class knew what I said to Hino—and besides, there was a group of bullies involved. I didn't think this was being spread on social media or whatever.

"What makes you think that?" I asked, putting my doubts on ice for now.

Wataya's eyebrows dipped down a bit. "Mmm... Well, people say a lot that I'm cold

and blunt and stuff, and I actually think that I *am*, too. But Maori's important to me. I wanna do what I can to ensure she doesn't have to go through any hardship. So when I heard what you said to her, I started looking for you...but really, Kamiya, you don't *act* like you love Maori much."

She had me dead to rights. I was hard-pressed to reply, but I still strung some words together.

"Well, how would you know that?"

"I *do*. Kamiya, you're like me. You speak really coldly toward people. Normally, if you ask someone about who they're head over heels about, it'd show up more in your face, don't you think? But you're not acting bashful at all. The only vibe you're giving is, like, 'let's get this over with.'"

I instinctively looked at Wataya. Maybe there's something written on my face right now. Maybe I should just tell her. That I made that confession as a lie.

And three, don't really start to fall in love with me.

But Hino must've spotted from the start that I wasn't *truly* in love with her—that there were other things going on. That's why she played along. Maybe she didn't even tell Wataya about her conditions and stuff.

"Well, I'm gonna talk with Hino after school, so could we maybe talk about this later?"

Wataya stared at me as I attempted to dodge the topic. She never changed her expression, so I had no way of reading her thoughts, but for just a moment, I detected a shimmering around her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Like I said, I know how this must look. Talking about this the moment I meet you, I... I know I'm weird. You don't seem like a bad guy, Kamiya, so don't hurt Maori or anything, okay? I'm really sorry. I just wanted to chat with you a little bit, so..."

I gave her a contrived smile.

"Oh... Yeah. So I guess you've done that now, huh?"

"Pretty much. Oh—if you run into any problems or whatever with Maori, don't be afraid to talk to me. We can trade contact info at least, right?"

We traded numbers (I was still on a feature phone), and then Wataya left. I wanted to talk to Hino as soon as possible—but rule number one forbade me, so I went back to the classroom.

"Kamiya," said Shimokawa the moment I sat down, "what happened with Wataya?"

"Um... I dunno if there *was* anything," I half-heartedly replied.

Shimokawa tilted his head down. "Did I cause trouble for you again, Kamiya?"

"No, not at all. What's up?"

"Like...they haven't done anything to me today. And a lot's changed around you while I was absent yesterday. You said you told Hino you liked her, but I was just wondering if, you know, something got pushed on you 'cause of me."

He sounded impassioned, which brought across just how sincere a person he was. People sometimes picked on him for being a little overweight, but really, he's a beautiful guy inside. You can't *see* people's insides, though, so sometimes people treated him like an idiot or vented their anger on him. Just like that group.

Once I protested to that group about it, they switched targets to me. The people around me stopped talking to me, so Shimokawa—I guess he was worried—started approaching me a lot more frequently. But just like the harassment, not having people around didn't bother me at all. I was fine with it, but when I kept ignoring and avoiding their attacks, they went right back to Shimokawa—and it was getting more spiteful behind the scenes. It took me too long to notice, but they were definitely taking money from him now.

We almost came to blows over it yesterday, when Shimokawa wasn't around. Instead, the clique's leader made a proposal, and I asked Hino to be my girl. I felt bad for

Hino, but I just chalked it up to bad luck, figuring I could play along and sincerely apologize to her some other day. Now, in no small part because of my reply to her, things were getting really weird.

So, after extracting a promise that he'd keep it a secret, I told Shimokawa about yesterday's events, except for the three rules Hino gave me. At first he looked tense, biting his lip a bit—but then he raised an eyebrow, and by the end, he was obviously shocked.

"That all *happened*?"

"Yeah. So, you know, I'm thinking that I'll talk with Hino after school."

"Oh. Well, thanks a lot. Guess you helped me again, Kamiya. Oh, but..."

Shimokawa stopped, looking anxious.

"What is it?"

"Oh, um... I just thought, you know, would they really give up like that? 'Cuz I'm gonna be transferring out of here pretty soon, but you think they might start bothering you again?"

I'd like to think the harassment he faced wasn't the reason (it mostly had to do with his parents' careers), but Shimokawa was very suddenly about to transfer to a school in China. The summer break apparently comes earlier there than in Japan, as early as mid-June in some areas, so they'd get all the paperwork done and make the leap over by then.

"Well, if it happens, it happens. You don't have to dwell on it. You got two weeks before then anyway, so let's just have fun at school for now, okay?"

The thought still seemed to be on his mind, but after a while he nodded and said "yeah." Then, for the first time in a while, he actually smiled in school.

The rest of the day went peacefully, with that clique doing nothing to us in the end. But I had my promise with Hino waiting afterward. She didn't specify where we'd talk. I felt a bit lost, but I told her which class I was in when we talked yesterday, so I decided to wait there to begin with.

Once the final bell rang, I said my goodbyes to Shimokawa. I usually left school with him, joining him on the way to the nearby rail station. None of us did any extracurriculars. I was worried the clique would try to rob him if I let him go alone, but his mother was coming to school today to file some transfer papers; they'd both meet with his homeroom teacher and she'd drive him back home in her car.

Scoping out the classroom from my windowseat, I realized the clique was gone as well. I took a magazine out from my bag, figuring I'd kill some time at my desk. As people filed out of the room, I could hear faraway sounds—the brass band playing their instruments; the assorted sports team stretching out before practice. It was a cross between solitude and solidarity in the air, and I kind of liked it. The blue sky, through the rectangular windows, brought a desolate sort of melody into the empty classroom.

I don't know how long I spent like that. All the other classroom sounds I usually heard from the hallway were fully gone. My senses reached out through the open door.

Then I could hear footsteps. They weren't in a rush, but they weren't taking their time either. There was only a slight sense of anxiety as they headed straight for their destination, kind of thing. They stopped. I turned toward the hallway. *She* was there.

She turned her eyebrows up for a moment, surprised, then flashed an innocent smile.

"*There's* my boyfriend. Toru Kamiya, right?"

It was Maori Hino, the very girl I confessed my love to yesterday.

"Y-Yeah," I said, somehow managing to nod my confirmation.

Hino looked at me, seeming kind of curious. She was being completely informal with me, oddly enough, even though I had pretty much all my defenses up. She stopped walking and stepped inside the classroom while I thought over that.

"I'll just come in, then..."

