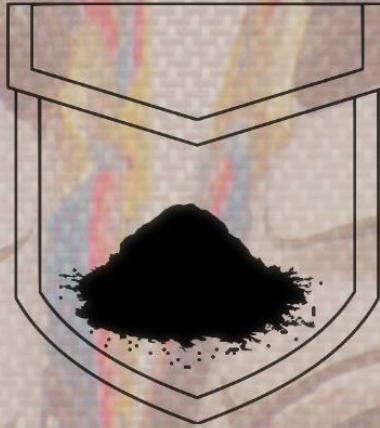




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Sleeping Demon

The last weekend had not gone well for Manoh, to say the least. Now he sat distracted on his bed. He rarely stayed in his bedroom. The only times when he came up to his bedroom were for sex, shower or sleep. Here he was, wide awake, alone and with no plans for a shower. What he had thought was behind him had suddenly re-emerged. What he had thought he had managed to push deep into the recesses of his mind suddenly surfaced and the weekend he had meticulously planned, had collapsed and left him feeling anxious. He had put on a strong face and managed to see the weekend through. He was quite sure even Nathan had not seen the disquiet in him.

*

When Nathan heard about Manoh and Santhu he was not surprised. Santhu had all the five requirements Manoh demanded in his men; fair, young, tall, innocent and Indian. Some of Manoh's earlier conquests were not quite men yet and Nathan had often told Manoh that his preference for young boys dangerously bordered on paedophilia and breached the age-of-consent law. To this comment, Manoh would retort, 'There's no age of consent for gay sex in this country.' Nathan would then use his legal background to remind Manoh that the legal age for marriage for men was eighteen. This, of course, was nonsense when it came to gay men, as all homosexual acts were criminalized in Malaysia. Anyway, Santhu, Manoh's business partner's son, who was doing his A-levels, barely looked eighteen.

Nathan himself had been one of Manoh's early conquests. Nathan had just



turned twenty when he met Manoh. Within a few months they had become a couple. However, their relationship was doomed from the beginning. Manoh was always on the prowl and did not know the meaning of the word ‘monogamous’. And sadly, unlike Dorian Gray, mere mortal Nathan began to age. Nathan was still fair-skinned but no longer young. Now at thirty-five, Nathan could still pass off for a late twenty-something man. But Manoh had gone beyond him. The many years of vegetarianism, teetotaling and evening runs kept his body slim and firm. After more than a decade of their failed relationship, Manoh’s and Nathan’s love for Kathak music still bound them. Even as they slowly drifted away from each other and were no longer in a sexual relationship, they continued to have sex with other men. Nathan became Manoh’s confidant and listened to his every new encounter.

Manoh was also one of those gay men who could not resist being attracted to straight men. His personal motto was there are no straight men. They had not just met the right gay man. And Manoh saw himself as the right gay man to the men he was often attracted to. Nathan, however, had to admit that Manoh had a high success rate. Beer and straight porn often made the guys he desired so horny, they could be coaxed to receive a hand job or even receive a blow job. So Manoh got his way with many straight men. And once he had his way with them, they held no interest for him anymore.

“But they do nothing for you!” Nathan had once told him.

And Manoh immediately replied, “Of course they do, you just don’t know how much pleasure I get.”

*

Nathan was seated at a banana-leaf restaurant having his afternoon tea when Manoh arrived. Manoh was immaculately dressed in his trademark



complete black attire, this time in a T-shirt and denim jeans. Nathan managed to get him out of his tailored slacks when he told him he might be mistaken for an Indian fresh out of an Air Asia flight from India. Manoh's black outfits further accentuated his dark complexion, the exact effect he wanted to project. Unlike many Indian men, Manoh was clean-shaven; no moustache or a designer beard, just two prominent side-burns that ran down to his earlobe. The only hair on his face were his rather bushy eyebrows. His hair was cut short and pitch black; dyed every fortnight, a part of his Sunday routine.

After ordering their masala tea and vadais, Manoh started talking about Santhu, in his typical fashion.

"Took Santhu for a movie yesterday night. He's so cute."

"His parents don't mind? A weekday night, even!"

