

Chapter 1 Love is knowing we can be

Lately, my mother's health has been declining day by day, and her whole being shows me that she is slowly descending the staircase of life towards peace and tranquility. The obstacles that once stood so strongly in my way are crumbling away. She tells me to *Enjoy this life* and *Be free*. I have decided to be honest with myself and confront my past.

Tokyo, 1964

"Katura-kun, where did you graduate from?" she asked.

"Omori Junior High School," I replied.

She smiled at me and said, "Wow, an elite school!"

I looked at her intently and asked, "Fukuda-san, how about you?"

"I 'm from Osaki Junior High School," she answered.

That was our first and only conversation in class on the first day, when I sat next to her. And yet, I fell in love with her for the rest of my life.

Everything about her seemed special to me. The uniform she wore, her shirt, her shoes – even dust on her jacket, I thought was important and meaningful to have it there. Osaki Junior High School. I had never heard of the school, and, for whatever reason, I felt sorry that I had no knowledge of it, and that I did not go there. I felt as if everything about me was being absorbed into her. It's hard to explain, but in an instant, everything about her became my favorite. Her mischievous eyes, her delicate, slightly upturned nose, her cheeky, curled upper lip, and her slim ankles were my favorites in particular. From then on, I wanted to be near her every day, even if just for a short amount of time. She had to be in my sight, otherwise I could not breathe right. I couldn't get her out of my mind. It was hard not to look at her all the time, no matter what.

In my freshman year of high school, we were seated next to each other, so I was happy just to feel the air when she moved, without being noticed. Sometimes she would stare off into the distance, lips lightly parted, not looking at the teacher or the blackboard. A warm breath would escape her. Silently, so that no one would notice, I would take a deep, still breath. I kept the secret to myself. Her hair was always alive, each strand smiling slightly, as if it was in conversation with the other strands. Soft, long hair that gently wrapped around her – lustrous, silky and supple, with hidden strength. I wanted to hold her tightly. I wanted the class to go on forever. After she left her seat, I secretly searched for her long hairs. If I had them, I would always be with her. I would want to go home as soon as possible, wrap that hair in my hands,

and soak in the sweet scent that spread from it. I was deeply absorbed in love for the first time in my life.

In high school, I just couldn't tell her how I felt. I believed that I wasn't the right person for her because I had convinced myself that she needed a boyfriend who excelled in every way. Meanwhile, I was just a kid -unsophisticated, unathletic, and above all, a liberal arts major. In my high school, science majors held sway in class simply because of the school's proximity to Tokyo Institute of Technology. Talks of new scientific discoveries dominated, but I had no interest in science and technology. In the second year of high school, we were assigned to two different classes: Class A and Class H, the two most distant classes from each other. It felt like a stroke of misfortune. I couldn't understand why they had to change our class arrangements, and I resented our teacher for being responsible for our separation. To make matters worse, her Class A was located on the third floor, while my Class H was on the first floor, which meant I even lost the chance to see her in the hallway from time to time. As a result, I no longer had the opportunity to see her every day.

During my senior year of high school, I spent countless hours alone planning strategies for my debut at the pole competition, the final event of the annual fall athletic meet where all three grades would be present. It was a brutal and dangerous event. I had to find a way through a human pyramid of students and climb to the top of the fiercely defended opposing team's pole. It somehow worked, but I literally risked being a punching bag at every stage to be the first one to climb to the top of the sacred red bar of the Class A and Class B combined team. Other people still talk about my being the *first to climb* as a *miracle* at class reunions more than 50 years later. But I don't think she saw it.

I never told her that I liked her or showed any indication of my feelings towards her. That's just how it was back then – expressing feelings was considered inappropriate and high school dating was out of bounds for serious students who were competing for university entry. But I was immersed in the sweet fantasy that one day she would suddenly write me a letter saying that she secretly liked me but was only shy to express her feelings, just like me. Of course, that never happened. It didn't even happen at the graduation ceremony, and we never even greeted each other.

I had heard from her friend that her dream university was Hitotsubashi University, which she loved in her mind's eye for its beautiful grounds and exceptional academics. So, without hesitation, I took the Hitotsubashi University School of Economics entrance examination in winter. I passed and enrolled at the university, hoping this would win her admiration.

But I was too shy to telephone her. Besides, telephones were still uncommon in those days and not every family had one in their home. So, in an effort to impress her, I took part-time job as a tour guide to a group of Japanese tourists visiting the United States and sent her a postcard from there. It worked! When I returned from the US in August, she met me at Haneda Airport, and we went on our first date at Almond Cafe in Roppongi. I don't remember much of what we talked about that day because my heart was pounding so hard that I could hardly breathe.

On our next date, we watched a movie called "The Thomas Crown Affair" at a cinema in Ginza. It was my way of expressing my desire to share the American way of life, which was becoming very fashionable at the time, with her. We became a couple, and three years later, on December 28th, in the cold, snowy winter, we married. Our marriage was a challenge since my parents opposed it, so in a sense, we eloped. I also had more than a year left before graduation.

My life changed drastically after our marriage – and the luxuries that I had got used to were no more. She had already graduated from Aoyama Gakuin Junior College and was working at a record store near Hitotsubashi University, while I struggled even to get to college as I was occupied with various part-time jobs. Life became minimal, and though I tried to apologize for the struggles we faced, she held onto resentment and bitterness towards me for not being accepted by my parents. I couldn't heal her broken heart no matter how hard I tried, and this made me feel useless. But despite the hardships, I found peace and comfort in my own way, and her parents warmly welcomed me into their family.

A year later, on January 3, she left suddenly and without warning. It is a day that is etched on my memory, as it was the day my world came crashing down. Her father, who had become a close friend, and I had gone to the Kawasaki Grand Shrine to pay our respects for the New Year. When I returned to our apartment, slightly tipsy from the sake we had imbibed, I found the room empty, save for a single item of clothing – black satin underwear, probably fallen out of a hastily packed bag, lying on the worn tatami mats. I was totally wrecked and confused as I tried to make sense of the situation.