She approached me with resolved footsteps, sitting on the side of the seat in front

of me. Her long black hair swayed around before my eyes. Then she moved the chair a little, sitting back down so she could face me. When our eyes met, she smiled, seemingly enjoying herself.

“You’re not in any clubs or anything, Kamiya?”

“Huh? Well, no, but what about you?”

Choosing my words carefully, I volleyed the conversation back at Hino. She put her elbows on my desk, resting her palm on her small chin. Her lips were still smiling. I never saw anyone look like she had so much fun in that position.

“Me neither, no. But good thing, though. I didn’t ask if you were in any, so I was worried I’d make you miss something.”

Smiles weren’t a common thing to see in my daily life. Every day was a cycle between school, home, and the grocery store. I didn’t smile much, and neither did Dad. Hino, though, was expressive.

“Also,” she said as she sat back up, “I’m sorry I asked to meet you and didn’t even pick a location. Good thing you were in your classroom, though. So I wanted to ask you a few things about our relationship, going forward.”

“Okay. Yeah, about that...”

I ran out of words, my eyes darting away from her. Out the corner of my eyesight, I could see Hino’s expression harden a little.

“Oh, are you having cold feet? I gave you those weird conditions and all. But that’s perfectly fine. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I’m sorry to make you put up with all that.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s not that, but...”

All this time, I had been lost. Should I tell her the truth and pretend that whole proposal didn’t happen?

“Um, Wataya came to visit me during my second-period break,” I said, trying to conceal my internal conflict.

“Yeah,” she replied, “I heard. She was there when you spoke to me in the hallway, and I told Izumi all about yesterday too. I guess she kinda took an interest in you, and...um. I’m sorry. It was only Izumi, you know, but I guess it’s not nice for people to talk about you behind your back, huh?”

The tone of her voice went down a measure, as if begging for forgiveness. I was flustered. This wasn’t what I was asking from her at all.

“No, you’re fine. It’s totally normal to talk about stuff with friends. You two get along pretty well?”

“Yeah. I mean, Izumi may not look it, but she’s pretty offbeat. You think she’s all chill, and then she say something crazy out of nowhere...and I kinda like that part of her. She’s really nice, too, so I can’t help but talk about stuff with her.”

I guess Wataya’s first name was Izumi, then. It was a novel discovery for me.

“Yeah,” I replied, “I kinda got the idea you two were like that. So about our meeting yesterday...”

Steeling my resolve, I talked about the events surrounding yesterday’s proposal. I thought she’d get worked up about it, but Hino didn’t seem surprised much. When I was done, she smiled, like she enjoyed the story or something.

“So it was *that* kind of thing? I thought you lost a bet or something, but you did it to help someone being bullied in your class? That’s really cool.”

“Nah, it’s nothing that amazing. He’s a nice guy, though, or at least the kinda guy who’d be friends with someone like me. I don’t want him to go through drama and mope around all day. He’s gonna be transferring out of this school soon too.”

“Oh, is he? That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, it is. So... I know I just told you ‘okay’ immediately, but...like, I have no idea why I said that.”

I was choosing my words again, before realizing that Hino was looking right at me.

"Do you not want to be with me, Toru?"

It had been a long while since anyone besides my father called me by my first name. Strangely, that alone made my name feel so awe-inspiring.

"...I...actually think I do, maybe."

"What's *that* mean?"

Hino laughed at my vague reply. I kept searching for words, making a face like I tried to smile and failed.

"Sorry if this sounds rude, but I think it could be...kind of interesting? With your three rules, you know... It's not like we'd really be lovers the way most people define it, right? We'd be like a pseudo-couple. You asked me not to fall in love for real, so...if you don't mind it, Hino, maybe I don't either."

By the time I finally came out with my collected thoughts, Hino was back to putting her elbows on the desk, lips curled upward. She really *was* enjoying this.

"Well, fine by me, then. Oh, but to keep Izumi from worrying, let's be a *real* couple on the surface, instead of pseudo-lovers or whatever. I didn't tell her about my rules, so..."

And so, on that day, we came to a rather odd agreement—we'd be a couple, but only under certain conditions.

3

"Hey, I'm home. Ooh, that sure smells good!"

I was cooking up some curry in the kitchen back home when I heard the door open. In a few moments, Dad was joining me.

"It's just the usual Monday curry. Oh, by the way, Dad, I got a lover now, so I just wanted to tell you."

"Huh...?"

My conscientious report made Dad's eyes bug out. In our family, we all tried to keep each other informed about our lives, a rule my sister first suggested.

"A lover...? Like, a real one? A girl, right?"

"Does that matter much? But yeah."

"No, I mean... Well, yeah, you're right, but... You know, it's kind of sudden."

Dad sat down at the kitchen table, still in his work outfit. I keep telling him over and over to stick it in the washer first thing when he's back home, but he can't shake that habit. Still, he's the one keeping a roof above our heads, so I can't be too hard on him. It was with that in mind that I looked at my suddenly very emotive father.

"Oh... Wow, Toru. It's about that time for you, huh?"

"Well, it's not like it's gonna change anything. I just wanted to report it to you."

Once we confirmed we wanted to go through with this, Hino and I spent a while longer talking in the classroom.

"Okay. Sorry if this is too soon, Toru, but can I ask some questions about you?"

I nodded. She took out her smartphone, using it as a memo pad.

"First, when's your birthday?"

"February 25th."

"Okay. Two...twenty-five. Oh, neat, you share a birthday with Renoir."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Now you do. Can I ask about your family?"

"It's just me and my dad."

"I see..."

"You look like that answered some kinda question in your mind."

"You're just really put together for your age, Toru."

"Put together? I dunno. One time, like three years ago, I went to school with a

rubber band around my wrist. People called me Rubber Band Man for a while after that.”

“Oh, that’s a good one. So, third year of middle school? They called you Rubber Band Man...”

“You’re writing that down?”

“Uh-huh. What’s your blood type?”

“AB.”

“Ohhh, *that* makes sense.”

“What do you mean, it makes sense? What’s yours?”

“...AB.”

“Ooh, *thaaat* makes sense.”

“Are you berating me?”

“I’m not berating you at all. Any other questions?”

“Who’s someone you respect a lot?”

“...Keiko Nishikawa.”

“I’m sorry, who’s she?”

“She’s a writer. Kind of a more obscure figure.”

“What do you like about her?”

“How hygienic her work is.”

“Hygienic? Like, really clean writing, or?”

“I think you can fake being clean, but you can’t fake being hygienic.”

