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College Folk

Professor Shibata's publication class, with all its good intent, was slightly unrealistic.

"A good writer makes a good editor, and a good editor makes a good writer." Her very first statement from the first lecture sounded like a fine opening, but upon giving it more thought, one began by asking "Oh, yeah?" and ended with a "Like hell it is." What she said seemed to be directed at neither writer nor editor. Standing in between the two yet not meeting anyone's eyes, she flung her words out from the middle of nowhere. It was naïve to claim that all creative activities become art. Even if you weren't up to it, you had to play the game. I was getting pretty sick and tired of the sophistry sold by art schools.

Tell us the truth, I wanted to shout. But then, I couldn't blame her for not being up front. She had the students' dreams and level of artistic talent to think about. Given the circumstances of the art school, she may have had to present an idealistic picture even if it went against her beliefs. Professor Shibata struck me as highly talented in planning and editing, but not at all cut out for teaching. My expression turned into one of "Oh dear, what is she to do?" Realizing I wasn't in a position to be worrying for a professor, I rested my chin on my hand and gazed out the window.

The Kyoto University of Art and Design, or Kyozo for short, taught editing as part of its creative writing program. With two faculty members who had once served as professional editors, the university had not developed the curriculum just for show. Regardless of one's views on "Is editing a form of art?", schools were fighting to recruit only those experienced in the field, which had both teachers and students aging before their time. This was a common phenomenon in Japan and Korea. Have I been a student for too long? Lost in thought, I had completely lost track of what was going on around me. Something I was well used to. I met Professor Shibata's eyes and chanted my cure-all spell: Only in *your* country.

Now that the last theory class was over, we were left with the group assignment of making a book starting next week. My attitude was far from cooperative, and I could see myself being subtly excluded, just like how I treated foreign students back in my undergraduate days. Thinking of the worst possible scenario failed to motivate me. Yeah, you guys go ahead. I'll pretend I don't understand, and settle for a passing grade while repeating "gomen gomen." Oh



wait, it's a pass/fail course for me. I won't have to sweat it too much.

Sunlight begins to seep in through the window, slanted to follow the angle of the roof. At 4 p.m. in the month of May, the classroom was like a greenhouse. It was already too hot for anything long-sleeved. I took off my jacket, hung it on the chair, and rolled up my sleeves. Professor Shibata had drawn her version of Girard's triangle—the relationship between writer, editor, and reader—and had fallen into deep thought, nibbling on the cap of the board marker pen. I watched her continue writing on the board for a while before downloading a dating app on my phone. Almost out of habit. I knew I had been lonely, so it surprised me that this was the first time I was installing it since arriving in Japan.

I requested a verification code by e-mail and, as always, set up my profile with a fake age, fake weight, and fake photo—usually of a bear. This time, I chose Ice Bear from *We Bare Bears*. I jumped over to Seoul with my GPS disabled. The list was a slew of familiar faces. The same photo and age for more than five years. I see you're still single. Guys I could put a face to just by looking at their lower half. I jumped to Yeouido, the neighborhood where Hyeong-seop works. I gave the list a few flicks, and his photo came up. He was cuddling his dog while watching TV—a photo I had taken. He had been in a relationship at the time I left Korea, but who knows what might have happened since. I tapped his profile and saw he was just “looking for friends.” I was done here.

I changed my settings to allow the app to read my location. Three users within fifty meters! Could they be in this classroom? None of them seemed to be the type. I tapped on each photo: One was a fashion design major whom I had sometimes bumped into at the cafeteria, and the other two—like me—hid behind their fake photos. What a waste of time. I blocked all three of them and deleted my profile. The final step of sterilization was uninstalling the app. Men, who needs them anyway.

At the end of class, I trudged down the stairs, which everybody called the Stairway to the Sky. It was another day of huge cumulus clouds. The setting sun added a more delicate, dreamy effect to the surroundings. This city is too sentimental, and that's why I like it. At the same time, this was a thought that upset me. I was tempted to drop by Sukiya for dinner but walked past it. My recent purchase of a Tiffany lamp from a vintage shop in Gion had left me with only three thousand yen. There were five days left until my next allowance. Deciding to skip dinner, I headed to Café Myu.

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Since turning thirty last winter, I had begun to see that “marriage” was not a



necessity, and had grown more accepting of open relationships. These were changes that occurred within me, alone. I had quit trying to meet someone, and the sexual tension I felt, if any, was a delusion. My happiness was less dependent on people, and even so, I wasn't bothered. These days, all that made me happy were retro objects reminiscent of the Showa period, buildings, plants, and the occasional, gripping discovery of things having different forms yet the same qualities. Literature and men, once my greatest sources of joy, were now reduced to mere objects.

I no longer had love in my heart. This fact alone made me undeserving. I felt drained. Thinking of it made me more tired and depressed. Not wanting to drown further in my sorrows, I shut the Nagai Kafu book and lit a cigarette. Through the window, covered in post-its, I saw leaves of different kinds dancing in the wind. The sago palm, kentia palm, sal tree, and the list went on. It was my first moment of joy of the day, and the first beautiful thing I had seen. As I stared blankly at the passers-by and cars past the trees, the café manager puts on a new song. I recognized it as Miyuki Nakajima's *It's Only Love*. I preferred her earlier songs that had a stronger folk feel, but this was great too. It was nice of him to remember I'd named her a favorite. I waited for the song to end, and went out for some fresh air. Then, I sent a text to Hyeong-seop.