A week or so later, she and her new boyfriend arrived at our apartment in a fancy Mustang convertible to collect her remaining possessions. Oddly enough, I felt no anger or grief in that moment. The saddest moment of my life had already taken place a few days earlier, when the three of us met at a coffee shop near her college in Aoyama to discuss the separation. He had started coughing, and she gently reached for his arm and tenderly said, "Are you alright?" I wanted to die. I said nothing; I was consumed by heartbreak. My hands shook. She loves him, I thought. The expensive sweater he was wearing seemed triumphant, and I agreed to the divorce without protest. I just wanted to flee the cafe as quickly as possible. When I stepped outside, my body trembled in grief and despair. I felt miserable and worthless. Snowflakes fell relentlessly from the winter sky, merciless and cold. Through my freezing tears, I promised myself that, one day, I would become the partner she deserves.

So many years have passed since then, but my love for her remains unchanged. My grandfather once told me that everything would vanish with the passing of time, when he thought I was being consumed by love for her. But he was wrong. I still have a copy of John Lennon's poem "Love", which she had written in pencil and given to me as a keepsake the day before she remarried. I sometimes ponder on its true meaning.

Real is love.
Feeling love.
Love is wanting to be loved.
Touch is love.
Reaching love.
Love is asking to be loved.
Love is you.
Love is knowing we can be.
Free is love.
Living love.
Love is needing to be loved.

Nagano Japan, 2019

After many years, I have finally found the freedom to love.
My mother passed away peacefully at 23:15 on October 22, 2019, at the age of 93, with her children and granddaughter by her side at Sanno Hospital in Ueda City, Nagano.

Chapter 2 "You're Still the Same"

I am already in another world from you, so I can understand what most people cannot see or feel. But I am sure you can understand me. That is why I am writing this letter.

I read *Love is knowing we can be* and it feels as though time has stood still. You are still the same. You have not changed at all. Your writing is still wonderful. The words in all those letters you sent to me in the past used to dance in my heart like a sweet melody. Lyrical rapture, that is what it was. I never got tired of reading them again and again. Floating in the romantic world of your writing, I was so comfortable, so euphoric. I loved being there. And I loved you... I remember how you used to lean over my shoulder and read your letters to me, you even recited your poems when I asked. The sweet sound of your voice held me and made me feel like I was in a dream. I remember you reading to me over and over. The music of the air, the eternity, the charm. I was living and dancing in it. I love your voice. I honestly wanted to be embraced by you, by the hands that held the letter.

When I left you, I wrote a copy of John Lennon's song *Love*. A poem because you will always be a poet to me. It expressed everything I felt for you. I hope you remember it. If you read this letter, you will understand how I felt at that time. I still love you in every possible way. But take heart, you have become the noble person I thought you would be. I am just so proud of you.

When I was a freshman in high school, your seat was next to mine. I had heard that you were a returnee from the U.S.A., so my first impression of you was as a well-groomed half foreigner. But you were still as innocent as a seventh grader. An intelligent, kind, noble individual who had just returned from America, truly innocent and pure. That is how I perceived you.

I remember the day I received my first postcard from you. When I came home from college, my mother put it out on the table beside some out-of-season fresh strawberries. It looked very precious. I knew immediately that it was from you – the noble person – because it was from the United States. My mother was smiling as I read out the postcard. She was in a favourable and happy mood, saying that if I am going to meet you at Haneda Airport, she would sew me a beautiful dress for the occasion. You had been accepted to Hitotsubashi University! I knew almost nothing about Hitotsubashi University, except that it was my favorite university. I saw it as chic, smart and intelligent – perfect for you. Everyone in your family goes to the University of Tokyo, but you decided to enter Hitotsubashi University because you were convinced that it is my favorite university. Do such things really happen in this world? I was ecstatically happy. I immediately declared to my mother that I would be going to Haneda Airport and marked the date on the family calendar in our kitchen.

Since there were only 10 days until you were due to return to Japan, my mother and I embarked on our dressmaking project straightaway. We agreed upon the design that same evening, and the next morning we went to the textile town of Okachimachi in search of fabric.

There were so many to choose from and then I saw it – an exquisite, transparent lace fabric with a stunning orange and pink floral pattern, which was perfect for the design we had in mind. I remember hugging my mother with joy. Over the coming nights, we worked tirelessly on the dress, laughing and chatting the entire time, enjoying every minute, especially the daily dress fittings. The end result was a beautiful mini-skirt dress with modest ruffles, just like Twiggy's. We put the finishing touches on it just one day before you arrived at Haneda Airport.

My father watched on with good-humoured amazement as my mother and I worked together, our noisy joint creativity echoing through the house each night. My mother was a wonderful seamstress and would make me any dress I wanted. This dress is still my favorite.

It was the first time that I had been to Haneda Airport, and it was teeming with people waiting to meet arrivals. Amidst the sea of faces, I struggled to see who was who. I feared that if I didn't reach the front row, you might leave without noticing that I was there. But the thick crowd proved impossible to navigate. I gave up trying to go to the front and instead waited for you in an open space I found a short distance away.

After a while, you came through. I felt too embarrassed to call out or wave, but I tried not to take my eyes off of you. Your parents and the other people who greeted you in the front row were in constant conversation with you. You are very popular. I didn't think I would be able to capture your attention. This is the first time I had seen you since high school graduation. You were no longer the naive boy I knew, but a sophisticated young person. It occurred to me that I hadn't spoken to you since our first year in high school, and I suddenly felt uneasy about what I would say to you.

I dropped my gaze, and at that moment, I heard your voice saying, "Fukuda-san" a voice I remembered from so long ago. I looked up with a gasp and saw you smiling fondly and saying, "I'm glad you came. Thank you." Your lustrous, clear voice cut through the hustle and bustle, like a poem. I looked into your sparkling eyes. At that moment, I fell in love with you. You quickly said goodbye to all the people who had come to greet you and the two of us hastily left the airport in a taxi.

We went to Almond Cafe in Roppongi, then the only fashionable cafe in town. I don't remember what we talked about, but it was fun. Roppongi? Really? It was as if you had brought a foreign country home with you. You took me home and greeted my parents. My father was a little shy and merely said, "Did you just fly in from America?", to which you replied, "Yes, I just got back a few hours ago". My mother was more chatty and stayed with us the whole time.