“That’s pretty funny, Toru.”

Hino kept pelting me with questions. My hobbies; the entertainers I liked; the movies, the places; whether I was a dog person or a cat person; what I did on my days off; the food I enjoyed, etc., etc. I occasionally asked her some questions back, and she answered most of them. She liked dogs, she enjoyed going to parks, and she had a sweet tooth for *miles*. It all seemed pretty normal for a girl like her.

And by the time the sun began to set, Hino came up with this out of nowhere:

“How about we try something couples-like?”

In Hino’s mind, “something couples-like” was taking a smartphone photo together. The picture we shot, framed by the orange light in the background, showed her gleefully making the peace sign, me making a weird face out of embarrassment. It was pretty funny.

I told her I had just an old non-smartphone, and we traded information. She sent the photo to me, suggesting I could put it on my lock screen, but I had to turn her down there.

We both took the train to school, so we walked back to the station together. Hino chased after her shadow, laughing. I found out that while I was three stations away from here to my home, Hino was four in the same direction. We decided to try and stick together as long as we could. We were on the train for not even ten minutes, but I felt tremendously uneasy sitting next to her, chatting.

I didn’t go into exacting detail with Dad, but I gave him the basic rundown as we ate dinner. I avoided the “pseudo-lovers” description, since Hino seemed keen to keep mum about that.

Dad closed his eyes, facing the now-empty plate of curry he just enjoyed.

“*Kaahhhh...*”

I wasn’t sure what that astonished exclamation meant—but the next moment, he headed toward my bedroom, one door away from our living room. Our place wasn’t big; we had a small, basic Buddhist altar in one corner, something we had to work hard to fit in there. Dad sat in front of it and began reporting something to my late mom.

“Toru’s found a lady friend. I was worried, since he never talks about women at all, but I’m so glad about this.”

“Dad, can you please not tell Mom weird things about me?”

"It's not weird. It's great news! Just the sort of thing Mom needs to hear about. And if Sanae were here, you know...um..."

He may have brought her up, but whenever my sister entered the conversation, Dad always grew timid. Maybe he felt indebted, I thought. He never came out and said it, but the way he acted, Dad seemed to blame himself for my sister no longer being with us.

"Can you quit being stupid and help me clean up for a change?"

"Oh, um, right. Let's do it."

We spent our evenings doing our own respective things. Once I washed the dishes, I did stuff like fold the laundry and iron his work outfit and our handkerchiefs. Dad was soon out of the bath, and I decided to hop in before the water got cold.

My sister wasn't gone because she got disgusted with Dad or anything. In our family, we talked to each other about anything, but there was one thing my sister never told Dad about. It had to do with that.

Once I washed my hair and body, I relaxed in our bathtub—not big enough to stretch out in, but still a familiar place where I could relax. A lot of things had happened today, and maybe that'd apply tomorrow too. I didn't think anything in my life would surprise me, but back there yesterday, I said "okay" to Hino's suggestion. *That* was a shock. I had no idea I had it in me—the ability to shock myself.

If I told my sister I started dating someone, how would she react? The question made me giggle a bit as I left the tub, drying myself off and putting some boxers on. Then I looked at the figure in the mirror—and I saw myself, looking high-strung and a little too thin.

4

Having a girlfriend didn't bring dramatic change to my regular life. I was off to school like usual the next day.

I suddenly realized that in the train, on the path to school, at the entrance, I suddenly kept an eye out for Hino and Wataya. It was a fresh feeling to me, having somebody new enter my life.

In the classroom, I looked around for Shimokawa. He'd be moving away next weekend. We didn't know each other for very long, but it felt kind of sad to lose someone just as I was expanding my social life. It's a feeling I thought I was used to, but still.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

Shimokawa always had something he wanted to ask or talk about. Today, at least, it was about something peaceful—his excess flab.

"I really should lose some weight, shouldn't I?"

It was the third time we had this conversation. I pooh-poohed the idea as usual.

"Nah, think about it, Shimokawa. Lower-class people can't even *put* fat on."

"Yeah, but in the U.S., if you're fat, people treat you like you can't take care of yourself, I heard."

"Fat in America is *way* different from fat in Japan, y'know. They wouldn't even *count* you as fat over there."

Shimokawa looked down at his belly.

"Like, if you wanna lose weight, you got my full support, but you don't have to go overboard with it, you know?"

"Mmmm..."

"Besides, there are some pickup lines that only work if you have a little weight on you."

"Like what?"

"I could eat you up like a two-pound steak and *still* have room for seconds."

"Wild."

"Fat? You, babe? Hell, you're the slimmest lady I ever *did* see."

"Wild...but gentlemanly."

"I promise to love you from cradle to grave...or appetizer to dessert, baby."

"You're starting to make less sense now, but still, cool. I can just be a wild pudgy ladies' man, huh?"

I wasn't just playing around with Shimokawa here. He had a tendency to overthink matters, letting them depress him, and I prevented that by tossing a barrage of positive thoughts his way. Before long, Shimokawa had a "dandy gentleman" look on his face. By lunchtime, however, once he realized that fat-guy pickup lines weren't too helpful if he never interacted with women in the first place, he stared up at the sky in front of his *quite* full bento box.

"Kamiya, I feel like I can learn a lot from you, but in the end, I need to take action, don't I?"

"Huh? Where'd that come from?"

I stopped eating from my own as I asked. Did I hurt his feelings that morning after all? Shimokawa, thankfully, was unaffected.

"Nah. I just mean, there's a lot I pick up on now that I'm not gonna be here much longer. You've always been trying to cheer me up as we talk, but... You know, that's something to be thankful for. I really should've tried to get friendlier with girls here."

He sounded refreshingly forward-thinking, even though his words seemed full of regret for what didn't happen. I smiled a little at it.

"Well, you can befriend lots of girls at your new school. A new environment's a chance to create a new you."

"I'll introduce my pick to you once I find it, Kamiya. Oh, but maybe that'd piss Hino off..."

Shimokawa didn't know that Hino and I were pseudo-lovers—but he was enjoying this, so I just vaguely smiled.

After school, I waited in class for Hino, so we could pick up where we left off yesterday. Shimokawa waved and said "see you tomorrow" as he left; it was such a natural motion that I said "you too" back at him.

Thumbing through my magazine, I suddenly realized something. Shimokawa was alone today. I put it down, worried he'd get harassed. Making a beeline for the front entrance, I noticed that Shimokawa's shoes were gone, although the indoor slippers used in school were save in their cubbyhole. I guess they hadn't kidnapped him and taken him into the bathroom or anything.

