Moonshadows

by

Andrew Oberg
To N, L, and K, with love always
– You have taught and given more than you know
Moonshadows

A novel, a diary, a ball of yarn
2019, March 25 (Monday)

School can’t start soon enough. These poor girls, spending their days at home, spring break eaten up by our move, our new apartment, new area, new life. They have nowhere to go and no one to watch them while I’m at work. They don’t even have any neighborhood friends yet, and probably won’t get any until the school year starts.

I can’t believe Manae will be in the fifth grade already, Terako now in the first. I still remember taking each of them to their opening ceremonies for daycare as if it were yesterday. It feels like yesterday. They’ll have whole other opening ceremonies this year, and I’ll probably have to work. Maybe I can get the day off, I don’t know, I hate asking having just started the job. But my manager’s got to understand, I’m a single mother now and he knows what that means. Or maybe anyway he has some idea. Then again, maybe not. We are something of an invisible minority around here.

That bastard Shoichiro, if he weren’t so useless I’d ask him to bring the kids to his kitchen. At least they’d be less bored there – though who knows, maybe they’d be more bored. He probably wouldn’t give them anything to do, just expect them to watch as he pounds out one boxed lunch after another. I don’t even know what he’s in charge

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of these days; I think last year it was the seasonal side veggies. Cooking in bulk like that – is he even a chef? He calls himself one, what a buffoon. I’m so glad I finally left him; if his father were any smarter he’d fire him and force the lazy bum to find a real job, or actually do some advanced culinary study or improve his skills somehow.

The truth is he does have some skill – he’s not a bad cook, I know that, but he is useless at the business side. I’ll probably even miss his *yakisoba* stir-fried noodles. The homemade sauce, that was the difference. I wonder if he wouldn’t be better off in a café, or a proper restaurant. What’s he going to do when his father dies and doesn’t leave him the company? Just keep slopping out good but unremarkable lunches for the salaried masses with six hundred yen to spare and thirty minutes to eat? I’m sure he hasn’t thought it through, I’m sure he hasn’t thought about anything. I don’t even know if he can think.

These poor girls, sleeping so sweetly in our one small bedroom. This place – it’s cheap, or cheap enough, but decent. It’s good; well, it’s okay. A 1LDK apartment: it’s come to this. Six straw *tatami* mats for the bedroom and an eight mat-sized living room/dining room/kitchen and everything else room. Faux wood flooring: at least that will be easy to clean. And the landlord agreed to
replace all the straw in the mats; I hate those little mites that get in there after enough summers of wear and tear. Plus there’s the smell: fresh green straw, that might be why my darlings are sleeping so soundly. Or maybe just exhaustion after yet another day spent bickering with each other over whose clothes get to go where. I’m sorry girls, so sorry, but we’ll get through this and be the better for it. You’ll see, a happier and more balanced Mama will make it worth having a smaller living space and no Papa around. And you’ll see him, you’ll see him plenty I’m sure. As long as he shows up when he’s supposed to. You certainly can’t say every Kochi man does that, but I have a feeling Shoichiro at least will.

It’s come to this. Awake alone in a new home, half-unpacked boxes thrown against a wall, the TV sitting on the floor – of course we had to set that up first – and me with it, parked here at our new five thousand yen dining table, the best we could afford and how very embarrassing. Tomorrow I’ll finish organizing the kitchen and actually make us a real meal; it’ll start to feel like home after that. I’ll let the girls do whatever they want with the bedroom, all I insist on is the space to lay out our futon bedding every night, and I know they have enough sense to maintain that. Three single futon – that’s nearly
the whole of the room. Those tears at having to throw out her desk, I’ll never forgive myself for that. I’ll make it up to you Manae; and Terako, I promise that on the same happy day you’ll get a desk for your schoolwork too, just like older sister. In the meantime this particleboard “table” will have to do for everything. We’ll certainly get our money’s worth out of it.

Yes it’s come to this, and I’ve started writing a diary. My goodness.
2019, March 27 (Wednesday)

Home is a bit more homey, day by day. For the most part I’ve gotten everything unpacked and my commute has become almost routine. The 6:07 tram, the first one of the morning from our local stop. It gets me downtown and to my building with just enough time to spare before our 6:45 clock-in. My co-workers are all right; I’m getting used to them too. Matsumoto-san is another single mother, and that helps. Tanaka-san has never been married and I can see why – the man is nice enough I suppose, but talk about creepy. I wish he wouldn’t look at me the way he does, thank goodness I don’t have to work in rotation with him. Sakaichi-san though, now there is someone annoyingly bubbly. Fakely annoyingly bubbly, I’d like to open up her head and peer inside to see what she’s really thinking because it can’t be that. And heaven help us if Tanaka-san actually asks her out on a date as he sure seems to want to. It wouldn’t exactly be Beauty and the Beast, but it would be pretty close. Not that Sakaichi-san is that good-looking, she’s just younger than the two of us divorcées and a whole lot less jaded. Although she won’t stay that way for long if she sticks around here cleaning office spaces every day.

That clacking the trams make as they roll down
Kochi’s main artery, it’s kind of soothing. Before this past week I hadn’t taken one for years, not since I was in high school. My classic racing bicycle, such a joy, it was one of the first things to go to finance our move, and as old as it was the money I got from selling it still covered our agent’s bill, plus a bit towards the upfront fees. I never expected a windfall like that.

I loved that bicycle, and nearly cried to let it go. Even when pregnant and riding it proved impossible I still kept it in great shape. Not that I had any dreams of being a real racer, I just loved the wind in my face and pedaling till I collapsed. At least, I did up until my mid-twenties when having birthed two babies finally caught up with me.

In my heart I refused to take any money from Shoichiro, but in the end he didn’t offer anyway. I’d still refuse if he were to suddenly do so today though. Not that he has it to spare. The household finances were my domain, after all, and why on earth was I cutting our grocery bills short to make sure he got his fifteen thousand yen playing money every month? How very stupid. But you know what they say about hindsight.

I can’t see the girls off in the mornings, but for now I’m not worried about it. I just hope they get to school safely when it starts. We’ve practiced the walk
together three times already, and there is another girl and two boys near us who will be going the same route at the same time. Manae has got to get over her shyness, she’s the eldest and can’t rely on Terako to be making friends for them. If the girls can get in with that other group and the five of them all show up at school it will be such a relief. Terako will have to wait on the days when her schedule finishes early until Manae gets done with her studies, there’s no way I want her walking back home alone. That’s the trouble with first graders, their routines are so different from the upper years’. They’ll both be fine, I know, I keep telling myself that they’ll be fine, but I do worry. What can I say? I’m a mother: it’s the biggest part of my job to worry.

Clack, clack, clack go the rails, the soundtrack to my days and my nights, it runs through my brain while I shower. I think the problem is that I’m always so exhausted when I get on the thing in the mornings – and late afternoons – that the drowsiness has made my brain somehow adopt those noises as a part of its natural background. It’s wired in, it feels like a beacon I’ve always known, like it’s been there buried, a piece of me, and is only now coming out in the fullness it always should have. If I think about it like that it’s almost as if my
fate is blossoming, as if I’m becoming who I was without realizing it, or like I have finally stepped onto the path I was already travelling with a suddenly switched on awareness. Like I’m turning into the me I was meant to be. Goodness, look at those sentences. Things must be pretty smooth if I’m musing about fate.

It’s not so bad, I was right to get divorced, to take the girls, to move out and on. I am happier now, I am calmer, and for the first time since Terako was born I feel like I’m actually in control of my own situation. I only have two people to mother now, and I actually am their mother. No more dead weight around the house, no more unpredictable wreck waiting to happen. The man could cook, and he wasn’t a bad drunk as much as he drank, but he was just so unbelievably useless. He couldn’t even cover our rent and car payments on his salary – money that he earned from working for his own father. If my part-time job hadn’t paid as well as it did we probably would have had to take out loans. For all I know maybe Shoichiro had been taking out loans. There was that one postcard I found in the mail slot before he could rip it away from me and insist it was nothing… What has that man gotten himself into? A gambling addiction, now that would be just like him. Or a fling on the side or something...
where he needed money to impress some stupid young tart. That would also be just like him. He told me once he only started learning how to cook to impress “hotties”. What a donkey. Well it’s nothing to do with me now.

Another day tomorrow, framed once more by clack, clack, clack. Sitting on those sixty or seventy year-old cloth benches, staring at the other riders opposite, no real heating that I can tell of, but I do remember from my school days how the cooling gets blasted out of somewhere during summer. Surrounded by the elderly and weirdo service industry workers – the only people up at that time. Along with me, of course. The early rising downtrodden, life’s rejects, bottomed out in a bottomed out city still running its trams hastily rebuilt just after the war. The wooden floors in those things say it all: no money for modernity here. But they’re comfortable enough, and they run, and they get where they’re going, they get me to work. All for two hundred yen. I’ll take it; life on our own in a tiny apartment halfway across town – it’s not so bad.
2019, March 29 (Friday)

Getting divorced was such a mistake. Shoichiro – I miss him. If nothing else at least he was a form of support, some kind of foundation. Maybe he wasn’t always faithful, I don’t really know and I never wanted to know. He’d go off on benders and come home after a night or two, reeking and barely holding it together, but he never bothered the girls by barging in at three o’clock in the morning and he never once hit any of us. Not seriously, not with a fist. I’m glad I never asked where he was, it was easier simply to think of him in some smoky pub with his friends, laughing away like macaques and slapping each other on the shoulders. Men.

I do know that he frequented one or two – or a few – “hostess” bars, money would disappear from our bank account on certain weekends and I don’t doubt that it ended up in some floozy’s hands, only to be forcefully split later with the club’s owner, but Shoichiro wouldn’t have cared about that. He would only have cared about impressing her in his drunken best and receiving whatever lavish praise or titillating touch he might have gotten in return. He probably went to the “soap lands” now and then too. Imagine spending hard-earned money on sex with a random tramp!
Men. Not that his money was particularly hard-earned. But he was steady, and he was there, and when I needed him he’d usually come through. His smile; it was something. He never worried about anything – he drove me mad the way he never worried – and somehow his lazy slide through life provided all the comfort he needed. If I hadn’t been there to prop him up who knows what would have happened. I guess we’ll find out now. But I do miss him. I even miss his stink. Every time I hang the laundry these days I think about his filthy boxer shorts which he always refused to throw away, and how I would sometimes go out and buy a new pair without his even noticing. A day or two or three later he’d ask where his blue checkered shorts had gone, or his Hanshin Tigers ones, or this or that stained and worn out old rag. In the laundry, I’d say, they’ll come out soon. They never did and he’d forget the whole thing. I think the only people that really knew were me and the waste collectors. What a buffoon; I wish I hadn’t left him. The papers are signed and stamped though, officially sealed and filed with City Hall. Divorced. I’m a one strike woman, a big black mark on my record, I can’t go back and I’ll never go through with it again. No way. No more men, just me and the girls. Life: what a load of crap.
That idiot Tanaka-san spilled the bleach cleanser all over the inside of our floor polisher and now the thing is broken. We’ve got to mop by hand until it gets fixed; at least three weeks they say. And no overtime pay even though it takes twice as long to get the same amount of work done. Why do all four of us have to be punished for his ineptitude? He said that his pay is being docked on account, but I doubt that’s true. The company couldn’t get away with that if he had the brains to complain to the local labor office – which he probably doesn’t. Maybe his pay is being reduced, I don’t know. I don’t care. The moron has cost me any chance of getting the day off for Manae and Terako’s entrance ceremony.

A brand new school, a new year for them, and it won’t even start with a proud Mama watching as they greet their new principal, vice principal, and teachers with their new classmates. I have to remember to call Shoichiro to make sure he can make it. His boss is his own father, surely he can get the day off.

Terako spent the afternoon at her new friend’s apartment right here in our building, it was easy enough to say yes when she asked if she could go. Yumi-chan, another charming six year-old girl, and I’m sure she’ll be in Terako’s class at school. It is such a relief to have her
making friends already, and so close too. Yumi-chan’s one of the group that will be walking to school with the girls. I wish she had an older sister, I’m worried about Manae. She’s so shy. She told me she spent the day alone right here at home. I’m glad she was safe but I wish she had at least gone over to Yumi-chan’s for a little while, some company would have done her good. She probably just played on her DS game console after watching TV till lunchtime. Terako said she took her meal over to Yumi-chan’s so Manae didn’t even have anyone to eat with. I’ve got to help her pry herself out of her shell.

Maybe I can meet one of the other mothers as soon as I get a chance to attend a PTA meeting. Anyone from her new class should live close enough for Manae to visit. And maybe on the weekends we could all get together or something, but I don’t want to step on any other parents’ toes. If they’ve got plans with their whole family how can I invite us along? Oh sorry, I’m divorced so it’ll just be me and my daughters. How embarrassing. People would feel sorry for us, treat me like a charity case or a basket case – or both.

Stupid, stupid Shoichiro, how I miss him. Our lives were on a trajectory, a path, we were going nowhere but we were in it together, sailing the waters in a single
vessel. Now we’re splintered, carried along by different currents. Still carried though.

Could I really have chosen differently? I felt so clear, so decisive, I knew what had to be done and I did it. But now I look back and can hardly recognize myself. How could I have taken this? Did I really think I had the strength to pull it off? What made me so confident? There were all those pressures, all those influences, all those factors bearing down on me day after day until I snapped or broke or solidified or hardened or something. Is that what people mean by fate? Inescapable forces pushing and pulling from outside and inside until – bang! – a decision, an action, a turn, a fork, a new road. Life unfolds in its inexplicability and you’re left with the mess of your own making. Is it yours?

Stupid, stupid Shoichiro, I wish you could have saved me from me. I still wish you could.
2019, March 30 (Saturday)

One of those postcards that Shoichiro tried to hide from me arrived in the mail today. Not for him either, for me. Addressed to me, to me and at our current address; it wasn’t forwarded by the post office. And right there on the label it read: “Takebayashi Kazenoko”.

My parents were such idiots. Naming me “Kazenoko” has been a lifelong embarrassment and was an endless source of teasing at school. Then today I had to see it written there, with my brand new address attached to a missive from a debt collection agency. Who are they? How did they even find me? And what does any of this have to do with me? The card claims that Shoichiro owes them one million yen, that he’s late in his payments, and that as his guarantor I am now legally responsible until his schedule is caught back up. I knew nothing of any of this – how can I possibly be held to account? It must be some kind of mistake, I’ll have to call the company on Monday and see what this is all about. Not that I don’t have better things to do with the little free time I have.

What a fool. He went and got himself into debt and now, even though we’re legally divorced already, I’m supposedly on the hook for him. I knew I should have changed my surname back to my maiden name, it would

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have been worth the hassle of re-registering my family records along with the girls’ at City Hall, if for no other reason than just to make a clean break with that so-called chef and self-proclaimed “all around good guy”. Shoichiro, what an utter buffoon. I suppose too I would have had to call my card company and utilities providers and get my name changed on our billing statements; also the insurance company. And that inane new national registry system where everyone has been assigned a twelve digit ID number… What was it called? It hardly matters, changing your name is a pain, but in this case it would have been worth it. It’s still worth it; after I get this debt collector straightened out and make sure they don’t send me any more demands for money I’ll go and make myself a Mori again.

One million yen – if I really had that much lying around do they think we’d be living here? With no space, hardly any furniture, and a job that barely pays more than minimum wage, but at least it helps cover national health and pension. I’m sure no one at the loan agency cares about any of that, but they will have to see reason. Anyway, it must be a mistake.

The girls’ Opening Ceremony at their new school is on Monday. I’ll have to miss that but at least I can go
with them to their practice for it tomorrow. It will be nice
to see what their future classrooms look like, and meet
their teachers too. The PTA newsletter said Manae’s
teacher is new to the school herself, somehow that makes
me feel a lot more comfortable. Teacher and student will
be able to get used to their environment and surroundings
together. Manae might even get a little extra attention
because of it. I hope so. I’ll have to text Shoichiro and
remind him where and what time to show up for the event.
I knew he’d be able to get the day off, but I’m still grateful
to my ex-father-in-law for the gracious way he handled it.
After all, not everyone would take a phone call from the
woman who divorced their son because that son is too
worthless to go and ask for the time off himself.
Takebayashi-san, thank you. You’re a better human being
than your deadbeat kid. I’ll call Shoichiro and ask about
this debt of his too, if I wait another couple of hours he’ll
probably be drunk enough to tell me everything: the man
never let a Saturday night go to waste.

Heaven help me though, I do still find myself
wishing he were around. Not all the time, but once in a
while. In the dark before sleep who knows how I’ll feel. If
he really has dragged me into some kind of debt burden
though I’ll go straight to our old apartment and take

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everything of value he owns. These last couple of months, and especially these last two weeks, they’ve been hard enough, I’m not putting the girls through any more deprivation. No way.

I’m too tired to cook tonight, and what am I doing writing in my diary now? This has become a real habit for me, a kind of therapy I guess. It is a relief to simply get it out and let my pen glide along these pages. I can write anything in here and no one will ever know. My outlet, my new best friend.

The one real advantage to starting work as early as I do is that I’ll usually be able to get home around the same time as the girls, and every now and then even before them, depending on how their schedules are and what clubs they end up joining. I do hope Manae sticks with her badminton. She’s not great at it but it’s not a hard sport for her, and it does seem to give her such focus. Her old teammates were so kind too; with any luck she’ll have that again. A lot will depend on the coach, of course. As for Terako, this will be her first year to even try something out. I wonder what she’ll show an interest in? She’s so outgoing, so active, it will have to be something like soccer or basketball or maybe softball. Activities for the lower grades are more about just learning and having fun,
which I’m thankful for. It’s so different from the official clubs with their rules and routines. Maybe Terako will even change halfway through the year, who knows? That would be good really, and we’re lucky that our local place has options for first graders, my old elementary school certainly didn’t have anything till the proper clubs started at fourth grade, and they were run like the military.

No, I certainly can’t cook tonight. In an hour or so I’ll drag the girls out of their little play bubbles – Manae’s probably on her DS again and Terako, by the sounds of it, is engrossed in doing her dolls’ hair; we’ll all walk down the hill to the supermarket. The deli section in there looked pretty good the other day, we ought to be able to find something we like. I’ll put a couple of cups of rice into our rice cooker before we head out. And you know what, I’ll tell them to pick out some ice cream too. Why not? It’s the weekend and we need to find an excuse to celebrate. Something, anything.
2019, April 02 (Tuesday)

Dear Diary – goodness, now I’m even addressing you – a lot has happened over the past few days. The main thing, I suppose, is that the girls’ Entrance Ceremony went fine and both of them had a good day at school yesterday. Today too. I wouldn’t say that they are exactly joyous, but they seem to be fitting in well enough at their new place. At least I haven’t heard of any trouble they’ve had, and both like their teachers. Terako will have it the easiest, she would have started a new school this year no matter where we lived, but I’m still worried about Manae. Completely new classmates after all, and being in the fifth grade her studies are only going to get more difficult. Next year we’ll have to start thinking about where she’ll go to junior high. Of course, unless I happen to win the lottery she won’t be doing any entrance exams for private schools like some of her friends might, but in our new area there are two public places that could be good – if she’s willing to travel a bit for one of them, that is. But we can worry about all that later. If she has a good start to this year and actually makes some friends – if – then maybe after that I can start thinking about next year. I’ll anyway worry no matter what, but I have to keep reminding myself that this spring is what matters most. And this spring does not look
good. Not for me.

Shoichiro did show up for the ceremony yesterday – and amazingly enough on time too – and the girls told me they were happy to see him. They also said he didn’t look very good, that he was tired and dirty. I’m not surprised after the lashing I gave him on Saturday night. I hope he didn’t sleep for two days, the rotten filth.

He did take out a loan, and more than just one, and not for any good reason either. They were for his stupid carousing, if you can believe it. He apparently wasn’t satisfied with the money I had been giving him from our household finances and took it upon himself to augment that – with loans from high interest and dubious lending services. What a fool!! How did he ever think that was a good idea? Of course he couldn’t repay his first loan, and so he took out another to start making the interest on the first. That led to a third, and then for that third he needed another guarantor since his mother wisely refused to sign on with him again after he asked her the initial two times. Of course he didn’t have the courage to go to his father, and so what did he do? He stole my registered hanko stamp and put me down without my even knowing it. Legally that means I’m as much of a debtor on that third loan as his mother is on the first two, and it doesn’t
matter that she got into it knowingly and I didn’t.

This ridiculous country and its ridiculous name stamps. I’ve heard in foreign countries people have to sign their names by hand on legal documents or they aren’t binding. Not here. Thanks to a hallowed tradition of borrowing everything from ancient China and never updating any of it later on we’re stuck with the fact that anyone can take a person’s City Hall registered name stamp and stick it on a piece of paper and it’s just the same as the person herself agreeing to all that’s written therein. Unbelievable. Naturally I tried calling the loan company and protesting my ignorance and naturally they didn’t care. They want the money.

Where on earth am I going to get that? Even to make the minimum monthly payments would probably break us, I did the best I could getting a decent apartment; the rent plus food plus utilities means living hand to mouth. I’m not sorry about that, anywhere smaller or older would be too cruel to the girls, but with that world’s biggest moron ex-husband of mine having brought this down on us, well – well, I don’t know what to do. Find another job?

I called Mom about it last night. In total and absolute desperation I actually called my mother to get some advice. I know what you’re thinking, but what could
I do? You hardly ever respond to me and I needed help. I still need help. Mom told me that the Party has a free legal service section and she’d check with them, she said not to pay a single yen until she got back to me. At least that made me feel a bit better. She also said that if it came to it we could move in with them, they’re not really using the second floor right now and the bedroom up there is big enough for the three of us to sleep in. We’d have to share the one bathroom and kitchen downstairs, but they would welcome us and would love to have their grandkids around all the time.

Thanks but no way. That was an easy offer to refuse. I’ve only moved the girls here, I’m not going to move them again. I’m not going to make them change schools again. And I’m certainly not going to live with my stuck-in-the-1970s parents again. I got out of that house as soon as I could and I’m not going back. I love them, and always will, but their world is just too crazy, too out of touch. Dad’s all right I guess, and I have to admit that every time I read one of his volunteer comics for the circular newsletter I have enjoyed it, but Mom? She’s too much of a firebrand, too stubborn, too controlling, too strong. Too much like me. Ugh. At least I don’t write militant poetry and give “recitations” to my friends at the
neighborhood pub.

Another thing, if we lived with them my commute would be a nightmare, I’d have to cycle nearly to the river just to get on the tram in the mornings. But much more than that is the girls and school, and that’s what matters. Along with my sanity.

That stupid, useless, worthless stinking pile of man Shoichiro. He got us into this mess and he had better get us out of it. I don’t care what he has to do. I’ve got the kids so he can get a second job, he can take a night shift somewhere and work himself to the bone until he clears this debt he’s piled up, blowing it away on idiocy with his moron friends and probably pouring it into the tramps so euphemistically called “hostesses”. I’m so glad I divorced him. I only wish there were some way to actually get rid of him, to get him one hundred percent out of our lives. That will never happen as long as he’s alive, I know, and the girls do need a father, they need their father – at least for some things and some of the time. But this weight of debt! Oh Shoichiro, how on earth did I wind up falling in love with you?

