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**Japanese Senior Project:
A Translation of *Yûrei no ie* (*The Ghosts' Home*)
by Banana Yoshimoto**

Translated by Alex Sun

Advisor: Peipei Qiu

Vassar College

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Introduction

To begin with, I want to thank Vassar's Japanese Department. Although I started studying Japanese at Vassar, I never thought that I would become a Japanese major since I had already decided on Asian Studies and French. However, it turned out that it was actually possible to have three majors, so I took advantage of the opportunity and joined the department this year. On that note, I would also like to thank Professor Qiu for being my advisor during the entire process from becoming a major to finishing my senior project. Without her advice, I do not think the project would have turned out like it did. Even though we were sometimes stuck debating the proper tense of a phrase, these were all invaluable learning experiences. I would also like to thank my friend Aiko Dorothy Hassett, who I went to when I needed extra help translating particularly tricky passages. Finally, I want to thank Mandy Chin for her support during the entire process and for giving me feedback on the clarity of the English draft. I could not have done it without any of you!

My objective for this project was to engage myself with Japanese in a way that I had never done before. Of course, it is impossible to say that I have never encountered translation in my time studying Japanese because as a language learner, it is our job to translate ourselves between cultures. However, I had never truly undertaken a Japanese translation task at this scope. Translating a short story would be a test of all the knowledge that I had gained until now and then some.

The short story that is the focus of my senior project is “幽霊の家,” which I translated as “The Ghosts' Home,” by Banana Yoshimoto from her short story anthology, デッドエンド思い

出づ (Dead End Memories), first published in 2003. It tells the story of Secchan and her relationship with Iwakura-kun, a strange yet charismatic loner. In the process of getting to know each other, they encounter paranormal phenomena, which plays a pivotal role in the way that the two characters develop. Banana Yoshimoto herself is a veteran author who has written many novels and short stories during her career. Daughter of a prominent intellectual, Takaaki Yoshimoto, she was born in Tokyo on July 24, 1964, and would eventually go on to graduate from the College of Art at Nihon University.¹ Her stories have been very popular, even becoming adapted to the big screen in various Asian countries.²

My friends and I often joke that I am constantly in a state of existential crisis, so when I found out that existentialism was one of the recurring themes in her books, I knew that I had found my match. Originally, I was not sure what kind of text I was looking to translate because the requirement for this project was that the chosen text must not have had a preexisting English translating. Of course, I went first to the usual suspects: the literary greats of Japanese literature like Natsume Sôseki, Osamu Dazai or Haruki Murakami. Though, to no surprise, most if not all of their works had an English translation. Undeterred by this, I continued scouring Google until I came upon more authors that were more obscure in the West, among whom I found Banana Yoshimoto. I had heard Professor Tsuchiya and Professor Qiu talk about her before, but it never occurred to me that Yoshimoto would become the focus for my project. The aforementioned existentialist themes are often applied in modern settings, which was what drew me most to her works. Considerations on the meaning of youth, the lived experience in a seemingly mundane

¹ Kathleen Kupier, "Banana Yoshimoto," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Banana-Yoshimoto>

² Kupier, "Banana Yoshimoto."

life; all of these resembled questions I have been asking myself as a typical young adult trying to figure out my own *raison d'être*.

Particularly in this short story, young adult existentialism in a modern world is one of the principal themes. Interestingly, the Encyclopedia Britannica explains that 物の哀れ (*Mono no Aware*), a philosophical concept stemming from the Japanese cultural religious tradition, is also present in many of Yoshimoto's works, "The Ghost's Home" being no exception.³ *Mono no Aware* refers to an awareness, and consequent appreciation for the fleetingness of things; the ebb and flow of existence, which in conjunction with this adult existentialism, creates an overwhelming sense of drifting in the story. Readers need look no further than Yoshimoto's distinct usage of the word *flow* in reference to the life of both the protagonist and all other major characters. They are caught in a cycle where feelings take shape, only to reach their apogee and disappear. Yet, paradoxically, even though this process resolves itself quickly in following *Mono no Aware*, the emotional aftermath leaves a deep lingering impact that is counter to the expected fleetingness; they are no longer able to appreciate the beauty in the transience of things because they are too caught up ruminating on the feelings of loss. Consequently, a quasi-nihilistic attitude towards the act of doing is created since if the consequence of one's actions are doomed to be short lived, there would not be a reason to put investment into it in the first place. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the way that *Mono no Aware* manifests itself in events that develop, and the way in which characters are able to reconcile themselves with these events that continually start and end, but which seem to never leave a sense of closure.

So then, does the text suggest a way to combat the unresolved feelings stemming from *Mono no Aware* in a rapidly progressing modern world? While there might not be a direct

³ Kupier, "Banana Yoshimoto."

answer to this question, I would argue that the eponymous ghosts themselves are clues to such a conclusion. What is interesting about them is that their existence is in and of itself a refutation of *Mono no Aware*, given that for most of the story, they are trapped in a sort of limbo rather than reaching a resolution and departing from the mortal world. Yet, this state of stasis is not treated by the other main characters as a desirable outcome, despite it offering a way to break free from the insecurity created by *Mono no Aware*. Secchan remarks that although the ghost couple lived a calm and tranquil life, they ultimately did so without consideration for the ephemerality of mortal existence, which is why they never managed to move on to the next life. This observation is important because it eventually helps Secchan find an answer to the insecurity caused by *Mono no Aware*: in light of her experiences with the ghost couple and the capricious Iwakura-kun, it becomes clear that we should neither ignore nor fight the constant ruptures in life, but rather embrace them, though not in the traditional way that *Mono no Aware* suggests. Secchan leaves Iwakura-kun with the words, ““I’ll see you again, if destiny permits,”” when they separate before he goes abroad. In Japanese, the word for destiny, 縁(en), carries the special connotation of a pre-existing interconnectedness between people. Thus, what allows us to fully embrace the instability brought on by *Mono no Aware* is the knowledge that even if our relationships with other people will come and go, these moments of meeting and rupture do not exist in a vacuum, and that our inevitable connectedness to other people will bring us all back together in the end. Therefore, Yoshimoto illustrates a modern take on *Mono no Aware*, in which uncertainty is defined by not knowing when we will receive closure for things that have unsatisfactorily ended, rather than by simply knowing that things will end.

Lastly, I would like to give some insight into the translation process. The first thing that stood about Yoshimoto’s writing style was her frequent inclusion of long sentences ranging from

three lines to half a page. These were tricky to translate at first because they contained lots of information that was often explained disjointedly. As such, the approach that I developed for this was to first break up the sentence and rearrange it in order to better understand the syntax of the sentence. Then while translating, I would be more lenient in terms of breaking up the one long Japanese sentence into smaller English sentences that corresponded with the amount of ideas present in the original Japanese sentence. I also learned to be more careful with sentence-ending particles, since I would often mix them up when I first began translating. In the translation, this meant paying more attention to my usage of conjunctions, or lack thereof, since that was what a majority of sentence-ending particles translated into.

Something that also occurred to me while I was translating was the way in which I conceptualized the switch from Japanese to English in my mind. Japanese, unlike French or other languages that closely resemble English, cannot be translated nearly as straightforwardly into English, which makes sense given the greater degree of linguistic variation. So, instead of trying to approach this project by veering more towards a literal translation, I tried to translate according to feel. By this, I mean that I tried to internalize the Japanese as sensations that I would then try to recreate in English as opposed to looking for direct equivalents in the dictionary. A good example of this is how I translated onomatopoeic words that literally described intangible sounds or sensations.

I also want to point out the way that I incorporated certain quotations. Although almost never used in such a way in English, in Japanese writing, quotations are often used to describe certain actions like adverbs. For example, on page 11, in the original Japanese text for “*oh no, he fell over*” was in quotation marks to describe how Iwakura-kun was making a face, if a child were to fall over. And while this may not sound the most natural when read in English, I tried my

best to keep these quotes in my translations because I thought that not doing so would be a disservice to a unique aspect of Japanese literature that makes the literature what it is.