Still concerned, I changed into my shoes and went out the door. There I saw Shimokawa leisurely walking toward the school gate. It made me breathe a sigh of relief. Nobody's brawny arm was around his shoulder, no one taking him away somewhere.

As I stood there at the entrance, I heard someone's voice behind me.

"Why'd you run off in a dash?"

I could immediately tell who it was. Turning around, I saw the ringleader of the clique that harangued Shimokawa, the guy who made me propose to Hino.

"You're *that* worried over that fatty?"

"Of course I am. I'm his friend," I replied, irritated.

He laughed chidingly at me. "Friend, huh?" Then, staring right at me, he informed me that his homeroom teacher and the guidance counselor had a stern lecture with him over lunch about him and Shimokawa. That was news to me.

"Fucker recorded us asking him for money."

"Recorded...? Shimokawa did?"

"Yeah. I think the second or third time."

The ringleader sounded like he was talking about someone else, his voice dry and

resigned.

"I didn't think someone with no balls or energy like him would ever narc on us. It's hilarious. And what do you think he told the counselor when he asked why he waited until now to tell him? He said 'I don't care about myself, but after I'm gone, I'm worried they'll start hitting up Kamiya, or someone else.' Like, just like that."

Based on what he told me, when Shimokawa's mom came to school yesterday for the transfer paperwork, he stayed after for a little bit to talk to his teachers about this. I was so surprised, I had trouble forming something to say. Shimokawa actually thought that much about me?

"But you know this'd happen sooner or later if you kept that up, right? So why? Why'd you even start? You worked hard to get into this school, didn't you?"

The ringleader laughed. There was a twinge of sadness to it.

"Why'd I start...? I dunno. I thought I was a pretty good student, but somewhere along the line, I stopped caring about skipping class. Now people I thought were my friends are flipping on me, saying I ordered them around. And since there's the whole money thing, Shimokawa's dad came around and demanded an apology before they brought the police into it. Like, Shimokawa said he didn't need the money, but his dad insisted."

He smiled again, before heaving a sigh.

"Ahhh... Why did my life get so *tedious*, Kamiya?"

I stared at the guy, not knowing how to answer him. He chuckled to himself, then walked toward the school gate. Was he chasing after Shimokawa? Resorting to violence out of despair? The thought occurred to me, but I figured he couldn't be that stupid. After all, he put in the work to pass this school's entrance exam. He had hope. He's just stumbling a bit right now.

There was no one in the classroom when I returned—Shimokawa included, of course. I sat at my desk, taking the phone I hardly ever used out of my bag. The thought of calling Shimokawa crossed my mind, but I stopped just before pressing the call button. He must've had his own motivations. I probably ought to pretend not to know until he brought it up.

So I picked up the magazine and lazily read it. Then Hino arrived, just as suddenly as yesterday.

"Ooh, my boyfriend's here!"

The sight of that still-sort-of-unfamiliar face felt a bit like salvation to me. Having a girl come to see you was still a pretty strange feeling.

"How should I respond to that?" I asked, grinning.

Hino thought for a bit. "What about 'Hi, honey!'?"

"You hardly even hear that in Western films any longer."

"Hmm... Right. My boyfriend isn't into the whole 'hi, honey' thing."

"You're taking *that* down?"

Hino tapped it into her notepad. Then I heard an exasperated voice behind her.

"*That's* the kind of cutesy talk you have?"

Wataya looked inside, wearing an expression like she ate something sugary that gave her heartburn. I had seen her and Hino together many times, but this was the first time we were all talking as a trio.

"Oh, you here too today, Wataya?"

"Yeah. I was just curious about you two."

She stepped into the classroom and headed toward my desk. Hino followed behind, staring intently at me again.

"What's up?"

"Huh? Oh, um, nothing. Nothing at all. Ha ha ha ha!"

"But you got two pretty girls with you right now, Kamiya. Shouldn't you look happier or something?"

One thing I learned from yesterday's conversation is that although Wataya was a little hard to approach, she never put on airs.

"Didn't you ever hear," I jovially replied, "that guys get used to beauty within three days?"

"Ohhh?"

Wataya marveled at this, perhaps not expecting it, then gave it a warm smile.

"So you're gonna get sick of her? It hasn't even been three days with us. You only really talked to him for the first time yesterday, didn't you, Maori?"

"That's right," Hino replied, taking the bait. "We talked about each other a lot."

"Oh? Like about what?"

Then Hino told me everything she learned about me—omitting my family, perhaps out of respect for being a single-parent household. Through that, we learned that Wataya's blood type was AB as well.

"Wow, we're really a trio of weirdoes, aren't we?" Wataya asked, apparently enjoying this.

"Well, two heads are better than one, right, Izumi? Or three..."

"It's too much of a good thing with *you* two. You'd probably be butting those heads before long."

The pace of their chitchat gave me a glimpse into how friendly their relationship was. Hino was eager to talk about anything, and Wataya always gave her cool, composed reaction to it.

"Also, Toru said he likes an author named Keiko Nishikawa."

Wataya's face filled with legitimate surprise. "Keiko Nishikawa? That's a pretty obscure pick. And I was about to say, you're reading *Literature World*, aren't you? You some kind of bookworm, Kamiya?"

We started talking about the magazine I had open. *Literature World* was one of the leaders of the genre in Japan. The work published in its pages would occasionally get nominated for the Akutagawa Prize and other prestigious awards. Keiko Nishikawa had a running novel in here as well, but I never expected anyone else at this school to know this magazine, much less her name.

"Not really, um... Not a writer. But why do you know about Keiko Nishikawa, Wataya? And this magazine?"

Instead of receiving a set allowance, I watched our finances carefully each month, using the extra money for things like magazines and books that I enjoyed. Dad read this magazine too, though, so we went Dutch on it.

"Oh, I *love* literature," Wataya nonchalantly replied. "That, and I love French films, Japanese films, even Russian films lately. That kind of hyper-personal, gloomy stuff, the sort of thing the masses *never* care about."

This was another surprise. I never thought there was someone else my age like this. Meanwhile, I spotted Hino to the side, taking down more notes on her phone.

"Hino, don't write down 'bookworm.'"

"I'm not! I get it. I'm calling you a bookworm who hates being called one."

"Great, I'm making things worse for myself..."

So we decided to spend our after-school hours together that day. We left school as we figured out where to go, me and Wataya talking about books and authors on the way to the station. Then I heard someone's phone go *click* behind me. I turned around.