"No, la. They thanked me for taking him off their hands and to a Hindi movie they don't want to watch."

"Very convenient for you, Manoh."

Manoh had his mischievous smile on and now it looked like a smirk. Nathan was not very comfortable with what was going on. But he felt he couldn't judge Manoh. "How are the arrangements for Banu's son's wedding coming along for this weekend?" Nathan asked Manoh, changing the subject.

"Krish has sorted out the arrangements for travel and accommodation. We can go with him, Saras, and Santhu. They have a seven-seater."

Nathan sensed where this was going. "I'll stay with my mum in Kuantan. So no worries about my accommodation," Nathan told Manoh.

"No worries la, they have a huge bungalow with enough rooms for all of us. Krish is Banu's cousin and she wants us all to stay together in their house. Let's all stay together. Less hassle to go for the dawn wedding ceremony on



Saturday.”

*

Nathan took a Grab to Manoh’s apartment. Krish arrived a few minutes later and they set off once both Nathan and Manoh had put their luggage in the booth. Nathan made himself comfortable at the back row while Manoh promptly placed himself next to Santhu, in front of him. The three-hour car drive was uneventful. Besides the driver, everyone was busy with their mobile phones. Somewhere along the journey, Santhu had lain on Manoh’s ever-ready shoulder and fallen asleep, an earphone still in his ear and the other half in Manoh’s. Manoh must have been as happy as a dog with a new bone. The traffic was kind until they arrived right smack into after-office-hour Friday traffic. They arrived at Banu’s bungalow at Teluk Cempadak while evening tea was still being served.

There certainly were many people at the house. Most of them seemed like relatives and Manoh and Nathan were probably the only guests. The bride’s mother, Banu, was a secondary-school classmate and they had remained close friends. They were the only three Indian students in the Form 6 Arts class. So what started as a form of security for the three Indians gradually grew into a long friendship. They got to know Banu’s husband, Seelan, over the years. First, he seemed a little distant from his wife’s male bachelor friends. But he soon warmed up over beer, commando chips and gin rummy.

They loved Banu’s fiery commando chips, something she had picked up from a chef from her father’s social and recreational club. The three of them used to go there for a weekly lunch at the club. Banu could sign for the food through her father’s membership. Manoh and Nathan had their own private joke about the underwear-less hot spicy chips stir fried with anchovies. This weekend there



will be no gin rummy. There certainly will be a free flow of beer, but commando chips won't be served either.

Banu had already organised the sleeping arrangements for them. Krish and wife would be in a room and the remaining three guests in their own rooms. Nathan was glad to be on his own. They were all left on their own till dinner and then to a good night's rest before the very early morning wedding ceremony at the biggest Hindu temple in Kuantan, the next day.

The dinner was a lavish event. Banu had ordered food from the most popular and expensive Indian food caterers in town. An aromatic array of southern and northern Indian cuisine assaulted their senses. A whole roasted lamb was the main attraction for every discerning Indian palate. This would be quite a contrast to the vegetarian food that would be served at the temple the following morning. At some point during the meal, just about everyone would have made their way to the roasted lamb, even the cholesterol-laden guests.

Santhu was inseparable from Manoh from the time they arrived. They sat next to each other, still sharing a head-phone set. Nathan knew exactly what Manoh was doing. The young lad was unaware, enjoying the attention from the older man. There were a few young people at the dinner but Santhu showed no interest to mingle with them. Anyway, they, too, seemed to have found cliques of their own.

After the meal, each of them made their way to their rooms. Manoh yearned to spend the night with Santhu. He decided he would lay the foundations for future explorations during this weekend. He went to Santhu's room and knocked on the door. A shirtless Santhu greeted him.

"Hi Uncle Manoh. Anything?"

"I was wondering if you want to listen to some music in my room? It's a big bed and it's comfortable enough for two."



Quite excited at the prospect of spending more time with Manoh, Santhu closed the door behind him and followed Manoh. A few minutes later, Saras wanting to check how her son had settled in for the night, came by and found his room empty. She guessed that he might be with Manoh. On her second knock, Manoh opened the door and she saw Santhu sitting on the bed.