I was also faced with the issue of how to translate referential prefixes そう(sou), こう(kou), and similar terms. In Japanese, ideas are often hinted at implicitly, with these referential words acting as a substitute for the “hidden” ideas depending on the context. The problem, however, when translating into English is that these referential words if translated literally, often lead to vague pronoun references, which is generally avoided in English writing. However, I also believe that doing the opposite and explicitly stating all the unspoken ideas undermines the cultural and linguistic integrity of the English text as a translation of the Japanese text. As such, I decided to would do both, and only insert explicit pronoun references when absolutely necessary for comprehension. Hopefully, this middle ground will be a good starting point that will not alienate readers who are not used reading this type of text, while also challenging them to think using a different cultural perspective.

One final remark I would like to make is about the formatting of the story. In the original text, Japanese is written line by line, almost as if it is dialogue. Sometimes these lines, or sentences rather, form paragraphs. Sometimes they do not. More importantly, this formatting does not read well in English due to its heavier reliance on paragraphs. As such, I have made the choice to adapt the line-by-line formatting into a paragraph-based formatting that will hopefully render the text more readable to an English-speaking audience. All that being said, I hope you will enjoy my translation of Banana Yoshimoto’s short story, “The Ghosts’ Home.”

The Ghosts' Home

“If that’s the case, then I want to eat hotpot, but eating at home alone is boring. So, Secchan, will you eat with me?”

I responded simply, “since I earned some money at my part-time job, I’ll find a way to treat you as a gift.” The earlier response that I got from Iwakura-kun was only that.

In a situation where I was invited like this by a boy who was living by himself, I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to accept it. But I thought that because it was him, surely its meaning was to be taken at face value. Besides, his apartment seemed close by. In any case, since he said it nonchalantly with a relieved expression, my chest wasn’t pounding at all. He had a strange, incomplete brightness and darkness to him like a completely clouded midwinter sky. For some reason, this was making me second guess my feelings for him. I didn’t seem to feel at all the vigor and excitement that resembles wanting to break out into a sprint, which is important in young love.

“Well then, shall we go make some food?” I asked, and a simple schedule was decided.

We were at a bench under the only large sprouting zelkova tree on the campus of the college that we were attending. I had practically no friends, and because the small number of friends I did have worked tirelessly at their part-time jobs, they didn’t really come to school. This was a

frequent occurrence at my lame private school. As such, Iwakura-kun and I frequently acted on our own, so we naturally grew closer to each other.

* * *

I made his acquaintance for the first time when I took over my friend's part-time job for a bit at a place that was like the neighborhood pub. He was working as a bartender there. Then at university, every time I ran into him, it felt like our relationship had developed to the point of eating breakfast and chatting together.

* * *

I've heard that he's the only son of a considerably famous swiss roll baker in town, but because he didn't want to inherit the family business, he did his minimize expenses and save money; the way he lived his life honestly gave that kind of impression. During his time at university, he'd been saving money but hadn't chosen his own path, so inevitably, a life of continuing to bake swiss rolls awaited him; being at his wits end like this was the feeling he gave me. The peculiar frustration of deciding his own path revealed itself from his life as a part-timer.

"Isn't that great, being the son of swiss roll bakers? Swiss rolls are the best, aren't they?" I asked, a sucker for swiss rolls.

“I don’t particularly dislike them, though my mom is an incredible mom who is very capable, a cheerful, pleasant person to be around, and a hard worker,” Iwakura-kun said.

For sure, Iwakura-san’s mom’s cheerful demeanor and cleverness were famous in the area.

I often heard that customers were touched by her hospitality and ended up buying her swiss rolls.

“I... I think she’s a really likeable person”

“I know!”

By merely walking together on the street, I could clearly sense his kind heart and good upbringing. For example: when walking in the park, the trees were rustling in the wind; the sunlight would waver; his eyes would narrow, and he would make an expression as if saying to himself, “doesn’t this feel great.” If a child were to fall over, Iwakura-kun would make a concerned face thinking to himself, *oh no, he fell over*, then become relieved when the parents picked up the child in their arms. That kind of sincere feeling is a quality of people who, in any case, definitely received something important from their parents.

“So, by spending my entire life in that family like this, I’ll slowly become a better person.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, but in my opinion, this isn’t real kindness. Anyone can become kind if they have time, money and peace, don’t ya think? In that vein, by doing things as they are now, you’ll only become nice in this moment. Then, the undesirable dark things will grow in you. Otherwise, you’ll live your whole life with a very superficial kindness. Since I’ve been a decent guy from the beginning, if it was something I could do, then I would have nurtured this kindness. Not the dark stuff.”

“Is this the reason why you try your best to economize and save money to such an extent?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say that, but... I only do what’s been decided now and what I am capable of doing. Otherwise, by not doing anything different as things are now, without realizing it, I’ll be working at the store. If I do that, I’ll no longer be able to break free from that flow of life ...” Iwakura-kun responded.

It was very costly to get into this school. In my case, as luck would have it, because I was born at a time when my parents were busy with work, I was put into kindergarten there, and like that, I only went up grade levels starting from the lowest grade.

I am the daughter of the owners of a moderately famous Western restaurant in the neighboring town. If you ask how famous, it’s always mentioned in sightseeing guidebooks. It’s the type of store where a family would eat out, or where an unmarried salaryman, who would splurge and go out to eat, but doesn’t want to spend money to the point of eating French cuisine, would stop by.

Because I wanted to inherit that store, which has continued since my grandfather's time, even if I didn't earn an impressive degree, it would be fine as long as I studied. Well, when I say studying, I mean that the recipe for foods like omurice, demi-glace, and pilaf were meticulously taught to me because the menu continued on without changing, and that was all that I had to do for the remaining time until obtaining my chef's license sooner or later.

My older brother didn't want to inherit the family business, so in high school, he moved out of the house for good. And now, he's employed at an advertising agency and is working hard there. That impression of my brother's hesitancy, then refusal to inherit the restaurant made me remember him from a nostalgic past, which is probably one of the reasons I felt close to Iwakura-kun. I was often made to hear my brother's complaints in the middle of the night.

On a positive note, my brother's very inquisitive, did nothing but socialize, and was not the type to be able to follow daily routines, nor did he always do the same action at the same time. Because he was always chasing excitement, he liked new things happening more than anything else. I think it was my parents' wishful thinking that my brother would be naturally suited to be their successor.

“Giving the restaurant to big bro is pointless! I'll take over the business!” I always said.

In the middle of the night, my brother kept grimacing in his room, but tried to convince himself that our parents wanted him to inherit the business because his own fingers were nimbler and he

had better stamina. However, my brother's that type of person who, whenever his position is being taken by someone else, becomes anxious.

And then, my brother's relationship with our family became one of coming home occasionally to hang out, eat a meal, then returning to his place. Since it seemed that he still wanted to play around and wouldn't marry for the time being, there wasn't really a sign that he wanted to inherit the store and come back home.

Our parents seemed to have thrown around various ideas, and when I said that I wanted to inherit our business, they worried, explaining that "it might be too challenging for you." However, they came to the conclusion saying, "we cannot let you become your brother, so it would be better off to let you earn some experience." To that extent, they seemed to have been shocked that my brother, who my parents had thought at first might naturally want to inherit the rest of the family business, hated it.

So, my parents did not want to force me to inherit the business and felt that they should make me attend college as preparation in order to give me more time to reflect on my situation, in the case that I would change my mind. Well, because my mind didn't change, going on to college was merely for the purpose of gaining life experience.

For me, aging alongside my working parents was a given. And because I thought that observing them take over the position of my already deceased grandmother, and that of my grandfather, who like the symbol of the restaurant, still comes by to help out and receive regular customers,

was the most certain and important thing in my life, I didn't understand at all the feelings of my brother who hated this and left home.

