

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

キラキラまわる

今野緒雪

集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 30

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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-colored 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.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Twirl,

Twirl.

Spinning twirl.

Onnee-sama, friends, petit soeur.

That face,
a sparkling smile,
brightly glittering.

Definitely tomorrow and the day after,
probably for as long as they live, they will remember.

About today.

It was fun, they'll say.

Always.

Scattered Sunshine

Part 0.

A certain day in March (Sunday).

On that day, at 10:30am, the group of ten youths that had appeared, as though by prior arrangement, greeted each other sheepishly with “Gokigenyou.” It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that, amidst the couples and excited children that flock to amusement parks, this was the only group that didn’t look jubilant.

Part 1.

Just where to start this story?

Right, right, they had held their private farewell party for Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama after the send-off assembly for all the third-years yesterday, on Saturday.

The first-years had done party performances, they had danced and had a wonderful time, but of course that kind of joy could not last forever and it had ended when the security guard had cautioned them to leave as he did his rounds.

Such is life.

Everyone was finding it hard to leave, not wanting to say “I’m going home,” so it was probably just as well that there had been some external impetus. If not, they may have stayed at school until 7 or 8 at night.

One thing led to another, and as they were heading home it looked as though everyone would be joining Yumi and Sachiko-sama on their date at the amusement park the following day. They had decided that it was only proper that they should invite the other participants from the Christmas party, so had stopped at a phone booth near the school gates and called Takeshima

Tsutako-san and Hosokawa Kanako-chan.

“Huh? What? What do you mean?”

Tsutako-san asked, on the other end of the phone. Perfectly understandable. Even the people who had been present at the farewell party when Sachiko-sama had made her sudden announcement hadn't understood immediately.

She'd said that they were going to the amusement park tomorrow, so if anyone else wanted to come along they were welcome. However, they weren't going to arrange to meet so everyone was free to do as they pleased.

See, it'd make you question your hearing. It's not the kind of thing you'd usually be asked over the phone.

“You see.”

Yumi persevered with her explanation and, eventually, Tsutako-san started to (somewhat) understand. Although she'd apparently forgotten that the idea that they all go to the amusement park together had been floated during last year's Christmas party.

“I wasn't sure when it happened, but I do remember a conversation about going to the amusement park.”

Yumi was initially skeptical but decided Tsutako-san was probably telling the truth. After all, Tsutako-san had been the first to respond during the Christmas party when Sachiko-sama suggested that they all should go together sometime. She'd loudly and enthusiastically endorsed that idea.

“Although I'll have to find out if I can go once I get off the phone.”

Yumi responded with, “Of course.” Since everyone was free to do as they wished, there was no need for an RSVP or anything.

“So, is it okay if I bring someone else?”

As she was putting the telephone receiver back on the hook, Yumi thought that Tsutako-san was probably going to invite Shouko-chan.

Next she called Kanako-chan but she wasn't at home. Her mother must have been out as well, because the phone rang about ten times and no-one answered.

"I'll call her when I get home."

Touko offered, and they all agreed to leave it to her. Originally, Touko and Kanako-chan had seemed like natural enemies, always at loggerheads with each other, but at some point there had been a thawing in their relationship and they now had a quiet friendship. Even their mutual classmate, Noriko-chan, trusted Touko on this.

"What shall we do about Nana-chan?"

Shimako-san looked at Yoshino-san. It wasn't as though she was Nana-chan's patron, but since Nana-chan was the closest thing there was to Yoshino-san's petit soeur, it seemed like she should be the one to ask.

"About Nana – "

Yoshino-san hesitated. She glanced at Rei-sama, but then quickly looked away. In contrast, Rei-sama was looking directly at Yoshino-san. Staring, even.

"We were inviting the people who were at the Christmas party, right?"

Sachiko-sama asked Yoshino-san. Implying that they should obviously invite Nana-chan as well.

"But Nana's situation is a bit different, don't you think?"

Even if she was just about to graduate, Nana-chan was still a middle-school student. Their school buildings were located only a short distance apart, but the invisible wall that separated middle-school students from high-school students was both thick and tall.

"That's true..."

High school students taking a middle school student out with them. It did

make you question whether it was okay or not.

“And since it’s a private get together, she’d have to pay for herself.”

So they couldn’t just ask her without thinking about it. Yoshino-san’s hesitation had some merit to it. Even so, it seemed a shame that Nana-chan was the only one they weren’t going to invite.

“I’ll give her a call after I get home.”

There was unanimous agreement with Yoshino-san’s statement. It was better that the conversation occur somewhere quiet, rather than with everyone crowded around a telephone booth. And they were willing to leave it up to Yoshino-san to see how that conversation played out.

Yoshino-san was the one who thought the most about Nana-chan out of all of them. And everyone agreed that Yoshino-san was the one that Nana-chan thought about the most.

“Just for reference, what time were you planning on arriving at the amusement park tomorrow, Yumi-san?”

Yoshino-san asked as they walked past the school gates, the brightening of her demeanor as abrupt as the change in topic.

“What time ... ”

The truth was, they hadn’t yet decided on a specific time that they would meet. Yumi shot Sachiko-sama a glance that said, “What should we do?” and in exchange Sachiko-sama answered for her.

“I was thinking we’d be there when the park opens.”

Ohhh. Typical of Sachiko-sama, her fighting spirit wasn’t just constrained to the announcement.

“Copy that.”

Yoshino-san grabbed hold of Rei-sama’s arm with her right hand, and

gestured a salute with her left hand.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you didn’t copy that. Do you want to impose on Sachiko’s date right from the start?”

Rei-sama said, freeing her arm. She then flicked Yoshino-san on the forehead, telling her that she was getting a bit carried away.

“I was only asking as a reference – ”

“A reference, huh. And then we’d probably leave home in time to catch the same train as them, I suppose.”

It was very much like watching a lover’s quarrel – “We’ll be bothering them,” “If we run into them by accident then it’s no problem,” “Just because you say it’s by accident doesn’t mean it is.”

“I’d say there’s absolutely no chance of that happening.”

Yumi said, interrupting the Yellow Rose sisters.

“Well, I suppose the chance of us being in the same compartment is pretty small.”

After saying this, Rei-sama made an inquisitive face. Apparently she’d latched on to Yumi’s phrase ‘absolutely no chance.’

“Yumi and I are going by car.”

This time it was Sachiko-sama that spoke. Then, without a moment’s pause, Yoshino-san responded.

“Say what? You two are going to be chauffeured in one of the Ogasawara household’s shiny, black sedans?”

“No, no.”

Yumi shook her head and waved her arms simultaneously.

“So, a taxi!?”

As though any healthy high-school student would take a taxi when they went out. Not even the daughter of the elite Ogasawara family would do that.

“We’re going with Kashiwagi-san.”

Kashiwagi-san was a student at the neighboring Hanadera University. Even those who hadn’t driven with him had heard tales of his bright red car and dynamic driving technique.

“Whaaat?”

After the initial slump that greeted their exposition of the trick, and having some time to ponder Kashiwagi-san’s presence, Yoshino-san said, “Ooooooh,” as though playing along with a joke.

“So it’s not just going to be the two of you? Why are you three going?”

“No, it’s not us three. My younger brother is going as well.”

“Yuuki-kun too? What’s up with that?”

Adding Yuuki in while they were still trying to figure out Kashiwagi-san’s role was only ever going to lead to confusion.

“Is it a double date?”

Noriko-chan asked, joining in with the Yellow Rose sisters.

“Keeping it in the family?”

On the one hand you have Yumi’s younger brother, and on the other hand you have Sachiko-sama’s cousin. Neither would have been romantic.

Basically, it was all a part of Sachiko-sama’s revenge. She was trying to recreate the same circumstances as their trip in autumn so that she could correct her mistakes, and that meant inviting Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki.

She skipped over this, as it was a matter of pride, instead stopping the explanation by saying that the group that went last time had agreed to go to the amusement park again.

“Well, if you’re going in Kashiwagi-san’s car then I guess we won’t be traveling with you after all.”

Rei-sama chuckled at Yoshino-san. Well, that’s true. He wouldn’t be able to take everyone unless he had a minivan. Perhaps that was another reason why Sachiko-sama had said that everyone else was free to come and go as they pleased.

“We’ll have to have our own private get-together then.”

The competitive Yoshino-san was already looking towards Monday.

“What will you do, Touko?”

It’d be impossible to take everyone, but there was still room in the car for one more. She might even have heard about this before today, since their driver, Kashiwagi-san, was her cousin. And when they went in autumn, Kashiwagi-san had originally invited Touko and not Yuuki to accompany him.

“Don’t worry about me. I won’t know whether I’ll be able to go or not until I get home.”

“Ah, right.”

Already Yumi had pictured them going for a drive with Kashiwagi-san in the driver’s seat, Yuuki in the front passenger seat and the three Red Rose sisters chatting merrily in the back seat. But since they had only told them today about going out tomorrow it obviously wasn’t going to be as simple as that. The normal course of action for a high school student would be to get their parent’s permission. That’s what Yumi had done, talking with her mother and father about it.

“Ah. The bus.”

Shimako-san said softly. Looking down the road, Yumi saw a bus with “M

Station” on the front glide towards the bus stop. Everyone except Rei-sama and Yoshino-san suddenly broke into a run. Luckily there were some other students already waiting so they didn’t have to frantically wave the bus down.

“Well then, see you tomorrow.”

“Yep. See you there.”

As they called out, both those within the bus and those without were undoubtedly thinking, “Will we actually see each other?”

Tomorrow was Sunday, all across Japan.

On top of that, the forecast for the Kanto region was clouds followed by sunshine.

The absolute best weather for an outing.

Part 2.

Then, just like that, the evening had passed and today had arrived.

There was no need to consult the weather report; brilliant sunlight streamed in through the east window. It was already sunny, despite yesterday’s forecast of clouds followed by sunshine. Surely sunshine followed by sunshine.

“Regardless, I’m so happy to be going out I could just throw my hands up in the air.”

Yumi scanned the newspaper’s weather forecast section. The sunshine symbol was there for the whole day. The amusement park would definitely be packed.

“At least it’s not raining. They probably stop the outdoor rides during heavy rain, and when they start again you’d get wet riding on them.”

Yuuki said, his brow furrowed as he carried his bag down the stairs.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Yumi stretched and then smiled. She was going on a date with her onee-sama. It would still be fun even if it was raining. But it was sunny. So there was no reason to complain. Bring on the packed amusement park. They’d have a fun time chatting while they waited. – The more Yumi thought about it, the more her anticipation grew.

It would soon be 8 o’clock. That was the time that Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama had arranged to pick them up from in front of the Fukuzawa house. But because they were coming by car, they could be either earlier or later depending on traffic.

“Sorry, Yuuki.”

She called over her younger brother’s shoulder, as he watched a taped program and fiddled with the TV remote control. Without turning around, he answered, “What for?”

“For making you accompany my onee-sama.”

“Ahh.”

Yuuki switched off the TV and turned to face her.

“I was a bit worried because of the way it ended last time. It’s not like I don’t understand what Sachiko-sama was feeling. Besides, I don’t mind the amusement park.”

“...Yeah.”

Pleased that she had such a fine brother, Yumi instinctively patted him on the shoulder. He responded by running away, saying, “That feels kind of wrong.” When they were young, Yumi would always be grumpy whenever Yuuki followed her around. Although she was never actually mean to him.

“Hey, Yumi-chan. Are you going to invite Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san into the house? If you do, we should probably offer them tea, right?”

Her mother was taking off her rubber gloves as she walked out of the bathroom. Based on her appearance, she had just been cleaning the bathroom.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s okay.”

Yumi waved her right hand.

“If you’re worried about their car, they can park in my office car park, since it’s Sunday.”

Even her father was joining in. Both her parents had taken a liking to the superficially handsome, young Kashiwagi-san. As for Sachiko-sama, they admired her like a celebrity – initially because they were brainwashed by their daughter, but then voluntarily after their first chance meeting with her. Consequently, it wasn’t just the Fukuzawa children, but also their parents, that wanted to be good friends with Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san.

“That’s not the problem. There’s only enough time for them to pick us up if we’re going to make it to the park when it opens.”

If they were to invite them in to the house, it would take at least 30 minutes to an hour. Of course, there was a little bit of leeway in their travel plans. But that was there in case they got caught in traffic – they hadn’t planned to spend much time at the Fukuzawa household.

“Really?”

Even as she said this, her mother was swapping out the towels in the bathroom for the nicer ones that they used when they had company. Just in case, despite what she had just heard.

“When I see you two like that, you really do look alike.”

Her mother smiled, because they were both wearing their coats in anticipation of their visitor’s arrival. It hadn’t been noticeable when Yumi was just wearing jeans and a pink floral blouse, and Yuuki was just wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. But now that they were both wearing similarly colored denim jackets, it appeared as though they were going for the same look. Add to that

their similar looking faces, and the impression of a mass-produced product was apparently quite funny. Pointing and laughing at the two children you gave birth to was either innocence, or irresponsibility.

“I’ll go change.”

Yuuki sullenly ran up the staircase.

“Ohh, now he’s upset. Ahh, Yuuki’s so delicate.”

“Indeed. I wonder who he gets that from.”

The words, “Not from you, that’s for sure,” almost made it out of Yumi’s mouth but she was just able to contain them.

The Fukuzawa intercom buzzed at about the same time that Yuuki was making his way downstairs, having finished changing clothes.

“Hello.”

Yumi was waiting by the intercom, having heard a car pull up outside, so was able to press the reply button almost instantaneously.

“Ogasawara here.”

“Okay. We’ll be right out.”

Buoyed by her onee-sama’s voice, Yumi swung her bag over her shoulder and hurried to the entrance. Her mother and father followed her, as though that were perfectly natural. Obviously intending to offer their greetings.

Yuuki was one step ahead of her, his butt parked on the wooden step, tying the laces of his sneakers. The denim jacket had been swapped for a beige-ish synthetic leather pea coat, and Yumi’s now very different looking younger brother moved to one side so that she could put on her sneakers too. After tapping her toes into the shoes, Yumi hurriedly turned the doorknob and rushed out.

“Good morning.”

Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama were standing right in front of the door.

“Morning.”

“Thanks for coming today.”

It was regrettable, but had to be acknowledged. The impression that Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama gave was of a beautiful couple. In comparison... Yumi glanced at Yuuki as he walked past.

“Don’t mention it.”

On her side of the door was the raccoon-faced duo. Although the two parties may have been genetically quite different, it seemed that there were still some things in common: The beautiful people were wearing jeans and a jacket too.

Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san both simultaneously adopted an identical expression as their attention was drawn to the area behind Yumi. Without turning around, Yumi knew that her parents had made their entrance.

Our children are probably going to be a bother to you. No, no, not at all. After exchanging the standard pleasantries, they decided to make their way over to the car.

“Oh?”

This time it was the Fukuzawa household acting in unison.

“Kashiwagi-kun, did you buy a new car?”

Yumi’s father was the first one to ask. The car parked on the side of the road wasn’t his usual chilli red car.

“No. This isn’t mine, it’s grandfather Ogasawara’s car. He lent it to me, saying that I should have a more substantial car since I’m giving these ladies a lift.”

“The president of the Ogasawara Group’s car? Indeed – ”

Her father didn't say anything further, but was probably thinking, "It looks expensive." Yumi couldn't tell much other than that it was left-hand drive and the paint was either dark green or dark blue, but it seemed that the value of this automobile was immediately obvious to anyone with even a passing interest in cars.

"It's second-hand though."

Sachiko-sama said.

Right, right. Even Yumi could tell that it wasn't brand new, since there were some light scratches on the front and sides.

"For the time being, Yumi and Yuuki-san can ride in the back."

"Oh?"

Yumi said, a little dejected, as she had expected that she would sit in the back together with her onee-sama.

"I said it was just for the time being, didn't I? We'll swap seats en-route. See, there are cars coming from behind us."

"Okay."

Even if she wanted to protest further, it wasn't worth making a scene over. Reluctantly, Yumi climbed into the back seat with Yuuki.

"Well then, we're off. I'll make sure they're home on time."

Kashiwagi-san bowed to Mr. and Mrs. Fukuzawa then settled into the driver's seat, adjusting the position of the chair and the angle of the mirror. In the passenger's seat, Sachiko-sama fastened her seat-belt and said, "Okay Suguru-san," curtly giving him the signal to proceed.

After they'd turned the corner in front of the Kakinoki-san's house and could no longer see Yumi's parents waving them goodbye, Sachiko-sama said:

"I wonder if there's a street wide enough to park the car in around here."

“Huh?”

They’d only just set off, so why did they have to stop so quickly? Kashiwagi-san chided her, saying , “Sacchan,” before Yumi could ask this question. It looked as though he knew the intent behind Sachiko-sama’s statement.

“Hey, Yumi. Do you know anywhere?”

Sachiko-sama asked once more, completely ignoring Kashiwagi-san, so Yumi chose to give her preference.

“A wide road?”

When she looked to Yuuki for help, he had a complicated expression that was part anguish and part bewilderment.

“What’s wrong?”

They hadn’t gone a kilometre from their starting point. They hadn’t even made it to a main road yet. Kashiwagi-san was famous for his rough driving, but it was still a bit too early to be getting carsick.

“I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Yuuki whispered.

“Huh?”

Yumi thought she heard him say that he had a bad feeling, but that must have been a mistake. After mishearing his first statement, Yumi cupped her ear with her hand to try and focus on what her brother was saying.

“If it were up to me, I’d say we go to the amusement park like we are now, non-stop.”

Was what he said. So it looks like Yumi hadn’t misheard him earlier after all. Still.

“What do you mean?”

Yumi challenged him, not understanding what was happening.

“Yukichi’s bad feeling is probably right on the mark.”

Kashiwagi-san spoke matter-of-factly as he turned the steering wheel.

“How rude.”

Sachiko-sama said indignantly.

What, what?

Yumi gaze leapt from forwards, to diagonally forwards and right, to the right and back again, desperately trying to find some kind of hint. Even so, the conversation continued steadily, minus a single stranded member.

“All those who agree with staying like this and not stopping.”

In response to Kashiwagi-san’s statement, Yuuki gave a hearty, “Me,” and raised his hand.

“Okay, all those opposed.”

This time Sachiko-sama raised her hand. Yumi hadn’t raised her hand for either option, since she didn’t know what was going on.

“Two against one.”

“Yumi, you should side with me, your onee-sama.”

“Ah, but.”

How could she agree when she didn’t know what was going on. And siding with her onee-sama would mean voting to see Yuuki and Kashiwagi-san’s bad feeling realized.

“There were three valid votes.”

“Wait a minute. You can’t just say that Yumi’s vote is invalid. Someone who

doesn't understand can't be expected to make a decision just like that."

Well then somebody please explain clearly what's going on. It was all because they'd ignored her earlier cries for clarification.

"If Yumi-chan did understand what was going on, she'd probably take your side, Sacchan."

Kashiwagi-san laughed derisively.

"Well, who can say."

Still, Yumi started to question the accuracy of Kashiwagi-san's theory when Sachiko-sama grumbled instead of offering up an explanation.

Realizing that she was getting nowhere, Sachiko-sama took drastic action.

"If you don't stop the car, I'm going to pull on the wheel and we'll see where we end up."

It wasn't just an idle threat, she'd already placed a hand on the wheel. Kashiwagi-san's hands were at 10:10, in other words where the numbers 2 and 10 were on a clock's face, while Sachiko-sama's hand had darted in at about 4.

"Waaaah."

Yuuki cried out.

"Stop! Stop! I get it. I'll find somewhere we can pull over and stop."

The usually aloof Kashiwagi-san begged miserably. It was almost like he was some TV comic that had just been given an overinflated balloon. Which would make Sachiko-sama the balloon – as she was thinking this, Yumi suddenly realized how dangerous a position they had been in. This was a highjacking, or, more precisely, a carjacking.

Later, after quiet reflection, Yumi realized that Sachiko-sama probably wouldn't have gone through with her threat because, seated in the

passenger's seat, she would have come off the worst. However, she wasn't able to assess things that calmly in the heat of the moment.

Eventually, Kashiwagi-san spotted a gas station close to the main road and pulled in. He stopped at a pump and let out a sigh of relief.

"Hi there, fill it up."

After opening the window and instructing the attendant on what to do, he turned to Sachiko-sama.

"Don't be so unreasonable, Sacchan."

"Isn't it your fault for not keeping your promise, Suguru-san?"

Sachiko-sama took her hand off the wheel. Her recalcitrance in not removing her hand before now was incredible.

"I'm sorry Yukichi. I hope you'll forgive my cowardice."

Kashiwagi-san switched off the engine then turned to face them in the back seat.

"Not at all. You've worked hard, sempai."

"So you understand?"

"I think that fight told the whole story."

"Yukichi!"

"Sempai!"

The two guys high-fived each other. Yumi looked on questioningly.

"Quit your grumbling. Now, let's swap seats."

Sachiko-sama unfastened her seat belt.

“Huh? Swap seats?”

Yumi’s twin ponytails bounced around. That’s right, Sachiko-sama had said earlier that they would swap seats en-route. So that’s what this was about. Sachiko-sama had been looking for a place to stop because she wanted to sit next to Yumi as soon as possible.

(Huh?)

But, why would there be a bad feeling about that? Why would Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki oppose it?

“Oh geez.”