“I thought I’d find you here. Don’t stay up too late. We have an early morning tomorrow. Manoh, don’t spoil him. He needs his sleep,” she said and left.

“Good night, Amma,” Santhu called after her.

Manoh closed the door and went back to the bed and put on the other earphone. After a few songs Manoh asked Santhu if he wanted to sleep in Manoh’s room. We can continue listening to songs and fall asleep. Santhu agreed. Manoh suggested that they strip down to their underwear and get comfortable. Manoh was surprised to see that Santhu wore white briefs. His mother is still buying his underwear, Manoh thought. For Manoh, white underwear was impractical and it had gone out of fashion a couple of decades ago. He kept his thoughts to himself.

“These are good songs, Uncle Manoh.”

“No need to call me Uncle when you are alone with me. Call me Manoh. I don’t mind.”

Santhu didn’t say anything. He had always called Manoh “uncle” as that was how his Amma had told Santhu to address Manoh.

After a while, Santhu slipped under the light blanket and began to doze off. Manoh looked at Santhu for a long time. He took the earphones off Santhu’s ear and the young man turned on his side, facing away from Manoh. Manoh slowly manoeuvred Santhu to lie on his back again. Manoh moved his head towards Santhu’s groin. Manoh saw the slight bulge in Santhu’s underwear. He closed his eyes and moved his face toward his target to inhale the odour of the



boy. Suddenly, he stopped. His mind flashed back a scene that had once plagued him, many times before, even after the source of his misery had gone away from their home. What had started as play and a secret only the two shared turned to revulsion. It was all very exciting in the beginning. He knew he was doing something forbidden but Devi *Akka* had started it and he did not want to refuse her. Soon it became frequent and he felt used but could not stop her. She frightened him to believing that she would tell his mother that he had been a naughty boy and done things to her. For a few years this scene returned to torment him. It only faded away a few years ago. He had since forgotten all about it. Now, as the scene played out in his mind, he saw himself again under the family dining table. A long table cloth is hanging very low, almost covering the table legs. He is under the table. He sees her legs. She's standing ironing clothes. Her legs are parted. He senses her impatience. He moves forward. He knows what is expected of him. As if in a trance he raises the table cloth and her short skirt. There is no obstacle. He moves his head forward and he can smell her womanliness. He begins and hears her moan. He knows when he can stop.

Manoh pulled his head back in a start. He lay awake on his pillow, afraid to close his eyes.

*

It was still dark outside when everyone came downstairs. The dawn wedding ceremony was set at an auspicious time and they had to get to the temple soon. Manoh was dressed in a new black khurta top with a black bottom for the wedding. "Another khurta set bought from Fabindia?" Nathan asked. Manoh gave no reply.

Nathan looked fondly at Manoh. He couldn't help thinking how handsome Manoh looked. He looked as attractive as when Nathan had first met him. Nathan



quickly killed the thought. “That way madness lies,” Nathan muttered a line from his Form 6 Shakespeare class to himself, and walked behind Manoh.

“Hope the night went well.”

Again, another silence.

Manoh did not return the expected smile. Nathan wondered what had happened. He dropped the subject. They got into the waiting car and left for the temple. Everyone was back in the same seats as the day before.

The wedding ceremony proceeded like clock-work. Everyone there was in the best attire and the women were decked in gold. And as expected, all these jewellerys will be returned to the safe boxes in the banks the next day. Now, all eyes were on the bride and groom on the dais. The wedding ceremony climaxed with the groom tying the *thali* around the bride’s neck that was already bedecked with an elaborate gold necklace and gold chains. The incessant sounds from the *nathaswaram* and the beating of *tavil* drums rang out.

Manoh remained his unusually quiet, new self, only making brief small talk with acquaintances seated near him. He only spoke briefly, when spoken to. He had not bitched about a single person or commented on any of the young men looking fabulous in their traditional Indian outfits. Nathan was bored. He shifted his attention to the eye-candy among the guests. He didn’t know anyone here. The attractive younger men Manoh normally relished on seem to have lost their appeal this morning and Santhu didn’t seem to be the cause, either. Santhu was seated next to Manoh paying no attention to the ceremony or Manoh but lost in his mobile phone.