Since I was young, I was serious to the point of being too serious and loved continuing to do things. I still continue to do calligraphy until this day, and only stopped using the abacus recently because my mental math has gotten better. Furthermore, I've been doing ceramics for ten years. I've even been routinely going to the same hot spring inn in Iwate with three childhood friends, which is an event that I haven't missed in the past eight years. So, I didn't really understand Iwakura-kun's feelings when he tried so hard to reject the swiss roll store, which has that delicious smell, is an enticing location, and is in a very good economic state. Besides, if he had something he wanted to do at any rate, I would've understood. But, he didn't, so I couldn't understand at all where he was trying to go.

I could only see his way of speaking, where he doesn't really clearly explain anything nor his inner thoughts, as a mere way of rejecting his own position from a dream-like state.

I always thought that we were simply kids belonging to business families, that our conversations were lively, and that we got along well. In a way, both of us knew this wasn't an important responsibility, yet for some reason, we seem to have accepted it as some sort of responsibility.

* * *

On the day we made hotpot, I bought the ingredients and went for the first time to the apartment where Iwakura-kun was living.

I heard that this building stood on the land owned by Iwakura-kun's uncle, and that its demolition was already decided, so until then, Iwakura was allowed to live there for 5000 yen. As such, he's been living there. However, it looks more astonishing than previously expected. It was worn-down and made of wood. Its glass fixtures and outside staircase were broken, and the hallway was falling apart here and in several other places.

What's going on here? It's pretty wild, living here all by yourself. Crazy, huh, I thought as I went weak in the knees.

Because it was in such an unbelievable condition, when I saw that there were no other residents, I nodded. I feel like I understood the reason why his vibe resembled a strangely transparent somberness and loneliness.

I rolled up my scarf, and in the cold winter air, looked up at the muddied clouds, then swallowed my saliva in one gulp. Somehow, I had a feeling that if I were to enter his apartment, my original self wouldn't be able to come back out.

At the corner room on the second floor, Iwakura-kun opened the sliding door and welcomed me in.

“Cool place.”

“Right? And, because my landlord used to live here, it’s quite big,” he laughed.

That was true. In contrast with the impression of the tiny screen door, this room’s layout had two living rooms: a western living room and a Japanese style room with 10 tatamis in the back. The bath and toilet were separated, and the ceiling was high up. Outside the window, a park was visible, and the evening music broadcast was echoing. The other room was dark and deserted, but other than that, the apartment was a bright space with a surprising pleasantness.

“Do you have a pot?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do! I also have a portable stove, y’know.”

“I’ll make a simple hotpot with chicken balls, lettuce and vermicelli. Might udon noodles be good at the end?”

“I’m happy,” Iwakura-kun laughed.

“To be honest, it seems I’ve always been better at making western food. Even with my eyes closed, I can make it!”

“Is that so? Now that I think about it, I should’ve asked you to make that. But I’ve been wanting to eat hotpot.”

“I also feel that it’s boring to make food to be served at home.”

I focused on making hotpot in the kitchen, and steam gradually enveloped the room. Iwakura-kun was reading a book while listening to music. The sky rapidly turned dark, and when I occasionally opened the only glass window in order to ventilate the room, a cold wind whistled in and encircled the room.

While watching TV, we ate enough hotpot to fill our stomachs. Our conversation never touched on romance, and time passed by quite normally. Due to the nature of my job (that I hadn’t actually started), I cooked without leaving any dishes to be washed. Besides, since cleaning afterwards was easy, Iwakura kun did most of it. Then, I drank the coffee he poured for me and ate a swiss roll that he received from home. I put my legs into the kotatsu and unintentionally said:

“Um, speaking of this room, I have a feeling that it’s a bit strange. Even though it’s calming, there’s this sensation that time has stopped. Only here is it super chill, and my mind is at peace. Since you’re often in a place like this, I would imagine that you enthusiastically leave home to go to your part-time job. If it were me, I would probably end up wanting to be here doing nothing.”

Iwakura-kun nodded.

“It’s like you said, whenever I’m here, my heart becomes too calm, and time completely stops. And, somehow, it seems that there are other people who live here.”

“In this building? Other tenants?”

I was thinking it was maybe something like homeless people sheltering here, which scared and surprised me. I asked him about it.

“Not exactly, that’s not it. It’s... my landlords.”

“The landlords are still here?”

“Very much so. Even though it’s hard to talk about it and they’re already dead, it seems you haven’t noticed, huh.”

“Huh?”

“They passed away in this room due to carbon monoxide poisoning while facing their charcoal heater– my landlord and their spouse. Well, they were already very old.”

“Here?”

“That’s it.”

“Are you thinking about freaking me out, and like, doing inappropriate things to me?”

“That would be great and all, but I’m not kidding. Sometimes, you can see the couple in the middle of the room.”

At a loss for words, “Iwakura-kun, are you the kind of person that can see stuff like that,” I asked.

“Nope, I can’t see them. Not at all. Even when I traveled alone and camped at a graveyard, I couldn’t see them then.”

“Then, why?”

“Whenever I’m at home, my mind wanders, and blankly at that as it seems. Or, for example, when I’m too tired at work; or anyways, sometimes when I’m waking up; or when I’m drinking tea after coming home tired, two worlds collide, and I end up seeing the two existing in a way that has continued up until now!”

“Wouldn’t it be good to do something like an exorcism, for example?”

“But, this place is also going to be demolished soon, y’know? So, I wonder if I need to go that far.” Iwakura-kun said.

“After all, it seems that I’m somehow living here happily.”

That kind of attitude was what was nice about him. It seems that he’s nice even to the ghosts.

“Hmph.” I said incredulously.

I was thinking that perhaps his worries about the future and the demandingness of his part-time job have made him a bit strange, so I should pay more attention to his behavior and watch him more closely. More than this, we were facing each other with our legs under the kotatsu and eating a roll little by little. Having a mundane conversation like this somehow made us seem like we were an old couple, which was strange.

On the way back to my place, he was on his way to go shopping and accompanied me while pushing his bike until we got to the front of my apartment.

“Secchan, why do you live alone? Even though your parents live next to the neighboring train station?” He asked.

In a sky of beautiful stars, the moon grew sharp like ice. I could see its whiteness as if having been cut out from the sky.

“When my mom started to hold cooking classes out of interest, the amount of people coming and going from the house increased, so my room completely disappeared. Well, where I’m living now is really more like a single room. I’m always returning to their place though. I often go back there to eat and come back to my place at night to sleep. I even go back frequently to help out at the store.”

“Going with the flow seems pretty great to me. Because right now, I’m going astray.”

“You care about the feeling of distance between me and my family after all. I mean, if I’m not careful, I won’t have any privacy nor any personal time as an adult. That’s why I’m making such an effort to live by myself and travel on my own.”

“Ah, so it’s like that, I see. I’m also in the same boat, but I might be getting tired of it. I bring the car out for my parents to shop and travel; I help my relatives move... I recognize that all of this has become too much of a given in my life. Yet, that doesn’t mean I’m opposed to any of it, or that I don’t want to become an artisan.”

“You still have a lot of time, so what if you save money and go abroad or get a job? Especially if a boy lives life as an obedient child like that, he becomes forced to act against his own nature, causing him to only be able to follow rules.”

“That’s right. For my parents, I am an extension of their parenting, but I have a life that’s my own now.”

“Thanks for walking me back home.”

“Thanks for treating me today. I’m also sorry for eating without paying for anything.”

“Don’t worry about it, the swiss rolls were delicious.”

He waved, then returned home on his bike. Even though it looked like an expensive moped, it had gotten worn down and was often repaired. I thought to myself that no matter what he does, you could definitely see that his family was rich. Leaving home and saving money while nonchalantly receiving these kinds of benefits was a near impossible task, so it’s not like I couldn’t understand why he looked and felt like he was getting more dejected.