—Hey, Japanese guys are so ugly. Seriously, there's not much to look at here. I feel so sorry for myself!

In Kyoto, I had not met anyone even remotely close to the stout, hairy man of my dreams. At the start of the exchange program, I had no idea it would be this bad. Oh well, it's only the airport. Yeah, those guys aren't Japanese. (True, the gay couple I saw in front of Ginkaku-ji were Koreans). He's had better days. Age must have caught up with him. Sure, Korea had its share of bad apples. There were times when an entire month would pass without a handsome guy in sight, be it in school or downtown. I was surprised that this dry spell could go on for two months, considering how gifted I was in finding a man to fall in love with. Just as difficult as finding handsome men was finding gays. Had my gaydar broken when I crossed the Korea Strait? Was the nonke¹ style more in demand in Japan? Or, was it because I was in Kyoto, where it was tough for even fellow Japanese to read the people's minds? As these questions flooded my mind, "East or West, home is best." was the reply I got from him. He has finally gotten a sense of humor, I thought. I chuckled, and texted him back, "bullshit lol."

I continued to live with him for more than two years after breaking up. Even now, I'm only here temporarily, and his house is still my home. It isn't that hard to tell others I'm living with my ex-boyfriend. In fact, I sometimes forget it altogether, even to the point of calling a friend a nutjob for meeting up with his

¹ Straight male.



ex a few times. I lost all feelings for Hyeong-seop when I lost my place in his heart. Living with your ex isn't as impossible as most make it out to be. It's quite alright really.

Sure, I've had uncomfortable moments. I got slightly flurried when I couldn't respond with grace or wit to friends who were more reserved. (Not that this is anyone's fault.) Men, with whom things seemed to be going well, would shake their heads at my confession and slowly distance themselves away. A gay friend who should have known better asked if we ever did it after. This made me want to sever ties with him, but I simply paid him back with a personal insult. (Actually, there was a time when my electric pad stopped working, and Hyeong-seop invited me to sleep in his room. It's not that I wasn't thinking about it, but it was really cold. I quickly gave up the idea when I placed my hand on his belly and he turned his back to me.) That was all.

He had found someone new at the start of this year. Two years ago, I felt exhausted after the string of short-lived rebound relationships and decided to quit dating altogether. Unlike me, my ex kept playing the field. He had a thing for older men, so being in a relationship with me—we were of the same age—was a miracle. But every guy that came after me was younger. Hmm. Was it his strong sense of responsibility that appealed to younger dudes? In this respect, he deserves to be praised, no doubt. After all, he was taking care of the rent, and even gave me allowance money from time to time.

The one time we got mad at each other was when he thought I wasn't home and barged in with his new lover. I lashed out at him, saying it was basic manners to check before bringing a guest. I would have acted the same no matter who it was, but he often slept out after that. Before leaving Korea, I told him to feel free to set up his home like a newlywed, just like he had done with me. I was the one living off him, and I going away would help him save on motel rooms. It was also my last chance to sign up for a student exchange program.

—How's Kuma doing?

It was something I asked every three days or so. He gave a curt "Fine," and flashed a photo. Behind the dog, sleeping soundly with its tongue out, I noticed a large stuffed elephant. Hmm, that must be from the Songkran festival he went to with his gay friends. I'd thought of him as the most boring man in the world, with the most boring life, but even that was changing. There were more and more things I didn't know about him. Out of spite, I told him to squeeze Kuma's anal sacs if he had the time to spread his ass. I ended the conversation with "Byeeee!" There really was no reply.

Perhaps I had failed in both weaning and mourning. I knew I had to get out of the relationship and eventually stand on my own two feet. Just a little longer, I



thought. After I'm done with my thesis, after graduating, after getting a job... I could have put it off forever. I can't be sure of what was on his mind, but things would have probably stayed the same unless something big came up.

Come next week, it would be June. At long last, the welcome program was over. I had survived the awkward welcome events, the lame campus tour, and orientation. "Have a nice life," I thought as I said good-bye to my orientation mentor, who was more touchy-feely than necessary. Now that I was aware who to talk to and who not to, there would be far fewer occasions for me to feel flustered. I looked forward to being more settled down. While most graduate students take nine credits, I could afford to do with just six. Fed up with writing, I had thought about applying under a different major for the exchange program, but didn't have the nerve to take the risk. Anyhow, the Department of Literary Expression sounded just as flaky as what they call it back at my university: narrative writing.

I signed up for Professor Shibata's publication class and Professor Ehara's writing class, which involved reading literary works and writing a short story. Next semester would be my graduating semester. I was determined to complete one out of the three pieces I had to submit if I wanted to graduate. On a bright yellow piece of post-it, I wrote my goals for the semester.

—Make a book.

—Read and write.

Two simple lines. It couldn't get clearer than that.

The Kyoto University of Art and Design was in many ways similar to the Korea National University of Arts. They were both at the foot of a mountain in the eastern end of the city, which meant there was no place to hang out or eat near the school. Plus, they both came without a field. They were inefficient in their use of space despite having a campus the size of a small community college, and had the preposterous idea that an exposed concrete finish would create a modern atmosphere while inspiring creativity in the students. The students at Kyozo were dressed pretty much the same, but stood out compared to the people of Kyoto. As for the art students, I could easily make out what they were majoring in even if they said nothing. Could art schools get any more alike? I didn't feel out of place at all here.