Being young and getting pregnant certainly didn’t help. My whole universe flipped that night I found out, I still remember sitting in my bedroom in my parent’s house
with the home pregnancy test showing its positive. The room right next to the one I’d share with the girls if we moved in – which we won’t. I was a senior in high school. It seemed like fate, it felt like fate. A little plus sign on my dried pee. I stared and stared. Could things have been otherwise? Couldn’t it have been a minus? Why not? I could have made him wear a condom, I could have been more sober, I could have said no, he could have been more drunk and unable to do it, he could have been more careful, more caring. So many could haves...

But what happened is what happened, and the world shifted, my future dropped out, my heart and mind froze, and then sweet, beautiful Manae was born and I have never regretted it. Every time I look at her face I remember sitting there with my plus sign and making my choice, and I would make that same choice a thousand times over. I would never change that.

I don’t know what that means, and I don’t know if it was destined to happen or not, but it did happen and so here we are – here I am – and we’ll get through this like we’ve gotten through everything else. Yes, we’ll make it, we will. We’re going to be just fine.
2019, April 10 (Wednesday)

We’re never going to make it.

Mom called last night with more bad news: I am legally responsible for Shoichiro’s debt. Only the one loan, she stressed, and only for the minimum payments, but I am still stuck with it. She told me not to panic, she said that the woman she spoke to from the Party is still checking into it so she may have better results later. Be patient, she advised, the woman is a licensed lawyer but hasn’t actually practiced for some years and might be a little out of touch. Things could have changed she said, who knows. In time something might come up, or there may be something specific about my case that opens a loophole or escape route of some sort. Let’s wait and see.

Mom added that I should probably meet with the lawyer in person – the sooner the better – and said if I needed her she would be there to support me. Annoyingly she also used the opportunity to proselytize yet again and remind me that I should have officially joined the Party years ago before also mentioning the lawyer indicated I may be able to sue Shoichiro to get out of the loan. Win or lose though the total fees would likely cost more than the debt itself. And that’s if I can I should settle out of court, she apparently told Mom. If I can.

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I’d like to settle Shoichiro’s throat out of court. The terrible thing is, the absolutely worst part about this whole ordeal, is that I find myself missing him. So much. All of the worry and anxiety of this past week has had me thinking about him nearly constantly, and when I do I can’t help but see the face of the father of my two darlings, my high school sweetheart, the man who was by my side for more than a decade; riding on the back of his bicycle going school, waiting for the tram with him while the rain poured down on all sides, giving up my hopes of university to have his baby, watching him give up his to start working, trying to take care of us. He never could, but those first few years he did try.

And then it was my turn to try while he went to a technical school for two years to get a cooking qualification. A license which he more or less squandered by taking the job his father offered when he opened the boxed lunch business. But you know, I’ve always suspected that choice was another sacrifice he made for us: stability over creativity, a paycheck over possibilities. After all, how much restaurateur work – or even real chef work – is there in Kochi? Eateries open and close here like lightning. Whatever dreams he had of owning his own place and featuring his own dishes had to be put aside;
even he knew that, and he’s stupid. And being in our early twenties with a toddler we were in no position to move to a bigger city and away from the help we so desperately needed from our parents. Especially when we found out I was pregnant with Terako. So the years passed, the girls grew, and now, well now here we are. Stuck, still stuck. Always and more so than ever.

Thanks to him. I have to keep reminding myself of that. Every bit of our current trouble comes down to him and his slipshod, moronic, completely irresponsible decision making. I’m not even sure you could call what he does “making decisions”. It seems more like childish play with zero foresight and zero intelligence. I want to call it a mid-life crisis but we’re both still too young to be at our midpoints yet. Not for Japanese. He does love his drink, and that might knock a little off the end, but those are the bad years anyway and his habit doesn’t seem to get in the way of anything else in his life. His idiocy gets in the way – that much is clear – but not his drinking. Oh Shoichiro.

What am I going to do? We’ll need more money if I’m going to start making these extra payments on top of everything else. There’s no way around it, we are simply going to need more money. I might be able to cut back. I could cancel my phone, but I need some way to keep in
touch, especially for work. If we never go out we could save a little on food. Of course there will be no family trip to Irino Beach and Shimanto City this summer. I haven’t signed us up for the internet at home yet and I certainly won’t now, the girls too won’t be getting their own phones until at least junior high. Maybe later if this debt keeps Shoichiro from offering any kind of support for us. Not that he would.

I was smart enough not to count on him when I chose this apartment, I even swore I’d never take his help, but I’ve still half-hoped he’d actually come through in some small way. It would really be a boost. That’s another thing: I’ve heard that in other countries when two people divorce the principal earner is required to meet whatever financial contribution is court ordered, and if they don’t they can go to jail or something. There are no punishments in Japan for fathers who fail to give money to their ex-wives. Nothing! Mom said the Party has been working on that, it really is too bad nobody votes for them. What would be the point in my joining?

This debt, this money, these worries, this mess. I don’t know, I just don’t know. I could get another job, maybe on the weekends. My parents or his parents or even stupid Shoichiro himself could take the girls while I
worked on the Saturdays when they don’t have school and are taken care of that way. That would just mean more time away from them though, more time away from home. Deadbeat Shoichiro is the one who needs to be working on the weekends. He’s the one who needs to pick up the slack. This whole thing is his fault, and it’s high time he started owning up to that. What if he takes out another loan? I’d better carry my hanko stamp around with me, he might steal it or get Manae or Terako to “borrow” it for him. Completely useless, worthless man. How I miss him – and hate him. It’s both you know, both. I can only admit that to you Diary.

But first things first: I’ll go and meet this lawyer.
2019, April 14 (Sunday)

I saw the lawyer today; it was very kind of her to meet me on a Sunday. Mom came and picked us up so I could make the trip to the Party office while the girls would have something to do that didn’t involve them being left alone yet again. She insisted on staying for the meeting, as I knew she would, but Dad was nicely hands-off and as always didn’t push in any way, he just took Manae and Terako to the arcade and games area in the little shopping mall nearby. I’m sure they got more than their share of candy and junk food. Good for them.

Moritomo-san, the lawyer, took the time to hear me out before carefully and slowly going through the details. She was much older than I thought she’d be, probably another former firebrand who got her politics after the war and in the midst of all that intense baby boomer competition and social pressure they had then. Not unlike my parents but probably before them, I’d say. She worked as a defense lawyer for a few years in the sixties and seventies but got disillusioned with the justice system – what she called the “cops-are-tops forced coercion” system – and quit to run for elected office, thinking her views could have a bigger impact that way. She never got further than a seat in her local Tosa City municipal
assembly but she seems to have gotten by. I loved her curled, dyed-blue hair and rounded glasses, she reminded me so much of how Grandma looked before she passed.

Mom said the same after we left, and I’m sure that’s one more reason why she wanted to be there to hear my full situation out and see what might become of her unlucky only daughter. I’m a bit embarrassed now by everything I told Moritomo-san, way too much private stuff about Shoichiro and me, but I guess my thinking was that the more she knew the more she would be able to help, and anyway it simply tumbled out. Mom held my hand and squeezed gently now and then while we talked; I was actually very grateful for that although I would never tell her. The bottom line is that I have a choice that isn’t really a choice, or at least not much of a choice.

By the letter of the law I am required to make the minimum payments if Shoichiro fails to, that’s what a guarantor does, that’s the whole role and purpose of having one, and even though I didn’t agree to becoming his guarantor the law considers that I did so agree because of my hanko stamp on the document. That’s the same as me actually taking a pen and signing my own name, Moritomo-san said, and she agrees that it’s a ridiculous process that allows somebody else to steal a name stamp.
and stick the person with legal responsibilities. The authorities say that’s why you’ve got to keep your *hanko* stamp so safe, but of course there’s plenty of opening for abuse, especially when it comes to people who live together. Moritomo-san called it a cataract no one with any power cared enough to remove; I guess by that she meant a legal blind spot.

The other side of it, though, is that since there is this potential abuse which everyone knows about despite no one doing anything about, I could simply try ignoring the demands of the collection agency and if they never bother to take me to court for a total of ten years I’d be free, not even nominally stuck with anything. That’s the limit for prosecution in cases like these – ten years. The question is: Would it be worth it for the debt company to pay for a lawyer and the proceedings just to pursue this one loan? Moritomo-san thinks the amount is small enough that it wouldn’t be, but there is still always the risk that they might want to make an example of me as a way to scare other borrowers even if in the end they lose money overall. It’s so depressing to think that what would break me and ruin our entire household is an amount that from a company’s point of view is something they could afford to throw away merely to make a point. I already
knew that I’m a tiny nobody, but hearing that really made my powerlessness and insignificance hit home. These days I don’t even feel like a good mother. The one thing that really matters, and I’m failing at that too.

If I were to get sued and lost there would also be penalties on top of the debt and the interest. I don’t really see how I could win if it ever went to court, and Moritomo-san wasn’t sure herself. It would boil down to simply being a matter of Shoichiro’s word against mine about what happened, and there’s my name stamp right on the paper as the sole evidence of the lot. If I could find the company employee who witnessed Shoichiro use my stamp, and if that person actually remembered the event and for whatever reason maybe believed that Shoichiro wasn’t acting with my permission whatever he may have said to the contrary, and if that person testified in a legal setting, maybe then I might have some kind of chance. But only if the judge were also lenient and inclined to believe me. That is an awful lot of maybes. That’s just dreaming, just wishful thinking, that’s what that is. Here in the real world I’m one tiny disposable nothing versus a mighty and moneyed company that wants their profit, and no one has any reason to believe me, yet alone care about what happens to me or to my two beautiful daughters sleeping
so soundly in the next room after a full day at school. They are all I have, all I’ve ever done that’s any good or has any value, and I’ve got to protect them. The trouble is, how can I do that?

I don’t know where I went so wrong. It seems like each of the big events in my past fell straight out of the heavens and into my lap. Pregnant in high school – wham! Dreams of university and travel out the door – wham! Giving birth and having a whole new life solely dependent on me – wham! Marriage and my first job – wham! Learning what love is through all the hardships – wham! But also never looking back in regret, not once wishing I had aborted Manae; that was a “wham” too, and I am so thankful for it.

These events, they piled up, one after another. Even being born to the parents I was in the place and time I was had nothing to do with me or any choice I might have made. All of those background factors formed me, they shaped and molded me in ways that couldn’t possibly be controlled by me or by anyone. No, instead I’m what has been controlled, driven along by these forces outside and within each step of the way, the entire contours of an existence determined by countless situational facts. Random droppings, poop from passing birds. And I’ve just
bumbled my way through the midst. Have I ever truly been able to make a real decision? A clear and uninfluenced choice? Only one? How could I possibly think I had? Even picking what to feed the girls is always coming from somewhere, things like money, time, the endless flow of my moods. It’s like life just happens, like it just happens to everyone. We are the audience to the movies of our own days.

I need to settle this with Shoichiro. I know I need to settle it with him, I’ve known since I first heard of it that I need to settle it with him – I just can’t bring myself to do it. I don’t want to hear his voice, and I still so yearn to hear his voice. I want him to tell me that everything will be okay, that he’ll handle it, that he’ll take care of me and that I can trust him, that I can lean on him. I want.

Those days are gone, up in the smoke of divorce papers. Those days never really existed, no, and the divorce papers are the final proof of that. The father of my children, the love of my young life, the only man I’ve ever slept with. What happened? These changes, this whirlwind of chaos I’ve brought down on my two darlings, how much can they take? They’ve been so resilient, so tough, so flexible, adaptable, chins out, strong and confident. They have never once complained, just watched with eyes
that might sometimes accuse but that are always filled with empathy. What could they know of being married? Of being divorced? Of being a mother? Of being in charge, of having lives thrust upon you? But they do know, somehow buried deep behind those sparkling lenses they know, they sense, they get it. It’s all so astonishing.

How can I even think of spending another moment away from them, slogging through a second job to keep us here and above water? I have to though, that’s exactly what I have to think about. Maybe that actually is a choice I can make: a hemmed in and circumscribed one, but still a choice in some way, still up to me in some manner or to some degree. I don’t know. Money, time, love, what was, what is. Life is a gift that no one asks for. And then, even if you figure out what you want to do with it, the stupid thing won’t cooperate, won’t bend that way. Not without breaking.

I’ve got to break down and do it. I don’t trust myself to actually go and meet Shoichiro, but at least I’ve got to call him and get him to agree to a plan to handle this. Whether or not he’ll stick with it is anyone’s guess. But I have to try, that’s the first step.
2019, April 26 (Friday)

I still haven’t called Shoichiro. I know, I know Diary, I should and I need to, but somehow I can’t. Every time I pick up my phone and click through to his name I just freeze. I’ve tried texting him too but nothing I write seems to match what I want to say and so the drafts sit there unsent. Anyway we need an actual dialogue with questions and answers and decisions and choices and options, not some pithy series of half-said sentences capped by emojis. That stupid man always tagged everything he sent with a little winking face or a hand making the peace sign or a dog doing back flips. What a child. A man-child, a child with the power to take out loans and ruin lives.

Last night as I lay awake in the dark of our new bedroom I longed to have him with me; not to hold me or even touch me, but simply to be at hand, to signify some level of support and sustenance and stability through his physical presence. Then this morning I woke up hating him and wishing he were dead so it could all just go away.

Waiting on the platform to take the tram to work today a woman about the age Grandma would have been elbowed me out of the way so she could get on first. It was raining hard and she refused to fold her umbrella up until
she had backed into the carriage, availing herself of the opportunity to shake the thing out before closing it, spraying me with water as I stood there dumbfounded. This is my hometown and I’ve never gotten used to the people here.

Rainy days are the worst on the tram. Only about half the stops have any coverings, so you either get soaked getting on or off the thing between navigating its narrow doors, taking a ticket as you enter or paying as you exit, and juggling your umbrella in one way or another. The floors get soaked from all the dripping, and the constant attendance of the very old reaches a kind of fever pitch of slowness inside since doing all that’s required is way too much for people in their eighties to handle with any efficiency. Not that I blame them, it’s hard enough for me some mornings, and I don’t even have a walker to negotiate like many of them do. I will say that for that generation though, what they lived through, folding an umbrella and hauling a walker up the two steps to board, take a ticket, find a seat – that’s nothing. They survived the rise and fall of Greater Japan, the burning to the ground of the entire country by American air power. They can manage a tram ride, and if one of them wants to elbow me out of the way and then splash water in my face I’ll be fine.
with it. Don’t get me wrong Diary, I’m no saint, and I was really annoyed at the time, but writing this out has certainly helped put some perspective on the incident. You’re a good friend to listen to me like this.

There I go addressing you again; what is wrong with me? I’m obviously lonely, but who has time for friends when you have kids? Not just kids either, kids plus the problems I’ve got piled on top. Thank goodness my two are so helpful that I can afford to keep my worries more on our money and time issues and less on their day-to-days. Manae and Terako have been great, they really have, making such a go of it. I am so proud of them. It kills me that I can’t see them off in the mornings like I used to, especially with Terako having started elementary school.

Manae is a real big sister though, she makes sure that she and Terako are up in time, eat the whole of the breakfasts I’ve made for them and laid out plastic wrapped on our pathetic dining table, and then she even washes the dishes before they get their books, backpacks, and head out. She has never forgotten to lock the front door either. Having her be such a diligent girl gets me through each day at work, it does. And once in a while I can be here when they get home. Not every day, a lot depends on the
tram back I’m able to catch and whatever their class schedule has been for the day, but at least a few times over the past couple of weeks I’ve beaten them home and the joy on their faces when they found me waiting as they walked in must only have been surpassed by mine.

The two of them are such treasures, even when they drive me crazy they are such treasures. Our evenings: it’s home, then baths, dinner, dishes and laundry while they do their homework. Maybe TV for an hour or so, off to bed, another day finished. Blissfully. The weekday wheels keep turning, just like those trams, clack, clack, clack, clack, one cycle into another. And you know, somehow it’s satisfying, somehow it’s enough. If only we can keep it.
2019, May 01 (Wednesday)

It was May Day today and I’m sure my parents spent it the usual way: Mom dragging Dad along to a rally where she yelled herself hoarse and wore herself out in a vigorous protest and materials distribution, while Dad hobnobbed, schmoozed, and generally rubbed elbows with his mix of friends, other spouses, hangers-on. The ardent and the tepid, revolution or reform, the old never answerable conundrum, the same fork everyone who has ever wanted societal change has faced. Things happen or they don’t. Afterwards there would have been drinks, cheap food, and lots of laughs at the local run by one of their own. It’s no wonder they’ve remained such active members all these years, the Party gives them a grounding, a purpose, and most importantly a socially fulfilling circle. In a lot of ways I’ve always envied them that, no matter how convinced I am of the futility of it all. Me? I celebrated by going to work.

Our floor polisher finally got fixed after more than a month of waiting; that at least was a nice surprise and made the whole morning much easier. Plus my current partner Sakaichi-san treated me to the full details of her personal life. Normally I find her effervescence way over the top, but today I pushed aside my annoyance because
what she said was simply too interesting. She went on and on about her new boyfriend, what a great guy he is, how much he earns, the restaurants he’s taken her to, the gifts he’s bought her, what he’s promised, the typical gushing stuff – sickening enough for someone in my shoes – but then she strongly implied she thinks he’s going to propose, and if or when he does she’ll of course have to quit. What a gem!

As soon as I heard that I couldn’t wait to let it slip during our lunch break just to see the look on Tanaka-san’s face. Now I have nothing personal against the man – he is a bit creepy but his oddities have somehow grown on me a little – it’s only that it proved to be such a wonderful opportunity to break the boredom of our team meals and see some real fireworks; I couldn’t help myself.

When it came to it – and I was so subtle, you should have seen me Diary – Sakaichi-san feigned embarrassment, but she wasted no time in once more launching into a spirited description of her beau while we sat and ate and watched Tanaka-san’s face sink and sink into an ever deepening horror. What I did was at his expense, I admit that, but he must have realized that he never stood a chance with her anyway. And if he didn’t then I just taught him. You’re welcome Tanaka-san. He’s
certainly never made any kind of real move; he can barely mumble his morning greetings when he tries to talk to her. His shock at lunch was right out loud though, impossible to miss, even trying to hide it he couldn’t.

Okay, maybe it was cruel of me, I can see that, but I haven’t laughed that hard in months, and I desperately needed a good laugh. Trying to hold it in so as not to offend the poor man made it all the better too, as did noticing Matsumoto-san’s own suppressed giggles: I felt like a pressure cooker of mirth.

I guess if Sakaichi-san does quit there’s a chance we might have to work overtime until the company finds a replacement, but it will all depend on the timing and frankly I might welcome that if it means more pay. Not forever, nor even an extended period, but a bit extra on a temporary basis couldn’t hurt – and it would surely help now. The girls might be alone more maybe, but I’m sure it would only mean going home an hour or two later at the most. Everybody would be fine, and when the weekend came the three of us might actually be able to go to a restaurant for a change. I know Terako would love that, especially if she could get one of her fruit punch dessert bowls from Sushi Ikkan. We could ride the tram to the branch out in Ino and make a real afternoon of it, browsing
at the hundred yen shop and playing in the park nearby. You see? Just that little extra; it’s a nice dream.

Money, it always comes down to money in this world. My parents are right that we could do so much better. As a society, as human beings. But utopias, they don’t grow on trees, and however fervent their crew and their politics may be it would take a lot more than a small number of tough but kindhearted senior citizens to break through the walls of reality we’ve got built up. Necessities and practicalities – that means money, at least a minimum of it, and that minimum is all my darlings and I have now. And just barely that.

Goodness, when did going out for conveyor belt sushi become a misty wish? Somehow I feel good about where we’re at, the three of us have settled into a regular routine and the girls are so helpful, so patient. We have fun every evening, and Manae has started talking to me more than I ever expected or hoped she would – she’s really opened up. I think the move and the new school have helped her discover things about herself that she didn’t think were there, and she likes those things. That is such a blessing. My heart – oh my, just warm. It could all come crashing down of course, and it probably will, but in this moment we’re fine and well. Yesterday was okay, today
was okay, and I suspect tomorrow will be too. Thank you.

I still haven’t called Shoichiro; I’m afraid to jinx these small happinesses we’ve found. I have to, I do realize that, and I definitely will this weekend. I promise. Who knows, maybe that will bear some good news too, maybe he’ll actually be with it and have a plan to make the payments himself. Maybe I’ll learn that I don’t have to worry and we can carry on in our little home here with our simple but satisfying everydays. Who knows? Life could be kind. It could.
2019, May 06 (Monday)

Maybe life is kind for some, maybe fate does know how to smile, and maybe we’ll find that one day ourselves, the girls and me – but not today. At least, not yesterday and most definitely not today.

Shoichiro and I had a long talk. A very long talk. I listened, I tried to listen, I really did, but the man is just so incredibly dense. His brain has vaporized to half of what I remember it being when we were students, and it was never very good. He used to get decent enough grades, he used to actually be able to think somewhat, but now he seems to have either undergone an alcohol induced lobotomy or had an early onset of dementia. That is a frightening disease, by the way, I just read that it can hit at any time, it simply suddenly shows up in the brain and then there’s no cure. It’s a sentencing. With Shoichiro though I’m sure it’s purely laziness; when muscles don’t get used they atrophy, and the brain is a muscle.

At least, that’s what I intended to say to him but it didn’t come out right and I only ended up yelling about what a stupid idiot he is and how he can’t tell his backside from his front. I’m glad the girls were outside playing in the parking lot with some new friends from our building when I said that, they don’t need to know what I really
think about their father. Not that they don’t already, I suppose, but anyway it doesn’t need to be reinforced.

He actually was planning to take out another loan to make the interest payments on his first three. I told him that wouldn’t solve anything, it would only make the whole situation worse. He asked what he should do instead and I suggested flatly he get another job. The moron replied he could never quit on his father. Can you believe he actually thought that’s what I meant? I repeated another job, as in a second job, to keep the one he’s got now and on top of that get another. What an idiot, anyone would have understood what I was getting at. When the message finally got through his reaction was about what I’d expect from someone who was told they were going to die tomorrow. He completely overreacted and started making all kinds of excuses for why he couldn’t possibly work any harder, about how busy he is, how much his father depends on him, how his work requires flexibility and that includes an open schedule; it went on and on. I said that in all the years we’d been together and he’d been working there never once had his schedule changed nor had his father asked him to help out – with anything – on short notice. It’s still possible, he replied pathetically. Moron. Stupid moron, worthless sack of fat. I am so angry with
that man I can hardly contain it. Any help from him would be worse than useless, he would only get us buried deeper.