That night, a little too much like usual, since neither my feelings nor anything else was agitated, a permeating feeling inside my chest led me to remark to myself, *guess this isn’t going to become love. We’re just friends.*

* * *

“Mom, the old apartment in the neighboring town, do you know about it?” I tried to ask my mom, “I heard that the landlord apparently passed away from monoxide poisoning.”

“I’ve definitely heard about it. It was on the news. She fell asleep warming herself in front of her heater without ventilating it, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Do you know anything about those people?” I tried to ask, thinking that since my mom was familiar with the area, she might know something.

The store closed; we cleaned up, and were eating pilaf, which acted as a sort of payment for our work, at the counter. The miso soup had a special flavor since it was passed down from grandma. Even if people say that I was born only to preserve this flavor for future generations, I’m not offended at all. It was that delicious; a miso soup that had a charm like magic. I guess grandma also used to make this flavor herself.

“They were often here, y’know. That old couple. But after the husband developed leg problems, they didn’t really come anymore. On weeknights, when the restaurant was emptying out, they would come in holding hands. They, um, always sat at table 6, and would order omurice and pork curry. And then, because they wanted to share the food, they would ask for another place.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, the image comes to mind. I also remember both of them.”

“They would both only order a single small bottle of beer. I felt that even though the cute old man and woman, how shall I say, had a plain and tranquil quality to them, they had nonetheless a modest demeanor, which was a result of the years accumulating, and they continued to live by

simply being like this. Although they weren't particularly enjoying themselves, they looked relaxed and gave a happy impression. I often told your dad, 'wouldn't it be great to live a long life like that.' And, sorry for saying this, but if the couple passed away painlessly in their sleep, then that would have been for the best," Mom said.

Mom and dad were a ridiculously close married couple.

My dad is the protagonist of a strange story: he was a diligent salaryman, but while coming into my mom's store to eat, he fell in love with her, quit his job and started studying cooking. They decided to open a store together, and now, when it comes to anything mom says, he will listen assentingly. With the cooking classes too. Even though I objected, it was my mom's wish, so I folded.

"You better not die in your sleep like them," I said.

"Even if it does happen, whenever I remember that the store will continue, I feel relieved," my mom laughed.

During my childhood, these words were often used on my brother. Though it seems that my mom only meant to say this joyfully without any ill will, inside my brother, these negative feelings had been accumulating. For him, those words weighed painfully down on him.

I have always been jealous of my brother who has been the center of our parents' attention.

If I were to also turn a blind eye to my desire to be the inheritor, it simply stems from a marked stubbornness, which is a trivial reason. I think about my brother and not understanding why he complains despite being in that sort of privileged position. These thoughts have become a gigantic mass that will probably keep coming back to haunt me.

But, this only occurred to me when grandma died.

At the funeral, my uncles, who were young at the time, appeared in full black suits. Grandma used to treat and give them advice. They talked about all sorts of things like dating and memories of fried prawns that grandma let them eat when they were heartbroken, then went home. I felt touched by how cool it was that by doing what she did, she became a pillar of support in other people's lives.

Even the utensils in the store, we used them every day. And, when we polish them each day, a deep color started to show. In that way, I felt that even grandma, who simply appeared in the store every day and was supposed to make one-of-a-kind food, had a life that was extraordinarily profound. I was emotional because it seemed that there wasn't anything on this earth that could outdo the impact of her life on others.

Then in the following days, Iwakura tried his best at work while I worked hard studying, helping around at the store, and learning the ropes. Because omurice was being served at the store on baking dishes I made, the ceramics became quite useful as busy work and I was learning how to

make them. Since I was also writing the restaurant's menu in my own handwriting, it seemed that I couldn't neglect my calligraphy skills.

Because of my personality, which is overly serious no matter what the situation, I would always do my best to wait until everything had a purpose. This was already a habit stemming from my temperament, so it couldn't be changed. In a sense, I only devoted myself to various things because my route was already decided. Since my academic work was by no means practical, I was bored.

Then, the Iwakura-kun, who I rarely run into, appeared hazily out of nowhere.

It seems he was also someone who left his extended family and was living by himself. And, the times when we did come and meet at the university, both of us were exhausted from work.

Although we looked rather mature, we were still only college students.

But, in any case, maybe it had something to do with being allowed to live in "those ghosts' room in the ghosts' house." Probably, for ghosts, they might have a haunting period. I was slightly worried that getting mixed in with this undeniably strange flow, which forever transcended the flow of time, might begin to drain what seemed like energy from just living.

* * *

Perhaps, even if I didn't think of Iwakura-kun in this way at that time, I had quite a crush on him.

I broke up with an older classmate that was in ceramics class with me after only a period of about half a year. It was a huge love affair, and because that person was single, I turned red, thinking to the point of imagining about marriage. Although we eventually split up for various reasons, I still wasn't able to forget about this person. This person married another woman from the same company, and because he stopped coming to the ceramics class, we weren't able to meet anymore.

This woman was being abused by her husband and asked to my ex for help. Unable to leave her alone, he was slowly reeled in by this person. My only saving grace being that I was young, I was completely powerless to stop them from meeting each other more and more, so I could only sadly watch these developments unfold. When the store wasn't busy, I accidentally told Iwakura-kun this story half-jokingly.

Then, Iwakura-kun said, "because men that get trapped like that will continue to be trapped, I think it was good that you broke up."

For guys of that age, I was surprised by his relevant comment. And, to tell the truth, these words continued to encourage me later, when I was bitterly hurt by love. Furthermore, of course we no longer talked. And, they got married, so I could no longer see him. So, without even giving chase, I forgot of all of this. Only the calm profile of Iwakura-kun's tilted head left a lasting impression as he talked while polishing a glass.

* * *

That afternoon, I met Iwakura-kun unexpectedly at the train station.

“Are you doing okay?” I laughed.

“I did as you said,” Iwakura-kun said abruptly.

“Are you free right now? Let’s talk while walking.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. In any case, I’m on my way home.”

“Iwakura-kun, what about work?” I asked.

“I don’t have work today! But I gotta wake up at 6 a.m. tomorrow,” Iwakura-kun said energetically, his complexion seemingly better than usual.

“Have you been seeing the ghosts recently?” I tried to ask him.

“Yeah, I see it occasionally. The old woman makes tea and does lots of laundry. As for the old man, he often does radio calisthenics.”

“Even though you painstakingly left your own home, you were thrust into another one huh. Can’t really say that you’re living alone, right?”

“I’m already used to it. It has that normal kind of vibe! The one when you meet occasionally and go ‘ah, hello.’ It’s just that they don’t acknowledge me.”

We walked around the empty winter city in the afternoon. While cars let off a wintery light, traffic continued without stopping in the withering color of the roadside plantanus trees.

“And? What did you do like I said?” I asked.

“Going abroad. Because I’m interested, I’ve decided to go to a confectionary school in France.”

“Speaking of this, you’re going on the path to becoming an heir, aren’t ya?”

“Well, I realized that I don’t want to become a person who has never been to France even if I’m making swiss rolls!”

“Ah, I see. Me too, had my home been a legit Italian restaurant, I would’ve also thought to do the same. Luckily, my family makes western food for Japanese people, so I haven’t thought hard about this to that extent.”

“Because I don’t intend to change the tale of the swiss rolls developed by my old man, it doesn’t really have to do with this. As far as this tradition concerns me, I’ve ruminated on it quite a bit. So, perhaps I’ll train, and maybe even work over there without coming back, but because going

there is still a work in progress, I can't really say anything. But, the feeling of wanting to do all of this is immense. Using my fingers to make sweets, even the sweets themselves, I don't hate either. Speaking of sweets after a meal, I have a dream: I want to make people happy. To start with, I looked for Japanese schools, but while searching, I started thinking about wanting to go over abroad more and more."

