

COBALT-SERIES

# マリア様がみてる

バラエティギフト



今野緒雪

集英社

# Volume 16 - Variety Gifts

## Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-coloured school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... Such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Now then, that day of autumn. An unexpected present was delivered to the Rose Mansion.

“To the cute little sisters,” the message was scribbled on the label. It had the feeling of “oh, right,” and was tied to the wrapping from a well-known department store.

They would surely remember that handwriting.

That tie which was tied with perfect symmetry, casually dressed, but always beautiful; there was no mistaking that it was from that person.

## Variety Gift I

Wednesday after school.

After cleaning was over, Yumi was, as usual, walking up the stairs to the second floor of the Rose Mansion, where an eerie spectacle awaited.

“...”

She didn't look, but still she saw it. So thinking, she quietly closed the door she had just opened (but did not remove her hand from the door knob.)

---But, the person there feeling the sensation of another person, naturally called out for her to stop. Without turning her head towards this direction, came “Yumi-san.”

“G... Good day.”

There was no helping it, if she's been spotted. Yumi, once again moved the door she had just closed in the “open” direction; in other words, just before she moved forward, she smoothed her discomfort over with a greeting. Saying “Good day” to the person with whom one spends six hours in the same classroom seems a bit silly at this point, however.

“You were just about to run away.” As that person slowly turned her head, Yumi saw who it was.

“Ah, um, no way.” It should be forgiven that she repudiated it.

“No, you did. Otherwise, why did you close the door once you'd opened it? So, what, you're saying that you intended to enter the room but left your body in the hallway?” She stood up from her chair, slowly drawing closer and closer. Her intensity grew with her attack, so Yumi finally gave up.

“But, it looked scary, Yoshino-san.”

“Scary? Your best friend is in a bind and that's what you say?”

Anyway, after apparently liberating Yoshino-san, Yumi ducked her head. “Best friend or utter stranger, scary is scary.”

Even if it was someone she knew, it was scary. Yumi described what she had seen as she had seen it.

“At first, I thought no one had come; the truth is, that, in the middle of a gloomy room at the table there was one tiny speck of movement visible, there was no way to know that it was a person sitting there, was there? With my heart beating that like that it was impossible. More importantly, once I saw that as I entered, I wasn’t going to look back and check. It might just be because of the weather, but there was some strange figure in the room. At least if there had been some light, I wouldn’t have been so frightened.”

“That’s rude. I just forgot.” As if Yoshino-san had really just remembered, she flipped the switch for the electricity on now.

“Because I was caught up in that for a long time.” Yoshino-san muttered regretfully, gesturing with her chin.

“By that, you mean \*that\*?” Yumi pointed to the top of the table to confirm.

Now that the room had been lit, she understood. She gazed at the vicinity of where Yoshino-san had just been, where a square box sat. Wrapped in the paper of a high-end department store, it had the air of an item that said “Exchange Presents.” Because she couldn’t measure it, she didn’t know the precise size but it looked to be about thirty centimeters long and wide, and about ten centimeters high.

“So what happened with this?” When Yumi couldn’t observe anything from its outward appearance, she asked Yoshino-san the question.

“This arrived.”

“When?”

“Just a little after fifth period.”

“Hmm.” When she had been here to eat her lunch, it certainly had not been there. So, either in the time Yumi and the others had left, during the short recess, homeroom, or cleaning duty, someone had come to this room and left the box there.

“Look here.” Yoshino-san pointed to a rectangular piece of paper stuck to the top of the box. It was a little small so Yumi leaned over the box to read the words “Please eat by XX/XX” that were written on the seal. That was all pretty usual, but a handwritten slip of paper which bore the words, “To my cute little sisters” was not.

“Hey, Yumi-san, do you think this is Eriko-sama’s handwriting?”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

So, that means this was provisions from Eriko-sama. Because Yoshino-san was serious with “No way, is this a mystery?”-type excitement; until she understood “but, why” her whole energy would be given over to this one thing.

However, Yoshino-san’s expression was hard.

“What does she mean by this?”

“What does she mean?”

“Have you forgotten what I told you at the Sports Festival?”

“...The sœur thing?”

Shimazu Yoshino’s onee-sama was Hasekura Rei, and her onee-sama was Torii Eriko who was no ordinary person. The memory was fresh of the other day at the Sports Festival, when she had, they thought, dropped by aimlessly for a visit, and made Yoshino-san promise to “introduce her sœur.”

However.

“You think this box has something to do with the sœur thing?”

“There’s no reason to think it doesn’t! The opponent is Eriko-sama. This has to be some kind of message. Either that, or a cunning trap.”

“Hmm.”

For the second time, the atmosphere leaned toward the mystery side. At least, that feeling was rising incontrovertibly from Yoshino-san alone. But Eriko-sama was enrolled in school, and this package wrapped in this way had to have been carried from home.

Because her home was also a business, they often received gifts or souvenirs, and this seemed to about the same level of expenditure.

Of course, it might not have been Eriko-sama only, anyone gathered at the Rose Mansion for tea or sweets might have brought it, preserving the atmosphere of a pleasant salon or something similar...

“I’m opening it.” As if her will had been firmed, Yoshino-san reached out her hand for the box.

“Eh - is it okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? After all, doesn’t it say here “To my cute little sisters”?”

“But,” For the moment, it might be better to wait until Rei-sama arrived, wouldn’t it.

“ If it said ‘To my cute little sister’ it would mean I have to hold back. It’s addressed to Rei-chan, right. But it says ‘sisters’. Which means ‘all of them’, doesn’t it. That gives me the privilege of breaking the seal.”

“That’s one way to reason, I guess.”

“So, therefore, even if Rei-chan isn’t here. This is obviously addressed to me.”

“...That’s a pretty absurd assumption.”

“It’s not an assumption, just using my authority.”

As she said that, the ally of authority, Yoshino-san, reached under the handwritten seal on the box, grasped the seal with the department store’s logo on it that stuck out and pulled. Slowly an opening appeared at the cut end of the seal, where it tore and came off in a diagonal strip, in a way that made it impossible to reseal it once the contents of the box had been confirmed.

Now that the object was no longer sealed, Yoshino-san began to rip the paper violently. Really, there was, she thought in her heart, no percent that could have been used to return it to its former condition.

Appearing out of the torn wrapping was a very pretty tin. Peeling off the tape around the lid, the tin was opened...

“Variety Gift?”

It was definitely something like that, an assortment set of cookies, the kind one used for an exchange gift.

The tin was separated into several partitions, around which were scattered orange peel and chocolate kisses in foil, candy wrapped colorfully all shining cheerfully and brightly.

Yeah.

As an accessory box, it looked totally like a Christmas tree.

## The Miracle of the Nativity Feast

“Hey, do you believe in miracles?” The girl asked, her eyes shining brightly.

For a moment, the world tilted wildly. There was a sense of déjà vu hanging over this, a spectacle seen many years ago. Like when she had shifted back and forth to see the red and green print on the color page of the magazine, which gave her a feeling of carsickness, and the sensation of being too close felt icky.

“Sensei, did you hear me?”

“Ah, sorry.” Katori Maki shook her head lightly, shaking off the vision from so many years ago. And what remained was the real spectacle. The usual mixed staff room. She was by the side of the desk, not terribly long hair, knitting as always, the girl with the penetrating gaze.

“Miracles? I’ve never seen one with my own eyes, I guess,” Maki answered as she gazed at the attendance record. Because today was the day before exams, many of the students who were out due to illness had returned, so all the members of her class would be gathered to attend the closing ceremony.

“Sensei. That was a pretty vague answer to the question. If this were a language test, I’d give you a zero.”

“Hahaha. Just what I’d expect from you, Kurosu-san. Pretty sharp.”

In response to the question does one believe in miracles, the answer should be yes or no. But for Maki, such an immediate answer was a misrepresentation. Therefore “that was a vague answer” wasn’t it, it was really, “the answer is vague.”

The girl’s face said “it can’t be helped.”

“So, do you want them to happen?”

Kurosu Hikari. She was in Maki’s homeroom, a student of the second-year Chrysanthemum class.

“Yes. If they happened it would be nice, I actually think some have occurred.”

That face didn't suit her, she thought. But why was she making those faces in succession. This girl was trying to forget something that had happened within her lifetime.

"Hey Sensei, can I tell you a story about a miracle?"

"The story of the miracle of Jesus?"

"No, something else. Something that happened to me."

"Ah, sure." Whatever, Maki shrugged her shoulders. A miracle that had happened closer to home then.

"Because it's Sensei, I can tell you this, special. It's a secret from everyone else."

"As expected."

"Yes, but really, only you. At my entrance interview, you laughed at my story."

"Is that so."

"Yes. Did you forget?"

"I do a lot of interviews, I guess." Although Maki expanded upon her answer in this way, it was really a lie. She remembered the girl clearly. There were many interesting interviews, truly, and it was rare to remember one story in the middle them all.

"The person I met in my dream, I promised to meet her again at Lillian."

At that time, Kurosu Hikari, had given that as her reason for applying to Lillian Jogakuen.

## Hikari

Even though I'm telling this, I'm not a person who believes in such things at all; but, to meet the onee-sama I met in my dream, I enrolled in Lillian Jogakuen middle school.

It was about halfway through December of my sixth year of elementary school. Every corner of the town was filled with the sound of children's songs, classical music, pops and Christmas songs all piled on top of one another. Red, green, gold and white colored packaging overflowed; it was the usual season in which people's hearts get all fluttery. From the window of the hospital room, I breathed a sigh, looking down on a not very big fir tree that was illuminated in the university hospital garden. It wasn't anything life threatening, I was in the hospital for a simple operation on my eyes.

At last, the surgery was to happen tomorrow night. Just before lights out, my mother who has been there to accompany me, had returned home, I was in my bed, where I was accustomed to crying alone.

"If you cry like that, your eyes will swell, won't they. It'll be difficult to do the surgery." That was what the nurse said, but it only made me cry more.

"Hikari-chan, you're almost 12 years old now. You should know that crying is useless." This young nurse who had a crying patient heaved a huge sigh, applied an ice bag to my eyelids by way of consolation, pulled the curtain around my bed and returned to the nurse's station.

I did understand that it was useless to cry. The doctor had explained that when I had decided to give consent for the surgery to be done. However, reason is different than feelings and I felt "scared" and couldn't shake that off easily, even with the fact that past data indicated a high success rate, and that the surgery was over fast.

“I understand, you know.”

Just then, the voice came from somewhere. It was different from the nurse from before, but it was a young woman’s voice. Either a middle school student or high school student. The feeling I had was that the voice couldn’t have been from someone much older than myself.

“You know, but you don’t know what to do, or what you can do about it.”

“Who are you?” I asked, turning around in the dark.

“Kyōko.”

“Kyōko?”

“I was admitted last night. Because I wasn’t feeling well, I didn’t greet the other people in the room...”

Last night there was another person admitted here?

The ice bag cooling my eyes notwithstanding, I inclined my head. This was a large six-bed room; between myself and the hallway were two beds to my left, in other words, I was in the middle bed. My neighbor to the left was a hard of hearing older lady, to my right an overweight middle-aged woman. Facing me was an attractive 30-year old or so OL who snored terrifically, the bed next to the window held a college student who had broken her ankle riding a bike.

I turned my head obliquely to try and see, had she been put into the empty bed by the hallway? --After all, her voice sounded like it was pretty close.

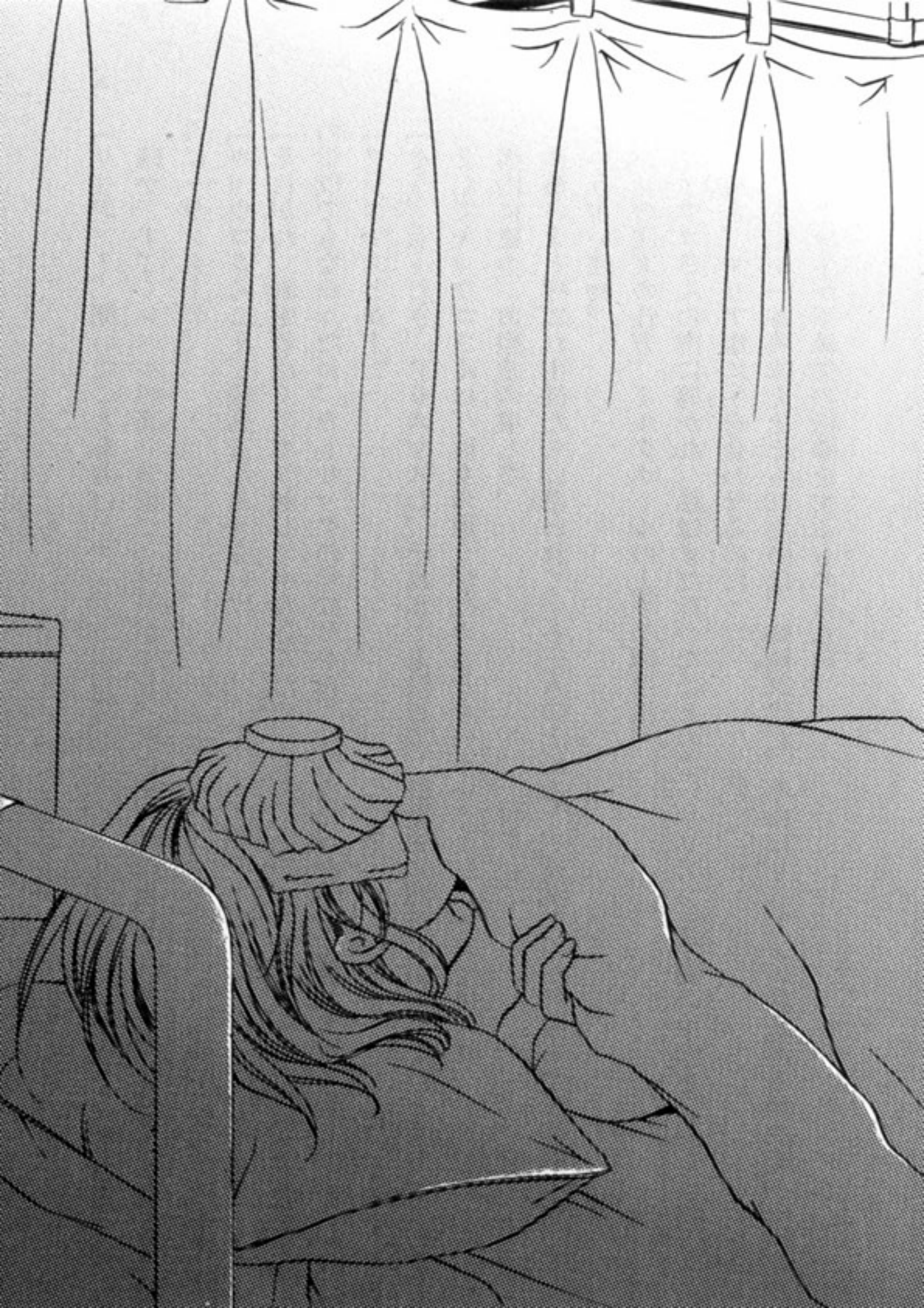
“Kyōko-san. Can you come over here?”

“No. Like I said before, I’m not feeling well... My stomach hurts so I can’t move.”

“Your stomach?”

“Yes. My appendix is swollen. I’m having surgery tomorrow.”

“Ah, me too. I’m having surgery too.”



“Yeah, I heard what the nurse said to you. So, when I found out that you were a comrade, I spoke to you.”

“Comrade?”

“Yes, a comrade in surgery. I’m scared about them cutting into my belly but, if I think of Hikari-chan in another operating room, I can persevere.”

“Me too. Me too, if it gets hard, I’ll think about Kyōko-san.”

Plunging a scalpel into a stomach to cut it, I didn’t know which was a larger scale surgery, but, now that I knew I wasn’t going into surgery alone, I could look forward to a bright tomorrow, I felt. At that moment, I wasn’t alone anymore.

We had become friends at once.

“Hikari-chan, Do you like school?”

“Not really.”

“Oh, why?”

“Because this year is the exam, everyone is always irritable now. When I was admitted to the hospital, in my heart, I was actually pleased a little.”

If she was really a little older than me, she’d have no relationship with my school would she, so I could say things to her that I wouldn’t even say to my parents.

“Hm. Hikari-chan, you must be excellent student.”

“Why do you say that?”

“People with poor study skills, when they are told to study just collapse and drag down themselves and the people around them. You don’t want to be with the people in your class.”

“Yeah? I guess so.” Admittedly, my grades were the best in my class. A position I defended desperately, to the very last. To tell the truth, the leader of the irritable was myself. Naturally, there were no friends who came to visit me while I was in the hospital.

“My school is very fun.”

“Eh, Kyōko-san, where do you go to school?”

“Lillian Jogakuen. Do you know it?”

“Lillian? I think I’ve heard of it.” I definitely had the feeling that it was a high-level school. It was a rank above the school I held as my number one hope for acceptance.

“You’re a good student too, aren’t you Kyōko-san?”

“There’s getting into those uniforms though, which is a bit of a drudgery. But when I entered, I didn’t have to study too hard. Because it’s a Catholic school, there are many pleasant events.”

“Like Christmas?”

“Yes, like now, Christmas. By the time I leave the hospital, I want to be in time for the end of term ceremony.” And Kyōko-san proceeded to tell me many things about the school she attended. About when the grounds were built and about the beautiful church.

How the three adored upperclassmen of the Student Council were referred to as the “Roses”, and how they did their work in an old building called the “Rose Mansion”

The way to order bread. How to use the milk hall.

Guided by Kyōko-san’s voice, I was led through the grounds of Lillian Jogakuen that I had not yet seen, peeping in at the classrooms, putting my hands together in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

In the middle of all this, the thing that interested me the most was the *sœur* system. That was Lillian’s traditional system, in which an upperclassman gives an underclassman one-on-one guidance.

“How wonderful. I want to become Kyōko-san’s little sister.”

“That would be nice. Then, let’s promise. Although I’m a second-year and next year I’ll be a third-year, there’s no reason why sisters can’t have a two-year difference. It’ll be wonderful if we can spend a year together.”

Originally, I had said, “I want to be your little sister” lightly, however, Kyōko-san got excited and began to make plans for the future by herself. Like what color the stone would be on the item that *sœur* make their pledge on, the rosary. What kind of chocolate she wanted at Valentine’s Day, things like that.

“But... I wonder if I can get in to Lillian,” I muttered. That was the real problem, the single most crucial point that could not be removed.

However, Kyōko-san laughed. “It’s all right. I’m sure you’ll get in. That’s my prediction.”

“I wonder.”

“Relax, relax. Since you’re normally an excellent student, if you keep cool it’ll be an easy victory. It’ll be easy, even if it seems like it might be a burden. And the even more then the surgery will be definitely less worrying if you think about it.”

“Mm.”

“In other words, positive thinking; I wish you could get a second opinion from my classmate.”

“Classmate?”

“Yeah. She’s really cheerful. The kind who, when she can’t see what the future will hold always believes that a good turn is coming. And then, she makes it happen. But. She’s not the kind of person who draws luck to herself.”

“That person, will she come and visit you here?”

“I don’t think she’ll come. We’re not that close.”

And the surgery is very soon, after all, so the homeroom teacher might not even have told the students.

“But that person alone, if she told you that you could do it, you would feel encouraged.”

“Ah, I see. It’s like that, huh.” At that time, I wondered if that person was someone Kyōko-san liked.

The nurse came into the room on her rounds, shining a flashlight around, so our conversation was suspended.

Maybe because my feelings were loosened during our chat, or because the ice bag on my swollen eyelids had cooled me off, the sleep trolley had visited. Tonight, when I had thought I would not sleep or cry myself to sleep. Now I just fell asleep with a peaceful heart.

With my eyes open, I prayed to God that Kyōko-san would recover safely from her surgery.

I completely forgot to make a request for myself.

The next day, on the morning of my surgery, I was awakened and was noisily taken along to pre-op for preparations.