In the end I finally resorted to threats to try and get through his meter thick skull. I informed him that if he ever wanted to see his daughters again he would have to get another job – a side job – and first and foremost pay off the loan that he roped me into being a guarantor for without even bothering to ask me. The two loans his mother is co-signatory to can wait, I said, because for the sake of his kids he has got to get us out of the trouble we’re in. The trouble he got us in. He balked, he whined, he made more excuses, but he did agree. I was serious too: I would keep our children from meeting that deadbeat with no problems and no regrets.

I didn’t tell him about my meeting with Moritomo-san and her advice, and I didn’t tell him about the postcard I got from the debt agency earlier, nor the most recent letter that came from them on Friday. That last message shook me so badly I threw all hopes of postponing or ignoring the required payments right out the window. It threatened a court filing, it laid out the penalties, it said the law was on the company’s side and that no client had ever beat them in front of a judge. It listed my two lovely daughters by name and age and told
me coldly that I needed to think about them and their futures and that the only way out was to immediately begin making the minimum payments. It was scary, I was scared, I still am scared. I have to protect my girls.

I left that out when I talked to Shoichiro because I knew that the instant I started to actually speak about it, to verbalize and enliven the specters haunting my head, it would give them a shape and a substance that would only magnify my horror. It would drive me into a panic, a madness I already feel I’m on the edge of. I can’t go over that precipice, I can’t. I have two beautiful children and no room to indulge maladies. I have to keep it together.

I spent all day yesterday going through our finances and trying to figure out how we can make ends meet with this added expense. It was after that when I called Shoichiro. If he could pay off the principal I should somehow be able to just barely manage the interest payments for six months or so. We do have some small savings, money I had kept hidden from that lazy and senseless man which he never knew about – and now never will – and even though paying his monthly minimums will exhaust those savings – and then some – it should work out. It might. We will have to tighten our belts a little bit more and not make any real purchases
aside from food until this debt is settled and my name is cleared. No travel, no shopping for new outfits, no restaurants, no unnecessary anythings. I think I can sell our old laptop computer too, I’ll have to look into it. If I can get at least twenty thousand yen for the thing it would be a huge short-term help. Manae has a stereo that she doesn’t use much anymore, I really don’t want to but I might have to ask her to sell that as well.

Imagine that Diary, having to ask your children to pawn their own things to cover the debt payments for your rotten ex-husband. We’re already living on next to zero valuables, but if I can find anything else around here to unload I will. As long as nothing comes up that I can’t foresee, and as long as he can pay the whole actual loan off in six months, we can make it. I hope. Shoichiro will probably have to work both Saturdays and Sundays if he can only get a part-time side job – and I’m sure that’s the most he’ll be able to get, given the circumstances – but if he does, and if he handles it right, it should be enough. He has promised to do that, anyway; let’s see if he comes through. I can pray.

The deal I made was that he can see the girls again when he’s got provable progress to show he’s getting it worked out. I am going to be watching him like a
hawk. I also made him promise to text me his monthly income and expenses statements so I can see where his money is going. He’s too stupid to figure out how to lie about that, and he’s always been bad with numbers, so my bet is he’ll be honest enough and simply type in what he’s really getting and where it’s really going. Oh, I’m sure he’ll lie about some things, but if the loan payments are right or nearly right that’s the main part I really care about keeping track of. Every Monday he’s got to send me that, I said. And he had better too, he had better.

We won’t get any financial support from him, not now and probably not ever, but like I wrote earlier Diary I was smart enough not to count on it when we moved in here. It would have been nice, but a lot of things would have been nice if they had worked out. Only they didn’t. My entire life would have been nice if it had worked out the way I dreamt it would as a little girl with the whole heavens before her. Would haves, ifs. And the biggest one of all: If we can just get through this…
2019, May 09 (Thursday)

I’m feeling a bit better today, a bit more settled and even – dare I think it – hopeful that somehow the floor won’t cave in and we’ll be able to keep our new apartment, keep our new lifestyle, keep ourselves fed and warm and cool and safe and dry. Keep ourselves together. Shoichiro texted to say he plans to start looking for more work this weekend and promised to send his financial statement without fail on Monday. He also had the temerity to ask if he could see the girls but I ignored that. He knows full well that the deal we made is based on real progress and not merely talk about what progress he plans or thinks he can make. I’ve had enough of that man’s talk and his charms won’t work on me anymore. I’ve learned my lesson the hard way.

Actually that’s a lesson I’ve had to learn the hard way many times over the years with that windbag waste of a human being, but now I can say I’ve finally gotten it nailed. I think. Talk all you want Shoichiro, when I see results only then will you. In the meantime we still suffer from your stupidity and there is no way I will ever let you forget that.

Things might be okay. In my darkest moments over the past couple of days I even thought about getting a
job at a “hostess” bar myself if Shoichiro doesn’t come through. I am neither too old nor too worn out just yet to get turned down for work like that, although I’m sure I couldn’t get hired at one of the high paying clubs. It would beat minimum wage, and my just-above minimum wage that I get with the cleaning company too – maybe even beat those two combined – but my sense of who I am simply wouldn’t allow it. I would have to be a lot more desperate than I am now before I could sign up for something like that. Picture me serving drinks to random men after they’ve finished their day at work, making light and constantly flirtatious, incessantly flattering small talk. Regardless of who the customer is or how he looks. It wouldn’t fly! I couldn’t pull it off, I’d probably come right out and tell at least half of them what lousy idiots they are and how they should be going home to their families not hanging around dumping money into a place like that.

I have no aptitude for that kind of thing, and no natural talent for it either. I know that. Some women can really swing it, I’ve heard some of the girls I went to high school with paid for their whole university tuitions doing that, but me? No way. I’d also have to go straight from the “hostess” joint to my regular job every morning, and by the time I got home from all that I’d be way too exhausted
to be any good for my darlings. Motherhood comes first, it always has and it always will. It doesn’t matter if I’m not the best at it, I’m doing the best I can, I know that and I can say that. I think I’m doing the best I can, at least most of the time. Yes, I’m doing the best I can, and that’s exactly what I’ll keep doing.

I have to admit I read over some of the entries in this notebook and startled myself a little. Writing these things down has been a huge help – a giant release, that’s for sure – but I have to maintain myself better. This diary is just a pile of bound paper, it’s not a person and I shouldn’t be talking to it – writing in it – as if it were a person. You aren’t. Calling this thing “Diary” like that’s a proper name, addressing you directly as if you could hear me or respond in some way. What is wrong with me?

It must be stress; stress and worries piled up, piled up, piled up. Who wouldn’t be stressed in my situation? But I have to control my feelings better than I have been and I will. I promise me – not Diary, I’m not making any promises to you – that I will stay strong for Manae and Terako and I will provide for them, and once we get through this and to the other side I will spoil them as rottenly as I can. We’ll take our usual trip down to Irino Beach and Shimanto City that we have no choice but to
cancel this year. Maybe we could travel a bit further than that, even get out of the prefecture and really see something new. I’d love to take the girls to the Dogen Hot Springs Resort up in Matsuyama City. We could ride the train there. Or maybe a shopping spree down Marugame-machi in Takamatsu City. We wouldn’t need to leave the island for either of those places. The girls have both been so good about not asking for anything it would be heaven if I could really reward them and just splurge. Oh to have the extra to splurge.

Some people can splurge all the time; not us, not yet. Ours will be all the sweeter for that when it does come for having to wait for it. Maybe someday we could leave Shikoku and cross over to Honshu, the main island. What would they make of that? I’m in fantasyland of course, but it might happen. Sooner or later one of the girl’s class trips at school will probably be scheduled for a place like Tokyo or Kyoto or Osaka or Naha. I would be heartbroken if I had to make some excuse to their teacher because we couldn’t afford it.

Come on Shoichiro, come through for us and be a real man and decent father for once in your life. No Diary, that’s not fair. He’s been a decent enough father, at least as far as compared with the men around here goes. Why
couldn’t I have been born in Tokyo or Sapporo and grown up with people who have sense and a mentality for hard work and diligence?

I was born where I was born, and to the parents who gave birth to me. I asked for none of it. Neither did Manae and Terako, come to think. Birth, parents, household, circumstances. All these things make you and you can’t escape from them, not for your whole life. It all crushes down and pushes you into a mold and you find yourself scribbling away in a notebook which you lock in a drawer every night for fear one of your daughters will read it, or that a stupid inquisitive ex who shouldn’t have been let into your apartment but was by a too trusting child will get his grubby hands on it. That’s what happens. You look in the mirror and only want to scream. But I won’t. I’ll hold it together, I’ll hold us together and I’ll keep us here. And then when the storm has passed and life gets easier and all this is our no longer new but regular and comfortable and smoothly running normal, then I’ll toss you out and forget I ever needed such an obvious and childish crutch. I’m better than this, I’m stronger than you.

I hope I’m stronger. I have to be, two sweet, beautiful girls sleeping in the next room are counting on me. They didn’t ask for any of this, nobody does. But
that’s life and you take it and you make the most of what you have and you don’t whine about what ifs. You don’t.

I’m going to eat that ice cream I’ve been saving.
2019, May 13 (Monday)

Shoichiro sent me his first list of how he’s been using his money and I can tell already what a useless exercise this is going to be. A useless exercise from a useless man. Instead of the details I wanted and was expecting – this much on this, that much on that, total balanced against take home pay – he created his own broad categories and gave me rough estimates. He claims that his salary for this month was one hundred and thirty thousand yen, but I know from living with the man for over a decade that his father always gave him at least one hundred and fifty. He knows that I know that too, and that’s probably why he didn’t fudge the number even more. Then he lists where some of that pay went this past week: eighty percent to rent, food, and “entertainment”, ten percent to “saving for the girls” – like I’m going to believe that –, three percent for his first loan, given to his mother rather than to the loan company I’m sure, I doubt that three percent would even cover the interest payment. Then another three percent for his second loan – that too must be to mother dearest –, and the remaining four percent on “miscellaneous”.

I didn’t want percentages and I definitely didn’t want vagaries. He’s probably trying to impress me by
showing how he’s paying down his first two loans, which I don’t trust anyway, and he’s trying to fool me by using numbers he assumes I won’t work out the math for and categories that are so broad they’re meaningless. “Entertainment” – what is that? Drinking money? Gambling on the horses? Carousing at “hostess” bars? Who knows, who could tell, and that’s the whole point of it. Stupid man.

There’s no way I could actually force him to keep better track either unless I somehow make him keep his paper receipts and then send those to me. I guess I always have the threat of not letting him meet his daughters, but I’m already using that and evidently to little effect. Maybe I could push it more, but honestly I have no confidence in his ability to actually do anything, let alone something requiring discipline and forethought like this. He really is that stupid; but on the other hand the girls do need their father in at least some ways, I know that. In the end, no matter what, even if he were to give me his receipts I could never be sure he did truly keep all of them unless I also got my ex-father-in-law to send me Shoichiro’s pay stubs so I could add everything up and have a solid number for comparison. Without that he could keep lying about how much he took in to make it look right. He’d

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have to be smart enough to figure out he could do that though. Is he? No way, but then in his imbecility he’d mess it up in some other way and I’d be just as much in the dark. Goodness, I really don’t know what to do.

And that “saving for the girls” – what a load of crap. In the many years we were together he never once suggested putting aside anything for the girls, he just considered it enough to pay for whatever was needed at the time and only for the time. I remember once he even took money out of the savings account I set up to use it on installing a TV system into the back of the front seat headrests in the car. He justified it by saying Manae and Terako could watch videos when we drove somewhere so they wouldn’t get bored. Being bored on car trips is part of being a kid! And who on earth thinks spending that much on something like that when we were barely keeping them fed and clothed is a good idea? Barely keeping them – when I think back to that time I realize how good we actually had it. These days I really am barely keeping them fed, and they’re only clothed because we had so many clothes to bring with us from our old place. Even with Shoichiro being such a numbskull and such a financial drain himself that double income really did help. It’s just my work now, and how I do notice the difference.
It doesn’t matter. He’s useless and that’s one of the reasons I divorced him. One of the many. I don’t have to support him anymore and I never expected that he would be able to help support us. I hoped he might, but I didn’t expect it. Of course, I never expected that he’d saddle us with an unlooked for and very unwelcome debt either, but there you have it. Life strikes again. Chance strikes again.

Unlucky in love, I guess, unlucky in birth, unlucky in place, unlucky in who I met when and how it turned out. But not only luck, I know I made some bad choices myself. Number one? Yes, Shoichiro. But in his moments he was such a good one, my oh my. Life, the heart, a chasing after – what? After me? After a dream? A dream of a life? What does any of it mean, why, and who really cares? Here we are and I have to deal with this.

As long as whatever that man does and however he wastes the money he has, if in six months or less I can stop paying the interest on this loan then we’ll make it. I’ll figure out our new budget tomorrow, and I’ll just have to assume – have to trust – that he gets a side job and makes the debt with my name on it disappear. One thing I will be sure to tell him though is to stop those flimsy three percents on the first two loans and apply it instead to his
third – the one I’m stuck with. He knows – or ought to – that he needs to prioritize that, that he needs to prioritize what he’s doing to his kids, and I swear I will hold him to it. However I can, I will.

Stupid, stupid Shoichiro. How I wish I didn’t miss him.
2019, May 20 (Monday)

I’m sick and tired of worrying about money. I can’t help it, it’s always on my mind: running through numbers, making them stretch, calculating where to put what and how much when, the food I buy, the electricity I use and nag the girls not to use, guessing what our water and natural gas bills will be, trying to figure out if there is any leeway to actually bring home the fresh vegetables and raw ingredients I’d like to instead of the processed but cheap, easy, and definitely tasty “foods” that will at least fill up our stomachs. Why on earth is it so expensive to eat healthily? I’m all for helping support local farmers by paying more for domestically grown items and keeping imports out, but produce should always be affordable. Shouldn’t it? I wonder what Mom would say to that – no, I don’t really, I can guess easily enough. She’d probably put that particular soapbox speech into a manifesto if she hasn’t already, fodder for another circular.

Mom. Her offers of help are becoming increasingly attractive. They live a bit out of the city, or anyway a bit further off the beaten east-west main street that carries the tram line I rely on. They might have some friends out there who could spare some vegetables, homegrown ones that are unsold or not for sale; I’ll have
to ask. I will not go begging, but I’ll ask. My darlings need some decent fare, something to keep their bodies lithe and sprite, a help to their wonderful spirits, their gaiety which so buoy s me; these days more than ever.

Shoichiro sent another one of his “financial statements”. I’m especially sick and tired of him. Even in divorce I can’t rid myself of the man, can’t get him off my mind and certainly can’t get his idiocy out of my life. Nor his charm. This will wear off, I know, I’ll forget about why I ever loved him and he’ll become just one more leaning memory casting its shadow, one more has-been in a life that drags on, one routine into the next. He’ll always cast a long shade of course, like the moon. You can’t be with someone for that many years and not have them leave a mark, not have them ever be a part of you, but it will lessen and maybe, just maybe, the sun may shine again. Not that I mean I’ll find another romance – goodness no, what a nightmare that would be. I simply think – dream – that something good might happen. Might. Who knows? I feel due, anyway, and if all that talk about karma is right then after these past few months I’ve certainly burned through the last residue of my stored-up bad karma. Unless I’ve just created more in the process. Now that’s depressing. I am depressed. Stressed, worried, depressed,
and with no end in sight. But it will come, some kind of an end, it’s inevitable. Everything has its close, every loop its starting and ending knot. And life is a loop, it’s a knot, a twist, a *noose*, from first scream to last.

Both my girls were screamers. How their cries would shatter the still nights. Sometimes, heaven help me, I felt like strangling them. Piercing punctures, eruptions of noise every couple of hours, needing my breasts, demanding, sucking, pulling, incessant and insatiable until they had my nipples and then – wonder of wonders – peace, angelic contours, contentment defined. Such a mystery that so little a thing can cry till your blood curdles, and then so sweetly, so softly, turn all your frustrations and irritations into the bliss of being a provider, a protector, a nourisher, a sustenance giver, a life giver, a mother. A mother. I would do anything for my girls, they know that and I know that, and that knowing is all that defines me. It’s the only thing that gives me any meaning, and resting in it the only thing that gives me any hope.

Hope. Now’s there a word, a feeling. Is it ever justified? Justifiable? That stupid lazy bastard, I’m going to go and try to catch him at this new side job he’s claiming to have found. I’ll go this very weekend. He said he’ll be working afternoon shifts at the Lawson
convenience store near the far end of the shopping arcade, close to the bus center. I’ll just take a look. If he actually is standing there with one of those silly blue and white striped vest style uniforms on then I’ll know, and maybe I’ll trust a little more, maybe I’ll hope a little more.

I’m so sick of money, but it’s there and we need it and we need him to come through. Don’t let your daughters down Shoichiro, get us out of the mess you put us in. I might be able to forgive you if you do.
2019, May 23 (Thursday)

Some fun at last, a good laugh, a much needed break from worry, from back and forths, ups and downs. And it came again from good old Tanaka-san, completely without his meaning to. I know I really shouldn’t, I know it’s not nice and it’s hardly considerate, but the man honestly does crack me up. He’s so earnest, so sincere in his expressions and so bad at hiding them that he almost comes across like Terako – and she’s only six. Even Manae has learned how to disguise her emotions better than he has. You’ve got to, that’s what keeps everything running smoothly. Not Tanaka-san though, and the way he fails, and the way that as a result our little work group certainly doesn’t run smoothly, well like I said it’s a much needed break and I won’t apologize for my laughter – even if I do feel guilty about it.

Here’s what happened: Sakaichi-san was talking about her boyfriend at lunch again, which she’s done quite freely ever since I told everyone about him – a development she embraced with gusto, actually, it was almost like she wanted me to share her secret so that she’d have an excuse to talk about him all the more – and as usual Tanaka-san’s face was quivering between an open depression and a quasi-stiff upper lip when Sakaichi-san
remarked that she has a date tomorrow at the very pricey kaiseki multi-course restaurant in the Harimayabashi stretch of the shopping arcade. At such a pristine location, she announced, there could only be one outcome: a proposal. She said it with such confidence and evident glee that it was contagious, we all felt like – and in fact did – cheering her on, applauding, congratulating her on what hadn’t even happened yet. All of us except Tanaka-san, of course, who tried to say something along the same lines as Matsumoto-san and I, bless his heart, but who simply couldn’t manage. It was just too much, his well wishes turned into sobs, real, tissue soaking tears. I couldn’t believe it, no one could. None of us had seen an adult cry publically since that ridiculous politician from somewhere in the Kansai area – I think – was exposed for corruption and held that stupid press conference where he wept like a baby all over the TV cameras in an attempt to curry public favor with a show of deep contrition. I laughed at that too.

Anyway, Tanaka-san started crying, big wet baby tears, and burst out of the room. The poor sap! He was heartbroken. Everyone quieted down and looked at the floor for a few seconds, but then I heard Matsumoto-san start to giggle a little so I started to giggle a little and then Sakaichi-san joined in too, and pretty soon our giggling
had crescendoed into barely contained snickers and then into not-even-contained guffaws. It wasn’t that we were laughing at him, just at the whole scene, the absurdity and unexpectedness of it. I’m sure Tanaka-san wouldn’t see it that way, of course, and I dearly hope he wasn’t aware of the way we reacted, but there you have it. Oh that silly man and his funny little crush on Sakaichi-san.

I can’t wait till Monday to find out what happened and if she really did get the proposal she’s been looking for. My marriage may not have worked out but that doesn’t mean anything for her, and if only half of what Sakaichi-san says about her beau is true then he’s a much, much better catch than Shoichiro ever was, that’s for sure. I wish her well. I wish her nothing but happiness.

I wish Tanaka-san well too of course, but he’s going to have to figure something out to keep himself in line a bit better. During the afternoon shift I had to go and borrow the extra strength carpet cleaner from him as the one I was using wasn’t powerful enough for a stain I came across, and there he was still sniffling away. He feels so deeply, in some ways it’s truly amazing. I wonder if it isn’t a result of never having been in an actual relationship, he might have built up all kinds of ideas of what love is or should be into that head of his and then reacts to the real
world through the lens of his fantasies.

People can be like that, responding to life as if it matched their dreams of it, as if it were high-minded, floating, romantic. I guess in some ways we each live in a bubble, but the truth of it, as anybody who has been through the wringer like I have knows, is that life is a filthy business of pushing your way through one day to the next and taking whatever small joys come your way. For me it’s the girls, it’s always the girls, and then maybe a big bag of Calbee potato chips and a marathon of the past month’s worth of daily TV dramas, especially the ones set during the end of the Showa Era just before I was born. In terms of what this city looks and feels like I suppose that not much has changed since those Showa times, but even the people down here in Kochi seem to think differently today than they did thirty years ago. For me too as an early Heisei Era child I remember everything was so much simpler before the internet came along. Simpler and somehow more beautiful, purer and more alive, more human. A comfortable isolation from the wider world we had then, combined with a lot closer local community. We used to get out and see each other before we spent all our time diving into screens.

The day after tomorrow I go on my spy mission
to see if Shoichiro has been telling the truth about his new side job. I’ll bring the girls with but naturally won’t tell them anything about what’s going on. As far as they know we’ll just be taking the tram downtown to have a nice stroll through the arcade, maybe do some window shopping. It’s a little cruel to take them to stores when they know and I know that we can’t afford to actually buy anything, but it’ll still relieve some stress for us. We can plan anyway, find and then remember what we want to buy when we are able to buy it. They can dream about their birthday presents. And I can at least afford to get them each a little treat, maybe one of the hundred and eight yen donuts at Mister Donut and maybe a drink set to go with it too. The selection there is pretty good and always fresh. Donuts; those simple joys, that really is life, whatever can be taken from it whenever you can. Grab those and don’t let go Kazenoko, don’t you let go.
2019, May 25 (Saturday)

There he actually was, right there in Lawson. The old dog wasn’t lying after all, he was standing there in the flesh behind the cash register and looking like even more of a fool than I have always known him to be, a stupid and spaced-out expression pasted over his face like one of the high school kids you usually see working at convenience stores on weekends. Shoichiro, honest to goodness holding down two jobs: who would have thought that possible? Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined he would not only come through but come through so quickly. He must really want to see his daughters; I have to admit I’m a bit touched by that. He must care more than I thought he did. That’s something, it is, and I hate to say it but I find myself feeling attracted to him again because of it. It’s admirable. But I have to be strong, and I will. I know there’s no going back down that road, not now, not after I finally decided, not after all the years of wondering and torture that I put myself through before I made up my mind and did it. No, I divorced him for very good reasons and I won’t go back. Unless… No, no, I have to be strong.

At least he didn’t look good. Aside from the stupid display his face was haggard; he’s probably been drinking too much and not eating enough. The man never
could take care of himself. He ought to move back in with his parents, that would certainly save him money, and that money could go to getting rid of his debt. I already suggested that to him of course but I think I’ll have to repeat myself.

I know, I know, he hates the thought of it, and truth be told between working for his father already and having his mother as the co-sign on two of his loans either one of them would probably kill him if they were living under the same roof, but it would be temporary and if he kept his second job what he saved on rent plus the extra he’s earning would make it a short temporary. I would think so, anyway.