"Have you told your parents yet?"

"I told them. I was completely opposed."

"So, what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna go to school over there, then find a job since I've saved about enough money to be able to live in a cheap apartment. I also have all my savings from since I was a kid. Well, because this is something that my parents saved up for me, I'd like to use it as sparingly as possible."

"That's amazing, Iwakura-kun, properly saving your money like that..."

"Yeah, well that's because I saved without using almost any of it," Iwakura-kun said.

Whenever I thought, *is that so, so you don't want to stay at all anymore*, my chest tightened, and a strange loneliness overwhelmed me. The sky that I looked up towards appeared more somber

and farther away. I thought to myself that he surely will go abroad, discover his own world, then live over there for a long time, and might not even come back.

From that time on, I already realized it. It was there regardless, the thought that Iwakura-kun wanted to sleep with me. That sensation coming from his face, a feeling from his voice; they made me think this for some reason. Between the two of us, the thought of snuggling together expanded like leavening bread and was settling in gently.

“I really wanted to eat Secchan’s omurice,” Iwakura-kun said.

“Even now, I regret asking you to make hotpot, but it was still delicious.”

“I’d say that if you come to my family’s restaurant, you’ll be able to eat it whenever, but it’s my mom or dad who makes it. Though, the taste is almost the same because of this. I still have a little bit of omurice, y’know!”

“We still have some time until graduation, huh,” Iwakura-kun laughed.

“... So, why don’t we go make some right now?” I said.

“Iwakura-kun is in charge of paying for the ingredients.”

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Amidst a slight bout of sadness, I was thinking that we understood this as an unambiguous exchange along the lines of, “are you down to do the deed,” “yeah, I am!”

The cloudy skies of winter seemed disagreeable without even having to mention the cloud’s thickness, gray skies, and blowing wind. I could only think that all of this was put into place to make people huddle closer together. In this greyness that went on forever, I just wanted to spend the entire time in a room. I wanted to get comfortable in an endless lust for companionship with someone else, as there was the only place I felt at ease.

* * *

We bought ingredients at the supermarket, then I once again set foot into the supposedly scary room in the dilapidated building. Yet, I didn’t feel any dread. Anyhow, I observed that the room appeared to slowly dim and grow more transparent. The air drearily became clearer and the color of the clouds, which formed thick piles everywhere outside the window, was visible after all.

While talking about a variety of things, I opened the window occasionally because of the heat from the gas stove and made omurice. If sauce had been required, the cooking wouldn’t have gone well since I wasn’t making it at home. But, because it was omurice, I was able to reproduce the exact same flavor as the store’s own omurice. I did him a favor and made oyster miso soup.

In my opinion, this already surpassed by and large the point of being uninterested in him. And although omurice is a typical dish, Ishikawa-kun was very happy and ate even my leftover portion.

Each time Ishikawa-kun went to the bathroom, I was nervous about what to do if the ghosts were to show up, but luckily there was only me in the middle of this uncomfortable room with the stove that shone and burned a brilliant orange like a brazier.

Then, when it was 8 p.m., while eating swiss rolls, which were amply filled with fresh cream, and whose lightly wrapped surface layer was slightly hardened and burnt, both of us put our legs under the kotatsu without talking about anything in particular.

“Why are there always swiss rolls in this house?”

“My mother brings them here! Together, with the rice.”

“Always having enough to the point of selling them is a point we have in common, huh. And even if we do this, even if the boom ends, swiss rolls will never lose their popularity, it seems.”

“Depending on the season, their ingredients are changed! More or less from carrying them, they become messengers, which is fitting, right? Well, Japanese people love swiss rolls in any case, don’tcha think?”

“What kind of ingredients?”

“Chestnuts, *matcha*, and yuzu lemons.”

“*Yuzu* lemons, huh? That doesn’t seem too tasty.”

I didn’t know how to express this relaxing feeling that came from the solitude when talking to this person about this carefree kind of topic. He was neither a family member, nor very interesting to talk to. Something just felt right, and we kept on talking. There were even moments of silence. I don’t even think about whether or not to do my make-up or hair like when I’m with other guys.

“I think it’s time for me to go,” I said.

“It’s a shame that you didn’t see the ghosts, but...”

“If you wanted to see, then you could come stay here,” Iwakura-kun responded.

I was a bit surprised. Well, just a little bit, but...

“I don’t want to see the ghosts, but I have a question. What do you mean by coming to stay here? Could you at least explain properly?” I said.

“Okay,” Iwakura-kun answered, deep in thought with a serious face.

Then, he said, “when working in the host business, this kind of thing becomes completely inconsequential.”

“What do you mean?” I said, my feelings obviously hurt.

“I understand that this isn’t the case, but aren’t there many ways to say that I have a crush on you, or that I think that if given no choice, I would say that I like you?”

“If I have to say it, I think your looks and personality are the best among all the girls that I know.” Iwakura-kun said. When he said this, I thought about whether or not it was true, and my chest hurt a little.

“But anyways, when you work part-time in the host business, younger company comes to drink on their way home, and it’s become a substitute greeting to ask, “are you going to stay?” When you grow considerably used to it, it means that you end up losing the frank feeling inside of you.”

“I... seem to understand this in one way or another.”

“Then, speaking of girls, even when they’re in the bedroom with men who do this, don’t they assess the atmosphere with their entire bodies? Probably.”

“I think no one is like that.”

“But, men can only see ass. Even in a woman, no matter how beautiful she makes herself, what kind of clothes she wears, how normal her conversations are; in the deepest depths of her body is ass. And, men can only consider that moist and seemingly detestable ass, which is the only thing men can see. Once they start thinking like this, they will only be able think about this.”

“Huh.”

“So, from the start, I’ve only been thinking about your ass. Each time you laugh and talk, all I think of is your ass.”

“Even if you say this, should I be happy or sad for you?”

“And, whenever I think about that, the more I want to do it, but because I’ll be leaving Japan soon, I also don’t want to feel sad.”

“It does seem like that. Getting sad seems inevitable, huh. No matter how much we act with our current desires, that does seem to be the case. If I make up my mind to do it, I know that I’ll end up liking it.”

“I also feel that way. If we do it, I’ll like it more.

“But, we still have some time, right?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Well then, let’s draw a line and choose to try to enjoy each other’s company.” I said

“The future isn’t in a state that we can predict. But now, I’m sometimes free, and there’s definitely ass here.”

“Is this okay?”

“Don’t ask me if this is okay. Don’t make it my fault.”

This was the first time that a person cornered me differently like this. I was astonished by how unusual Iwakura-kun was being.

* * *

Then I stayed over at Iwakura-kun’s place.

To my surprise, rather than having a large futon, he was of course a little prince and seemed to have a great, but used mattress, a high quality down blanket, and clean sheets in his closet.

Outside, the winter wind howled and rattled the windows. With only a small light, we had sex just once that night. We never said a word while doing the very kinky stuff. Besides him, I only knew one other guy, but Iwakura-kun's gentleness fundamentally changed how I felt. He examined my body, and it felt like he was figuring out what was best to do where. He held back his excitement, which was annoying. This was the first time I was before someone else's gaze. After completely making sure, he paused for a moment then put it in me. This was a strange moment. It seemed that in this room, we were each meeting another person who was having sex for the first time, which surprised us both. I understood that both of us were wondering to each other what we had done up until now. A really hard and slippery object entered into an area that was really wet and tight, which led me to think there didn't exist a better connection. I thought to myself that these movements existed in order to confirm the wonder of this inimitable connection and the consequent elation. We were following a rhythm which paused then started again. It didn't hurt anywhere, despite not always being on the mark, we found the other person to be doing it well. So, we were on the verge of wanting to continue doing this forever, even when we stopped. It was in that moment that I understood all this.

Then, we wrapped ourselves in the down blanket, cuddled warmly against each other, and fell asleep.