"Why're you taking a picture, Hino?"

She took a shot of me and Wataya's back. When I brought it up, she fidgeted like a first-grader caught in the act.

"Aw, stop being so rude," Wataya replied. "She doesn't need any *reason* to take a picture of her guy."

She didn't know the truth, of course.

"Well, no, but... Ahh, I guess I'm not used to it."

"Hurry up. Three days!"

"Oh, come on! I'm not even used to talking to two hot girls at the same time."

"Aren't you nearly bored of us yet?"

"It's not been three days."

I thus rehashed our classroom discussion with Wataya for a bit.

"All right," Hino interrupted, "why don't we try to break the ice a little more, then? How about we all go to a café somewhere?"

"Huh? A café? Sure, but..."

The topic changed to where we'd go, but the diners and cafés they selected were a little pricey for me. I didn't have that much leeway with the money I had on hand.

"Oh, it's fine! I'm robbing you two of your personal time, so I can pay for you. I got a part-time job, although the school bans it, so I have some money."

"Yeah, but... I dunno, Wataya, I feel bad about it..."

"It's fine, it's fine!"

Hino thought things over a bit as Wataya and I bickered.

"Ah! I think I have a good idea. It's still early, so..."

We both looked up at her. What she said next was totally unexpected.

"How about we just go to Toru's place? Then it'll be free, right?"

"Huhh...?"

It went without saying that the slack-jawed groan came from me.

5

"Thanks again!"

In the end, I let them come over, convinced that it was fine as long as it wasn't just the two of us. We had an apartment in a complex just like any other, nothing in particular to brag about.

"Wow, you keep this place really nice, Toru!"

Despite that, Hino's head swiveled around, like this was some rare sight.

"Can I take a pic?"

"I guess."

Since my sister left, no women had ever come in here. My usual quiet, dull surroundings suddenly seemed a little more ornate to me. But my mind just couldn't keep up with this reality. I never expected this at all.

For starters, I had them both sit down at the kitchen table as I boiled some water and prepared some tea. I drank tea three times a week, so I was used to this.

As I worked on this, Hino and Wataya talked to each other in that kind of high-pitched gossipy voice you hear girls talk in.

"I can't believe how organized your apartment is, Kazuya. You said your family wouldn't be in right now, but is your mom a clean freak or something?"

"No, uh..." I calculated how long to steam the tea leaves. "I didn't mention it until now, Wataya, but I live alone with my dad in here. Keeping clean is kind of my hobby, so...yeah. That's what I do."

"That's right," added Hino. "My boyfriend's all about hygiene!"

"Hygiene?" Hino asked, not diving deeper on the single-parent thing. "Not cleanliness?"

"No, no, you can fake being clean, but you can't fake being hygienic. Look closer at Toru's shirt. The collar and sleeves are totally straight, right? And he washes and irons his handkerchiefs every day too. It takes real *hygiene* to clean the stuff people don't see."

"Hohhh..." I couldn't tell if Wataya was impressed or just dumbfounded. "You're

kinda weird, aren't you, Kamiya? I never knew until we started talking."

"Like I need *you* telling me that. Oh, the tea's ready."

Serving time was here. Removing the hot water from the warm tea container, I poured out some fresh Lady Grey from a ceramic pot. The uniquely refreshing Bergamot citrus aroma filled the kitchen.

"Here you go. Nothing fancy."

"No need to be so humble about it. It's not a tea ceremony or anything."

"Yeah, maybe not..."

I took two cups to the table, then my own cup, along with a large white dish of cookies I got on sale. We had three chairs, a relic from when my sister lived here, so I took one and sipped my tea. The added orange and lemon flavors made it a calming, easy-drinking experience.

Hino, seated across from me, took a sip, then gave me a surprised look. "Oh, this is good! You're really good at making tea, Toru. And it smells great!"

"...You're right. Where're these leaves from?"

Wataya seemed to agree. I breathed an internal sigh of relief. Shimokawa liked it too so I was pretty confident, but I still got nervous before I heard their review.

"Just cheap grocery-store stuff. Lady Grey tastes pretty good at any price...but the leaves didn't jump as much as I wanted. I'll give it a 77. There's more if you want it."

After checking the taste for myself, I went to the kitchen to fetch the full pot, placing it in a cozy and putting it in the middle of the table. My sister taught me how to sew, so a tea cozy wasn't any big deal to make.

Sipping it once more from my plain white cup, I realized the two of them were looking at me.

"What?"

"I never noticed until just now, but... Kamiya, it's like you're a noble prince who fell on hard times or something. Like, you got this weird elegant streak."

"Hard times? Thanks. And stop taking notes, Hino."

The three of us chatted for a bit as the pot, and the plate, were emptied. Then they began exploring my home—although since it was a typical two-bedroom place with a combined living room and kitchen, there wasn't much to see. I couldn't show them Dad's room, so all they had access to was my room and the common space.

Wataya seemed interested in books, and sure enough, she was closely studying the shelf in my room. Hino was taking pictures the whole time, which was...fine, I guess.

"Why do you like taking so many photos, Hino? There's nothing really worth shooting in here."

"Of course there is. This is actually the first time I've been in a guy's room, so it's fun."

"Ooooh, Kamiya!" exclaimed Wataya, acting like she was browsing around the bookstore. "I really like your taste in books. You got a lot of rare one that I bet go for a lot. Where did you get these?"

"Those are hand-me-downs from what my dad picks up at the used shops. He's the kind of guy who buys a lot of books and leaves them all over the place, so I use the shelves here and in the living room to organize them."

They both looked impressed...or perhaps less than impressed.

"You really *do* have it together, Toru. All these books, but there's not a speck of dust in this place."

"Hey, hygiene is important."

"There's that word again! Hygiene!"

"Wataya, please don't fixate on 'hygiene.' You make me sound all OCD."

Then, for some reason, they asked for a demonstration of my ironing technique. I took the laundry down, hiding my undies, and ironed a shirt and handkerchief for them.

Wataya said I was so good, it's scary; Hino shot a video like a tourist.

Once evening rolled around, I decided to take them to the station, figuring I could pick up food for dinner along the way. Reusable bag in hand (picked up as a gift from somewhere), I walked in line with them.

"This fallen noble looks *too* natural with that bag. Are you *really* in high school?"

The sight of Wataya barely able to contain her laughter was thankfully captured from the front by Hino's camera. It was such a surreal day.