The one person who didn't fit the mold, of Korea and Kyozo, was Professor Ehara Hironobu. He wasn't the stereotypical art professor: uselessly modernesque or on the borderline of sanity. He was born in 1977, which placed him on the young side. Yet for some reason, conversations with him felt like I was speaking to someone of my father's generation. They were subdued and comforting—he was always in control. He studied French literature at Kyoto



University and came to teach under the title of novelist, but had a greater passion for translation. He won the Noma Literary Newcomer's Prize with his debut piece, and published two books, which have yet to be translated into Korean. The slight outward squint in his left eye, if you didn't look closely, gave the impression that he was in a daze or didn't know where to place his eyes—I found it cute. He was of average height, had droopy eyes, and always had a two-day stubble. He wasn't exactly my type, but being around him would put me in a better mood. In one word, he was fuckable.

Professor Ehara's office always smelt of slightly unripe citrus, and it was where we met for individual lessons, making me more nervous than usual. At the start of each lesson, he would hand me a cup of matcha frothed with a bamboo whisk. I would gulp it down, thinking it was green tea latte, and the bland taste never failed to surprise me.

Today, I was sitting across from him with Kafu Nagai's *A Strange Tale from East of the River* between us. Me with the Korean translation, and him with the original. As a writing professor who also identified himself as a translator, he told me it wasn't a must to read it in Japanese. I rattled off, with my limited vocabulary, what I thought of it. Most were from the script I had prepared a day before. They went something like this. *When you think about it, Kafu's views on women are surprisingly outdated. The frame narrative is hard to stand if you don't bear in mind it was written eighty years ago. His intelligent honesty sort of puts me off. But then again, the way he revives the Edo period by overlaying it with the present is remarkably beautiful and natural.*

"Does reading his work make you want to write?"

He was thinking of me as an overly faithful reader. It was true.

"I haven't thought about it."

"His method of composition is not something you can apply today. It would make you look shallow. But a work that weaves together reality with writing, reality with illusion, and reality with the story itself is timeless," he said. I jotted down his words. I couldn't understand everything he said because I usually feel a greater desire to make analogies than to write after reading. Actually, what I really wanted to ask was stuff like whether he saw the resemblance between Kafu's exploration of the red-light district and a gay man's late-night cruising, and whether my speculation had any worth. He gave a recap of writers and their works in the age of militarism. Sensing that he had gotten slightly longwinded, he came back on track and shared a more balanced perspective of Kafu's views on women. Reminding me that I could decide what to take and what to throw out, he recommended a few works of prose by the same author. I told him I was glad to have read the book, even though I probably didn't sound that way earlier, and thanked him.



“Mr. Kim, didn’t you mention liking Roland Barthes and Philip Roth?”

“Yes, professor.”

“I don’t know much about Philip Roth, but I may be of some help when it comes to Barthes. How about reading some Barthes next time?”

“Oh, that sounds great.”

“This time, Mr. Kim, you decide what to read and drop me an e-mail.”

He sprang to his feet, and threw a grayish-green cardigan over his left arm. I looked at the clock, and saw there was still more than an hour left to class. According to the professor, we wouldn’t be doing right by Kafu if we were to remain on campus after reading his work. And with it being such a fine day, he suggested taking a walk towards Demachiyana Station. Absolutely, I said.

I’m informed that Demachiyana is where the Takano River meets the Kamo River. I’m not sure why that’s important, but I was fond of the Kamo River, which runs through Kyoto from north to south. We cut across the field in Kyoto University, and walked slowly towards the river. The campus, though not as beautiful as I’d imagined, had an old-fashioned charm. I followed behind, taking photos of some students playing catch.

Professor Ehara called himself a native of Kyoto. His declaration was a mix of subtle pride and scorn. “I’m friendly, but don’t trust me” or “I’m suave, and at the same time, shrewd” was what he seemed to be saying. I stopped every now and then to ask where we were or what the term was for something unfamiliar. He replied kindly each time. This is called a happi. That’s the raccoon dog statue. KWSK is KY-go² for “kuwashiku,” which means “in detail.”

Because it wasn’t a tourist attraction, the riverside was quiet. The river, flowing below the bridge, was peaceful and serene. It was a post-Kafu picnic, yet we didn’t say a single word about him. There was nothing strange or uncomfortable about that, but not knowing why always got me anxious. He asked if I wanted to head down to the bank and walk for a bit longer along the river. Yes, I replied with a nod. Leaving behind the picnickers, sparsely seated at some distance away from the waters, we walked in the same direction as the flow. I got a good look at Professor Ehara’s frame when his off-white shirt clung to his back in the wind. After walking more or less wordlessly for about twenty minutes, a small bridge appeared. We crossed it to get back to the pavement. The building facing us was the Kokoro Research Center. We walked past it, and found ourselves standing on the east of the river.

² Literally “KY language,” which abbreviates Japanese phrases using roman-letter initials.



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Hyeong-seop had sent the books I asked for by express mail. They came in one big bundle. It would take an entire semester—longer—to read them all. A few weeks ago, I had asked him to buy me some books written by Barthes and modern Japanese novels. I got them to follow the new syllabus that that Professor Ehara had prepared, taking my circumstances into consideration. Hyeong-seop mentioned how hard it'd been for him to get a copy of *Empire of Signs*. Overcome with excitement, I forgot to give him a proper thank-you. Instead, I clutched the book, worn and frayed at the edges, and went “hehehe” before running out to the veranda. Looking down at the city, I went “hehehe” again. How low the buildings, how high the trees! I couldn't help myself.