“Getting involved and sleeping with someone like this is something I wanted to do. Even more than eating hotpot, I guess” Iwakura-kun said before falling asleep.

“Even though you have a home to return to, even though you’re loved, you’re still lonely. Might this be what we call being ‘young?’” I responded. If this was the case, I felt it keenly as well.

When I woke up, Iwakura-kun had slept in, so he had hurriedly changed and was in the middle of brushing his teeth. He said that he was going to leave first, asked me to lock the door and put the key into his locked mailbox, and noisily left.

“Before I go, I want us to meet again at least one more time,” he said as he kissed me while I was still in the blanket, half-dressed.

* * *

And even now, while searching the seemingly snowy grey skies, I’ve dozed off to that euphoric feeling of being completely enveloped by the pleasant sensation of the down blanket, which felt like being drunk of my own warmth.

When I woke up next, I was miserable and alone, but satisfied. It was eight in the morning.

Afterwards, because I caught myself feeling more and more wistful whenever my body settled into what would’ve been Iwakura-kun’s space, I made up my mind to wake up. I returned back

to my own world and had to restart my daily life. First, I turned on the stove, which started to warm up the room. I looked absentmindedly at the fire on the stove, then murmured to myself, “that’s right. I completely forgot about the ghosts.”

When I looked, I saw the old woman’s receding image near the sink. At a leisurely pace, she boiled water and made tea. The kettle was not moving, and the water wasn’t actually boiling. The half transparent old woman was, in any case, making gestures while lightly swaying back and forth. Each gesture was slow and slight. Politely executed, they were typical movements done with her usual countenance. This might have been the warm and calming way of doing things that’s been passed down from her own mother and even from her mother’s mother.

I recalled the appearance of my grandma who used to work like that in the kitchen and gazed at the transparent old woman fixedly with a feeling as if I were going back in time to when I was a small kid. When I caught colds and had a fever, I would peer at grandma like that from behind. I even felt that before long, grandma would make porridge and kindly bring it to me. It was a nostalgic, painful, then warm feeling.

Then, in the opposite room, the old man would do radio calisthenics. Dressed in knee-length sweatpants, he would deliberately carry out each exercise one by one while extending his twisting legs and hips. He must have believed that thanks to this, his body would always be healthy. I never would have thought that his weakness would be the heater.

The couple lived modestly, sincerely greeted other residents, properly paid their rent, and updated their account books. Once a month, they would eat the same food at the same restaurant. This was perhaps their meager indulgence.

This isn't at all terrifying, I thought to myself while I was just watching.

These people surely hadn't done any preparations for dying, and simply lived as they always did until the end of their time.

I was wrapped in the futon here, and while thinking about Iwakura-kun, who always quietly watched people without bothering them, and his kind but desolate heart, I felt it more keenly. It seems I've really fallen in love with him. As it was, I was still in the middle of feeling his essence all over my body. Even if he's weak, dense or kind, he's a sincere young man that can embrace a woman with a man's strength.

The old woman would forever continue to move around the kitchen meticulously, and the old man would forever do his radio calisthenics. Together, they had an intimate and calm appearance that I've seen before at the store, which was just like in this scene. In order to not disturb them, I quietly changed and left the room.

"Sorry for bothering you," I greeted them properly.

But, without even looking toward me, they silently continued on with their lives.

* * *

First, he needed to ask his French acquaintances to be potential volunteers to teach him French. Then after becoming able to speak a bit of French, he will go to a confectionary school located in the Parisian suburbs. Consequently, Iwakura-kun became super busy, and it felt like he only had time to give me a wave when I would occasionally see him at school. In the blink of an eye, the day of his departure drew near.

I kind of wanted to keep my distance, so I was avoiding him in one way or another. But, his saying “let’s meet again one more time,” (well, it was actually only “let’s do it one more time.”) is all that I remembered. Of course, I still had this feeling. I think he felt the same.

But I didn’t call or text him.

Nonetheless, I thought that we would surely have good timing.

Then, exactly on the Friday morning two weeks before the day of his departure, when the gently overcast winds were strong once again, we unexpectedly met at the station square. Layering ourselves in coats made us feel that we’d grown completely distant since the summer when we worked the same part-time job.

“Today, I’ve decided not to go to language school because of preparation for the move.”

Iwakura-kun’s eyes that glanced over at me were the eyes of someone in love. They were passionate; a set of eyes that even now seemed to want to get involved with me. They were not voracious, but rather the eyes of a man when he looks at someone precious.

“I’m also taking a break from work,” I said.

“Well, do you want to stop at the bookstore for a moment?”

Then, we went together to the bookstore and got lunch.

“That building, it’ll be demolished soon. It’s about time for me to be moving out.”

“The old couple, what’s going to happen to them? I’m worried.”

“Did you see them?”

“I saw how they were living modestly! It seems that they were people that often came to the store. I recognize their figures. The old woman was making tea, and the old man was doing calisthenics.”

“Were you not scared?”

“Nope, how do I say it? It felt like my heart settled down.”

“Maybe it would be better to give them something like an incense stick.”

“Yup, even if we aren’t experts, doing that might be better.”

Like an old married couple, we bought a single, pure white chrysanthemum and some incense.

“Wouldn’t it be good to give omurice and pork curry as offerings? I think they’d want to eat some,” Iwakura-kun said, also thinking that this was what they would want.

We went to a nearby supermarket and bought supplies.

That winter afternoon, when looking at us stocking up on various things, carrying many white plastic bags, and huddling close together as we walked relaxedly in everyday clothes, we might have looked like a cute newlywed couple living together. However, we were sad because soon, we were going to be a pair that will only separate.

No matter what we did, I was so happy, but also a bit sad.

Iwakura-kun’s room was already empty and various things were completely packaged, so there were almost no wasted items. He told me that rather than renting a room in the house of an

acquaintance that he met before his leave, he will be allowed to be a babysitter. It seems Iwakura-kun's father did him a favor and got in touch with that acquaintance.

“Speaking of that, aren't you no longer being opposed by your parents?”

“Well, that's just my old man. My mom is still opposed. Though, she might already understand that I won't be coming back. And because I don't want to lie to her, I've been saying that I won't come home. Even though she's against me, if I save money, I'll probably be able to leave that home and live on my own.”

His face lit up towards the future. Differing from when he does his part-time job and is unable to decide what path to take, this was a face that was looking at an unknown world. I thought that if he was this serious, then he would study well. It was good that I wasn't even jealous or sad. In comparison to him being tired and growing paler, he looked far happier.

As soon as we entered the room, without turning on the electricity, Iwakura-kun and I were wrapped in the down blanket and had sex. Then, while naked, we talked about various things, and, like your typical young people, were revealing our trivial thoughts about things like considerations about the future and our parents.

Nonetheless, a sadness continued to trail behind us. No matter what we were doing, when I thought about the words, “soon, it'll be farewell,” I felt shivers despite time passing by quicker.

After laughing joyfully, it for sure became a slight feeling of dejection. But, because I was enjoying myself now, I was going to focus on the moment.

Then, when it became night and we got hungry, he pulled out a frying pan, pot, cutting knife and cutting board from his soon-to-be shipped packages, and I made omurice and pork curry. More than usual, I continued to put heart into my cooking, focused, and did my absolute best to make it. These people are people, who, by taking pleasure in making their final days more extravagant, chose our restaurant's flavor. When thinking about this memorial service for the deceased, I became frantic. They already can't come back a second time; and even if we want to offer them some again, they aren't able to eat. Nonetheless, I want them to taste only the feelings infused in this food. Thank you for your patronage until now; thank you for choosing us; these were the feelings I wanted to convey

We ate most of our food, but first, we neatly arranged food on small paper plates, then put them by the window. We arranged the chrysanthemum inside a paper cup, lit the incense, and brought our hands together, earnestly praying that when the building was demolished, the souls of the two deceased would go to heaven. I even offered them a small bottle of beer.