I remember very little about our high school days. It was a dull school for girls and I wanted to graduate and leave as soon as possible. It was simply the wrong fit for me. I had no interest in science-oriented boys or anything the school had to offer. The curriculum favored science over literature and art, and the school was like a science crammer with no emphasis on aesthetic

thinking. The atmosphere was one of male chauvinism, and I found the boy-centered athletic events wildly violent. I apologize for not watching your pole event, but it seemed barbaric to me. I do remember that in the third grade you represented Class H in the 100-meter freestyle, the final event of the swimming meet. In first grade you wore a plain red cap, but by the time of the swim event you had earned black stripes on your new white cap. I remember being genuinely surprised. You must have worked incredibly hard because even though you weren't on the school swim team and weren't a natural athlete, you managed to become a top swimmer in just one summer.

I always envied you because you had lived abroad and could speak English better than anyone else in school. Once, in front of the class, recited Edgar Allan Poe's *Song* and explained its meaning. I cried when I heard it. You didn't know, did you?

You said that with a slight change of just one word to the Japanese translation would make the poem surprisingly straightforward to the reader. Especially for a poem like *Song*, which is based on the author's personal experience. Then you wrote your revised translation of *Song* on the blackboard with just one word change.

Song

I saw thee on thy bridal day—
When a burning blush came o'er thee,
Though¹ happiness around thee lay,
The world all love before thee:

And in thine eye a kindling light
(Whatever it might be)
Was all on Earth my aching sight
Of Loveliness could see.

That blush, perhaps, was maiden shame—
As such it well may pass—
Though¹ its glow hath raised a fiercer flame
In the breast of him, alas!

Who saw thee on that bridal day,
When that deep blush would come o'er thee,
Though¹ happiness around thee lay,
The world all love before thee.

Edgar Allan Poe 1809–1849

¹ You changed 'Though' to 'But' throughout the poem.

Really, seriously, oh my God! I finally understood Poe's poem, thanks to your explanation. Before, I could hardly make sense of it, but for the first time, Poe's poem came to life through your interpretation. First love at the same age as us. Its unexpected and sudden end. Time stopped in the classroom, which was usually filled with tasteless activities. Not a sound was heard. With a single poem, *Hakuun*² in the classroom moved and *Aoyama*³ appeared. I shivered contemplating Poe's despair and loss. You looked divine in class.

We changed classes in the second grade and never spoke again, not even at graduation. When you recited your poem, you saw the fire in my eyes. I didn't notice. I'm such an idiot.

We were both busy at the beginning of a new semester at the university, but on our first date, we met up in Ginza to see "The Thomas Crown Affair". I imagined that you must have grown up in an environment like in the movies. We always went to places that are usually off limits and it was always completely luxurious. We dined in the Continental Room at the Hotel Okura while listening to jazz by Martha Miyake. We even danced on the dancefloor together. It was the first I had danced outside of class. The song was *(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay* by Otis Redding. I felt like I was floating in the clouds. I was living in a dream world that, until then, I had only seen in foreign movies. Talking to you was fascinating and every time I heard you speak, I felt emotionally moved. We both joined our university golf club, so we often met outside of school at the gorgeous driving range at the Takanawa Prince Hotel.

In early spring, when it was still chilly, you invited me to Hitotsubashi University in Kunitachi, which is located 30 minutes from the center of Tokyo. We had completed our first-year semester examinations and it was our first spring break. The brick buildings of this highly-respected school were dotted majestically and quietly around a forest, giving it the appearance of a foreign country. It was my first time seeing this university and I was thoroughly impressed.

As we entered through the main gate, we strolled through a beautifully maintained foreign-inspired garden. Behind it, lay a forest that was filled with large trees. In the midst of this forest, stood an imposing library built in a Romanesque style. In front of it was a rectangular garden pond, designed in the classical style that you would expect to find in an elegant European garden. Water was flowing down from the mouth of a lion carved in stone, and there were benches lined up around it, inviting walkers to sit and read.

You laid your muffler on the bench for me, saying that it was cold, and we sat down together. It was warm. The lingering evening sun floated and sank soundlessly on the surface of the pond. A tranquil spring breeze gently pulled the few remaining leaves from the trees and silently placed them onto the pond.

I felt your fingers on mine. They were warm.

² A Zen term for something in flux, such as spirits and emotions.

³ A Zen term for something fixed or immovable, such as Mount Fuji.

"I love you."

My fingers trembled.

"... I love you, too."

Neither of us said anything more. We headed for the nearby Kunitachi Station. On the train ride home, we were silent. Our fingers occasionally touched, and it was warm.

We got off at Osaki station and you walked me home, saying that it was dark. We arrived at the gate of my house. I didn't want to go home. I wanted to stay with you a little longer. Without exchanging any words, we walked around the house. I wrapped my arms around yours. Minutes seemed like hours, like infinity. We were back at the gate again.

You lightly held my shoulders.

"Do you love me?"

I nodded.

I felt a tremor. My heart palpitated. I closed my eyes. A warm flowery breeze of trust danced in front of me. Our lips touched and in that moment, I gasped, "Ahh", and ran towards the front door. Every nerve was on my lips. I was happy. You were to be with me forever, held within the depths of my eyes.

When the summer vacation arrived, you invited me to go with you to your family villa in Karuizawa in August, along with your tutoring student, to help you out for a week. "There will be some college classmates joining us, too" you added. I was absolutely thrilled to receive the invitation, having been to Karuizawa several times with my school club camps. Karuizawa is, without doubt, my favorite place in Japan. The fresh air, the villas scattered along the paths and the sun shining through the trees all unfolded before my eyes and my heart leapt with excitement. So, without even consulting my mother, I immediately said, "I'm going!". My mother supported me, *post factum*. "Go ahead", she said. She would ask my father to let me go. I love my mother, who always encourages me. My supportive father too. I was in heaven. I will be with you, my idol, and in Karuizawa – my favorite place – for a whole week! Your villa was close to my college dormitory at Aoyama Gakuin University, which I know well. In fact, during our training camps, I used to secretly invite my friends to catch a glimpse of it. The elegant classical villa is situated just opposite the summer residence of the Swiss Embassy. As I had never been inside your family villa, I spent many days imagining what it would be like inside, even drawing pictures to show my mother. She told me that I was a little crazy. My mother made me a cute beige summer mini pants suit that would be perfect for Karuizawa, along with a matching chapeau. I couldn't wait to wear them for you to see!

『I wish you would stop your daughter from going to Karuizawa』

Your mother called my mother. On the morning of my departure, my mother said to me, "I wasn't sure whether to tell you or not, but I will". It took me completely by surprise. I had never experienced anything like this before. All of a sudden, like a bolt of lightning had struck me very, very hard. The moment I heard it, I froze but I managed to regain my composure and decided not to worry about *it* for now. After all, I was going to see you in just an hour, and I could discuss *it* with you in person. Despite the shock, I was still eager to show off my new Karuizawa attire to you.