Now a grand Indian vegetarian breakfast of *thosai*, *idly*, *poori*, *vadai* and Indian sweetmeats lay before the guests. With so much to go round, meat was not missed and Nathan, certainly did not miss it, having not tasted it since birth. This was a family tradition he had never complained about. The guests also knew



that the wedding dinner which will follow in a few hours will out-do what they had the night before.

The day of the wedding had gone by fast. During the dinner, both Nathan and Manoh were kept busy by some familiar faces. No one asked them when it would be their turn to marry. They had both gone past what was considered the marriageable age and being husband material. The aunties and uncles had moved on to other younger grooms-to-be they could hound.

Nathan watched Manoh talking to one of the young men among the dinner guests. They had met him in another wedding a few months ago. Nathan knew that Manoh had met him before for sex. Sitting among other guests, Nathan noticed Manoh leave the room and the young man followed him.

Once in the room, the young man unzipped Manoh's pants and pulled out his cock. Manoh closed his eyes and was lost in the pleasure he was receiving. Once done, he pulled up his pants which lay around his ankles and gently kissed the young man on his lips. "Glad to see you again, let's go back to the crowd before we are missed," he said sweetly. While walking back to the main dinner area, Manoh sighed relief. He felt he still had it in him. He hadn't lost his touch. He wondered what had happened to him the night before.

Nathan knew that Manoh will give him a detailed account if anything had transpired the night before and a short while ago, when time permitted. All the socialising and eating sent them to their beds by midnight, even as the last guests drove out the house gates. Manoh was exhausted by early evening, not having slept properly the night before, soon he was sound asleep.

By mid-morning they were bidding a very tired Banu and Seelan their goodbyes. The bride and groom were still in the bridal suite that had been set up in one of the many rooms in the house. "Our highway traffic is heavy and unpredictable during the weekends. It is best we arrive in KL by early afternoon," Krish announced, apologising for their early departure. The drive back was very much like the drive from Kuala Lumpur. After about three hours, Krish dropped



them off at Manoh's apartment. Everyone shook hands except Manoh who gave Santhu a warm hug and said his goodbye. As the car drove off, Nathan could not wait any longer.

As soon as they entered Manoh's house, "Tell me, la, what happened? Two nights and nothing to report?" Nathan burst out.

*

Nathan was not surprised with the details that Manoh gave about his brief encounter with the young man during the wedding dinner. But he found it unbelievable that nothing had happened between Manoh and Santhu the night before. It was totally out of character for Manoh, Nathan thought. How strange! How un-Manoh-like! Nathan knew that if anything had transpired, even if Santhu had given him a chaste peck on his cheeks, Manoh would not have held back. He never lost an opportunity to boast of a sexual conquest.

Manoh had not fully recovered from what had happened on the first night in Kuantan. He thought it was all in the past. Something within him had triggered it to re-surface. It had lain silent for so long he thought it was gone. Why it had returned to haunt him now, he didn't know. The sleeping demon seemed to have awakened. His quick sexual escapade during the wedding dinner was like old times. But every time his thoughts strayed to Santhu, he felt his old fear and his mind played out the scene he was trapped in.

Manoh could not understand what was happening to him. He was not doing something he had not done before. There had been many men from whom he had got what he had wanted, and in many different ways. From the seemingly innocent get the men drunk approach so they are completely relaxed he could have his way with them to the most exploitative. Once Manoh had given an uncooperative young man a cup of coffee with a small dose of Valium mixed in



it. The unsuspecting young man soon fell asleep and Manoh delighted on him. He had gone on to take photos of the young man in slumber, fully unclothed waist downwards. Nathan was one of the beneficiaries of these semi-naked photos. Manoh had not stopped to consider the implications of his actions. When Nathan told him, Manoh just laughed it off, “It’s for my collection.” What he had planned to do with Santhu that night was nothing near to what he had done before. He merely wanted to gently touch Santhu and lay his face on Santhu’s cock and inhale deeply while giving release to his already hard cock.