Kashiwagi-san unfastened his seat-belt too. Perhaps he was going to buy something from the gas stand. From memory her father would just open the window, hand over his credit card and that was it. As her mind was going in circles thinking about this, both Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama got out of the car.

“Huh? What about you, Yuuki?”

Her younger brother wasn’t moving at all, despite being told that they were swapping seats. Instead, he let out a small sigh.

“Say, Yumi. You have your moments of brilliance, but you’re usually pretty slow.”

“What?”

“You don’t understand what she meant when she said swap seats, do you?”

“You two are swapping seats, right?”

Yumi crossed her fingers over, indicating that Yuuki and Sachiko-sama would be swapping.

“Nope.”

“Huh? Then...”

Herself and Sachiko-sama swapping seats? That way Yuuki wouldn't have to move. But why would Sachiko-sama want her in the front seat?

“... There's one other combination.”

“Huh?”

Well that was no help. Kashiwagi-san was the driver, so he couldn't change seats, and there was no other combination involving the front passenger seat swapping with someone in the back seat. The two people in the back could swap, but what would be the point of that?

(Oh.)

Hold on a minute – an alarm was sounding somewhere inside her head.

(So why did Kashiwagi-san get out of his seat?)

The seat he had been sitting in was special because only someone with a driver's license was allowed to sit there. Yumi could happily sit there while they were stationary at the gas stand, but there was no way she could take hold of the wheel and drive out onto a public road. Both legally and practically. Naturally, neither could Yuuki. And – .

“Ah.”

Yumi suddenly had a flashback.

(How on earth!)

That had been her reaction when a driver's license was thrust in front of her. Back then, Satou Sei-sama was still a high school student.

“Huh!?”

No way. No way!

“Took you long enough.”

Sachiko-sama gracefully sat down in front of Yumi just as Yuuki muttered this. In other words, the two people in the front had swapped seats and Sachiko-sama was now at the wheel.

Part 3.

Her onee-sama sat down in the driver’s seat. Then she adjusted the seat position and the angle of the mirror. It was the same thing that Kashiwagi-san had done in front of the Fukuzawa’s house.

“O-onee-sama!?”

While all this was going on, Kashiwagi-san handed his card to the pump attendant and returned to the car, seating himself in the free space in the front – the passenger’s seat.

“Don’t worry Yumi. I’ve got my license.”

Ahh geez. That was the exact same thing that a certain someone had cheerfully said to her some time ago. Even the pose was similar. This time, the proffered license had a photo of the exquisite Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. Yumi felt just a little bit nervous.

“Umm. When did you get your license?”

“Let’s see. I didn’t come to school last Friday, right? That’s when.”

Indeed. She had been absent. And Yumi hadn’t inquired as to why.

“So this is what you had been uncharacteristically studying for – ”

“Oh, you noticed? I was going over a workbook for the written exam. Normally I wouldn’t have to study for that, but the test has all kinds of trick questions that I needed to familiarize myself with.”

So that explained what Minako-sama had referred to as ‘her eccentricities’ and why they had suddenly stopped after Friday.

“Did you go to a driving school ... ?”

“Yes, of course I did. I’ve been going since not long after the student council elections. I’d go in the evening on weekdays, during the afternoon on Saturdays and all day Sunday.”

So that was why she went home straight after school.

“Then, that’s why Kashiwagi-san was going over to the Ogasawara household – ”

“My, you were concerned about quite a lot of things.”

Sachiko-sama seemed pleased.

“I was her tutor. She was determined to get it on her first attempt, so I went over to help before her temporary license exam and final exam.”

“I didn’t say anything because I wanted it to be a surprise to you, Yumi.”

In that case, her plan was a huge success. Yumi was completely surprised.

“You don’t have to make that face, it’ll be okay. I made it from my place to your house without accident.”

“It would be a huge problem if there were an accident.”

So why would they change and have Kashiwagi-san drive them away from the Fukuzawa household when Sachiko-sama had driven there? It seems that was done so Yumi’s parents wouldn’t worry about an inexperienced driver driving them around. Yumi had no way of knowing for sure, but she suspected that there had been a bit of an argument about this, and it was only after Sachiko-sama had extracted the promise that they would switch at an appropriate time that she allowed Kashiwagi-san to drive. But Kashiwagi-san had become faint-hearted once the Fukuzawa siblings were in the back seat, thinking it would be safer for them to continue on to the amusement park

with him as the driver. Was Sachiko-sama's driving really that stressful?

"How long have you known, Yuuki?"

"Since my sempai sat down in the driver's seat."

"Out the front of our house?"

That was quick.

"If he had driven there, then he wouldn't have had to adjust the seat and the mirror as much as he did."

"Ah, was that it."

Five minutes earlier, Kashiwagi-san had adjusted the seat and the mirror so they were comfortable for him, in the same way that Sachiko-sama had just done. Because someone else had been driving the car just before. But only two people came to the Fukuzawa residence in this car, making it trivial to deduce the identity of the driver.

"Although I became suspicious when he said that Sachiko-sama's grandfather had lent them the car for the day."

Kashiwagi-san laughed at Yuuki's statement.

"I guess that was pushing it."

Kashiwagi-san had taken numerous young women driving in his usual red car. The ones Yumi knew about were Sachiko-sama and herself, Youko-sama and Touko. So why hadn't this car made an appearance before now?

The gas station attendants cleaned the car windows. There were three of them, and Yumi found it strange that they were doing such an incredibly thorough job. Initially, she thought it was because they were admiring Sachiko-sama's beauty, but they spent just as long on the rear windows. Apparently they were fascinated with the car itself. Was it really that rare an automobile?

“Is this Sachiko-san’s car?”

Yuuki asked.

“No. Didn’t I tell you? It’s my grandfather’s.”

“But her grandfather doesn’t drive. He bought this a month ago, for Sacchan.”

It was nominally her grandfather’s. However, it was essentially Sachiko-sama’s personal car.

After filling up the tank and returning Kashiwagi-san’s credit card, the attendants reluctantly stopped cleaning the windows.

“Umm.”

The Fukuzawa siblings nervously asked if Sachiko-sama was really going to drive the rest of the way there.

“It’ll be fine. She’s passed the license exam.”

Kashiwagi-san said soothingly, stifling any retort from Sachiko-sama. But there would be far fewer traffic accidents if having a license meant that you were a completely safe driver.

“Just take it carefully. After all, you’ve got your precious Yumi-chan on board. Right, Sacchan?”

“Of course.”

That was slightly reassuring. Still, even though Sachiko-sama had said that, they didn’t know what kind of a driver she was. Yumi knew that people could change when they got behind the wheel.

“Check front and rear.”

After pointing out the front and to the mirror, Sachiko-sama slowly started to drive. The attendants got out of the way and the next car pulled in behind them.

“Blinker.”

Instructed Kashiwagi-san.

“I know.”

Sachiko-sama grumbled after switching on the left indicator.

“Aren’t you noisy. I was just a bit slow turning it on that time.”

Yumi no longer wished she was sitting beside her onee-sama. Kashiwagi-san, with his year-long driving history, was the only one who could cover for Sachiko-sama’s faltering driving. To make matters worse, this car wasn’t fitted with something as convenient as satellite navigation. Kashiwagi-san, with the map spread across the passenger’s seat, had to rely on street signs to know where they were.

Still.

“You have to speed up, so we’re part of the flow.”

“Somebody said to drive carefully.”

After the Fukuzawa siblings went quiet, leaving everything to Kashiwagi-san, the two-person conversation gradually started to heat up.

“Don’t turn the blinker on so early.”

“But you said I was too late last time.”

“You have to time it just right.”

“Could you be quiet for a bit?”

This had probably gone on for the entire drive from the Ogasawara residence to the Fukuzawa’s house too.

“Ah – we had to turn right there.”

“Then you should have said so sooner.”

“But you told me to be quiet.”

“It was Sei-sama that said this, but you really do have a bad personality.”

“Or maybe it’s because you were rushing.”

Then, to top it all off, they got stuck in a traffic jam on the freeway, completing their foul mood. A sunny Sunday morning was the perfect time for an outing, after all. The congestion wasn’t anyone’s fault, but the extra irritation caused by inching their way along made for an intolerable atmosphere within the car. The Fukuzawa siblings tried to brighten the atmosphere by talking about cheery things, but no matter where they tried to steer the conversation to, the fatigue still remained.

So, not only did the Red Rose sisters, Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki arrive at the amusement park thirty minutes after its opening time, no-one was in a good mood when they got there either.

“We didn’t make it in time, even though we left home two and a half hours ago.”

Sachiko-sama muttered ruefully as she locked the car. This was the part of her personality that hated to lose coming out. Although it was unclear who she was competing against.

“Well, it hasn’t been half an hour since the park opened, so we’re not that late.”

Cheering up her irresponsible onee-sama may be a lot of work, but if her bad mood continued then today would be no fun at all.

“Anyway, let’s go and buy a ticket.”

Yumi took hold of Sachiko-sama’s hand and walked towards the ticket-counter, right next to the main entrance. There was a queue of about ten people in front of each of the windows. Looking around, she could see a surge of people heading this way from the train station. The sooner they bought their tickets, the sooner they could enjoy the rides.

Even so. Yumi started to feel dizzy, thinking about all the people that were going to the amusement park. After all, the people she could see now were just a small fraction compared to the people that had already entered in the last thirty minutes, and those that would come later. Probably.

“Oh?”

Even though they’d arrived massively late due to the traffic jam, Yumi saw someone she knew standing in front of the ticket counter.

“Yumi-san...”

The girl with braids dangling over her shoulders smiled weakly.

Frivolity and Self-Loathing

Part 1.

“Don’t tell me you were waiting here for us?”

Yumi asked in disbelief.

“It’s just a coincidence.”

Yoshino-san answered sourly. When Rei-sama appeared from behind them she greeted Yumi’s group of four with “Gokigenyou,” but seemed to be forcing herself to be cheerful.

“I wonder if they’ve been fighting.”

Even if Sachiko-sama hadn’t whispered this in Yumi’s ear, the tension that filled the two metre gap between the Yellow Rose sisters was obvious.

“They haven’t changed a bit. No matter how much time passes, they’re still acting like children.”

That was an incredibly morally superior position for Sachiko-sama to take, considering she had been bickering with Kashiwagi-san not that long ago. But, thankfully, it looked like those comments hadn’t carried to Yoshino-san’s ears. Still with a sour look on her face, Yoshino-san poked her thumb over her shoulder and said:

“The impromptu gathering’s still going on.”

When Yumi turned around, Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan were standing right behind her. Shimako-san and Noriko-chan were also visible, a short distance away.

“It seems they caught the same train here.”

Yoshino-san said. Although everyone had arrived at the amusement park half

an hour after its opening time, Yoshino-san's use of the word 'seems' implied they hadn't arranged this meeting.

"Were the trains running late?"

"I didn't hear anything about that."

So, at the very least, Yoshino-san and Rei-sama's late arrival wasn't because of the trains.

"But there was congestion during the bus ride."

"Hmm."

They hadn't made it in time to catch their intended train due to the slow-moving bus and had lost thirty minutes. It all fit together. Still, as Yumi watched the Yellow Rose sisters walking away, she was convinced that something else had happened on their journey here. If the problem was only that they were late because they got stuck in traffic, Yoshino-san would be more animated, saying things like, "They need dedicated bus lanes," or, "There needs to be more buses." In contrast, gentle Rei-sama would never get upset over something as trivial as a traffic jam.

But enough of that. Yumi, Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki each purchased a ticket with their own money.

Having said that, the decision that they should all pay their own way was arrived at only after a massive dispute. Sachiko-sama had announced, unprompted, that she would pay Yumi and Yuuki's share, since this was all so she could have her revenge. However, Yumi's parents were unwilling to stray from their principle that school students should each pay their own share, and the Fukuzawa siblings were unwilling to disobey their parents. In the end, they struck a deal where Kashiwagi-san would drive them, thereby letting the Ogasawara family cover the travel expenses (Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama obviously kept their finances separate, but Yumi's parents knew they were related). Back then, neither Yumi nor anyone else in her family had imagined that Sachiko-sama would be driving.

After buying an all-day pass, they waited by the main entrance for Tsutako-san, Shouko-chan, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan to join them.

“Oh.”

Surprisingly, it was only then that the White Rose sisters realized the other members were present. Shimako-san looked at her watch, then quietly said something like, “I wonder if we should go in.” They probably hadn’t expected to meet their friends here since they had arrived late themselves. Yumi had waved at them from the ticket counter, but apparently they hadn’t noticed.

Still.

(What, what?)

A pall hung over the area, as though they were holding a wake.

There should be more energy to a gathering of ten young men and women at an amusement park on Sunday. But this group seemed to have run out of fizz, like a soda can that had been opened and then left to stand for an hour. They hadn’t entered the park yet, and they were all like that. Even though they had been so enthusiastic yesterday evening.

They started by greeting each other with “Gokigenyou,” although no-one looked particularly happy.

The Yellow Rose sisters were fighting about something. Noriko-chan was acting reticent with Shimako-san around. Even Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan were strangely awkward. Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama were on-edge because of their bickering over traffic and driving, while the Fukuzawa siblings were exhausted from fretting over their respective seniors.

“... I suppose we should go inside.”

Even though Yumi was worried about her friends, they wouldn’t solve anything by standing there looking at each other. Since they had all arrived about 30 minutes late, they entered the park together, as though they had

planned to do this.

“Since it turned out like this, it’s a shame that Touko and Kanako-chan aren’t here as well.”

The amusement park date was always intended to be an optional outing, and if they happened to run into each other they could have some fun together. When they parted company last night, they hadn’t been able to contact Kanako-chan and Touko had said she didn’t know whether she would be able to come or not. If the park has just opened, they would have waited a while for Touko and Kanako-chan, but the park had already been open for thirty minutes so, assuming they intended to come, it was possible they were already inside.

“Surprisingly, they may have made it here when the park opened.”

“It’d be nice if we met them inside.”

Then let the Touko-and-Kanako-hunt begin!

“Ahh – the steam train’s running!”

Yoshino-san pointed and shouted just after they’d walked through the main gate.

“You, you, and you. Let’s go ride it.”

As for who Yoshino-san was proposing should go on the ride with her, it was Yumi, Shimako-san and Tsutako-san. In other words, all of the second-years from Lillian’s Girls Academy. By all rights, the first one to see Yoshino-san’s smiling face should have been her partner, Rei-sama, but she was being completely ignored. Yumi didn’t know what caused their fight, but the insinuation was quite obvious.

Noriko-chan and Shouko-chan were pulled in as well, following Shimako-san and Tsutako-san respectively. And then, just like that, Yoshino-san was in high spirits as she led the group of six.

“Yoshino. Yumi-chan’s here with Sachiko.”

Rei-sama was hastily chasing them, but Sachiko-sama said to her:

“It’s okay. We’ll all split up sooner or later, so we may as well have some fun together now.”

“Indeed. The steam train looks as though it can hold ten people riding together, so does anyone mind if we join in?”

Kashiwagi-san smiled as he grabbed hold of Yuuki’s arm. Yuuki shrugged himself free, saying he wasn’t a child, and walked alongside Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama. Maybe older women were his type.

“Oh look, they have bicycles for inside the park.”

“Ah. There’s a bear riding a bike.”

As they all traveled together, the conversation gradually picked up and the pall was lifted. There was no boisterous laughter, but it approached the liveliness of a Buddhist memorial service. Even Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san, by keeping a buffer of other people between them, were able to soften their mood. Since it was such an insignificant quarrel, there were unlikely to be any long-term repercussions.

In that case, perhaps Yoshino-san and Rei-sama didn’t want to be left alone just now. The White Rose sisters and the photography club duo didn’t really understand what was going on, but since they agreed to ride on the steam train they obviously weren’t looking to spend some time alone just yet.

Since the steam train could take over a hundred people at a time, it didn’t take long until it was their turn. Now the problem was who would sit where. Normally, the couples that came together would pair up, ie. the White Rose sisters, the Yellow Rose sisters, the photography club duo, the Red Rose sisters and the pair from Hanadera Academy.

Occasionally they’d shuffle things around, but at present they had no way of randomly assigning lots, and no-one would want to do a show of hands for who sat where.

“Yoshino-san, what do you want to do?”

Yumi asked the most problematic person directly. Thereupon.

“It’s okay. I’ll sit with Rei-chan.”

Was Yoshino-san’s response. The way she said it made it obvious that she didn’t want to be with Rei-chan, but that it was the lesser of two evils. That may be true, since she would be asked to explain if she sat with anyone else. Everyone had noticed that something was up, but Yoshino-san hadn’t said a single word about their fight. It must be something she wasn’t proud of.

So, they all boarded the steam train and sat down with their usual partner. Yumi was happy to be next to Sachiko-sama, but found herself glancing two seats forward to where Yoshino-san sat, out of concern.

As expected, Yoshino-san was completely ignoring Rei-sama on her left, instead looking only at the scenery through the window on her right.

Part 2.

The kindergarten aged boy sitting in the seat in front of her was constantly exclaiming “Wow!” and “Cool!”

At first he was excited just to be on a steam train, which he’d only seen in picture books before (apparently), then when it started moving he took great joy in the park scenery that coalesced around them, then called out reassuringly after confirming that his parents were sitting beside him.

(Ignorance is bliss.)

As she gazed at the scenery without noticing it, Yoshino let her own deep sigh join the rushing wind. It wasn’t that she found the boy annoying or foolish. If anything, it was closer to envy or nostalgia. Yoshino had been that ignorant and determinedly excited when she woke up this morning.

Yesterday, after it was determined that they would be going to the

amusement park, Yoshino couldn't stop herself from getting excited. Thoughts of going on the rides with Rei-chan, and what they would have for lunch, thrilled her – so much so that she awoke before her alarm clock went off this morning.

But despite that.

(How did things end up like this?)

Yoshino desperately wanted Maria-sama to tell her how she could turn things around, so that she could grab hold of Rei-chan's arm and innocently say, "Look at that," and "Wow," like the boy sitting in front of her.

Yoshino had arranged to meet with Rei-chan at 8:10am.

Having excitedly woken up over two hours before that, she had a leisurely breakfast, tried on the clothes she had picked out to wear last night, changed into a different pair that she thought might be better, then eventually went back to the first set of clothes. Despite taking such a long time to get dressed, there was still plenty of time left over.

Because she had so much free time, she started thinking unnecessary thoughts, which led to the cracks starting to form and the beginning of her sorrow.

"Hehehe."

Yoshino thought that her brain had probably melted from excitement. Upon reflection, it was obviously a mean-spirited practical joke, but at the time she was only thinking that it would be a bit of fun. She'd had the high spirits of a child in pre-school.

Yoshino finished all her preparations for going out, then at 8:05am got back into bed and pulled the blanket over her head.

When 8:10 rolled around and Yoshino still hadn't come out of her house, Rei-chan would enter the Shimazu house, and Yoshino's room, as usual.

(Yoshino, what are you doing? Wake up already.)

Just as Rei-chan pulls down the blanket:

(Buh!)

Yoshino, already dressed to go out, would poke out her tongue.

(Geeze, Yoshino.)

(Hehehe. Did I scare you?)

The two would look at each other and laugh. – Well, that was Yoshino's plan, anyway.

Still wearing her jacket and with the blanket pulled over her head, Yoshino started to boil, but she kept enduring it. A little bit of patience is always needed before something fun.

However.

No matter how long she waited, Rei-chan still didn't appear in her room. When she lifted up her blanket to take a look at the clock, thinking that perhaps it hadn't been five minutes just yet, Yoshino saw that it was 8:20am.

"Don't tell me Rei-chan overslept?" Yoshino thought as she got out of bed, but then she heard the sound of someone walking up the stairs, so she hurriedly got back in bed.

The sound of knocking on the door was quickly followed by the door opening.

Now, come to me.

Yoshino was waiting for the blanket to be ripped off her bed. Instead.

"What are you doing, Yoshino?"

The voice she heard was not Rei-chan's.

“Mother!?”

Naturally, when Yoshino pulled down the blanket the person standing there was the woman that had given birth to her.

“Where's Rei-chan!?”

“As she was leaving, she said she'd go on ahead since you weren't there on time.”

“Huh.”

“Hurry up and chase after her. Really, going back to sleep after you'd woken up so early.”

Explaining that she hadn't gone back to sleep would be a pain, so Yoshino said, “I'm off,” and flew out of the house. As she ran towards the bus stop, Yoshino cursed Rei-chan for making her do this.

Turning the corner, she caught sight of someone up ahead. The long, jeans-clad legs that poked out of the short, off-white trench-coat were moving briskly.

“Rei-chan.”

Rei-chan stopped walking when Yoshino called out to her.

“Why'd you go on ahead of me?”

Yoshino complained as she ran.

“Because you weren't there at the time we'd set. I waited five minutes for you.”

Rei-chan brazenly fixed Yoshino's bangs when she caught up. Damn it. It seems her hair got messed up while she was hiding under the blanket.

“But you usually come and get me.”

If Rei-chan were to say, “I’m sorry,”, then Yoshino was prepared to say, “It’s my fault too.” But that didn’t happen.

“Why are you acting so spoiled?”

When Yoshino heard that, it was like a switch was flipped inside her.

What’s wrong with that? After all, once Rei-chan had graduated, she wouldn’t be able to participate in their morning ritual of waking Yoshino up just in time to make it to school.