In the daytime, I preferred reading in Café Myu over the school library or my room. Besides the good selection of folk songs, I enjoyed watching the male students, who looked like they were in between jobs, each engrossed in something useless. The café, which had the feel of a grimy, run-down manga hangout, appealed to me. The manager liked that I was an aspiring writer and cheered me on. Wait, let's not forget he's from Kyoto. It felt like I have only been showing my reading side, and for a moment, I thought about doing some writing. In my notebook, I scribbled a few words and fragmentary sentences without any context whatsoever. The leaves and patterned curtains cast a shadow on the page. Again, I was distracted. Not today. In nearby Osaka, an anti-Korean rally was in full swing. Even the nonchalant Hyeong-seop expressed his concern, but here I was, relaxing on what could not be a more peaceful afternoon. Was the world deceiving me? Oh well, it didn't matter anyhow.

I didn't miss Korea at all. Rather, Japan was pure bliss. Back when I was a film major in college, a professor asked, “So what is it that you eventually want to achieve in filmmaking?” I gave it some thought, and answered, “I want to perfectly restore Jinhae to how it was in the 1980s.” Childhood and hometown have always been, and are still, my focus. I have quite a collection of writings and photos of my hometown in its old days. When I realized how pointless they were, I felt a slight pang of regret. I was such a sucker for show and retro. I thought I had guarded my memories well, but here in Kyoto, I was surrounded by scenes from my childhood. This was Jinhae, that was Masan, and on the far end was Gwangbok-dong. They came naturally without me having to rack my brains. There was no need for me to make-believe or indulge in illusions. In each and every space, I discovered my childhood. Hopelessly so. With the memories unfolding before my eyes, I didn't even have to think. All I had to do was pick them up, like a miner in the gold rush.

It was only around sunset that I settled the bill and left the café. The buses in Kyoto, with a dark green line drawn against a pistachio-colored background,



were very similar to the Cheil Transit intercity buses from my childhood. Just as I brought to mind the old bus terminal, I was enveloped by a mist of exhaust fumes. It was for sure the scent of a man. I breathed in repeatedly until the smell disappeared, all the while thinking myself crazy for doing so. I wanted to catch another whiff on the way home, but it was gone.

From a distance, I saw that the three-story co-op house was lit up except for my room. A folding bed that left my feet dangling at the end, a desk and chair too small and inconvenient for me, and a tatami mat that should have been replaced ages ago. When I first moved in, I found the sliding window looking to the veranda too thin—a useless worry since I would only be here for the spring and summer. I took a photo of the room with the book he sent as the main subject. It poked its nose under the Tiffany lamp, and opened its mouth wide. This had me in a much better mood, but I wasn't feeling full. Save for the fact that I was a little hungry, all was well.

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The events of that morning are vivid in my mind. It was the first Monday of July, and I had left the house with a reminder from the newscaster to pack an umbrella. The day was very humid and hot, but I felt relieved knowing I'd get to school before the rain. There was some time left until class so I headed toward the statue of Yoshida Shoin for a quick smoke.

To the back of the statue was a mountain, and the smell of trees that came mixed in the drizzly rain was fresh and fragrant. Not long after I had lit up, a drop of rain, and then two, fell on the statue's cheek. I quickly put out the cigarette, and dashed into the building where Professor Ehara's office was. The school was quiet on Monday mornings. Even in the office corridor, there wasn't a soul to be seen. Through the half-open window at the end of the corridor, I could see that the rain was falling harder. The door to Professor Ehara's office was cluttered with A4-sized prints of photos and typed words. At first, I thought it was an art installation or an assignment where you had to use tape to create the illusion of three-dimensionality.

Stuck on the door at eye level was a selfie of Professor Ehara. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, he was giving a thumbs-up while wearing a somewhat masculine expression. The bathroom selfie below was of him in a pair of white briefs. Next to it was a low-angle photo of a naked man, hands tied to the headboard and penis erect, with his body covered in lewd comments.

Hironobu, slave pig dying to be tamed! I'm your dirty bitch hole.

The words were scrawled in black paint. The high-res photo that showed every one of his wrinkles was clearly not manipulated. It had been cropped around the nose, but the cleft was unmistakable.



In the last photo, he was lying face down and ass up, with his hands tied behind his back. His neck was hanging to the left, and the camera had caught him in a state of drooling ecstasy.

*Slave hole Ehara, you feeling good? Are your adultery novels all fake?
Professor Ehara, is your back pussy daijoubu?*

The photos were surrounded by a tangle of typed words.

As I slowly digested the messages, I felt the front of my shirt getting soaked with sweat. The photos were all screenshots from a dating app. My heart was thumping louder than ever, and my breathing getting heavier. At the same time, something was surging up from deep within, and I had to keep myself from shouting.

I ran out to the main corridor to make sure no one was around. I hurried back to the office, tore down the sheets of paper, and stuffed them in my bag. A sudden craving for a cigarette had me almost fleeing the building. I smoked three in a row. The humid air worsened my breathing, adding to it a bout of dry heaving. Smoking didn't help calm me down. I went into a toilet, took off my drenched undershirt, and dumped it in the trash. After washing my face and getting my breath back, I headed for Professor Ehara's office. It was twenty minutes past nine.