When I arrived at Ueno Station at the appointed time, I found you and your student, Umino-kun, waiting for me on the platform. He was a well-dressed, clean-cut boy, and I couldn't help but think that he must have been just like you in junior high school – you always had exceptional taste in clothes. So I was a little worried about your reaction to my mother's Karuizawa design wear, but you were in very high spirits and seemed really excited to see me in it, far more than I had imagined. During the train ride to Karuizawa, we had a lot of fun chatting with Umino-kun about his neighborhood in Nakano. I quickly became good friends with him. When you went tutoring at his house near Nakano Station, I strolled around the area until you were done, so I knew his neighborhood well. Anyway, I was relieved to find out that Umino-kun was sweet and friendly, and even more relieved when I discovered that his favorite foods were dishes that I specialized in. It felt like the week we were going to spend together in the villa was off to a great start.

But I had bigger worries on my mind during the train ride. Despite the ever-changing green scenery and our fun conversations, *it* was constantly on my mind, and I found myself preoccupied with the thought of my mother speaking to yours over the phone.

On the second night, Umino-kun and everyone else had gone to bed early, leaving just the two of us in the half-basement kitchen, sipping whiskey. Finally, we had some *alone time*!! We lit candles and became summer villa sweethearts. You've always been romantic and loving, the ideal boyfriend a girl could ask for, especially in such a setting. The alcohol made my head spin. I knew it was time to be romantic, but *it*, the phone call, came into my mind over and over, and with every flicker of the candle flames my thoughts turned to *it* more and more. Before I knew it, tears started streaming down my face. You had never seen me cry, at least not this way.

"What is wrong?" you asked.

Finally, I spoke about the phone call, and completely lost control of myself, bursting into tears, as if a dam had collapsed. I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop crying.

"What... what, what?"

It was an abyss. I couldn't control myself. I just kept crying, unable to say anything meaningful between my sobs.

It must have been the first time you had heard about *it*; you were taken aback, troubled, unsure of how to react. Your usual confident demeanour and warm smile disappeared, replaced with a sad and perplexed expression as you saw me cry, cry and cry.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry", you immediately apologized. "My mother should have told me first instead of calling your mother", you continued, taking a swig of whiskey straight from the bottle without mixing it with water, despite not being a heavy drinker.

"I should have explained everything to my parents. Please don't worry; it's all my fault", you said.

"I am so confused. I don't understand what's wrong. Should I not have come here? Is this unusual behaviour?" I asked.

"Am I a slut? At least your mother seems to think so."

"No, no, no... I'll talk to my parents about this when I get back," you said, promising yourself.

"But what will you talk to them about?" I asked.

"I'm sure they're just worried about societal norms and how it might appear to have a young girl staying alone in a villa with boys. I really don't understand what is wrong with that. You are just taking care of us with the cooking and cleaning. Of course, you and I are here because we love each other. You are not my housekeeper. My parents are just too old-fashioned," you said.

"Love and social convention are so different. They exist in completely different space and time dimensions. Worlds, universes apart... I don't really understand what I'm saying," you said, sounding lost.

I was surprised by your confusion, given that despite your naivety in many areas, you have always had a surprisingly strong will, even in high school. I believed that you would, and can, accomplish anything. Even rescuing me from *it*.

With tears in my eyes, I watched the kindling flame in your eyes. As dawn was about to break, in a room next to the kitchen, with nothing but an old bed, we were united for the first time. I was convinced of our love.

You remained in Karuizawa for the rest of the summer, staying at the villa, while I returned to Tokyo and spent the remaining days of the season reminiscing about the bittersweet memories of that beautiful summer. Upon your return to Tokyo, you spoke with your parents, but nothing was resolved. Our days together in Karuizawa were just a short-lived dream, a thing of the past.

Your parents hated me. That much was clear. Even though I didn't see them, I could feel their animosity. They had labeled me as a girl who grew up in a family with no common sense. This thought devastated my self-respect. But I love you. That is why I tried very hard not to think about *it*.

About a month after our return from Karuizawa, you grew uncomfortable with your parents and left your home in Aoyama. You moved in with Kimoto-kun, your best friend from high school and university, in a place called Yaho. It was about a 30-minute walk from Hitotsubashi University towards Kosu Kaido highway. The house you shared with him was an old, detached hut built on the grounds of a large farmhouse. Although it was almost in the countryside, in a way I was happy because I would be able to visit you without hesitation. But it was a long way from the Aoyama district, where my college was located and where we used to go on dates before.

I was enveloped by your love and happiness wherever I went and whatever I did. Whenever we had time off from our university activities, we were always together, often traveling and meeting up with our mutual friends. During the Osaka Expo, we stayed at my aunt's house in Ashiya, Kobe. You still had two and a half years of college left, so you were very relaxed, but as a junior college student, I was eager to make the most of my final days as a student.

My father and mother always supported me because they genuinely liked you. However, this left a void in my heart. I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the thought of your parents disliking me. When that thought, *it*, was absent from my thoughts, I was the happiest girl in the world. Yet no matter what I did, *it* would always find ways to creep back in. Despite my efforts, *it* weighed heavily on my mind, and I didn't know what to do.

After graduating from junior college, I took up a position at Kiddyland, Inc. in Aoyama. It was close to your parents' house, which made me feel uneasy. A year had passed since our first intimate encounter in Karuizawa and I was serious about us being together. Back then, marriage was the only socially acceptable way to live together. Naturally, it was the only option in both of our minds. We visited your grandmother who lived alone in Kunitachi, near your university, and when we told her that we wanted to marry, she was overjoyed. In that moment, I hugged her with all my strength. She accepted our love with open arms, and then *it* disappeared from my mind. From the first time I met your grandmother, she showed me unconditional compassion, comfort and love.

The following month, you had planned to visit the family cemetery in Gifu with your parents. Seizing the opportunity, you intended to discuss our marriage with them and ask for their blessing. That was the plan.

However, when you came back from Gifu, you appeared drained and exhausted. You said that your father had told you to not to think of marriage before graduation. That was the extent of

the conversation, and it was final. The vivid glow had vanished from your face, and your smile, which I loved so much, was gone.