When I was much, much younger, that is to say, when I was in the earliest grades of primary school, they didn't hesitate to use general anesthesia on anyone, but I, who was neither child nor adult as a sixth year student, was asked by the doctor which I wanted. Therefore I was going to have general anesthesia. Of course, with local anesthesia, the burden would be lighter and end more easily, but the area of the surgery was the eye, if the pain was dulled but I wasn't asleep, I'd be able to see any defect in the surgical technique close up. Looking straight on at the scalpel, the sutures, the needle entering my eyes, I wouldn't be able to stand it.

Thus, my return to the ward was delayed while I slept off the general anesthesia from my surgery.

“Was Kyōko-san's surgery successful?” As soon as I was lying in my bed, that was the first thing I asked.

“Who is Kyōko-san?” Asked my mother, who was playing attendant, as she stroked my head gently.

“Um, the person who was in this row, next to the hallway. She was admitted yesterday. Today she was having appendix surgery.”

“Is that right,” my mother moved her chair back from my bed and stood, taking a few steps away and back. One, two, three, four, in all I counted seven steps. As gauze covered my eyes, I used my hearing to compensate.

“The curtain is open around that bed, and there's no one there.”

“Then I guess she's still in surgery.”

How long did it take to do surgery on an appendix, I didn't know. However, even though I didn't know when her surgery had begun, I didn't think it would that much of a difference from the average surgery. For a little while after surgery, I was in a room near the nurse's station where they could watch over me, so maybe she was there now, before being returned to the room.

"I wonder, we can ask the nurse about it afterward, okay. So, right now, you should rest. The next time you open your eyes, you'll know what happened."

"Mm." And for the second time, I fell into a deep sleep.

The next time I opened my eyes, I thought, it would be nice if Kyōko-san had come back. But the next time I awoke, I was unable to meet Kyōko-san.

"You must have had a dream, Hikari-chan." My mother's face smiled crookedly. After the attending physician removed the gauze that covered my eyes and I was able to see my surroundings, everything was completely different.

"I asked the head nurse but she said that that bed was empty from the day before you were admitted."

"Then, what about the other beds?"

"There was no one by the name of Kyōko-san here."

I, stumbling against the side table, the door, whatever, made my way to the entrance where I confirmed this on the plastic name board. As Mom had said, there was no name Kyōko-san. All the people who had been there when I was admitted had their names written there by the nurse.

"But, but, I was certain..."

Kyōko-san was in this room. When she had heard me crying in fear, she had spoken to me to comfort me; we had promised to become sœurs.

“If you look at the characters in the names of all the in-patients, there aren’t any that could be compared to that name, either.” Mom has come out into the hallway, and embracing me, led me back to my bed.

“It wasn’t a dream.”

I didn’t understand.

Why had this happened? During the time that I was in the deep sleep, the entire world had turned upside down.

However, one day, two days, three days passed, and my conviction that this had not been a dream grew faint. Gradually, as my vision recovered so that I could make out outlines of things, but the postoperative gauze still warped the scenery, I wasn’t able to remember. Every day that passed without seeing Kyōko-san, my ability to believe that it was the truth diminished in proportion.

With the curtain pulled around, setting my bed apart, none of my neighbors raised their voices to establish conversation. With both Kyōko-san and I laid out in our beds, it seemed unreasonable that we were able to talk normally.

I had never met Kyōko-san unexpectedly. I had never heard a voice call out from a person I had never seen. If reality was included in the dream, then it had all still been a dream. However, it didn’t feel as if that settled the matter at all, if it had just been a dream.

“I’m going to take the exam for Lillian Jogakuen.” I told my parents when I left the hospital.

Even now, the school I had chosen did not change. I understood well enough that it was high level, that I’d have to press myself to begin studying. If I failed the examination, in three years I could take the exam for the high school, I thought. There was no public school that I wanted to go to, none other than Lillian. To give some meaning to Kyōko-san’s existence, I felt that I wanted to keep that promise and become a student at Lillian. Kyōko-san might be waiting, possibly. Because wherever Kyōko-san was in reality, on that day we had met inside a dream.

Despite my homeroom teacher, whose face said give up, when I was warned against recklessness, and my classmate's derisive laughter, I was accepted to Lillian. My mother was proud of the fact that I had passed the barrier into Lillian, but I did not feel particularly triumphant that I had made first in my class. The only reason I had ever wanted to enter Lillian at all was to meet Kyōko-san, that alone. The brand itself had no worth to me.

Immediately upon entry to school, I began to search for Kyōko-san. Among the current third-years, I asked about a person called Kyōko who had been temporarily absent during some days in December. I visited the classrooms of this year's third-year students, I asked the homeroom teachers of last year's second-year students, I stuck a note saying that I was looking for someone on the free corner of the announcement bulletin board. I was watched with considerable amusement by the teachers with a sort of 'what are you \*doing\*?' feeling. Among my classmates, there were a few who found it all interesting and helped out.

It was about the end of April or so, I was in my classroom after school drawing up a flyer, when my classmate Ogasawara Sachiko-san called out to me. She had been a student here from kindergarten through elementary, moving up into middle school; she was quite beautiful and not very easy to approach, even by a member of the same generation.

"Hikari-san. You're asking about the person you met in a dream..."

Sachiko-san picked up the master of the flyer I was working on and looked at it. She might have been going home to attend some kind of lesson, because other than her school bag she carried an extremely large bag over her shoulder.

I had never had direct contact with Sachiko-san before but, since my entrance into school one month ago, every one of my classmates knew about my search for Kyōko-san.

"You promised to become sœurs or something like that?"

“Yes.” Since some kind of information about that was likely to go around, I nodded cheerfully. Sachiko-san looked amazed for a moment, then sighed. The feeling was that she found it troublesome.

“In middle school there is no *sœur* relationship, didn’t you know?”

“Whah?”

“Although it’s spoken of as a Lillian tradition, the *sœur* system only exists in high school. So...”

So.

“So, I thought I’d tell you, so you can check the high school third-years as well.” That was all she had to say. Sachiko-san said, “Good Day” shortly, looked at her wristwatch and left the classroom.

While the sound of her footsteps had faded, although I had never thanked her for her advice, I considered the content of my conversation with Kyōko-san intently. I had clearly stated that I was taking junior high school exams. At the time Kyōko-san mentioned that she was a second-year, had she touched upon whether it was middle school or high school? I couldn’t remember.

I had thought that the difference between us was two years, but perhaps she was my elder by five, I wondered. As I thought upon that, I became terrified. What if that were the case and we were never to be in high school at the same time, we would never be able to become *sœur*.

“Do you know of any student that left just before last Christmas to have her appendix removed?”

Nonetheless I walked myself over to the high school buildings. We may never be able to become *sœurs*, but I still wanted very much to meet Kyōko-san. However, there was no Kyōko-san there.

There was nowhere else for to look for her.

And, one day, I too became a second-year high school student.

Five years passed and I no longer looked for Kyōko-san however, every time I encountered anyone named Kyōko I was assailed with complex feelings. Because Kyōko isn't an uncommon name, there were often one or two people in my class with the name. Because at Lillian we were supposed to call each other by our given names, every time anyone uttered "Kyōko-san" my heart skipped a beat. Like a completely suspicious person.

When my second-year of high school began in the same class was Mita **Kyōko-san**, whose reaction to my calling her "Kyōko-san" seemed fitting to me. She had entered Lillian for high school and was a very talented woman. Although she herself said it was "an accident" it was well-known that entering high school was several times more difficult than entering at middle school.

Kyōko-san was a quiet and mild person. She had joined the Flower Arranging club; after club activities were over she could be found arranging flowers in a small vase to decorate the classroom.

"Is Kyōko-sempai here?" It was nice when the underclassmen came by, the first-year students of the Flower Arranging Club who visited the classroom. However, she didn't have a *sœur* yet.

"Kyōko-san, aren't you going to choose a *sœur*?" One day, one of our classmates asked Kyōko-san something that I had always wondered.

It was on our way back from the science room, chatting. We just happened to have been in the same practice group, so we were moving along together in the same stream.

"Hey, you should ask Hikari-san."

It was troublesome for Kyōko-san, being dragged into my circle. Settled in the middle of four people walking we weren't *onee-sama* and *imōto*, we were only me and Kyōko-san.

"There's already someone Hikari-san has her heart set on. Other than that person, she won't become anyone's *sœur*." From the side, Hasekura Rei came out and explained, teasing. She was *Rosa Foetida en Bouton*, with an honor student *onee-sama* and a cute *imōto*.

“You know the person you’ve got your heart set on?”

“Yes. They met in a dream.”

Once again it was Rei-san who answered Kyōko-san’s question. Because we had come up from middle school together, naturally Rei-san knew my story about the dream. The figure of me desperately searching for Kyōko-san I knew from somewhere in time.

“Dream? A dream? Like when you’re asleep and you dream, dream?”

“It’s all right if you laugh. I’ve always believed that we’d meet. After ten years, twelve years, in a dream again, it’s okay. When we meet, I want her to see the grown-up me. If it’s at all possible, I want to become her favorite.”

Kyōko-san didn’t laugh. “Mm. Somehow, I understand... I understand.” Kyōko-san nodded with the look on her face I wanted to see most. I was more and more interested in Kyōko-san however, because she was taking a break from school soon, I wasn’t able to become more friendly with her.

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“--Then?” senior high school teacher Katori Maki asked, placing the cap on a ball point pen. “I understand that this was the basic outline until the last time. But where’s the miracle? Did it happen after this?”

This long story had taken about twenty minutes. If it was going to go on much longer, she thought that she’d get ready to go home and listen on the way. After all, Kurosu Hikari, like Maki, took the same JR line to the M station to go home.

“Recently, yeah.” Hikari grinned.

“Eh?”

“It happened recently. Sensei. Didn’t you sense anything?”

“Anything?”

“The data related to Mita Kyōko-san’s absence. Of course, you must have noticed.”

“Mita-san’s? Of course. I’m her homeroom teacher.”

The evening of the day before exams, she had been at home and had suffered from intense abdominal pains, which resulted in her being hospitalized. She would be out through the whole finals period and the vacation after.

“The name of the disease?”

“Appendicitis.”

“Also known as?”

“Appendix.”

As Maki muttered the word, her whole body got goosebumps.

“So, Sensei, any of you know which second-year high school student was, just before Christmas, admitted into the hospital because of her appendix?”

The words that Hikari had called out four years, seven months ago in that staff room resounded, while Maki slowly turned.

“Impossible.”

“That it is. Wouldn’t you call it a miracle?”

“Mita Kyōko is your...?”

“Yeah. But, when I told Kyōko-san in the morning when I saw her, she said this,” Kurosu Hikari,” as if she were opening the lid of a treasure chest, carefully spinning her words.

“Hikari-chan, you say. Hikari-chan, isn’t Lillian fun? So, uh, your eyes are already all right, I guess, since you went on. Isn’t that strange? That was five years ago. But for me, it was just a few days ago.”

If it was true, it was truly a miracle that had occurred to Kurosu Hikari that she relayed lightly.

“Now, I’m as happy as I can be. Second-year high Kyōko-san and sixth-year elementary me, still can’t be sœurs. We’re classmates. It’s like a dream.”

“Really.” She nodded, even though it wasn’t believable.

This was all unbelievable, but there was no way that Kurosu Hikari had made it all up by herself. Maybe she and her classmate Mita Kyōko had gotten together to create this wild delusion.

“Sensei.” As if she had read what was in her heart, Hikari said, “Even if you don’t believe in miracles they happen, but you might overlook them. You have to proactively seek them out.”

Like the sound of a church bell, the sound of those words reverberated in something that had always been in her heart.

The girl who had spoken of miracles left, Maki left the deserted staff room behind, suddenly realizing the mistake that had been left in Kurosu Hikari’s dream.

This was the real world.

Did Kurosu Hikari even exist in the first place?

So thinking, she stood and took out the attendance record to check.

“Kurosu Hikari... Mita Kyōko.” So they were for real.

What am I thinking, she thought as she stood up from the seat. She carelessly threw the attendance record back onto the desk, which caused a small box to fall to the desk.

“Uh-oh.” She picked it up, panicking.

Out of the box came flying an angel mascot who, asked once again this year, quietly.

Do you believe in miracles?

## Maki

“So, do you believe in miracles?” whispered the small, white-colored doll.

“Good day.” I wasn’t saying it to anyone in particular, so I just muttered as I pulled out my school bag. It was the last day of finals. My classmates chatted enthusiastically about how they did so-so in the exams, what their plans were for winter vacation, and after that what they were interested in for Christmas, leaving slowly or scattered here and there around the classroom.

Personally there was no one I felt like telling what I was doing at year-end and New Year’s, no one’s plans I had any interest in, so I gathered up my stuff and made to leave quickly.

“Ah, wait a sec, Maki-san.”

“Yes?” I turned to look over my shoulder at whoever had called out to me. There, near and slightly behind the platform, there was a group of several people turned towards me and beckoning.

“What is it?” I thought how I was really hungry, as I retraced my steps until I was surrounded by my classmates.

“So, uh, Maki-san, what do you think of the social studies teacher, Atsumi-sensei?” One of my classmates asked abruptly.

“What do you mean, what do I think?” Trying to figure out the intent of the question, I repeated it.

“I mean, like, it’s a “do you like” type question,” was the answer.

“Is there a choice of **two things to like?**”

“No, no. This is a do you love or not type of conversation.”

“Love!?” At least it wasn’t a questionnaire investigating the level of good will. However, love...

“The class is very interesting and I love it, but I don’t have any other feelings about it, I guess,” I prevaricated, pushing my hair back. When it came to Atsumi-sensei I did have a lot of thoughts, but I wasn’t about to say anything in response to being asked now.

“So, it’ll be useless even if we invited you, huh.”

“What are you talking about?” I didn’t answer docilely so much as demand the right to know. Whereupon one dropped her voice and said, “The truth is...”

“Look, the closing ceremony is on Christmas Eve, right? We were all going to go after school together to the staff room and give Atsumi-sensei a present, that’s what we were discussing.”

“We all, you said?”

“Everyone here.”

I looked around and understood. One, two, three... All told there were eight people. This group which didn’t seem to have much in common was bound together by “Love for Atsumi-sensei” it seemed.

“Atsumi-sensei, huh?”

“Hey Maki-san, are you trying to say something?”

“No, nothing.” I shook my head.

“Atsumi-sensei is great.”

“It’s unusual in our school for someone to be that young and cool.”

“It’s rare and precious to have a male professor in his twenties – precious. And for all that, he’s got better than average points in the looks department.”

Several of my classmate’s eyes went all dreamy as she said that.

“...Is that right?” There was no reason to object. With no boys of our own age around, this was a popular pseudo-romance in a girls’ school, after all. Teachers, and sempai of the same sex.

“Yes, that’s the way it is. So, Maki-san, are you in on the plan? Or not?”

Somehow, that conversation from a while back, about going to the staff room together and all that, wasn’t yet over, it seemed.

“Why should I give Atsumi-sensei a present. If anything, I want the opposite.”

“What, you want Atsumi-sensei to come to you with a present.” My classmates let out chuckles.

“...Certainly. Anyway, I think it’s okay if I’m not included.” I smiled bitterly and waved, and this time left the classroom.

I had taken a few dozen steps down the hallway when the classroom door I had closed, opened and closed with a clatter and a single student flew out. She ran up to me with small steps and peering into my face said, “Let’s go home together.”

Abe Mika-san. Of my class, the littlest, palest, thinnest, doe-eyed, type you wanted to protect, girl. Plus, she had been one of the Love Atsumi-sensei Eight... This would be established shortly.

Sheesh.

I stopped where I stood and took Mika-san’s school bag and purse in my hand. Running after me so scattered, she was trying to put on her school coat so, her bag and purse were now in danger of being dropped.

“Maki-san, you’re very kind, aren’t you.” With both hands empty, Mika-san put her coat on slowly, then said, “Thank you” and took her bags back into her own hands.

Not sure how to answer, I turned around and continued walking.

Taking and holding a bag while someone put on their coat was the kind of thing anyone would do. She had said that was kind. Mika-san exaggerated a little.

“So, what do you think will happen if you confess?” We were walking side by side past the library when I asked.

“A kind of... Oh right, I guess it’s possible to understand it as a confession.” Mika-san repeated the words blandly. Her breath coming out in little white puffs, Mika-san pushed her soft looking hair out of the way.

“If it’s understood to be that, it’s all right?”

“If the other person likes me and goes out with me, yes.”



“Go out? That’s not going to happen!” I raised my voice in denial. If the object of her confession was a male student from the school next door, or a friend of her brother’s fine, but the confession was directed at a teacher from the same school.

“Maybe not. But, in the past teachers have married students who graduated from here.”

“Those would have been a small number of fortunate couples. Nobody noticed them going out, so they probably waited until after graduation to confess. So, Mika-san, you should wait three more months.”

“Three months, huh...” Mika-san murmured, looking up at the cloudy sky. I hoped that Mika-san’s fever of love was due to the typical whims of a young girl.

“I might not be able to wait that long,” she said as if talking to herself., then closed her eyes and pressed her hands together. Without me realizing it, as we spoke as if in a trance, we had arrived in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

Because it was the custom as one went back and forth to Lillian, I emulated putting my hands together. However, my heart was free of Maria-sama et al, and I now ruminated over the words I had just heard.

Might not be able to wait that long. What on earth did she mean by that?

Suddenly afraid, I opened my eyes and looked around. Having finished praying before me, she was to my side and slightly behind me.

“What’s the matter, Maki-san...?”

Upon seeing those eyes, I understood what the matter was. Like Mika-san’s breath on that cold day, I thought she could disappear in an instant, but I couldn’t say it. The instant I said anything, I felt that the magic would come and snatch her away.

After that we walked down the tree-lined lane, went out of the gate to the bus, and rode as far as M Station; all that chat relating to Atsumi-sensei seemed completely nonsensical. Like the sham that was the shopping district, with Christmas cakes and Santas.

“Hey. Katori.”

In front of the local station, I heard my name called from behind. I turned around, and saw that there was a man waving his hand energetically at me from a car.

“Atsumi-sensei.”

“Going home now? Get in, I’ll take you.” Stopping the car slowly by my side, Atsumi-sensei opened the passenger side door.

“That’s okay. Because the nuns say we’re not supposed to be alone with men outside our immediate family.”

“Is that right. Um, right. It’s good to have resolve.”

I had said it jokingly, but when he turned it back on me with an honor student feeling, I followed, amazed.

“That was a lie. I’m actually going to the bookstore to get a book of problems.”

“Ah, Maki-chan’s taking the exams, aren’t you.”

From Katori to Maki-chan. Why had Atsumi-sensei crossed that boundary line and called me that.

“That’s rough, isn’t it? It’s easier if you plan on going to Lillian U.”

“And then? Marry a teach after I graduate?”

“Hahahaha.” He laughed awkwardly at this blessing. Not realizing that on account of him, in the near future, many people would shed tears; Atsumi-sensei was a sinful person.

Thinking about this, I became very angry, and decided to drive away this dandy.

“Shouldn’t you be going? Father and Mother are waiting. You have to talk about engagement presents and fix the date and all that.”

“Probably, but I’m in no hurry. Katori, I’m going to drop by an arcade?”

Watching the sparkly new car drive off, I muttered, “Huh. What a superficial teacher.”

Insolent Atsumi-sensei. He didn’t understand people’s feelings at all.

Because of this, I spent the next hour or so killing time in the bookstore – I didn’t really feel like going home.

When I received the phone call from Mika-san’s mother, it was about five days into winter vacation.

“This is Abe. Please forgive this sudden phone call...” It was a voice I’d never heard before, an adult woman’s voice. At first I didn’t know who it was. Because although I knew in my head that Mika-san’s family name was Abe, I never thought that I’d get a phone call personally from her mother. “I know it’s terribly rude to ask you for this favor but, I’d like to you to come to where Mika-san is.”

“Huh...?”