But Rei-chan didn’t agree. It was probably because she was graduating that she didn’t want Yoshino to rely on her anymore.

Perhaps it was due to their different positions. The one heading out on a journey wanted to cut off all ties, while the one left behind wanted to cling to them.

“Ahh!”

Rei-chan cried out. The bus had sailed past them right at that moment. There was no-one waiting at the bus stop. It didn’t look like anyone was getting off either, since the bus kept on going until it disappeared from view.

“Ahh.”

As she listened to Rei-chan’s despondent cry, Yoshino said:

“There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“There’s hardly any buses on a Sunday.”

Rei-chan scratched her head.

“This is your fault, Yoshino.”

“What?”

Sure, she hadn't been out in front of her house at the time they had agreed to, but that just meant Rei-chan should have come and got her. It had been Rei-chan's decision to wait five minutes, then leave without her, so she had no right to blame her. Even now, it was because of a choice she had made. If Rei-chan hadn't stopped when Yoshino called out to her, instead continuing to walk along in silence, she would have caught that bus.

“... Honestly.”

Rei-chan studied the timetable printed on the bus stop, then looked at her watch and sighed theatrically.

For argument's sake, let's say Rei-chan did make it here on time and Yoshino still hadn't come, would she have got on that bus?

That's cold, Rei-chan. Yoshino curled her lower-lip as she looked at Rei-chan's profile. If that's how it was going to be, then damned if she'd open her mouth until she'd received an apology.

The next bus wouldn't be here for about twenty minutes. Rei-chan didn't attempt to talk to her, so Yoshino remained silent as well.

When they finally boarded the bus, it moved at a sluggish pace. The only possible reason was that the roads were packed. Looking out the front window, Yoshino saw all makes of cars, both big and small, filling the road to the train station. Even when the lights turned green, there was no hint of movement.

“Yoshino.”

Rei-chan spoke, for the first time in thirty minutes. Thinking that Rei-chan was about to apologize, Yoshino responded with, “Yes?” and turned towards her. However, the next words out of Rei-chan's mouth were:

“Don't you have something to say to me?”

– That.

“Good morning, Rei-chan.”

Yoshino forced a smile.

“That’s not it.”

Rei-chan was waiting for something else, but Yoshino said, “That’s all,” and shut her out.

It’s a shame, but Yoshino wasn’t going to be the first one to say, “I’m sorry,” today.

As she absentmindedly watched the red light on the car in front of them, Yoshino thought, “At this rate, we’re not going to make it to the amusement park by opening time.”

Part 3.

They began their time at the amusement park with everyone riding the steam train together. When they disembarked, Noriko thought that it had been a splendid idea from Yoshino-sama.

At the very least, it had been for the White Rose sisters. Squeezed into that single carriage with the rest of the passengers, they felt the vibrations of the train track as they were quickly whisked around the grounds. The gentle caress of the wind coming through the open windows upon Noriko’s face had relaxed her. If it had just been the two of them, the situation would have seemed more serious, so much so that she would have been conscious of how she was breathing.

So when Yumi-sama had enthusiastically asked, “Who wants to go to the haunted house?” Noriko raised her hand without hesitation. She loved Shimako-san, and they really needed to have a proper talk soon, but for now she just wanted to spend a bit more time with her friends.

Shimako-san said, “I wonder if we should go too,” perhaps because she understood Noriko’s feelings. As usual, Noriko’s chest tightened when she saw Shimako-san smile.

Shimako-san had said that, “It’s not that big a deal,” but Noriko couldn’t set it aside that easily. But, while still not knowing what she should do, Noriko realized that there had been nothing she could have done all along. All she could do was take the hit, but she was running away to try and avoid that.

What had been her state of mind when she first discovered that Shimako-san was the daughter of a Buddhist priest? No matter how hard Noriko tried to remember, she couldn’t. Shimako-san’s secret had been announced to the whole school, making it no longer a secret, then they had become soeurs, and the quiet, peaceful days had piled up one on top of the other.

Certainly, there were still many things she didn’t know about Shimako-san. But Noriko had never considered that this would be one of them.

Some lively music intruded on Noriko’s thoughts. It looked as though a parade had started on Main Street. The group of friends she was walking with had paused to watch as well.

The characters in their brilliant costumes sang, danced and paraded. The spectating children waved at the bears and squealed with delight. Everyone seemed to be having fun.

Still, as the parade became more and more cheerful, Noriko became more and more depressed. Or perhaps her mood hadn’t changed from five minutes ago, it just seemed more or less pronounced depending on the excitement level of her surroundings. Like if someone had been walking along a flat road for a long time and suddenly there were mountains towering over them on each side, they’d think they were in a valley. That kind of thing. Probably.

(Was it a heavy burden for you?)

Even now, the words Shimako-san said to her about an hour ago lingered in her mind.

Shimako-san, standing right beside her and smiling as she shook the bear’s hand, seemed incredibly mysterious.

Noriko had arranged to meet with Shimako-san at the subway's ticket gate.

They would both be taking the same JR train-line to get there, but they had delayed their meeting because it was too hard to organize a rendezvous on-board a train.

Noriko disembarked from the JR train just after 9:10am. They had arranged to meet at 9:20am, so it was perfect timing. She looked around as she walked to their meeting place, thinking they both may have caught the same train, but when she got there Shimako-san was already waiting for her.

Since Shimako-san lived further away, she had probably left earlier to make sure she arrived on time. She might seem light and fluffy, but she was actually very diligent and earnest.

“Gokigenyou.”

After exchanging greetings, they walked towards the platform. From time to time they would go on outings to churches, temples and statues of Buddha together, but this was their first time going to an amusement park. Consequently, Noriko was a bit giddy with delight, although she wasn't aware of it.

“We're only changing trains once but it all looks so complicated.”

Shimako-san said, as she unfolded a map of the train lines in Tokyo's outskirts.

“It's alright. I know my way around here really well, so leave it to me.”

Noriko smiled, saying that, obviously, the reason she knew her way around here wasn't because she was always going to the amusement park. One of her relatives used to live in this area and they would often come and visit, and, as a child, she had often traveled to Tokyo alone to view various statues of Buddha.

“Alright, I'll follow you.”

Shimako-san said, quickly putting the map back in her bag. Noriko was

gladdened by that small gesture, which said, “I have faith in you.”

There weren't as many people on the platform as during rush hour on a weekday, but there were more than Noriko had expected. She thought there was no way that all these people would be going to the amusement park, but predicted that about two-thirds of them would get on the same train as her and Shimako-san. Since people usually faced in the direction that the train they wanted to catch was coming from.

The train arrived not that long after, and the number of people getting on the train was roughly what Noriko had predicted. A lot of people got off the train as well, so it wasn't too crowded. They could stand normally, without brushing up against other people.

They stood opposite the door they had used to board, beside the closed door. They'd have to take care when their door was open not to obstruct the people getting on or off, but while it was closed they could have a leisurely conversation.

“I wonder if everyone's coming.”

Shimako-san said softly as she looked out the window.

“It seems like Yoshino-san and Rei-sama will definitely be there.”

“I'm not sure about Touko and Kanako-san. I wanted to ring them and find out, but since it was supposed to be entirely optional I didn't feel like I should.”

Over the telephone it would be easy to mistake a simple question of whether or not they were going for an imposition.

“That's true. And the amusement park costs money too... Noriko, are you okay?”

Shimako-san's sudden inquiry implied that she had only just considered this. She was probably worried because Noriko lived away from her parents.

“I have money set aside for unexpected expenses, plus I still have some left

over from my New Year's gift."

She curled her index finger around to meet her thumb, making the OK sign. Her hobby of viewing Buddha statues didn't usually require much money, but there were the occasional massive spikes. Like when there was an exhibition of a Buddha statue that was only shown once every few years, at a place that was too far away for a day-trip, and she had to pay for travel and lodging. Consequently, Noriko was used to budgeting and keeping some spare cash on hand.

"In my case, I thought I'd be able to pay for it myself, but."

Shimako-san smiled ruefully.

"But?"

It seemed like someone else was footing the bill for Shimako-san's fun today.

"My father gave me a special allowance."

"Your father?"

Shimako-san's father was the chief priest of the fairly large Buddhist temple called Shouguuji, and friend of Noriko's boyfriend / partner-in-Buddhist-statue-admiration, Takuya-kun. He was a cheerful and funny guy, whether he was wearing his monk's robes or not.

"Strange, isn't it? If any normal girl were in my place, she'd be delighted."

"..."

Somehow or other, Noriko felt like she understood.

Shimako-san's father would feel more at ease with a daughter tainted by the world, rather than one who stubbornly brooded over becoming a nun. And, understanding that, Shimako-san had decided to gratefully accept his money and go out and have some fun.

"I guess you never pester your parents for things you want, Shimako-san."

Looking at her, you wouldn't think she had any worldly desires.

"You do, Noriko?"

"I do. For Christmas, I pestered them for a 10,000 yen photobook of statues of Buddha."

"For Christmas you wanted a photobook of – "

"Statues of Buddha. It's odd, right?"

"Perhaps. A little."

While they were both giggling, the train stopped and the door they were standing next to opened. The two of them stood back and watched as the train seemed to breathe, exhaling old passengers and inhaling new ones. Then the train's mouth closed, and it resumed its rattling journey. At that point, Noriko resumed their conversation.

"I want to talk to you about Touko."

"Touko-chan?"

Shimako-san cocked her head. That name had only been mentioned in passing in their earlier conversation. Noriko's classmate, the girl who may or may not be going to the amusement park. Someone who probably considered Noriko her friend.

"I asked Touko to tell me the details about her date with Yumi-sama. This was after the report had been published in the Lillian Kowaraban. I asked her casually, without thinking about it too hard, since they were now safely soeurs."

"Ohh."

"I thought the report was just an excerpt, but I was wrong. The places they went were all in there. Then I started wondering, did that mean that anybody could follow the same trail as them and have the same date. I can't explain it all that well, but the things that weren't written in the report – their

conversations and emotions – those would probably be completely different.”

Noriko asked herself, “What am I trying to say?” Certainly, when she started this conversation there had been something she wanted to say to Shimako-san. But the more she talked, the further it seemed she was getting from that, to the point where she had become trapped in a maze of her own words.

But Shimako-san didn’t hurry her, instead listening to Noriko’s words with a calm expression. Not dragging her forwards, just waiting nonchalantly by the exit. That kind of feeling.

“When she was a baby, Touko’s real parents both died in a car accident. She went to visit the location of that accident with Yumi.”

“Hold on a moment.”

Shimako-san interrupted her.

“Is this something you should be telling me?”

What Noriko had just blurted out may have been something she was told by Touko in confidence. It was therefore only natural that Shimako-san would want to confirm that it was okay.

“Yeah.”

Noriko nodded.

“Touko said it was okay if I told you. That she knew it was painful to keep things from your onee-sama.”

Actually, Touko had laughed. She said that *Rosa Chinensis* and Yumi-sama already knew, so there was no need to hide it anymore.

It seemed that, for Touko, the main question had been whether or not Yumi-sama knew about this. Since she had broken through that barrier and was able to speak openly with Yumi-sama, it was of no concern if the rest of her friends knew as well. If anything, she seemed revitalized by it, although that was a poor way of putting it.

“I see.”

Shimako-san nodded slightly, then her expression changed to one of understanding.

“If I had known that during the Christmas party, I could have had a different conversation with her.”

“Christmas party?”

Again, an old conversation was mentioned. About three months old, now.

“Back then, she asked if I would succeed my father in the family business.”

“Ahh – ”

That explains it. This time it was Noriko with the expression of understanding.

Touko had told her that her grandfather owned a hospital near the accident site and that her father had no plans to succeed him. Apparently she was thinking about shouldering the burden of the hospital in her father’s place. Shimako-san’s family ran a temple, so perhaps Touko asked because she thought it could serve as a reference.

“So, what was your response, Shimako-san?”

“I said I wasn’t sure, but thought it would be better if my older brother succeeded my father.”

“I see.”

Shimako-san had a much older brother. He was an enigma of a man, who at one point was a Buddhist monk but now occasionally made sweets (apparently).

“But even if I had known about the accident, I still wouldn’t have been able to offer any pertinent advice. Everybody is different, so my experience wouldn’t necessarily apply.”

At that point, Noriko equivocally said, “I guess so,” and let the matter drop. People who had lived long lives had all kinds of experiences so could more easily place themselves in the other person’s position, whereas someone who was only a little bit older wouldn’t be able to offer much advice. Noriko knew that was the prevailing view amongst the general population.

So Noriko returned to their earlier conversation. There was something she wanted to hear Shimako-san’s opinion on.

“I was useless. I’d blundered into this heavy conversation in a light, thoughtless manner. I didn’t know what I should have said to Touko – ”

Noriko was just as useless in this current conversation, although she hadn’t yet realized it.

She believed that Shimako would smile and warn her to show more discretion in the future.

Instead, what awaited her was Shimako-san’s serious face.

“When Touko-chan told you this, was it a heavy burden for you?”

“Huh?”

“Did you regret that you heard it, Noriko?”

Why was Shimako-san throwing these questions at her?

“I’m not sure. Why do you ask?”

Noriko really wasn’t sure of her true feelings, but what would Shimako-san’s reaction have been if she had said that it was a heavy burden and that she did regret hearing it?

Shimako-san wasn’t Touko. So why was she fixated on this?

Suddenly, Noriko's heart started hammering in her chest.

(What was it that Shimako-san had said about the Christmas party?)

She said, "If I had known that during the Christmas party, I could have had a different conversation with her."

("If I had known that" – what was the 'that'?)

That Touko wasn't really her parent's child.

(No way.)

Noriko looked at Shimako-san.

"It looks like I'm the useless one again."

Shimako-san silently turned and looked straight at her.

"To me, it's not that big a deal. So I was going to bring it up as a casual conversation, without thinking that it might be a difficult thing to hear."

Wait, don't just keep the conversation flowing. At least, not until she'd had some time to mentally prepare herself. Just as she was thinking this, Noriko realized she already had some inkling of where this conversation was headed.

"On top of that, I haven't found a way to tactfully broach the subject."

Noriko wanted to avert her gaze. To close her ears. But she couldn't. Shimako-san had already noticed.

"But I see you've already figured it out, Noriko."

"Shimako-san."

Noriko wanted to cry, not knowing what else to do. But that was the one thing she couldn't do. Noriko desperately repeated this to herself like a mantra. Shimako-san still hadn't said anything.

“Right.”

Shimako-san smiled.

“I’m not the child of my two parents.”

Noriko thought that it would have kept gnawing away at her mind if she had managed to evade this conversation. Therefore, Shimako-san’s choice was definitely the correct one.

Still, even if she had managed to deduce it, it was still a shock to hear the truth coming directly from Shimako-san’s mouth.

She was also shocked at the fact that she was currently shocked.

Noriko was thrown into confusion, questioning why she was shocked.

Regardless of whose child Shimako-san was, Shimako-san was Shimako-san and Noriko’s feelings for her shouldn’t change.

So then, why was she so upset?

Was it a feeling of pity that Shimako-san didn’t know her parents? Was it the shock momentarily overwhelming her sense of compassion?

A family didn’t have to be bonded by blood. There were plenty of parents lovingly raising non-blood-related children. Conversely, there were also blood-related families that were miserable.

“We’ll discuss this properly. Let’s get off the train.”

Shimako-san took hold of Noriko’s hand.

“Huh?”

“This is where we change trains, right?”

When the doors opened, the two of them were caught in the crowd of passengers getting off the train. Noriko looked up and saw the name of the

station and, sure enough, this was the place where they had to get off.

Even so, they both remained motionless for a while. After watching the other passengers get sucked into the stairway, they sat down on an empty bench.

“I know you’ve met my older brother. But, the truth is, ... there was another brother, older than Masafumi.”

Shimako-san spoke in past tense – ‘There was another brother.’

“He was my real father.”

“So then...”

The chief priest at Shouguuji was Shimako-san’s –

“My grandfather. Although they’re now listed as my parents in the family register.”

“What happened to your real mother and father?”

“They died. Much like Touko-chan, it happened when I was just a baby.”

“When did you find out about it?”

“I’ve always known about it – my parents explained it to me when I was very young. Perhaps they would have tried to hide it from me if my real parents had been strangers, but since their son was my father, it was bound to come out sooner or later.”

Traces of their dead son’s life undoubtedly remained in various places around the house. It would be hard to remove them all so that Shimako-san never saw them. It would probably be equally difficult to tell Shimako-san that he was her elder brother. And it would be nigh-impossible to keep that a secret in a place like their temple, with so many people coming and going. As the eldest son of the head priest, he would have been known to everyone in the community.

“So that’s why it’s not something that I find particularly worth mentioning.”

Like pointing at fresh leaves and teaching her that they were the color green. Or like teaching her that a priest was a job, much like a fishmonger or chauffeur. She had been taught that she had dead parents, and living parents. That was how Shimako-san spoke about it.

“Since it was all so natural to me, I never realized that it was such a serious topic. If I had known, I would have told you earlier. I’m sorry, Noriko.”

Noriko looked down and shook her head numerous times.

The reason it had never come up in conversation wasn’t because Shimako-san was hiding it, but because she wasn’t aware that it was special.

Even now, Shimako-san probably didn’t think of it that way. Despite that, she had adopted a serious expression and spoke about the matter as though it were of importance. Noriko felt like she was the one who should apologize.

But if she apologized here, Shimako-san would be even more conscious of her feelings. Therefore, she mustn’t appear gloomy.

“Noriko?”

Shimako-san was inquiring if she was alright, so Noriko smiled.

“I’m fine. It just took me by surprise is all.”

Noriko rose from the bench, indicating it was about time they left. If they waited around here too long then the next train would arrive and the platform would once more be full of people.

“Okay. Lead the way, please.”

“Leave it to me.”

Noriko nodded, took hold of Shimako-san’s hand and cheerfully headed towards the staircase.

Looking back on it, her cheerfulness has probably been a front to hide her confusion, a false bravado, as she hadn’t yet regained her presence of mind.

Even though Noriko knew the area quite well, and even though they got on the right train line, they caught the in-bound train rather than the out-bound train they were supposed to catch.

As a result, when they finally arrived at the amusement park thirty minutes late, Noriko was feeling doubly depressed. No longer able to squeeze out any more bravado, she had become reticent.

The bear from the parade that had been shaking Shimako-san's hand made his way over to Noriko, and patted her on the shoulder.

She couldn't hear what the man inside the bear costume was saying, but he seemed to be encouraging her to "Cheer up."

Those Two, On the Other Hand

Part 1.

Since it was a fairly popular attraction, the haunted house was quite busy.

The line of people waiting to get in turned back on itself numerous times, and the lady on duty told them it would be a thirty to forty minute wait.

(...Let's do it)

In a spot where she couldn't be seen by Tsutako-sama, Shouko psyched herself up. She was determined that this was where she would liven things up. Shouko wanted to avoid her esteemed photography club senior becoming bored – well, as much as possible anyway, given her usual emotional detachment.

“Tsutako-sama, did you see that bunny rabbit do a back-flip during the parade?”

“Huh?”

Perhaps this conversation was a bit too sudden. Tsutako-sama's eyes were wide from surprise. However, having started with this topic, Shouko had no choice but to plunge onwards.

“It had to be a man inside that costume. It must have been tough with those tights and bloomers, and that ribbon attached to its head.”

“Sorry, I didn't see it.”

Tsutako-sama said. And with that, the conversation came to a grinding halt.

“Ah, okay.”

Still, Shouko couldn't let such a trifling setback stop her. On to the next topic.

“So what did you think the differences between the twin piglets were?”

The amusement park had a pair of identical twin piglets as two of their mascot characters. Every day, there would be five differences between the two piglets. The park guests could then amuse themselves by finding those differences.

“I saw that the position of their buttons and the colors of their socks were different, but couldn’t find the other three. Then Rosa Gigantea told me that the brims of their caps had different shapes.”

Shouko turned her head around, trying to find Rosa Gigantea in the line behind her. But Rosa Gigantea wasn’t looking her way, instead engaged in conversation with her petit soeur, Noriko-san. Even though the group of ten had decided to have fun together, they naturally split into their own little groups.

“Add to that the shape of their tails and the fruits they were carrying.”

Tsutako-sama said.

“Their tails?”

“The older twin’s was curly while the younger one’s was straight.”

Ho ho. So she hadn’t been watching the bunny rabbit, but she had been paying attention to the pigs.

“And the fruit?”

“The older twin had a green apple, the younger one a pear.”

“Incredible.”

If it had been a red apple then it would have been easier, but the difference between a green apple and a pear was just too small. Shouko hadn’t thought that someone with such thick lenses in her glasses would be able to spot those differences so easily. Those must be the eyes of a photographer, able to capture everything in an instant. Very impressive.

(Just what you'd expect from the photography club's ace.)

– Danger. Danger. She had relinquished that role for today.

Shouko continued to chat with Tsutako-sama in a lively, perhaps even frantic, manner and before she knew it twenty minutes had passed. The line had been moving steadily and they had almost reached the entrance.

A sign by the door listed the rules for the haunted house, one of which was “No flash photography.”

“I wonder if anyone still takes photos in there, even without a flash.”

Tsutako-sama smiled, probably thinking she should have brought a specialized camera. Although if they were concerned about that, the rules could just say that photography was forbidden inside.