But you know what? That’s between him and his parents, and aside from telling him once more that he should I think I’ll just let it be. His welfare isn’t really my concern any longer, I have to remember that. I spent so many years mothering that man that now I’m finally free of it I can’t allow myself to return, whatever my inclinations might be. I have to stay strong. I won’t go back to living with him and I won’t go back to trying to take care of him. I won’t. However much he may impress me by actually following through and making some efforts for us I won’t fall for it, or for him. I won’t let myself.
way. You’ve got my word on that Diary.

Goodness, what is happening to me? I’m still addressing this silly diary as if it were a real person, as if it were a listening ear, a friend, a confidant. Which must be what I crave – real companionship. It’s all these nights sitting here alone after the girls are asleep, sitting at this pathetic little coffee table that has become our dining table slash accounting table slash kids’ desk slash lone place of emotional solace. I have to swallow my pride and call someone, anyone, and simply have a good long chat. I need to see a friend. I need a friend.

That’s the problem with having kids: as soon as the constant busyness of raising children sets in you have no time for friends, and unless they have kids too the friends you had before just don’t get it. They don’t understand why you don’t see them anymore, why you don’t call or text like you used to, why you always make excuses for not getting together which actually are good reasons and not mere excuses. They don’t hear them that way, they can’t, it all comes out like a flimsy lie to avoid meeting when the fact is you’d love to spend the day together like when you were in school but simply can’t. There is too much to do all the time. Other mothers get it, but you can’t rely on them for much because they’re

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bouncing off the same walls that you are. Nobody has any leeway for anybody. Well, anybody but your own kids. They’re worth it, I wouldn’t trade my moments with Manae and Terako for the world, but sometimes you simply want to have an adult conversation.

I even nearly tried chatting with Shoichiro today. Thank goodness I caught myself before that happened. I was hiding outside the Lawson entrance spying on him, ducking behind a vending machine to stay out of sight, when all of a sudden the desire to walk in and ask how he was doing came on me like a rain storm in spring. Out of nowhere – bam! – it just started pouring down loneliness, and the comfort of the familiar that his stupid face brought back was almost more than I could handle. Luckily some other customers went up to his register to pay for a few drinks and snacks and the sudden commotion they brought clicked over my brain and gave me a chance to sneak away without being noticed. Instead I went and found the girls looking wistfully at a smartphone display at the Mobile/au shop and dragged them away from there with promises of donuts and sodas. That I could do for them. It is the simple things, like I’ve been telling myself.

Maybe I have some reason to hope. Shoichiro is working harder than I’ve ever known him to work – by a
long shot – and I figured out a budget that will let us stay in our new place and our new neighborhood, cool and comfortable and safe and dry, fed and dressed and even with a tiny bit for play now and then like our downtown adventure today. If we can all hang in there, and if nothing major happens, we’ll be able to make it. We will. Six months from now Shoichiro’s third loan with my name on it will be squared away and I won’t need to make any more interest payments for him. Six months from now we’ll be open and clear and we’ll suddenly feel flushed with money. We’ll splurge. Outfits for both girls and a big meal at a Korean barbecue place for the lot of us! That’s the dream, as pure and as lovely as it is. I can do six months, Shoichiro can do six months, and Manae and Terako can definitely do six months because they’ll never even know the difference. I’m their protector and their provider, and I won’t let them down. No way.
2019, May 26 (Sunday)

I had a sudden revelation today that life is worth living. Well, I’m not sure if I can call it a “revelation”, and I’m not sure if that answer really never would have occurred to me had I actually questioned it, and I’m not even sure that I ever doubted whether or not it was true. Okay, maybe it was nothing, but the plain fact of the matter is I never thought about it before. I never asked, and so I never answered. Have you Diary? Now though I have – and in the positive. That hit me, it did. It’s a wonderful feeling, a strange feeling because really it’s so obvious and simple, but wonderful nevertheless.

Let me set the scene for you: We were at the supermarket picking up some items for the week; everything was totally normal and as it should be. I was comparing prices for tomatoes and had given Terako the task of picking out the best package of locally-grown eggplant and Manae the chore of getting a carton of soy milk when all of a sudden, totally out of nowhere, a smile crept across my face and I looked over to where Terako was standing near me and felt so warm and right and loved and loving. It was wonderful, like I said, absolutely wonderful. I am alive, I have two daughters, our home is in a small city with a tram and sunshine and rain and
mostly decent temperatures and sometimes the smell of the sea that floats out of a river flowing through town into a bay in the Pacific Ocean, a river that rises and falls with the tides. It’s perfect. We rise and fall just like that, just like the Kagami River, and we see ourselves in that rising and falling, just like we see ourselves in that river named after a mirror.

Yes life. Yes to life. Yes with all its ups and downs, ups and downs, its flowing on and its being clean and clear and soft and refreshing. My girls here with me, a nice enough apartment to come home to, food to cook and eat together, soft bedding to pull out and lie down on, snuggle in, lounge about all day on Sundays on, fold up and put away every morning before work and school. It’s more than sufficient to make anyone happy, and in that moment – and in this one – I felt truly happy, truly blessed, truly grateful. I wanted to thank God but I wasn’t sure how and so I just kept smiling as the waves caressed my heart. We weren’t going to be all right, everything wasn’t going to work out, it already had. We were all right, everything had worked out: we’re here and alive and it’s beautiful.

I don’t really have anyone to tell this to, and I don’t really know how I’d even go about saying it if I did, and so I’m telling you Diary. And I don’t mind that I’m
telling you, and I don’t mind that I’m talking to you as I write in you. I don’t mind at all. I say these words out loud as I write them – quietly, not to wake the girls, but out loud. I talk to you as my pen scratches out all these strokes, and I don’t mind.

What a lovely language we Japanese have, what a pure way to express emotion it gives us, this mix of Chinese characters and homegrown hiragana and katakana lettering. And my heart, it’s full.

I’m alive, I have brought life into this world, we’re here together and we get to see each other’s faces every single day. Nothing could be better. Life – you know maybe it is all fate, maybe it is all just an unfolding of millions of little bits pre-set in motion, but what a tremendous experience. I wouldn’t trade this for anything. If I can only keep us together like this, keep us healthy and keep us together, keep us as the three of us. I know I can do it, and I know I can count on help from Mom and Dad, and I know that even my ex is doing his part. I am so content and life is so good and every second is worth it.
2019, May 27 (Monday)

There was no proposal. Sakaichi-san’s dinner passed pleasantly enough it seems – she mentioned a few times how much she enjoyed the food – but there was no ring, no “Will you marry me?”, no life changing, moment freezing, heart stopping question. Poor Sakaichi-san, she had so gotten her hopes up. If you think hers were dashed though Diary you should have seen the look of pure elation on Tanaka-san’s face when he heard. That man – the fool – he’ll never win Sakaichi-san over with an open display of mirth like that at what she takes to be such a terrible misfortune. She really tore into him over it too, which was so funny, you should have been there. If only you could have been there. But I don’t dare take you out of home Diary; you are for my eyes only. You’re all mine – but you know that, don’t you?

Anyway, Sakaichi-san minced no words at seeing Tanaka-san’s beaming onion bulb as she told us every tiny detail about the night she was so sure would be her special night. It was a thunderstorm, she let loose, a rainfall of hammers. She even interrupted her own description to do it. Predictably she made him cry, and when Tanaka-san burst out of the room once more, unable even to hide the fact that his eyes were welling up, the expression of
triumph she shot us was a little menacing, to be honest. I wouldn’t want to be on her bad side. She had vanquished her foe, that was true, but he was such easy prey that I don’t think it was anything to gloat over. It was still funny, mind you, but nothing I would be proud of.

I don’t know what she’ll do now. Her hopes and expectations had been so high: she was so convinced it would be the night. I suppose she’ll naturally keep seeing him – she certainly gave no indication to the contrary – but there is a deep and honest pain she’ll be carrying now, and my guess is that it’ll come out in one way or another. Her beau might be in for an earful along the lines Tanaka-san got; probably tempered down by a large margin, but along those same lines. Men: Dense as the day is long sometimes, wonderfully surprising at others. Mostly the former.

All this has made me remember when Shoichiro proposed to me. We were only kids at the time, I had just gotten pregnant – well, I had just learned that I was pregnant – and any plans we had were very suddenly thrown out the window. He was never one for study, and I think his talk about going to university at the time was just a result of wanting to please his parents. That wasn’t the case for me. The way he threw himself into becoming a
father is kind of admirable now that I think about it. Partly it might have been that it furnished him with the best excuse to forego everything else, the ultimate reason not to bother studying for the National Center Exam or any of the other university entrance tests and requirements, but it was endearing and it still is, really.

He vowed to get a job and support us, and right there in my bedroom he actually got down on one knee just like in a Hollywood movie and put a silly toy ring on my finger as he shyly asked if I would marry him. I was so happy, it seemed so perfect despite the whole mess of it, and I had already made up my mind to have his baby and change my own dreams and plans to become a mother, a real mother, a mother like my own had always been to me. I had no inkling of what that would mean, and frankly looking back I’m shocked I was able to handle the entire process of carrying and birthing a sweet little soybean as well as I did, but there you have it. Resilience. The human drama played out, motherhood as instinct, biological programming. It’s all there inside each of us I think, or anyway close enough to keep this whole silly human wheel spinning as the comedy and the tragedy of life on this planet plays itself out. To what end? To what end…

That night, the night I got pregnant, the maze of
my days could have turned out so differently had that turn not been taken. All the little details; I remember them often enough these days as I find myself wondering how I could have gotten here, sitting at this low and cheap little table night after night, worrying about money and my girls. My life’s path seems like it was set, like it was unavoidable. If Shoichiro had only had one more drink that night he probably would have had trouble even doing it. He might have just burst in his pants before he could get them off. He nearly did as it was. He might have passed out. He might have been too far gone to even think about trying. And me – if I had only had one less drink I might have had the foresight to force him to use a condom. I might have said no, I might have pushed him out the door or satisfied him some other way that wouldn’t have jeopardized the future I had so carefully laid out for myself, the one that started with studying modern Japanese literature, then becoming a high school teacher, then working for ten years, and only then marrying another teacher and having three children – two boys and one girl – in a little house with a vegetable garden attached. But one thing led to another that night, one thing led to another every night after that, and every night before that too, and I simply can’t see any one point at which I would
have chosen otherwise. It just flowed. And it makes me think that maybe I didn’t really have a choice, none ever all along, the whole way. It’s like some outside force – or forces – was pushing me, pushing Shoichiro, and we just acted out the script.

We met in our first year of junior high school, we were in the same class, he used to tease me mercilessly and I used to do my best to ignore him. We got closer, drifted together, I started helping him with his homework and he started helping me lighten up and live a bit. My parents were very indulgent of him, they liked his charm, they found him funny – he was funny. He still is. Afternoons at my house, early evenings that sometimes stretched if my mother invited him to stay for dinner, weekends playing tennis together. He was a lousy server, and the way he shrugged it off and put on such a serious face when trying to keep the volleys going only made him the more lovely. He knew it too, and knowing that somehow made it work better for him. Shoichiro – it’s no wonder the girls always giggled and looked out of the corner of their eyes when we passed in the hallways. I was so proud to be with him in those moments. I was proud those first couple of years too when I stayed at my parent’s house with newborn Manae and he came over every single
day without fail to check on us, tell us about his job hunting, tell us about the work he found, assure us that he’d save enough so we could all move into our own place. And he did, he came through on that. He really did.

Now here he is, coming through again. He was stupid to take out three loans – I know that – he was doubly stupid to forge my name on one of them – I know that more than anything – but he’s got two jobs now to make amends, and heaven help me but I think he will. He’ll make things right, he’ll patch it up, and I might yet forgive him. Oh goodness, I already have forgiven him. I admit it: I love the man and always will. He’s stupid, irresponsible, a halfway playboy, but he was mine until I cut our ties. Can I put them back? Should I? Do I want to? Now that is a question Diary, the question.
2019, June 05 (Wednesday)

I was home when the girls got back from school today thanks to an early finish, and I’m glad I was. Manae came in looking very upset; I don’t think she expected to see me and as soon as she did she quickly put on her best brave and impassive face to cover it up, but I saw, I saw. She looked like she was about to cry, like she was maddeningly angry and about to cry. Something happened. Someone must have done or said something dreadful to her. She’s such a sensitive child, you could never tell that by looking at her but she is. No one knows her better than me, I birthed her, fed her, changed every single one of her diapers and we were never apart for more than ten minutes a day the entire first three years of her life. Manae and I have the same skin, and I saw a pain in her eyes like I’ve never seen before.

Of course I did my best to find out what happened. It was something at school, that much is clear, probably something with a classmate. She wouldn’t say, she wouldn’t tell me. She knows she can trust me, and she does, but for whatever reason she wouldn’t come out with it. Maybe it’s too terrible? Maybe she’s afraid I’ll get upset? That I’ll do something to make it worse? What could I do? I just want to listen, to console her, to make
her believe everything will be all right. She is such a good girl; I hate to think what could have undone her so.

Terako was no help. It’s not her fault and I don’t blame her, but I was hoping for more. Although really, how could she know anything? They’re in totally different years, totally different classes, and their schedules are different too. They don’t even have recess at the same time. What could she have seen? I thought maybe Manae would have mentioned something on their walk home together but I guess not. She must have kept it all bottled up. Maybe she thought she needed to protect her little sister, that’s exactly the kind of thing she’d try to do. Such a good girl, always the protector, always the helper.

I’ve got to find out, I need to know, I have to fix it. I’m her mother! She and I, we ought to have the tightest relationship in her life, in my life. We must tell each other everything, be there for one another every moment, and know every second of every day that we are one and forever will be. We are, we do, we always have, Manae knows that, and I do too. We’ve got to share this. She’s got to share this.

I can’t force it out of her, I can’t and I won’t, but this is killing me. I need to hear from her. I wonder if she’d talk to her father; goodness, there’s a thought I don’t
need right now. All I can do is wait until she opens up, but what agony. Maybe her teacher saw something, maybe I could call her tomorrow, it’s too late now and she won’t be in the office anymore.

No, I can’t call her. Manae would take that as a breach of trust. I might make it worse. Oh goodness Diary, there’s simply no way around it: I’ll just have to wait. This is torture.
2019, June 07 (Friday)

I found out what it was, Manae finally let loose, she finally told me. It was after dinner tonight: we were sitting on the floor on our zabuton cushions, leaning against the wall and watching TV like usual when she very carefully started sharing. She was pensive, hesitant, I’ve never known her to use such caution when speaking and so I did my best not to look directly at her, not to prod, just to let her find the words and put them together however she needed to. It was something so small, so silly, but for a ten year-old these small and silly things – well, they mean the world, don’t they? One of the other girls in her class had heard or found out somehow that we are a single-parent household and began teasing Manae about not having a father. It’s so stupid, it makes me so angry. Of course I know how kids are, I know all about the cruelty that even a little difference can call down, about that drive to be the same and accepted that our culture fans into the brightest flames. I know that, but I cannot think my knowing – or anyone else’s – excuses it.

Naturally Manae has a father, how could she not? He just isn’t here. And what business is it of that little brat’s how our family is? Why should she even think that’s something to talk about? It’s so frustrating. I’d like to have
a good long chat with the child’s mother, but of course Manae didn’t – and probably wouldn’t – tell me her name and I know better than to ask. I’d like to do more than just talk to be honest, I’d like to ring the girl’s neck for making my precious Manae so sad. She’s somebody else’s daughter – I understand that Diary – and I realize too that she certainly doesn’t fully comprehend what she’s saying, but even so what a little cretin, what a turd. I would absolutely ring her neck.

It doesn’t help that the girls haven’t seen Shoichiro since I found out about his loans and the mess he landed us in. They don’t know why they haven’t met their Papa, they must think it’s a decision he’s made, that he’s choosing not to be with them, and maybe they blame themselves for that. I hope not – but they probably do. Goodness, I suppose I have to let him come over or join him in town or something. What did Manae say back to that girl? I wonder. If she feels like her father has abandoned her it would have made those harsh words so much more painful. And it’s my fault, I have to admit that. I’m the ultimate source.

I tried to very slowly explain to both the girls that their father’s been extremely busy lately doing some extra work to try and help us out, that he loves them very much
and they will see him soon, but naturally that only brought more questions. Why do we have to live here? Why can’t we all stay together? What did Papa do that was so terrible? It was heartbreaking, they can’t understand what happens between two people who have been married for so many years, two people who have the past Shoichiro and I have, two people who fell into the ruts we did and who finally had too much pressure to take it any longer. They can’t understand that.

In the end it wasn’t him either, it was me. It was all me. I simply couldn’t take it. He was just fine, for him it was all and always just fine, he was simply bumbling along like he did, completely oblivious to his own inadequacies, to the pain, the sadness, the disappointment I felt each moment. I will never forget how he looked when I pushed the divorce papers across the kitchen table to him. They only required a push of his name stamp on the bottom line. Finalized. He never saw it coming. I nearly stopped myself when he shot me that expression. Nearly. I steeled my nerves and went through with it, the act had been too long in the making, I had been thinking about it and planning it for too many months to give up then, at the last moment.

And now, now my sweet firstborn treasure, my
most precious in the whole world, now she’s getting bullied at school because of what I did. What I decided. How can I ever forgive myself? But how could I have stayed there with him as if everything were fine? Some women do, I know, some women are able to swallow their pride, to sacrifice their own happiness, their own health, even their own bodies, for the sake of keeping a family together. Some women put up with a lot more than I ever did. But that’s not me, and I don’t want my daughters to be that way either. I want them to demand more from life and to take it, grab it, force it out and latch onto what life won’t give and wrest it away. I want them to make that stand and to be that strong. I had to show them how to do it. I thought I was.

Only they don’t get all that. Not yet. They don’t and maybe they won’t, they can’t, not for many years anyway. I pray that they will though. Right now they are two scared little girls trying so hard to be tough and strong and supportive of their mother who is very rapidly losing it. They are such amazingly good girls. I’ve done it, I have, I’ve ruined their lives. In trying to make things better I’ve gone and made them so much worse. I am a terrible mother, a terrible person. I did this. I made Manae cry like that, I made her the target of that stupid, hateful slug of a
fifth-grader. Her stinking classmate. It’s my fault. I don’t know how to make this right, how to undo this mess. But I have to. I do know that.

I just held Manae. I reassured her as best I could. I tried to explain, but how could I? I don’t even remember what I said exactly. We cried together. I’ll send a text to Shoichiro and arrange for him to meet the girls. Maybe I’ll go too. Maybe somehow things will be all right, maybe if I talk to him we can work it out. Maybe I don’t need to stay here, maybe we can be a family again and the girls can feel like they’re normal and not be bullied and teased by spoiled idiot kids who don’t even know any better themselves and think they have the answers and have being “normal” down pat. Maybe. If only we didn’t live in this tiny backwater of a town, if only other children had other situations and everyone knew that everyone was different and that it was perfectly fine to be so.

It’s too hard to be unconventional here. Can I figure something out? Is my own happiness really that important? Am I even happy now? I need to call my mother. I need to talk. I can’t think Diary, I’m lost. Lost and terribly, terrifyingly responsible for my wonderful daughter’s pain. It’s on me, I did this, I did.
2019, June 08 (Saturday)

Mom made me feel much better. I knew she would, she always does. She drives me crazy, spins me around, makes me wonder who I am and why on earth I can never live up to her expectations or manage to escape being only a child in her eyes, but she still knows exactly what to say to make everything smooth and fine and bright again. And today too she pulled it off, she did.

Manae is ten and her problems are those of a ten year-old. They’ll go away and quickly be forgotten about, quickly turn into growing up. Ten is a good age, but it’s also on the cusp of being a hard age. It’s a time when those difficult years are barely around the corner, when they’ve started sneaking up on a little girl who is no longer so little, when the pure joys and simple pleasures of everything she’s known start to give way – creepingly, sneakingly, slowly, but surely – to self doubt, to worries about reputation, to concern for how she’s seen by others, the ways she’s being thought about. Her body, till then merely a tool for fun, a vehicle of enjoyment pure and free of any worry, starts to betray her, and she now feels that whatever it is it doesn’t fit, it’s not right somehow, some way, it needs to be shaped and she always has to keep an eye on it.

Oh my poor Manae, poor Terako, poor me and poor every
woman on this planet who has to live among men in a
man’s world where “good enough” is never good enough
and where those eyes, those eyes that never stop looking,
taking in, evaluating in an instant, those eyes are always
and everywhere on you. If they linger a second too long or
a second too little your mood can change like that. Snap!

At this age and with two kids and even with all
the worries I have I still get angry when men look at me
too long, whether it’s approvingly or not. Especially if it’s
approvingly, actually. Am I a man-hater? Have I become
one? I don’t know, I certainly find no use for men, that
much I can tell you Diary. Of course other women can be
just as cruel, just as judging. No, that’s not true. They can
be far more judging. Other women make men look easy, or
even kind by comparison. But at least we know other
women; men are too stupid for the depth we expect, too
simple, and that makes them unreadable. At least that’s
how they’ve always seemed to me. Except for Shoichiro.
He was – is – simple to a fault, simple to being nothing
more than what-you-see-is-what-you-get. That equates to
no depth but readable. He always wore his heart on his
sleeve and it was as plain as day that there was nothing to
that heart but having fun and letting all the rest take care
of itself. Which of course meant someone else taking care
of all the rest, and all the time at that. You can’t be a boy forever. Well, you can try – he always has and still is, I suppose; doing his best not to grow up – but sooner or later it will come and bite you right on the bottom. That’s what Mom reminded me of, and I’m glad she did.

Shoichiro was a child from day one in our relationship. He never ceased being that junior high school boy from my class, the one I loved to hate and then just loved and then – well, now I don’t know what I feel, but he’s still more or less that silly and carefree boy. It was too much for me, and I didn’t get the support or the help I needed. Not with working nearly full-time hours on top of everything else. If he could have just chipped in with the girls or the housework from time to time, or if he could at least have been financially reliable. Or simply faithful.

Even before I found out about this debt he’d piled up that’s what I’d wished for, before these loans that I didn’t have an inkling of until after we’d divorced. He has forever been terrible with money. Spending it willy-nilly and having the gall to ask for more, as if the household budget meant nothing to him. He’d splurge on the girls too, and they of course never complained about that, which made it all the harder for me to say no to his requests. How could I know where it was going? He didn’t know
himself ahead of time. He tried to make me feel like I was taking good things away from our daughters, like I was stealing their happiness just by trying to keep our home in a good running condition, keep the lights on and the water flowing and the rest of it. Maybe he didn’t purposely intend to make me feel that way, I mean he never put it in so many words or hinted that that was what he meant. He still did though. It’s true Diary that he probably never really thought about it, and he probably couldn’t even think about it today, not coherently and not if he tried. It’s just how it came off, that’s how he made me feel. As if I owed him, or something like that.