What Mika-san’s mother told me was that about two days ago, Mika-san’s health had deteriorated and to be cautious, she had been admitted to the hospital. There she was bored, because no one had come to visit.

I heard that that she’d been admitted, so I grabbed my coat and was left my house. To get to the hospital that I was given, from my house the bus took about ten minutes, comparatively close by.

“What, my mother told you, you say?” Mika-san greeted me from the bed in a private room.

She looked a little thinner, I felt, but other than that, she didn’t seem like she was feeling bad enough to be in the hospital.

“Is it a cold?” Strong and healthy by nature, I barely knew of any other illnesses. Therefore, in my mind, when I heard that her physical condition was bad, I equated it with a cold. “You look a little tired. It’ll be all right. This will pass, won’t it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Holding the pale pink rose I had bought at the flower shop in my hand, I stepped up to Mika-san. I had never entered a flower store, so I seriously worried about my first time buying flowers. My intent was to match Mika-san’s image.

“Looks a little tired, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s because the roots are drained, probably.”

Hey, from below the coverlet, something appeared. A sewing box.

“Wha...!”

“It’s a secret from my mother. Shush.” Maki-san put one finger up, and pressed it against her lips.

“Even if it’s not about your mother, I’ll try to be quiet. What are you doing with a sewing box under your blanket?” Needles and scissors could be stuck into a body, I thought with a bit of thrill.

At this I felt a considerable tension flow from my right ear to my left, as Mika-san smiled and gestured towards a roll of something on top of the box.

“It’s almost done.” It was an angel mascot doll made from felt.

The hair was yellow thread, the clothes made from a lace handkerchief. Making a halo float over her head would be difficult, so it was set on the head, like **Son Goku**.

The eyes were black buttons; mouth and nose were stitched in embroidery thread. White and little, it was totally charming. The face sort of resembled Mika-san’s in places.

“It’s just the right size for a car decoration.”

“Don’t you think?”

Although this was all that was said, it was obvious that this was the present meant for Atsumi-sensei. Atsumi-sensei had recently bought a car; commuting to school in that car as one’s heart’s desire was a popular topic of conversation.

“Hey, do you believe in miracles?” Mika asked, stroking the angel’s head. “Angels are supposed to bring miracles, right.”



“What kind of miracle?”

“Hmm.”

Mika-san never said anything concretely. But there was not much doubt that she was thinking of Atsumi-sensei.

“If it’s something that can happen easily, it’s not a miracle.” Although I didn’t know what she meant, I was only a little irritated.

“But. You know the word miracle exists because in this world there are miracles,” Mika refuted.

“Do they, I wonder.” I didn’t want to quarrel in front of the other patients. Then, why couldn’t I stop? The fact that I couldn’t stop my feelings perplexed me.

“But, they do.” Unlike my excitement, Mika’s declared this calmly with a quiet expression, like a calm lake. “You know, when my cold came back then became aggravated and I was dying.”

That incident occurred six years ago. It was around the same season as now. Christmas songs flowed through the town.

“Then, at that time, an angel appeared, and stroked my sad face. That little thing wasn’t there to take me.”

“An angel?”

“Yes,” Mika nodded, her face totally serious. “So, I took that hand in a dream and made a wish. Just a little longer, please let me live, I asked.”

“Just a little? That’s a little vague, isn’t it.”

Why not for a much longer period, I thought. If you’re asking anyway, fifteen years or a hundred years, saying anything, would be okay. But Mika-san shook her head back and forth.

“A miracle is an ‘impossible wish’, isn’t it? If it’s too unreasonable a wish it can’t be granted.”

So, because Mika-san’s wish was modest, the angel was able to grant it and therefore she was alive, it seemed.

“Don’t you think that was a miracle?”

“Miracle...” Was it? Were we speaking about a real miracle? Six years ago, when her cold had been aggravated, Mika-san had had a fevered dream about seeing an angel. That’s all that story was. Probably Mika-san had recovered from whatever treatment they had given her. You couldn’t call that a miracle.

“If I lived a little longer I could just go to school normally, make friends, fall in love. The angel granted that wish.”

Just got to school normally, make friends and --.

“Mika-san. But Atsumi-sensei is...” Even as I said that, my voice was blocked. Instead of words being spit out, I found them crowded out by tears rising. “Anyway, miracles don’t just happen hey presto.”

I had missed the time to hand over the rose, so I just thrust it into Mika-san’s hand and ran out of the sick room. Tears fell from my eyes, so I could not see. Why? I thought.

As in a dream I moved down the staircase, choosing the least popular path so I could cry alone.

I knew why.

Her physical condition was not good, and no matter how hard she worked to make that angel mascot, there was no way it was going to bring Mika-san a miracle.

If there are miracles in this world, I didn’t want the one fulfilled to be love. For whatever reason, this weighed heavily on me, why was it even necessary for it to exist.

I didn’t know the reason for my own tears at the time, but they dragged me down until I squatted in the staircase.

Two days later was the day of closing ceremonies. Mika-san was there at school. After our unpleasant parting of the day before, I was unable to meet her eyes, but she came up to my seat and greeted me normally with “Good day”. As always, Mika-san. It looked like her health had improved.

So distracted was I with the situation with Mika-san, I never even noticed that the class was buzzing back and forth with rumors.

My name was called, I stepped up to get my report card, and just as I turned to go back to my desk I heard someone say, “My social studies grades didn’t go up,” but I didn’t think it was directed at me.

“Maki-san, wait a second.”

It was just after school when I grasped the state of affairs. Seven of the “Love Atsumi-sensei Eight” confronted me and threw the question at me. Mika-san was not there.

“There’s a rumor going around that Maki-san is going out with Atsumi-sensei, did you know?”

“Huh?”

“On the last day of exams, someone saw the two of you being very friendly in the shopping district of town.”

“I met him by chance on the way home. He called out to me from his car, so I stood for a while and talked, that’s all.”

Not taking the proffered ride had been the right thing to do. However, where or who had seen that I had no idea. Clearly the story had grown with each telling from mouth to ear until it needed an explanation.

“Then, Maki-san never let Atsumi-sensei into your home?”

“Wha... What are you talking about?”

“Because you don’t buy a case of beer to make visits to students’ homes.”

“...”

“He got take out sushi from a restaurant. Are you saying that you have no relationship with Atsumi-sensei?”

Somehow or other, someone from the school acted as a private detective. That Atsumi-sensei guy, had probably just gone to a nearby liquor store before going home, poor bastard.

“Maki-san, when you wouldn’t tell us what you thought about Atsumi-sensei, weren’t you just stealing a march on us?”

“Absolutely not.”

No matter what kind of explanation I made, whether I repudiated it or not, I knew it would seem that I was Atsumi-sensei’s lover.

“Then, tell us. Explain yourself.”

If there was an explanation to be made, it was long past time.

“I’m sorry. You’ll have to forgive me.” I left the room as if I was running away. When I walked out the door, Mika-san was there.

“Mika-san...”

I wondered if Mika-san had heard the rumor from somewhere, and if so how she felt about it. But I couldn’t read anything in her expression.

“Maki-san, um...” She smiled, and held out a little box that was wrapped prettily.

“Can I give this to you?”

“This...” Inside the box appeared the angel doll.

“I was thinking about it. And I came to the conclusion that Atsumi-sensei isn’t likely to like it very much. And everyone will make such a fuss, saying that I’m just taking advantage to get a ride. Anyway, I’m not going to give it to Atsumi-sensei. I want you to have it.”

“...”

I didn’t know what to say, and anyway no words would come out of my mouth. Because, I understood that Mika-san was lying.

Obviously, she really liked Atsumi-sensei. If her illness had been that serious, it would have been better if she hadn’t made it.

While I stood there not saying anything, there came Mika-san’s mother, who greeted me, and took Mika-san home. There was the distinct sense that she was saying ‘you’re not well, why did you leave the hospital so willfully, you should have stayed,’ that kind of thing.

Because Mika-san was no longer in front of my eyes, the words I was searching for were no longer necessary, and I relaxed a little in my heart. However, I was soon at a loss once again.

What should I do about this angel.

I couldn't run after her and give it back. I couldn't give it to Atsumi-sensei and tell him that it was a present from Mika-san.

Mika-san had entrusted to me her love, together with this angel.

"I'm sorry."

I walked around the corner of the hallway and stood for a little while, holding the angel.

Strange rumors spread quickly as the year dawned, of Atsumi-sensei's engagement. His fiancée was a former Lillian University graduate.

However, there was no relief for my misunderstanding with Mika-san. She would not face the new year, because she would be leaving this world.

Four days into the new year, we received a communication from our homeroom teacher, that our two class representatives would have to attend Mika-san's funeral ceremony. For us this was rather sudden, as death had touched our lives hardly at all and, as we put out hands together, we felt that we had been touched by a fox.

Could someone so young die so simply? It was said that it was pneumonia, but maybe it was suicide.

After the closing ceremonies, and because I could do nothing after she died, my chest felt heavy, like it was wrapped around a stone. But as I stood in line to light incense, some people who looked like said that she had been chronically ill since she was young, it was said that she wouldn't graduate elementary school, that she lived seventeen years, that was the talk that reached my ears. The direct cause had been pneumonia, but there had been no power remaining in her body to fight it.

I had had no relationship to Mika-san's death. However, the feeling of having committed a crime would not disappear.

It was a fact that I was about to become Atsumi-sensei's sister-in-law but it didn't mean I had to like it, and planned on keeping silent about it until I graduated - and had forbidden the adults to speak about it.

However, it wouldn't help to scold Atsumi-sensei, it would just annoy him, especially as Mika-san had never spoken frankly to him.

However, the time of the misunderstanding had passed, and never been explained. There would never be a second chance for my vindication.

And, I kept the angel mascot doll.

As I prepared to move on from that place where I left my heart to go to Lillian Women's College, after graduation, I went back once more to that classroom.

I pulled out the box I had left in the desk that held the angel. I took it out every Christmas Eve, to apologize to her. It wasn't something I decided, I thought of her every day, not being able to do anything, living in sorrow.

This life isn't bad, I thought but, as things went on my family and classmates became worried, trying to find the cause of it.

But I didn't want to know.

Of course I didn't want to cast a shadow upon my sister's and Atsumi-sensei's wedding.

But my number one reason was different. I did not want to dirty Mika-san's memory by being a party to it.

As she left the high school staff room to walk down the hall, something bumped against her arm.

"Oh, sorry Katori-sensei."

"Ah, Atsumi-sensei... Excuse me."

In harmony we gathered up the items that had been dropped to the floor. It was just before winter vacation and there were many things that needed to be taken home.

“Going home? I can give you a lift in my car.” Atsumi-sensei took a car key from his sports coat pocket with a smile.

“What are you talking about. Atsumi-sensei’s house is in the opposite direction of my apartment building, isn’t it.

“But, I have a reason. Saki is making a cake.”

Isn’t it a bit too much inviting your unmarried thirty-year old coworker over for a family Christmas Party?”

“If you say it that way, yes. But I think of it more like as an older brother... By prior contract.”

“I guess if you say it that way, it’s not so suspicious. So, then, I accept the invitation gratefully.”

As the conversation was settled, we crept up the hallway gathering up our remaining items. Until the end, the angel mascot’s whereabouts were unknown, until Atsumi-sensei discovered it.

“What’s this? A cute angel?”

“Do you want it?” Wiping the dust off it with her skirt, Maki asked lightly. Whereupon...

“I want it. I was looking for a mascot for my car,” he bit the words off, thinking.

“Then take it.”

“Ah, but wasn’t it a present to you from one of your students?”

“Sort of. But that girl, she’d really like it if Atsumi-sensei took it. She was too embarrassed to hand it over directly. It was given to me to hold.”

“No way. If you’re serious, then I’m very happy. Who was it - one of the second-year Chrysanthemum group students?”

No one had called on Atsumi-sensei, this almost forty-year old married, heavy, middle-aged teacher for Christmas or Valentine’s again this year. Nowadays it was Maki who was popular among the students.

“It’s a secret. It’s useless to ask, and I won’t give it to you.”

“Eh~”

“I’ll tell my sister on you.”

“Please forgive me. Now I’m scared.”

“Okay then. Otherwise you might lose your love-love”

Hey, do you believe in miracles? The angel asked as it shook happily along with the car’s vibrations.

(Yes, I believe in them.) Sitting in the dilapidated car’s passenger seat, Maki smiled.

Born last year, Atsumi-sensei’s first daughter had incidentally been named Mika.

The chief archangel **Mikaeru** was also known as Mika.

## Variety Gift II

The contents of the box of food supposed to have been sent by Eriko-sama were unexpected, and Yoshino, after having lifted the lid, stood staring dumbfounded for some time.

“Did you think there was a bomb inside?” Yumi inquired.

Whereupon Yoshino placed the lid upon the table and muttered, “No. But what if it had been one of those spring trick dolls that popped out - -”

“...What kind of person do you think Eriko-sama is?”

At that moment, the kind to confer a gift box upon a rival, obviously. There was no such person who did that old trick anyway. And thinking about it, because it had been tightly wrapped by department store wrapping paper, it wasn't likely that the contents were some kind of trick. Therefore, go ahead and eat the sweets inside. And they lived happily ever after.

“It's suspicious,” Yoshino-san said as she reached out for the marble cookie.

“Ah-” Yumi's voice cried out vainly, while the cookie disappeared into Yoshino-san's mouth. Still, none of the third-years were here to put out a hand. What was that boldness worth?

“Even if it's suspicious, there's nothing to do but eat it.” While Yoshino-san was chewing, she took two more cookies into her right hand, then grabbed a chocolate with her left.

“What's suspicious about it?” Yumi abandoned the idea of stopping her. When you've eaten one piece, what's two or three?

“What is Eriko-sama trying to say to me by sending this thing, that's what. What if we get food poisoning from eating these sweets.”

“Come on, there's no poison in the candy. The 'eat by this date' day hasn't happened yet. Yumi read the date from the seal affixed to the wrapping for Yoshino-san's benefit. It said the last day of November.

“Yeah, Well, if we eat too much, we'll get stomach aches.”



“Then don’t do it. Hey, wait...” What was so confusing? If you eat too much of the gift Eriko-sama sent and got a stomach ache, then it didn’t seem like it would be Eriko-sama’s crime.

“More importantly, what should we do? We opened the box selfishly without checking with our onee-samas and now you’re eating some of it--” Yoshino-san really was going to give herself a stomach ache, as she kept stretching her hand out for one sweet after another. --She thought that she would soon complete her mastery over all the kinds.

“Nothing.” Not heeding her sin at all.

“‘Nothing’!?” She envied her composure. When facing others’ business, one of them was impatient, and the other a coward.

You just say, ‘it’s your nature’, and how nice would it be to explain things so simply with a single phrase, she thought seriously.

“If we eat it all, there’ll be no one to criticize.”

“‘Eat it all’!?”

All of a sudden Yumi had become a parrot, Yoshino-san’s cold glance said. “It’ll be fine. No one else is coming. And, let’s face it, Yumi-san’s onee-sama is pretty frightening.”

“That’s not the problem--” Just as she protested, the biscuit door opened and three girls flew into the room.

“Good day, Yoshino-sama. Good day, Yumi-sama.” Leading the way, her eyes sparkling as if they were childhood friends, was Matsudaira Tōko-chan.

“Our apologies for being late.” Next up was the very tall, with long hair, the former stalker of Yumi, man-hating Hosokawa Kanako-chan.

“Homeroom dragged on for a long time, then cleaning went on and on... Ah, tea’s made already.” And in the rear, kappa-headed, make you think of an Ichimatsu doll, Nijō Noriko-chan.

The three girls of the first year Chrysanthemum Group.

Noriko-chan was *Rosa Gigantea en Bouton* however, the other two were for a limited time until the school festival, assistants.

“Ah - cookies. And chocolate.” Tōko-chan was the first to spot “it.” Next to both her ears, the spring-like banana curls bounced as she approached.

“It’s from a sempai who graduated.”

“Wait a second, Yoshino-sa...”

“It’s fine.”

Before Yumi could restrain her with a word, Yoshino-san had beckoned the three with “Please, go ahead.”

(Ah-!)

Making the underclassmen who don’t know the situation partners in crime. This could not have been foreseen when, just a moment ago she had said, “No one else in the group would be coming.”

So, the result was...

A girl who did not like sweets, there may be such a thing however, it’s a minority. Being of the more common type. All three girls respectively flew over to the variety gift tin with eyes shining with pleasure.

“Itadakima-su”

“Yes, eat up.”

Eat up, she says. Yoshino-san was totally acting like she had brought it herself.

“Speaking of which, I heard about how difficult last year’s Valentine’s Day was,” muttered Kanako-chan, as if the chocolate had made her remember.

Taking up the thread, Noriko-chan continued. “We only heard the rumor from the high school because it was Lillian, and because in my class, there were some people who wanted to hurt the high school students who were mixed up in it.”

We were there in that place, Noriko-chan and Kanako-chan. So, what about the leftover individual?

“Tōko-chan? Was it like that in Lillian Middle School?” Yoshino-san asked.

Tōko-chan answered, “Ah, well...” With a lack of oomph. “There was interest in the middle school, but of course they couldn’t participate with the high school. I was in the crowd, I wanted to see *Rosa Chinensis en bouton* at that time. Since we’re relatives and childhood friends, I thought it would be nice.”

“Not blood relatives, though.” Yoshino-san’s sharp riposte made Tōko-chan’s fangs come out like a cat.

“True, but we’re still relatives-”

“Excuse me. It’s true, a distant relative.”

(Ah, it’s starting...)

Yoshino-san wouldn’t put up with backtalk from an underclassman.

Wearing the nature on their sleeves, the fireworks exploded, boom boom, around these two characters, the other three were like “hey now,” soothingly. It was the same character they put on as always, but if for instance, Shimako-san had been there, it might not have gone on this way.

“While I accepted your invitation, I think it would be best for me to decline. It’s not in my nature to run and make my skirt pleats flutter.”

Putting the silver foil chocolate wrapping in her pocket, Tōko-chan’s expression said that this was concluded; while the other four all had the same penetrating thought.

“She’s about to lose it.”

--So.

## Chocolate Portrait

“Do you dislike photographs?” She put her camera down as she spoke. “Me too.”

“Eh, but, that...”

To my question she said, “Ah, this?” and held up her hand lightly with a smile. That a person who dislikes photographs should carry a camera was a simple contradiction, as were her next words.

“I’m bad at it, being photographed.”

“Ah... I see.”

I was also no good at having photos taken. Therefore when she said that, it made me happy. Taking it from the side of that person, who understood the feeling of a person who didn’t like taking pictures, I would press the shutter.

Because this person wasn’t going to force me. Once more the camera was lifted, I avoided it by taking myself off outside.

At that time, I thought, if such a mysterious person took one of me, it would be all right.

Mm, it would.

When, later, the memory returned, it was an even more positive feeling.

I wanted that person to take it.

Having met the cameraman who thought in such a way, that was the first time in my life I thought that.

## Part 1.

“Hey, Shōko-san. Did you know about this?”

It was after school, as I checked over my English vocabulary, when my classmates Atsuko and Miyuki came over and stood in front my desk and said that.

“What?” Well, that was sort of natural to ask. When someone suddenly says “Do you know about this?” you want to know what they are referring to. Like when you doze off in class, and the teacher asks “Did you hear me?” you’re likely to answer “Yes.”

“This.” Atsuko held out the “Lillian Kawaraban” so I looked over the printed page. As it covered the dictionary, I quickly hid all the study materials in haste.

Why didn’t I want anyone to see how seriously I studied or reviewed my lessons? This way I could say to my family when I get home that I don’t have to be at my desk so much. Like being able to say, “Ah, I don’t have homework” or “I don’t want to study for exams” and not having to be in any rush to open a textbook.

So there we are.

The “Lillian Kawaraban” Atsuko-san was presenting was the Lillian Jogakuen High School newspaper which, although we were students in middle school, we read with pleasure anyway, so it was a quite popular publication. We were overreaching our bounds a little, but to learn about the onee-sama of the high school, it was a precious source of information.