I met with your father in Tokyo several times to discuss our marriage. For some reason, he preferred to speak with just the two of us. Your father was polite – that's how I perceived him. However, not even once did he mention love. I believed that it should have been the primary topic of our conversation. But to your father, love seemed entirely irrelevant. My attempts to discuss love felt like futilely pushing words onto a smooth, polished marble surface. Desperately trying to maintain my composure, I felt foolish as I slipped and slid on the slick stone. Your father never seemed willing to try to understand my feelings. As I had with you and my parents, I spoke earnestly and from the depths of my heart to your father too. I find solace in having done that, but the more I talked, the emptier my heart grew, and the more reality dawned on me.

“What is the point of getting married so soon?”

“Because I love your son Kei very much. It's a love I've nurtured since high school, and I can't suppress it now.”

“Ah.”

“Although we only dated after graduating from high school, we realized that we had loved each other since we first saw each other.”

“So...?”

“So now, I want to be with Kei forever. I want to share my life with him.”

“Why don't you just move in with him?”

“No, no... that's not an option for us. We desire the social recognition and legitimacy of marriage. ”

“Love often doesn't last forever. It often falls apart.”

“I've never contemplated love fading. And I wouldn't want to marry if I thought it wouldn't last”.

“Do you realize that love alone isn't enough to sustain you?”

“Your son is already living independently, so our survival isn't a concern. What I can't imagine is a life without love and him by my side.”

“Kei is still a student, and now is the time for him to concentrate on his studies.”

“I don’t see Kei leaving school just because we are getting married. In fact, he told me that student marriages are quite common in the United States”.

“If you're so eager to commit, why don't you get engaged first?”

“It seems you don’t fully understand our feelings. We are deeply in love and want to start our life together right away.”

“When it comes to marriage, common sense dictates that you have to first consider societal factors...”

My feelings were completely ignored. My head kept spinning. I thought it was impossible to bridge the stark differences. It was just as you said in Karuizawa. Time and space were completely different. We cannot find any crossing. Nothing was conveyed. Nothing was heard. We are not communicating. Rationalized self-persuasions were being imposed on me without any considerations. Such feeling grew. The *it* that disappeared after the visit to your grandmother reappeared in my mind. A little girl from a family with no common sense. This time it was like letters engraved on a marble tombstone, never to disappear again. I have no place in your family. Permanently erased. That is the message. That is what I clearly recognized. Then the thought of reality came to me and tormented me.

The same infertile arguments were repeated over several months. I just wanted my love for you blessed by your parents. I love you and want to be with you. That's all. But it was impossible. I had no hope. It was just a dream. A short dream which died in Karuizawa a year ago.

At the end of that year, on December 28th, the last day of work, we gathered with our two close friends, and with their signed consent, we submitted our marriage certificate at the ward office in Shinagawa, where I lived with my parents. That same day, we went to my parents’ house in Osaki, Shinagawa to share the news of our marriage. My father and mother welcomed us with open arms, congratulating us and encouraging us to work hard and not hesitate to ask for help when needed.

After visiting my parents, we made our way to your parents' house to inform them of our marriage. Your parents were waiting for us at the front door, their faces tense and cold. The first thing your father said was, “Why did you come?” Upon announcing our marriage, they responded, "You made this choice on your own, now leave our house!" We found ourselves quickly pushed out, the door slamming shut behind us.

I had anticipated this, but when it became a reality, everything went dark before my eyes. You stood there, facing your parents without uttering a word. Laden with heavy luggage, we walked

towards the nearest Harajuku Station, exchanging small, fleeting words of encouragement. Tears streamed endlessly.

We moved from Yaho to a one room apartment next to the Kunitachi College of Music, and this became our new home. The bathroom had been broken and neglected for a long time, and the toilet was an old-fashioned pump system with an unpleasant smell. Our favorite pastime was visiting the nearby public baths and enjoying fried fish set dinner at a budget-friendly student restaurant. I was disheartened by the depressing conversations I could hear from the adjacent room of the apartment. You spent most of your days working various part-time jobs: package delivery, restaurant garbage collection, small truck driving, private tutoring and translating English magazines. You even worked as a driving school instructor, saying it was the highest-paying part-time job. Determined to make ends meet, you worked tirelessly despite never having held a part-time job before. I don't think you attended a single university class, except for your professor's mandatory seminar on Friday afternoons. You valued your university very much but just didn't have the time to go. Yet, you never complained and always appeared cheerful in front of me. In the mornings, you ate only black bread, likely because it was the cheapest and most filling option. My heart broke at the sight of my noble and resilient husband. I switched jobs to a music store near your university and became a record salesgirl, wearing a gray uniform.

In March, we held our wedding ceremony at the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Aoyama. To fulfil the church's requirement, we attended Bible study classes prior to our nuptials. Having studied at a Christian junior college, I found it easy to embrace these teachings and listened attentively during the sessions. You, on the other hand, were cute in your occasional resistance to the religious and philosophical teachings, albeit unsuccessfully. At the wedding, many of our friends, as well as my parents and relatives, gathered. My mother crafted a stunning wedding dress for me, which brought me joy for the first time in a long while.

Your esteemed university seminar professor, a dignified and respected figure, and his warm-hearted wife kindly agreed to serve as our witnesses for the ceremony. His wife's radiant smile and welcoming demeanor made everyone feel at ease.

"Cheers! I salute your courage in choosing love above all else, even in the face of adversity."

Professor Hiroshi Fukasawa of Hitotsubashi University's toast was thought-provoking and philosophical. Above all, it was warm. Neither your parents nor your sister came. Worse yet, I later discovered that the priest had been called on the day of our wedding and asked not to perform the wedding ceremony. I was once again reminded of *it*. Pushed back from dream to reality.

Our honeymoon consisted of an overnight trip to the Izu Peninsula near Tokyo, but I couldn't help wishing we hadn't gone. The scenery from the train window, the atmosphere at the inn, and even the food was steeped in sadness. Our cherished memories of Karuizawa, a year and a

half earlier, seemed to fade into a tearful haze. I felt as though I was journeying towards a metaphorical grave. We returned to our gloomy apartment and argued for the first time.

Why was I acting so despondently? You understood the reason but were reluctant to acknowledge *it*. The situation was difficult for me, particularly because I could see your internal struggle. You were frustrated with yourself for being unable to influence your parents and solve *it*.