With that, I did all I could, which made me feel refreshed. This was still my job: rewarding the people who loved our flavor. Iwakura-kun was once again happy because of its deliciousness and gulped down what I made.

Then, in a faintly calm atmosphere, we fell asleep one more time.

“Even though we’ve quickly gotten much closer, it’s really too bad that we have to separate,” Iwakura-kun said. I thought the same thing.

The ghosts did not come out. I thought that they were probably satisfied by their meal.

Because staying would make me feel sad, I decided to go home in the middle of night, and he saw me off. The two of us taking our time to walk on the nighttime street somehow felt refreshed.

“Send me messages, okay?”

“Okay, I had a lot of fun. Thank you.”

We said these words as we hugged each other while laughing. The inside of my jacket was filled with Iwakura-kun’s warmth, which became one with my own warmth and was super warm.

“Even though we like each other this much, we’re really separating, huh,” I said. Then when I looked, tears were welling up in Iwakura-kun’s eyes.

“When it came to goofing off and sleeping, we were too obedient.”

“Aren’t you leaving Japan in order to stop being so obedient?”

“Yeah, but it’s pointless in front you. I’ve already shown all of myself to you.”

“I’ll see you again, if destiny permits.”

Then, we separated.

Endlessly waving his hand, Iwakura-kun saw me off on the nighttime street.

* * *

I think we cared about each other’s future, but might we have stopped staying in touch?

Only once did a message come from Iwakura-kun. Other than how he was doing, he wrote, “I can’t take it anymore here.”

That tone, the teasing feeling; they made me think of him in all his being, and tears welled up in my eyes. Iwakura’s silhouette that always seemed unsettled, the color of sky that we looked up at together, and the way we used our hands and fingers all came back to me. When I thought to myself that it was already impossible to meet again, even though we might have been able to remain together had only a single thing been different, the tears wouldn’t stop.

One day I happened to pass by the apartment, but the building was completely demolished, and a beautiful condo was built in its place. And, even though it was my job to watch the town's changes, my chest hurt. I thought that the old couple, along with our passionate feelings, were given a burial.

While praying that all of these would go to heaven, I walked past the demolished grounds.

Then, I forgot everything as well as the flow of time.

However, eight years later, we ended up getting married.

I guess this could only be called fate.

* * *

First, Iwakura-kun worked as patissier in a restaurant located in the Parisian suburbs over these eight years. Of course, in that time, he probably had various romantic encounters, hardships, and happy moments. And, although I had a passionate love affair of my own, gave up inheriting the store, and thought about becoming that person's wife, we ended up separating, and I finally went back to doing my calling. Even though I was far from feeling like a completely stable person that supported myself, I was still responsible enough for my parents to be able to go to an onsen when they took a break from the store.

Iwakura-kun's mother passed away due to a heart attack. It was April of this year. I didn't go to the funeral. I thought that if a woman who had slept multiple times with her son were to go, they would be bothered. But, in my heart, I gave my condolences, and even though I kind of wondered if Iwakura-kun came home, my memories of him along with the passage of time became impressions from a time when I was an entirely joyful student. And since these impressions were fading away, I didn't particularly want to meet again.

The reason for this being that there were many customers who grew interested in me. Since even my mom read too much into various things, I was in a place where I was the girl in charge of attracting guys to the store and in choosing from among this bunch, I was developing a good relationship with one of them.

Moreover, this person was in line to become a chef and already complemented my future dream well. He had a good physique, was a good-natured person, and slightly resembled my grandpa. Ah, this was a time when I dreamed that if he were it, it might've been better to marry him.

* * *

Yet, Iwakura-kun and I unexpectedly ran into each other once again with that coincidental timing. Well, because it was in our hometown, you could say it was just a common occurrence. But, why is that in our situation, we happened to meet when we had free time despite both of us being busy?

At a cafe in the neighborhood, I was drinking tea by myself when he walked straight in. In the moment I thought to myself that a man, who was wearing strangely beautifully colored clothes, came in, it was unmistakably Iwakura-kun.

We stared at each other in wonder, and when I beckoned to him, he sat to the side across from me.

I thought that the quality of his skin had changed because of his long stay abroad. And, due to making sweets, his right hand was very rugged. He gave me the impression that his shoulders were also much leaner than before, and that his face was thinly sculpted. His eyes didn't feel vacantly kind like before and had become the sharp eyes of an adult who knows solitude and self-reliance.

Ah, he wanted to become like this, but because there were never opportunities for this to happen in Japan, leaving was his only option, I thought to myself when I saw him with my own eyes and understood. Judging from the way he spoke, he didn't know at all what he wanted from the conversation. Despite this, the part of his smiling face that shined plainly did not change.

"It's been a while. You've completely become a grownup," I said.

"You've also completely grown up," Iwakura-kun laughed.

This was the seat next to the window that was brimming with the early summer light. There were stores in the vicinity of where people exiting the train station entered into the backstreets, and everyone's arms, which had just changed into short sleeves, felt like they were glistening with sweat. The greenery of the trees vigorously livened up, and even now appeared to be reaching towards the sky.

"As expected," I said.

I was thinking that with his personality, there's no way that he wouldn't inherit the store that has become solely managed by his father after his mother passed away.

"Were you able to see your mom?"

"Yeah, I was with her for a month after she was admitted to the hospital for her first seizure. Every day, I was checking in on her, and after she was discharged, we even went to a hot spring! Already, she didn't say a single word about inheriting the store. It's good that she was allowed to simply have a good time. Then I reflected on various things as expected and felt a little lost, but as today has come, my reason for being over there has faded. Since the store working opposite us expanded, many new young employees joined and were just briefly instructed, I thought that it was all okay. As timing goes, I wondered if it might've been just the right moment."

"Was your dad okay?"

“No, he was already so disappointed that it’s hard to see him like this.”

“So, what kind of store is it going to become? Is it going to be your dad making swiss rolls, and you making cakes?”

“I also thought about this, but because we’re a specialty store that’s painstakingly selling goods, I was thinking that this was going to take the form of allowing orders during Christmas. When I try to look carefully at the present, my old man has uniquely cool tricks and techniques to him. But, despite doing all that studying abroad, no matter what I do, I just can’t bake swiss rolls as well as he can.”

“Given that, would you be able to take over the business?”

“If we were to strictly do it based on taste, then I might be able to do it. Because my old man is truly an artisan, I’d say that while he bakes swiss rolls, when touching them, they aren’t hot to the touch and seem to crackle under the heat, or that his form when mixing batter is different every day, but his judgement isn’t based on climate or temperature, nor can it be put into words anymore. With good timing, he actually mixes the perfect amount of cooking oil with the batter! I’ve thought about the sophism of people who’ve never studied this behavior of his until now in his natural habitat. But, in comparison to these people who end up going to schools at various places, I’ve done something like using the methods from only this store as reference. Maybe retaining that flavor was what I wanted to do. I observed and wanted to grasp those methods in my own way from a different point of view. And, after taking so much effort to learn these

methods, I'll try to make various things. Even my old man seems to be happily learning new things from me. I might start thinking about making an original cake together. And by doing so, his hope might have a resurgence.”

“When your mom isn't there, the store doesn't do too well, does it?”

“Yeah, that is the case. Y'know, we really brought in a profit with my mom's ability to socialize. Since some things have changed, we've been adopting a slightly tougher attitude. Although this transition might be taking some time, well, no matter how hard we try, we aren't at all able to do anything like my mom did. She was truly a genius at receiving customers, right? Besides, through studying my work abroad, where they were the type to value things like older employees and traditions, I ended up learning various things, as well as maybe interpersonal relationships. And, being self-reliant in front of my old man seemed to be a pretty big thing. I even became able to make French cuisine.”

“Because it was your dad's wish, please don't open a French restaurant and become a rival of the store. It's in trouble even under normal circumstances.”