“I don't know. Although if they did ban it outright, people might be tempted to take photos just for the thrill of it. Then you'd end up with a situation like at concerts, where you have to hand over your camera on the way in.”

“That'd be a pain, if it came to that.”

Tsutako-sama thrust her hand into her pocket.

“Ah.”

Immediately after her little cry, Shouko concealed her “Ah.”

Her realization came too late as well.

They'd both forgotten, just for a moment, that the camera Tsutako-sama was searching for wasn't in her pocket.

Part 2.

She hadn't imagined that things would turn out the way they had. Last night, she'd received an unexpected phone call from Tsutako-sama.

“I don’t really understand, but ...”

Was how Tsutako-sama prefaced their telephone conversation. And the contents of that conversation were appropriately baffling.

Apparently Rosa Chinensis had announced that they were going to the amusement park tomorrow and that other people could come along if they liked. But it wasn’t really an invitation as such, since they weren’t arranging to meet, instead people could come and go as they pleased.

“When you said an amusement park, umm, you meant that place with the roller coasters and a merry-go-round?”

Shouko moved as far away from the phone’s usual position in the foyer as the cord would let her, making it to the staircase. Still carrying the handset, she sat down. Since she ended up here, she would have been better off putting Tsutako-sama on hold and getting the handset from the second floor. But Shouko didn’t want to keep Tsutako-sama waiting, and above all else was too intrigued to interrupt this conversation. She’d been excited ever since she heard her mother call out, “Phone call from someone called Takeshima-san,” and had leapt at the telephone receiver.

“Yep, that’s it. That amusement park. I got a call from Yumi-san not that long ago. It sounded like she was calling from a public phone, and I didn’t really catch all the details.”

“A phone call from Rosa Chinensis en bouton...”

So that would make this third-hand information. It would probably be impossible for Shouko to understand the full picture. Like in the game ‘Chinese Whispers,’ the further away from the source you were, the stranger the message you received.

“I was planning on going and I thought you might be interested, so I gave you a call. Even if we can’t get any good photos, we can still have fun at the amusement park.”

Shouko cherry-picked the phrases she wanted to hear, ending up with, “Going to the amusement park together would be fun.” Yep, it definitely would be fun. Shouko was elated, because that made it sound something like a date!

“I’ll have ... !”

Shouko shouted into the handset.

“Huh?”

On the other end of the phone, Tsutako-sama seemed surprised by the volume of her voice.

On Shouko’s side, her older sister, Katsumi, walked out of the living room and asked, “What’s going on?” Shouko responded with a look that said nothing was happening, and Katsumi gave a bored “Hmmpf,” before heading up the stairs. In other words, not only was Shouko’s telephone conversation an annoyance but so too was her location on the stairs.

“... Pardon me. I’ll have to ask my parents.”

Speaking in a quieter voice, Shouko corrected herself.

Shouko was, by and large, an honest person. Asking her parents meant they might forbid her from going, but she didn’t have the nerve to go without asking for permission.

“I guess so. Since it’s tomorrow it’s quite sudden, so you’ll have to talk it over with them.”

Then Shouko realized she would also have to consult the contents of her purse.

(Let’s see.)

Having fun usually costs money. Shouko tried to remember what the entrance fee was for the amusement park, but couldn’t. Until now, she’d only been with her parents.

(I wonder if there's enough left from this month's allowance.)

Suddenly, she pictured the contents of her purse. Her New Year's money had been spent on a camera and a book on photography.

(I'll have to dip into my bank account.)

After thinking this, she realized something else.

(Tomorrow's Sunday, the bank won't be open.)

Shouko considered asking her parents for an advance on her allowance, but discarded the idea. It seemed more likely that they would just forbid her from going to the amusement park in that case. Her position was stronger if she could say she was using her own money.

“Shouko-chan? Do you want me to call you back?”

“Ah, okay. No, wait, I'll call you.”

Then someone prodded her in the back.

“Huh?”

Turning around, Shouko saw that her older sister had reappeared. Sitting two stairs further up, looking like she wanted to talk.

“Umm, Tsutako-sama. Could you excuse me for just a minute.”

Shouko pressed the ‘hold’ button. Her older sister had a strong personality, but was generally straightforward. She wasn't the type of person to try and childishly disrupt someone else's phone call, so the conversation would probably be pretty quick.

“What is it?”

“Here.”

Shouko's sister was offering her a thin envelope.

“You can have it.”

“Huh?”

Initially Shouko thought it might have been money, but in that case surely her sister would have said ‘borrow’ rather than ‘have.’

Still wondering what was inside the unmarked envelope, Shouko opened it and withdrew two slips of paper.

“How did you get these!?”

Shouko cried out, loudly. She could tell what they were from a single glance. The words ‘All-day Pass’ were printed over a picture of the amusement park’s mascots laughing. The thing that Shouko most desired at this moment. Her sister must be a magician, or an ESPer.

“I won it in a contest about six months ago, but then forgot about it. I was really aiming for the next prize down – a pre-paid card for a bookstore – so it was still a loss for me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I wouldn’t go anyway. It expires at the end of March, so you’re only just in time.”

“Thank-you, Katsumi.”

Shouko impulsively hugged her sister, who smiled awkwardly and said, “You shouldn’t keep Tsutako-san waiting,” before disappearing once more into the living room.

“I’ll go! I should be able to go!”

After pushing the ‘hold’ button, Shouko spoke cheerfully into the handset.

“Your parents are fine with it?”

“Ah.”

Persuading them would be her next task.

In the end, Shouko's parents agreed to let her go to the amusement park fairly easily, especially after her older sister had, unusually, put in a good word for her. It seems the fact that she was going with older students from her school counted in her favor too. Since the friends of her straight-laced graduating older sister were themselves mostly straight-laced and studious, her parents had apparently decided that 'Lillian's student = serious and diligent'. Even in this, her sister had played a role.

Of course, that's not to say that Tsutako-sama wasn't serious or studious. But a 'camera freak' wasn't quite the same as an 'honors student.'

Shouko arrived at the JR station where she was to meet Tsutako-sama about twenty minutes before their agreed time, which was five minutes earlier than Tsutako-sama.

"Shouko-chan."

When she turned around, she heard the sound of a shutter clicking and was dazzled by the flash. She'd had no time to compose herself for this surprise attack.

"Hehehe. Gokigenyou."

Shouko hated to be photographed, so this was Tsutako-sama's signature method for getting 'nice photos' of her.

"Go-gokigenyou."

"You're looking very grown-up today."

"Oh?"

It wasn't an outright compliment like saying she was pretty or cute, but it still made Shouko's heart flutter. Actually, it was a bit embarrassing. Since she hadn't been out with Tsutako-sama in quite a while, Shouko had borrowed

her older, taller sister's spring coat. When viewed dispassionately, that slight over-extension, combined with the over-eager way she had shown up so early, were actually quite amusing.

The clothes that Tsutako-sama wore effortlessly – the jeans, T-shirt and jacket that looked like a jersey, seemed far more stylish. At the very least, they were better suited to the amusement park.

Just as she was starting to feel depressed, the shutter clicked once more.

“But that doesn't really suit you.”

That single phrase was enough to bring her back from the depths. Simple, but effective. It was such a pointless thing for Shouko to beat herself up about.

“So, shall we go?”

Tsutako-sama put the small camera in her pocket then pointed towards the staircase. Since they met by the entrance gate, they wouldn't have a chance to buy a ticket here. Shouko had used her commuter pass when she entered, intending to pay any excess when they arrived at the amusement park.

Even though it was Sunday, the station was still incredibly busy. A train had probably just arrived, as the people coming up the stairs from the platform spilled out across the line that demarcated the ascending and descending sides of the staircase. They found a gap at the edge of the wall of humanity and carefully descended the staircase.

“It's been a while since we last went out together.”

“Yeah.”

The last time was for New Year's. Shouko had worried about inconsequential matters, such as where they should go or if they should meet at school on a Sunday. However, she'd since realized that when they met up at odd times it was usually because Tsutako-sama wanted to take someone's photo. Today was probably no exception, despite what Rosa Chinensis had said, and Shouko was fine with that. Because she liked the camera-toting Tsutako-

sama, and wanted to spend time with her. And if she was satisfied with that, then what would it be called if not a date.

” – Right. So I have to be upbeat,” Shouko thought to herself. However, her introspection made her oblivious to what was happening right in front of her.

“Watch out!”

Tsutako-sama, walking right behind her, shouted. By the time Shouko had noticed, a suitcase-sized sports bag was directly in front of her eyes.

Shouko couldn’t think of any way to escape. And by the time she would think of one, it’d be too late. She’d have to rely on instinct, and even then it would be close.

So, idiotically, Shouko closed her eyes, unable to do anything else. And then, a miracle happened. Shouko didn’t do anything, but some outside force moved her body, just a little.

Opening her eyes after the light impact, Shouko saw Tsutako-sama standing right beside her. Well, it was probably more accurate to say that Tsutako-sama was the meat in a Shouko and wall sandwich.

“Sorry.”

The sports bag apologized. Ah, no, it was the tall guy with the sports bag hanging over his shoulder. He’d been looking the other way as he flew up the stairs, right until the point of impact with Shouko.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

The guy with the sports bag asked, looking at Shouko and Tsutako-sama.

“I’m fine, but – ”

Shouko looked at Tsutako-sama. Tsutako-sama had probably taken the impact with the wall in order to save Shouko. If anyone was injured, it would be her.

“I’m fine too.”

Tsutako-sama shook her right arm, which had made contact with the wall, as she said this. Shouko let out a sigh of relief. If Tsutako-sama had been injured trying to save her, all the apologies in the world wouldn’t be enough to express the regret Shouko would have felt.

“I’m really, really sorry about it.”

The guy with the sports bag bowed to them a couple of times, then walked off.

“Thank-you.”

Shouko formally thanked Tsutako-sama after they’d made their way through the crowd on the staircase and down onto the platform. She shivered when she thought about how things could have turned out if she’d taken a direct hit to the face. Ending up with a nosebleed may have been getting off lightly. If she had been really unlucky, it may have required some stitches to her face.

“Don’t mention it.”

Tsutako-sama smiled. Then, as though she’d just remembered something important, Tsutako-sama started fidgeting.

The answer came before Shouko had a chance to inquire.

“I’m sorry, Shouko-chan. Do you mind if we take a detour on the way to the amusement park?”

“Huh?”

“It seems something’s not okay after all.”

“Oh.”

So she’s injured after all!? That was the conclusion that Shouko jumped to.

“No, it’s not me.”

Tsutako-sama held out the precious camera that had been in her pocket.

They stopped at a station about halfway to the amusement park – geographically it was still in the city and the station building was impressive. However, after leaving the main road in front of the train station and walking for about five minutes, they came to an area full of narrow alleyways and old buildings.

Tsutako-sama's goal was a camera shop somewhere in this area. Shouko had been told that she could wait at the platform, but she pressured Tsutako-sama to let her tag along since she didn't have a fixed-destination ticket. Even if she did have such a ticket, she probably would have followed Tsutako-sama out through the gate anyway. Since the camera had been sacrificed for her sake, it would have been inexcusable to stand idly by.

"I'm so sorry."

Shouko repeatedly apologized while they walked.

"I told you not to worry about it. It wasn't your fault."

Shouko stubbornly persisted, even though she knew Tsutako-sama was probably finding it annoying. She couldn't think of anything else to say as they walked down the road, and it was less frightening than silence.

"But that camera's more important to you than life itself."

At which point Tsutako-sama burst out laughing.

"My life is waaaaay more important to me than a camera. And so are you, Shouko-chan."

Shouko should have been happy hearing this, but she wasn't.

"Those kind words are tough for me to accept right now."

It would have been better if Tsutako-sama had voiced her displeasure, saying

something like, “You should have been watching where you were going,” or, “That camera was expensive.” However, it was precisely because Tsutako-sama would never think of saying those things that Shouko loved her. Probably.

“Then I’m in the wrong, for putting you in that position.”

“Not at all.”

“Let’s stop this. Why don’t we say this makes us even for the amusement park ticket you gave me earlier? Look, we’ve arrived.”

Tsutako-sama stopped in front of a small building.

“What is this place?”

It looked somewhat like an old house, but its street frontage was unlike that of a normal house. The sliding door made it look like one of those old-time candy stores shown on TV, although without a glass inset. The upper half of the door, which should have been glass, looked like it had been filled in. Finally, the street frontage was very narrow.

“This is my uncle’s store. He runs this place as a hobby.”

Tsutako-sama opened the door, which made a loud rattling noise. Upon closer inspection, Shouko saw the words “Takeshima Cameras” written on the door. A casual glance revealed nothing, as the lettering was largely the same color as the door.

“Uncle.”

Shouko followed Tsutako-sama into a room that was, for a store, unbelievably poorly lit.

“Uncle.”

There was no response.

“He might be out.”

“If he were out, he would have locked the door. And since he knows I’m his customer, he’s probably taking his time. If it were someone he didn’t know, he would have been out right away. Regardless of what he was doing, even if he was on the toilet.”

“Ah.”

Just as Tsutako-sama had said, about five minutes later a middle-aged man appeared in front of them.

“Sorry about leaving you in the dark like that.”

The middle-aged man flipped the light switch as he was speaking. The gloominess must have been an energy-saving mode for when he wasn’t there.

“Oooh.”

Looking around the brightened store interior, Shouko saw that both walls of the narrow corridor-like space were lined with shelves full of cameras. Antique cameras, that she had only recently read about, were lined up alongside strange looking objects that Shouko could only assume were also cameras.

While Shouko was admiring the items in the glass case, the store owner asked Tsutako-sama:

“Who’s this young lady?”

“A junior from the photography club. Shouko-chan.”

“Ah, I’m Naitou Shouko. A pleasure to meet you.”

Shouko hurriedly turned around and bowed. She had been so engrossed, she’d forgotten to greet Tsutako-sama’s uncle.

“Welcome to my store.”

He smiled at Shouko beneath his beard before turning to Tsutako-sama and asking, “What happened?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I can tell just by looking at you that you’re here because something happened.”

“That’s what I’d expect from my uncle. Actually, it’s about this.”

Tsutako-sama held up her camera towards her uncle.

“Ah. Well, I can see that it’s obviously broken.”

He took the camera and shook it lightly, the strange sound coming from within apparently confirming his suspicions.

“Can you fix it?”

“Hold on a minute.”

Tsutako-sama’s uncle said, before withdrawing deeper into the store with the camera. No matter how big stores were, they always had deeper areas.

“This place looks like a museum.”

Shouko said to Tsutako-sama.

“Pretty much. He only stocks rare cameras, so there’s not a lot of turnover. Well, it’s not like he never sells anything.”

“So it’s a hobby?”

“From time to time he’ll do some repair work on old cameras as well, but that’s about it. He has another job that he does for a living, which is why he can do this.”

Tsutako-sama’s uncle returned soon after.

“Nothing I’ve got back there will work. I’ll have to order a part in. It’ll take about a week to fix it.”

“I see.”

Tsutako-sama looked down in resignation.

“It’s a shame. Well, since you came all the way here, the least I can do is offer you some tea. I’ve got some Youkan jellies to go with it too.”

Tsutako-sama’s uncle pointed behind him with his thumb, but Tsutako-sama declined by shaking her head.

“We’re on our way somewhere.”

“Is that so? And I suppose you were planning on using your camera when you got there.”

“Well, yeah.”

Tsutako-sama owned a number of cameras, but that was the only one she had brought along today. She lived too far away to return home and get a new one, and they’d already spent enough time on the train today.

“I’ll lend you one of these if you’d like.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Are they a bit big for you?”

“... The price-tag is.”

Listening to their conversation, Shouko thought to herself:

(Now would be the time, if I’d brought along my reasonably priced camera.)

It was about then that Shouko’s confidence began to falter.

(Why didn’t I bring my camera today!?)

She was in the photography club. Tsutako-sama had probably invited her with the intention that they would go and take photos together.

(Idiot, idiot, idiot!)

Why had she only realized now, when it was too late.

“So, where are you going?”

Uncle Takeshima asked.

“The amusement park.”

“Oh, the amusement park.”

He smiled to say, ‘That’s nice,’ before continuing his soliloquy.

“Still. The amusement park’s not really a place you go to take photos, it’s a place you go to have fun, right?”

Then, suddenly, he turned to Shouko.

“The photography club – there’s no rule that says its members have to carry a camera with them everywhere they go, is there young lady?”

“Ah, no.”

Shouko answered promptly, but then thought it through.

” – but how did you know?”

Both uncle and niece responded at the same time.

“Because I’m camera mad.”

“Huh?”

“I love cameras so much, that I have this sense that goes ‘beep beep beep’ whenever a camera’s nearby – like a fishfinder or a wiretap detector.”

Shouko doubted this was true, but decided to humor him.

“So is it hereditary? Do you have it too Tsutako-sama?”

“As if. You have to take my uncle’s stories with a grain of salt. He just has good intuition.”

“Ah.”

Still, it was amazing that he hit upon the fact that Shouko hadn’t brought a camera with her, despite being in the photography club. Although it was equally amazing that Shouko hadn’t brought a camera with her, given that she was in the photography club.

“What do you say, Tsutako? It looks like the gods have decreed that today is a camera-free day. Are you up to the challenge of going the entire day at the amusement park without taking a photo?”

“That’s impossible.”

Was Tsutako-sama’s immediate response. She would probably know herself better than anyone else. Shouko rated the possibility that Tsutako-sama wouldn’t be able to make it through the day at 80, although she was less sure about what total that 80 was out of.

“Well, how about playing a game with your uncle then?”

“A game?”

“Right, a game,” uncle Takeshima reiterated, nodding his head.

“If you’re able to do it, then I’ll cover the cost to repair your camera, including the parts.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then you’ll have to pay for the repairs.”

Well that was a strange development. Shouko decided to keep her mouth shut and watch how this played out.

“I can see how I would gain from winning, but you don’t get anything out of it, uncle. How odd to have a game where only one side benefits from winning.”

“Quite the contrary – this game isn’t going to cause me any pain. I’ll be sitting here in my store laughing while you’re out there suffering.”

“... What are the rules?”

Tsutako-sama seemed quite interested. Was the cost to repair her camera really going to be that high? Or was her personality such that she wouldn’t back down from a challenge? Shouko thought that if it was the former, she’d feel bad if she didn’t pay part of the cost. If it was the latter – well, all she could do was cheer Tsutako-sama on.

Tsutako-sama’s uncle said, “Hold on a minute,” then rifled through several desk drawers before finding what it was he was searching for. It obviously wasn’t an antique camera like the ones lining the walls, but instead a small camera, about five or six years old.

“Will you be able to walk around with this, without using it?”

Having received the camera, the first thing Tsutako-sama did was start pressing buttons, including the shutter button. But it looked like there was no film in the camera so, obviously, it didn’t take a picture.

“If the cravings get too bad, then you can use it. I’ll even let you borrow some film and the camera case.”

Basically, Tsutako-sama would lose the game if, when she returned the camera, she’d taken a single photograph.

“Did you consider that I could just use up all the film and replace it with another roll of the same brand? Or I could just leave it alone and buy a disposable camera from a convenience store?”

“You’re not that kind of a girl.”

With that level of trust shown by her uncle, there was no way Tsutako-sama

could cheat now. Well, there was some truth to what uncle Takeshima had said – Tsutako-sama was the kind of person who felt a greater sense of defeat from cheating than they did from actually losing the game.

“I’ll take you up on that challenge.”

Tsutako-sama grinned. Uncle Takeshima took back the camera and put a roll of film in it. He slowly turned towards Tsutako-sama and Shouko, then quickly pressed the shutter button.

“There, now you’d better not break it.”

Clever. By the time Shouko had noticed the lens, the photo had already been taken.

“Umm.”

Shouko called out to Tsutako-sama’s uncle, who was wandering off to find the camera’s case.

“That photo you just took. If Tsutako-sama wins the game, can I have it?”

“Huh?”

“... Umm. I don’t have a photo of the two of us together.”

Uncle Takeshima responded with a bright smile and said, “Ahh, I see,” to Shouko’s hesitant request. The photography club were usually out taking photos together, but it was rare that they would be the subject of a photograph. And, since he was her uncle, he probably knew that Tsutako-sama didn’t like having her photo taken.

“No matter who wins, I’ll give you a print of it, young lady. As a chaperone’s fee.”

“Thank-you.”

Shouko bowed deeply for a full ten seconds, during which time uncle Takeshima returned with the camera case. Apparently he’d found it almost

immediately. He'd already put the camera into the black synthetic-leather case.

"Don't just carry it around in your pocket."

Tsutako-sama hadn't said anything about how her camera came to be broken, but her uncle seemed to have figured it out anyway.

"I'll put it right at the bottom of my bag, then there's no chance I'll take it out."

"Good idea. If you open the case, you'll have no chance of stopping your fingers from pressing down on that shutter."

Tsutako-sama opened her shoulder bag, and uncle Takeshima forced the camera case down to the bottom.

"Good luck."

After that, they retraced their steps back to the train station.

Putting an end to their stopover, they again boarded the train. It eventually arrived at the amusement park, 30 minutes after they had originally intended.

Tsutako-sama said that she'd be fine, since she didn't usually have her camera with her during class or on the way to school, but Shouko saw through that.

Occasionally, Tsutako-sama's fingers would drift into her pocket, searching for her camera. Then she would become aware of what she was doing and jerk her hands back.