Manoh broke his silence and told Nathan. “You’re gonna be surprised, man. Nothing happened. I had got both of us down to our underwear and somehow I just could not go any further. I just watched Santhu sleep and then finally dozed off. Such an anti-climax after all that planning. I think I need to see a doctor,” Manoh said, a little distracted. Exactly for what purpose, Manoh did not say.



BRYLLE B. TABORA

SCIENCE EXPERIMENT

Science insists where salt goes
water follows, which accounts
for the distended body of
the beached whale found along
the coast of Camarines Sur.
When they split its carcass open,
a gush of dead crabs and salt
poured out. The townsfolk, thinking
it was of extraterrestrial origin,
attracted a large number of tourists.
A mangled blob of red and guts left
to rot in the sun for too long, it started
to reek all over the island.

Only in this version, it was the
opposite of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
which is how I remember you when
you arrived that morning, all gangly and
unassuming, just the way you like it.
The sweet-stickiness of meringue
around your mouth. And when you pick
the stubble off your face, you are instantly
a child of ten years fumbling his way around.
I pick you up, fold you in my hand,
And put you in my pocket as a memento.

A hundred years from now, some
space-age scientists will haunt you
down for experimentation.
When they cut you open to inspect
your insides, all they will find
is a mountain of crystallized salt.
And when they chip away
to the core, they will find me there
still clinging to you as a voice:
You are salt and I am water.
Wherever you go I follow.



**KIM BONG-GON
KYOUNG-LEE PARK**

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.

*

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.



*

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.

*

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.

*

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.

*

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.

Falling asleep together and going to school together was a whole new experience. The classes seemed to never end. We would attend our respective classes, meet up at the cafeteria for lunch, climb Mount Uryu, or head to the café to each do our own thing. Professor Ehara became bolder, even wrapping his arm around my waist in a secluded park. When I glanced at him in the midst of procrastination, I caught him gazing at me with the eyes of a man undeniably in love. With him sitting across, I could concentrate on neither writing nor reading. My mind was flooded with thoughts like, 'I picked a fine man,' 'so handsome,' and 'we did it, you and I.' He worked on his translation, splitting his attention between a French book published by Gallimard and his laptop. I adored how he hummed along to a Spitz song, and poured a huge dollop of cream into his coffee.

I got to know something interesting. As I made a note on the cover of the final assignment for the publishing class, Professor Ehara mentioned that Professor Shibata was the editor behind his two books. When he asked with great curiosity how I found her classes, I had to reply that she was extremely diligent and passionate. It was true though. My views on editing had changed quite drastically.

When I was attending theory classes at the start of the semester, I regarded editing as a mere technique, confined to tasks such as proofreading, revision and rewriting. But making an entire book was actually an artistic process. Was



it after I became acquainted with Barthes? To borrow his words, editing was a feast of moire, and a world of nuances. From the cover design to choice of font and font size, a slight difference in detail could lead to a completely different product.

“She made me who I am.”

This run-of-the-mill statement wasn't pleasing to my ears, but touching all the same. She stuck by the principle of not being visible. It dawned on me some time later that a writer is not necessarily one who writes. What didn't change was the thought that being a good reader was a prerequisite for both editor and writer. The concept of “not being visible” raises some interesting questions. He described editing as similar to the art of making a bouquet.

Around evening, Professor Ehara and I were watching a gardener hosing the inside of a shrub. We were eating asazuke (skewered cucumber), and he taught me the expression for “tastes like nothing,” pointing to it as an example. When we were halfway down the skewer, I had to stop myself from saying, “That's just as large as yours.” That day, we had sex at my place. The creak of the foldable bed got to us, and we repositioned ourselves on the floor. The tatami mat, its grassy scent and how my sweaty skin stuck to it, felt pretty good. He kept far away from the S of SM and the D of “dirty play.” As I watched him riding me up and down, I wondered whether sex was an act that changed by partner, just like how you would read differently depending on the writer. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him closer to my body.