I knew where most of the money went – right to drinking, right to “hostesses” or pachinko or some stupid gamble on something – and he still thought it was only natural. He is such a man, such a Kochi man, nothing but a product of this dirty little port stuck between the big Pacific and a ring of mountains, trapped with nowhere to look but at itself and no options or opportunities to connect with anything outside. In Kochi there is no world but Kochi, and Kochi doesn’t care. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die, as the line from that American movie goes. That’s Kochi, although maybe here it would be: Drink, drink, drink some more, then eat, carouse, eat.
and drink again, and be merry. No “for” is needed in these parts, everyone knows what life’s point is, and everyone agrees that life’s over far too quickly.

Maybe. I sometimes feel like life can’t get over soon enough.

Mom’s right. I made the wise choice and things will work themselves out, our situation will calm down. I might not be happier this instant but I will be sooner or later, and the girls will be the better for it because their home will be more stable, more predictable, and much less chaotic. And they’ll still see their dad; he won’t disappear from their lives. He might have a real part to play, a good part. He might have some help to offer, even if it’s only a listening ear from time to time. That much he can do.

Mom has her doubts about this second job of his. She doesn’t think he’ll be able to keep it. She’s probably right about that too, but I don’t want to admit it because I know what that would mean: I would be stuck with the whole third loan. Whammy. Particularly since I’ve already made the first payment; now I’m locked in and there’s no getting around it. I held my breath and transferred a full month’s worth of interest to them using an ATM in a Lawson convenience store of all places, though not Shoichiro’s branch, thank goodness. Nothing but a few
buttons, a few touches, and we were suddenly that much poorer. I have to believe that Shoichiro will come through, that he’ll keep at his extra work. Sure, he’s getting hourly wages that are the legal minimum or close enough, but it’s something extra and if – if – applied rightly it will get us in the clear in six months or so. His full Lawson pay plus what I can scrape together every month will just cover it, just be enough to make do, to erase the loan. And after that – free, we’ll be free, and the girls and I can focus on ourselves. We’ll only need Shoichiro to show up and be a fun father now and then, give me a little break, a little rest, a few hours on my own, get his daughters some ice cream or an afternoon in the park or a stroll through the mall or whatever they want to do. He can manage that.

That’s the dream anyway, but Mom’s not buying it. She sees the floor falling out, she sees me making payment after payment for the next few years unless, until… I know, I know, it’s quite likely. We’ll have to move in with them. Not having rent would mean I could clear this ridiculous loan on my own in only a matter of months, not years. I could cut this last legal tie to that man and his childishness. Done for good.

But going back home? With two school-aged daughters who are getting bigger by the day? Giving up
adulthood and living in my old bedroom again? She’s crazy. She’s right but she’s crazy. I won’t do it until we have to, not until we absolutely have to. Till then Shoichiro’s my best hope, my only hope. Now that’s frightening. The cause and solution to all these troubles is that one man. Keep your blue and white striped uniform you bumbling ex, keep that second job and don’t you mess it up. Oh Diary, what if he shows up drunk and gets fired? His Lawson boss is not his father, there won’t be any leniency like he enjoys there. Then again, what if he simply gets fed up or bored or restless and quits? He might. How has it come to this, to pinning my hopes on such a wasted little man-boy?

At least Manae’s okay, and that bully can wait till Monday. That’s one step in the right direction, one small step forward.
2019, June 15 (Saturday)

We saw him today, all of us, all three of us, the girls and I. Our girls and I. That made the four of us, together again, a unit, a family. Only now a broken family, splintered into shards. Shards? No, just two pieces: a lone corner cut off from the whole, and then the new, slightly smaller but still intact, leftover rest. The better rest. Shoichiro and then the three of us. Him gone, us here. But really it’s us gone; I’m the one who left, who initiated everything, who took the girls and moved out and started this great upheaval in our lives which hasn’t stopped. But it is somehow calming down. Or at least it was until we saw him. Now? Diary, now I’m more confused and angry even than I was before – and that was a lot – more confused and angry than I have been for quite some time.

A comment Mom made when we talked about this, to the effect that the girls are not quite so young as I imagine, got me thinking, and I finally decided that I had to just come clean and tell them the entire story. I thought it would help them to make sense of why we live where we live, why they haven’t seen their dad for a few weeks, and why they needn’t be upset by that or feel that he has abandoned them in any way. Of course telling them didn’t really help my case much as they both blamed me for
abandoning him, but I think they still more or less understood. More or less, maybe; well, Manae seemed to get it and Terako will too I think, although she’ll probably need a couple of more explanatory sessions before things really sink in. Anyway, I told the girls about the debt and how it has reinforced my decision that we’re better off separated from their father, but I was careful not to give them a bad impression of him and not to make them think that he was out of their lives completely. If any of what I said will prove helpful or not with Manae’s bully I’m not sure, but I tried.

And they tried too, they made every effort to understand; I’m very proud of them. They were also smart and sensitive enough not to bring any of it up in front of Shoichiro when we met earlier today. To be honest I think they were simply very happy to have some time with their Papa, so much so that I didn’t suppose they’d ever stop talking. Either of them, both of them: yammering away constantly as if his were the only pair of working ears on the whole planet. For his part Shoichiro was kind and patient, attentive in a way I hadn’t known him to be, and patently delighted to be with his daughters. I think he may even have been excited to be with me. It was cute, he was cute, and I’m kicking myself while still patting myself on
the back. Like I said, confused and angry — that’s me.

We saw him inside his Lawson after his shift ended this afternoon. Since I had filled the girls in on the situation I didn’t see any reason to hide the fact that he was working there, but later I thought maybe I shouldn’t have shown them exactly which Lawson he’ll be at every weekend as it might pop into one or the other of their heads to go and pay him a visit. They can ride the trams by themselves and his branch is right downtown, easy to find and easy to get to. I do kind of regret that, but on the other hand I also think there’s nothing wrong with either Manae or Terako meeting their dad if they want to and he’s up for it. And if he isn’t up for it then that’s his fault and his problem for being a father in the first place, it’s something he’ll have to deal with on his own. He is an adult after all, even if he very rarely acts like one. I’m not feeling sorry for him.

He was the same clown today that we knew and used to love, still do love. A fun clown, a clown who put us at ease in what could have been a very awkward situation. I was grateful for that. It was uncomfortable seeing him; not just “seeing” him but talking to him, being with him. It was uncomfortable and very familiar at the same time. It was so strange Diary, but I feel like I can tell
you this because we’ve become such good friends. I don’t mind sharing that when I saw him today I got those same butterflies in my stomach again, just like I had way back in high school when we first got serious after dancing around each other during junior high. Approaches and retreats, half steps and half measures gave way to actual dating and opening our hearts and of course the inevitable physicality. The fumbling and the clumsy, passionate intensity that passes for love among young people all around the world. We were teenagers and we behaved accordingly. No surprises there.

We’re not teenagers anymore, not by a long shot, but I felt like one today. So strange. I tried to be hard and to stick with my choices, to reinforce my ideas and conclusions and judgments, and to remind myself why I took the path I did, but seeing him across the table in the little café area of his convenience store, watching him joke with his offspring as we had the desserts he treated us to with his employee discount – well, it was something very sweet and I couldn’t lock away the emotions that swept over me. There we were: him and me, the kids – our kids – laughing and playing. I nearly broke down into sobs as we got on the tram to come home. Our home, without him. I was right to divorce him, of course I know that, but I
didn’t feel that today, I only knew it. Head and not heart. That worries me, it does. What would happen if I got back together with him? I can’t, I can’t, even Manaé said that after I told the girls about the debt situation we’re in. She couldn’t believe her Papa could be so dumb, but at the same time she wasn’t at all surprised that he could be so dumb. She’s ten and she thinks like that. Talk about growing up quickly.

Shoichiro was a gentleman about everything. He asked when he could see us again – us, he emphasized that, he wanted to include me – but he didn’t push anything and he didn’t force anything. He even seemed contrite, which is a quality I have very rarely witnessed in him. I think he actually is serious about setting things right, and whether it does or doesn’t include me taking him back; he seems to want to make amends. But then I couldn’t figure out if he wants to be taken back or not, and what really set me off – and still does as I write this – is that I can’t figure out if I want to take him back. I’m angry at myself for not being more angry at him, and then that makes me angry with him but, in a way I can’t explain. I know you’ll understand Diary, I know this will make sense to you. You are such a good listener, you always get it right away. Thank you.

Anyway, he left it open and said he’d be happy to
meet us whenever we could and he told me not to worry, that he had learned his lesson and was being careful and would get us out of this money trouble as soon as he could. He patted my arm a little and looked like he really wanted to hug me. His affection was touching, it was attractive, and that really pisses me off more than anything, though at the time it only warmed my heart. I want him and I don’t want him, I need him but can’t be with him. I divorced him, I thought about it for years before I finally did it, and now here he is being Mister Charming and throwing everything into confusion, ruining everything I’ve finally got going for the girls and me. I won’t let him disrupt our lives, not any longer. But I admit that I don’t dare admit to feeling like he could help put things back together, even though I might actually feel that. Might.

We could move back in; no, he could get rid of our old place since the rent is higher there and move in with us at our new place. It would be cramped but it’s cramped now as it is. The girls wouldn’t have to change schools again. With the money saved from his no longer paying a rent over there and me not paying the full rent here anymore we could get out of his stupid loans in no time. But then there’s the thing: they are his stupid loans, the most obvious but definitely not the only sign of his
irresponsibility. If I give him an out on what he’s done, if I let him get away with this whole debacle and accept him back after going through the entire divorce proceedings, if I do all that then I’d be the stupidest woman on the planet. But maybe also a very happy one.

Diary! What am I supposed to do? Of course I’m confused and angry. But I’m not wrong, I know I’m not wrong, and I will never admit to doubting as much as I do. Not to you and certainly not to me. No, I’ve got to stay the course and test that bastard, let’s see what he’s really made of and how much of a show this princely playacting of his turns out to be. If he can come through and prove himself, well then maybe he’s got a chance, maybe I’ll give him a chance. It’s up to him. He’s got a long ways to go first and I’ve got to be – and I will be – strong. Super strong. Super Woman strong. It’s him who has got to show some proof. For the time being our lives will stay as is; yes, as is. After that will be after that.

Today I did it, I pulled it off, I came through for me and mine. Tomorrow I’ll find out what the girls make of all this after we’ve had a good sleep and let our feelings settle down a bit. We’re in this together, we’re on the same page. We’ve always been, our diary page. How I’ve come to rely on you.

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2019, June 26 (Wednesday)

I feel stuck. It’s been a few days now since we met Shoichiro, we’ve had some good sleeps on it, our brains have turned things over. Turned and turned and turned in however it is that the brain works; but don’t ask me about that, I never even got to go to university, and if I had I wouldn’t have studied science, that’s for sure. Literature, books, words – they are what’s always been my life. But anyway, the answer that the girls and I arrived at to the big question of Shoichiro, that mystery I’ve been waiting on, is that we don’t know. We have no idea.

I know! After all our wonderings and all our talks we’re still lost in the woods. I’m sure I’m more lost than Manae and Terako, and in some ways I think their professions of not being sure are purely out of a deference to me as I’m obviously so up and down about it, but there you have it. Nobody knows anything and nobody can decide anything. It is of course my decision to make, mine alone, the girls are well aware of that and I the more so, but for their part they at least agree there are plenty of pluses and minuses to go around. Plenty.

And so I’m stuck. The girls want to be with their father but they told me honestly that the two of us fighting so much did not make for a happy home. They were
uncomfortable, and who can blame them? They want to see their Papa, they want him to be a part of their lives and maybe their everydays, but they also want me to be content and settled, and since I’m the primary caretaker (of course they didn’t put it that way Diary but that’s what they meant) my mental well being affects them more than Shoichiro’s does. And we all know that no matter what happens to that man his mentality – such as it is, what passes for “the mental” with a man like him – will be just fine. The girls didn’t say that either, naturally, they just indicated that although they would like their father to be around, for them my emotional evenness is most important. At this point in their lives at least. They don’t want a crazy Mama. Me too, I don’t want to be a crazy Mama, I don’t want to go back to being a crazy Mama the way I felt like I was far too often.

But then there’s the other side. I found my old emotions getting stirred up, brought back, returning with a real force. That man, he was my first and only true love, my only honestly deep and genuine love aside from my parents and later on the girls. And as everyone who has ever kissed a romance knows, the love I had (still have! oh my) for that goofball is of an entirely different form than the love I have for my mom and dad and daughters. It took
talking to him, it took being with him and spending time with him and not just seeing him, to bring all that rushing to the surface, but it came. It came, and with a vengeance. I have to admit that I still love the stupid idiot; maybe that means I always will. The question is: Can I be with him again? Can I really go back to him? I can’t decide, can’t see what I ought to do, and so I’m stuck. Motionless, immobile – paralyzed. Yes, frozen stiff.

I made a choice to move out, I worked like mad to make it as smooth as possible: finding an apartment, planning and packing and setting things up surreptitiously for weeks in advance, and then I hit him all at once with divorce papers to sign and stamp, struck in the most elegant coup d’état. That was it, and he never stood a chance. And now I want to reverse everything I worked so hard for? Maybe I do but maybe I don’t. What would happen if I did? Would we only fall into the same ruts we were in? The same patterns of behavior and interactions? The same ways of being together while being separate? The same lives in parallel that didn’t really amount to a partnership, but that did make for a kind of calming familiarity? What would be better for the girls?

That’s the sole truly important issue, and the one that has me more confused than anything. I honestly do
not know, and I simply cannot figure out what kind of home life would be best for them. They are everything, and if I could only understand what’s preferable for their nows and their futures then everything else would so easily fall into place. Only I can’t and so – you got it – I’m stuck. It’s like I’ve been placed in limbo by some mix of uncontrollable and unalterable forces, and now too many pairs of unseen eyes are watching me to see how I’ll react. I’m fate’s experiment, that’s how I feel. Bets are being placed and arguments made: Will she or won’t she? That? Oh certainly! No way!

Haha, as if I mattered so much, as if the great powers in this universe – whatever they are – as if they’d watch my little life with any interest. I’m a nothing living in a nowhere. Nobody is concerned about Kazenoko. Nobody but her parents and her children. Maybe her ex, though he would never show it. He’d feel it though, he might. Is that worth anything? Stuck.

The rain doesn’t help. Kochi is wet year round, but the spring rainy season into the summer rainy season and then the autumn rainy season with breaks only in May and August doesn’t do much to lift the spirits. Not most years and not this year. Clouds and rain, humidity and heat. Sticky, yucky blech, day after day. Ocean and mountains,
that’s all we’ve got here and it makes for nothing but moisture. If I wouldn’t have been born in this town I would have fled years ago. But don’t you see? There too I’m stuck, trapped by money – more like its lack. Stuck in mind, stuck in place, rotted to the bottom by fate. Anchored as the waters get deeper and deeper; already up to my neck. Drowning. I wish I could see what will happen next.
2019, July 04 (Thursday)

I’m still stuck, it’s still raining, and I’m more depressed than ever. More depressed than I was anyway, which was pretty depressed but frankly I’ve been too busy to be keeping track of how depressed I am. Let’s just say that however depressed I was I’m more so now. That will have to suffice as a description Diary.

Things with Manae are going better at school, that’s at least one positive, one bright shining light in all of this confusion and indecision about where we are and where we might or should be. Her bully has apparently come round after some good involvement from their teacher. She finally noticed what was happening and gave a long talk to the whole class about how every family is a little bit different and that’s okay. Which in itself is pretty remarkable, none of my old teachers would have given us a talk like that. They probably would have inclined more to its opposite, in fact. She didn’t single out anyone and gave as an example her own personal history, which I was surprised to hear when Manae – with eyes wide – shared it with me.

Her teacher’s mother is from a single mother family too, her grandfather was never around, and not only was he absent but she never even met him or saw a photo
of him. Unusual enough but it gets better – this really knocked the kids out and I have to say did me as well – her grandfather was Korean. Imagine that! Her mother was born and raised here in Kochi just like she was, but her grandmother evidently either went to Korea or met a Korean man at some point somewhere in Japan. It’s not as crazy as it sounds, although it is strange and definitely not the kind of thing a typical teacher – or anyone – would share or want to admit to. Nobody would want that getting around; having a foreigner in the family? That’s the kind of personal history that gets deeply buried and would be a major source of shame. I guess Manae’s teacher chose to share it because she knew it would have a huge impact and that whatever other atypical situations existed in her classroom – like Manae’s, but others too I’m sure – they would never top hers. She got that right.

What I mean about it not being all that crazy is that Manae’s teacher is probably around my age and so her grandmother would have been in the war generation. At that time there were a lot of Koreans living here, and I’ve read that the whole of Korea was itself part of Japan. It seems we went over there and started running the government, helping out and making it a better place. At least, that’s what I remember from our history textbooks at
school. As part of that a lot of Koreans came to live and work in Japan, mostly on Honshu in the big industrial cities but other areas too. It’s possible as well that Manae’s teacher’s grandmother was working in a factory in Osaka or around there; she wouldn’t have to stay in Kochi, quite a few people were working all over during the war. Once she got pregnant I guess she must have come back to her hometown to live with her parents again.

But whatever the details were it’s such an unbelievable story that Manae’s classmates were beside themselves, and anything like Manae not living with her dad surely seemed like a tiny mote by comparison. And it is, it is. I think too meeting Shoichiro the other day helped Manae get her courage up, to enable her to have something to say if something gets said to her, and she knows now that her dad isn’t at home anymore because of stuff between him and me, that it has nothing to do with her, and that he is and will be a part of her life. All of that certainly must help.

A Korean grandfather though; who could possibly have guessed? She looks like a totally normal Japanese woman, but in fact she’s one quarter foreigner. Maybe more, who knows what else she has hidden away. Wow.

That time, the war, it seems so divorced from the
reality we know. Life then, how it was lived, the day-to-day struggles, they are just simply beyond the thinking of anyone who didn’t experience them. Today is actually the anniversary of Kochi’s firebombing during that war, right in the final year of it. Not many people know that, not even many locals and I’d bet hardly anyone outside of Kochi knows. Probably no one would really care, I guess, given everything that happened during those years in the different parts of the country, and especially if you think about something like Tokyo getting firebombed basically every day. But it did happen here too, and on July fourth – today. It’s also apparently the anniversary of America’s independence from England. I wonder why they chose their own national holiday to go and do something like that. The pilots had nothing to do with the timing of course, they just did what they were told to. Somebody had to decide though, and since the American military dropped the bombs it must have been somebody in their own ranks that put it through. Maybe some American general thought it would be patriotic or something, they seem like a violent enough people for that idea to occur to one of them.

For my part I don’t know how to feel about what happened then except to be curious. I can’t relate to a
firebombed city, and my grandparents never spoke much about the time. Maybe they would have if I had asked, but I didn’t and it’s too late now. My parents have only told me they heard about the constant pain and hunger and grew up being very grateful for food to eat and a roof over their heads, that’s it. That was enough to leave an impact though, and those simple values are probably what made their politics turn out the way they did.

Those two, Mom and Dad, they are without question children of the seventies, the decade when they came of age. I used to be embarrassed by my “radical” parents but now I just find them funny. Stressing at times, but warmhearted and funny. I often can’t understand them, but I know they mean well.

I have also, by the way, never understood why America wanted to go and be independent. Good for them I suppose, but it doesn’t seem like Canada or Australia ever suffered from not having revolutions against England. An Australian man I met in the Hirome Market once told me that lots of Australians want their country to be a republic. He spoke excellent Japanese. He might have been flirting with me, I’m not sure. I was at a table with my friends and he and his friend just came over and sat down. They bought us drinks, and although we were too
young for it you can bet none of us refused. Hirome is like that: a massive open floored building with two central public seating areas surrounded by a ring of bars and restaurants. People get a table, walk over and order what they want from wherever they want and then the staff comes to find where they’re sitting with the food and drink in hand. The tables are wood and the seats are too: benches mostly, sometimes stools. It’s indoors and the cigarette smoke is intense, but it’s loud and boisterous and always fun. It’s very Kochi, you can meet anyone in there. That day I met an Australian; for me it’s the only day I did. My pregnancy got on, I could hardly go and sit in such a smoky place, let alone drink anymore. I probably shouldn’t have been drinking then, but I wasn’t sure if I was pregnant or not at the time. I hope that didn’t affect Manae’s development; this is the first I’ve ever thought about that. I was very young and silly back then.

Australia wants to be a republic and America had a revolution. It’s all so different, so strange, so separate from how we Japanese think. Our country has always been just fine with its slow and proud traditions. We have peace, but I know we didn’t always. Maybe America’s wars are what made them so brash and aggressive and gun crazy, and maybe Australia’s being built by a bunch of thieves is
what made them so loose and irresponsible, I don’t know. What about us? Have our cultural inheritances of calligraphy, flower arrangement, or the tea ceremony made us more refined? I don’t see much of that in the people around me, but maybe I would if I lived in a place like Kyoto. We’re each still Japanese though.

I wonder, do national histories carry their own fates into the people of a place? What makes a nation anyway? It’s probably too much to figure out. One thing I do know for sure is that Shoichiro is a Kochi man. As we say around here, *igosso* through and through: a fun loving man-boy, maybe not the most responsible, a drinker, stubborn, and filled with guts. He’s Japanese, but more than being Japanese he’s a Kochi-ite. I guess I am too.

Not Manae’s teacher though, she’s Korean. Or partly Korean. Crazy. You know, writing about all these meandering nothings is really helping my mood, thank you so much Diary. I feel much better, and I owe that to you. I’m still stuck and I have no idea what to do about that man, but I’m a lot less depressed after just these few minutes of sharing. You really are the best listener, a true friend. I owe you for that, I do, and I won’t forget it.
2019, July 07 (Sunday)

Today is the Tanabata Festival. When the girls came home on Friday they told me about their wish cards that they made at school and hung on the branches of their classroom bamboo poles. It’s a nice tradition. I imagine they’ll bring the cards home tomorrow after the holiday officially finishes.

At dinner tonight I tried telling them the Tanabata story as well as I could remember it, but the character’s names escaped me so I just called them “prince” and “princess” and “king”. Actually I wasn’t sure if the forlorn lovers in the tale were royalty or not, or if maybe only one of them is. Luckily Manae’s teacher had told them the entirety in detail and so she was able to fill in what was missing from my re-telling, which turned out to be a lot. I should have just let Manae share the whole thing herself but I was feeling pretty proud at being a good mother right then and so I carried on. It seems that the young man is actually a cowherd, but the young woman is indeed a princess and both of them are stars. It’s the girl’s father who separates the two across the Milky Way, and those bright dots in our sky come together just once a year on this very day. I was at least right about there being a “king” involved. The princess apparently didn’t do her weaving
work while she was with the cowherd, and he likewise neglected his animal husbandry duties, and so as punishment they were placed on either side of the heavenly river. Out of mercy for his daughter the king relented to her tears and allowed her to meet her beloved, but only every July seventh. The moral must be to mind your place in society and do your work properly. That sounds pretty Japanese to me. Manae’s teacher did also say that the story originally comes from China, but after learning that she’s Korean I’m not sure how much I trust her on things like that.