Later, my dinner prep wrapped up, I was deep in a textbook on the kitchen table when I heard the door open. Dad was home—a little late, and judging by how red his face was, I could guess why. He could barely hold his drink at all, but he must've been at it again somewhere.

"Dad, if you're gonna be out drinking, give me some warning."

"Ahh, sorry, sorry. I was so happy you had a girlfriend, Toru, you know..."

I told him that she was here today, along with her friend. His eyes burst open.

"You let 'em in a place like *this*?"

"I didn't show them your room or anything, Dad. It's fine, isn't it?"

"Oh, of course. But, you know...um, did they smell good?"

"*There's* a question you should probably avoid in public, Dad."

I sighed as I returned to the kitchen and began to prepare dinner for myself. Dad, sitting at the table, kept his eyes on me.

"What?"

"I was just thinking about how much you've grown."

I didn't respond, taking a few pre-made things out of the fridge. Then Dad started to enjoy a little hair of the dog. I tried to stop him, but he won out in the end, enjoying bits and pieces of dinner with his cheap low-malt beer. He barely made it half a minute before he collapsed.

"Ugh... You didn't even take a bath..."

I had little choice but to warm up a towel and tell my revived father to wipe himself off. In the meantime, I let myself into his room and put out a futon for him; last time, he fell asleep on the sofa and complained about how sore he was the next morning.

As I straightened everything out in his room, he came lumbering in.

"You okay? You know you're not that strong—you shouldn't be drinking that much. Here, change out of your clothes."

"I'm fine, Sanae; quit worrying about me. I'm a-okay!"

That made me stop for a moment. Dad didn't notice, changing into his pajamas and lying down on his futon. He fell asleep in an instant.

Just before I closed the door to his room, I took a look back at him. He was so drunk that he mistook me for my sister.

Since she was within range of my commuter pass, the next day we wound up deciding to visit Wataya's place after school. "You ought to stop on by," she told me. "My setup's pretty similar to yours, so..."

The day itself was totally peaceful. Shimokawa showed up and attended class without incident, the ringleader now abandoned by his own clique. It looked like he was reading a part-time want-ad magazine, but I didn't say anything about it.

After class ended, I met with Hino and Wataya and we headed for the latter's place. Wataya took the same train to school as the rest of us, but she was only two stops away in the same direction. Her family was renting a condo-style apartment, with a lobby and auto-locking entrance doors and all. I always looked up to that kind of thing, so I stared at

the front doors for a bit.

“...*More* pictures, Hino?”

Meanwhile, Hino had her phone pointed at me, a smile on her face.

“I wanted to get a video of my boyfriend looking all surprised.”

“All you’re doing is capturing me looking like an idiot. You’re wasting your data plan.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!”

“Hey! Stop flirting and get in!”

We followed Wataya’s voice into the elevator hall. She apparently lived alone with her mother, a designer who mainly worked on bookbinding and stuff. She did this work at home in the evenings, but usually spent the day out on errands and things. Wataya would occasionally help her out, working on a part-time basis for her—things like data gathering, preparing paperwork, managing receipts, and so on. They were currently separated from her father.

Being a lone man going into a home with nothing but women was honestly a little nerve-wracking.

“Well, have a seat.”

We were taken to the living room, airy and much bigger than the one at my place. I guess her mom really *was* a designer, because there was art on the walls and every piece of furniture and décor seemed carefully considered. This was the top of a ten-floor building, and the sky seemed wide open out the window, from which their laundry...

“I’m sorry, Wataya. I saw something just now.”

“Huh? Oh. That’s okay. I don’t care...but I’m sorry, Kamiya, I guess *you* would.”

Despite that incident, Hino and I sat facing each other in the living room, waiting for the tea Wataya was preparing. Then I noticed that, once again, Hino was staring at me.

“What’s going on, Hino?”

“The fallen noble.”

“I *told* you to forget about that.”

“Sorry, sorry. But I just think that description fits you perfectly.”

Maybe this was Hino’s way of complimenting me, but I couldn’t welcome it with open arms. It must’ve shown on my face.

“Oh, stop looking like that. Smile some more!”

“I wasn’t trying to make a weird face at all,” I said, although I’m sure I was. Hino, meanwhile, had that same gregarious smile as always.

“You’re always smiling, aren’t you?” I casually observed.

Hino raised her eyebrows a bit. “Oh, yeah. Kinda. It’s not *all* the time, but when I’m smiling, I try to smile big. Like, if you’re in a place in life where you *can’t* smile, there’s no way for you to, no matter what, so...”

It wasn’t the response I expected. I looked at Hino. Realizing I looked surprised, she immediately began to defend herself.

“No, I mean... It’s not something *I*’ve experienced. Just stuff I read in manga and so on.”

“Really?” I asked, doubtful. “Yeah,” she nodded, forcing a smile on me.

“Well, all right. But, you know...”

I sidled up closer to Hino, lowering my voice so Wataya wouldn’t hear me.

“I know we’re pseudo-lovers, but if you ever have any problems, don’t be afraid to talk to me about them.”

“Oh...? Um, okay.”

I was getting a close-up view of Hino’s astonished face. Then Wataya interrupted with an “Okay, guys!” as she brought a tray in.

“If you’re gonna flirt with each other, can you do it someplace where I don’t have to

watch?”

“But maybe you’d still be able to *hear* us, Izumi,” replied Hino, back to her usual jokey tone of voice.

“Oh, man, breaking out the adult humor? Loving couples like you are *so* ‘whatever’ like that, huh?”

Wataya placed the tea tray on the table, then started tickling Hino. She tried to resist, but began laughing before long. As I watched, I thought over what Hino just said.

If you’re in a place in life where you can’t smile, there’s no way for you to, no matter what, so...

She called it something she learned from manga, but it felt like there was a lot of actual emotion there. Or did I read that wrong? I took another look at Hino, still carrying on with Wataya. You can’t peer into people’s minds, I suppose—but Hino was laughing joyfully, completely without worry.

7

The days passed silently. It had been over a week since Hino and I became lovers—but apart from how I spent my time after school, there were no epic changes to my life.

Or...were there?

Lately, I came to realize that I was thinking about Hino pretty much all the time. I’d recall her with her elbows on the desk, her head resting on her palm. Or her beautiful hair, teeming with life all the way down to the tips. When the setting sun hit it, it’d shine this beautiful sheen. But am I just attracted to her looks? I had almost no interaction with girls before now—was I doing this all wrong? I didn’t feel like that was everything. I was curious about that thing she said. Someone like Hino, always smiling—I wanted to know if she was hiding something behind that. If I could, I wanted to help her.