Shouko was reminded of when her older cousin would come to visit. He was forbidden from smoking at their place, but his restless fingers would occasionally search for a cigarette. And then he'd look either slightly irritated or depressed.

Tsutako-sama was showing the same symptoms.

It was probably easier for Tsutako-sama to accept defeat when her camera was broken, because there was nothing she could do about it. But it was much harder for her now, consciously restraining herself from using the camera that she had.

Part 3.

The amusement park's haunted house started out with an area for on-foot free exploration, but part way through it turned into a ride with small, three-person buggies. People who weren't familiar with the haunted house, or weren't paying close attention, would invariably become separated from their companions.

"What should we do?"

Yumi asked, at the exit.

"Let's see."

Responding to her was, of course, her onee-sama. They'd been holding hands the entire time they explored the haunted house, then both went in the same buggy. There was no way they were going to get lost.

"I did see Rei-san and some of the others get in a buggy ahead of us."

Kashiwagi-san said, adopting a contemplative pose.

"Sorry, I didn't have time to see where anyone went."

Yuuki muttered. Although the ghosts and monsters were designed to scare little children, it looked as though he had been completely terrified.

Even so, it was admirable that the two guys had stuck together all the way through the gloomy, disorienting haunted house, much like Yumi had with her onee-sama. It's not like they were holding hands the entire way, right?

Realizing her train of thought wasn't heading in a good direction, Yumi stopped that line of questioning.

Alright then. Standing here, now, in the vicinity of the haunted house's exit were four people: Yumi, Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki. So Yumi's question of, "What should we do?" was really asking whether they should wait there a little longer to see if anyone else joined them, or whether they should move on and go somewhere else.

If they waited around, they may meet some more of their companions. But they didn't know whether or not there was anyone behind them, so it was a bit of a puzzle. Kashiwagi-san had just stated that he saw Rei-sama and some others (probably Yoshino-san) ahead of them, so at the very least they knew they weren't the first out of the haunted house. But the question of whether the White Rose sisters and the photography club duo were behind them or not still remained – .

"Let's go."

Sachiko-sama had decided.

"The original idea was that everyone was free to come and go as they pleased. And since Rei's group has gone on ahead, there's no need for us to wait for the others, right?"

Rei-sama's group had probably moved on because they didn't know whether or not anyone else was still in the haunted house. The White Rose sisters and the photography club duo would probably go their own way too if they didn't find everyone waiting when they exited the haunted house.

Having said that, it's not like Yumi and Sachiko-sama were about to bid farewell to the Kashiwagi/Yuuki pair. The four people standing here formed a single group. The 'Autumn Amusement Park Revenge' group.

Sachiko-sama still held the keys to the car she had driven here, so Kashiwagi-san was probably quite anxious to make sure he was in the passenger's seat on the way home. In other words, the two couples were in the same boat.

“What time is it?”

Hearing Sachiko-sama's question, Yumi looked at her wristwatch.

“Ah, it's just after one.”

“I'm feeling a bit hungry.”

“Shall we go and eat?”

They walked off, hand in hand, the two guys trailing after them.

“Don't go deciding these things without asking us.”

Yumi completely ignored Yuuki's complaint. There was no way he wasn't hungry, despite his protest. Yumi had distinctly heard his stomach rumbling not that long ago.

Hearing the screams coming from the roller coaster, Yumi looked up at the sky.

It was nice weather.

Had Touko really made it to the amusement park?

Part 4.

On the other hand.

Touko and Kanako had made it to the amusement park.

Winding back the clock a little while.

Their loss of time due to an unexpected problem when they were supposed to meet (they were both waiting on opposite sides of the ticket gate!) could only be described as unfortunate. Consequently, when they arrived at the amusement park ten minutes after opening time they had no way of knowing they were the first ones to arrive, so they hastily bought their tickets and entered the park. Since they hadn't told anyone whether or not they were going, they simply assumed that the others had gone into the park ahead of them.

Anyway, they were at most ten minutes late. Touko joked that with a bit of searching they should be able to find the others straight away.

Sachiko-sama and Touko's onee-sama would definitely be there, as would Rei-sama and Yoshino-sama. In their discussion yesterday, Rosa Gigantea and Noriko had been leaning towards going. Oh, right, Suguru onii-sama and Yuuki-san would be there as well, making it a fairly large group. They would stand out when they were all walking around together, and it would be easy enough to find the group by spotting any one of them lined up for a ride.

Looking back on it later, their hypothesis had seemed reasonable enough but their search had failed to find any sign of the group.

"You want to stop somewhere and get a drink?"

Touko had grown weary of their futile effort and made the suggestion hoping to have a bit of a rest. Kanako-san's response was:

"Mind if I get something to eat?"

"Huh? You want to have lunch already?"

"I didn't have anything to eat for breakfast, so it's more like brunch."

"... I guess that's okay."

Which was how they ended up going to a cafe that also served light meals.

"You should have come with Yumi-sama, since you're her petit soeur."

Kanako-san remarked as she ate her sandwich. “At least that way you wouldn’t currently be moping, Touko-san.”

“I told you yesterday on the phone, didn’t I? They’d initially planned to go to the amusement park together as a date. Since we’re just along for the ride, we have to be quiet and not intrude.

Touko sipped her tea. She had a fruit tart in front of her. This was all the concession to Kanako-san’s brunch that she could make, since she ate breakfast before she came. Incidentally, Kanako-san was drinking coffee.

“You did say that on the phone, but I wonder if it still applies. After all, Rosa Chinensis invited everyone to come along.”

“Well, apparently she said that we should all go together back during the Christmas party. Which led to this, right?”

“How thoughtful of her.”

“Really.”

There were hardly any customers in the cafe, probably because the park had only just opened. It should get incredibly busy around noon with people looking to satisfy their hunger, much like they were doing now.

“But you still came, even though you said you didn’t want to intrude on them. You couldn’t stand the thought of something fun happening when you weren’t around, right?”

“Pretty much.”

There was no need to put up a front for Kanako-san. Touko knew how alike they were.

“You didn’t think about hanging out with the Yellow or White Rose sisters?”

“And be a third-wheel?”

Touko shook her head as she responded.

“Well, how convenient for you that I just happened to be invited.”

“Indeed. Thanks for coming along.”

If Kanako-san hadn't come along, Touko might have been sitting there alone sipping her tea. Of course if she had come alone then there wouldn't have been that delay when they met, so chances are she would have got here on time, before the amusement park opened.

“Because I evened out the numbers?”

“Exactly.”

The pair looked at each other and giggled softly. Then they slowly resumed eating the food they had ordered.

After eating in silence for a little while, Kanako-san suddenly raised her head.

“Even so, I'm really glad you invited me.”

Touko quickly corrected Kanako-san's expression of gratitude.

“It was my onee-sama who told me to invite you.”

Then:

“...Hmmm....”

“What?”

In the odd gap of time before Touko's question, Kanako rested her chin on her hands. Her cool response was:

“You've become quite used to calling her 'onee-sama.'”

“Thankfully.”

Then they both sipped the last of their beverages.

Star Up Teacup

Part 1.

The ‘revenge group’ of Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san, Yuuki and Yumi walked into the same restaurant they went to back in autumn. Unfortunately, there were no free tables, but after waiting about five minutes a group of four left and they were able to slot right in.

The amusement park’s restaurant was quite interesting. There was a completely exhausted father, a group of middle school students who were hurriedly stuffing down their food so they could move on to the next ride, a child crying on the floor after what had started out as a brotherly quarrel and a couple who had finished eating but were still completely absorbed in their own private world. Even though they shared this fairy-tale space, they were all lead characters in their own dramas.

So how would Yumi’s group’s drama unfold? Just like last time, they all went to the counter and ordered their own meals then split the bill. And, as expected, when they got back to the table they saw that everyone had ordered three-colored curry.

“Everyone must really like their curry.”

Sachiko-sama muttered, to which the three others responded, “That’s not it.”

“You’ve been going on and on about your revenge, Sacchan, so there was this pressure to order the same thing as last time.”

The Fukuzawa siblings nodded in agreement to Kashiwagi-san’s explanation.

“But I didn’t say you had to do that.”

Despite her statement, Sachiko-sama had also ordered the same curry, so she may have unwittingly cast the spell on herself too.

“Anyway, the curry here’s good so it doesn’t matter.”

Almost immediately, Yuuki started to soak up the curry with his extra-large naan bread. He must have been hungry after all. Sachiko-sama and Yumi, sitting next to each other, had a whispered conversation and then broke one of their naan bread pieces in two. The other, untouched piece, they offered to the guys. The portions here were a bit too large for high-school girls, but not quite enough for guys in their late teens, so they always expected to share some of their food. This way was much better than letting the guys have the left-over naan bread after they had finished eating. This was one of the many ways in which they could make the revenge, or revision, better than the original.

“That reminds me, Yumi. We haven’t done the roller-coaster yet.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going on that too, onee-sama?”

Maybe she’d been secretly practicing riding roller-coasters, like she’s been practicing driving for her license.

“I won’t go on the roller-coaster. I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?”

Indeed she had.

“Then I’ll pass on it too.”

If it would keep her onee-sama waiting, then Yumi had no desire to ride the roller-coaster. And if things went like last time, then she’d be riding it alongside Kashiwagi-san. She didn’t really want that.

“Don’t hold back on account of me. Just because I won’t be riding it is no reason for you to abstain.”

“I’m not holding back.”

Then Kashiwagi-san, who had been listening to their conversation, chimed in:

“If you don’t want to go on the roller-coaster with me, we can search for Rei-san’s group and you can go with her.”

Bulls-eye.

Was Yumi's face betraying her thoughts yet again? If she were to hastily bring both her hands to her cheeks then it would just confirm his suspicions. Therefore, she calmly and quietly smiled back at him.

"That's a rather over-inflated sense of self you have."

"Really? Well then, anytime you need an escort, I'll be there for you."

While Yumi was thinking about how odious his smugness was, she realized she had a long way to go if she wanted to spar with Kashiwagi-san like this.

Aim for a higher stage, he said. On that autumn day. Was she still fumbling around in the same place as back then?

"Yumi."

Unexpectedly, Yuuki spoke.

"I'll ride the roller-coaster with you, if we don't find Yoshino-san's group."

"You don't have to force yourself."

"I'm not."

It looked like he was using the roller-coaster to cover over his earlier cowardly behavior at the haunted house.

Like a piece of naan bread soaking up chicken curry. Still, it seemed kind of sad.

Part 2.

"Ah, you went in there, huh?"

They bumped into Yoshino-san's group just as they were leaving the restaurant.

“What did you have for lunch, Yumi-san?”

Based on that, Yumi inferred that Yoshino-san’s group had eaten lunch at some other restaurant. Humans seemed to have a strange fascination with where and what other people eat. Hoping to satisfy that appetite, Yumi answered.

“Curry.”

“I had a rice bowl.”

“An onigiri rice ball?”

“That’s what you’d think. But you’re wrong, it was a donburi rice bowl.”

Yoshino-san laughed. ‘Bowl’ not ‘ball.’

“Say, why don’t we go on one of the rides? Come on, Yumi-san. You know, earlier I was thinking that I should have a light lunch. About that time I saw some people coming out of one of the shops talking about how the rice balls were great, so, without thinking about it too deeply I decided to have that and went inside. By the time I’d realized it was rice bowls not rice balls it was my turn to order, and I figured it’d be okay. After all, the lines will be pretty long so there’s plenty of time for it to settle. The rice bowl itself was fairly ordinary.”

Yoshino-san was chatting away. This was proof that she still hadn’t made up with Rei-sama. All her pent-up conversation from lunch time was gushing out over Yumi.

Furthermore, if Yoshino-san wanted to reconcile then she probably would have asked Rei-sama where she wanted to have lunch and they would have talked it over. Instead, Yoshino-san had overheard some random stranger’s conversation as she was walking along and used that to decide where to eat. Still, it was good to see that she had loosened up in some respects. Usually, Yoshino-san wouldn’t give in so easily if the store didn’t have the food she expected. If there was something she wanted to eat, she’d complain loudly as she moved to a different store. Basically, there were many aspects of

Yoshino-san's lunch with Rei-sama that defied Yumi's expectations.

Yumi snuck a glance at Rei-sama. She looked shell-shocked, like someone you would offer condolences to.

"Can't you call a truce, at least while we're at the amusement park?"

Yumi quietly suggested to Yoshino-san, who responded coldly with, "What for?" She seemed stubbornly unwilling to admit they were fighting.

"I don't know what you're trying to imply, Yumi-san. If she apologizes to me, then I'll consider it. Since she's in the wrong."

So, to Yoshino-san, this wasn't a fight but "something Rei-chan did wrong." Unilaterally. However, that seemed kind of suspicious. Rei-sama wasn't the sort of person who would unilaterally do something wrong; she was a pacifist who would apologize over the slightest matter. Things had soured to the point that a reconciliation would be difficult without an apology from Yoshino-san. Nonetheless, the fact that they were still walking around together was a testament to their perseverance.

"Yoshino-chan, what did you want to ride on?"

Kashiwagi-san inquired.

"... I hadn't decided."

Yoshino-san glanced at Rei-sama. But she still didn't seem to want to talk to her.

"Since we ran into each other again, I thought we might stick together for a while. Is that okay with you, Rei-san?"

"Ah, yeah, of course."

Kashiwagi-san had apparently noticed the turbulent atmosphere between the Yellow Rose sisters and was attempting to intervene. His plan was probably to use the excitement of their friends to get the Yellow Rose sisters to gradually reconcile.

“Then let’s start with that.”

Kashiwagi-san said cheerfully, pointing. The teacups ride had just come into view, and that was probably what caused him to interject.

Still, not everyone hurried towards the ride.

“I’m not going on that.”

Sachiko-sama said.

“Huh?”

“I said, I’m not going on that. The teacups spin round and round, right? Riding on that would make me feel sick.”

So the list of rides Sachiko-sama wouldn’t go on wasn’t limited to just the roller-coaster. From memory, they hadn’t gone on the teacups ride last time either. And there’s no way they were going to force someone onto the ride who had just announced that it would make them feel sick.

“Will you be alright just watching us, Sacchan?”

“I should be able to do that.”

“Ah – ”

Before Yumi had a chance to say, “Then I’ll watch too,” Kashiwagi-san whispered to her:

“Sacchan’s going to stand outside and wave to you while you’re on the ride, Yumi-chan. How sweet. Kind of like a family, right?”

“See,” he said, pointing towards a woman who was holding a baby, watching the teacups ride and waving. She was looking straight at a man and a primary-school aged girl who were happily waving back. So that’s the kind of sentiment she was looking for.

“I see.”

Yumi nodded, and thumped her chest. Yuuki laughed at her simple-mindedness, but she wasn't going on the ride just because of Kashiwagi-san's invitation. If Yumi was there, then Yoshino-san would chatter. And Rei-sama's expression would be slightly more gentle. If it were just the two guys, it seemed unlikely that they would be able to make a good connection.

Now, in order to pull off this plan to reconcile the Yellow Rose sisters, it was imperative that they both be in the same teacup. They may have eaten lunch together in silence, but there was no way they'd be able to maintain that for the duration of the spinning teacup ride. The ride was designed to get people giddy and excited.

With that in mind, Kashiwagi-san, Yumi and Yuuki lined up ahead of Yoshino-san and Rei-sama. Their plan was as follows: When it was time to get on the ride, Yumi, Yuuki and Kashiwagi-san would all dash towards one of the teacups, leaving Yoshino-san and Rei-sama with no option but to ride together. No matter how awkward they found it being around each other, it was incredibly unlikely that they'd sit alone in separate teacups.

After they'd been standing in line for a short while, Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan joined the end of the line, about two groups back. They didn't call Tsutako-san's group over, out of consideration for the people lined up between them, but they did wave to let them know they were there. It looked like this attraction was everyone's first stop after lunch.

Soon the line started to move and eventually the attendant asked them, "How many people are in your party?" They answered with, "Three people," and the attendant moved on to Yoshino-san's group.

"I'm sorry, but this is the limit for how many we can have on at a time."

In other words, Yumi's group would be on the teacup ride the next time around, and Yoshino-san's group the time after that. Along with Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan.

Yoshino-san clicked her tongue softly. The amusement park was supposed to be a fun place, but due to her fight with Rei-sama it was quite the opposite. Usually she'd have more patience but currently she wanted to rush through

everything. That much was plain to see.

“Yoshino.”

Still, Rei-sama wasn't going to allow that.

“There's nothing we can do about it. We have to wait our turn.”

Having just been cautioned, Yoshino-san's dissatisfied expression turned to outright displeasure.

“Um, we can get on the next ride, if you'd like to go instead of us.”

Yuuki offered, either because he was unable to watch any longer or because he was unwilling to stand idly by.

“You're better off not indulging her, Yuuki-kun.”

“Hmph, I never said anything about wanting to go ahead of you.”

“There's no need to lash out at Yuuki-kun.”

“He started talking to me and I merely answered.”

Yuuki thought he was acting like a gentleman but got shot down. He would have been better off acting unconcerned, but, having grown up attending an all-boys school, Yuuki couldn't understand a woman's delicate emotions.

In general, it's better to let sleeping dogs lie. Then the ride came to a stop, the passengers got off and the attendant did a quick check of the insides of the teacups before giving them the go-ahead signal. Kashiwagi-san called out, “That red cup!” and Yumi dashed after him.

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were left behind and what happened between them was up to God. It would be nice if they could cheer up as they spun around together, but things probably wouldn't work out that easily. Still, a little bit of improvement would go a long way.

Due to his quick decision about which teacup to aim for, Kashiwagi-san was

able to claim the red teacup while everyone else was still deciding. Yumi caught up with him and plopped down on the chair inside the cup.

“Huh?”

Yuuki still wasn't there, even though he should have been a faster runner than Yumi. Maybe he hadn't heard the call of red teacup and was wandering around lost. Yumi looked around restlessly, but there was no sign of him amongst the multicolored teacups. Then the attendant started making her rounds, checking that the doors on the teacups were securely closed.

“Yukichi's blown it.”

Kashiwagi-san muttered. Yumi turned around, wondering what he was talking about, and saw Yuuki standing at the front of the line, looking towards them with a miserable expression. His arm was being held tightly so that he couldn't escape. By Yoshino-san.

“I didn't know Yoshino-san liked Yuuki.”

“Neither did I.”

In other words, it must have been something else.

“She was probably planning on grabbing you, Yumi-chan. But you got such a good start that she had to quickly switch to the slow-starting Yukichi.”

“... I've been had.”

The bell that signaled the start of the ride rang and then a cheerful melody washed over them. The red teacup that Yumi and Kashiwagi-san were sitting in slowly started to move.

“Now that Yoshino-san's caught Yuuki, what do you think she'll do with him?”

“Who knows. They'll either go together as a group of three, or she'll use him to squeeze Rei-san out.”

Kashiwagi-san spun the wheel in the center of the teacup. Then he called out, “Look, it’s Sacchan.”

Remembering, Yumi hurriedly looked for Sachiko-sama. However, not only was the teacup spinning but so was the tray that it rested upon, which made it quite difficult for Yumi to get her bearings.

“Yumi – ”

Spin, spin. Yumi caught a glimpse of Sachiko-sama out of the corner of her eye and frantically turned and waved at her.

“Onee-sama – ”

But by then it was already too late, and Yumi was looking straight at some unknown smiling family.

“Hahahaha.”

Kashiwagi-san laughed as he spun the wheel.

“Hahahaha.”

His laughter was infectious, and Yumi joined in.

Outside, Sachiko-sama laughed too. Yumi couldn’t see clearly, but she definitely seemed to be clutching her stomach and laughing.

Yumi’s twin tails whipped against her face. Something green occasionally danced in front of her eyes, as though one of her ribbons had come untied.

Soon it became hard for Yumi to tell whether she was spinning or the outside world was spinning.

The music was coming from somewhere, but she couldn’t tell where. Was it coming from somewhere outside? Or somewhere within her?

Spinning around, Yumi knew what the tigers in ‘Little Black Sambo’ felt when they turned into butter from chasing each other around. The teacups

slowly came to a stop while she was contemplating this.

Stepping out of the teacup, Yumi's legs turned to jelly.

"Are you okay?"

Kashiwagi-san offered his arm to her, like a prince. Normally, Yumi would have spurned him by saying, "I'm fine." But she hadn't returned to normal after the temporary high of the ride.

"Hahahaha."

Yumi clung to his arm, grateful for the support. More like an old lady than a princess. Yumi started to laugh, seeing the lighter side of clinging to Kashiwagi-san. She was the spitting image of a happy drunk, although, since she was underage, she'd never been drunk.

Since she was intoxicated from the ride and not from alcohol, Yumi sobered up after about five steps. She thanked Kashiwagi-san and then let go of his arm.

"It was my pleasure."

Kashiwagi-san grinned, then turned to look at the teacup they had just left.

"Oh, right, Yuuki."

Yumi had been having so much fun that she'd completely forgotten about him. How would the problematic Yellow Rose sisters and their prisoner Yuuki arrange themselves in the teacups.

Still standing at the entrance, Yoshino-san didn't look as though she had let go of Yuuki's arm since she first grabbed it. They looked nothing like a pair of lovers, despite having the same outline, due to the militant look in Yoshino-san's eyes and the cowering look in Yuuki's.

"I think they should take Yuuki with them and go as a group of three."