A few days later, I got a call from Hyeong-seop. “Your birthday's coming up,” he began. He thanked me for the clothes I'd sent, and asked when I'd be back in Korea. I replied, “Around mid-August.” Even though I was caught off guard when he said he might be in his hometown, I continued listening. The production company where Hyeong-seop was working at lost the bid for a home shopping channel in the latter half of the year. He wanted to make use of this chance to return to his hometown and study for the state exam to become a civil servant while living off unemployment benefits. When we were together, he mentioned every now and then that living in Seoul was tough and that he longed to go back to his hometown someday. But this wasn't how I thought it'd work out. There was another side to this. I'd imagined him to be enjoying life as a newlywed, but he had recently broken up with his boyfriend. Just when he was down in the dumps, his brother-in-law's suggestion of trying out for the special appointment of firefighters would have sounded all the more attractive.

He asked for my opinion, as he always did whenever he had to make a big decision. I liked this about him. I always set it up to be favorable for me. I asked back, “Aren't you taking things too fast?” I said that he could switch to another company if it was because of his boyfriend, that being a civil servant was not for anyone, and that he wasn't the studying kind. This time though, it



seemed like he had already made up his mind. He told me I could take my time in returning the deposit, and offered to pay my rent for about two months.

Back home, I took out a huge notepad and drew up a calendar from July to February the following year. It was already the end of the semester. I made a list of things to do and things to write. I could move to the school dormitory if need be. Thinking about the paperwork gave me a headache, but I didn't exactly have to rush it. Professor Shibata's assignment had left my hands, leaving me with just one thing to do.

Next to "Ehara's final assignment = story," I added "when, when, how, how." I wrote his name over and over, and scribbled lines all over until the words couldn't be seen.

*

Now that the rainy season had passed, the days were steaming hot. The hydrangeas have long yellowed and dried. His class was over, but I hadn't even begun writing. He laid down a cut glass of iced coffee with a thud.

"By August 17, the morning after the Obon holiday."

He had gone back to wearing the expression of a professor, and I was taken by surprise.

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

For dessert, I ordered a strawberry parfait.

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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minutes, we arrived at a small, quaint bookstore bathed in yellow light. In front of the store, there was a tricolor cat lying belly up and rubbing its back on the legs of a chair. He held my hand and stepped in.

He bought me the two novels he had written. They were titled *Kiss and Headlight/Taillight*. From the titles alone, it was difficult to tell what they were about. In any case, they were refined and beautiful, just like the author. I looked here and there for something to give him in exchange, but couldn't find anything fitting. I ended up simply repeating the words "sorry" and "thank you."

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He handed me his handkerchief. Holding his hand, I took him to a temporary shelter. Something told me that it was our last day. I don't know the last day of what exactly. The Dahurian larch trees, which had all grown to be of the same height, rustled in the wind. The clear night sky made the clouds appear whiter than usual. I caressed his shoulder. He looked back and smiled. Again, I couldn't say it. I stared hard into his eyes. We kissed, and I hugged him tight, real tight. Our lips met and parted, and our eyes met and parted. I had chosen this secluded place so we wouldn't be seen, but now, it didn't matter at all. In fact, a part of me wanted to be seen.

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.

I watched as he walked away, between the tall trees and low buildings, and past the dancing noren curtains and rows of vending machines. It was only when he was out of sight that I turned to walk in the opposite direction. At the start of a maze-like alley lit by a stone lantern, I looked back with a slight hope.



And because he wasn't there, I gave myself permission.
I could say it now. It was time to confess.

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I opened all the windows in the room, and threw down my luggage. I lied down then and there. Now, this was cool enough! It was the first summer in Seoul that I didn't find to be unbearable. I was back in Korea on the first day of August, earlier than I'd planned for. Just as he had informed me, Hyeong-seop had packed his things and moved to Gwangju. Half of the wardrobe was missing, and I was slightly upset that he had taken the television and set-top box. There were still two desks, but he had cleared out the desktop computer, monitor and speakers. Worse, there was no Kuma. It felt strange. The house was tragically desolate, almost making me feel dirty.

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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.

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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 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 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.