“You seem kinda spaced out lately, Kamiya.”

These thoughts were flashing into my mind at inopportune moments in my daily life—hence why Shimokawa said that over lunch.

“Oh? I don’t think I am.”

I tried to smooth it over with a smile.

“By the way,” he continued with a gentle expression, “like we talked about a little before, I’ve been ordering and collecting a bunch of Japanese-language books. They’ll be harder to get once I leave the country.”

The change of subject threw me a little, but I did recall that conversation.

“Oh, right. Find anything interesting?”

“Yeah, a lot of stuff, but there’s this one book of sayings I like the most. You can look them up on the net, but in a book, I feel like they hit home harder. Like my body.”

He slapped his belly. I’m sure he was trying to get a laugh out of me, and he succeeded.

“You’re gonna be a walking quotation book before long.”

“Well, anyone can walk, but *continuing* to take one more step—that’s the challenging part.”

“Who said that one?”

“Oh, Shimokawa the Large. He was known for doing pretty much nothing his whole life.”

He smiled, defeated. I was starting to enjoy this conversation. My observation that intelligentsia like him are popular in foreign countries seemed to be a hit with him.

“But did you ever hear the one about how you can’t hide your coughs?”

“Oh...?”

That one, on the other hand, caught my attention. There was a book of quotations

in my place as well that I read, and the one Shimokawa brought up was in the “Love” section. The two things you can’t hide in life: your coughing, and your love.

“Wasn’t it, like, you can’t hide your sneezes and you can’t hide your coughs?”

“Yeah, sure,” Shimokawa said, laughing.

So things went along like usual, me chatting with Shimokawa during school and spending time with Hino after it. I never got into the habit of texting people and wasn’t good at it anyway, so I apologized for not keeping in close contact with her.

“Don’t worry,” she replied. “You’re just following rule two of mine.”

Instead of that, we talked a lot in my classroom after school.

“So you cook every day? Must be a lot better at it than me.”

“I don’t know how good I am, but I make it work, yeah.”

“You say that a lot, don’t you? ‘I make it work.’”

Still taking notes on your phone, huh? I really don’t think I do.”

Hino and I hadn’t had conversed seriously since that time at Wataya’s place. Maybe we could if I tried forcing it, but I wanted to avoid that. We were lovers, but at the same time *not* lovers. It was on the condition that we didn’t *really* fall into it.

At first, I didn’t have any problem with that. If anything, it was me who started all this trouble in the first place. I’m not sure how Hino saw it, but I didn’t have any particular issue with being pseudo-lovers. But I suppose if you fake it long enough, you start making it, or however it went. I could sense that my relationship with Hino was rearranging things inside of me, and it was bewildering.

It was now the second Friday after I began spending time after school with her. Tomorrow was Saturday.

“Hey, so since it’s June and all, you wanna maybe go somewhere, Hino?”

“Wow. *That’s* a surprise. June already?”

Hino’s face looked a bit clouded that day, but she had her usual smile.

“...Oh, sorry. Did you have any plans for this weekend, Toru?”

“On Sunday I’m gonna go see my friend Shimokawa. He’s moving away.”

I told her about him before. Really, I wanted them to meet each other, but Shimokawa said no to that. Apparently he didn’t want to meet anyone else before he left, since it’d make it harder for him to go. “You should cherish the time you have with her,” he told me with a smile, “but I’m good.” Hearing that really made me think he was one of my few good friends. And maybe he’d be in China, but this wasn’t goodbye forever. We can stay connected all kinds of ways. I was sure we could keep our friendship going.

So I was going to miss him, but right now, my focus was on talking with Hino.

“But I’m free the whole day on Saturday, so what do you think?”

“Oh,” she replied, apparently not expecting this. “So is this...like, a date?”

“I guess so, yeah. No biggie if you don’t want to. I was just thinking about what you get up to on the weekend, Hino. You were busy last Saturday, right?”

“Yeah, I had a thing at the clinic. Nothing serious, but...”

Hino averted her eyes. I may not have noticed that kind of thing before now.

“A date, though, huh...? Sounds like fun. Let’s do it. It’ll have to be in the afternoon, but is that okay?”

For a moment, her reaction left me at a loss for words. “Oh? Ah, um, sure. But you have stuff to do Saturday mornings? I know you said we can’t talk until after school, but...”

I had been wondering about that rule. Hino seemed reluctant to reply.

“Well, you know, girls have to deal with a lot of stuff. So where do you want to go, Toru? I bet you usually just read and do chores on your off days.”

Having it spelled out like that made it sound pretty unattractive.

“Yeah... That kind of thing, really.”

“And you don’t want to spend a lot of money, right?”

“Not that I’m proud of it, but no.”

I bowed a little.

"Don't worry," she hurriedly added. "How about we spend it at a park? If you don't mind, you could make lunch for us, and I could treat you to dessert at a café or something after that. That won't be much of a burden for you, will it?"

I really appreciated that offer—financially, as much as psychologically.

"All right. Any requests for the bento boxes?"

"I like pretty much everything, so bring it on. I might wanna have some tea, though."

"Okay. Bring it on, huh? You have some pretty weird turns of phrases sometimes, Hino."

We kept talking in the classroom for a while longer before heading home together at sunset.

8

Saturday arrived, a day I had been looking forward to.

Wrapping up my chores early in the morning, I began working on our lunches. I wavered a bit on our menu, but opted for some sandwiches that'd work well with tea. So I cooked up some chicken covered in potato starch in a frying pan, a low-calorie alternative to traditional frying. We'd need some salad too, and since fruit goes great with tea, I opted to keep it simple.

Dad was in his room all morning. I brought him some of the extra tea I made, only to find him typing at the one laptop computer we had in the house.

"You writing that novel again?"

"Yeah, the deadline for the *Literary World* New Writer Prize is coming up. Hey, that smells good."

I gave a cup of tea to Dad as he turned around in his seat. Novel writing was his hobby, his most enjoyable pastime, and maybe his whole life, even. I heard he'd been writing since before I was born. He hadn't won any prizes yet, but his dream was to keep himself afloat with that someday. I had the feeling he was neglecting his household for that dream, but I couldn't lecture him too strictly.

"I have a date today, so I won't be in this afternoon. There's some extra sandwiches in the fridge, so you can have those for lunch."

"Oh, thanks. A date, huh? Hang on one sec."