“It says that the Yamayurikai are have a Valentine’s treasure hunt event. Don’t you think that sounds like a fun plan?”

“Treasure hunt--?”

“Uh, you don’t know what that is?”

“No, I was just thinking out loud.” Underneath the “Lillian Kawaraban,” I was taking my Japanese-English dictionary, vocabulary book and reading textbook out and sliding them onto the shelf under the desk.

“If I’m not mistaken, the story says that the treasure to be found is something the boutons are hiding secretly—”

“Ah, Shōko-san’s real sister is enrolled in the high school. There’ll be a lot of onee-samas there.”

“Yeah... I guess.” I said noncommittally.

I hadn’t heard anything about this from my sister. Of course I could get information from my older sister with whom I lived in the same house, but as the two in front of me could guess, us sisters didn’t often have pleasant chats.

I had a grudge, so as a result I was completely ignorant of that kind of conversation. No, more than ignorant, I used my senses to avoid any kind of conversation with her. Saying there was prejudice there was not too much of an exaggeration.

As proof, every time I read the “Lillian Kawaraban” when I was done, I would roll it up into a little ball and throw it out.

Anyway, was she my “real onee-sama”, I thought. Outside people had told me that, and it wasn’t like that suggested complicated family circumstances. Everyone here had been poisoned by the idea of the soeur system, but I didn’t want to think about it.

In high school, there was a tradition of one-on-one guidance that bound them together, That was the “soeur system.” When one became a soeur, the underclassman called the upperclassman “onee-sama,” but since in the ordinary world girls who are siblings born of the same parent will call the older “ane”, for the sake of distinction, people used “your real onee-sama”.

“But,” I muttered, as I wrapped a curl from my semi-long perm around my index finger. “We have no direct relationship to this event.”

It seemed like this would be a noisy place, and we were just middle school students. It was likely that outsiders wouldn’t be let in.

In response to my modest doubt, Miyuki-san and Atsuko-san met each others eyes and gave a little laugh.

It was a little mischievous. Like the feeling when a person is trying to make you join in and take a candy.

“You know, the truth is, we’ve already discussed sneaking in that day. Then we thought we’d ask you to come with us, too.”

“Me too?” Although it was an ordinary pause, I was fiddling with my hair around my finger, I brought it in towards my nose to confirm.

“Eh. So, if Shōko-san...”

“Yeah, that’s, that’s...”

We were all the same, loyal readers of the Lillian “Kawaraban,” and how many times before had that been the subject of lively conversation. But, if you counted how many times we’d actually acted on anything, the total would be none.

“We invited Tōko-san, but she declined.” Miyuki-san said. Yeah, yeah, that was the one who sat next to her, Matsudaira Tōko-san was the girl who had those banana curls that hung beside her ears.

“Rosa Chinensis en bouton is one of her relatives. She wants to go on her own to stand out and cheer her on she said.” Atsuko-san added.

“So, Tōko-san is the relative of one of the boutons.” I said guardedly, pretending to be very surprised. Incidentally, about the bouton , the high school student council presidents are called the “Bara-sama”, the Roses.

“Yeah. She’s seems a bit boastful about it.” Miyuki turned her glance toward the classroom door, next to the hallway, with a bitter smile. Probably Tōko-san was in her club activities in the theater club. One could faintly hear the sound of speaking exercises.

“I wonder if that’s enough.”

Two people seemed uncomfortable. Five people stood out. So saying, they had decided that three or four was a good number.

Although they had invited a number of people, not all had accepted. Lucky for me, I thought.

But why, I wondered, did I feel that I had to hide that, since I learned about high school's Yamayurikai-sponsored event, I'd been feeling anxious. Because of that, I was behind them, pushing.

"Yes. That sounds fun." I nodded.

"Then it's settled." Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san clapped their hands together, and told me about tomorrow's program.

I totally thought that something would happen when I was there. I felt like I was in a dream, all excited. High school would be the kind of place filled to overflowing with this kind of feeling.

## Part 2.

“Hey, onee-chan.” That night, I called out to my older sister, Katsumi’s, back. “You said that tomorrow is the day of your exam, right?”

“Yeah. What’s up?” Concentrating on her reference book, she didn’t look up. Maybe, because of her always looking like “I’m studying,” I disliked to be seen studying by other people?

“Hey, tomorrow is Valentine’s Day, isn’t it?” There’s rumors of something going on at the high school so, I wondered if you were going after the exam is over.”

“Go to something so stupid? The day after tomorrow is another exam. If I have any free time, I can spend it memorizing another English word.”

“...Guess so.” I nodded, leaning on my sister’s closet. Well, that was pretty much the answer I expected. For the moment, that was all I was going to ask.

“So. What do you want?” Heaving a displeased sigh, my sister dropped her pen, turned her chair and asked over her shoulder.

“Mm. If you were participating in the event, I wanted to know what it was going to be like, what your classmates are saying. ...That’s all.”

“Following the latest fad.”

“...” That’s my older sister. It might have been the truth, but I didn’t want her to say it.

“My friends asked me to go to that, but I guess you’ll be there to look like a fool too.” My sister never hesitated to criticize other people. So, why was it that when she did that so heartlessly, she always sounded cheerful. “While you’re off doing stupid things so happily, your rival is studying hard, right?”

Exactly what you’d expect to hear from a third-year high schooler. Good grades mean going to a good college and working at a good company, so you have to study. “From now on, you should really be studying hard.”

“Because I’m going to Lillian University, it’ll be fine.”

“You’re too easy going.”

Because my sister smiled coldly, with a sneer, I shot back, “It’s my preference, and it’s the choice of people with the highest grades in my major. Previously, those who chose other schools found their grades dropping. Entering a college is different than middle school or high school, don’t forget.”

“...Hmmpf.”

“Besides, I don’t regret that I’m not studying now.” Yeah, well, I thought, you probably regret that you are studying now, don’t you? In the quest to go to a good college and get a good job, you’re not living your high school life and you’ll never get that back.

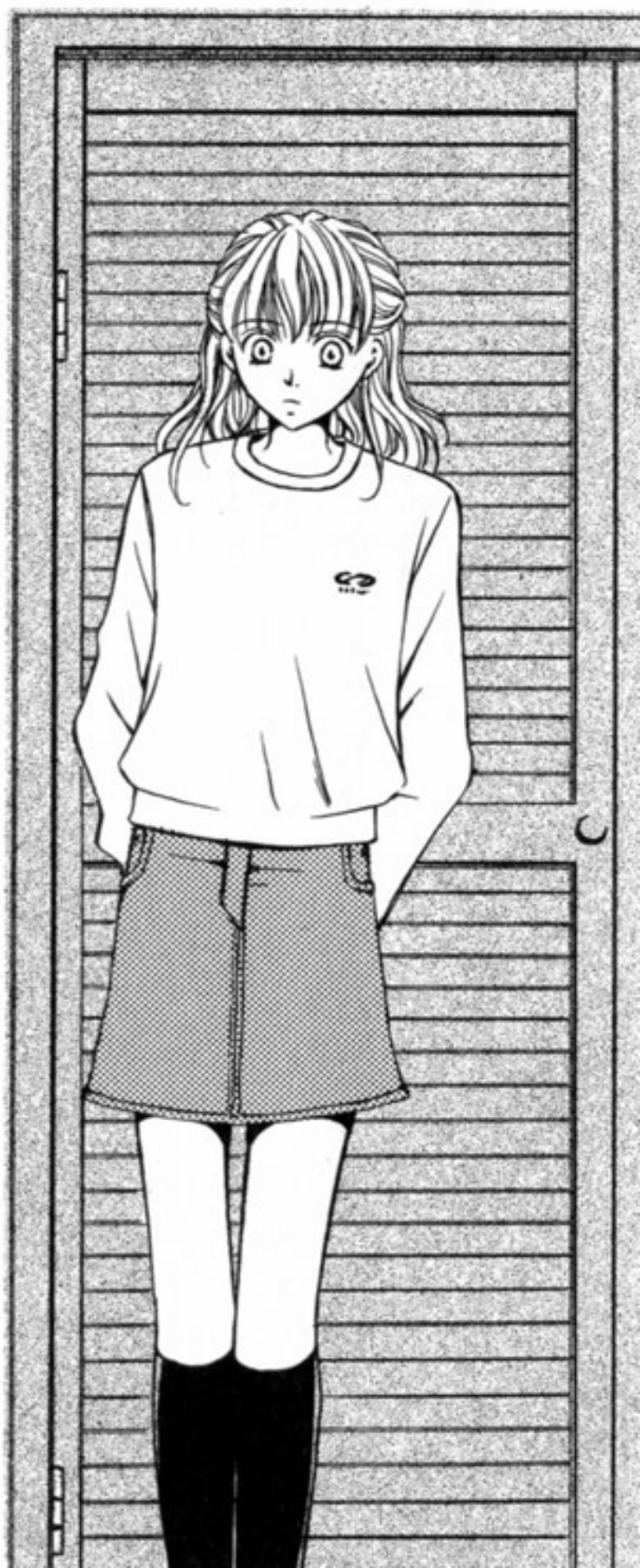
Therefore, I thought, I want to do things now that are fun. Stay positive and do everything the opposite of my sister and a happy life will be proof that I am right.

“People who have fun have nothing worthwhile to look back on.” My sister turned back to her desk and began her “grinding study”.

“Sorry to interrupt.” I returned to my own room, to the English I began checking after school. Both parents were already in bed. In this mood, my sister wouldn’t be leaving her desk for a while.

treasure—宝物 (takaramono)

While consulting the dictionary, I thought a little. People who have fun, who on earth did she mean? Those people, what had they done to my sister?



### Part 3.

“...Is here. Shōko-san.”

After school.

After we had finished cleaning our individual areas, meeting up at the pre-arranged place, Atsuko-san and Miyuki san saw me and lightly waved me over.

“Ah, but. We have to have a disguise so we won’t be seen as middle school students.”

“Eh? But. That--”

I told them about my perfect disguise idea, brimming with self-confidence; from here, we would go to the high school buildings around the edge of the boundary.

“Mufflers, or wearing school coats. Or we should change our hair styles a little or something.”

“Heyy...” Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san looked at each other, their concerned expressions disappearing into cheerful ones.

I had taken a school uniform from my sister’s room and changed into it after school.

The high school and middle school uniforms appeared, at first glance, to be the same but it was a little different in the chest section. The collar and tie area in the middle school uniform ended in a thin black ribbon that was more suitable for a bow knot.

In my classmate’s estimation, my disguise was perfect. I thought that, even if I got into a deep position, I’d be safe in this. I’d look just like any other high school student and, as my sister was not at school that day, my victory would be natural.

Victory would be natural.

As I said that once more inside my heart, I had no idea what I meant.

3:40

The middle courtyard of the high school grounds was overflowing with participants for the event.

Leaving timid Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san behind, I slipped into the middle of the crowd of participants. No one was lined up by class. One lone middle school student could blend in and, with the same uniform, no one would notice.

Pretending to be one of the participants, I took one of the flyers being handed out without hesitation. The paper contained an application form, the rules of the challenge for participants, and a map where one could search.

In the column of the application form, I wrote my sister's name and class. Just as a little prank. I thought it would be fun if someone saw it and thought, surprised, "That straight-laced person participated?"

It was a little mysterious; although I might be able to see the en bouton I admired, I wasn't feeling very lively. What I might feel if they weren't the beautiful people. It was like, when I read the "Lillian Kawaraban", I had been all excited but, against expectation, now nothing was boiling up.

As the organizer, the president of the newspaper club explained things, the fever of the area slowly heated up. In opposition, my own feelings stayed cold.

The treasure hunt event was conducted as a simple game, we would be looking for a red, yellow and white card hidden in secret by the bouton, the winners would get, as an extra prize, something like a coupon good for a half-day date with that bouton.

However, even if I were in front of the bouton, and we went out together, what I was expecting to do, I couldn't imagine. They all went to the same school my sister did, like actresses on television that don't change, unknown strangers. Of course, as I wasn't a high school student I didn't have the right, but that wasn't the point.

The bouton's sœurs were given a handicap. The first-year little sisters were going to participate, and I also thought I saw two of the third-years.

Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Foetida. If you add Rosa Chinensis, who I did not see there, those three were the leaders of this year's Student Council. Rumor had it that they were in competition for their year's top grades, so they were probably my sister's rivals. On the other hand, they had time to play and participate. Those two looked relaxed, and like they were having fun.

"Where is Rosa Chinensis?" One of the people in the group of participants next to me asked her friend. Because that was something I wanted to know as well, I turned an ear towards them.

"Today's an examination day. That's so pathetic."

"If Rosa Chinensis was here she would find Sachiko-sama's card right away, I bet."

Sachiko-sama is Rosa Chinensis en bouton.

"What about Yumi-san?"

"I wonder what she'll do. Should we follow and see?"

So they weren't going to search, they were going to shadow. That didn't seem like a very fun game.

I tried to peer ahead to see the first-year known as Fukuzawa Yumi, but just didn't have the power. However, I got the sense of a face almost about to cry.

That this girl was chosen, I had some sympathy for those gathered. To the upperclassman, this must have seemed rude.

"Start."

With a "fwee" signal from a whistle, the treasure hunt began.

Leaving the bouton's sœurs behind, everyone dispersed in small groups. I, not sure which way to go, loitered on the pleasant lawn of the central grounds and enjoyed the atmosphere.

As I looked around for something tell me what to do, I definitely looked no different from any other fad follower, sucking information like a sponge. In other words, I didn't know whose card to take aim at.

In that, I was different from the other two I had come with. Miyuki-san was an Ogasawara Sachiko-sama fan, while Atsuko-san was a fan of Hasekura Rei-sama; they had been hot on the trail of the red and yellow cards. The two of them had earlier done janken to determine which card to search for first.

The girl who had been part of the group I listened to before, glanced over at me and leaned towards her companion close to her ear.

My heart pounded, as I thought I had already been found out as a middle school student. But, without much more of an uproar than a suppressed laugh, they went off. Until Yumi-sama left the Rose Mansion, they were going to wait on standby in her path.

Discouraged, I thought I might try and meet up with Miyuki-san and Atsuko san, but they had already left this area and, pretty soon, there was no one else there.

I couldn't complain. When I had entered the middle of the grounds in the high school uniform, and taken the application form, I hadn't led them along.

"Hey. Won't you come inside and have a chat? The boutons are here." With a face like a Greek sculpture, a third year, Rosa Gigantea, Satō Sei-sama called out, inviting the students in the grounds in. This was the first time I had actually seen Rosa Gigantea but I had heard about her character from my sister, and seen her picture in the "Lillian Kawaraban" I had procured; she seemed different.

I thought she would be a colder person, and more superficial. Like, the kind of person who would make others feel foolish. But she was totally different. Gentle, someone who would put her shoulder into it, an interesting person. That sort of feeling.

Although the invitation to talk together was tempting, I was a middle school student, and my primary motive to be there was to experience the treasure hunt, so I unintentionally followed the group who were following Rosa Chinensis en bouton's sœur, until I got off halfway.

## Part 4.

Not all the places where the cards were hidden were revealed.

Before that, because of my lack of experience in the high school area, I wasn't sure where to look. After I looked at the map, nothing much had changed. Like, where the science room was, you had to know that, or there wasn't much significance. If they gave this map out to guests for the school festival to see, they'd wander around; outside people would feel like they were lost in a labyrinth.

More than that, I didn't know the bouton's patterns of behavior, or their preferences, or anything really, that well. Of course I had gained some information from reading the "Lillian Kawaraban", but given the gap in my sense of Rosa Gigantea and the real person, with my knowledge, unless I stumbled upon the treasure I might as well start with a janken tournament, rather than look for the treasure, I thought. For example, Kendo club member Hasekura Rei-sama might hide the yellow card under the tatami mat in the kendo hall, or devout Christian Tōdō Shimako-sama might hide the white card in a bible in the library reading room. Ogasawara Sachiko-sama's red card was--, that I couldn't guess quickly.

I walked out of the school buildings.

Then, suddenly, a girl with her hair in braids came flying out, and in front of my eyes, ran away. Following after her came high school students, confirming that she was, in fact, Shimazu Yoshino-sama. It was the same pattern as with Fukuzawa Yumi-sama, tagging along as she searched. Pathetic.

"How pathetic."

My voice hadn't come out. Why did the same words I uttered in my heart reach my ears?

"Ah, was that too threatening? Sorry."

Turning to look over my shoulder, there was a camera there. -  
-No, there was a person holding a camera.

Reflexively, I lifted a hand in front of me to ward off the lens.

“Do you dislike photographs?” She put her camera down as she spoke. “Me too.”

“Eh, but, that...”

To my question she said, “Ah, this?” and held up her hand lightly with a smile. That a person who dislikes photographs should carry a camera was a simple contradiction, as were her next words.

“I’m bad at it, being photographed.”

“Ah... I see.”

I understood that. But sorry, I didn’t understand why she would want to take one of me.

“Excuse me.”

She lifted the camera a second time, turning towards a different direction than me and pressing the shutter.

Once, twice, three times... The gasha sound felt a little nostalgic; I stayed quiet and listened.

When she had taken many pictures from the same angle, she pressed the shutter once more turning elsewhere to take the picture.

At first glance, she was taking pictures randomly, but no. She was clearly chasing someone in particular.

“Are you a member of the newspaper club?” I asked. I figured that pictures taken of the people searching for the treasure must be for use in the “Lillian Kawaraban.”

“Uhn-uhn. Photography club. Hmm, yeah. I guess there are still people in high school who don’t know me.”

“Ah, sorry,” I flinched. If she had been famous, it was inconceivable that the middle school students wouldn’t know of her.

“No, no. I am the Photography Club Ace--”

“...First-year Peach group Takeshima Tsutako!” It had the feeling of getting the answer right to a quiz, I thought, as I pointed and shouted. Furthermore, I forgot to use an honorific. But she didn’t seem to take offense.

“That’s me. How did you know?”

“I’ve seen the pictures you take occasionally for the “Lillian Kawaraban”. At the school festival, I saw the large-scale panel you did of Rosa Chinensis en bouton and her sœur. ‘Scuse me, I didn’t know the actual face... No, I mean, I forgot.”

“Thank you for that. I also don’t think I’ve seen you around that I’m aware of, so we’re even. Um...”

“Shōko.”

Uh-oh. Would it have been better if I had been Katsumi, I wondered. Well, there wasn’t that much of a difference. We only just met here.

“Sure, Shōko-san. I suppose you’re here to participate in the treasure hunt?” Takeshima Tsutako-san asked, looking at the map I held in my hand.

“Yes.”

“Even if it’s not like you?”

“Not like me?” I repeated.

“You don’t look like you’re having fun, I guess I mean. Ah, sorry. It’s really none of my business.”

“No.”

Not like me. Even as I considered those words myself, I hadn’t thought of that at all. However, I was surprised that even though she and I had just exchanged a word or two, she had guessed right.

Just then, Fukuzawa Yumi ran in front of us. As expected, Tsutako-sama lifted her camera and the sound of the shutter sounded. The brigade of students chasing after her followed. She opened the camera to reveal the film.

“Isn’t this fun?”

“Uh.” Which this did she mean? Could be Yumi-sama. Or the flock of girls chasing her. Or “this” could include both. However, for a moment, I was impressed by that weak looking Rosa Chinensis en bouton’s little sister, with her skirt flapping as she was chased.



“The game is to be able to take pictures without being noticed. And to take as many as possible at the same time.”

When I noticed Tsutako-sama, it wasn't an escape, I thought.

Certainly, I wasn't having fun. But there was no helping it. After all, I was a middle schooler fake participating.

“Ah, darn it,” Tsutako-sama said, glancing at her wristwatch.

“I promised to be in front of the statue of Maria-sama... You want to come with me?”

Instantly I wanted to not be parted from Tsutako-sama.

“Is it all right?”

“Of course.”

Today was Valentine's Day, but my thought that she probably was giving chocolate to someone was incorrect. Probably she had been commissioned to take pictures of what was going on there.