Falling asleep together and going to school together was a whole new experience. The classes seemed to never end. We would attend our respective classes, meet up at the cafeteria for lunch, climb Mount Uryu, or head to the café to each do our own thing. Professor Ehara became bolder, even wrapping his arm around my waist in a secluded park. When I glanced at him in the midst of procrastination, I caught him gazing at me with the eyes of a man undeniably in love. With him sitting across, I could concentrate on neither writing nor reading. My mind was flooded with thoughts like, 'I picked a fine man,' 'so handsome,' and 'we did it, you and I.' He worked on his translation, splitting his attention between a French book published by Gallimard and his laptop. I adored how he hummed along to a Spitz song, and poured a huge dollop of cream into his coffee.

I got to know something interesting. As I made a note on the cover of the final assignment for the publishing class, Professor Ehara mentioned that Professor Shibata was the editor behind his two books. When he asked with great curiosity how I found her classes, I had to reply that she was extremely diligent and passionate. It was true though. My views on editing had changed quite drastically.

When I was attending theory classes at the start of the semester, I regarded editing as a mere technique, confined to tasks such as proofreading, revision and rewriting. But making an entire book was actually an artistic process. Was it after I became acquainted with Barthes? To borrow his words, editing was a



feast of moire, and a world of nuances. From the cover design to choice of font and font size, a slight difference in detail could lead to a completely different product.

“She made me who I am.”

This run-of-the-mill statement wasn't pleasing to my ears, but touching all the same. She stuck by the principle of not being visible. It dawned on me some time later that a writer is not necessarily one who writes. What didn't change was the thought that being a good reader was a prerequisite for both editor and writer. The concept of “not being visible” raises some interesting questions. He described editing as similar to the art of making a bouquet.

Around evening, Professor Ehara and I were watching a gardener hosing the inside of a shrub. We were eating asazuke (skewered cucumber), and he taught me the expression for “tastes like nothing,” pointing to it as an example. When we were halfway down the skewer, I had to stop myself from saying, “That's just as large as yours.” That day, we had sex at my place. The creak of the foldable bed got to us, and we repositioned ourselves on the floor. The tatami mat, its grassy scent and how my sweaty skin stuck to it, felt pretty good. He kept far away from the S of SM and the D of “dirty play.” As I watched him riding me up and down, I wondered whether sex was an act that changed by partner, just like how you would read differently depending on the writer. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him closer to my body.

A few days later, I got a call from Hyeong-seop. “Your birthday's coming up,” he began. He thanked me for the clothes I'd sent, and asked when I'd be back in Korea. I replied, “Around mid-August.” Even though I was caught off guard when he said he might be in his hometown, I continued listening. The production company where Hyeong-seop was working at lost the bid for a home shopping channel in the latter half of the year. He wanted to make use of this chance to return to his hometown and study for the state exam to become a civil servant while living off unemployment benefits. When we were together, he mentioned every now and then that living in Seoul was tough and that he longed to go back to his hometown someday. But this wasn't how I thought it'd work out. There was another side to this. I'd imagined him to be enjoying life as a newlywed, but he had recently broken up with his boyfriend. Just when he was down in the dumps, his brother-in-law's suggestion of trying out for the special appointment of firefighters would have sounded all the more attractive.

He asked for my opinion, as he always did whenever he had to make a big decision. I liked this about him. I always set it up to be favorable for me. I asked back, “Aren't you taking things too fast?” I said that he could switch to another company if it was because of his boyfriend, that being a civil servant was not for anyone, and that he wasn't the studying kind. This time though, it seemed like he had already made up his mind. He told me I could take my time



in returning the deposit, and offered to pay my rent for about two months.

Back home, I took out a huge notepad and drew up a calendar from July to February the following year. It was already the end of the semester. I made a list of things to do and things to write. I could move to the school dormitory if need be. Thinking about the paperwork gave me a headache, but I didn't exactly have to rush it. Professor Shibata's assignment had left my hands, leaving me with just one thing to do.

Next to "Ehara's final assignment = story," I added "when, when, how, how." I wrote his name over and over, and scribbled lines all over until the words couldn't be seen.

*

Now that the rainy season had passed, the days were steaming hot. The hydrangeas have long yellowed and dried. His class was over, but I hadn't even begun writing. He laid down a cut glass of iced coffee with a thud. "By August 17, the morning after the Obon holiday."

He had gone back to wearing the expression of a professor, and I was taken by surprise.

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