When I knocked, he invited me in from the other side of the door. He seemed to have just arrived. As I took my seat, he placed his briefcase below the desk, and removed his Barbour jacket wet from the rain. As usual, he started whisking a cup of matcha. I could only stare at his hands. I couldn't meet his eyes, and fought to look away from his body. There came a moment when I had to raise my head, and his chin came into sight. I was haunted by an image of him breaking into pieces at the cleft. I took a sip of the tea he passed over, but couldn't stomach the gross taste and vomited there and then. I was rambling on about cleaning up the mess when he pressed gently on my shoulders, settling me in my seat.

"Mr. Kim, you're breaking out in a cold sweat. Are you all right?"

I insisted I was fine, but he said it'd be better for me to take the day off. He told me where the student health clinic was, along with the name of a nearby hospital. He also gave me his number so I could call if anything came up. I hadn't expected my body to react so strongly. Since the queasiness had passed after emptying my guts out, I chose to go home. It was pouring. Raindrops blurred the view beyond the clear, transparent umbrella.

Once getting to my room, I smoothed out the crumpled pieces of paper one by one. I taped them back where they had been torn. This time, words far more



profane than what I had noticed earlier caught my attention. There was even a screenshot of Professor Ehara's profile, containing all kinds of personal information from body measurements, sex positions, dating preferences, favorite songs and foods, to how he liked to spend the weekend.

While taking it all in, I had to try and deduce who the culprit was. But I was clueless. My first guess was that a student turned down by Professor Ehara had taken revenge. I soon realized this was ungrounded. I couldn't assume it was a student's doing based on the word "professor." It couldn't be the photographer since that would be too obvious. There was no guarantee that whoever did it was gay. They were screenshots of the professor's private photos, but anyone pretending to be gay could have got to them. The sole evidence seemed to be that the outer had read his novels, which I couldn't be sure of since I haven't read them myself. Not that it would have made much of a difference.

They were clever, deliberate statements that didn't give anything away no matter how well I played detective. The photos lingered in my mind even when I closed my eyes, and an imagined voice belonging to someone of unknown gender and age pierced the obscenities into my ears. It was an extremely dangerous act and a threat. Meeting up is easy, but so is making threats. And just as easy as it is, there are risks involved. He and I, caught off guard, were laughably weak.

For the few days that followed, I searched the school's online bulletin board and Facebook whenever I got the chance. What I feared had not happened. There was neither exposé nor public testimonial. I was relieved, and at the same time, I was engulfed in insecurity knowing the assault could be repeated. Professor Ehara seemed his usual self when I met him in his publication class on Wednesday. He asked about my health, and I replied I had fully recovered. There was nothing out of the ordinary in his behavior. I couldn't jump to the conclusion that he didn't know, but I couldn't ask either. I had to make do with guessing.

I rang up Hyeong-seop for the first time in a long while.

Hey, big friggin' news. My advisor here is gay! was what I stopped myself from saying. Instead, I asked how Kuma was doing.

"It's getting really hot here, y'know. I wrapped an ice pack in a towel for Kuma. I'm on my way to work now," he said.

I was tempted again and again to tell him about Professor Ehara, but ended up asking after his relationship. "Same old, same old," was his reply.

"By the way, can you help me choose some clothes for summer? I've got no idea what to wear."



I recall how I'd crammed my luggage with all the summer clothes I could find in the house. I thought about ordering them online and sending him the bill. But then he'd been kind enough to find me the books, so I promised to buy him some clothes in exchange. When it was about time for his studio shoot, he hung up.

After class that evening, I headed out to the streets of Gion. I bought some t-shirts and pants for him at a few SPA brands, and stretched my budget a little on a shirt from Brooks Brothers (I could always wear it if I changed my mind). Everyone who had experienced summer in Kyoto had warned me how hot it will get, but who would have thought. I couldn't even bear to hold up anything made of slightly thicker cotton against me. From the bargain counter, I chose a few flimsy t-shirts for myself. I had a hard time deciding if I should get a pair of gray gym shorts, as short as my swimming trunks, and went with it in the end.

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A few days later, we were again seated across from each other with *Empire of Signs*. The drink was cold oolong tea. It wasn't to the point of not being able to meet his eyes, but I wasn't completely at ease. The image of him in the photos kept flashing before my eyes. Putting his hands together, Professor Ehara leaned forward in his seat. I had to stay calm.

"Mr. Kim, what is it that you like about Barthes? Do share."

"He's sensitive and persistent. There're many people in this world who are sensitive and persistent, but among them, Barthes is the only one who writes beautifully. I guess I vibrate on the same frequency as he does. Another thing is that he's more passionate about my favorite novels than I am."

"Have you ever thought of him as making much ado about nothing? Or that his logic is flawed?"

"Aren't those the basic qualities of a writer?"

My comeback made him turn to me with a smile.

I loved everything about Barthes—his exaggeration, his logical jumps, his obstinacy. Above all, I was drawn to his beautiful layers of metaphor. A gift box wrapped in layers and layers of chiyogami paper. The way I saw it, most of what Barthes wrote were produced in support of his existence as self and his existence as a homosexual. They were kind, endless signals that called out to himself. The non-center, the inexplicability of punctum, impersonality and degree zero, codes and fantasy. These were what Barthes placed in his gift box as intellectual and emotional proof of his queerness. His structural intentions



resonated with me so much that I couldn't have interpreted otherwise.