Despite your delicate appearance, you possess a resilient nature that compels you to confront challenges head-on. The stalemate left you feeling frustrated. I believe you were wrestling with feelings of disappointment and bewilderment at my refusal to stand by your side in resolving *it*. I seemed like a girl who didn't want to face her problems. But the truth is, I had little strength left in me.

"I knew my parents and sister wouldn't show up", you said.

(.....I expected that)

"I am so sorry", you added.

(.....Me too)

"I know you're angry", you said.

(.....Just disappointed. Angry at myself for thinking that your family would relent)

"Please say something. I am so, so sorry", you continued.

(.....Me too)

"Are you upset because we're poor? Are you bored? ", you asked.

"It's not that ", I replied.

"You don't want to live like this, right?", you asked.

"It's not that", I said again.

"Do you love me?", you asked.

(.....I can't answer that now)

"I'm asking you... Do you love me?"

(.....Probably not)

"I don't know", I finally said.

"Then why did you marry me?", you demanded.

You pushed me down on the tatami floor and straddled me.

"It hurts", I screamed.

"Why?... Why did you marry me?" Your voice was trembling and I could feel your hands shaking as they grasped my wrists.

"Why? For revenge! Against your parents! " I said it clearly, "I married you as an act of vengeance".

Tears streamed from your eyes, cascading onto my face. I had never seen you cry before. My tears burst and collectively our grief saturated the floor.

As a new semester dawned, your job training commenced. You had been fortunate enough to secure a position with the highly prestigious and top-paying Motor Corporation. Following your training in Nagoya in May, you returned and proposed the idea of going on a *proper* honeymoon.

I replied, "Yes, but if it's Bali", knowing full well that it was an unreachable dream.

"My sister went there for her honeymoon", you said.

You were incredible. Discovering that the grand prize for the Sony Essay Contest was a trip to Bali, you didn't hesitate to enter and astoundingly claimed first prize among 130,000 entrants! It felt surreal. On the trip, you were occupied with work for Sony, as the prize's conditions required that you travel around Southeast Asia before and after Bali to support the promotion of Sony's new product. The prize was intended to be for one person, but you persuaded Sony to let both of us embark on the journey together. Even though you were just a student, you fearlessly negotiated with a big company just for me. During our travels, you presented Sony's new color TV at various press clubs, exhibiting your exceptional English. While you spoke, the reporters nodded in agreement, and I found myself admiring both your fluency in English and your persuasive capabilities. I remembered your recitation of *Song* in high school and thought that Edgar and Sarah may be listening to you.

After returning from Bali, I made the decision to leave you. During the trip, I had a lot of time alone, so I was able to think about many things. You can live without me. I cannot live without healing my wounds. They will become deeper, uglier, and more chronic if I am with you. I cannot live until *it* disappears. It is taking precedence over everything. I was completely trapped by this thought.

On January 3, 1972, I left with Nakayama-kun, whose parents embraced me wholeheartedly, in his car. You were away with my father at the Kawasaki Grand Shrine for the new year worship, Hatsumode. I hastily gathered my belongings. I was determined to live a real life. With that decision, I left everything behind and said goodbye to Kunitachi and you.

Chapter 3 Together in Bhutan

I read *You Are Still the Same* and I heard your voice – more than that your cry. It echoed within me, stirring a deep remorse for my past failures. I shuddered and my heart bled. I wanted to apologize instantly for my failure to understand you and alleviate your suffering. While I may have appeared noble to you, I was just a child inside, a naïve boy blinded by his own selfish love, consumed by *greed and jealousy*. I lacked the capacity to heal you and remove *it* from your mind, from our lives. Thus I failed you when you needed me most, and for that, I spent the next 50 years without you.

After we separated, I was determined to become someone you could be proud of, but I didn't realize that wasn't the true issue. I had left *it* to the resolution of time – a time that didn't come until 23:15 on October 22, 2019. At that moment, I was finally liberated and independent, only to learn that you were no longer in this world. As you have always said *You are always the same*.

How rewarding to learn that you had watched the 100-meter freestyle at the school meet. Is it strange that I feel a sense of triumph in finding out, 50 years later, that my daredevil attempt to win your attention did work? At the time I was so self-conscious and disappointed about finishing second from last that I felt unworthy of you and couldn't speak to you. My failure to finish first silenced my confession of love, and the swim meet became just another embarrassment. The summer before, I had risked everything to earn those black lines on my white swim cap—an absurd goal only a blindly smitten high school boy would pursue.

Do you recall the rule about students who couldn't swim more than 50 meters? They were forced to wear red caps, standing out as failures. At best, this practice could be seen as a character test, requiring courage and resilience to overcome humiliation. However, it also had the potential to break spirits. The elegance and beauty of swimming had no place in this system – it was distance that mattered. The red caps were just one of many unenlightened and outdated rules at our school – and society at the time was no better. The economic and political systems governed by *tradition and command* superseded the pursuit of truth, beauty, and self-expression. Any challenge to the status quo seemed impossible unless you were willing to be branded as an eccentric.

Love, for instance, was pushed aside and seen as a hindrance to progress. Freedom was hemmed in by the prevailing systems of *tradition and command*, leaving no room for dissent. Having returned from the USA, with a taste for an education based on a *laissez-faire* ideology, I struggled to comprehend these constraints. Yet, you boldly defied such dogmas, facing everything head-on with courage. Your resolve to voice your opinions, even when others disapproved, captivated me. I admired your unwavering spirit against the prevalent

unreasonable norms. I longed to tell you how much I admired your efforts, but I lacked the wisdom and confidence to express my feelings, so I remained silent.

I felt the need to escape this absurdity. During my first summer vacation in high school, I visited Lake Biwa with friends. At the northern part of the huge lake, there is a bay, which we impulsively decided to swim across. Among the three of us, I was the only one wearing a red cap. My friends were seasoned long-distance swimmers, but for me, who had never swum more than 25 meters before, this was a life-or-death challenge.

As we set off, we encountered floating clumps of algae, some as big as cars. In one of these eerie masses, I saw a large carp that was dead, belly-up. Carp shouldn't drown, I thought, they are natural swimmers. The algae is like the *dogma* of society, killing freedom and progress. It could entangle even the strongest of lake-dwelling fish, here in its own environment. I stopped thinking. I focused on staying alive, swimming cautiously and conserving energy. At many points, I thought I would die in that lake, but there was no turning back. I saw you on the tips of the small white waves and the vision of your smile and the possible reward of black lines on my white cap kept me going.