"Agreed."

“If it’s just a trivial fight, they’ll probably do a complete 360 and blow it off. Like how I ended up having fun even though it was just us, Kashiwagi-san.”

“Right?” Yumi added, seeking his agreement, but Kashiwagi-san had a slack-jawed expression on his face.

“What’s the matter?”

“Yumi-chan, sometimes you say things that cut right to the bone.”

He must have been offended by the ‘even though it was just us’ part. Talk about delicate.

“Then excuse me.”

Leaving him with that, Yumi rushed over to where Sachiko-sama had been waiting for her.

“Did you see me waving to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Could you tell I was your onee-sama?”

“Of course.”

While they were happily absorbed in their own private world, a still moping Kashiwagi-san joined them, pointed towards the ride and said, “Watch.” They saw that the rope had just been removed, allowing Yoshino-san’s group to enter the ride.

They all waited to see how Yoshino-san would use her trump card, Yuuki.

“Ah.”

What was that all about? Right from the start, Yoshino-san grabbed Yuuki’s hand and took off running. Grabbed only Yuuki’s hand.

Rei-sama didn’t seem to know what to do after being left behind, but took off

after Yoshino-san. She arrived at their teacup just as Yoshino-san was shutting the door. Naturally, Yoshino-san had remembered to push Yuuki into the teacup first before embarking.

Rei-sama seemed dumbfounded by Yoshino-san's appalling behavior. Rather than standing her ground, she walked off to try and find another free teacup.

However, there probably wasn't going to be a spare teacup, as they had most likely told the line attendant that the three of them were one group, and she would have let on as many groups as there were teacups.

Cruel. Too cruel, Yoshino-san. Even the line attendant was apologizing profusely, thinking that she had made a miscalculation. Her voice didn't carry to where they were standing, but she looked as though she was asking Rei-sama if she wouldn't mind waiting for the next ride.

Unable to just watch, Yuuki was standing up and trying to open the door, but then a lifeboat came from another direction.

"Rei-sama, you could join us for this ride, if you'd like."

It was Tsutako-san. In a teacup with just herself and Shouko-chan, Tsutako-san called out and waved Rei-sama over.

Tsutako-san was always reliable, but Yumi couldn't remember ever asking something like this of her.

(Go! Go! Tsutako-san. Our hero (not heroine) Tsutako-san. I love, you love Tsutako-san. T S U T A K O. Our hero! Tsutako! Yay!)

She was so wonderful that Yumi mentally burst into an improvised cheer. Tsutako-san.

Naturally, Rei-sama gratefully accepted the request. After saying her thanks, she climbed into their teacup.

And what was the villain, Yoshino-san, doing? She seemed relieved when Rei-sama escaped from her position as the center of attention. Apparently Yoshino-san had shut Rei-sama out without thinking about the consequences.

Really, that was just too much.

The teacups started to spin.

Yoshino-san completely ignored Yuuki, instead she kept her eyes fixed on Rei-sama's teacup. For her part, Rei-sama didn't so much as glance towards Yoshino-san. Rei-sama laughed as she spun and chatted with Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan.

This may just have been Yumi's imagination as she watched on from outside, but it looked as though Yoshino-san became angrier and angrier. About their fight, about her inability to say "I'm sorry," about her malicious behavior, about Rei-sama's enjoyment, about everything.

And then she turned that emotion into action.

Yoshino-san gently took hold of the wheel but then began to spin it with tremendous force. The teacup, which had been spinning fairly quickly to begin with, responded and gained incredible speed.

"It makes me feel sick just watching it."

Sachiko-sama turned her back on the scene. That was the proper course of action. But Yumi couldn't tear her eyes away. She was convinced that deep down Yoshino-san was crying, as she single-mindedly continued spinning that wheel.

"I wonder if Yukichi's going to be okay."

Kashiwagi-san too was worried. It was even drawing the attention of some of the passengers in the other teacups.

Then the music ended and the teacups slowly came to a halt. The passengers shuffled out of their teacups. But Yoshino-san didn't move at all.

Part 3.

Yuuki pondered what he should do.

“Umm, Yoshino-san?”

She had been spinning the wheel like a woman possessed while the teacups were in motion. They had been spinning so fast that he had to grab on to the sides of the teacup, although it's not like they would have been flung out.

And then this. The moment the teacups stopped spinning, Yoshino-san went limp, like a toy that had run down its batteries. Still gripping the wheel, she lowered her head onto her hands and remained there. Like she'd stopped dead.

His only guidepost was that she'd muttered, “I feel woozy,” just before she shut down. Yuuki had heard that Yoshino-san used to have a weak heart and it would be no laughing matter if the rapidly spinning teacup had brought on a heart-attack.

Anyway.

“What should I do?”

Frankly, he had no experience with this kind of situation. If he was with a guy, he'd just say, “Pull yourself together,” and then drag the other guy out of there. But this time he was with a girl. If he touched her in the wrong place then he would probably be branded a molester.

Just as Yuuki remembered that the ride attendant was also a woman, he was tapped on the shoulder from behind.

“Sorry, I'll take it from here.”

It was Rei-san.

“Rei-san...”

Even though she had been treated so poorly, Rei-san was still the first one to rush to Yoshino-san's aid when she was in a bind. She was truly a big-hearted person.

Yuuki had heard that Rei-san was talented enough at kendo to embarrass most men, but he hadn't seen anything manly (in a good way) about Rei-san until now. She looked so dashing that he started mentally singing an improvised supporter's song.

(Go! Go! Rei-san. Etc.)

“Yoshino. Can you walk?”

Rei-san called out, having entered the teacup. Yoshino-san responded with something that sounded like gibberish, but Rei-san seemed to understand her.

“Alright, let's get you up.”

Clinging to Rei-san, Yoshino-san got out of the teacup. Yuuki felt a bit superfluous, since he could only watch on.

“Rei-san, is there anything I can do?”

He called out, in case there was any way he could help.

“Well, you can take Yoshino's bag.”

At the same time she said this, Rei-san threw the bag to him with a basketball pass, which he gladly received.

“I'll look after it.”

He'd do whatever the dependable older-brother (sorry) Rei-san asked of him.

“Anything else?”

That was when the limp Yoshino-san lifted her head, turned towards him and said, “A message.”

“Huh?”

Yuuki asked.

“A message for Yumi-san. Tell her that I won’t be going on the roller-coaster today, so she should go ahead without me.”

Leaving him with those words, Yoshino-san was led off somewhere by Reisan.

What Kind of Groups?

Part 1.

Yoshino-san emerged from the exit of the teacup ride and was almost carried by Rei-sama over to where Yumi and the rest were waiting.

“Don’t worry about her. She’s just woozy.”

Rei-sama informed them, then escorted Yoshino-san away. Judging by the direction they were heading, they were probably going to the restroom.

“Let’s leave this to Rei.”

Sachiko-sama said.

Indeed, they wouldn’t accomplish anything by all following after Yoshino-san, asking “Are you okay?” And that’s probably the last thing the sick person wanted too. Yumi was incredibly worried about Yoshino-san, but chose to resist the temptation to chase after her.

“Rei-sama really was keeping a close eye on her, wasn’t she.”

Neither Tsutako-san nor Shouko-chan had noticed anything strange happening with Yoshino-san. It was only as they were leaving the ride, when they noticed Rei-sama wasn’t with them, and they heard Yumi saying, “I wonder if she’s okay,” that they realized something was happening.

“A message.”

Yuuki returned, a bit unsteady on his feet. His mind and body looked like they had taken severe damage from the double-punch of being spun to exhaustion on the teacups followed by Yoshino-san collapsing right in front of him.

“It is as follows: I won’t be going on the roller-coaster today, so you should go ahead without me.”

“Huh?”

“A message for you, from Yoshino-san.”

“Ah, okay.”

It wasn't really like they'd promised to go on the rides together, but apparently Yoshino-san's earlier invitation of, “Why don't we go on one of the rides? Come on, Yumi-san,” was equivalent, in her mind, to a promise.

“Sounds good. Why don't you go and do that now, Yumi. Given how she was looking, Yoshino-chan probably won't be back for a while. The same applies to you too, Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan. I'll wait here, so if there's any other rides you want to go on, you might as well do that now.”

The two photography club members excused themselves and left. Since they were heading towards the lake, it seemed unlikely that they were planning on riding the roller-coaster. As she watched them walk away, Yumi idly thought that Tsutako-san looked somehow different to normal. Although there probably wasn't anything wrong with her health, since she seemed to be enjoying herself immensely on the teacups with Shouko-chan and Rei-sama.

“Come on, you too Yumi. I'll look after your bags.”

“But.”

Yumi was still worried about Yoshino-san, and didn't want to leave her onee-sama either. However.

“That's an order.”

Based on Sachiko-sama's tone of voice, Yumi knew she wouldn't tolerate any dissent.

“Okay.”

Yumi left her bag with her onee-sama, taking only her handkerchief and her all-day pass.

“Well, shall we go?”

Kashiwagi-san lightheartedly offered his arm to her but Yumi chose not to acknowledge it, instead turning her back on him.

“Yuuki... I suppose this would be a bit too much for you.”

“Sorry.”

Earlier, her brother had been enthusiastic about going on the roller-coaster this time around, but now he remained seated on a nearby bench, looking on with a listless expression. Given how things had turned out with Yoshino-san and the teacup ride, it was fairly obvious that he was willing to call it a day at this point. It would be unfair to make him go on the roller-coaster after all of that.

“I’m heading off.”

Yumi bid her onee-sama farewell, then turned towards the roller-coaster entrance. Kashiwagi-san once more offered her his arm, which Yumi completely ignored.

“You don’t have to be shy.”

“I’m not shy. It’s just embarrassing, doing something so pretentious.”

The amusement park was a dream country, a fairy-tale country, but it was still unmistakably a part of Japan. It wasn’t like a formal dance, where it was customary to link arms. There were some couples who had reluctantly given in to holding hands, but she and Kashiwagi-san were not a couple.

Kashiwagi-san didn’t appear even slightly discouraged by Yumi’s response, or her labeling of it as pretentious.

“I can’t help it. I’ve been raised since birth to be a prince.”

“Of the ginkgo-tree country,” Yumi thought to herself.

A child looked at Kashiwagi-san, as though he were something unusual.

Well, that was true. A gentleman walking along, leaning slightly, with his elbow jutting out.

“Yumi-chan, you’ve grown so much.”

Kashiwagi-san said, maintaining his odd pose.

“The way you said that, it seems somehow wrong.”

Yumi coldly rejected him.

She was under no illusion that Kashiwagi-san was especially interested in her, but it was uncomfortably similar to how Hikaru Genji saw the young Murasaki in ‘The Tale of Genji.’ Not understanding the subtle nuance, the person in question smiled and said, “Wrong, huh.” In this way, his breeding and his looks made him incorrigible. Yumi increased her pace, leaving the prince behind. She didn’t really care if she wasn’t with Kashiwagi-san on the ride. She could ride the roller-coaster by herself.

Still, stride length counted for a lot, and Kashiwagi-san soon caught up and was walking alongside Yumi. He wasn’t making that odd pose, so perhaps he’d given up on that.

“Is there something, specifically, you’re trying to say?”

But it looked like he was still continuing on with their earlier conversation.

“Like before. Really, you wanted to stay with Sacchan and wait for Yoshino-san to return. But you put yourself in her position and decided to go on the roller-coaster.”

“Sachiko-sama’s position?”

Yumi had intended to ignore his remarks, but was unable to do so once her onee-sama’s name had been brought up.

“Yoshino-chan was probably worried that you would forgo the attractions and just wait there for her. That’s why she gave that message to Yuuki, to prevent that from happening.”

“...”

“Last time around, Sacchan fell ill midway through your amusement park date, and had to retire. Robbing you of your fun time. This time around, the same thing happened to Yoshino-chan. And you responded in a way that would please Sacchan. Of course, that’s how Yoshino-chan wanted you to act too.”

Yumi hadn’t actually thought about it all that deeply. She’d just been following her onee-sama’s orders, which seemed the correct thing to do. But maybe that had been part of her motivation, and she hadn’t tried to self-analyze.

“Not really. I just wanted to go on the roller-coaster.”

Yumi lengthened her stride, trying to get away from Kashiwagi-san. If it was true, then it was annoying that Kashiwagi-san was able to articulate it.

“Ahh but I find that petulant, childish side of you so cute, Yumi-chan.”

“Give me a break.”

Was there something he wanted to say?

Could he be flirting? No, Kashiwagi-san was supposed to be gay. Wait, was it that, or did they say he was bi?

Either way, if that was supposed to be flirting, then Yumi thought it seemed rather forced.

“But there’s no way of stopping you from maturing, Yumi-chan. It’s sad, but I have to recognize that there’s also some good things to come of it.”

“Huh?”

Yumi was completely lost. She was fairly certain that he wasn’t flirting, but it seemed awfully close. Seeing her confusion, Kashiwagi-san smirked slightly.

“Basically, you asked me if there was anything I wanted to say, and I want to

express my gratitude to you, Yumi-chan.”

“Gratitude?”

“About Touko.”

Touko.

So that’s it. It was easy to forget, but Kashiwagi-san was actually Touko’s cousin.

“But I didn’t – ”

Do anything deserving of gratitude. They had become soeurs, but only because they both wanted it. So it wasn’t something that Kashiwagi-san should be thanking her for.

“You did. I wasn’t able to save her. But you subdued her wild spirit, and melted her stubborn heart.”

When Kashiwagi-san was talking seriously about someone he cherished, his face looked like a rough sketch of a stone statue. The stone statue and the smug look, they both belonged to the same person but they seemed like different people, leaving Yumi confused about how to deal with him.

“Since she’s become your petit soeur, Touko’s heart seems to have settled. And I put that down to you having a steady heart, Yumi-chan, and holding onto her tightly.”

“Settled?”

Yumi tilted her head in confusion. For some reason, that phrase got stuck in her head.

“... Ah.”

That was it. It was the true shape of the ‘solidness’ that Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san had both mentioned a few days ago.

Settled.

Yumi wasn't too sure about this 'steady heart' business, so much as it could just have been that she wasn't on-edge recently. Which may have been why Sachiko-sama pushed against her behind the gymnasium.

"Did I, by chance, hit upon something with that phrase?"

Kashiwagi-san peered at her, smiling, the stone statue now completely hidden.

"That's a secret."

"Well then, why don't you take my hand as thanks."

"No way."

The line for the roller-coaster had just come into view, so Yumi ran off ahead, knowing full well that Kashiwagi-san would soon catch up to her.

As thanks, Yumi decided to allow him to sit next to her on the roller-coaster, and to scream really loudly.

Part 2.

Yuuki's body had more or less recovered by the time Rei-san and Yoshino-san returned.

"Sachiko-sama, I'm deeply sorry for making you worry."

Yoshino-san faced Sachiko-san as she apologized. Yuuki could hardly believe his eyes. Incredibly, she had skipped over to meet them, twirling the jacket she was no longer wearing around in her hands.

What kind of magic had been used to bring about a full recovery in Yoshino-san? From listening to her conversation with Sachiko-san, it became apparent that she had spewed. Although Yoshino-san hadn't phrased it quite that

crudely.

“And you too, Yuuki-kun.”

Yoshino-san said, turning towards him.

“I’m sorry. For lots of things.”

The predatory look she had had in her eyes when she grabbed Yuuki by the arm right before he was about to go on the teacup ride and the possessed look she had had about her as she continuously spun the teacup’s wheel had both completely disappeared. Yoshino-san smiled sweetly, looking like a completely different person.

“It’s okay. It looked like you were going through some tough times yourself, Yoshino-san.”

Yuuki was relieved to see that the stormy atmosphere between Rei-san and Yoshino-san had dissipated.

The foundations were strengthened by adversity, or, rather, their petty squabbles vanished when something important came up.

After all, they hadn’t actually been fighting, but there had been a cloud over them. And everyone else had been dragged into it. A certain amount of collateral damage was to be expected.

“Where’s Yumi-san?”

Yoshino-san asked Sachiko-san, as though she had just noticed that Yumi wasn’t around.

“She went to the roller-coaster with Suguru-san.”

“Oh, really? That’s good.”

Upon hearing Yoshino-san say, “That’s good,” Yuuki also thought, “That’s good.” If Yumi were still here then it would have meant that the meaning of Yoshino-san’s message had been lost.

After sitting down on the bench in the gap between Yuuki and Sachiko-san, Yoshino-san said:

“I’m feeling kind of hungry.”

(Huh?)

“I want to get something to eat.”

(Huh!?)

Was it normal for someone who had just vomited up the entire contents of their stomach to want to fill that space so quickly? Wouldn’t it be better to give the stomach a rest for a little while? At any rate, she had recovered quickly. Too quickly.

“Wait here, I’ll go find you something easy to digest.”

Rei-san said, then walked off. Were there any limits to her tolerance? Yuuki watched Rei-san’s shrinking figure with respect.

“Yuuki-san. Is it alright if I ask you to watch over our bags?”

Hearing his name called, Yuuki spun around. He was being asked to watch over their bags, which meant –

“Yoshino-chan and I are going to go for a short walk. We won’t be long.”

“... Okay.”

Judging by the puzzled look on Yoshino-san’s face, this was something that Sachiko-san had decided on her own, not something that they had discussed.

“Well then, I’ll leave these to you. Let’s go, Yoshino-chan.”

Regardless, it was a request from a senior. Yoshino-san followed along, even though she looked unsure.

“Wait. Wouldn’t it have been easier for me to leave instead?”

By the time he'd realized what had happened, Sachiko-san and Yoshino-san had already left their bags with him and started walking. Left behind, the teenaged boy evaluated his situation objectively and slumped his shoulders.

Alone, sitting on a bench, looking after three women's bags and one women's jacket. If there were just one person's worth then it would look like he was watching over his girlfriend's belongings, but there were three bags. There was no easy explanation.

So then, would it be better to be embarrassed by the situation (as seemed proper), or to act defiant and adopt a, "Yes I'm looking after three women's bags. So what," attitude? If Kashiwagi-sempai were in his position then he'd probably respond with, "It's tough being popular," but there was no way Yuuki would be able to pull that off, so it was useless as a point of reference.

Yuuki slowly surveyed the area of the park around him. Everyone was so wrapped up in their own enjoyment that they didn't spare a single thought for the teenaged boy sitting alone on the bench. Much less what he was looking after – .

"Ah!"

Yuuki called out. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he had seen the fleeting likeness of someone he knew.

"Uh, uh, uh."

It was just for an instant. And then they'd disappeared behind one of the buildings. But he was fairly certain it was them.

"Wait!"

Yuuki stood up, ready to give chase. If he were to dash off now, he was certain he'd catch up to them. After all, his quarry was a girl who was simply walking along.

"Ah."

But three bags and a jacket were literally weighing Yuuki down.

“Ah – geeze.”

Sachiko-san had told him to mind their bags, so there was no way he could just leave them behind.

What to do, Yuuki. How will you weather this crisis!?

“No choice.”

Fukuzawa Yuuki made his decision and started running.

Part 3.

“Why did things sour between you two?”

Sachiko-sama asked as they walked.

“...”

Yoshino-san’s silence elicited a small smile.

“I don’t mean to interfere in someone else’s affairs, but I can’t stop worrying about it. Maybe it’s because graduation is getting closer and I’m starting to get nervous.”

Yoshino thought that it was Rei-chan and herself, not Sachiko-sama, who were acting nervous.

“I won’t bother you with what sparked it, since it was completely trivial. But neither of us were willing to back down. In other words, how to put this ... it was stupidity.”

“From Rei?”

“From both of us.”

“I see.”

It wasn't in her nature to be docile, but Yoshino understood the situation. After hearing that, Sachiko-sama would say nothing further. If Yoshino had stubbornly replied that it was Rei-chan's fault, then she would have received a lecture from Sachiko-sama about it.

"Still, that's not like Rei."

Sachiko-sama said, after thinking for a while.

"That's for sure."

Yoshino-san agreed, walking beside Sachiko-sama. Rei-chan was, fundamentally, a patient and tolerant person. Knowing this, Yoshino believed she could do whatever she wanted and Rei-chan would still forgive her. So, for Rei-chan, going on ahead after waiting for five minutes and trying to force an apology from Yoshino was not like her at all.

"I don't know what you think sparked all this, Yoshino-chan, but perhaps there's something more to it than you think."

"Something more?"

"The root cause of all this ... It may be that Rei's displeased with something, but you haven't noticed it."

"Displeased, huh?"

About how she was acting like a spoiled brat right before Rei-chan's graduation? Or how she needed to be more self reliant? Nonetheless, Yoshino was fairly confident it wasn't something so abstract.

Sachiko-sama probably thought so too, for she offered the following example:

"Perhaps there's something she wants to talk to you about."

"You mean, like an apology?"

"I think it would be something else, don't you?"

Even without Sachiko-sama's response, Yoshino knew that her answer was wrong. After all, the apology came after the act. It's not like Rei-chan's heart had hardened because Yoshino rarely apologized.

(There's nothing Rei-chan wants to say to me, right?)

"Ah."

Suddenly, Rei-chan's words came back to her.

"Did you just remember something?"

"Yeah. But it's a bit, umm ... "

It was a bit faint, but she'd caught it. Perhaps Rei-chan hadn't been looking for an apology on the bus. But something else. There was probably something else that Rei-chan had wanted to hear.