"Professor, do you like Barthes?"

"Is it even possible to dislike him?"

What I would have regarded as simple assent on any other day sounded like it had more between the lines.

"I sense a depth in him."

At this, Professor Ehara nodded.

"Barthes' writings come from depth. That depth stems from a thoughtful sincerity."

I agreed and disagreed at the same time.

"I think you should explain what you mean by sincerity."

"I'm not referring to superficial expressions. They're hardly desirable. That kind of delivery can't serve as the language of literature."

From another perspective, I thought of Barthes as having a cowardly style of writing. I wanted to say, be more extreme, show more, be crude, and tell it as it is. Those sickening layers. But there was no denying that the essence of pleasure in reading Barthes was how I became bound to his secrecy as a confidant. That's where his depth came from. It was cowardly and beautiful and rich.

"In fact, beating around the bush would be a better choice."

"Is that how Barthes writes, or how people in Kyoto speak?"

He flashed another smile. Now, Professor Ehara was to me a text written by Barthes. I wanted to rip apart his layers of metaphor.

When he rose with a palm-up gesture, as though admitting defeat, I caught a whiff of citrus and the pleasant scent of a well-groomed man. I felt a welling up, like bile, and my heart kept going thud, thud. I was fully erect. He turned to me, about to speak. I scooted the chair back, enough to spread open my legs. I placed my hands on my thighs. His gaze dropped to my crotch. My penis squirmed beneath my gray gym shorts, beckoning. He looked away, licked his lips, and turned back again to my groin. I was in luck.

I was seized by a burning desire to pounce on him. I imagined taking off his



pants, burying my face in his sweaty crotch and then licking him all over. If he wanted, I would have agreed to being trampled or drinking his piss. But, I thought it'd be best to stop here. Of this, he was more certain.

“Mr. Kim, you have fully persuaded me.”

His hands were stuffed deep into his pockets. Leaning his head back and stroking his stubble, he added, “That’s it for today.”

Before walking out, I suggested Shuichi Yoshida’s *Water* for a lighter read in our next lesson, followed by a drink at Gion-Shijo.

“Sure.”

When he dropped the honorifics and spoke to me more casually, I was certain that I would sleep with him. My instinct always proved right—it wouldn’t be instinct if it had ever proved me wrong.

*

The next lesson was too long a wait. We met for dinner the very next evening. I relished each waiting moment, something I had not felt in a long while, and my body filled up with a premonition that was the reverse of doom and gloom. From what I’d seen in the screenshot of his profile from the dating app, there was no doubting I was his type. It worked out like mathematics. Since the day I’d discovered Professor Ehara’s photos, my heart continued to throb, but to a completely different rhythm. I got changed, and styled my hair as best I could, even if it wouldn’t hold up much in my sweat. In Kyoto, a minty deodorant suited the hot weather better than any perfume.

Now that he had one layer peeled off, he turned out to be one who smiled often. I don’t know if it was the temperament of writers, but he knew how to express his thoughts and emotions appropriately, in moderation. We met in Shijo Street, and roamed about Pontocho for dinner and drinks. Below the lamp-lit table, we rubbed our thighs together and played around while wearing subdued expressions. He was a genius of a seducer and an excellent tempter.

We boarded a crowded bus that would take us to his place. With my chest against his back, I grabbed the handles. The heat from his back came through the thin linen and passed to me. When I saw how he was flushed to the nape, covered in soft hair, I almost lost control. Standing on tiptoes, I cooled my face under the air-conditioner. After a few rounds of heating and cooling, we got off at his stop. There were professors and alumni living near the university. Like them, he was living in an apartment in Yoshidahonmachi. His parents were in Kitayama, and this was where he had been staying since he turned thirty. It wasn’t the traditional wooden house I’d fancied, but stepping in, I was



impressed that he had it done like a huge library in the Showa retro style.

“It’s my first time meeting someone in reality.”

“Huh? Reality?”

“I mean, not through an app.”

“Me too.”

Disguising my guilt as embarrassment, I looked away. Then, returning his gaze, I said,

“You meant to say ‘daily life,’ not ‘reality.’ I see even you make mistakes sometimes.”

I held him in my arms. Slowly, he penetrated me. He was gentle and tender—I couldn’t match him to the man covered in words like “slave,” “pig,” “anal,” and “pussy.” It was gentler than I had fantasized, but I don’t mean to say the sex wasn’t passionate. We were both versatile, and took turns in our roles. It was the best sex I ever had. I haven’t read his works, but I suspected he might be far more talented in this field. I couldn’t help laughing at how cute he was when he asked, out of courtesy, the all-too familiar question of whether he could go first. After ejaculating, he jumped on top, and crushingly rubbed his body against mine. Harder, I found myself saying. Yeah, that’s it. I love it when a man presses down on me, making me feel like I’m about to burst, close to the brink of suffocation.

I turned off the air-conditioner, and opened the windows so I wouldn’t start to sweat. My body had cycled between hot and cold, but now it was easing up, going limp in a good way. Thanks to the house overlooking a mountain, I could open the windows without worrying. The air at night was thick with the smell of green, as rich as what you get in the mornings. The wind quickly filled the room with the sugary scent of the tall katsura trees towering over the building. The cicadas had toned down their chirping. When I turned back to look at him, he wasn’t yet asleep. He would rest his eyes briefly, and then open them again, looking at me with a smile. He was quite visibly drunk, and ready to doze off any minute. Come to think of it, I had never been sober on my first sex with anyone.