When I finally reached the opposite shore, my body felt like a rock. I collapsed on my back like that dead carp and looked up to the heavens. The midsummer sun poured down, its rays piercing even through my closed eyes. I was alive. I called your name over and over, as if to announce my survival to the clear blue sky. The following summer, the high school pool seemed so small it could have been mistaken for a puddle. The school and the teachers had also shrunk.

In the society of our era, love was seen as a diversion from the primary ethos, a small bonus overshadowed by life's grander objectives. Love was expected to operate within a strict set of rules, and we were not meant to surrender to its whims. Love was to be tamed and moderated by willpower, adopting discipline more suited to Samurai. Success was defined by graduating from a prestigious university, obtaining a job at a reputable company, marrying according to your parents' wishes and placing work above family. Those who deviated were branded as weak and deemed failures in life. The concept of living for love was a privilege accorded to artists, while the respectable members of society were expected to conform to the *reason and will* of Western philosophy.

I deeply regret that you, a brave opponent of rigid beliefs, were forced into a futile battle with my parents. From the outset, these discussions were destined to yield nothing, destined to conclude in disappointment due to the glaring disparities in our perspectives. Two completely different paradigms. I was deliberately excluded from these meetings, and my error was rooted in my naive belief that nothing could overpower the strength of love.

It was a discussion for the sake of discussion. Our emotions and passions had no place there; they were dead in the water. The carp trapped in the algae was tragically lifeless. It must have endured a struggle, an unnecessary one had it managed to avoid the algae. I empathized with the carp for pursuing a blind dream only to meet death. Choosing to swim skilfully, to bypass

the algae, is akin to accepting reality. This holds more importance than chasing dreams because the essence of life is its *continuity*. And it's this *continuity*, the perpetual dance of life from one generation to the next, that the genome encapsulates.

On April 13, your birthday, I landed in Bhutan. Here, an immaculate blue sky reaches infinitely upwards, where the endless sweep of time has filtered out the wickedness and lies of the world below. Paro Airport has the serene appearance of a traditional Bhutanese house with a multi-tiered, curved roof and ornately carved, painted wooden eaves, or labse, overhanging its windows. My good friend Pema, now serving in the National Assembly, had come to meet me.

As we walked through immigration and customs to exit the airport, Pema drew my attention to a charming little green-backed tit nestled in a hollow under one of the eaves, its plumage as formal as a tailored suit. It seemed to hold a breath of the spring breeze on its chest, which was pure white with a thin black stripe resembling a tie. The bird fluffed its feathers and chirped "*Tupi tupi*" (hello) and "*Lut lut*" (happy). The lingering sound of the departing jet quieted for a moment, and the bird's high-pitched twitter echoed below. She looked at me with mischievous eyes, issuing a clear, unyielding call. I immediately recognized you. I waved my hand, and you responded by spreading your wings. Thank you. You came to see me. You have forgiven me.

Pema drove me to a lodge halfway up the mountain, not far from the airport, with an expansive view of the valley. As we sat on the veranda engaged in conversation, I imagined that I saw a Tashi Goman – a portable temple carrying Buddhist relics and sacred texts – on the mountain road across the valley. In my mind's eye picture, a Lam Manip, the priest entrusted with taking these teachings from one village to another, house to house, was also visible. Bhutan lives and breathes under the guidance of the Buddha Dharma and it was comforting to see its presence manifested everywhere.

You are here with me. "*Pyu pyu*" (yes).

While we were enjoying a cup of apple and cinnamon tea, Pema turned to me and asked, "Kei, why are you so drawn to Bhutan?". "Because it is closest to heaven," I responded instantly, without a second thought. I had just come from India and the flight had offered me a breathtaking view of the Himalayas. An endless expanse of peaks, each rising over 7000 meters, their tips touching the pristine blue sky, with clouds and glaciers cradled beneath them – a sight so divine that it cannot be described in words, one that would make anyone turn their thoughts to the existence of gods. If an absolute *cosmic will* could be depicted visually, this view would be it. I found myself thinking that if there is a sight to behold before death, it should be this one.

Upon hearing my thoughts, Pema responded with a warm nod. "You know, I share that feeling, Kei", he said, his voice carrying the calm rhythm of the mountains. "Whenever I return to Bhutan from my travels, the sight of those majestic Himalayas, standing tall and proud, reassures me that heaven is truly here. We Bhutanese, we like to remind ourselves that we're

residing in paradise, living in our very own Shangri-La. And that's not just a saying, it's a feeling deep within."

He paused, sipping his tea and looking out across the valley. "Things have changed over the years, sure, but the essence of life here remains the same. Our elders, they've kept the traditions alive, carried them forward. The younger generation, they witness this and naturally learn to live this heavenly life. It's ingrained in them, as an integral part of who they are. It's quite different from Japan, I imagine."

"I don't think any country is quite like Bhutan", I replied. "What I find truly endearing here is the compassion people show to all living beings. I remember during my last visit, my hotel room was filled with an unexpected number of flies. Over a hundred of them! I asked the room attendant to handle the situation, expecting him to use an insecticide or something similar. But instead, he simply opened the windows and coaxed them out, uttering 'Ho Ho Ho', and they all obediently flew out in a group!"

Pema chuckled at my story, "That's not surprising, Kei. Here in Bhutan, we believe in the cycle of life and death, of reincarnation. We're taught that every living creature could have been our ancestor in a past life. This belief fosters a profound respect for all life. Our understanding of reincarnation and of nirvana is woven into our everyday life."

"I see", I said.

"We are privileged in that whenever we wish, a Lam Manip will visit our homes to recite the Four Noble Truths of Buddha's teachings. This keeps our understanding and respect for the Buddha alive. But we also recognize the profound difficulty of attaining enlightenment. The only person who has achieved Buddhahood is Shakyamuni, some 2500 years ago. And the next Buddha, Maitreya, isn't prophesied to appear for another 4000 years."

"In that case, I suppose we're all destined for reincarnation into some realm or other," I said.