Anyway, when I was a kid we always wrote our wishes on strips of paper and hung them from a bamboo pole to celebrate too just like the girls did, I’m glad that’s continued. Terako’s is so cute, I can’t wait to see it. She said she wrote that she wished she could get a large peach cake for her birthday next month. I’ll have to remember that. Manae’s was more standard and shows the pressure to conform to “what’s right” that children always face so heavily, especially at school. She wrote that she wished for a healthy and happy family. That’s a great wish, don’t get me wrong, but it’s pretty boring and doesn’t show any of Manae’s spirit. I need to do a better job of encouraging her to open up and be brave enough to be the unique girl I
know she is.

If I were going to write a wish this year it would be pretty different from those average ones, and maybe pretty shocking. Certainly so. Can I share it with you Diary? Can I really tell you the truth? I wouldn’t want to hang it anyplace where other people could read it, that’s for sure. What I would wish for – and don’t think ill of me until I’ve had a chance to explain myself – what I would wish for is that Shoichiro were dead.

There, I’ve admitted it, right here on paper,. I can see it written down in black ink and I can now re-read it any time I want to. I probably never will, but there it is, and there you have it. I would like my ex to be gone – permanently. But the funny thing about wishes is that sometimes they are just expressions of buried emotions, they don’t carry any real meaning or motivation behind them. And sometimes they do. Having declared mine I’m trying to figure out if it’s a real one or one of those empty types. You tell me and I’ll tell you. This is a dance we can perform Diary, but only you and me, quietly, secretly.

The main reason I think I want him dead is that I can’t make up my mind to be with him or stay without him. I know, I know, it’s the same old nonsense I’ve been writing about for days, but the trouble is still there.
would be much, much easier if I didn’t have to decide anything. If he disappeared they would all be sunny skies. The way I’ve struggled with this, it’s like a side to my life that isn’t mine. I mean, it’s an internal that makes no sense to me. I more or less know the various outside factors influencing who I am – or think I do – and I know how they contribute to my inability to come to a conclusion, but this thing – you see it’s all inside. These parts, out there and in here, they’re tied up together and it must be my fate to stay indecisive on this point. What is that telling me? Of course I could just throw my hands up and leave it to the universe, and for the time being that’s exactly what I’m doing, but that doesn’t really amount to much besides plain laziness. And maybe a lack of courage. Probably a lack of courage. But what kind of courage would you need for that?

My brain tells me I left him for good reasons, great reasons, that although things are a bit tight with money every other aspect of daily life is so much better, and hence I need to stay the course. But then my heart tells me things weren’t really so bad with Shoichiro, that he’s a caring and even loving father, and at least an averagely decent husband. Mom says I deserve better than average, but of course she’d say that. I don’t think I do, really, and I
also don’t think I’ll ever find a better man than Shoichiro at this age and with two kids in tow. Then, though, I think that I don’t want to find a better man or any other man at all, that I don’t need a man and once this stupid debt which that stupid man put on us is cleared we’ll be nearly back to where we were financially before the divorce, and as a bonus we won’t have to support Shoichiro’s wasteful habits out of our household bank account. On top of that, and flipping things over again, every now and then a happy and fun memory of times with him will creep in and ruin my entire line of thought, disrupting any clear feeling I had and leaving me more lost than before. It’s inescapable, he’s inescapable.

Don’t you see? It’s impossible, but if he were just dead and cleanly out of the way then everything would simply fall into place. His debt that has become our debt would probably vanish too. What would we lose in the process? The girls wouldn’t have a father but they’d have a good reason not to have a father, they wouldn’t have to be embarrassed by our situation anymore. Okay, I realize it’s very selfish and I’m only thinking from my own point of view, but that’s how I feel. It’s my life and my fate and of course I’m only looking at it from out of my own two eyes. You can’t blame me for that. In the privacy of my
heart I can do that and nobody can judge me – no one, that is, except you. You know too much. But if I can’t be honest with you then who can I be honest with?

Give it to me straight: am I really so terrible to wish that? Who hasn’t wished their problems away in a similar fashion? Make them vanish like this debt. And if your problem is a person it’s a pretty short couple of steps from “wish away” to “vanish” to “dead”, isn’t it? So don’t be too harsh on me Diary, I’m just one mother trying to get through, just one former wife who is completely lost in the woods that life has led her into. Yes, I’ve been led. This is my fate, an unfolding, an unwrapping. I’m merely along for the ride, doing the best I can, doing all I can, striving every day.

Well maybe. I don’t know. What’s there to strive for anyway? It’s not like I’m headed to a goal or anything, and if I were that would only vanish too. I’m tripping to my grave. But I’ve got the girls, they are meaning and purpose, the whole of it. And you know what else? Yes, Shoichiro will get there first. I might not even hide my smile at his funeral.
2019, July 17 (Wednesday)

I knew it. I knew it would happen sooner or later. It was too good to be true, and when something’s too good to be true it usually is. I heard that in an American movie once, and they got that right. Too good. Life can never be too good, and if you suspect it is then you either thank the heavens or you watch out for coming trouble – and in both cases you take a very deep breath.

I’m trying to remember which movie that was, trying to remember for no other reason than to keep my brain off of this; that stupid, miserable poop. I’m too angry to even write it down, I need a distraction, but it’s not working; nothing will work. Nothing. Who cares about some stinking Hollywood cheese? The bastard! What a useless, unreliable, good for nothing, complete and total waste of humanity. I don’t even want to spend this ink writing about him, it’s worth more than he is. I’ve been too livid to make a start on it until now. But I have to, I have to. If I don’t get this out I’ll erupt, it’ll poison me through and through.

Shoichiro got fired three or four days ago. Of course he tried to hide it from me. And he almost did except that I texted to arrange a visit to his convenience store with the girls last weekend to set up another get
together between them and he wasn’t there like he was supposed to be. I asked one of the other workers where he was but the man said he didn’t know. He was some brain dead high school kid by the looks of it, he probably doesn’t know anything about anything, I really shouldn’t have been surprised. Then I asked for the manager and got the full scoop. Ha, hardly. I got blown off by manager-ese: Takebayashi-san was unfortunately “retired” recently due to a discrepancy with his work. What does that mean? I’m sorry I can’t tell you for privacy reasons. I’m his wife. Oh, I didn’t think he was married. I’m his ex-wife. Oh, I see. Why was he fired? I’m sorry I can’t tell you for privacy reasons. It’s maddening, I tell you Diary, it leaves me fuming the officious way these people talk. Like robots. That dirty high school kid would have been a better source of information if his head hadn’t been filled with fluff.

I left the Lawson in a rage – the one that’s still with me – and not knowing what to do next I kind of hovered lamely outside. I told the girls to meet me later over at Mister Donut again, to go and choose what they wanted. I needed some time by myself to think, and naturally Manae and Terako were thrilled at the prospect of an unexpected treat. So there I was, standing around confused, pissed off, at a loss and really, really burning up
when I saw Shoichiro around the corner wearing his Lawson uniform and looking like he was cleaning up the sidewalk. Pretending to be cleaning up the sidewalk – and just with his hands, no broom or anything. I moved straight over to him and, pushing my feelings deep down into a little ball, a little bomb, said hello as calmly and as coolly as I could. I gave nothing away, that’s for certain.

You know what he did? He said hello right back, as if everything were normal. The idiot! He should have known I knew. Couldn’t he see that? I kept acting like I didn’t know anything and asked how this side work of his was going and whether or not he wasn’t too tired for his main job with his father. Oh, it’s no problem, he assured me. All is well. As if it were! I tore into him, I couldn’t keep it bottled up one minute longer. My little bomb exploded right over his stupid, haggard, fallen, alcoholicly-chubby cheeks. I screamed at him, in the open and in front of each and sundry, I didn’t care how I looked. I had no thoughts for reputation or propriety, no concern for public niceties. His rotten face threw me into an uncontrollable frenzy.

It did what was called for, or anyway I got what I wanted, which was to know what happened. He melted, he was so ashamed to be the target of my artillery fire,
standing there in the center of town with people we might know walking back and forth and the dazed tourists waiting for the signal to change so they could spend their Chinese and Australian money in our shopping arcade. He got caught stealing. He is so, so stupid!! I nearly throttled him, I couldn’t control any part of my body, I started pounding my fist on his shoulder as he crouched to defend himself, looking horrified. I stopped, shoved it back inside, I had to, there were too many goldfish eyes staring. It was so humiliating, as if I were the one who was in the wrong. I’m not wrong, he is. He is nothing but wrong. He should be dead!

Some cans of Chu-hi cocktails and a few beers, a couple of useless plastic toys that he thought the girls might like. That’s what he stole. That’s what he threw his entire extra income source away on, his job that was a lifeline for us and solution to our shared problem which was entirely his creation, the one he saddled us with. What a selfish, unbelievably moronic, stupid, worthless, pathetic pile of filth. He’s not fit to be a man, not fit to be a human. I wish I had strangled him or at least given him a black eye. Next time I will. There will never be a next time.

I have no clue what to do now. Another payment is coming due in a couple of weeks. If I just transfer the
same amount I did last time it will only be the interest. That’s as much as we can afford, but without him paying in – which he won’t since he doesn’t have the bonus income – it’ll only be me making interest payments. Forever. The full loan will never go down and never go away. I’m stretching everything we have to make these interest payments as it is, and now – idiot!!! – I’ll have to make them with no end in sight. What happens when the girls need more money? When they go to university, like I never got to? When they want to take driving lessons – also like I never got to – or, heavens help us, take an actual family trip? I really wish I had grabbed his throat and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until his fetid ugly face turned blue, purple, black, popped – BANG!

Goodbye Shoichiro, and good riddance.
2019, July 20 (Saturday)

You probably saw this coming Diary, I’m sure for you the outcome was never in doubt. But I had to live it, and I still do, so try and have some sympathy, okay? I’m going to move back in with my parents. Back there, back to my childhood home, back to my old bedroom; unbelievable. Well, not exactly back to my old bedroom because of course it isn’t still exactly how it was and the three of us wouldn’t fit in there anyway, but you get the idea. Back. A giant step in reverse. Defeat. Absolute and utter defeat. I’m waving the white flag, I admit it: I’m a failure. A failure in the whole game of life. My dreams have come to ruin, my goals have disappeared right in front of me, I’ve accomplished nothing. I am nothing.

Mom tells me not to think about it like that. This is temporary, don’t worry, you’ll be fine and on your feet again in no time. Maybe. But now the girls will have to change schools once more – the second time in the space of less than a year – and start from zero in another new environment. Right when Manae had learned how to deal with a bully too, just when things had finally worked out for her and it looked like she could succeed and fit in and be okay and get past a difficult situation. Terako has been flying in her own classroom environment, but she would
have regardless as it’s her first year of elementary school and that’s just the kind of girl she is. For her part she’ll probably adjust well enough to the new place, she has the personality for it, but Manae – how I worry about Manae. I haven’t had the heart to tell either of them yet, and I don’t know when I will.

This is a decision I finally came to after a long talk with both Mom and Dad today over at their place while the girls were outside. They’d make space for us, they said, we could use the whole upstairs and would only have to share the kitchen and bathroom on the ground floor. They’d switch their bedroom to what’s the living room now so both rooms on the second floor could be ours. I guess my old bedroom will become our new living space and their bedroom where we sleep. Imagine how I’ll feel going to bed every night like that. Guilty? Yes. Embarrassed? Yes. Humiliated? Most certainly. Done, I’m done. I’m a terrible mother.

Every step in my life has led to this. I got pregnant in high school, I quit the very idea of university, I stayed home with my parents to care for my newborn daughter, I married her father and as soon as he could manage it we moved into the apartment he got. We struggled through, I started working part-time, we both
supported each other as we found ourselves in jobs that were okay but not what we wanted, we were very lucky that his father was later able to employ him and keep him employed at something close to what he wanted.

Me? I’ve never been close to what I wanted. I’ve read and read and read on my own, and I would never trade that for anything, but I’ve not been able to do one iota with it. Not for work, not even as a cram school teacher. Being self-educated means nothing, and I can’t take the test to get a teacher’s license without a university degree. And where would I have gotten the money or the time for a university degree? What a joke, here I am feeling bad about my old idea of becoming a Japanese literature teacher and I couldn’t even remember the Tanabata story. I really am an absolute failure. My daughters will hate me for this, but what else can I do?

I calculated it out and with no rent to pay I should be able to clear that worm’s debt taken in my name in less than a year. Maybe a lot less depending on how my folks are, but I want to pay them for our utilities and of course for our food. At least that. In fact I want to keep our food and theirs totally separate even if we do eat together every evening. I’m feeling bad enough at their generosity as it is, the last thing I need would be to sit down to a meal cooked
by my mother. I’m sure she’ll try to insist, and I’m sure my dad will try to refuse any money from us, but I have to do it my way. I already can’t look in the mirror, if I ended up being nothing but a parasite child – at this age and with two of my own children – I’d kill myself. I’m serious, I’d do it. The world would probably be a better place without me as it is.

Who am I kidding? The world wouldn’t even notice if I were dead. Nor should it. My kids would, but they’d be well cared for and I suspect my parents would be better parents to them than I’ve ever been. And without doubt better than that slug who got us into this mess. Maybe they’d miss me for a week or so, but that would be it. Anyway, don’t worry Diary, I don’t actually have the courage to go through with a suicide so you won’t be getting rid of me that easily. I know myself well enough to know that.

It will have to be soon, this move. This week is the girls’ last at school before summer break so that is at least one positive. We can uproot – once more – and they can switch schools during a time when there aren’t any classes. I’ll have to call and get the summer homework load from the new place they’ll be at. I’ll also have to tell our landlord we’re moving out. I’ll have to pay for the
whole of August whether we’re here or not, and I know we’ll lose the entire deposit since we signed a two-year lease to get into this building, but there’s nothing that can be done about that. At least we’ve cut down on furniture so much that with Dad’s help we’ll be able to transport everything ourselves and won’t need to use a moving company. That will save a bit of money. Also it will cost us nothing to move in this time – no deposit, no security, no cleaning fees – which is about the only thing I don’t need to cry over. So much to do, so much to prepare. Yet again. My head is spinning.
2019, August 10 (Saturday)

We moved in with my parents today. It wasn’t easy, and of course getting everything ready turned out to be a lot more work and a lot more complicated than I thought it would be, even though I anticipated it being mountains of work and endlessly complicated. That’s the way of things I guess, that’s how it goes when you’re a mother and a provider and a householder and everything else that no one should have to do completely on their own, rolled into one. It’s always harder and takes longer than you think it will. Or should, really.

And in case you’re wondering Diary, you with all your sanctimonious judging, I’m not feeling one bit sorry for myself, I’m simply stating things the way they are. You wouldn’t know because you don’t have kids and so you can never understand. I just have to accept that – and I do – maybe adjust my expectations a little too. Being responsible like this, being in charge of other lives, that’s something you have to experience, and until you do an infinity of words wouldn’t make a stroke of difference. You can keep your comments to yourself.

Once I made the decision to leave our hard-won apartment and make a run at clearing the debt that fleabag Shoichiro infected us with I just jumped in and went for it.
It was a whirlwind, it was way too much to do in three weeks, but I did it. I couldn’t see any reason for staying longer than was necessary in those rooms, in that tiny home that had come to symbolize both my hopes and my dreams; my utter defeat. Being there, breathing that air, taking in those walls, staring out those windows, sitting at that low table that had itself become a second home, seeing the fortress I built for us with no help from anyone, it was bitter, debilitating, suffocating; it was the death of the woman I thought I could be. She who – her – I cannot be. I can’t do it, can’t make it, there’s too much stacked against me.

Ha!! As if anyone anywhere, any force or power or entity or energy, anything beyond these two arms and legs and quiet little torso, as if he or she or it cares one jot for this little nothing. There isn’t “too much stacked against me” because no one is concerned enough with me to bother stacking anything. No. Instead there’s too much stacked against everyone, all of us stuck here alive, feeling compelled to stay alive and keep going for no reason whatsoever. Towards nothing. The total extinction of the human race wouldn’t be noticed, not even by a single cell sucking vitamins out of a puddle of water on some lone rock. Nothing is paying attention. Everything has
something better to do.

The Earth would probably be relieved at our absence, every other animal sure would. Collectively we’re nothing, and me, this tiny, dumpy, scared girl desperately trying to keep her family together while the barons pound away on her head, she’s more nothing than nothing, she’s the dirt and the dust on the floor of the room we just piled our pathetic stack of worldly goods into. Make something of that, this space seems to be taunting me. Go ahead, make it soft and comfortable and easing, it doesn’t matter. Decorations in a jail cell. Defeat, darkness, the end of the stupid dream I foolishly let myself wallow in. Upstairs in my parent’s house. Eight straw mats, four walls, a closet, a door, a short hallway, four more straw mats and one more closet, four more walls, then a staircase, a front door, an exit: locked. There is no exit from this.

Don’t you say that Diary, I’m not being melodramatic, I’m telling it like it is. Few people have the courage to speak the truth like I do. You should know that about me, and you ought to by now: I have never shied away from putting it straight. That’s not a very Japanese trait I realize, but it’s a Kochi trait and I’m a Kochi woman and that means something. It means something in a meaningless way that leads nowhere maybe, but it still
means something, or it does in the here and now of this room where you and I give and take, where we duel our back and forth. You really should face up to who it is you’re dealing with. Take nothing for granted, and keep those half-closed eyelids and downward gaze to yourself.

The girls were brave but I could see the tears in Manae’s eyes. She has grown so much from her experiences these past few months, and she knows it. Now she must feel like I’m erasing that, like she’ll have to start over and go through it all again. I’ll never forgive myself if she runs into another bully. Her newfound and freshly won strength will come back, it’ll bubble up and she’ll see it, she’ll realize it’s still there and always will be because she’s the one who has gone and grabbed it, but it won’t be easy. Terako was sad too, but she is such a fighter and so incredibly positive about every twist and turn and corner that somehow she took it in stride. She’s been the sunshine today, a huge help while Manae has generally moped. They do love their Grandma and Grandpa though, and that will make it easier. My parents will do something wonderful for us as a welcome – there’s no doubt about that – and they’ll make this first night in yet another new home and staring down yet another new school seem like a wondrous, magical outcome. We’ll eat like royalty
probably, watch the kids’ favorite movie or something, stay up way too late playing karuta card games. My parents are the best.

There you go, a bright spot. You didn’t think I had it in me, did you? Well, I do. I may be a failure, a nothing, but I’m no pushover. I’ll do this and I’ll fix everything and we’ll be back in an even better apartment in a better neighborhood with a better local school. Not that the school here is bad mind you, and I would like to avoid making the girls change again, but the point is that in the midst of this meaningless dust I’m going to do it. I’ll show you, I will. And then in that there’s going to be some meaning after all, there will be some reason. If I have to be alive then I’m going to be alive with strength, and if I have to fight this wretched and cheating world tooth and nail for every scrap it refuses to give, well then I’ll fight with everything in me and I won’t care about fairness or keeping it clean because the one thing that’s for certain is that my opponent doesn’t. So there.

If I can get used to my new commute, and if the addition of a necessary cycle ride out to the nearest tram stop doesn’t kill me every morning and evening, maybe we’ll even stick around here till the girls both finish the sixth grade. At least Manae. After that it’ll be junior high
and she could end up anywhere if her entrance tests are good enough and we have the money to pay an extra bus or tram fare to get her where she thinks she wants to study. I can’t imagine her caring too much about getting into any particular school, but she might. It’s true too that there aren’t very many options in this brackish backwater of a town but there are some, and I want her to at least know that she can pursue those. It’s up to her – more or less.

I’m sorry for being so irritable with you earlier Diary, it’s been a hard day. A hard month. And work, I haven’t told you about work. The drama continues, and it is so much fun. Sakaichi-san still hasn’t gotten her proposal but she persists in thinking that it’s close, and then the fact that she hasn’t keeps giving Tanaka-san hope she never will and thus she’ll eventually get so fed up she dumps her boyfriend, leaving her single and – he must presume – available for him. He probably wouldn’t have the courage to say it through to: She dumps her boyfriend and then goes out with him, but that has to be what he’s thinking. Oh the fantasies that man must have.

Sakaichi-san has never forgiven him the mistake of being happy at her failed assumed engagement way back when she had the date at the kaiseki multi-course place, and it is still funny. Every chance I get I bring that
up to remind her to hate Tanaka-san all the more. The way Sakaichi-san glares at him when I do, and the frightened bunny rabbit pose he makes in response, it’s the highlight of my day. Maybe it’s at their expense, but who cares? It makes me happy. It’s a dark pleasure yes, but I’ll take it. It’s a pleasure anyway. That stupid man should get what’s coming to him, and keeping Sakaichi-san angry lets her release any pent-up stress; it’s an open valve. So you see? I’m actually providing them with a service.
2019, August 12 (Monday)

Terako’s birthday is tomorrow, the thirteenth, seven years old, a brand new beginning. And in just another couple of weeks she’ll have a different new beginning, school will start up again and both girls will join their new classrooms, meet their new classmates and new teachers. It won’t be easy, I know that. Manae has been keeping her spirits up and hiding away whatever unease she feels, but I’m certain it’s there and probably in very great amounts. Tomorrow though we focus on Terako, and it will be a much, much needed respite, a diversion from the mess our lives have become. Because of me. No, cross that out Diary, because of Shoichiro. I am more and more convinced that every single one of our problems stems from that man, and that whatever I’ve done that has ended up being hard on the girls has only been in reaction to him, to his utter stupidity and childishness. He is the source, he is the wellspring of our suffering. It’s time I was honest about that and faced him for what he is: a disease. It’s like I’ve been walking blind all these years.

But enough about that for now. We’ll have a party at home after we’re back from play and work and from however my parents spent their day. Mom has offered to pick up a cake and a platter of sushi. Terako has really
wanted a new Rika-chan doll for quite a while now, and even though she’s been conscientiously quiet about it lately – probably thinking about our money trouble, the poor girl – I know her birthday wish hasn’t changed and so I decided to toss it and made a trip to the big Aeon shopping mall after my shift today to pick one up at Toys ‘R Us. What’s the point in moving back in with your parents to save money if it means you don’t splurge now and then?

And it is splurging, those dolls are nowhere near cheap, although to be honest they seem fairly cheaply made. Well, the dolls themselves aren’t, but some of the accessory clothing items certainly are. Manae had a Rika-chan swimsuit once that ripped the first time she tried to dress the doll in it. What a disappointment that was, the little beach set was so cute and the design on the swimsuit perfectly matched the parasol’s fabric. It just didn’t work to have Rika-chan relaxing on her patio chair beneath a light green and pink parasol wearing a blue evening dress. Anyway, there are a few newish lines out and the one Terako has been wanting is Rika-chan working at – of all places – Mister Donut, and since the doll herself comes with the uniform we won’t have to worry about extras, not for a few months when boredom
with what she’s got sets in. These doll makers, they do keep you buying things, I guess I have to admire the acumen of their business model.