“I'd like to do a little more peeping, but it takes up time so, for the moment, I'll have to leave the treasure hunt.” As we walked, Tsutako-sama was pressing the shutter. Although it was after school, there were students visible everywhere in the school grounds.

“Ah, middles. Cute.”

There were Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san. Another middle school student would quickly see through my tentative disguise.

“Oh, right. Because they don't have a map, they're searching outside the bounds, huh.” While laughing, Tsutako-sama lifted the camera and pressed the shutter.

“Do those girls seem like they're having fun?”

“Ah, are you worried about what I said a little while ago?”

“Not really.”

It didn't really bother me that she had said I didn't look like I was having fun. But I had a vague sense of being jealous of those girls. What was that all about?

“They do look happy. But, even if they weren’t, I’d take the picture. People who are crying or people who are angry. Whatever you want to call it, isn’t it worth taking a picture of? Taking a picture by chance is better, because I don’t want it posed... I guess that’s a bit difficult.”

“So, you’ll take pictures of happy scenes?”

“I wonder. Just, I think that today, even when I’m going to take pictures like that, I think I can get some good ones.”

Standing in front of the statue of Maria-sama where the tree-lined road split, there were a lot more people than I expected. From what I’d heard, this was a famous place to hand over chocolates.

“Good, looks like we’re in time.”

Tsutako-sama drew near the two neatly ordered lines, when the students lined up fifth from the front called out. Obviously, she was the one to whom the promise was made.

“Five minutes, and they’ll be there.” Tsutako-sama said as she separated from the line. Increasing the distance, she took a picture of the students waiting for their turn in front of the stature of Maria-sama.

“Isn’t it fun to take pictures of people posing for the camera?” My words were, more or less, sarcastic.

“That can be fun too, but...” The shutter sounded.

“Why?”

“You can see the drama.”

“You mean, when you’re taking a posed picture?” I asked anyway. Poses are like acting, showing what one wanted to show.

“Well, the striking of the pose itself might be dramatic.” Tsutako-sama’s answer had some kind of persuasive power that made me nod instinctively.

It was almost like I was having a hallucination of “Ask the photography expert”. Before I could even think, my mouth opened.

“I’m. Not photogenic.”

I could hear the sound of the shutter, and Tsutako-sama's surprised "eh?"

I continued, not caring. "I'm awkward."

Tsutako-sama didn't lower the camera, but she pulled her right index finger off the shutter button. I interpreted this as permission to keep talking, so I thought I'd go until the end.

"When I was a child, I did modeling. Yes, look this way, smile, that kind of thing. Or, cute, this time lift your right hand and tilt your head. It became too much for me, I didn't understand why I had to turn toward the camera. After I stopped modeling, when it comes to having my picture taken, I get nervous and stand stiffly, not able to make the right face, even just talking about it doesn't give me any peace or joy. No matter what I do, it backfires and the picture comes out strange."

"How about at the Sports Festival? Aren't the pictures from that natural?" Tsutako-san offered, but I shook my head back and forth violently. "The field of vision of a camera is limited, so even in the team event and the creative dance, I'm aware of it; if, comparatively, I was not aware of the camera, I was somewhere where the camera couldn't see me."

And, even if it is possible to take a good close-up with a zoom, that really only applied to the Sports Festival. Not too sympathetic, that.

"Because of that, I'll never get married. I can't have an **omiai** picture taken." I said it half seriously, but Tsutako-sama laughed.

"Not even if it was a marriage for love?"

"If I married for love, we wouldn't have to have a marriage picture."

"Yeah, in that case, you wouldn't be forced to take a picture. Ah, sorry, it's time," she said; I walked after her. I could see the client in front of the statue of Maria-sama, beckoning. It was within a small percentage of the time promised, since Tsutako-sama had not quite waited five minutes when their turn came around.

Tsutako-sama was all around the chocolate giving/receiving couple, taking pictures of them in a variety of poses, and the photo session was finished in exactly one minute.

“But, you know, I understand that Shōko-san is serious, and although I’d like to take your picture, I’m not confident I could do it.” When Tsutako-sama returned, she remembered the previous conversation and returned to where we had left off a minute ago.

“How about Tsutako-san?” I asked. I thought we were the same, that she didn’t like having her picture taken.

“Yeah, me. To put it simply, I’m different from Shōko-san. I just don’t like being on the taken side. Therefore, I just run from the camera and my problem is solved. But I still have to participate in group photos.”

“When it’s vacation, do you make quick exit?” Tsutako-sama muttered, pointing at me.

“Yes, out the back corner. Haven’t you ever done that?”

“Of course. To avoid having my picture taken, I skipped the middle-school entrance ceremony.”

The image of a badly developed photograph taken by me in the rear courtyard, of my classmates all lined up in the middle of the full-blooming sakura tree, that looked like a balloon, floated into my mind.

“B, balloon? Ha, hahahaha.”

“Hahaha.” Tsutako-san grabbed her arms, laughing, so I laughed. Just so.

“That face, I want it.”

The next second, the camera lens was turned directly towards me. I couldn’t hear the sound of the shutter. I just turned my back quickly.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Shōko-chan. Go ahead and laugh.” In her portrait cameraman role, Tsutako-sama threw the words at me.

“I’m sorry. But,” I still wasn’t able to respond to the magic.

“It’s a serious illness, huh?”

The opposite, really, it was just a symptom. When Tsutako-sama averted the camera from me, I turned back towards her.

Although I was still running from the camera lens, I had determined not to run from Tsutako-sama.

The atmosphere was cold. In that moment, there were no words between us. However, with those eyes watching me from within those frameless glasses, I somehow understood.

Probably, the problem was inside me.

Whatever attitude I projected was over-exaggerated, which caused me to be unable to move.

“Tsutako-san, will you photograph us too, please?” From behind her, a student asked, destroying the silence between us.

“Ah, then I’ll be going.” I moved away from that place,

Shortly the treasure hunt would be over and Tsutako-sama would be taking another group of photos, and returning to the school buildings; I didn’t want to be a hindrance and inside my heart, what were all these sort of feelings seething that I wanted to think about on my own.

As I returned to where the tree-lined path began, I hit on it by chance, and half way turned around and went back.

“Uh. Tsutako-san. Someday, when you see me. If you want to press the shutter just then, will you please take the picture without hesitation?”

“...Is it okay? Tsutako-sama asked, tilting her head a little, smiling.

“It will be my most treasured possession - the one portrait of me in my teen years.” I raised my voice as I turned and walked away. Tsutako-sama stood, stopped, in that place, smiling.

“You’re exaggerating.”

“No. It’s the truth.”

“I understand. During class, I usually have my camera somewhere within reach. If I can, I’ll do it, I guarantee it.”

“If it’s a picture by Tsutako-san...” That would be perfectly fine, I was saying. To that degree I could endorse it, I thought, as I ran back to the school buildings, relieved.

## Part 5.

As I headed back to the school buildings, I looked at my wristwatch to see that it was already 4:30, and in just about ten minutes, the game would be over. In the end, I never ended up participating in the treasure hunt that looked like it would be fun.

At least, I could hear the results, so I headed back to the starting point, walking through the hall to the center garden, when from behind me a voice called out.

“Wait right there.” The person with semi-long, smooth hair pulled back in a hair band was Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama.

“Uh,” I was immediately on guard.

Because I followed the fads, I immediately knew her face, although she couldn’t know mine. I couldn’t understand the reason she would have called out to stop me.

Three year’s difference in one’s teen years is enormous. Like a frog being watched by a snake, the force of her glance pressed me and wouldn’t let me move. Compared with the “Lillian Kawaraban” goods and my sister’s photo album, Torii Eriko-sama was much more beautiful.

“That uniform,” at those words, in one moment, I was cursed. I had been found out.

I turned on my heel. Could a person tell just from looking at the uniform that was worn? More importantly, as expected from the things said about Rosa Foetida, that she could, from behind, have the power to determine that someone is a middle school student.

“Wait right there, you.” Rosa Foetida called out following. So, I ran.

“Why are you running away?” Rosa Foetida yelled after me, Why are you following me, I asked in my head.

So then, why was I being chased after, I wondered. As I ran down the hallway, no clear answer came to me.

Because I’m wearing the wrong school uniform? Apparently.

Even as I was about to be caught, I noted that I was near the staff room. Why was I running away so desperately?

Ah, that was it.

If I were caught, it would cause problems for my sister. It was only meant to be a little mischief. With my sister away at exams, how much effect could it have on her?

I was like Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama with those girls running after them. Like them, I was now looking behind me with a serious expression. If I met Tsutako-sama in that place now, there was no doubt that the shutter would be pressed.

I made my escape into the wave of humans.

However, as I made my way from one building to another, I changed my gait slightly and the difference made me lose my balance.

Oh no. Was it better to fall down ungracefully than to be caught painlessly by Rosa Foetida? If I fell down, it was just a matter of time before I was caught anyway.

In a short moment, a person can think of a lot of things. I was very quiet, putting both hands out in front of me, thinking that I hoped I didn't hit my face.

"Be careful, Shōko."

Who said that, someone who was flying over, calling out my name.

As it happened, I couldn't see the person's face. I tried standing, throwing my face into that person's chest, leaning all my weight into her at the moment.

It was my sister, Katsumi.

"What are you doing here, Eriko-san?" My sister asked Rosa Foetida, as she held me. With a somewhat intense tone.

"...Nothing."

"It doesn't feel like nothing, though."

"It was just that something about the uniform, it caught my attention. But, if it's a student you're close to, I'll leave it to you, then." After patting my collar lightly, Rosa Foetida turned away. I had not moved.

Turning to look over her shoulder, Rosa Foetida looked at me again, then one of the students who surrounded us whispered something to her, her brows drawn together. I thought I heard something about the yellow card, although I may have heard wrong.

Just as she left, Rosa Foetida shot another glance at us.

“Katsumi-san. I’m relieved. You can make that kind of a face, too.”

“Shut up.”

As I feared, my sister returned the comment with abusive language.



## Part 6.

When I heard the broadcast announcing that the game was over, we left the school building by the emergency exit. Happily, the previously scattered students gathered back in the central area, but we weren't seen.

"What were you doing?" My sister, who I was pulling by the hand, and who had not said a word to this point, suddenly opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry."

"I mean really. Wearing my school uniform."

Upon hearing "school uniform" I suddenly became frightened and clung to my sister's arm.

"What are you going to do, onee-chan. Are you going to tell Rosa Foetida or the teachers?"

"What are you talking about?" Smiling, my sister put her hand around my neck and pulled something off. "Didn't you notice that the cleaning tag was attached?"

Pinched between my sister's fingers was a slip of paper like a label. Written on it, the characters XX Cleaners were visible, and I said "Ah."

That was what Rosa Foetida was trying to tell me when she called out. At the start of the treasure hunt, when those students were looking at me, that must have been for the same reason.

"What a dunce you are, Shōko."

"...Mm." I nodded meekly. I was already pretty self-conscious. "But, why are you here?"

Although she had appeared like magic out of nowhere to rescue me, today my sister was not supposed to be coming to school. Whereupon, my sister stretched a little.

"Because I'm an idiot. When the exam was over, and could have gone home directly, for some reason I wanted to come here."

"Oh."

“I guess I was thinking something like a third year ended without a Valentine’s Day was futile or something.”

“...”

“I even went so far as to buy chocolate on the way here. For serious me, a big adventure.” From her pocket, my sister pulled a small wrapped box and held it up in front of my eyes.

“Let’s eat it together.” The box was wrapped with yellow paper, and she picked at the slender green ribbon.

“But...” I was going to ask who she had bought it for, who she wanted to give it to, but I stopped. Even between sisters, there are some areas best to not get into, was the feeling then.

My sister, although it was obvious that she thought that she wouldn’t be able to give it, had gone and bought the little box and hidden it in her pocket in case she happened to run into the person she wanted to give it to today. Perhaps I had been the one to crush that thought, and she’d certainly deny it if asked.

Inside the box there were five pieces of almond chocolate. I said “Itadakimasu” and took one piece. My sister watched quietly, then asked, “Is it good?”

“Yeah, delicious.”

My sister who had, for a moment, been a fool, had forgiven me without saying anything.

“Is it?” My sister smiled sadly, as if she were about to cry, looked up to the sky.

“I think, I wasn’t even able to be seen.”

From the central grounds, the broadcast announcing the results of the treasure hunt could be heard.

But my sister and I stood together and ate our secret chocolate, and I thought that it was a Valentine’s Day that was very like us.

## Part 7.

“Phew.” In the first-year Peach group classroom, Takeshima Tsutako heaved a sigh.

“Tsutako-san, what’s the matter?”

The classmate who had caught the sigh, Fukuzawa Yumi-san, was in a very bouncy mood as she asked. It was after school a few days after Valentine’s Day.

“Ah, Valentine’s Day pictures? They’re done?”

“Ah, mm.” The snapshot prints were spread out on the desk, about halfway through being sorted.

“Waah. I look terrible.”

“What, no, you’re cute. Here’s a two-shot with Sachiko-sama. The title is, yeah, “Making up after the argument. Onee-sama, I’m so sorry.”

“I beg you, please, don’t publish that in the newspaper.” Yumi’s eyes clung to her as she spoke. Her expression proclaimed compassion against teasing. --But, today she was forgiven. Maybe that was why she asked the question.

“By the way. Do you know this person?” Tsutako-san pointed to one of the photographs, Yumi-san said, “I don’t know her” and she discarded it once and for all.

“That’s it. Yumi-san, I can’t get a hold of data about a person I don’t have a relationship to.” It was said with finality.

“Ah, wait a moment. I think I remember seeing this person.” Yumi-san pointed to the person on the left.

Tsutako-san smiled wryly. “Third-year Chrysanthemum group, Naitō Katsumi-sama. She’s a classmate of Rosa Foetida’s, and always one of the top five in the test results.”

“Um... So, Tsutako-san doesn’t know her?”

“Well, even Yumi-san knows the famous people. The problem is the one here.” On the right, she pointed to a young figure in profile.



“I thought that maybe it was a first-year, but I haven’t found her. Maybe a sempai, I wonder. But, I haven’t seen her in the upper classes either.”

“You can ask Naitō Katsumi-sama.”

“Yumi-san, don’t you know? That Naitō Katsumi is famous for being a stubborn, totally focused on studying person. Do you think that such a person would want to see that she had been caught on camera eating chocolate around the back of the school building?”

“What, you mean it would look like a threat?”

“Don’t you think? Ah, what a bother, what a bother.” However, Yumi-san thought her tone was rather cheerful, considering.

“Why? Isn’t it just like always, when you put aside your basic humanity and morals?”

“It may look like that, but this girl here wanted me to take her picture.”

Why didn’t you ask her which class she was in, Yumi-san didn’t have to say it, since Tsutako-san was clearly amazed at her own omission.

“I was careless. I’ll have to rely on the name Shōko alone, I guess... All I can do is look for the characters on the register of names.”

Too late. But, in truth it would be better to have had the family name.

“Shōko? Did you say Shōko-san?”

“Now that I think about it, even Shōko is doubtful. It could have been **Shōko, or Choko.**”

“Or Choco?”

“Maybe it was meant as a tease?” Tsutako blew her bangs up, and Yumi-san patted her lightly on the shoulder.

“If she’s a third-year, won’t she be graduating soon in March? You’ll be able to meet up with her then.”

That, and that alone somehow lightened her feelings, although she didn’t know why.

“You think so... Yes, I will.”

“Someday” she said, she’d see the girl called Shōko. One day, during an unexpected visit, she thought she’d be able to show her this photo, so she thought she need not be in a hurry.

We have time.

I’ll hand it over when we meet.

When the time comes, we’ll probably meet again.

Tsutako-san wrote “Hitsuji” on a white envelope, put the photo in it and placed it in her school bag.

This was a picture postcard portrait of two girls taking chocolate.

## Variety Gift III

“It wasn’t that it was visible, it was just that I saw it.” Thrust in the middle of the four people, Tōko-chan’s face was dyed as red as a boiled octopus’.

“Number one, a false start is a violation of the rules, isn’t it?”

“It is. We heard the rules from Tōko’s own mouth,” Noriko-chan said drily.

Whereupon Tōko-chan said, her brows drawn together, “What do you mean?”

“Mean? Exactly what I said. Right, Kanako-san?”

“Absolutely.” Kanako-chan gave a quick nod. The three of them were in the same class, not really friends, but on the same appropriate level of acquaintance.

“Well - you two are creeping me out, what is it?”

At the threatening command to speak plainly, Noriko’s mouth opened. “...The frilly white poncho.”

At that, Yumi remembered it and said, “Ah”. Some time ago, Noriko-chan’s story about it had reached her ears.

But Yoshino-san, who had not heard from anyone about the business of the first-year Camellia class, repeated the gibberish words. “The frilly white poncho?”

However, at that simple question, Tōko-chan’s voice, which was usually supported by abdominal breathing, disappeared.

“That wasn’t against the rules. But, I’m not disregarding anything that is written anywhere.

“Fine, fine.”

“I really dislike it when you use that expression,” Tōko-chan said in a loud voice. She said it clearly and it hurt to hear. This wasn’t the auditorium or the gymnasium. It was a small room.

“So, what’s going on? Not only do the first-years know, Yumi-san has a face that says ‘I understand’ so only I’m out of the loop. It’s a creepy feeling.”

“It’s like this, Yoshino-san...”

When she looked back and forth like that, with her cheeks swollen and red, she looked like a Daruma.

“Hmm?”

Daruma-san? Yumi suddenly thought of a problem.

“Daruma-san? What? Buddha?” Noriko-chan turned, asking.

“Not again, Yumi-sama...”

Sheesh, said the huge heaved sigh.

# The Extra Sheep That Passes By

## Part 1.

“The rain isn’t stopping, huh,” Noriko muttered, looking up at the sky through the window.

“Yeah, it isn’t.” Yumi answered. Why didn’t it stop, was the unasked question and to answer “Because it’s the rainy season,” would be boorish.

This was just an example of filling in communication. The contents weren’t important, it was just a sign of “You’re here and I understand.”

It was after school.

In their old friend, the headquarters of the Student Council, the Rose Mansion.

It was raining.

It wasn’t a big room but, it felt empty, and maybe that was why she could be alone with an underclassman she had never talked one-on-one with before. --By stretching just a little, she could see the **Kappa**-head just behind her, she thought.

Recently, first-year Nijō Noriko-chan had taken Yumi’s classmate Tōdō Shimako’s rosary. In other words, she was “a friend’s little sister.”

Why that same Shimako-san was not in this place, you might ask - she was probably running late because of a conversation in class or something.

The two yellow rose sisters, Rei-sama and Yoshino-san, were absent because of club activities together. And, Yumi-sama’s onee-sama, Sachiko-sama was--. When she thought about that, she sighed.

Sachiko-sama was completely absent from school. Since she and Yumi had argued, she hadn’t seen her face once.

How many days did today make? Even if it’s counted, it’s an empty day, which makes it not count.

(I want to make up. Ah, I want to make up, please let us make up.) --Well, for the moment, let’s put that aside.



In other words, the situation was that Yumi and Noriko-chan were alone together at the Rose Mansion.

It was turning towards autumn, they were in the middle of the preparations for the school festival, but after having finished the tasks Shimako-san had assigned them, the two boutons were at a loss as to what to do.

It was then, as they had their filled in conversation as Yumi thought of it, that Yumi noticed. (Noriko-chan and I really don't have any point of contact...)

She had no idea where to turn to come up with an appropriate topic of conversation.

(Ah, um...)

Noriko-chan, whose hobby was aesthetically appreciating statues of Buddha was an eccentric girl but, for her to say "The Nara Buddha is very large isn't it" suddenly would be a big problem.

Then the moment came.

Noriko-chan said "The rain isn't stopping, is it" out loud.

The rain isn't stopping, is it.

Only, in the words there was the true meaning.

The topic of the conversation was the worrisome weather.