"Yes, exactly," Pema affirmed. "Achieving enlightenment requires the complete annihilation of one's *greed and jealousy*, so it is not possible for an ordinary person to be enlightened. We all harbor innate tendencies towards *greed and jealousy*, likely hardwired into our DNA. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, life itself is a disease, marked by the Four Sufferings: birth, aging, sickness, and death. The *cause* of this *disease* is the self. Thus, the only way to *cure* it is to extinguish the self. That is the essence of enlightenment. Buddhism offers *medicines* such as the Eightfold Path to help us in this arduous journey towards nirvana."

"Pema, do you think we should consider a reverse perspective?" I asked, "What if *greed and jealousy* are essential driving forces of life?"

"Are you saying that without *greed and jealousy* life would not continue?" Pema queried.

"Yes, I think they might serve as triggers, as the energy that fuels life and propagation. We could even call it the *soul*. It sounds more high-minded, so is more likely to appeal to humans. If we scrutinize the actions of other animals, this perspective might be easier to grasp. In their world, greed and jealousy are evident in fundamental survival activities like gathering food and mating. Yet, we humans, tend to disguise and complicate these processes with our complicated language."

"Are we trying to hide something then?" Pema mused.

"Probably," I responded. "It could be that we're trying to assert our status as a superior life form, with concerns extending way beyond gathering food and mating. The theory of evolution, which implies our dominion over all life on Earth, is, in my view, significantly flawed. So, we may well be living under the illusion that we are the sole higher life forms. Yet, at the end of the day, our life's purpose, as encoded in our DNA, is fundamentally identical to that of other life forms."

"You're starting to sound like Drukpa Kuenley," Pema commented, "Simplifying complex philosophies and teachings to make them understandable to the masses."

"Perhaps the only life form that resists this simple truth, what could be interpreted as *Copy Thyself* inscribed in our DNA, is us humans. We gaze at the stars, reflecting upon our origins, our identity, and our eventual fate. Other creatures grasp this truth by instinct, the message encoded in their DNA, so they don't waste time on existential questions. They're too busy with the basics of gathering food and mating. Otherwise, extinction awaits. They don't indulge in illusions like us. They don't stare at the stars and weep. Perhaps we should find more contentment in our basic needs and spend less time worrying because the only truth in the cosmos where life flourishes may just be *Copy Thyself*. And all life must have originated from the cosmos and will ultimately return there."

"*P̄yū pyū*" (Yes. How silly!)

Poem of Rain

Rain falling from the sky

Same rain

But strange

Today it whispers to my ears.

I came from space on a comet

Wore a water dress in the sky, and

Wind guided me down

Just now.

Where am I? the Rain asked.

The Earth! I said. And the Rain said,

I will make lots of friends and return to the sky

The sooner the better.

"Pyu Pyu" (Yes, me too).

In the limitless expanse of the universe, life thrives everywhere, and nothing is special. Within the infinite, the extraordinary becomes the norm. Amid the vastness of the cosmos, our existence is an infinitesimal, negligible speck, just ephemeral cosmic *dust* – like the *dust* I first saw and loved on your uniform.

Love is at the root of all life. It fuels our life's purpose, our instinct to *Copy Thyself*. Love's universal message, embedded in our DNA, transcends language. It speaks for itself. So, simply recognize it, feel it, and live it for therein lies the truth.

Reason, so often in conflict with love, quantifies causality by weight and size. However, love cannot be confined by these parameters. Societies and traditions that regard *reason* as the paramount principle lack a sense of universality in the cosmos. *Reason* may offer temporary satisfaction and peace of mind, but this is ultimately an illusion. It is destined to devolve into discontent and anxiety due to our inherent tendencies towards *greed and jealousy* inscribed in our DNA. The only truth that we would be wise to understand is to *Copy Thyself*.

No matter how much we analyze love and balance it against reason, the discussion will forever remain futile. It was, and always will be, an unnecessary conversation for two young people in love.

"Pyu Pyu" (Yes)

A little bird came at dawn.

"Tupi tupi" (Hello)

Wait a minute. I'll open the window now.

"Lut lut" (Happy)

Here perch on my finger.

"Pyu pyu" (Yes)

I'm going to read you a poem, just like the old days.

"Lut lut" (Happy)

MY LOVE

Now I'm alone

Doing nothing

Just thinking about you

I've never been so happy.

I don't want to do anything

So I stopped time

And I just think about you

I'll never be this happy again

Snow riding on time

Soft and fluffy

Happiness cuddled

Silently falling

Because I love you

I say to you I love you

I want to be with you just for a little while

Just for a little while.

"Chut chut Lut lut" (I love you)

My LOVE (return poem)

I am alone, like you

I am thinking about you, too

"Lut lut" (Happy)

I don't want to do anything.

So I stopped time, too

Just thinking about you

"Chut chut" (Satisfied)

I am happy too

I know I will never be this happy again

Outside the window is pure white with snow since yesterday.

Big fluffy snowflakes falling, holding happiness in their arms.

"Lut lut" (Happy)

I love you

So let me say I love you too.

I want you to hold me

Even for a little while

"Chut chut Lut lut" (I love you)

Even for a little while

I want to be with you.

"Kut kut" (Dream)

Bhutan is in the midst of a harsh winter. Dawn breaks late. Beyond the glistening ice crystals suspended in the air, the Himalayas rise, a vision of white upon white, and the panorama unfolds in an endless liaison. Its winter sky opens into an azure realm.

When the housekeeper stepped into the room around midday, the pair were still asleep. The logs in the fireplace had long since burnt out, leaving behind the faint, earthy scent of smoldering embers, and a cold stillness enveloped the room. They never woke up again.

The last book they had read together lay neatly on the desk: *On the Shortness of Life* by the Roman philosopher Seneca.

On its last page, it read, *Men go on forever, taking the lives of others and being deprived of their own, breaking each other's equanimity and plunging each other into misery, without fruit, without joy, without spiritual progress (in the vain hope of a distant future).*

Two scribbles were written out in the margins of the page.

What power can match a love

that has given its all.

At last we are together.

“Chūt chūt” (Satisfied)

I am happy just the way we are.

“Pyu pyu” (Yes)

A one-line letter was attached. It read,

LOVE and ETERNAL RECONCILIATION to all

Midori and Kei

December 28, 2035

There was nothing out of the ordinary. Time forgotten. They were in love – that was all. From the frost-covered window, two small, pure white birds took flight into the shimmering icy mist under the dazzling sunlight. They chattered to each other:

“Kūt kūt” (dream)...

The end.

Katsura Kei

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