It took me a long time to get back, or “home” now I guess – home again after all these years, right back to my childhood – from the mall. It was nearly an hour and a half between the bus and tram and waiting on each. Thankfully I no longer need to get stressed about the time. Neither girl is ever sitting alone in an empty house, and in just these first couple of days that has really made me feel so relieved. What a weight off my shoulders it’s been. Thanks to my parents and no thanks to that idiot, of course; the peace of mind is worth every extra minute of my longer commute. I still have to catch the first morning tram to get to work on time, which now includes a fifteen minute bicycle ride to the nearest stop at Akebonocho Higashimachi, but I’ll manage. I used to love riding a bike. And leaving that early at least means the day’s heat hasn’t set in yet, although next month when the autumn rains start up it will probably be pretty miserable. Dad bought me a full kappa style rain suit, a head-to-toe plastic robe, complete with a hood and visor: I’ll be just like a duck. That was very sweet of him to worry about me so.

My parents are being careful with us; welcoming
and warm, but I can tell that we’re going to quickly get on each others’ nerves. Who wants to move back with their parents as a grown woman with two kids, and what set of parents want their grown children with two kids to move in with them? There’s no easier answer: No one. Any grandparent would naturally love to see their grandchildren more often, but that hardly means living together. Proximity breeds conflict, and even in a house with two separate floors there is really nowhere to get away. Especially not when the bath, toilet, kitchen, and entry are each shared. And even though Manae is a few years from being a teenager she doesn’t shy away from dominating the sink and mirrors. Dad will probably try to keep to himself and maintain the peace, but Mom and I… Well, let’s just say that we have never pulled any punches with each other and I don’t suspect we’ll start now. I’m sincerely grateful to her, I am, but she drives me crazy, and being under her surveillance and evaluating eyes and constant stream of commentary on what ought to be done, when, and how, has already started to get under my skin. I’m riled, in only about two days. What’s it going to be like in twenty? In two hundred?

Two hundred! There is no way I will let us be here that long. Maybe in the general area if we come to
like it and the girls do well at school, but definitely not this house. No way. I’ve got to get clear on this debt as soon as possible, get it over and done with. Fully done. After that the skies will clear and the girls and I will be free again; free to simply live. Who knows what that will mean; maybe we’ll even choose to do something incredible if life lets us. Life, the bastard, with its traps of circumstances and pressures, its chains and weights and endless stresses and worries. Life: it is the gift no one asks for and may in fact best be returned unopened, but it’s too late for us, we’re here now, and I’m going to give my girls every joy I can.

School starts next month on the second. How I worry for Manae. Her new teacher seems nice enough but is much older than her last; heavens I hope she doesn’t meet any more bullies. Terako’s teacher is actually a man, but he didn’t seem creepy when I met him. I do wonder about male elementary school teachers though. But then Manae’s last teacher was Korean, which is even more unusual, and she still seemed fine. I’m sure this guy will be too. I hope so.

Terako is the tough one, the one I can sit back and watch fly through every challenge that greets her. Manae is a worrier, and she has me worried. Maybe after they’ve
both finished their summer homework I’ll take them to meet their teachers ahead of time if I can get a weekday off to arrange it. That might help put us at ease a little, but then again it might not. It could make things worse. All these ifs and maybes…

That filth Shoichiro, what a rotten curse he turned out to be.
2019, September 10 (Tuesday)

My parents are the worst. Stupid hippies of the most sickening kind, stuck in another age when it might have been possible to do something but now totally out of touch. People power? Who are you kidding? What power do any of us have? Bits and pieces in this great money machine we merely turn like cogs – we’re turned like cogs –, this same machine they fantasize they did something about, that they fought against it and beat it when in fact all they did was to briefly drop out of societal norms and then wind up grounded under its wheels. Look at them Diary, the hypocrites: homeowners with a mortgage to a bank which is only just getting paid off, working away at salaried jobs for most of their lives to retire on a government pension and private insurance plans the same as everyone else. Oh they fought the system all right. They are the system!

The system won and it always wins and I won’t let those two tell me how to raise my kids or what to teach them. The fact of the matter is we’re all pawns stuck in the conditions we’re born in, and in this piece of history that means sucking it up and suffering it out while the rich get richer. We are the defeated, the common person is nothing, a dispensable and replaceable tidbit in a web of parts and
parcels chained to the constant need for income to stave off ill health and homelessness, forced to struggle – always struggle – towards some kind of stability. There is no safe spot, and if you’re not born into money or at least the right connections you might as well forget about it. You’re a sucker, a dummy, and that’s the way you’ll remain. I can’t believe how those two talk to me, as if they have all the answers, like they’re in a place to give advice. Especially Mom; how I wish she’d just shut up and mind her own business.

No Mother, I don’t know when I’ll let Shoichiro see the kids again. Yes Mother, they talk to him on the phone regularly. Yes Mother, I’m sure they miss their father. No Mother, I don’t think he’s making amends. Why not Mother? Because he still hasn’t gotten another second job after getting fired from Lawson for stealing cheap drinks and crappy toys. No Mother, I don’t know where he’s living now. He hasn’t said any differently so I suppose he’s still in our old place. Yes Mother, that means he’s still paying our old rent and hasn’t found a cheaper place. Yes Mother, I doubt he’s saving any extra too if he’s covering that rent by himself out of the salary he gets from his father’s shop. No Mother, that doesn’t mean he’s doing the best he can, it means he’s doing the least he can. Yes
Mother, I expect too that I’ll have to pay the entire loan he took out in my name. No Mother, it isn’t fair and it isn’t right. But what in the wide world am I supposed to do about it? Your precious Party is no help, and what is the point in joining it only to have yet another monthly payment to make in the form of membership fees? What are they going to do, negotiate a higher wage for me? My workplace isn’t even unionized. If I raised a stink or anyone else did on my behalf what do you really think would happen? Goodbye Takebayashi-san, anyone can do your job.

Takebayashi – I still haven’t gotten rid of that excrement’s family name. If there weren’t so much paperwork involved I’d go right to City Hall and the Prefectural Office to get it done today. I’d have to go back to being a Mori, but that would be no problem as far as I’m concerned. No problem at all. How I cringe when my co-workers need to address me for some reason. Those five syllables, they only remind me what a useless waste Shoichiro is. I’d ask them to call me Kazenoko instead except that my first name is so embarrassing and everyone would feel weird calling me by it. It’s not the Japanese way.

Those co-workers: right now they are my sole
outlet. I told Sakaichi-san that Tanaka-san has been secretly photographing her to see how she’d react, just a little fun you know. He hasn’t, of course, he’s actually been extremely careful around her, me, and even Matsumoto-san, but who cares? I need a break and he’s the one to provide it. It was hilarious Diary, the fallout was almost immediate and very overblown.

Sakaichi-san fumed the whole morning and most of lunch, her rage looking like it was only building during our break as she sat there silently glaring at the man. Then right about when we were due to finish and head out for our afternoon assignments she suddenly exploded. She screamed at him, actually screamed, and demanded to be shown the contents of his locker. Tanaka-san had no idea what was happening, he looked like a little kitten staring at an oncoming car about to hit him, it was so funny and so cute. He was even too scared to cry! It was obvious he wanted to though, he still has that ridiculous crush on Sakaichi-san and for some bizarre reason her cruelty to him only seems to make him like her more. Maybe he thinks she’s coming around, what a fool. Well, Matsumoto-san tried to calm everything down but I sided with Sakaichi-san to egg her on. I said that if Tanaka-san really did have nothing to hide then he should show us the
inside of his locker. He didn’t want to and who can blame him? He didn’t have a clue why any of it was happening. But I pushed, and Sakaichi-san pushed harder, and we bent that stupid man. He relented. It was so funny.

His locker didn’t have much in it, certainly no hidden spy camera and no secret photos of Sakaichi-san. In addition to the clothes he comes in before he puts on his uniform everyday it had some extra and dirty looking socks, a couple of undershirts, and one of those thick magazines that are composed of a few comics bundled together with glossy pages of young girls wearing bikinis inserted between. When we saw that he was already blushing deeply but I still accused him of being a pedophile and demanded to know how old the models pictured in the magazine were. I’m not sure why I kept on him like that. He didn’t know of course, how could he, but I wouldn’t relent. I think even Sakaichi-san felt like it was going a bit far, but since I had supported her earlier she kind of halfheartedly made similar remarks.

In the end, after standing there with a face as red as a postal box and looking as if he were on the verge of wetting his pants in terror, Tanaka-san appeared to suck up his pride, grabbed the magazine, and very dramatically threw it in the trash. The trash for trash! he declared as he
glanced at Sakaichi-san. If he was hoping to get some approval from her for the gesture it wasn’t forthcoming. I muttered “pervert” under my breath but loud enough for everyone to hear, at which Sakaichi-san burst out laughing. Tanaka-san went into his usual crybaby mode and Matsumoto-san tried to comfort him, giving me a confused look. She must wonder what’s gotten into me. I wonder too, but not really – that putrid infection Shoichiro has ruined my life. Our lives. It’s about time he got what he deserved. And there’s more where that came from.
2019, September 26 (Thursday)

Life isn’t fair. It simply isn’t fair, that’s the most you can say about it. It’s not rigged against the little person, or against women or foreigners or kids or whatever, it simply isn’t fair. Not fair for everybody. The problem is that it’s not evenly laid out, far too much depends on chance. Think about it Diary, nobody asks or gets to choose where or how or to whom they’re born, it happens and then you’re stuck in the midst of countless circumstances and surrounding facts that sway and mold and shape every single aspect of your life for your entire life. You make a choice and think it will mark some kind of difference, but even that choice was influenced by all those other aspects, and then whatever comes of your choice ends up pushed and pulled by those thousands of interlocking other aspects too. It’s like each of us are together playing a game of suikawari: blindfolded and feebly swinging away with our bamboo poles, trying to crack open that watermelon.

Maybe you think this “life watermelon” symbolizes success or something but it doesn’t, because even that is defined differently. Oh, people talk about money or things or houses or whatnot, but sometimes success is only about power, only about control. And you
know what? Whatever illusions we hold nobody has that, not really. Each one of us is at the mercy of the billion random bits of data floating in this all-connected world of ours. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn’t, but no matter who you are you’re going to be unhappy, disappointed, pained, maybe even betrayed. How I wish I didn’t see this so clearly!

I decided to redeem myself with my colleagues. Not that it makes much of a difference or that I really care about them, but I got tired of being looked at askance all the time by Matsumoto-san and wonderingly by Sakaichi-san. I think she might be trying to figure out if I’m really on her side or not. There aren’t any sides to take. Tanaka-san hasn’t spoken to me – at least not at any length – and he seems to be keeping his distance, but that suits me just fine. I don’t have anything to say to him anyway, he’s just nothing, and he’s hardly said much to me since the day I started as it is. With the other two though – especially Matsumoto-san – I felt like I should at least make some kind of amends or bridge-building or however you want to put it. I didn’t do anything to her, but what I did do that day with Tanaka-san’s locker made her image of me change. She’s stupid to react that way, I know, but she has and so I thought I should do something to put it
right. There was no way I was going to apologize to anyone though, that much I can tell you.

The best fix I came up with was proving Tanaka-san’s guilt. Of course he isn’t actually guilty of anything, but he’s there and he’s annoying and as far as I’m concerned that’s enough. What I did Diary was to surreptitiously take some pictures of Sakaichi-san over the course of a few days using the camera in my phone. I tried to think of how a pervert like Tanaka-san would want her photographed, but of course I don’t really know how perverts think so the best I could come up with was some close ups of her face, her bending over to pick something up, her leaning on something, things like that. I wouldn’t say that any of my shots were particularly sexy, but how interested in “sexy” are perverts anyway? Who knows. What I got was good enough for what I wanted, and I then took my phone to a camera shop and had the pictures printed out on postcard-sized paper. It was a little embarrassing explaining to the clerk at the store what I was trying to do when I asked for some help with their customers’ use printer so I made up a story about my friend creating a website detailing local cleaning services and needing some images of a model to use. I think the staff believed me, or maybe he just didn’t care, but the
entire process only took a few minutes.

The next day during our afternoon shift I made a pretext of going to use the restroom and went down to the locker area, snuck into the men’s side – which is right next to the women’s and only separated by a curtain because the building we mainly work in doesn’t give our company much space for storage – and slid the pictures into Tanaka-san’s locker, being careful to leave one jutting out from the bottom of the steel door a little so it would be noticeable. Lastly I pulled the dividing curtain back to make the entire row of lockers, women’s and men’s, visible from the entrance. After that I only had to wait for the end of the day.

When we finished and headed downstairs to put our tools and supplies away and change out of our uniforms I nudged Sakaichi-san with my elbow as we entered the locker area. Once I had her attention I nodded in the direction of Tanaka-san’s. She followed my eyes and luckily hers landed on the photo sticking out that I had planted. Fireworks! She marched right over and yanked it from the door slot, saw that it was of herself, and screeched. She screeched! Just like how I imagine owls do. She tried to rip open Tanaka-san’s locker but of course she couldn’t, and so she yelled to get the security guard to
unlock it while Tanaka-san stood there dumbfounded and Matsumoto-san looked both confused and worried. I didn’t want to miss anything but I also wanted to see how it would finish so I ran over to the guard’s office and asked the man there to please come with his set of keys. He duly followed me and in moments we had Tanaka-san’s locker open and Sakaichi-san rifling through everything in it as she searched for more pictures of herself.

She easily found those I had placed there, but that was it this time, no girly magazine or anything like that. Sakaichi-san was so furious that she got right into Tanaka-san’s face and violently crumpled up the entire lot of photos before throwing them at his nose and hissing that if he ever so much as handled or simply glanced at his phone while she was around she would run over it with the floor buffer and smash every single one of his fingers till they cracked like chestnuts. She didn’t specify what she’d smash his hands with but I could imagine a few options and I’m sure Tanaka-san could as well. For his part he was too mortified to reply, he stood there frozen stiff with his jaw half open and totally bewildered. He didn’t even manage to protest that he hadn’t done it, he didn’t make a peep, just remained where he was, catatonic.

It was at that point when Matsumoto-san moved
to intervene. She shot a look at Tanaka-san that was unmistakable in its judgment, pulled the still raging Sakaichi-san over into the women’s side, and quickly tugged the dividing curtain shut. After that we changed our clothes in silence and went home, each with our heads full of what took place. Sakaichi-san was probably turning over what she’d like to do to cause Tanaka-san the most possible pain, and Tanaka-san was probably too confused and terrorized to think of very much with any kind of clarity. Matsumoto-san I don’t know, it’s hard to even guess, she was probably lost in a state of pure disbelief. Me? I did my best to appear alarmed and shocked, flabbergasted, but as soon as I was safely on the tram back here to my parent’s house I laughed and laughed and laughed. A total success.

Your idea is as good as mine how much longer Tanaka-san will be able to last at work. He’s been even more silent and subdued than he usually was ever since, keeping his head lowered, not saying any unnecessary words to anyone, and taking his food somewhere else at break time to eat by himself. I hope he’s lunching in the toilets. That’s what he gets and no one could blame me for putting the man’s sins out in public.

With Manae and Terako I’ve had less to be happy
about. They seem to be doing generally okay at school, and I haven’t heard of any problems with classmates or teachers, but I know that transferring schools twice in one year has been very hard on them. Any child would be devastated by that, it’s the demand to make new friends that is so hard, and especially coming in the middle of the year when the other kids have already formed their little groups and circles. Terako has mentioned one girl’s name a few times so I think maybe they are playing together or spending time with one another during recess and between classes, but Manae has for the most part been mute. Even at home she’s moped around a lot. I miss her smile; she might be depressed and I wouldn’t blame her if she were. Dad is doing his best to cheer her up, and Mom has recently taken over some of the cooking for the girls – despite my protests, although I do have to admit that it’s been much easier on me this way, especially with the extra time it takes to get back and forth from work.

Poor Manae. She’ll pull through, but I wish I could spare her this time of feeling rotten. I wish I could fast forward her life to a month or two or three from now when she’s all settled in and actually looking forward to going to school, to meeting the girls she’s clicked with, gossiping in the corner, showing each other the stationary

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and craft tools they have, the cute toys or magazines or comics they got for whatever occasion, the letters they’ve written each other. And then us, there in that future, debt free and able to make some real decisions again. I know I’ll have to keep the girls in this school, we’ll have to stay in this neighborhood. The move has been too hard on them, it’s been too many times. Things between my parents and the girls are fine, and I don’t think they have any trouble at home – not like me putting up with their “useful advice” anyway – but it’s been too much in too short a space. We’ll get our own apartment again, I will make that happen. It’ll be around here though.

Life, it isn’t fair, I know, but I’m a fighter Diary, and I’ll take what’s mine and what isn’t mine. It’s time to get tough, I’m going to grab life and shake it down. I’m in control now.
2019, October 11 (Friday)

The girls’ Sports Day at school is coming up on Monday. I hope it goes well but somehow I have my doubts. The long weekend with the national holiday is nice, and I remember really liking all these Mondays off before I had kids and the days got filled with activities, but this year’s will be less than ideal. For one thing, it shouldn’t even be Sports Day. Only kindergartens and some other special needs schools have their group competitions at this time of year, ours should have been in May. The weather was so bad though it was decided that all elementary schools citywide would switch their events to coincide with the Physical Education Day public holiday. Whatever the inconveniences of this irregular timing might turn out to be, the weather should at least be a bit drier and more comfortable than May would have been. But who knows.

The girls have only just started at their new school – again – and of course haven’t had time to get into the rhythm of how their current classrooms are running the day’s competitions. Their teachers were nice enough to ask me what events they were registered in at their previous school so they could put them into the same ones now, but neither Manae nor even Terako has been able to adjust very well, especially with the relay races. It isn’t a matter
of character or ability – though heaven knows neither of them is an athlete – it’s simply a problem of time, of not having enough of it. I don’t think the festival will be a disaster or anything, and they certainly don’t have any expectations about winning, but because all these background issues have hit us at once no one is really looking forward to it, not even me. We’ll go, naturally, and spend the day there, but that’s about the most I can say.

It should at least prove to be an unusually good chance for me to see how the girls are with their classmates, and how the teachers are with their students, and maybe I’ll be able to meet some other parents, but my guess is that next year will be much better. Next year when the schedule is more normal and everything feels far more normal for us – as normal as it can, anyway.

Shoichiro, that waste, texted to ask if he could come on Monday to watch. I’m surprised he even knew Sports Day is happening then, he’s usually so clueless about everything that I didn’t expect him to be aware of the odd scheduling. He wanted to know the full program details, I’m sure he’s just interested in seeing Manae and Terako when it’s their turns and not planning to hang around for the duration. He’s also under the impression – because I never told him otherwise – that we’re still in our
old place and that everything will be held at our prior school. I was very tempted to give him the times and events that the girls will be part of but not tell him we’re in a totally different section of town now. He would have shown up and stood there like the world’s stupidest idiot watching kids that weren’t even his run around and perform group dances and silly team games. I wonder if he’d realize that none of the children out on the grounds were his own. Probably not. What a dunce. In the end unfortunately my good side got the better of me and I gave him the right address and – very curtly – informed him that because of his irresponsibility and total incompetence and uselessness we’ve had to move back in with my parents. I hope he feels as badly about that as I intended to make him. Though again, probably not. The filth.

I wonder how it will be to see him again. I’m still boiling with rage at the man, but I know myself well enough to realize that when I come face to face with him those old feelings will come roaring back. Feelings I can’t help no matter how much I may want to. Shoichiro. My entire life from junior high school onwards has revolved around him. He’s connected to me in a way that can never be undone, never be removed or replaced. I have to simply face that, I have to face up to that. He will always be a part

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of my life of course, but more than that he will always be a part of me, a part of my personhood in a way that makes him this massive and irreplaceable portion of my whole existence. I wouldn’t be me without Shoichiro. Leaving him was like cutting off my own arm – but I knew I had to. It was like that gangrenous flesh I’ve read about, stories of mountain climbers stuck in the Japanese Alps for days on end where their toes or fingers slowly rotted while still stuck on their feet or hands – appendages that didn’t even have the decency to fall off – and then, upon rescue or return: snip! Gone, and the remains could stay healthy, could only then return to their former health. I’m still trying to return.

Yet as long as we have this bond of our girls I can never fully excise him from my life, never snip him off, never truly and simply be rid of him. Not while he’s still alive, not while I’m still alive. One of us has to go before the other can have any peace…

I have to make a plan for when I see him Diary. I have to figure out a way so that the love and the lust that I know he yet stirs in me, that somehow inexplicably bubbles to the surface when I see him and hear him and smell him and am with him in his goofy, fun, lightheartedly imbecilic way does not touch me. I have to
prepare so that no matter what he does or how he is I will be sure to feel nothing. I know I can’t trust myself to just relax and be me and – heaven help us – enjoy it. I can’t and I won’t. I can’t and so I won’t. Diary, I promise you right here and now that I will not fall for any of that reprobate’s tricks. No charming skullduggery will get through my shields. Whatever he says or however he acts he is getting frozen out, the iciest of cold shoulders. I won’t even look him in the eye.

But I will be warm and loving and supportive and every bit the mother my girls need me to be on their Sports Day at their second new school in the space of a year. I put them in this situation – thanks to him, not me – I made the decisions and I admit that, and because of it I will do absolutely everything to make their transitions as smooth and as good and as peaceful as possible. They are children, they deserve this time of innocence, they deserve to be nurtured and treasured and protected in their fragility. He, that man, he stole that from them because of the way he is, the pure facts of his nature forced me to leave him and start anew, start afresh. He did it, he took it, but I’ll give it back. And I’ll give it in a way that keeps the girls as partly his girls, because despite it all every daughter needs a Papa. I know that too Diary, I do.
2019, October 14 (Monday)

It was predictably a disaster. Not so much for the girls – although Manae came close to having something like a nervous breakdown after she lost her relay team’s better position by fumbling the baton pass to the girl after her, the girl who was on top of everything clearly the slowest runner out there – but more so for me. My parents were present, and for their part when they saw Shoichiro they were friendly enough, even kind, but me – I was a mess. Just an utter shambles. I still don’t know what got into me.

When I first saw him all my carefully planned rage and standoffishness held firm, intact, but that lasted only about two minutes. He was so charming, the old Shoichiro who I fell in love with and stayed in love with through everything for those very many years. The bastard somehow countered my negativity; he knows me probably nearly as well as I know myself – he might know me better – and he convinced me to go easy on him. Somehow or other he convinced me.

He made what sounded like a very good argument for why he did what he did to get fired from Lawson. For the life of me I can’t remember what it was, but at the time it sounded reasonable and exculpating. He made a case
that I was the one really behaving poorly, and that what he was asking for was simply to meet his own daughters from time to time. He gave me a litany of reasons for how and why he is working to pull things together and ease our money trouble. He admitted to being in the wrong in taking out a loan in my name and using my registered stamp without my permission in order to get it. He understands that he is the cause of my leaving him, that he could have been much better, and that he isn’t asking us to get back together but that he wants me to know he still loves me. Now what am I supposed to do with that? I know everything is his fault, but I never expected him to come out and admit it. I wouldn’t. I mean, if I were actually wrong in anything I don’t think I’d admit it. Probably not anyway. The point though is that he hoodwinked me into being nice to him.