“Of course, I can't do it to that extent! Is it mostly going okay on Secchan's side of things?”

“No, well, a long-time regular is super picky with his food. Whenever I'm the only one in the store, there have been instances where I feel super discouraged.”

“Well, isn’t it no big deal, as long as the food’s that good?”

Once we referred to each other as Iwakura-kun and Secchan, it became a bittersweet feeling as expected.

Then strangely, in that moment, time was flowing in a weird way.

Even though it was going backwards, it wasn’t stopping.

It only spread airily and rapidly expanded. In the light, spreading as if it were reaching for the sky, the time that enveloped the two of us became an eternity. Even though this was how I felt until the very end, if you were to try and ask Iwakura-kun afterwards, he indeed also harbored the same feelings.

In that moment, there certainly wasn’t even a single ounce of sexual desire between us.

While drinking black tea at that seat near the window that was bathed in light, a somehow nebulous, warm, yellow light covered the both of us. And, this was something I wanted: a light that made me think in my desolate heart, *this is it. But, it isn’t enough.*

“Blessing” might have been the word that most resembled this feeling.

Even though I’ve been continually searching for various things, I felt that this might be it.

Because we were young at the time, we thought that we connected through sex, but that wasn't it. By simply talking in one way or another like we were doing now, an indescribable life force coming from the bottom of our stomachs gushed forth. Ahh, it's this. I was able to think that this was all I needed.

This gradually became a conviction that by just gladly smiling at each other, we would be satisfied. I thought that this time would continue on forever. This was it, yet I thought that something was missing, and continued feeling that we had lost something. Even though it was something I knew to be somewhere in my heart, I definitely didn't think it was that. I was undoubtedly lonely, but that was because there was still something missing from that feeling of contentment. Since I was too lonely, I wasn't even able to think about all of this, which was how my soul was speaking.

The light from inside, the beautiful, transparent light outside, and the light that was burning between us all became one and illuminated the future.

* * *

We exchanged contact info, and a week later, I got a call from Iwakura-kun saying, "if you're single, let's get married."

Because I was also thinking the same, I immediately responded, "that sounds good." Iwakura-kun heartily laughed on the other side of the line.

Under the condition that our respective stores would continue on, the marriage talks proceeded. My parents were a bit surprised but changed their minds right away and started to be in complete agreement.

What seemed to change was that I was hiring yet again another pro cook (not the cook who was in love with me) that would become my assistant. And, though I was called the owner, I was a bit closer to fulfilling that role. I tried my best to also conduct domestic life, and it was decided that swiss rolls would be produced at our store. With my calligraphy skills that I still kept up with, I added “Seasonal Swiss Rolls” to the menu on the wall, and placing them on my baked plates, it was decided that two thick slices of swiss rolls was to be put out for some 600 yen.

Even though in our long lives there are tons of tedious things, even then, I accepted time and time again that this was me.

It was something that was much less boring that I thought it was going to be.

* * *

When Iwakura-kun said, “at the marriage ceremony, we kind of want to invite the old couple to it, huh,” I immediately nodded and said, “yeah, that old couple.” The room was empty, which made me think of exactly that.

Our honeymoon was decided to be in Nice. Because I was going with Iwakura-kun who could speak French, I absolutely looked forward to it. It was convenient because everyone from the store and hotel knew Iwakura-kun. Like that, my narrow world expanded a little. Then, we started looking for a new home and finally found good property. This searching process was something from a time when we went to measure the size of the curtains of the room that we were moving into.

“It seems this room will not conjure any ghosts,” he said.

These eight years have completely changed him, though the unchanging parts have not changed at all. Things like his jacket with a silhouette that a Japanese person would never have, his confectionery tools, and his figure when he converses in French using an international phone that he occasionally makes calls with, have changed me and made me brim with hope. The introduction of both the familiar and unfamiliar into my life has made me happy.

I often wondered if he thought I was boring. I was always in the same place doing the same thing. If we were to talk about new things that I could give to him, it would only be the not too amazing position of having a wife that would work daily somewhere else and omurice. I wonder if he would have preferred a woman who was talented like his mom at receiving customers, or if she were to have a job, one that was showier and more exciting.

Even though I tried asking him this many times over, Iwakura-kun said that he’s never bored, being with me is comforting, and he’s grown to like my face and body. Certainly, because my body was inexperienced, flat and had the figure of a pouting girl, but it was becoming more

adult-like. When I looked in something like the bathroom mirror, there have been moments where I even thought, “what a lewd body,” about the shape of the narrowest part of my waist. My butt was thick, my ankles tensed firmly, my chest was round, and I had soft, pink nipples. These were good signs. It seems that they were all sufficiently tempered through physical labor.

“That old couple, I wonder if they entered into nirvana.”

“Thanks to the omurice and pork curry, they were surely satisfied. Even at the very end, the old man’s leg acted up, so he couldn’t come right?”

“It seemed to be the case. So, I wonder if he was definitely happy,” I laughed.

I might not be able to make food filled with strength beyond what I made back then, and even now I’m tired and losing my touch. When the seasoning seems to get salty, I make Iwakura-kun, who prepared it and always stretches out his back muscles, eat last. Then, when I don’t lose the feelings that I put into the omurice and pork curry for the final meal of that couple who was going towards heaven, I end up feeling like I’ve done enough.

For anybody, what I made potentially becoming a final meal... I think that I’ll never forget doing that kind of work.

“If you can make some free time, I was thinking that we’ll take the order of an older customer who lives alone in the neighborhood and deliver it. Let’s start developing something like a cheaper omurice bento,” I said.

“I think I’ll do that. In France, particularly at a store located outside of Paris, they really, really treasure the local region. Although the guests who travel here from far away are important, by meaning to allot the best time for locals, they have such a pro-awareness,” Iwakura-kun said.

“Let’s combine our stores into one store at some point somehow.”

“It would be great, wouldn’t it, to have a large piece of land and for houses to be set up there?”

I thought to myself that until then... surely, we’ll live in this room.

The room has good exposure to sunlight; the ventilation was good; the greenery of the park was easily visible, and the lively voices of kids from the neighborhood elementary school could be heard. This place was completely different from that worn-out room. Ghosts also probably wouldn’t appear, and we’ve both completely become adults.

If we hadn’t become adults, then surely in the limbo time from before, we wouldn’t have met someone close, nor while feeling kind of bored, sharply clung onto our own opinions. If we hadn’t become adults, we would have paused to realize that the continuous talking then quieting down while admiring the things that our partner was saying was more precious than the sex,

intense fights, and passionate reconciliations, and still decided provokingly to not to be aware. And, if each of us were to reflect on this now, having felt that the latter immature ignorance is important would be the feeling called “youth.” Because of that, we didn’t understand the other’s preciousness, but because we knew it somewhere within us, we seemed to have realized it later.

Despite this, we talked to each other endlessly about things that went hand in hand and trivial things in a way that no one understood, or had sex, and continued aging. While fostering those bonds that weren’t just physical or emotional, a space that was only ours kept swelling up to the point of no return.

Using Nice as a start, while we became aware numerous times of our good sex compatibility, might we have travel to a variety of other places?

Nevertheless, there doesn’t seem to be anything better than being wrapped in the down blanket while having sex in the middle of the warm room that had ghosts under that cloudy sky. The pace of the relationship between the two of us always seemed to feel like it was from that time. And, like that couple, perhaps we will someday almost disappear without leaving a trace.

Though all this seems like a plain life at first glance, it’s something that belongs to the gigantic flow of things that rivals an actual adventure on the seven seas. My deceased grandmother is there, and Iwakura-kun’s deceased mother is there. That old couple is also there. Everyone’s flow is born individually, but we will all nonetheless end up in the same water in the end. And had we not seen the old couple in that room, would we have gotten married?

Though only this is a riddle, we probably wouldn't have, it seems.

Anyway, that's the feeling I get.

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