So, from whom did you hear that. Baseball and religion conversations were taboo. And uh, so were conversations about politics.

Anyway, that limits things to noncommittal conversation. Whether she was with the rainy faction or the sunny faction could lead this kind of discussion into a big brawl, so she shouldn't ask.

"Noriko-chan, do you dislike rain?"

Then, Yumi would expand upon this line of conversation.

"Eh? Not really, I don't like or dislike it... It's probably more like I've never thought about it."

"Hmm."

"What do you say about it, Yumi-sama."

“I guess I dislike it a little. Well, I used to like it, but. Recently, it’s been especially...”

The rain calls to mind memories of her absent onee-sama. The day her umbrella had returned but, that cold day she and Sachiko-sama’s friendship had separated. Every day it continued to fall, the rain was like cellophane, shutting their hearts off from each other.

(Ah, I want to see her. See her, reconcile, have Onee-sama fix my tie...)

---Stop it. She was thinking about Sachiko-sama again.

Other thoughts rose to the surface, but they couldn’t drive out the sadness about Onee-sama. It was the rainy season, it really did turn one’s brain into miso.

Why, Yumi was thinking, as Noriko-chan suddenly asked a question.

“Yumi-sama, you’ve always been at Lillian?”

“Mm.”

From kindergarten, always. A burden of thirteen years. That was Lillian tearing at her.

But why?

Before Yumi could get the words to her mouth, Noriko-chan, with a clenched fist pushing into her cheek asked, “Is that right. So, you never had to go through the oral examination to get into high school, did you.”

“No, but... Why?”

“No. It’s just, if you had experienced it, I was going to ask what kinds of questions they ask. For reference.”

“Eh?” The contents of the questions for the oral examination. The usual kinds of things, probably.

For instance.

Why do you want to go to this school, kind of thing.

Or, in middle school, what kind of clubs were you in.

What is it you want to do in high school, etc, etc.

Although the words were harsh, of course they didn't mean to be a hindrance. But, the person being questioned was a middle school student, after all.

Why on earth had Noriko-chan asked about this mysterious thing.

“Because in my class, most of the students came up from middle school, I really don't what the situation is. I've heard that the oral examination for Lillian is pretty usual. But thinking about it now, that might have been a dream, or something I just am thinking ought to be.”

Noriko-chan's eyes seemed kind of far away. As if she was looking about 45 degrees upward obliquely and about four months ago.

Apart from that.

Looking back over one's shoulder, as if in a dream, what on earth was she thinking about the oral exam...

“Um, Noriko-chan?” Her brows drawing close together in the middle of her forehead, Yumi came asked, “Hello?”

So, what question is it that you want the answer to, then.

\*\*\*

In elementary and middle school, I commuted to a local public school, so naturally, I expected to go to a co-ed public school for high school, I never expected to have any part of my life at a private girl's school.

“Um. Exactly as I'd expect of a Catholic Girl's School.”

That the entrance to the school were high gates surrounded by a high wall, was my, Nijō Noriko's, first impression.

I took one step inside the gently curved picture of a tree-lined path continuing from outside to the center, which did not allow one to see in. Probably, for such important flowers raised in the greenhouse, this is a device to protect them from harmful insects.

Like a picture drawn of a rich girls' school, I thought. That there even was such a school nowadays...

But apparently there were many girls who hoped to go to school here.

The ratio of successful applicants who took the Lillian High School outsiders exam was considerably small, I knew from outside information.

“Are you sure? Lillian Jogakuen is not the school for a backup exam.” My middle school homeroom teacher, the guidance counselor also said it was a bad idea when he heard of my desire, telling me as his eyes moved away. On the other hand, if I passed, I’d have to accept going to Lillian before I could wait for the results of a public school exam. And in my middle school there were no other students who chose to go to Lillian’s high school.

Whether Lillian was a school worth transferring to, I didn’t know. For my great-aunt, the one who set up my exam, who was a Lillian **OG**, I opened the gates easily and stepped, crunching, forward. I didn’t need the signboard for the “High School Examination Location” and arrow to confirm, the gentle stream of people all headed in one direction was guidance enough.

There were many in school uniforms walking in front of me. I was wearing the same standard blue colored school uniform that one found anywhere in public schools, the one recent change having been the addition of a light colored youthful feeling sailor collar. The blazer and sailor collar were unusual in the middle of all these famous private school uniforms.

Regardless of the school uniform these girls walked with grace and an elegant, even pace. When they meet to take the same bus, inside the carriage, the inside was usually full of cheerful conversation but, because of the chaperoning mothers, now it was full of reticence. Their mouths were completely closed, as if they’d been cursed.

From the point that they enter those gates, the entrance examination will soon begin. It will be a hardship.

Walking down the tree-lined path, step step; halfway the road parts ways, but why, at that place, does the wave of humanity slow? Like a bathtub drain clogged up by hair, the smooth stream becomes blocked.

What the heck.

As if frozen by what they see, the girls all stop where they stand, looking at a luxuriously grown hill, turning towards what was, in reality, an artificially created forest, and seriously putting their hands together.

This resembled the behaviors of the followers of some new religion that I had seen previously on a variety show, but it was also used by the Catholic religion. It was an obeisance used globally. It was simple, the old and new had very little difference, piling one thing on top of the other, I shouldn't wonder.

The **sardine head** turn towards the hand, the hands are put together for Maria-sama, under whose famous name all belief can be delivered impartially.

"Thank you for waiting, please go ahead," says the sailor collared uniform wearing girl ahead of me, over her shoulder. I was just watching all the girls stopping and praying with curiosity, not waiting for a turn, as she supposed.

"No. I..." I had, for many years, been worshipping before Buddha and Kanon, so Maria-sama would have to forgive me.

"I prayed that I may be allowed to go to this school come April. You want that too, right?"

"Yeah." Not to be rude to the gentle words the girl spoke to me, but I had no intention of going to this school.

Therefore, I turned, and immediately after me, there was someone else to take their turn, so I thought I had made the right choice.

But it would get all confused if I try to explain, so I just put my hands together there unwillingly and went through with it. Of course, I did not pray for school success.

In the first place, I was a lover of statues of Buddha, not a passionate fan of Buddha, and although in the course of visiting a statue I might put my hands together, I was not in the habit of asking for favors.

If one of the members of my family had a serious disease which made the doctors throw in the towel, I might rely on the powers of the gods, possibly. But for things I could bring about with my own strength, I didn't see a need to rely on them.

I turned away from the statue of Maria-sama, satisfied with my worship, opened my eyes and already couldn't see the form of the girl who had been in front of me, she had walked fairly forward.

I emulated the girl in front of me, saying "thank you for waiting" to the blazer-wearing girl behind me. Not forgetting to smile pleasantly. Although it was not a gesture to which I was accustomed, I did it surprisingly skillfully.

"----" How many women are in this girls' school? –Upon setting foot in the assembly hall that was the classroom for taking the paper examination, that was my honest thought.

But of course, all of the students taking the exam were girls. To the extent that the extras would be dropped, that this was an entire generation of girls felt strangely real. It was almost as if it was saying, don't open the door to that different world, there was such a sense of incompatibility there.

It was like I was being asked, now that you are inside this fence where the young ewes of Jesus Christ's flock are gathered, what do you plan on doing?

"Ah, you. Your seat's here, diagonally behind me." One nearby girl, after confirming the number on the examination ticket in my hand, guided me to the chair.

"Ah, thank you for your kindness."

"No. I was thinking that since today is the examination, everyone will be a little tense."

“Eh... Yeah.”

That was true since, upon entering the classroom I, or anyone else, might freeze upon seeing all the girls there; she wouldn't be likely to mistake that kind of pressure.

“Write the kanji for ‘person’ in your palm, then swallow it.”

The girl in the seat next to me said.

“...R, right.”

But, why was it that person after person I met here was so obliging? In a school where it was so hard to get in, everyone who was present here should be a rival, right? Either that, or in order to get into Lillian Jogakuen, did one really need to have a heart like an angel's--?

Again, I felt that there was no way I was going to be able to go to school here.

The examination was shockingly normal, with the three subjects: Language skills, English, Math. It wasn't very difficult, and from the stories I had heard from students in my class, they were much the same questions and, just the day before a girl who had taken a private school exam said that those questions were much more difficult. However, degree of difficulty and magnitude are not always proportional.

More importantly, despite my “Eh?” and tilting my head, that afternoon, I'd have to take the oral examination.

I entered the designated room, stated my name and my current school, and took the seat I was offered. There were five examiners for the oral exam. They all looked completely normal.

But, when I heard the first question, I doubted my own ears.

“A beaker is full of liquid. You want to know whether it is an acid or an alkaline. What would you do to determine this?”

“... ..”

In middle school I had practiced the oral examination many times with my teacher as a partner, but this kind of question had never come up. Of course there wasn't any "List of Possible Oral Examination Questions" written down. Usually they were "Why do you want to come to this school" or "What do you want to do at this school," that kind of question.

So, why did my ears catch words like "acid" and "alkaline"?

Of the subjects covered in the entrance exam, science was not one of them. – However, it was more likely that being questioned like this now would elicit some kind of reaction. That was why it was called the interview.

"Um, is it all right if I use litmus paper to test it?" I asked.

"That would be fine." The examiner who asked the question nodded. He wore a white coat. Maybe the science teacher?

"However, unfortunately, they are out of red litmus paper, you'll have to use blue. What do you do?"

"If the liquid turns the blue litmus paper red, then it is an acid."

"And if not..."

"It's an alkaline."

"Isn't there a possibility of it being neutral?"

"You originally asked whether it was acid or alkaline."

"Ah, true." A middle-aged teacher like a mantis struck his head like "mistake, mistake". "Then, second. Chemical element symbols."

"...Youya-sensei, that will be fine." Sitting in the middle was a sister, who would be the next interrogator after the white-coated one. "Nijō-san. Our Lillian Jogakuen is a Catholic school. Are you able to recite a Christian prayer?"

"Amen." My unhesitating answer seemed to confuse the sister a little. I thought I might have made a mistake, when the next came at me at once.

"Please tell us what you know about Christianity."

“Okay. In 1549 Francis Xavier brought it to Kagoshima, in 1613 the Edo government made it a prohibited religion and barred the teaching of it.”

Upon hearing my answer, the sister lowered her head and, with a little smile muttered, “It appears that your strength is in history, then, not religion.”

“Is there anything more?” Sitting next to the sister was a young female examiner, who inquired, enduring with a smile.

“Umm... Christ’s mother’s name is Mary.”

“That is correct.” Like this was a quiz show.

However, the number of correct answers was probably unrelated to the interview. It was a system that estimated what kind of person the person who answers is.

“Then, what is your reason for wanting to come to this school.” The oldest of the teachers with a slick head finally asked the core question.

“The desire is my great-aunt’s, who graduated this school.”

Oh, the voices rose. The acid or alkaline teacher, Youya-sensei, wrote something on the document in front of him, shooting glances around him, storing away that personal information about the examinee.

“Then, is your own desire to go elsewhere?” A middle-aged, slightly heavy woman, said pointedly.

“Yes.” I had answered clearly. And you’d think they’d drop it there. But lying wouldn’t make me eligible.

But, as expected of the clergy. The dignified sister in the middle, when she learned that this institution was not my first choice said benevolently, with a nod, “It would be best if you were accepted to your first choice.”

“I’m humbled.”

“Good work.”

“Thank you very much.”

As I made my farewells and left the room, I thought seriously,  
I must not cut my line to this school.

## Part 2.

“—But, why does it seem like we must we be so strongly connected?” Noriko-chan smiled bitterly.

Inside her heart, Yumi nodded in agreement.

Certainly she was the owner of a rare personal history, when she had gone to Kyoto for a once-in-a-many-year’s public appearance of a Buddhist statue, and had encountered a heavy snow that had kept her from taking the exam for her first choice of school.

“I had a bad feeling about it.”

“A bad feeling?”

Noriko-chan’s expression gave the words a sense of resignation.

“I finished the interview and went out into the hallway, and turned towards the central garden, I could see into the window of the school building.”

“Mm.”

“In that window, a message was written.”

“Ah...” Yumi snapped her fingers together.

Whereupon Noriko-chan’s eyes grew round. “You know about it?”

“...You could say that, last year we did it. The words were on paper in the stuck to the window pane?”

“Is that some kind of custom?”

“No, why did we do it? I don’t really know.”

On the day of the general high school examination, those wishing to go to university and the middle school third-years were taking the same paper test.

They affixed paper with message to their future classmates to the window that faced the central garden from the school, but who on earth suggested it? That person mentioned some precedent she may have learned about from some sempai, but Yumi didn’t know.

“I couldn’t see that it was drawing paper, it looked like it was written in that spray snow they use in windows at Christmas time.”

“Ehh...” A year had passed and things had evolved.

“But, to be able to be read facing the window, didn’t the letters have to be written backward? In each window, one by one was written ‘We’ll’ “See’ “You” “In” “April”, but the “S” was backward.

“Phew.” Laughingly, Yumi blew out a reflective breath. Somehow, in writing the characters backwards, someone had made the mistake. But, no one had noticed the misfortune. Perhaps someone would say leniently that had been done by one of the middle school third-years.

“That mistake really dug into my heart, because of that I really noticed the message, I think.

“That’s the premonition?”

“Well, looking at it now, you could think that, but. In reality, do you think that would have been a suitable response to the message?” Noriko-chan said that with a serious face, but slightly amused. At that, Yumi laughed, thinking, what an interesting girl, this Noriko-chan.

“So, what did you do then?”

She watched Noriko-chan laugh for a while, then, was she beginning to construct something on the tabletop?

Rolling up a pocket tissue, then wrapping it again in tissue paper squeezed around it tightly. Looking at it, it looked sort of like--.

“It’s a **teru-teru-bōzu.**”

“...I was just thinking that’s what it was.” Yumi was going to ask why she was making one in the first place, but instead of answering, Noriko-chan silently bound it with a rubber band.

“With this, can you make it sunny?”

“...Who knows.”

Or the rain might not stop, it might be prolonged? This teru-teru-bōzu. If Yumi served up this curve ball to Noriko-chan, she’d probably just take it and shoot back a correct answer.

However, poor Fukuzawa Yumi. She didn’t have any information about teru-teru-bōzu with which to bunt.

(teru-teru-bōzu, teru-teru-bōzu... Um,)

While she worried about it, Noriko-chan had finished up the teru-teru-bōzu and held it up, saying dryly, “You know, teru-teru-bōzu looks like **Jizō-sama.**”

Eh, now we’re onto Jizō-sama? Noriko-chan, you’re changing topics too fast.

“Jizō-sama, you mean Buddha?” She had to receive in some way.

At that, Noriko-chan smiled. “Well, **‘Buddha’** has a wide variety of meanings. For instance, there’s ‘Bodddhisattva.’”

“Bodddhisattva?”

“Yeah. Jizō is a Bodddhisattva. Kanon is also a Bodddhisattva. Kanzeon-Bosatsu.”

Somehow the ping-pong rally continued. Things related to Buddhism were Noriko-chan’s field of expertise.

“T, teru-teru-bōzu is...” Caught up in the moment, she inquired, as Noriko leaned forward.

“Is not a person, but you can call him a **priest.**”

Hmm. This was in all in vain.

But, is that so, human, huh? Like, possibly, a Buddhist Priest with a bald head. But, an **Umibōzu** wasn’t a human. What kind of Bōzu was a **“Mikkabōzu”** –Why, Yumi had gone off on a solo digression.

“...A group of Teru-teru-bōzu.” Noriko-chan used a rubber band to make a little swing set from which to hang it.

“Eh?” What did you say just now, Yumi asked to hear it again.

“Nothing. Just that Lillian Jogakuen often surprises me. It had a lot of impact, seeing that group of teru-teru-bōzu hanging then.”

“A group of teru-teru-bōzu?”

“Yeah. That’s the way I saw it.” So saying, Noriko-chan rose and looked out of the window. Although it was less than before, the rain was still falling.

For a moment, Noriko-chan looked puzzled. If the teru-teru-bōzu made from tissue were to get wet, it would be disastrous, she muttered, while hanging it on the curtain rail.

It was really eerie.

What that was, and what use there was for it, that shouldn't have been the main point of the impact... But there was no point in saying that now. What you don't know, you don't know.

“School uniform, leather shoes, gym clothes, sneakers (for use outside), the same (for use in the gym). Anything else will be handled by the school shop.’ ...So.”

This could all be done tomorrow, when she could get to K station to shop.

She put a check mark next to “Sharp pen” on the items on the thinly printed pamphlet.

“Textbooks (required subjects) are for sale in front of the auditorium at noon of entrance day. Regarding optional subjects, obey the instructions from your homeroom teacher.’ “Ehh-”

Textbooks were things to buy, how admirable. In compulsory education, naturally textbooks were handed out, and those were the ones taken and those were the ones unquestioningly studied.

“So, you're saying that on the day of the entrance ceremony, I'll have to carry enough cash.” Confirming the amount needed with the pamphlet, she needed to keep that in mind.

“A headband for use in gym can be bought in the store after the class announcement”? Why specifically after the class announcement, what does that have to do with it.”

In middle school, they used a reversible red and white headband for gym, so their heads didn't come loose.

“The colors of the hachimaki are by class, that's why. Until you know what class you're in, you can't buy one.” The sliding door opened suddenly, and Sumireko-san entered the room.

“Wah!” Seeing the figure, I instinctively backed up.

“What’s the ‘wah’ for. It’s just your landlady.”

“Ah, sorry. But,” when a pale face suddenly appears, anyone might be surprised, I thought. My great-aunt, my landlady, and the benefactor whose last-minute influence saved me from being a high school **rōnin**, Nijō Sumireko-san, (age unknown, but probably pretty old) was preparing for shopping tomorrow with a face mask. Sumireko-san was not concerned that it was not a shopping district near Ginza. For example, if she was going to accompany a relative’s daughter on a shopping trip, then she would consider her makeup and dress of importance.

“Hmm, the classes have colors.”

To my new surprise, Sumireko-san replied with a bored look. “They do, like Peach color or Pine color.”

“Peach color? You mean, like pink? And what the, pine?”

This is the first I’d ever heard of it. Obviously not the color of the trunk, so obviously like a dark green color.

“Not pink, Peach. The color of the name of each class.”

“Huh?”

“You’d better study hard, you’re kind of dull-witted, Rico.”

“... ..”

That’s me.

Apparently anyone who didn’t know that, on the day of the entrance exam, each class was called upon one by one to be named after a plant, was ignorant.

This might be an excuse but, on the day I took the entrance exam, each room had a piece of paper that said ‘Examinee Number X-XX’ which was affixed on the room plate and may have covered the “Peach Group” or “Pine Group” so I couldn’t see the characters.

“Now then.” Pulling myself together, I once again began to read the contents of the “What You will Need on the Actual Day” pamphlet, when several characters flew out at me.

White poncho.

“What’s this, this ‘white poncho’?” My voice raised, I slapped the thin pamphlet. As if it had suddenly revealed it’s true form to be a caterpillar and began crawling in front of my eyes, I was repulsed.

“White poncho?”

After the repetition of these words maybe about 3 seconds had passed. I could see the circuits in Sumireko-san’s hard drive connecting “beepbeepbeep.”

“Ah, that’s right. White poncho, right. Tomorrow, after you’re measured for your uniform, we’ll stop by the cloth store.”

“But, what’s with the white poncho?”

“A poncho is, well it’s a poncho.” So saying, Sumireko-san peeled the mask off her face. Ah, not the kind of person to wash it off, huh. –While I made that leisurely observation, the main problem was not resolved.

“...Ah, um.”

“You don’t know what a poncho is?”

“I do, but. An, um, blanket with a hole in the middle you put your head through, some people wear it for clothes. Like, places in South America.”

It had appeared once in the opening of an anime I had seen.

“That’s all there is to know. Isn’t that enough?”

Hey, that’s wrong. What was necessary for me to know wasn’t some trivia about the poncho, but to be told exactly why I might need a “white poncho” for after the entrance ceremony.