Dad stood up, found his wallet, and opened it up. With a frown, he then rummaged through a chest of drawers and took some bills out of an envelope.

"Here's some spending money. I know you refuse to take an allowance, but a high-school kid can only do so much with what's left of our monthly budget, y'know?"

"That's okay, Dad. I can buy tea and stuff with our food budget just fine. I told you, being given a rail pass and a phone is payment enough."

"Well, yeah, I bought you that pass 'cause I didn't want you biking to school. And that phone's on the cheapest plan they offer. Just take this."

I looked at the ten-thousand-yen bill in front of me. Money held real power—the power to make people happy. A good meal makes people smile. Enjoying the things you like in life has the power to bring not only joy, but real meaning to the day-to-day grind. But that's why you had to be careful with it.

"I'll just use half of it, okay? Then we can have something good for dinner tonight. I know you like *sukiyaki*, so how about a hot-pot dinner? Chinese cabbage is out of season, but I'm sure there's some good meat to be found."

"I wish you wouldn't say that...but that's your compromise, huh? All right. Let's have a feast tonight."

He waved the bill in front of me, demanding it to be taken.

“Thanks. Don’t spoil your appetite for tonight.”

“You have fun too, Toru.”

I thanked him one more time for the money before leaving. Back in my room, I placed it inside the wallet I had been using since middle school.

Wrapping up my final chores, I took the picnic basket my sister liked to use from the closet. It was a sturdy, yellowish-brown wicker basket, and I put my bento boxes and flask in there. It was still early, just eleven in the morning, but I decided to leave anyway.

There was a large public park about a fifteen-minute walk from my place, famous for its large cherry blossom-lined path, so a lot of people came in the spring. I would be meeting Hino in front of the fountain there at noon. I considered taking my bike, but I didn’t want the wind blowing on me, so I decided to go by foot.

I still wound up arriving a good half hour or so early for the date. People were around, but it wasn’t particularly crowded. I sat down on a bench overlooking the fountain and took a paperback book out of the basket.

Ever since I was a kid, I always enjoyed spending days off outside reading a book. I was probably kind of a weird kid—that alone was enough to get me excited. Even if there were large families around me, I didn’t really think I was alone. Besides, I knew something they didn’t. Whenever I concentrated on my book too much and it got dark, I’d suddenly come to and get all anxious—but right then, someone would always find me. “*There* you are,” she’d say, the reddish-purple sky behind her. That’s how my sister always greeted me.

“Um... You’re Toru, right?”

I looked up from my book. Hino, looking a tad anxious, was right in front of me. My eyes shot toward the clock tower in the park. Over thirty minutes had passed.

“Oh!”

“Whew! I’m sorry, I had trouble recognizing you outside your school uniform, so I wasn’t too sure.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m sorry I didn’t see you coming.”

Then I noticed Hino looked different from usual. She had a white shirt on, paired with a long, green, soft-looking skirt. I hadn’t seen *her* outside a uniform either.

As I was taken by the sight, Hino noticed the basket next to me. “Are the bento boxes in there? Wow, I’ve never seen an honest-to-goodness picnic basket before.”

“Oh? Yeah, my sister bought this for cheap at a rummage sale or something a long time ago.”

“Your sister? I’m sorry, did I hear about her? I thought you lived alone with your father...”

“Yeah, I do. It’s the two of us now, but it used to be three not long ago. She didn’t die or anything, but...”

My voice trailed off.

“Ah,” Hino said, picking up on this and adding a tone of brightness to her voice. “Well, I’m sure hungry. Where do you want to eat? I know I made you wait until the afternoon and all...”

She beamed an almost blinding smile at me. When something’s exposed to bright light, that makes the shadows all the more distinct. People get caught up in those shadows sometimes, like a lone man looking at someone else’s big, happy family. But the the brightness Hino exuded didn’t make me feel lonely. A decent percentage of all the world’s tragedies might just be stuff you keep inside of you anyway.

I returned her smile as I stood up.

We then merged into the weekend park landscape. There happened to be a free spot under a tree in the main lawn area, so the sunlight wasn’t a bother to us. Putting out a sheet, we laid out our bento lunches, watching other families enjoy the day further away. Hino took another photo before we ate.

“Ahhh, that was great! You’re amazing, Toru. You’re so *good* at this!”

It was fun for us. Between eating and talking, the time just flew past. I used practically no money making this stuff, but if she liked it, I was happy.

“I just put this together with things I had around the kitchen, so it’s really nothing fancy.”

“But it’s still good. You’d make a great husband, Toru.”

“You too, Hino...well, *actually*, hmm...”

“Hey, why’d you cut yourself off at the end, huh?”

She snickered, breathing in the refreshing air and looking at the sky. I began to look at myself as someone living in a storybook world, connected by strange and unusual events to the person next to me. We weren’t lovers with each other, but just having someone I could spend time off with was something I appreciated. It made me happy.

So we kept talking about whatever, laughing and admiring each other, sometimes just staring at the sights around us. After a while, the conversation died off. I, at least, didn’t find that quiet stifling.

“Weird, isn’t it?”

Hino’s whisper made me turn toward her. Noticing me, she softly smiled.

“What’s up?”

“No, I... I just think it’s kinda weird. Like, really. You can’t hurry your heart, as they say...or, really, you don’t need to. Even all quiet like this, I don’t feel bored or constrained at all. It feels like we’re just quietly passing the time together.”

Something unseen, unnoticed about Hino was now tingling within me. For a moment, it felt like true happiness. If there’s something palpable building itself up between the two of us, it was cause for joy.

I closed my eyes. My other senses spread out a bit, and I enjoyed the sensation. The warmth of the sun, the smell of the grass, even the breathing of the girl next to me—it seemed like I could feel it all. A gust of wind opened my eyes, the girl next to me holding her hair down. In the midst of that slice of time, I thought about saying something. I realized I was no longer able to make our love a lie.

“Do you mind if I fall in love with you, Hino?”

The wind had stopped by the time I asked. I thought about that one moment, the moment that ended just before I could finish. Love? Yeah. It’s true. Saying it made me really feel it. Me, and you...

Hino took her time, slowly turning her face toward me.

“You can’t,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked.

Hino looked downward, lost in indecision.

“Because...”

The wind came by again, taking up her long hair.

“Because I have a disease. It’s called anterograde amnesia. When I go to sleep at night, I forget. I forget everything that happened that day.”

The voice—maybe it slipped into the wind—took time to reach me.

(To be continued)



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