"By the way, what happened with Nana-chan?"

Nana.

Hearing that keyword, the penny dropped.

"... That's it."

Sachiko-sama's eyes widened at Yoshino's utterance.

"Yoshino-chan. Are you saying that you didn't even tell Rei about what happened with Nana-chan?"

The 'didn't even tell Rei' part stung her ears.

"Yeah. I forgot."

It wasn't just Rei-chan – she hadn't said anything to Yumi-san or Shimako-san either. She'd just forgotten.

"And how about the phone call to Nana-chan? You did call her, right?"

“Yeah, of course.”

Yoshino had taken care of that last night. That part she hadn't forgotten.

“But Nana had some things she had to do, so she said she wouldn't be able to make it. Of course it's possible she was just being polite ... she's a bright kid, after all.”

“Indeed.”

“Whereas I'm really quite dim. It wasn't like I was intentionally keeping it from Rei-chan, but it still probably made her feel like she was being excluded.”

Yoshino had been somewhat relieved that Nana-chan wasn't coming and, after a night's sleep, had forgotten all about it. Much like chickens that forget what they're doing after three steps. And then Yoshino got carried away with thinking about how she would hide under her bed covers and surprise Rei-chan.

“As long as you understand, you can change things.”

“I'm going to talk to Rei-chan. Then I'm going to apologize.”

“That's how a bright kid would handle it.”

Sachiko-sama put her arm around Yoshino's shoulder as they walked along. When Sachiko-sama said, “Shall we return?” and altered their course, they happened across a rather unusual scene.

“Oh ... Isn't that Yuuki-kun?”

“... Yeah.”

The sight of a teenaged boy running at full pace while carrying three bags – one over each shoulder and one held in his left hand – and holding a jacket in his right hand was drawing considerable attention.

And not just from Yoshino and Sachiko-sama, other people walking along

the path were turning to stare at him too.

Part 4.

She wasn't quite sure how it ended up this way, but Touko and Kanako-san boarded the steam train for a trip around the amusement park. They timed it well and were able to embark without having to wait long.

The haunted house and pirate cove were both enclosed adventures so it felt good to be journeying outside, in something well ventilated. Blowing in the wind, her vertical hair rolls would collapse, but Touko was enjoying herself so she didn't really mind. Kanako-san tied her hair with a hair-tie shortly into the voyage, worried that her long hair would get tangled by the wind.

At any rate, they still hadn't met anybody.

Touko was gradually becoming more and more concerned about whether or not they had actually planned to come to the amusement park today. For instance, maybe they actually meant next Sunday. No, Sachiko-sama had definitely said, "Tomorrow." And surely she wasn't mistaken about the name of the amusement park.

Touko wanted to confirm this, but there was no point asking Kanako-san since she hadn't actually been there at the time.

"Ah!"

Kanako-san suddenly cried out.

"What is it?"

"What do you think that is? A deer? A cow?"

It was the same sort of thing that the primary school student seated in front of them was saying.

"Hey, look at that person. Oooh, that's a puppet, right? Or just someone in

makeup?”

She kept pointing left and right, urging Touko to look at various sights. Kanako-san seemed to have an unexpected fondness for this sort of thing. Who knew.

“Ah!”

“What is it this time?”

“*Rosa Chinensis* and *Rosa Foetida* en bouton.”

“*Rosa Chinensis*?”

For a moment, Touko thought that it was the name of some character. That moment’s hesitation was enough.

“Where!?”

“Ah – they’ve disappeared behind that rock.”

The train was in motion. It wasn’t possible to get off midway through. Just as Touko was ruing the fact that she hadn’t seen them, *Rosa Foetida* suddenly popped into her field of vision.

“*Rosa Foetida*!”

Touko shouted out, without thinking about it. It probably wouldn’t have reached her anyway. Not just because of the distance, but also because the sound of the steam engine and the clatter of the wheels would have drowned it out.

“Huh, where, where?”

This time it was Kanako-san that had missed out.

“The others could be there too.”

They strained their eyes but couldn’t find anyone else they knew.

The steam train returned to the station it had departed from. They were both puzzled as they disembarked.

“What was that all about?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn't as though they doubted what the other said they saw. But still.

“On the one hand, there was Rosa Chinensis with Rosa Foetida en bouton.”

“And on the other, there was Rosa Foetida by herself.”

The impression they got from on board the train was that the two parties were some distance apart from each other.

“Just what kind of groups are they walking around in?”

– Without knowing about the drama that had unfolded earlier, it certainly looked like an inexplicable situation.

Part 5.

When Yumi returned from the roller-coaster, Yuuki told her:

“I saw Touko-chan.”

“Touko-chan? You mean Touko?”

He responded somewhat sulkily to this question with, “Who else would it be?”

“So, where is she now?”

The only other people gathered at the makeshift waiting area they had established around a bench beside the teacups ride were Sachiko-sama, Rei-

sama and Yoshino-san.

“I dunno.”

Yuuki spat the words out.

“You don’t know?”

“That’s what you say when you don’t know.”

That hardly seemed pertinent. It was the kind of thing a little child would say. Fairly irritating when you were trying to better understand the situation. Perhaps Yuuki’s foul mood was contagious.

“If you saw her, how come you didn’t call out to her?”

Then, just before she was about to add, “Are you an idiot?”

“Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama intervened.

“Yuuki-kun went to a lot of effort. So don’t blame him.”

“Huh?”

“It was our fault that he lost sight of Touko-chan.”

Yoshino-san chimed in on Yuuki’s behalf. What on earth had been going on at ground-level while Yumi was screaming her lungs out on the roller-coaster?

For some reason everyone was fussing over Yuuki, who looked suitably depressed.

But, her onee-sama had said, “Don’t blame him,” so Yumi ceased her interrogation of Yuuki (she could always force a confession after they’d returned home) and changed the topic by asking a different question.

“So, was Touko by herself?”

“No, she was with Kanako-chan.”

So Yuuki had noticed who Touko was with. And since she was with Kanako-chan, it meant he probably hadn’t mistaken someone else for her.

“And she called out to Rei-chan too.”

Yoshino-san said, standing and pointing her finger.

“Called out to you?”

Rei-sama nodded.

“I heard someone call out, “Rosa Foetidaaaaa,” but when I turned around I couldn’t see anyone I knew. I couldn’t say definitively, but I thought it sounded like Touko-chan’s voice.”

“Did you hear it too, onee-sama?”

Yumi asked Sachiko-sama. If two or more people had heard it, they could be reasonably sure about who it was.

“I didn’t. I was with Yoshino-chan at the time.”

With Yoshino-san? Just the two of them?

“Yeah. I’d gone off to buy some soup, right?”

Rei-sama said smoothly.

Still, the way Rei-sama said that made it sound like she was asking for confirmation, which raised more questions than it answered for Yumi, who was hearing this for the first time.

Now that she mentioned it, Yoshino-san had been nursing something in a Styrofoam cup for a while now. That was probably the soup Rei-sama had just mentioned.

A number of nagging questions were piling up in her mind, but if she got sidetracked here then the conversation wouldn't progress at all, so Yumi decided to plow on ahead.

“So, where were you, Yuuki?”

Yumi glanced at her brother, who was looking down, unwilling to say anything. She couldn't tell why, but it looked as though he had been off on his own at that time.

“Just what kind of groups were you walking around in?”

Kashiwagi-san muttered, standing beside her. Yumi shared the exact same opinion.

Distant Desire

Part 1.

Let's go on the Ferris wheel.

That's what Shimako-san had said.

She hadn't said, "Would you like to." She'd said, "Let's." Then Shimako-san took hold of Noriko's hand and they joined the end of the queue.

"Are you okay with heights, Noriko?"

"... Usually."

"Right. You're strong."

"Usually I'm scared, was what I was going to say."

"Oh, you."

Noriko thought that she should have been the one delivering that last line. It didn't seem like Shimako-san had a love of heights, based on the way she was talking, so why had she deliberately chosen the Ferris wheel?

"Is this some sort of challenge you've set for yourself, Shimako-san?"

They'd been on the roller-coaster just before the Ferris wheel. And the go-carts before that.

In terms of speed and acceleration it wasn't like those other two. Shimako-san's shrieks, whether they were of joy or terror, had come to an end. Noriko thought she may have been the first person ever to hear Shimako-san's voice raised so loud.

Despite all that, and for reasons that she didn't fully comprehend, Noriko still had the same gloomy expression on her face. She let out a sigh. Shimako-san

herself had said, “It’s not that big a deal,” so it was foolish of Noriko to let it drag her down.

“It could be.”

Shimako-san looked up into the clear blue sky, then returned her gaze to Noriko.

“Perhaps it’s because I’m with you, Noriko.”

“But this isn’t the sort of challenge I’d set for myself.”

“That’s not what I meant. Because I’m with you, I feel like I can do these things. So we should try and conquer all sorts of things.”

“And by all sorts of things, you mean things you’re not good at?”

“I can’t really say whether or not I’m good at them. I haven’t been to an amusement park before.”

“Not even when you were young?”

“Not even then. I never asked my parents to take me to an amusement park, because I never felt enough of a desire to come to one.”

Shimako-san laughed softly.

“So that’s how it was?”

“How about you Noriko? Did you come here often?”

“Well, it’s not like we were here all the time. It was mainly because of my older sister.”

In Noriko’s case, she didn’t have to be assertive because her older sister would badger their parents about going, so occasionally they’d go to the amusement park. The days that her public servant father and school teacher mother had off lined up exactly, so on Sunday they would all go somewhere together as a family.

“Ah. I suppose that happens when you have two siblings about the same age. In contrast, my older brother left home when I was young and, since my father’s the chief priest at our temple, Sundays aren’t really days off. So a daughter like myself fitted in perfectly.”

Even after their heart-to-heart talk earlier, Shimako-san still talked about her family with the same tone of voice as always. It really was “not a big deal.”

“Ah.”

Shimako-san’s gaze had absently wandered forwards, and then she suddenly hung her head in shame. Noriko was about to turn forward to see what had happened when Shimako-san grabbed her hand, stopping her.

“...”

But, she hadn’t made it in time and Noriko had seen. The couple standing in line in front of them were kissing, unconcerned about the fact that they were out in public.

Noriko didn’t think that she had done anything wrong, so didn’t see the necessity to avert her eyes. She considered staring at the couple until they stopped what they were doing out of embarrassment, but relented out of deference to the way Shimako-san let her innocent gaze drop.

At any rate, standing right behind Noriko and Shimako-san were three grade school boys, and the exhibition came to an end surprisingly quickly due to them pointing at the couple and calling out, “They’re kissing,” and “Kissy-kissy.”

The boys were probably brothers. They were different heights, but their faces all looked similar.

“That’s what our mom said.”

“Aunty didn’t say that at all.”

Listening in to their conversation, it became apparent that two of the boys were brothers, and the third was a cousin.

Lined up behind the boys was an elderly man and woman. Were they husband and wife? Or companions? It seemed unlikely, but they could be siblings. The surprisingly energetic seventy-year old gentleman was expertly escorting the cane-carrying lady.

So then, what kind of relationship would the people around them think they had? Noriko suddenly found herself wondering this.

Friends? Sisters? Relatives? People that got along well together? Or two girls that were part of a large group that came here today and had decided to go on the Ferris wheel together even though they didn't really like each other?

They weren't quarreling, but people could definitely get that impression from Noriko's glum expression. Still, Noriko thought it was better than a forced, meaningless smile. And they were holding hands, after Shimako-san had clasped Noriko's hand.

After boarding the Ferris wheel and sitting down facing each other they both looked out the window. As they ascended, the figures of the people on the ground became corresponding smaller.

"The people, they're so small."

Shimako-san said what Noriko was thinking, before Noriko had the chance to say it.

"As the daughter of a temple priest, it was always tough on me when it came to keeping secrets."

The amusement park looked like a miniature garden. The mountain, the lake, the castle and the roofs of the various buildings were all visible. The people down below looked like tiny insects, although they would each be laughing, or crying, or angry, etc.

All of that in such a tiny container. Pondering this, Noriko thought that perhaps people's problems were also that tiny, after all.

"And now?"

Noriko asked. Shimako-san responded immediately with, “I’m happy.”

“Because I have my darling Noriko by my side.”

At that moment, the capsule they shared reached its highest point.

For the first time, Noriko felt that the words Shimako-san had said, that “It’s not that big a deal,” weren’t some kind of justification, but her true feelings.

Part 2.

On-board the steamship, the wind washed over them pleasantly.

As she brushed the stray curls of hair from her face, Shouko heard the person standing beside her say, “Click.”

It wasn’t the sound of a shutter, it was a voice.

Shouko turned her head and there was Tsutako-sama, smiling at her through a rectangular frame she had made with the thumb and forefinger of both her hands.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking a photo.”

“Huh?”

“Even though no physical copy will ever exist, the photo I just took of you will remain in my memory.”

At some point Tsutako-sama had stopped searching for, and being disappointed when she didn’t find, the camera that wasn’t there. Rather than forgetting about the camera, Tsutako-sama seemed to be strangely reveling in the fact that she couldn’t use one.

“At first it was a pain. But once I got over the withdrawal symptoms, it was

surprisingly comfortable.”

Tsutako-sama said, suddenly and lightly. Even without her camera, she was just as interesting as ever.

“And Yumi-san and the others didn’t say anything, right? About me not bringing a camera. That meant a lot.”

Tsutako-sama said, turning her finger-frame towards the land. Although she probably wasn’t going to find *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, no matter which direction she pointed at.

“It meant a lot that they didn’t say anything?”

Shouko asked. She knew how something that was said could stay with you, but couldn’t understand the opposite. Then Tsutako-sama lowered her hands and looked at her.

“Well, outside of photography, I don’t really have a lot of self-confidence.”

“Huh?”

“At school, I like taking photos of other students. So whenever there’s some kind of event and they invite me, I’m happy. And everyone really enjoys the pictures I take. To a degree, I’ve increased my value by playing the role of a photographer, and it’s usually how I communicate with other students. Basically, by taking photos I’ve made my school life run smoother. That’s why I touch my camera whenever I have a spare moment. Having it by my side gives me peace of mind. So for me, the camera is like Linus’ blanket.”

As she listened to this, Shouko was filled with disbelief. Tsutako-sama always looked so magnificent and full of confidence, and that was how Shouko saw her.

“So my uncle may have made that bet with me because he was more worried than I was.”

“He was worried?”

“About whether or not I’d be alright without a camera.”

Suffering the consequences of relying too heavily on her camera, Tsutako-sama smiled. Now that her camera had been taken away from her, she could be herself. What did she think about that?

“You didn’t bring your camera with you, right Shouko-chan? When I heard that, a part of me was so envious. I thought, ‘Ahh, Shouko-chan’s so strong.’”

“...”

Tsutako-sama had been thinking these thoughts while Shouko had been depressed about being a photography club member who forgot her camera. It was unimaginable.

“But Yumi-san didn’t say anything. Or, rather, she probably didn’t even notice that I didn’t have my camera. She can be a bit of an airhead.”

“And being an airhead’s a good thing?”

“Yep, it is. At least for me, right now. Because, after all, it’s proof that my doubts were baseless, right? To Yumi-san, I was still myself whether or not I had my camera with me. So she had invited me not as a photographer, but as a friend.”

“Why were you using *Rosa Chinensis en bouton* as your reference point?”

Shouko looked puzzled.

Certainly, Tsutako-sama and *Rosa Chinensis en bouton* were classmates, so they would know each other well. But she was also classmates with *Rosa Foetida en bouton*, and had been in the same class as *Rosa Gigantea* in first-year. So what made *Rosa Chinensis en bouton* special? There was a certain amount of jealousy in the question.

“Well, the Yellow and White Rose sisters were wrapped up in their own affairs all morning, right? They wouldn’t have noticed anything going on with anyone else.”

“Huh, what happened with the Yellow and White Rose sisters?”

Tsutako-sama spoke as though it were common knowledge, but this was the first Shouko had heard of it.

“I don’t know the details, but I’m fairly sure something was going on. Couldn’t you tell just by looking at them?”

Now that she had been asked, Shouko reviewed her memory of what had happened earlier this morning but couldn’t find anything unusual. However.

“... I was caught up in my own affairs too.”

“I thought as much.”

Tsutako-sama grinned at her. While Shouko had been nervously looking at Tsutako-sama, Tsutako-sama had been looking right through her.

“It looks like Rosa Chinensis was the only one who noticed, and she didn’t presume to say anything. But she’s the exact opposite of Yumi-san, so she would have decided not to say anything only after carefully thinking it through.”

Tsutako-sama closed her eyes, finding pleasure in the wind blowing against her.

“Why do you think that?”

The response to Shouko’s question was, “That’s just how she is.”

Tsutako-sama seemed to think that Shouko was inquiring about Rosa Chinensis, when really she was asking about Tsutako-sama herself.

“So, rather than being disappointed, maybe it’s a good thing that my camera broke.”

Their boat ride would soon be coming to an end.

“If I had my camera with me, I’d be constantly swinging it around, taking photos, so don’t think I’d be able to enjoy myself as fully as I have.”

Tsutako-sama looked over at Shouko.

“The teacup ride with Rei-sama was fun, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

Her smile had burst free as they spun around. Certainly, if Tsutako-sama had had her camera with her then Shouko probably wouldn’t have seen that unguarded smiling face.

Which was why Shouko believed the words of Tsutako-sama’s uncle, that this was a decree from the gods.

Part 3.

Yumi-san’s group were browsing in the gift-shop.

“Why don’t we go and have a look too?”

Rei-chan started to walk forwards, but Yoshino grabbed the hem of her coat, stopping her.

“What’s wrong?”

Yoshino thought, “I’m supposed to be the one saying that.” For Rei-chan, Yoshino’s drunken retching after the teacup ride seemed to have defined some kind of boundary, blowing away their earlier disagreement. She had reverted back to the usual, kind Rei-chan, as though nothing had happened.

Yoshino thought it would be better for her to apologize while she still wasn’t feeling well, and away from the others. If Rei-chan had been anticipating this, then she would have responded smoothly. But Rei-chan had been reset back to normal and seemed to have completely forgotten about making up. Consequently, Yoshino hadn’t yet found the right time to make the apology

that she had told Sachiko-sama she would, since it was hard for her to broach the topic.

“I want to go on that ride.”

Having said that much, Yoshino wondered what she should do next. There wasn't really any ride she wanted to go on. She was just using that as a pretext for spending some time alone with Rei-chan.

“Which one?”

Rei-chan frowned.

“You can't go on anything too fast.”

“I know.”

Now all she had to do was think of some docile ride. As soon as possible.

“You know, that one, that one.”

As she struggled to think of one, Yoshino desperately tried to give the impression that she knew, but just couldn't remember its name. The roller-coaster was no good, the teacup ride was preposterous, the haunted house wasn't the kind of place you'd go twice in one day, and the arcade wasn't really what you'd call a ride.

“Ummm... that slow boat-ride around the world.”

At her wit's end, she couldn't even name the ride. How the mighty had fallen.

“That should be fine. But didn't you say that you weren't going to go on that?”

That was true. Yesterday, on the way home, Yoshino had smiled as she completely dismissed Rei-chan's very feminine interest in the boat ride that sailed past displays of dolls from various countries. “I'm not some little child,” was what she'd said.

“I changed my mind.”

Just one more push and she'd be fine. Even now, Yoshino didn't really want to go on that boat ride, but if she pulled out at this point things would only get more complicated.

“Sachiko. We're heading off on our own.”

Rei-chan raised her voice so that Sachiko-sama, about 50 metres ahead of them, could hear.

“Understood. Are you going to watch the fireworks?”

Sachiko-sama turned around and fired back, in an equally loud voice.

“Yeah, that's the plan.”

So, see you then. They waved farewell, then Yoshino and Rei-chan headed off towards that slow boat ride.

As they held hands, Yoshino thought, “Just hold on a bit longer, Rei-chan.”.

As we ride on the boat past those dolls from various countries that you like, I'll tell you properly.

About Nana.

Afterward, I'll say the ‘Sorry,’ that I should have said earlier.

Part 4.

There were a number of interlinked shops selling souvenirs and character figures clustered around the main entrance.

“Oh, Yumi-san.”

Tsutako-san just happened to be browsing inside the store Yumi had innocently wandered into. Naturally, Shouko-chan was with her as well.

“Are you buying a souvenir for your family, Tsutako-san?”

She was holding a cookie tin in her right hand and a box of chocolates in her left hand, apparently trying to decide between the two.

“Not for my family. These are for my uncle.”

“Your uncle ... ?”

Why would she be buying something for her uncle, but not for her family? Was he someone who had never stopped loving the park’s characters, or a figurine collector? It seemed unlikely, but maybe he was constantly on the lookout for new sweets? Guessing Yumi’s questions, Tsutako-san supplied the answer:

“He’s repairing my camera, so this is just a thank-you gift.”

“Oh? Did you break your camera, Tsutako-san?”

“Yeah. Just before I came here. So I haven’t had my camera all day.”

“Ah, really!?”

As Yumi’s voice rose, Shouko-chan mysteriously convulsed with laughter. It was unclear what was tickling her funny-bone, but she was laughing so hard she grasped her stomach. Shouko-chan desperately tried to stifle her laughter, probably considering it to be rude, but that just seemed to set off another burst.

“Excuse me.”

Shouko-chan left the store, still laughing.