With each step, my foot made a smacking sound as it separated from the tatami mat. His shriveled penis looked like a cute spoon worm. Lying down beside him, I caressed his stomach before taking him in my mouth. I took a playful bite of his foreskin, as though adding a period to signal an end, and crawled up to lie by his side. One thing’s for sure: I loved everything there was to love about men. I gently lifted his head, and slid my arm under him. My gut



told me my feelings for him would get a lot stronger. Now this was something I hadn't expected.

Quietude was the word that came to mind. More so when I looked at how he had fallen asleep, blissfully unaware, in my arms. Just then, a wave of guilt swept over. As long as I don't say a word, as long as I don't say a word. Would not saying anything be a lie?

Was it really? Was I being cowardly? Did my actions warrant criticism? If not saying anything was all I had done, was it deception or prudence? My mind was clouded by anxiety, permitting no clear conclusion to be drawn. I tugged the thin cotton blanket, and wrapped it around us. The hum of my thoughts stopped, and his breathing grew softer. After a while, the only sound that pestered my ears was the calls of insects ringing from afar.

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After that night, I spent every Sunday at his place. Of course, the status of our relationship, and my inquiries remained unaddressed. I couldn't give up taking advantage of the information I had. He wasn't suspicious at all about me knowing his preferences inside out. Looking at his face, my feelings for him would take over, and I ended up putting aside all judgments.

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"It's our last night. Is this how you want to be?"

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It was my last night in Kyoto. We had grown more intimate, but neither of us confessed our feelings. We did not come close to anything of that sort. And so, I wasn't sure of which expression to wear before the man I would soon bid farewell to. I couldn't wear the expression of a student saying "Thank you for being my teacher," or one of a satisfied traveler saying "I hope to visit again next time," or one of a lover saying "Take care, I love you." It wasn't my first time being in a complicated relationship, but I couldn't help feeling impatient. I longed for him to define us, and I would have been willing to fit whatever role. I couldn't bring myself to say it first, or rather, it felt forbidden. He too appeared unruffled, not saying a word.

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In front of Damachiyanagi Station, he asked, "How about staying over tonight?"

Smiling, I replied in a roundabout way, "I have to get things done. I have lots to do now."

He nodded, and wore an expression that seemed to say he understood. He didn't have a clue. As knowledgeable as he was, he was a fool when it came to matters of the heart. He waved and turned back. I always fell for this kind of men, and thought of them as the cutest thing in the world.

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I threw out all the food in the fridge. I loaded the washing machine with all the clothes from the wardrobe, and hung up the non-washable clothes one by one. I got rid of the chipped bowls and ugly cups, and gave the bathroom a good washing down. On the way back from taking out the garbage, I saw a bill in his name sticking out of the mailbox. My new chapter in life had come suddenly, but it would have started if it wasn't sudden.

A loud "boom" shocked me awake. I leaned out the window. There were fireworks exploding past the Gyeongui Line, somewhere around Sangam. I wanted to turn on the television to see which broadcasting station was behind it, and then realized even the remote control was gone. Looking at the shower of fireworks in my half-asleep state, I asked myself a foolish question: Is it ending? Or just starting?

I took a shower, and flipped open my laptop. Before it, I spread open my notes and monthly plans. I picked out Professor Ehara's two novels from my luggage, and laid them on the empty desk. The deadline for the assignment was two weeks away. Among the many things I had to take care of, it was clear what I had to do first. I was at my sincerest when I was in love. This was hardly sexy, but I knew well it was my best self. I turned up the brightness on the stand, and put on a song by Miyuki Nakajima.

The moment had come for me to recall the days I had no need for in my memory.



The days I felt redundant were regarded as days I didn't have to write about. A moment later, I was caught up in the notion that not writing meant I had not truly lived. But this was a jump of logic. Claiming so would be making slight of my life. While I was fine with underestimating myself, I didn't want to discount my life. That you had to write to have truly lived was just something I wanted to declare, even if only once.

I laid down Kafū and Barthes on top of Professor Ehara's novels. I will recall the past few months to write something of my own. I wish to be as beautiful as the great writers before me. There's no knowing why I cannot stand keeping it secret, and why I cannot bear the peace of solitude. It's time to say it. Without reason, without delay. I cannot start unless I show all the cards in my hand. It wasn't my style to play unfair. I hope I can be more honest in writing than how I am in person. The image of him as he walked away made it more acceptable to give myself permission.

I will write a story.

While writing, I will reminisce about him and how we were together, and I will be appalled by the fact that I was still in love with Hyeong-seop. At the same time, I will realize that my feelings for Professor Ehara are genuine. I feel bad that it ended without me ever saying "I love you." One day while writing, I will burst into tears when Hyeong-seop leaves after passing Kuma over into my arms. I won't be able to write for a while. And when I start writing again, I will have to admit that what I felt when I saw your photos was excitement guised in anger. As I revise my script, I seriously consider becoming an editor, drawn to the idea of "not being visible." After hesitating for a good while, I have to confess that I was very pleased upon discovering your photos, and that keeping this knowledge secret was my plan and weapon. I read your books to get over the nagging feeling that I've missed something, that there's something unresolved. Beneath the layers, I see now it was your way of inviting me, and I smile. There's no doubt that we vibrate on the same frequency. As belated as it may be, I will have something to give you in return.