“So, do you not understand ‘white’?”

“Sumireko-san, are you, maybe, being malicious?” After I said it, I noticed that the “maybe” was too much.

“Oh, my bad reputation. Just think of it as a puzzle to be solved happily in the future.”

“That future is now cursed with embarrassment.”

“Foey.”

Sumireko-san put face lotion on a cotton ball and began to pat her face with it. “Rico is, you know, really boring. Like you’re putting great effort into it, “please don’t let me graduate, please don’t let me graduate.”

“That would be a bad thing.” It’s my nature.

“Isn’t it interesting to think you the big snowstorm that made you miss your exam was part of a curse?” The smile she was suppressing appeared. It clearly said, don’t get caught in this, this is a “Danger Zone.”

“Is it fun to pick on your roughly half-century younger relative’s daughter?”

“Roughly half a century is pretty full of malice, I think.”

“Really, but it’s the least one can do for a friend.”

“So, it’s going to be like that. Tomorrow, I’m thinking that there’s no way I can accompany you to K station.”

“That’s fine if you can’t. I can get a uniform on my own.”

“Eh, what about a white poncho?”

“I’ll manage it one way or another. It’s written here what to do.”

Two such similar people might just leave it there but, because of the age difference, they could go beyond propriety. Which of the two was slightly more adult might be determined by which one would retreat.

In circumstances like this, Sumireko-san would become perverse and I concluded that I would have to go alone to buy the things I needed to prepare for the entrance ceremony.

I went out to K station, to the shop designated and ordered the school uniform and gym clothes, then went to obtain the materials for the problematic white poncho.

“... ..”

At the time I went to get the uniform, because K station was the station closest to Lillian Jogakuen, the stores on the side were welcoming the new students.

Going over to the white cotton corner, there was a line at the wagon processing the sales for “the most suitable for a poncho.”

The instructions said to go for 100 percent, raw white cotton, suitable for white shirts.

I had already got the cloth cut, went to the wagon and took white bias tape (“cut from here”) in my hand. To make the hole in the center, it was necessary to process it with the bias tape or it would become loose.

And, to make the poncho’s hem and cuffs, fold it in four, a machine stitch finished it.

As long as it cleared the bias tape, making a white poncho didn’t seem that hard.

“Ah, right.” Once again, as I turned away from the register, I remembered the question of what thickness of thread I would need for the machine I would need, I retraced my steps to get it.

Halfway, I was passing through the section of lace and frills and ribbon and other gaudy stuff, when I noticed three girls investigating the goods with something near ecstasy.

The girls were talking so much, they didn’t notice me. All of the girls had in their hands the same bias tape as me. At a guess, they were probably entering Lillian in the spring together.

“Hey, look, look. This lace is cute.”

“Ah, don’t you think it’s a little too conspicuous?”

“But wouldn’t it be pleasing? Wouldn’t it be all right if it’s white? I really want to add those buttons...”

“Buttons are no good.”

“So I heard, I wonder if I can use spangles?”

As they spoke, they were holding the ribbon or lace up to the material for the poncho.

Those girls, were they the type to make a poncho? They didn’t seem to be. However, they had the paper on which the instructions to make the poncho were written and nothing was written there on decorating it.

Then, though I might have had the courage to speak to the three of them, why did I not do so? I wasn't the type to usually do such a thing, it just wasn't possible that I would beg meekly for instruction from people who knew about the white poncho. It was Sumireko-san's fault.

Then, I withdrew quickly to the register to pay. The store employee tapped the register, put my purchases in a bag and said, "A new student at Lillian Jogakuen, huh? Congratulations."

Ah, I knew it.

If you were buying this stuff, you were a Lillian student.

When I got back home, I looked it up on the internet, but could not find information on what I wanted to know.

I couldn't help it, but an "Aha!" mark floated about ten centimeters over my head, to simply abide by the rules of manufacture of the white poncho.

Sumireko-san silently came over to watch me on the sewing machine, but did not offer to assist me in anything or tell me anything at all. Because it would hinder me, I didn't ask a second time.

And, the entrance ceremony was the next day. And finally, I encountered the group of *teru-teru-bōzu*.

The first-years entering were, on that day, remonstrated with many warnings about school life from the teachers and the nuns, including an explanation of how to apply for optional course, and were let out early before noon.

As I had come from an outside middle school, I didn't yet have any close friends, naturally I wasn't going to do anything with anyone or go to a store together, I quickly made my way back to the classroom.

There were still second- and third-years left, and with the addition of six classes of first-years that had been left out the bus to the JR station was congested. It appeared that this was always the case, but I really hated being packed in like a sardine.

At the place where I got on, something crossed right in front of my eyes.

“Hii-...!”

Holding the doors open with my body weight, I somehow managed to extract my hips, somewhat surprised.

(W, what’s that...!)”

I distrusted my eyes.

In front of the school buildings, there was a single-file line of white poncho-clad students, walking along, step by step.

One after the other, one after the other.

It was an extremely bizarre sight.

From their shoulders to about 10 centimeters over their knees, the entire upper half of their body was completely white poncho. Of course I had tried mine on to confirm that it fit, but to see so many gathered together had an certainly intensity.

I couldn’t count them one by one, but it approached 30 people, maybe one class’ worth. It wasn’t grandiose or anything, but it looked exactly like a migration of a herd of teru-teru-bōzu. Or the revised edition of pilgrims.

No, no, Lillian Jogakuen is a Catholic high school. That probably wasn’t suitable here.

But.

Cows on the 100 pilgrimages, black magic or white magic. In this world there were some things I was unlikely to ever see.

The god you don’t touch can’t curse you.

So muttering to myself, I ran after the gaggle of teru-teru-bōzu. If I hadn’t gone to confirm whatever it was, I wouldn’t have been able to sleep that night. If I knew the truth, it might still leave me creeped out, but I preferred to err on the side of curiosity.

I shadowed them about ten meters behind the tail.

As I observed from behind, I felt a momentary panic, as I saw what came next.

The girls – probably a group of sempai – each carried a piece of A4 size thick paper. Because they weren't really close I couldn't see what was written on them but, it appeared as if they were very important somehow. Why then, were these people holding these cards to their chests, occasionally peeping at them, then hiding them away again.

(Hm.)

The white ponchos weren't the official cover over the uniform; I confirmed that they were wearing gym clothes on the lower half of their bodies.

(But, why do they have leggings over their knees, when sweat pants would be suitable... And)

While the all fluttered along in their coverings, there were many variations in the waist, and binding string. The majority of the strings followed the custom of the headband and were the class color, but in the middle I could see a string straight, or left and right, or elaborately sewn on one of these white ponchos that they wore.

I remembered the girls I met at the cloth store. They were planning on revising the instructions in this way, too.

While this was going on, the flock of teru-teru-bōzu were proceeding towards the south. Because they were wearing gym clothes underneath, perhaps they were considering going out of the grounds, but about halfway, their course changed. I also followed, turning left past the library. Going down the tree-lined path, where it split, passed the statue of Maria-sama, to where a white bus stood parked.

(Ah.)

And, the tribe of teru-teru-bōzu were, one at a time, sucked in by that bus.

### Part 3.

“So, it was the X-Ray mobile, then,” came out of Yumi’s mouth banteringly.

“...Yumi-sama. When someone is trying, with all their might, to get a story out, please don’t interrupt.”

“Sor-ry. But you know,”

“I understand. I heard about what it was from students who came up from the middle school. Noriko-chan said, with a sigh. As if, when she had tried to convey this to a friend in email, it had been a big hit. That’s right, the white poncho was not typical, even though it was to Yumi.

She had revealed the trick.

At Lillian Jogakuen, the white poncho was the cover the students wore for the physical examination.

In order to be ready for the X-ray, one could unfasten one’s bra so that one didn’t have to be completely naked, and the doctor could put the stethoscope under the poncho so that getting undressed wasn’t necessary.

It was an old school after all.

For example, assuming that the doctor was a man, some sempai, unwilling to show her body, had devised this idea. No, of course today’s students wouldn’t want to be naked in the presence of others, either.

“But, well, I think the white poncho is reasonable.”

Noriko-chan, having seen them in use, also seemed to have come to that conclusion.

“But, why isn’t is explained in the information for new students? The correct usage of the white poncho is never touched upon - don’t you think that’s awful?”

“Umm. I guess it might be. I carried over the one I made in middle school, so I never saw the information for new students, so I don’t know.”

At Yumi's words, Noriko-chan's face had, for a moment, a look of "eh?"

"First year students don't have to make them?"

"It's only used once a year, three times total. You'll have it for about six years if you wash it correctly. There's no regulations that say you have to have a new one every year, but there are probably some people who want to make new ones.

"Ah, Tōko must be one of those."

"Tōko-chan?"

The sweet voiced, curly "banana curl" first-year floated into Yumi's mind. Tōko-chan was the trigger in her and Onee-sama's argument. However, she didn't dislike her now.

"Thinking about it now, I saw Tōko-chan at the cloth store. That girl, this year was going to make a frilly fringe on all four sides."

"Frill!?"

"Yes. But the teacher gently warned her about it."

"...I guess so."

None of Yumi's classmates had done that. At most, they had made the cords at the waist differing lengths.

"But, Tōko-chan wasn't discouraged. She said, with passion, that next year she'd do embroidery on it in white thread. Really, isn't she an idiot?"

As Noriko laughed, so did Yumi. Noriko-chan's "idiot" was incredibly gentle, an affectionate "idiot." With a big smile in her heart.

As the two rolled about with laughter, the door that looked like a popular biscuit opened and someone entered.

"I'm sorry I'm late." It was Shimako-san.

Noriko-chan rose from her chair. She rushed over to the pot. To make tea for her beloved onee-sama. At this innocent couple, Yumi was a little jealous.

“What are you laughing about? You look like you’re having fun,” Shimako-san asked, but Noriko-chan responded, “It’s nothing important.”

“I was saying that it would be nice if the rain stopped. Yumi-sama and I were discussing it.”

“Rain? It’s stopped.” Shimako-san said.

“Eh?” Yumi ran to the window and looked outside.

It definitely had. Sometime, the rain had stopped.

“The teru-teru-bōzu was as effective as you expected, huh, Noriko-chan?”

“I’m glad.” Noriko-chan was grinning, handing Shimako-san a cup of hot tea.

“Yumi-san, since the rain stopped, in thanks, you should draw the teru-teru-bōzu’s face in.”

“We should?”

“Ah, hadn’t you heard?”

At Shimako-san’s words, both Yumi and Noriko-chan shook their heads back and forth to say “I don’t know.” In the first place, she hadn’t hung up a teru-teru-bōzu as a charm against the rain in who knows how many years.

“But, if there is such a story...” Yumi took a ballpoint pen and drew eyes, nose and mouth on the teru-teru-bōzu that hung near the window.

“Hm, what a great smile that is,” when Shimako-san said that, looking from the side. Yumi said, “Ah, is that so?”, noticing at last.

When the two of them had been alone, Noriko-chan had surely intended to cheer her up with that story.

## Variety Gift IV

“Um, in general, what you’re telling Yumi-sama is that the model for the red toy Daruma is based on real Buddhist priests sitting in meditation. It’s close, but it’s not the same. Even if you roll it, it was made to be a good luck charm.” Noriko-chan explained, disinterestedly.

In her head, Yumi took a memo of a real Buddhist Priest rolling around.

When one is near someone whose interest it is, and they can give a good lecture, it’s easy to get ideas into one’s head.

“Talisman... Ah, you mean like the kind you see at elections and the like.”

“Yeah. First you pray with one eye open, and when the wish is fulfilled, you draw the other eye in.”

If you make my wish come true I’ll draw a face for you. Very similar to the teru-teru-bōzu.

Then.

“I’m sorry, I’m running late.” It was Shimako-san.

“This is significant, because it’s nearly the opposite of using ofuda for protection.” Noriko-chan brought the conversation firmly to a finish by rising from her chair, and rushing to the pot. In order to brew excellent tea for her beloved onee-sama.

“What are you talking about? It looks like you’re having fun.”

--D, déjà vu?

Just as she was thinking it, the biscuit door opened again, this time the two third-years completing the gathering.

“Ah, she did it, she did it.”

“Ahh, really. It’s as you said, Rei.”

Rose Foetida is Hasekura Rei-sama. Rosa Chinensis is Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

“What are you talking about, Rose Foetida?” Noriko-chan asked, taking out two more cups.

“I’m saying, we’re late, and Yoshino-chan already broke the seal on it.”

“Then, Rei-sama, you already knew about the box—” Yumi muttered, while Rei-sama smiled.

“Of course I knew. After all, I was the one who brought it.”

“Eh!?” Yoshino-san and Yumi said simultaneously.

“B, but – the writing on the tag...”

“Ah, you knew? It’s Eriko-sama’s writing.”

That always precise writing, how did Rei-sama... She looked at the label that had been peeled off the wrapping paper.

“Um, Rei-sama was the one who brought these sweets. But Eriko-sama’s writing was on the label. What...?” Yumi confirmed. Inside her head things were not being properly kept tidy and in order.

“Right.”

Uh, which of the two options was it closer to.

“Obviously, it was Eriko-sama. It was just given into my keeping, to bring it here.”

“When was it given into your keeping?”

“Earlier.”

“Earlier?”

“About cleanup time, I left for a bit and ran over to university buildings to meet Eriko-sama.”

“The university buildings?” This time Shimako-san joined the chorus of second-years.

“Mm. You know, it’s not easy to get into the high school area if you’re not wearing a uniform.”

That was so not it.

“Um, but, wasn’t Eriko-sama attending a different university?”

“That’s right.”

“Then, why...”

Why was Eriko-sama here at Lillian University, was the question Shimako-san was asking.

Yes, that was it, Yumi nodded. That was what she wanted to hear too.

“Obviously, to meet up. Last night I got a phone call to come out and receive the supply drop.”

So, then, Rei-sama went out for a little during cleanup to go meet Eriko-sama, receive this Variety Gift into her keeping, brought it to the Rose Mansion, then returned to her area to finish cleaning, is what she was saying. Well done.

But.

“You never told me about it.” Yoshino-san was angry. From yesterday evening until now, you never said anything about this, what was she was saying.

Definitely, Yumi thought.

But, these two were also cousins, their houses were built next to each other, on the same premises; in morning these two came to school together, ate lunch at the Rose Mansion together with everyone. There had been how many chances to talk.

However, Rei-sama answered calmly. “Right. I didn’t say anything.”

“Why didn’t you say... No, I mean, why didn’t you mention it?”

In front of the first-years, Yoshino-san altered her speech. Yumi was already accustomed to it, but still, it was important to clarify one’s standing as an upperclassman or underclassman in this school.

“Because, this morning Yoshino was in a bad mood. I thought that, at the time, if I brought up Eriko-sama, it would only make it worse. If you asked who the candy was from and I said Eriko-sama, it would be the same, right?”

“Right, I understand.”

Knowing Yoshino-san too well, Rei-sama had decided to bring the box without mentioning the giver and letting the contents speak for themselves. And knowing Yoshino, Rei saw it through.

“But, my mood wasn’t bad. I was just thinking about something.” The way Yoshino-san said that, it was probably a problem about taking a little sister. Ironically, something that had to do with Eriko-sama.

“So then, Eriko-sama? After giving you the box, did she leave for home then?” Yumi inquired. If she had come all the way over to the university, she could have carried it to the high school, she thought. Standing out because she was not in school uniform was some kind of reason, certainly but, Eriko-sama was not the type to worry about being rude. A graduate could enter with confidence, at any rate.

“It looks like it. I also went, wanting to catch even a glimpse I thought, so I left the cleaning with Rei and went with her to the university., but...” Sachiko-sama shook her head.

“Afterwards, did it look like she had some plans, don’t you think?” Rei-sama rubbed her cheek with a finger puzzled, trying to stimulate her memory.

“I wonder if that’s true.” Detective Yoshino-san crossed her arms and inclined her head suspiciously.

“Why would Eriko-sama lie?”

“Because, the odor of some kind of scheme floats around that tin.” Yoshino-san pointed to the tin.

Just so.

From the faces of the first-year girls, who had just a while ago eaten the cookies and chocolates so happily, the smiles completely disappeared.

“It’s all right. There’s no poison inside. Probably.”

“No, there’s no worry about that.”

Why was Noriko-chan, with a smiling face, answering so intently.

Of course, no one was thinking that she or anyone else had put poison in them. Of course, after someone mentions that they are involved in a scheme, it’s unlikely that anyone will want to consider eating anymore. When the ringleader says, “It’s a plot” even if everything else is left ambiguous, of course it will be distrusted.

“It’s a plot, huh?” Rei-sama took a jam sandwich cookie in her fingers and held it up to the light. “If Yoshino says it is, then it might be.”

“Eh?”

“Because, Eriko-sama. Because, when she handed it over to me, she said, ‘Give Yoshino-chan my best regards.’”

From that two layer cookie, from the hole cut in the top layer so that looking down, one could see an ambiguously yellow-colored jam, maybe apricot, maybe apple, came an amber light.

## Poison Apple

The clouds were oppressive.

That was what I thought when I looked up.

But, when I thought about it, what part of me felt that way? Whether it was my body or my heart, even I didn't know.

When I relinquished the thing I had carried with me from home, I felt completely light. Why would that be the case?

If I thought about it, I would probably come up with an answer, but in order to think about it properly, I'd have to know what it was I was thinking about and that seemed entirely too troublesome.

Therefore, for an hour, I shelved "oppressive" and sat on a bench in front of the fountain.

"Ugh," I said in a completely old woman way.

And again, I stared up into the sky. The oppressive clouds hadn't changed. The same went for me looking up at them.

It was because it was a little chilly, or because it was time to be in class. On the lawn near the fountain, there were no students to be seen. It seemed more like a park on the verge of closing than a woman's university garden.

The other day, when I had come to peep at the sports festival, the grounds were completely crowded with students, parents everywhere I looked. That was already two or three days ago. But it felt like much longer ago than that.

In any case, I smiled to myself bitterly. The bag in which I had carried the Variety Gift must have been my source of power. Since, I hadn't let go of it. So it seemed.

While I was carrying it, it felt like it was a surprise box with a joker inside. If I had actually used one of those, I could imagine Yoshino-chan's response, the thought floated into my head.

In that case, it was like the Variety Gift had been like a balloon for me, maybe. Therefore, now that I had parted with it, my cheerful mind sank.

Be that as it may, at last my foot reached the ground. Whether it was my feeling of being heavy or gravity, it was the way things were. However, the reality was that I felt oppressed.

I stared at the ends of my shoes.

The Variety Gift of treats lifted my heart a little, however, not for very long.

Whoever held the joker at the end of the game loses. Or, more appropriately, if someone opens a surprise box without knowing what it is, then the meaning is wasted.

Therefore, I who had parted from it, laughed from far away.

“Pardon me, you wouldn’t happen to be Torii Eriko-sama?”

The voice comes back to me, as if by chance, in front of my eyes are two feet in short black boots. The toes were turned this way as they stood there. As my gaze rose slowly upwards, there appeared the face of a dear friend.

“It is as you say, Satō Sei-sama. Well, what wonderful coincidence!” I grinned, putting out both my hands as I stood.