“What happened to Shouko-chan?”

“Who knows?”

Tsutako-san said, then returned to choosing a gift for her uncle. Even though she probably did know what caused Shouko-chan to start laughing.

“Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama appeared. They had become separated as they browsed the spacious store. Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki were somewhere in the shop too. Since Kashiwagi-san was so tall and conspicuous, he was easy to spot inside the store and served as a convenient landmark. Obviously finding something funny, the two guys were pointing and guffawing.

“What do you think about these?”

Sachiko-sama was holding two key-chains featuring the bear mascots, one in each hand. In her right hand was the older bear, in her left hand the younger one. Twin bears.

“There’s a cute little bag over there too. I could get the purple one and you could get the pink one. What do you think about that, Yumi?”

Her onee-sama was going to buy them a matching pair of items from the amusement park’s gift-shop. It was a promise that had been carried over from their autumn visit.

“Either one is good.”

Her onee-sama was buying her something, and on top of that they’d both have a matching set, so Yumi was delighted no matter what it was.

“Saying either one is good doesn’t help me. I asked because I was having trouble deciding.”

Indeed, that seemed to be the case. So Yumi said the first thing that popped into her head:

“Then how about buying some candy?”

“Candy?”

Sachiko-sama stared back at Yumi, as though she’d just been bitten by a fox.

“It’s okay to get something that disappears after you’ve eaten it.”

“You don’t want something to commemorate today?”

“Even when there’s nothing left, we’ll still remember it. The delicious memory will always remain, don’t you agree?”

Yumi reflected on how her onee-sama might react to the impertinent suggestion she had just made. Perhaps something along the lines of, “Even though I went to all the effort of finding matching items, and tried my hardest to come to a decision. You’d throw all that effort away and ask for sweets.”

What was her onee-sama thinking about? Worried about the response she would receive, Yumi cast her eyes downward, as though she were looking at some of the merchandise.

The shop was fairly busy, now that the day was turning to evening.

“That’s true.”

Sachiko-sama eventually said.

“Even though I hadn’t considered it until now, it’s a good idea.”

Tsutako-san had apparently been straining hard to listen and quietly said, “Is that really okay?” which was kind of odd.

“Tsutako-sama. How about this?”

Her fit of laughter apparently over, Shouko-chan had returned. When she realized that Sachiko-sama was also present she bowed slightly and greeted her with, “Gokigenyou,” before turning back to Tsutako-san and showing her what she had brought.

“Don’t you think it’s perfect for your uncle?”

Yumi made her way over to Tsutako-san so she could sneak a peak at what was there too. At first glance it looked like a disposable camera. But then the word “Chocolate” printed on the packaging jumped out at her.

Tsutako-san’s shoulders started to shake.

“When I return the camera he loaned me for today, how about I put this in the case instead?”

“You could. He’ll be surprised.”

Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan giggled together, like a pair of naughty schoolboys contemplating a prank. It didn’t seem like they were buying this as a gift to thank Tsutako-san’s uncle for repairing her camera. And what was that about a camera he had apparently loaned Tsutako-san?

“Say.”

There was another person looking at the photography club duo with the same faintly puzzled expression. However, she hadn’t heard the key phrases, ‘camera repairs’ or ‘thank-you gift.’

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation Tsutako-san. If you had a camera with you today, why didn’t you take any photographs?”

Sachiko-sama’s innocent question seemed to tickle Shouko-chan’s funny-bone once more.

“Excuse me.”

Pushing the chocolate disposable camera lookalike into Tsutako-san’s hands, Shouko-chan once more made for the exit.

“What happened to Shouko-chan? Did I say something strange?”

Unable to get away with just saying, “Who knows?” this time, Tsutako-san followed that up with the equally incomprehensible, “She seems to be quite sensitive today.”

Amongst the Stardust

Part 1.

The shadows were growing long by the time they left the gift shop.

“There’s still some time before the fireworks. Yumi, is there another ride you’d like to go on?”

Sachiko-sama asked, looking at her wristwatch.

“How about we go on the merry-go-round, onee-sama?”

“Ah ... that thing?”

Despite Yumi’s bold invitation, quite predictably Sachiko-sama looked back at her grimly.

“I already told you that I can’t stand spinning things, didn’t I?”

Sachiko-sama rejected the idea, probably because she was conflating all rotating rides and had seen Yoshino-san incapacitate herself on the teacup ride not that long ago.

“While it does rotate around, it’s not a frenetic spinning. At most it’s a slow twirling. Look, there’s a baby riding on it.”

Sachiko-sama finally relented after seeing a one-year old riding the merry-go-round with her father.

“I suppose so ... ”

Just as Sachiko-sama was letting her guard down, Kashiwagi-san said:

“You’ve been horse riding before, right Sacchan? It’s about the same pace as a warm-up trot around the horse grounds. Plus, it isn’t going to hurt your butt.”

Minus points for the followup. Still, the ‘horse riding’ example was quite smooth. Yumi never would have been able to come up with that comparison herself.

“Okay. I’ll take the challenge.”

“Alright!”

Yumi took her onee-sama’s hand and walked over to the end of the line, before she could change her mind.

“Oh, what about you two?”

The two guys hadn’t followed them and when Yumi asked, “Aren’t you going to go on the ride?” they both answered, “No.” But they each had different reasons.

“It’d be a bit embarrassing.”

Yuuki said, his eyes indicating that being put on public display riding a wooden horse that was adorned with flowers and a lavishly decorated saddle as it rose and fell while slowly circling around was more than he could bear. But he didn’t dare put that in words, probably because he didn’t want to say anything to deflate Sachiko-sama, given how much effort it took to get her interested.

“Would you be embarrassed too, Suguru-san?”

“Not particularly.”

Kashiwagi-san said, running his fingers through his hair.

“But I’d just look so perfect riding a white horse that it would draw everyone’s attention.”

Yumi wondered if she was supposed to laugh but couldn’t really decide, so didn’t provide much of a reaction. Sachiko-sama laughed sarcastically, so that was probably the correct response. And as for Yuuki, he ignored it completely.

The sun was setting and the lights were coming on in various places around the amusement park.

In its nighttime configuration the merry-go-round too shone brilliantly, like a radiant jewelry box.

“A long time ago, in my grandmother’s room, I saw a music box that looked like this.”

Sachiko-sama said softly as she watched the carousel, spellbound.

“When you opened the lid, there were three horses that would slowly spin around accompanied in time to the music. Beneath that were drawers with rings or necklaces, I can’t remember which, but there were all different colored gems. I used to enjoy opening the music box and the drawers, and gazing at the horses and the jewels. It was incredibly pretty.”

Sachiko-sama smiled at the memory.

“It was so beautiful that my younger self wanted to enter into the music box. And here it is.”

As she said this, Sachiko-sama dashingly straddled a white horse. Her movements and posture were awe-inspiring, probably due to her horse riding experience.

Yumi followed her, taking the horse diagonally behind Sachiko-sama’s. Following her onee-sama’s lead, she sat with her back perfectly straight.

The music flowed forth and the horses began to slowly move.

Inside the glittering jewelry box, dozens of horses gracefully twirled.

From time to time, Yumi’s onee-sama would look back over her shoulder at her. Yumi would wave, by way of response.

It was closer to twirling than spinning. No matter how many times they went around, they never drew any closer.

They didn't draw closer. But they didn't get further away either.

That's fine. That's fine.

Yumi felt as though she had found her answer.

Her onee-sama twirled.

Smiling radiantly, calling out to her, "Yumi."

Commit it to memory, this sight.

This scene that shone so brilliantly it almost stung her eyes.

Undoubtedly, there still remained plenty of wonderful things in store for Yumi. But this moment was a once in a lifetime experience.

She would stow it safely in her jewelry box, as her most prized possession.

It made opals look like pretty candies, figuratively speaking.

Part 2.

"I suppose this is a decent enough spot."

Tsutako-sama exhaled, then smiled.

After struggling up the hill road, they'd arrived at this lookout just in front of the artificial mountain. Since it was away from the bustle of main street, and the lights from the other rides weren't in direct line-of-sight, it was the perfect spot for watching the fireworks. It overlooked a lake, and sections of that were lit up, but complaining about it wouldn't change anything. Instead, Shouko was impressed that they had managed to find such a location.

This was probably one of those places that well informed people knew about but most people didn't. Even though they'd arrived fairly early, there was already a small crowd there.

“Oh, right, why don’t we check that the chocolate we bought fits inside my uncle’s camera case?”

Tsutako-sama said. There was still about 15 minutes until the fireworks started. She’d probably made this proposal thinking it would be a perfect way to kill some time. But Shouko wasn’t convinced that this would be a good idea for Tsutako-sama.

“Umm, will you be alright?”

Even talking about it directly made her a bit nervous.

“Why?”

“Umm. You know...”

While Shouko floundered, Tsutako-sama guessed what she meant and said, “Ahh.”

“About what my uncle said? That if I open the case I won’t be able to stop myself from taking a photo? Is that what you’re worried about, Shouko-chan?”

“Yeah.”

With all her heart and mind. Of course, that’s not to say she didn’t have faith in Tsutako-sama, it’s just that, to Shouko, Tsutako-sama’s uncle’s words sounded like a curse.

Like how a recovering alcoholic can return to their former binge-drinking ways with just a sip of alcohol. Or how a single cigarette can lead a former smoker back to their pack-a-day habit. Those kind of stories were fairly common.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like quitting smoking.”

Tsutako-sama smiled.

“I’ll just take the camera out for a second. I’ll put the chocolate in the case,

see how it fits, then put the camera back.”

“Then let me do it.”

Shouko put her hand out without thinking about it.

“You’ll do it?”

“It’s just taking the camera out for a second, right? Put the chocolate in the case, see if it fits, then put the camera back. If that’s all there is to it, then I can do that.”

Tsutako-sama said that she was just going to take the camera out and replace it with the chocolate, but the moment she touched the camera she might press the shutter, just out of habit. Surely it was better for Shouko to do this, rather than run that risk.

Since Tsutako-sama was only taking a break from photography for today it didn’t really matter if she became re-addicted, except for the fact that this camera was part of the wager between her and her uncle. And she couldn’t lose that.

“Well, I suppose I could always do it tomorrow.”

“Huh, no way.”

Having come so far, she was going to put it off?

“Well, okay then, can you do it for me, Shouko-chan?”

Enjoying Shouko’s reaction, Tsutako-sama reached into her bag and retrieved a black case from near the bottom. It had been a while, they’d last seen it in Tsutako-sama’s uncle’s store.

“Huh?”

Tsutako-sama seemed puzzled. Even though Shouko had both her arms outstretched waiting to receive the camera case, Tsutako-sama kept hold of it and lightly shook it.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m trying to remember if I held this before.”

Tsutako-sama said. By ‘before’ she probably meant when they were in her uncle’s store.

“You didn’t.”

Shouko shook her head. She remembered that scene well.

“Your uncle buried it in your bag.”

He’d said something smug like, “Good luck,” as he put it in.

“That’s what I thought.”

As she was saying this, Tsutako-sama peeled apart the velcro that kept the top attached to the rest of the case.

“What are you doing?”

Panicked, Shouko lunged at her but Tsutako-sama simply smiled.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to lose the bet. Or, rather, my uncle made it so the outcome was never in doubt.”

“Huh?”

“He tricked us.”

Tsutako-sama held out the camera case for Shouko to see and inside were two small Youkan jellies.

The wager had surely given Tsutako-sama’s uncle enough amusement to cover the cost of the camera repairs.

Part 3.

After they got off the merry-go-round it was almost time for the fireworks to start.

“Ahh, this is bad.”

Like Cinderella hearing the clock strike 12 o’clock, the two women hastily fled. And following them were the two princes.

“Hey, where are we going?”

“I found a good spot to view the fireworks from a while back.”

Yumi explained, turning her head to look back at the guys. It was away from the buildings and not brightly lit. It was also somewhat elevated and near a lake, so both the view and the scenery would be nice.

Still, they probably weren’t the only ones who had this idea, so the place might be packed already. At any rate, all they could do was try. If it was full, it was full. Essentially, the sky was so vast that they’d be able to see the fireworks regardless of where they were.

When they reached their target destination, they found there were people there but it wasn’t overly full. Since the fireworks happened at the same time as the evening parade, most people were probably watching that. This lookout was away from the parade route.

“Excuse me.”

Yumi said to the patron that had arrived just before her, then proceeded to survey the area. Yumi was checking her watch, thinking it was almost time for the fireworks to start, when she felt a withering gaze coming from beside her.

“Huh?”

Yumi turned to see what it was, and there was...

“Touko!”

Her drill-like hair rolls swayed beside her ears.

“Onee-sama.”

Instinctively, the pair embraced tightly. – Well, that’s what Yumi expected, but the cute petit soeur ensconced in her open arms didn’t respond that way at all.

“What kind of greeting is ‘excuse me?’ No matter how dark it is, you should still be able to recognize your petit soeur’s face with just a single glance.”

In reality, her petit soeur was playing it very cool.

“Ah, sorry.”

“By all rights, you should even be able to identify her from behind.”

On top of that, she was also very strict.

Yumi had been worried that she wouldn’t see Touko today since, despite the signs that Touko was there, they hadn’t run into each other yet. Now that they had met when she wasn’t really expecting it, Yumi was getting excited. But only a little bit, nothing too over the top.

“Touko-san’s just saying that she’s very happy to see you, Yumi-sama.”

As they looked at each other with somewhat conflicted expressions, these words suddenly slipped into the space between them.

“Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama.”

Yumi searched for the owner of the voice and standing there smirking was Kanako-chan. She was bursting with style, wearing one of the character’s caps and with a bag of popcorn hanging from her shoulder. It looked like she had been fully enjoying her time at the amusement park.

“Kanao-san, please don’t put words in my mouth.”

Touko glared at her, but Kanao-chan seemed completely unfazed.

“Translation: I’d be embarrassed if I told the truth.”

“Oooh.”

Thrust and parry, Kanao-chan seemed happy to provide her own translations of Touko’s comments, which made Touko fall silent. Still silent, Touko leaned in close to Yumi and whispered, “I was worried we weren’t going to meet.” This time around, Kanao-chan didn’t supply a translation.

“Did you hear someone call out ‘Touko’ just now?”

From some distance away Yumi heard a voice she knew well. She looked around and, sure enough, a group of people were making their way over.

“See, I told you it was Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san led them over. Following her were Shimako-san and Noriko-chan. Just as Yumi was starting to worry that the Yellow Rose sisters were still fighting, Rei-sama appeared. It seems she had stopped to pick up a handkerchief that Yoshino-san had dropped.

They explained that they’d run into each other at the slow boat ride and had decided to come here together.

The Red Rose sisters, the Yellow Rose sisters, the White Rose sisters, and Touko and Kanao-chan, plus, as a freebie, the two guys from Hanadera. It felt like the whole gang was there.

“Now if Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan were to appear – ”

They’d have a royal straight flush, the best possible hand.

“But things never work out that well.”

While everyone shared a laugh, a hand slowly raised a short distance away, amongst the crowd.

“You called?”

“Tsu-Tsutako-san!?”

Was she like the devil, speak and she appears? Because there was no mistaking that it was Tsutako-san standing there.

“I noticed you a while ago, but Yoshino-san beat me there so I was just waiting for the right time to make an entrance.”

“What an incredible coincidence.”

As Yumi chuckled to herself, a chorus of “Nope” came from around her.

“We’ve been waiting here because Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama said that this was the place to go if you wanted to watch the fireworks. It’s no coincidence.”

Shimako-san said.

“Right. And earlier Sachiko asked if we were going to watch the fireworks, so I took that to mean that we’d meet up here.”

Rei-sama too smiled in amazement.

It was then that the fireworks they’d been waiting for started.

Hyy — , bang!

A section of the amusement park was decorated with a giant ethereal flower.

The fireworks came one after the other, without a break.

The surface of the lake reflected the sky, becoming a dream-like flower garden.

“Waah.”

The group of friends smiled broadly watching the fireworks make their heavenly journey.

Twinkle,

twinkle.

When they went off they shone like hundreds of stars sparkling in the night sky.

Yoshino-san turned to Rei-sama, smiled and said, “Your mouth is open.”

Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan were portioning off sections of the sky, using their fingers to make a frame.

Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama were talking, she agreed to let him drive them home.

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan were holding hands.

And Yumi, she was looking up at the sky with the same expression as Kanako-chan, Touko, Yuuki, and probably everyone else.

Shine,

shine.

Sparkle.

At first she had been concerned about how it would turn out, but looking at the sparkling faces of her friends it felt like everyone was glad that they came today.

Shine,

shine.

Sparkle.

The firework's brilliance was just a moment in time.

But they'd never forget it.

Everyone was smiling.

All sorts of things had happened, but everyone would carry with them some happy memories.

Undoubtedly.

Eternally.

Afterword

“Maria-sama ga Miteru” is a fantasy – or so I’ve been told.

It’s also been called a lot of other things, such as “a school comedy,” “a soft Yuri novel,” “a mystery,” etc.

Well, using genres to differentiate between novels certainly makes it easier when organizing or making a recommendation from a massive pile of books but it’s never something that should be considered definitive. I’m fine with anyone who reads the book and labels it as ‘Such-and-such kind of a novel,’ provided it’s not too far removed from reality.

So, back to the topic of ‘fantasy.’

Occasionally I’m asked this by people trying to confirm their opinions, and I’d usually smile and respond with “Why do you think that?” or “It’s just supposed to be about a normal high school girl’s school life,” but gradually I’ve started to think that, “Perhaps it is.” Especially while writing some of the conversations for this volume.

Because. You know? It raised a very simple question.

– Why didn’t the girls just call each other on their cell phones?

While typing away on my keyboard, I quipped to myself:

“Just when the heck would anyone have that kind of conversation?”

Hello, this is Konno.

Well, it’s not set in the Edo or Shouwa periods. It’s set in the Heisei period. You can tell because I’ve written that on page 8, line 15, “Even now, in Heisei.” (It says that, right?)

So then, the time when Yumi and the others are attending (or attended) Lillian's Girls Academy can be roughly defined as 'some time during the Heisei period'. I don't know how long the Heisei period will continue for, but all of that is included in 'some time during the Heisei period.' Pinning it down further than that becomes difficult.

The hard to pin down part could be called fantasy. That's how I think about it.

Fantasy.

Consulting the large dictionary I have at hand, words like 'illusion' and 'visions' and 'dreams' are scattered around. There's no dragons or swords or magicians or people with wings, but if you think that, "This world is just slightly different to our own," then I guess it could be called a fantasy novel. Even though it's rude.

Okay. This book goes out for sale during the beginning of the 12th month of the 19th year of the Heisei period (although I think it will be dated as January 10, 2008). We're approaching the 20th year of the Heisei period and the world sure has changed a lot since the start of it.

To deal with the question that this story raised, it looks like Lillian's Girls Academy has instituted a rule prohibiting the use of cell phones on school grounds. And since they would have hardly any opportunity to use them, why bother having one? On an ordinary day they'd spend half their time at school, and you could add to that time spent commuting. They're a necessity if everyone else has one, but if under half the class had one then perhaps they'd be an inconvenience.

The current generation of teenaged girls might find this hard to believe, but when I went to school nobody had a mobile phone. That was normal, so we didn't think of it as inconvenient. If we wanted to meet, we'd use our home phones and organize a time and place and make sure we were there. There was no SMS to say "I'm running five minutes late." We'd run frantically. Ahh, that takes me back.

Incidentally, Kashiwagi Suguru has a cell phone. But he's the only one, so

it's not much use to him.

Which reminds me, this is a carry over from last volume.

The true form of what Ms Tsukiyama Minako referred to as "Sachiko-san's eccentricities" was revealed. The proportion of people who guessed this correctly (via mail) was quite high.

I think a response of, "I knew it," is fine, but there were plenty of hints there. Cramming for the exam, a tutor at her house, Kashiwagi Suguru, her day off from school ... I don't want any spoilers in the postscript, so I'll stop there.

Moving right along, the setting for this volume is an amusement park.

I like amusement parks. If pushed, I'd say that I enjoy the rides more than watching the parades and shows, and I'll happily ride on the regular roller-coasters (although I'd pass on the more extreme ones). I'm similar to a certain somebody in that I squeal really loudly. Stress relief, I guess. Although it can be a bit scary.

Speaking of scary, there's the haunted house.

I'm a scaredy-cat. Naturally, the haunted house is scary. I can somewhat enjoy a western-style haunted house, but a purely Japanese one is just too frightening for me. They make me want to close my eyes and move forward holding someone's hand (in that case don't go in, right?) The cemetery, the old water well, the tattered sliding doors in the abandoned temple, the execution grounds ... geeze, just writing about it scares me. The young lady standing there in a white kimono is quite cute if she's supposed to be an apparition (if possible I'd like to avoid writing ghost). Aaaaargh.

I suppose that just means I'm Japanese. Foreigners would probably find their own cemeteries and horror films the most frightening.

Which brings me to the haunted house that Yumi and co went into. I imagined it as a Western style haunted house as I was writing it, but since I

didn't depict any specific details feel free to imagine it as whatever style of haunted house you want.

Looking over the guidebooks to various amusements parks that I bought as reference for Yumi's trip there, I found myself wanting to visit one of them.

But I don't like the cold and I'm sensitive to cold, so I should probably wait until it gets a bit warmer.

Konno Oyuki.