Amidst this tangle of thoughts, a title comes to mind.

College Folk

Before fall, you will reply to my story with a "pass" or "fail."

It probably doesn't matter which, but I might read deeper into the alphabet P or F in the monitor. Nevertheless, I will accept it. I will hope your feelings for me remain.



I jotted down my thoughts on a piece of sky blue post-it.
—I don't know.
—I want to know.

Two simple lines. As clear as day.

Tonight, I won't be able to write. But tomorrow night, I can. I must start again.

Mixed in with the rustling ginkgo leaves was a cool breeze. Lalala, lalala, lala lalalalala. I got up, and gazed down at the vast nightscape beyond the substation. Her voice, guitars, drums, and other instruments faded out. I closed the window, and closed my eyes. The spring and summer I'd spent with him washed over me.

*

After that night, I spent every Sunday at his place. Of course, the status of our relationship, and my inquiries remained unaddressed. I couldn't give up taking advantage of the information I had. He wasn't suspicious at all about me knowing his preferences inside out. Looking at his face, my feelings for him would take over, and I ended up putting aside all judgements.

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I called Mom to say I'm back safe and sound, and left a text for Hyeong-seop saying I've arrived. He had already signed up for classes, and he was busy with studying in the mornings and preparing for his fitness test in the evenings. I asked him to bring Kuma so that I could look after the dog at least until I moved to the dormitory. I added he could hand me down his clothes if he grew too slim for them from all the exercise.

I threw out all the food in the fridge. I loaded the washing machine with all the clothes from the wardrobe, and hung up the non-washable clothes one by one. I got rid of the chipped bowls and ugly cups, and gave the bathroom a good washing down. On the way back from taking out the garbage, I saw a bill in his name sticking out of the mailbox. My new chapter in life had come suddenly, but it would have started if it wasn't sudden.

A loud "boom" shocked me awake. I leaned out the window. There were fireworks exploding past the Gyeongui Line, somewhere around Sangam. I wanted to turn on the television to see which broadcasting station was behind it, and then realized even the remote control was gone. Looking at the shower of fireworks in my half-asleep state, I asked myself a foolish question: Is it ending? Or just starting?

I took a shower, and flipped open my laptop. Before it, I spread open my notes and monthly plans. I picked out Professor Ehara's two novels from my luggage, and laid them on the empty desk. The deadline for the assignment was two weeks away. Among the many things I had to take care of, it was clear what I had to do first. I was at my sincerest when I was in love. This was hardly sexy, but I knew well it was my best self. I turned up the brightness on the stand, and put on a song by Miyuki Nakajima.

It was the moment when I had to recall the days I had no need for in my memory.

The days I felt redundant were regarded as days I didn't have to write about. A moment later, I was caught up in the notion that not writing meant I had not



truly lived. But this was a jump of logic. Claiming so would be making slight of my life. While I was fine with underestimating myself, I didn't want to discount my life. That you had to write to have truly lived was just something I wanted to declare, even if only once.

I laid down Kafū and Barthes on top of Professor Ehara's novels.

I will recall the past few months to write something of my own. I wish to be as beautiful as the great writers before me. There's no knowing why I cannot stand keeping it secret, and why I cannot bear the peace of solitude. It's time to say it. Without reason, without delay. I cannot start unless I show all the cards in my hand. It wasn't my style to play unfair. I hope I can be more honest in writing than how I am in person. The image of him as he walked away made it more acceptable to give myself permission.

I will write a story.

While writing, I will reminisce about him and how we were together, and I will be appalled by the fact that I was still in love with Hyeong-seop. At the same time, I will realize that my feelings for Professor Ehara are genuine. I feel bad that it ended without me ever saying "I love you." One day while writing, I will burst into tears when Hyeong-seop leaves after passing Kuma over into my arms. I won't be able to write for a while. And when I start writing again, I will have to admit that what I felt when I saw your photos was excitement disguised in anger. As I revise my script, I seriously consider becoming an editor, drawn to the idea of "not being visible." After hesitating for a good while, I have to confess that I was very pleased upon discovering your photos, and that keeping this knowledge secret was my plan and weapon. I read your books to get over the nagging feeling that I've missed something, that there's something unresolved. Beneath the layers, I see now it was your way of inviting me, and I smile. There's no doubt that we vibrate on the same frequency. As belated as it may be, I will have something to give you in return.

Amidst this tangle of thoughts, a title comes to mind.

College Folk

Before fall, you will reply to my story with a "pass" or "fail."

It probably doesn't matter which, but I might read deeper into the alphabet P or F in the monitor. Nevertheless, I will accept it. I will hope your feelings for me remain.

I jotted down my thoughts on a piece of sky blue post-it.
—I don't know.



—I want to know.

Two simple lines. As clear as day.

Tonight, I won't be able to write. But tomorrow night, I can. I must start again.

Mixed in with the rustling ginkgo leaves was a cool breeze. Lalala, lalala, lala lalalalala. I got up, and gazed down at the vast nightscape beyond the substation. Her voice, guitars, drums, and other instruments faded out. I closed the window, and closed my eyes. The spring and summer I'd spent with him washed over.