“It has been so long, are you well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

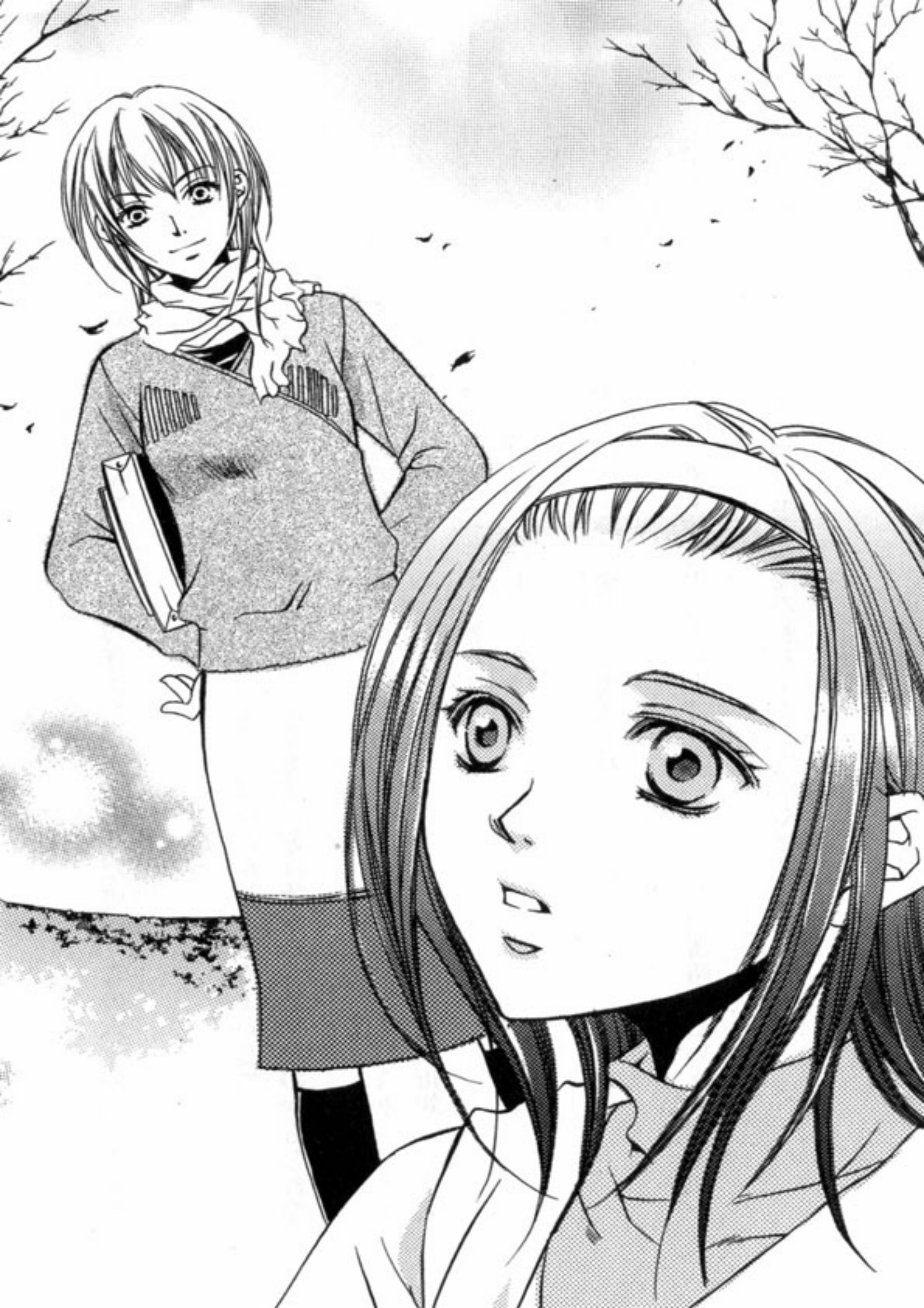
The two of us were jokingly moving the conversation along formally. Old friends meeting unexpectedly in a place like this, why did this embarrass me?

“What are you doing for today? Do you have business here at Lillian Jogakuen? Did you forget something?” Sei inquired. When she had graduated, she had chosen Lillian Women’s College. Therefore, it was not particularly mysterious to see her here, but why did I remember a sense of incompatibility?

Here on the same premises as the high school, although different buildings, Sei was not in high school uniform.

As I stood to meet her, although I could call myself graduate, here at the university I was an “outsider”.

We had been apart for only about half a year.



“To come and take back something I forgot after six months had passed after graduation, what kind of person do you think I am?” After I laughed at that, I rethought it. Maybe I had come back to get something I forgot after all, in one sense.

From somewhere appeared three girls in kindergarten uniforms, their voices bubbling over as they ran up to the area around the fountain. They had left their guardians behind them, but after them came several women who looked like their mothers, walking up to the bench and sitting down.

And, then, my surroundings, which had been quiet, were now lively and gay.

“Do you have time? Will you take some tea?” At Sei’s suggestion, we removed ourselves to the café in the university.

“Quiet, isn’t it?” I asked as we walked. On the way up, if you look at the school building, it looked gloomy on account of all the classrooms not being lit.

“Because we’re in the middle of exams. I was struggling at the end, in the library.” Sei laughed. “What about yours?”

Ah, I smiled bitterly. “Today the general education exams are over. Afterwards, all sorts of presentations and reports have to be filed, though.”

I myself, on the final day of midyear exams was, with my empty afternoon, visiting my alma mater. It was much the same schedule at another university.

“Hmm. My day is replete. Being able to meet busy Eriko.”

“I guess so.”

The café was much busier with university students than I would have thought. Because some facilities were closed during exams, they washed up here, it seemed.

Sei bought blend coffee, I milk tea, then we sat. The cup was warm, my cold fingers were happy. It was colder outside that I had thought.

“I hear you have a grandchild?” I asked, turning towards my friend. Because we had not met for some time, I wanted recent news.

“Grandchild? Ah, Shimako’s soeur you mean?” Because Sei, in her third year, took a first-year student Shimako to be her soeur, Sei’s soeur’s soeur was therefore her “grandchild.”

“How is she? Cute?”

“Um, how is it. Even though it’s after I graduated, it’s nice. To the extent that I know her face.”

While saying that, Sei told me Shimako’s soeur’s full name and about her peculiar hobby. Except for her hair, she’d be the type Eriko liked, was her added comment.

“How do you say it... Yeah. Now that someone to be by Shimako’s side has appeared, I’m quite relieved, myself.” Bringing the black coffee to her mouth, her eyes narrowed. Inside Sei’s communication of relief, there was a slightly bitter flavor.

“It’s not often you get to feel what it’s like to be a grandmother, huh.”

I added a half a spoonful of sugar, then stirred the milk tea. In the small cup, the beige swirled around and around.

“I’ll just have to lavish my affection on Yumi-chan instead.”

“I see. Sei’s still interested in Yumi-chan, huh.”

“I’d be affectionate to Yoshino-chan, too, but she’s Rei and Eriko’s cherished cat. There’s no gap for me to get in.”

“Aha, so it looks that way?”

Upon hearing that she was a cherished cat, I was a little pleased.

“It looks that way. There’s always a sense of Eriko teasing Yoshino-chan because she’s so cute and you can’t help it.”

“Heheh.”

Exactly what I’d expect from my best friend. Certainly I couldn’t help myself from lavishing affection on her. And, since she’d had the surgery, Yoshino-chan was doing very well.

“Your opponent has to have some serious fighting spirit.”

“That’s true.” If they were some weepy, weak, prone to running away person, I wouldn’t be able to give myself up. They had to bite at the challenge; Yoshino-chan’s straight on gaze attracted me.

“Although she looks like that kind of girl, she’s isn’t that all the time.” It was like it wasn’t Sei across the table from me, but myself that I was talking to. I wouldn’t have to say even a word to that me, so why did I feel that way? Sei then asked, with a sense of “this is trivial, but,” “What’s up? Did something happen with **Kumaotoko**?”

Kumaotoko. He was a professor at the school next door to Lillian Girls’ School, Hanadera Academy, and less importantly, the man I love.

“You can’t really say anything happened, per se. What can I do about it.”

He was the man I loved, but we weren’t lovers. The first time I proposed he had refused. Afterwards, we decided to start over again as friends but, after seeing each other for half a year, we were still just friends.

“Stop,” Sei interrupted. “Because, there’s no way I can offer advice on a love affair between a man and a woman, you know.”

“I don’t need that. That’s not what’s bothering me.”

“Then, what?”

“I guess you could say that a rival has appeared.”

“Kumaotoko has a woman?”

I wanted to say that he wasn’t that type. Or mutter that Sei was being completely rude. But really, on the other hand, it wasn’t a woman.

“He has one from before over there.” Kumaotoko was suspended between there and here.

“That’s like Yoshino-chan, isn’t it.” Rei was suspended between there and here.

“Yes. However, I didn’t really need to peck at Yoshino-chan”

“What’s that?”

I summed up for Sei the entire story about the sweets for the Yamayurikai. Just a little, I wish I could rewind time. But in the real world, it’s not worth thinking about. For a moment, I turned my eyes away.

“About Yamanobe-san.” After a pause, I confessed. “He has a child.”

“Eh -”

Sei reacted just as I had predicted, which satisfied me.

“A girl in kindergarten. It’s not really strange. He had a wife after all.”

“That, that’s true, but--”

Yamanobe-san was a pitiable man, whose wife had died. The people close to me knew that much. But.

“I knew about it from the beginning.” Just after we met, to learn a little more about him, I had showered him with questions.

“Your father and brothers...”

“They don’t know. If I tell them, they’ll definitely be set against it.”

“That, that’s true, but--”

“It’s not like I’m lying. Just, if they don’t ask, I don’t have to answer, that’s all. We’re really just friends. If a friend has a child, I don’t think there’s any reason for a parent to complain, is there?”

“That, that’s true, but--”

Sei was repeating the same words from earlier. Although she seemed to tentatively agree, she didn’t seem satisfied with what had been done. “If Eriko consented to it at the beginning, then yes, it has nothing to do with your parents. But, it’s been the same for six months now. Why is she a rival all of a sudden.”

Sei pointed out naturally. However, the truth was that something had altered since the beginning.

“He, you know, wants me to meet his daughter this time.”

“Wait a second.” It wasn’t “that’s true, but--” this time. --- Well, it was true.

“Do you think that this is his way of thinking of me as more than a friend?” Come meet my daughter was similar to come meet my parents in that way. Because of this, ever since I’d heard his words, I hadn’t been able to control myself properly. Because the last time I had met him was the week before last, the next time would be in two weeks.

I am the kind of person who generally has fun, even when something I didn’t expect occurs. But, this time, it was out of my hands.

Why was this so life-affecting a thing.

What goes up, must come down.

These rising and falling emotions somehow, would become past feelings that were recalled when a diary was read or an album was heard. Or, as an extreme eccentricity, when the high school uniform was put on once again. Or, by extension, stopping by the Lillian sports festival.

I already knew that I could never return to those days of high school, thinking about it only made me depressed, especially when passing through the gates of the old alma mater made my heart say, “what if”. If I see Rei’s face, I’ll clear up my heart a little. Or something.

However, unexpectedly, I was thinking about cheerful Yoshino-chan. Before the contest, she had been enthusiastic; it was dazzling, hateful, precious. As I have since I was young, I had to peck at it.

I stepped in to change Yoshino-chan’s hopes. And I left her a souvenir of a reckless promise. At the moment I met Yoshino-chan, I was able to regain the self I loved.

“...So, what are you going to do?” Sei asked with a serious face.

“Meet her.”

“A person with kids, is that okay with you?”

“Mm. I’m fine with it.” After all, I loved Yamanobe-san and his genuine charm doesn’t change just because he has a child. So, if he says “come and meet her” then I’ll meet her. Of course.

“Then, what’s sticking in your mind?”

“How to handle my opponent, I guess.”

“Haaaah, you mean Yoshino-chan---” as she spoke, Sei lifted her hand. “Sorry, Eriko, hang on a second. He-yy, here, here.”

Following Sei’s gaze, I could see a woman who looked like a university student standing in the café entrance. When she noticed the signal, she quickly walked over to the table.

“Uh, Satō-san, how long are you going to rely on the fact that my house is near the school.”

So saying, that person held out the kind of notebook that one uses for classes. Which Sei received reverently.

“Whoa whoah, this is a mite large.”

“You know, you’re hateful. Did everyone really admire you in high school, that’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“It’s the truth. Sei let the underclassmen spoil her.” I interjected myself into the conversation. For the first time, Sei’s friend became aware of my presence, so I nodded with a cheerful “Hi”.

“This is?”

“My friend, Torii Eriko-san. She graduated from my high school.”

“Ah, Rosa Foetida, huh. I’m I Satō-san’s class, Katō Kei.”

“Nice to meet you, Katō-san. You could call me Rosa Foetida, although I’m a former one, the name still attaches. But... You know all about it, huh?”

“Fukuzawa Yumi-chan instructed me. Although she said them pretty fast, because it was interesting, I remembered the names of the members.”

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida, Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida, Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida.

Katō-san said hesitating a little over the words Rosa Foetida.

“So, the former Rosa Chinensis is absent today? Or is she only late?”

“Today is a two-person class reunion.”

“Oh, I was going to beg a **three-shot.**”

She said it like she really regretted it; maybe she wanted to know more about Sei, perhaps. However, Sei was apparently interested in the scenery.

“Right, Kei-san. You can give us the perspective from the daughter’s point of view,” Sei asked.

“Of what?”

“A father’s lover.”

“Umm.” Katō-san stood at the side of the table, looking up at the ceiling. On hearing “A father’s lover” I immediately remembered Ogasawara Sachiko’s family but, in Katō-san’s case, there was no wife when her father took a lover. Her mother died when she was still young - in that point it resembled Yamanobe-san.

“In our situation, he met her when he had fallen ill, and was at his wit’s end. Either way, he was either going to die, or to be driven to despair. Then, she was a person who was able to get him past the critical point. Well, if I look back at it, she was a really nice person and for that I have the feeling that I could forgive her. ...Hey, is that a good reference?”

“Good enough. Thank you.” I wondered if it was even possible to have a reference in what to definitely do in this kind of case but, having a daughter that is at his side looking towards him is one part of Yamanobe-san’s character, and she probably has many worries about becoming a good daughter. That was something I decided to never forget.

“Yeah? I’m glad.” Katō-san grinned at me, then quickly turned to Sei with a bitter face.

“Sei-san. The rent on that notebook is high.”

“Okay. I finished my job already. Will this cancel the debt?” Sei took out an envelope from a travel agent and handed it over to Katō-san.

“Ah, it’s already gone. Mm, good. Good work.”

Inside were probably tickets, I guessed. Ah-hah, had violently shy Sei had found someone to go on a trip with?

“Sorry to have disturbed you.” Her exchange of notebook for ticket hadn’t been much of a disruption, but when she turned her back and retraced her steps, Sei leaned her face close to mine and whispered, “What a great person to forgive like that. What do you think?”

What do you think, she said. “Since it’s Sei, you understand, right?”

This good person couldn’t handle it otherwise. It was impossible for her to perform the impossible.

“The role of evil stepmother bullying a cute princess suits me.” I lay prostrate on the table and thought about this well-suited role.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall’ you mean?”

“Exactly.” I lifted my head. “But in the Yoshino-chan version, she’d surely throw away the poison apple and run after me.” The spectacle floated into my mind.

It’s not unfair, it’s not unfair, it’s not unfair. I said.

“You look like you’re having fun.” At my evil chuckle, Sei’s brows drew together.

“You didn’t go and put poison in the sweets you gave them did you?”

“Not in the sweets, but--” I drank the rest of the milk tea in the cup silently.

Would Yoshino-chan receive the right message from the Variety Gift box, I wondered.

It had cooled down completely, but as the milk tea flowed into my body it brought warmth.

And I became a little brighter as I had been before.

## Variety Gift V

“It’s part of a plot you say?” Yoshino-san muttered.

“Wait a moment, Yoshino. I only said whether it was.” This is bad, Rei-sama was clearly thinking, as she repeatedly returned to the cookie tin to fix it. The harbinger of a big explosion. At the table, Yoshino-san sat with her fists clenched and clouds swirling overhead, so it was possible to say there would be aftershocks.

“Rei-chan may think so, but I haven’t decided!”

Ka-boom.

It came at last.

It was fortunate for Rei-sama that there was no cushion nearby. Not finding anything close by to throw, Yoshino-san threw both hands into the air in futility, as if to throw them at Rei-sama. Her eyes went to the tin of sweets in front of her, but throwing food was no good. It looked like she was still capable of reason.

“What. What haven’t you decided?” Rei-sama asked guarding her face with one hand. Even if it flies, there’s no need to guard yourself from air.

“But, doesn’t it ping your intuition anyway, Rei-chan? Don’t you think so? Rei-chan, I think you’ve rotted since you’re no longer Eriko-sama’s sœur. There are some things that only a sœur can know, things that they can’t feel unconsciously.”

The blood already rushing to her head, Yoshino-chan was speaking without paying attention to her words.

Casual speech ‘Rei-chan,’ one-sided abuse. More importantly, the inconsistencies in her own words.

Now then, the peanut gallery watched these two with open amazement.

“Yoshino-chan calm yourself.” With one roar, everyone returned, to the right of the two, to Sachiko-sama, for the arbitration to begin. No, more than arbitration, to see Yoshino-san returned to a state of correctness, really. Somehow, the active volcano took a one-hour rest to be a dormant volcano.

“Right. Rei-sama hasn’t done anything to do to deserve criticism.”

“Yumi-san is right. In the first place, the sender of the sweets isn’t Rei-sama, it’s Eriko-sama, isn’t it.”

In this atmosphere, as the second-year’s spoke, Noriko-chan investigated the cover and the paper that separated the contents, commenting in her usual unconcerned tone.

“This sempai called Eriko-sama, she brought this from home, didn’t she? Since it remained unopened, then it couldn’t be part of a scheme could it?”

Right, right. That was completely the conclusion she had reached before. Therefore, Yoshino-chan could run to eat as much as she wanted with an easy mind.

“Then, the code for the message inside is?”

Yoshino-chan lifted the seal from the table. She couldn’t yet throw away her theory that Eriko-sama had some scheme in mind.

“‘To my cute little sisters.’ Is this where the code is?”

From behind, looking over coolly, Tōko-chan said, “What about the name of the merchandise?”

“‘Variety Gift - M’.” Kanako-chan read from the cover of the box.

“Em?”

“M size, I think it means... But...”

Yoshino started with Y. Eriko with E. There was an M in the middle of Shimazu but it wasn’t the first letter, so there couldn’t be any connection there.

“By the way, the manufacturer is Maple Parlor.”

There was no point to be taken there. Yumi, who often had exchange gifts in the house, had gotten exchange gifts just like this. Therefore, if the code was concealed in the Maple Parlor shop, it was sure to be here and there in the everyday confusion.

“Other information--” Yoshino-san took out the folded paper that had wrapped it from the table where it had been laid with suspicion. Definitely, even if you make your eyes go round, it was the usual the Maple Parlor logo on wrapping paper. When it became Christmas or Halloween, they would wrap with a different version, but basically the same.

“It’s got to be your imagination. Sorry, Yoshino.” Rei-sama said, as if saying please stop now; then stopped her motion towards Yoshino-san.

“...This is...” At the sound of her voice, everyone surrounded Yoshino-san, who held her hand out. But all that was in it was the wrapping paper.

“Got it.” Yoshino-san grabbed the vexing wrapping paper and wadded it up.

“What? This seal that was stuck on? Or the ingredients? Or was it the ‘must be eaten by’ date?” Rei-sama took the wrapping paper from Yoshino-san’s hand and stretched it out.”

When she heard the word seal, Yumi was taken aback. She had seen the seal in question a little while ago.

“Ah, um, flour, sugar...”

Why was Rei-sama reading the ingredients. But then, if she read them from the beginning, she might find something, maybe, she was thinking.

If this was associated with the time Eriko-sama met Yoshino-san and extracted that promise, then she didn’t understand the meaning of the message.

“To continue, the best if eaten by this date is... Ah, this year, November, last day of the month. These will be delicious if eaten by two months. But the best if eaten by date has no connection to us, does it? There probably won’t be any left over by tomorrow.”

Rei-sama’s comfortable laughter penetrated into Yumi’s heart. There was a connection there, Rei-sama.

Is that right? If it's November, it's the Intramural Kendo Matches.  
Rei-sama didn't know of it, the reckless promise that  
Yoshino-san made to introduce her to her sœur. ---So.

Best if eaten by, the last day of November.

That, and nothing else, was Eriko-sama's message saying, "I  
haven't forgotten the promise."