Yes, that’s it exactly Diary. He tricked me somehow. He spun all these words around and was funny and kind and gentle and somehow or other I got so caught in his web that I ended up being kind too. I even remember laughing and slapping him on the shoulder in a far too friendly gesture. He absolutely deceived me. How on earth did I let myself get carried away like that? It’s so embarrassing. And worse than embarrassing it’s
counterproductive to my plan for resetting the girls’ and my life. My only hope is that neither Manae nor Terako saw me actually having fun with their deadbeat father. If they did they haven’t said anything, but if they did… The last thing I need now is to make the girls as confused and wishy-washy as I’ve turned out to be. I am so upset with myself I can hardly write this. Who am I? I was sure that I was made of much tougher stuff than this.

Afterwards Mom and Dad were soft but definitely not subtle in their comments. Dad mentioned how Shoichiro isn’t such a bad man, that he has his faults, as each of us does, but that he can’t be blamed too much for them because he’s stuck in his own troubles and is probably doing the best he can. After all, he owes money in his mother’s name as well as mine and that can’t be easy. I’m sure it isn’t, and I know my mother-in-law – that is, ex-mother-in-law – and I know how she has always been with Shoichiro: ever as attentive as a bedside nurse, and then suddenly putting the screws in, only to do a U-turn a moment later. It’s no wonder the man ended up so generally feeble: he was doted upon and carried through just about everything with only the occasional and inexplicable explosion of anger to deal with, an eruption that wouldn’t have left even the tiniest mark on him.
because it wouldn’t have made any sense. Too inconsistent. Mom then interjected into Dad’s little speech about how we’re all victims of predatory banking methods and unfulfilling working lives, that every one of us is wrapped tight in an economic system that punishes independent thought and reduces personal pride and ability down to easily exploitable levels. For the most part I didn’t listen to her preaching – I’ve heard it enough already – but something she said about work did stick in my head.

In the dim of the desk light as I write this Diary, as I share this with you my truest friend, I see clearly that my revelation of a few days ago was just that: a revelation. I cannot be with Shoichiro, yet I cannot be without him. There is no going forward as long as the two of us are both here. I will always be intertwined with and in that man, disassociation a never-no-way, he will worm into my head and my heart and my girls’ lives and we will never be free and able to stand apart and alone. It isn’t only the money; no, it’s him. Either he goes or I go. Yes, I actually mean that: Either he goes or I go.

We don’t have the resources or the opportunity to relocate across the country. I have already done too much to Manae and Terako in our double move this year. He has already done too much to Manae and Terako in forcing the
double move on us. It all comes down to him. And looking back and seeing how he cast his black magic spell over me at Sports Day, my enlightenment has been made complete. He has to go. I know that deeply in my bones, in the core of my heart. That man has stolen a part of my soul and I won’t get it back until he’s gone. I’m going to kill him. Somehow or other I’m going to kill him.

My goodness, writing that down, confiding that in you Diary, it gives it a reality, it does. The thing will happen. Don’t you dare tell a soul! I know I can trust you, but I want to make this as clear as I can: You mustn’t breathe a word of this to anyone, not even to my parents. It must remain an absolute secret; you and I will take it to our graves. That is the only real way of success, the only real chance. It’s possible, I know I can do it and not get caught, but this is something we simply do not discuss. Ever. With anyone. Do you hear me Diary? If anything must be said you share it only with me. You and I, together we will keep each other’s company in this and be each other’s outlets. Through all the planning and then – then – the execution of it. His execution. Shoichiro’s. It’s so clear. Sometimes the weeds have to be pulled out by the roots before the garden can bloom.
2019, October 31 (Thursday)

I don’t know what I was thinking.
But no, I do, I am determined. Somehow…

The kids had a Halloween party at school today. Well, Manae had a party, in Terako’s class it seems the day was barely mentioned and each student only given a tiny candy. Of course I understand the idea behind allowing classroom teachers some leeway to make their own decisions on events, and if I had ever been able to become a teacher I’d have wanted that too, but I do wish the principal or maybe vice principal had done a better job of at least trying to coordinate things between the staff. The difference for my two girls was pretty big; and a bit sadly so. Manae’s teacher made a real go of it, planning far in advance and encouraging students to dress up in a letter she sent home ahead of time – Manae insisted she would do no such thing, and I wasn’t surprised one bit by that – and then she dedicated the entirety of her class’ lunchtime and recess period to eating special Halloween treats on top of their regular school meals. She even gave a little mini-lesson about Halloween in America and everyone played some games and scribbled out a few fun worksheets. I think there was a short video of some kind involved at one point, although Manae was a bit vague on
that detail. It sounded great, I wanted to go myself.

Terako was naturally very jealous of Manae, and if Manae’s teacher’s plan proves popular and spreads to some of the other classes next year I’m pretty sure Terako would make the extra effort to dress up and really participate. This evening at dinner when we were talking about it, she – very cutely – emphatically declared she would, and knowing her I don’t think that decision will change much during the coming year. She tends to stick to what she says, which is an admirable trait most of the time, but especially for a seven year-old.

All the talk about ghosts and skeletons and otherworldly visitors made me focus more on my plan. That is, on what’s becoming my plan. Not that I’ve stopped thinking about it these last couple of weeks. It’s such a strange feeling; I don’t really know how to describe it. Tentative at first, hesitating with it, teasing it, it teasing me, back and forth, back and forth, not believing it myself and then wondering what if, maybe, could it be? Is it possible? Isn’t it just a daydream? A fantasy? And then along the way what was only my play became more and more serious, and as it did the impossible opened up to the possible, a light burst through, it felt as if it was a foretaste of power, real power. That was enough, and then finally,
when I shook loose my last reticence and embraced it and screamed inside that Yes! I will do this!, then, right at that point, something inside me snapped. Burst. Ballooned. Birthed. It was an awakening, a turning over, a crossing of a threshold I never could have imagined. It was like my whole being took on a fresh and deep and meaningful purpose that it never had before. I found existence in the thought of non-existence, I discovered a true life blossoming out of death – but not my own, no – his. I’m going to live forever.

I’m not even thinking about my own death now – it’s the furthest thing from my mind, and why should it be otherwise? – it’s only his. His death. His disappearance from the Earth, and the liberation and accentuation that that will bring to ours. With him gone we’ll be able to really live at long last. We’ll have freedom, we’ll have grace, the mercies of fate: we’ll have the ability to do the things we haven’t been capable of, our opportunities unbound, our days unfettered. Who knows what the girls and I will be able to accomplish once that parasite has been removed. It’s the answer to each of our problems, and the shock of its beauty and simplicity struck me in a way I never could have predicted. Honestly Diary, I feel like I’ve been born again. Every single day since I came
into this world has been leading to this, and now I’m on the road, on the way, home after all these dark wanderings, back after getting lost in the woods. I’ve found myself, found my strength. I can do it: I’m here and I’m me and I’m so much more than you think. Do not doubt me Diary, do not look down on me.

No, you give it some thought Diary, some time. Be free enough to consider what I’m trying to say, and don’t you dare shut yourself off because it’s such a nonconventional solution. Hear me out, listen, consider. It’s not so strange. The first thing you must realize – something you probably already know but likely haven’t taken to heart – is that what I’m proposing isn’t really all that unusual. People have been killing other people since people have been around. And it’s usually been about solving problems. The problems that other people don’t just represent but are. People can be problems, their being a problem and not only problematic; Shoichiro is that. Fully, clean and simple. And what’s his life anyway? What’s it to you, what’s it to anyone? What’s it to him?

He’s on his own now, working at a dead end job that he only got because his father gave it to him, going nowhere and coming from nowhere. A nothing in a craterous void. Who is going to miss him? His parents.
might, but having watched the way they interact for so many years I hardly think either of them would mourn for very long, especially his father. I’ve always gotten the feeling that even his own dad thought of Shoichiro as something of a waste, a weight pulling others down, one more duty to put up with, one more thing to tend to in his busy businessman day. If he were out of the way it might suit the elder Takebayashi-san just fine.

His mother is another story. Maybe. She seems to enjoy doting on her son in a way that is kind of sickening, frankly. It’s like she can’t let go of imagining him as a cute and mostly helpless toddler that needs to have everything done and directed for his pretty little clean hands – done and directed by her, and no other, of course. Pushing him around might be the meaning she’s made for her life, and so with him gone she’d have to find another outlet. Her poor husband! She’d crash down on him for certain. I don’t care though, that’s on them for bringing the rot of Shoichiro into the world in the first place. It’s their own fault, not mine. I’m innocent. I’ll stay innocent. He pushed me into this; it’s suicide, not murder. I’m a mother, not a murderer. I’m a protector, a deliverer, nothing more nor less. Do you see me now?

Okay fine Diary, I admit that I haven’t thought it
through perfectly, that I still need to make a stronger case. But calm yourself and stop yelling at me, I can hear you perfectly well. Be silent and know this: My choice is there and it’s solid, and the way it makes me feel is so good I cannot and will not go back. I admit it.

You hear me out, you think on it, and then whatever you may have to say after that I’ll do you the same courtesy. But right in this moment I say – and I say it with pride – I say that I am thrilled – thrilled! – thrilled to kill my ex-husband. Yes, kill dead. Kill him. Kill Shoichiro Takebayashi. I will do it. I will. I can convince you why it’s such a good idea later.
2019, November 01 (Friday)

It’s been a day, a night, a chance to sleep on it. And what do you say now Diary? I thought so, you see my reasoning. You understand. You know too. Yes, perfect. Perfectly clear. A single step back and it all makes sense, doesn’t it? I knew you’d come around.

Oh, the irony of discussing this with you as I sit at the same childhood desk I used for my school days’ homework, tucked up in what used to be my bedroom but has become my daughter’s and my living room – no, it hasn’t been lost on me. It was here, right here, where my romance with Shoichiro blossomed and grew. It was here, right here, where Manae was conceived and a new life created. And it is here, right here, where I now plan the end of a life, an old life, his life. I still can’t believe it. But I can. I will. I’m strong enough, I’m in control of my own destiny now, no longer victim to the circumstances and contexts of my surroundings. No. I’m in charge, and I will free my beautiful daughters and myself from this whole mess. It’s just money after all, money and struggle that can be easily cleared by the removal of one little obstacle, one little thorn. Easy. And then we’ll be free.

I’m not stupid enough to be traipsing across the internet looking up how to do this, don’t worry about that.
I know better than to leave a trail which would be only too easy to follow. And to be honest I think fate is on my side here for once, all the signs are pointing in the direction of this brave act being doable and untraceable. Yes, the forces of the universe have combined to offer me aid right when I need it most. The path is set, beautifully pure and simple: what I never even would have considered has been delivered up to me, and I find myself obsessed. Thrilled, consumed; how bizarre.

Everywhere I look I find warning labels on the industrial cleaning products I use daily. Poison this, keep away from eyes that, if ingested seek immediate medical attention. I simply need to find the right combination and deliver it in the right way. Even our staff training manuals have been helpful in highlighting which of the liquids we carry are most dangerous, in what way, and by which amounts. Think about it Diary, all that’s needed is for the right cocktail to go into that alcoholic’s drink and then nothing more: the thing will take care of itself. He probably wouldn’t even notice the difference in taste considering the cheap paint thinner he pours into himself so regularly. A wrong step though and the coroner would notice, and if he does then the police would be brought in and fingers pointed and investigations begun. I can’t allow
that. Obviously. I need to learn a bit more, but everything is already at my fingertips. Sent down from up above, dropped from the heavens. Just for me, so I can do this, so I can put right what’s been done to me, put us right – me and the girls – put us back in a place where we can soar unchained, let loose from the weight of too much burden, of more hardship than we deserve. They’re innocent and shouldn’t have to suffer like they have. Me too, though maybe less so. But me too, yes me too. I claim that.

I’m thinking to make use of Tanaka-san to get my final research done for me. He can have the evidence on his smartphone, I don’t care. He won’t even know what’s happening anyway, and if the police do end up arresting him he might make for a nice alibi, a convenient fall guy. You might guess that he’d try and tell them it’s my fault, that I was talking about this or that, but I’m not going to be obvious. I’ll ask a few questions here and there, he won’t be able to answer them right away and will look it up on that phone of his, the same phone that now – thanks to me, hahaha – he has to put in his pocket every time he catches a glimpse of Sakaichi-san for fear she’ll think he’s secretly photographing her again. He never did in the first place! The old fool, the middle-aged burnout, the bum, the waste. Much better than Shoichiro, I’ll give him that, but
what a sucker.

Shoichiro at least is a man’s man, a man with some guts inside him. Tanaka-san, he’s one of these vegetable boys you see on the variety type TV shows nowadays, only from the wrong generation and not nearly as well kempt. He isn’t pretty, but he is weak, indecisive, and certainly non-confrontational. A “vegetable boy” all right. I should be able to get every morsel of information I need from him, done in small bits and pieces stretched out over a few months so that no one notices anything and no one is the wiser. Nobody would be able to say anything, and if the police happen to get their suspicions up, and if they come around here checking out the deceased’s ex-wife who was crushed by the debt he racked up and did – therefore and admittedly – have a reason to bear a grudge, well even if all that happens just so and fingers start getting pointed I’ll be here with a clean slate while Tanaka-san has everything in his phone’s search records.

What motive could he have though? That’s all been arranged too Diary, all laid out. Now being arranged anyway, a work in progress. I’m moving towards introducing Shoichiro to Sakaichi-san. Yes! Her boyfriend still hasn’t proposed and she’s getting very tired of him. She doesn’t need to start dating Shoichiro or anything for
this to click either – no, nothing of the sort – she just needs to be interested enough because sick enough of her current beau to put his contact details into her phone. That’s it. Then of course Tanaka-san also needs to know about that so the rest of us can corroborate how jealous he is of Shoichiro, and then pop! Here comes the motive, spilled out nice and invitingly like one of those plastic balls with a toy tucked inside tumbling from the front of a *gaccha gaccha pon* vending machine. Two hundred yen is all it takes, just put the coins in and spin the dial. Who knows what will come out? I do, I put it in there. The strength and the cunning I’ve found in myself, I never would have expected it. A mother cornered, eh Diary? A mother bear cornered, claws and fangs and all. I’m shocking myself; I love it.
2019, November 20 (Wednesday)

What have I been thinking? I can’t kill Shoichiro. I can’t kill anybody. It’s totally ridiculous, a fantasy, probably a result of too much stress. Maybe I’m losing it, maybe I’ve been losing it. I certainly have been stressed. Not so much about money, not anymore since we’re no longer paying rent. Mom and Dad have been nothing but generous, the amount they agreed to accept from me towards utility use and whatnot is even less than we were being charged in our apartment. No, it’s not the money that’s stressing me right now, although of course it’s still a concern, the only real reason we’re here, in fact.

What is it? My daily flow isn’t really affecting me either. Like always I pick up food for the girls and me, I cook our breakfasts before I leave in the morning, but then Mom has been very kind about helping out with dinners. She’ll sometimes – and sometimes not – prepare what I ask her to, and other times she’ll surprise me by having everyone’s – all five of us – ready when I get back from work. For the most part I’ve been able to do as I like, so my stress isn’t coming from there either. Plus my new commute hasn’t even been as bad as I thought it would be, and frankly I find the additional bicycle rides refreshing most days. Work is still work, and you already know
plenty about that.

No, it’s none of those things that have been piling up on me. Instead it’s all of those things, it’s everything: life plainly and simply as it is, life plain and simple. I’m tired of it, I want out, but there isn’t any out. I want to decide something purely and only for myself, and then be able to actually do it; but I haven’t had that luxury since before I first got pregnant. At eighteen! But come to think of it not even then either, I was living at home – here – and was a high school student; how much choice or freedom does anyone anywhere have in that situation? Not much, next to none. The world over. And those circumstantial facts carried on oh so easily into a different “not much, next to none” as Manae came along, then getting married, then moving in together and trying to make ends meet, struggling to find some happiness in the midst of every detail and every duty stacked and stacked onto my shoulders. Along came divorce, and with it a glimpse of a life that didn’t revolve solely around handling things for others – except of course my kids –, but then that too was robbed from me.

I have never had a life, not my own. This life I’ve been living, what is it? Little wonder I hatched such a radical plan. Little wonder I sought a way for me and the
girls to get out on our own again. Little wonder. But now that’s stolen away as well, disappeared, vanished into the aether once more. Fate as thief.

My mother: I look at her as a role model. What to do and what not to do. Just like me she’s poured her whole life into her family. Just like me she’s sacrificed and sacrificed and sacrificed. But unlike me she found an outlet; two, actually. She has her militant poetry and she has her Party and its cause. She is devoted to both in a way that’s probably only secondary to her devotion to us. The Party’s vision is probably illusory – or overly optimistic – I’ve thought that since I was a kid, but it’s her illusion and she clings to it and thinks that it gives her life a purpose and a meaning. Maybe it does. The way she throws herself into rallies and election campaigns and newsletter distributions, well maybe it does. It certainly passes the time for her. In the end isn’t that what all this living is actually about? Passing the time. Life: who asked for it, who would?

I guess Mom thinks she’s empowered by the Party in a way normal society wouldn’t allow her to be. One thing’s for sure, they have always treated women a lot better than just about everywhere else around here. I mean, I have to put up with a lot at my workplace but I can’t
imagine having to sit at a desk in full view of a leering boss all day. And the comments, the comments. I had to put up with that garbage at my first job, and it was torture. Naturally I was younger then, and in the same situation now I doubt I’d still get the same. But then you never quite know with men.

Men, they’re the real problem. Men run the world, and we just have to go along with it. Be quiet and stick it out. Why should I have to get stared at? Touched? Belittled? Why should I have to evaluate my life and surroundings on criteria only men find relevant? Why can’t I see the world through my own eyes? Even that stinking rat Tanaka-san thinks he’s so superior to the rest of us just because he has a penis. I can see it in the way he talks to Matsumoto-san, the only person who is actually nice to him. He talks down to her. Me he avoids, but I’d bet that he has no respect for me. It’s fear. The same with Sakaichi-san, although that’s a different kind of fear. What type of man can’t even act properly towards a woman he’s interested in? Can’t even talk to her, heaven help him. Where does he think romance comes from? He’s weak and pathetic but he still manages to be condescending and dish out commands now and then as if he were the boss. How I wish our actual manager were around more often, he’d put
Tanaka-san in his place in no time. Instead he jets from one building to another, checking on the crews the company dispatches, keeping track of the equipment and the supplies. He’s another man, and if he did spend more time in our building he’d likely be even worse than Tanaka-san. What would we have to silently accept then?

I’m so tired of having to grin and bear it. I want to be free, really free, I don’t want to have to worry and care all the time. I want to cut loose and do what I feel, not provide and protect and console and be in charge of making everything all right all the time. I’m sick of compromise. I’m sick of being depended on. Why can’t I be irresponsible? Why can’t I just blow out? Mom lives in the daydreams of her own self-potency, of her and her fellow members creating a new and fairer world little by little. She really believes that. She honestly thinks she’s doing it. That’s what keeps her going, what gets her up in the morning, every morning. I wish I had something to believe in. I wish I had something to do besides making barely enough money to keep the girls and me eating and to pay off that cretin’s debt. Even once we’re free of that debt I won’t be free. I know that. I’ll still be in the same situation, going from day to day with nothing to do except clean an office building, cook, tidy up the house, do the

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laundry, watch TV. Is that it?

At least these last couple of weeks have given me something to think about, something to plan and plot and—yes—look forward to. Thinking about how to kill Shoichiro has been the only thing that’s got my blood flowing in I don’t know how long. Now that would be empowering, that would be taking charge, that would be me making a real decision and taking real direction for my life. Not like it’s been, not like every moment heretofore where everything I’ve done has been to react to what I’ve been thrown into, to what’s been thrown at me. No, that would be breaking apart all those circumstances and ripping life right out of its cage. The cage it’s put me in. I’d end up in a cage. But not if I didn’t get caught, not if I wasn’t even suspected. I can still do it, I can. I mean, I think I can. I’m sure I can. I’ve already worked out how, what’s left is only the actual doing, the execution of the deed. The execution of the man, the framing of the other man: my revenge on fate for its heavy handedness. It will be mine. Maybe. Can it? Is it really possible?

A shudder just went down my spine Diary; it’s starting again, I’m believing again, believing in me. Shouting into the dark and finally taking life as lived and not as parceled out. Take control, take power, take a
chance, take a choice. It’s not about the money anymore, not the debt, no; it’s about me. Me and this world that I didn’t ask for. I’m asking now.

Can I ask? Yes. No – not ask, demand. *I demand.*
2019, November 23 (Saturday)

Today is Labor Thanksgiving Day. What a joke. It’s a national holiday, and it’s a day off I’ll take, but this country has never had anything like a thankful attitude towards its workers. Maybe “Labor Thanksgiving” really means we regular types, us drones, ought to be thankful for labor, for having work. Oh yes, Mister Elite, I’m so grateful to be slaving away for you. Please sir, give me more. Cleaning your building spic and span so you can pull in all that profit out of the thin air of capitalism. Conjuring your loot, never mind my broken back. With all that “well deserved” pay you can buy up more of my sisters to entertain and titillate you, at least until you get bored and toss them away. But never mind. It’s always money and it’s always men with it, pushing and molding and whipping us along simply so that we can eat from day to day, leaving us with little but to the attempt to wring some tiny joy from out of our plebian lives.

Goodness, I sound exactly like Mom!

I’m so tired of have-to-do. Nothing satisfies me, nothing interests me. In the end I’ve decided again, once and for all, to kill Shoichiro. It will give me something to do. I’m going to kill him to make myself feel more alive, to feel something besides this dreaded monotony of day on
day on day, of same same same. And anyway it’s win-win. Win: Shoichiro gets to die and be freed from his empty and pointless life spent making food that is beneath his talents and drinking to forget that fact, and Win: I get a project worthy of my abilities and one that as a bonus will launch the girls and me into financial freedom. Win-win, and the Earth keeps on spinning. Nobody loses anything.

Just money again, I hear you saying Diary. But you know what? That’s the world we live in. Maybe if we had the utopia my mother and her Party have been pushing things would be different and I wouldn’t need to worry about bills and rent and food and schooling, or about finding something worthwhile to do with my time, but we don’t have a utopia, and we don’t have fairness. What we do have is the world as it is, right now today, and it stinks. The best I can do is try and move my kids and me away from the rot a bit, and to do that it takes money. You think we can stay with my parents forever? Lay off with your self-righteous sanctimony, okay Diary? I’ve heard it enough already.

Taking Shoichiro’s life will give me something to do, it will. He deserves it, Tanaka-san deserves to be framed for it, and I deserve to have some happiness and fulfillment along the way. It won’t be easy, but that makes
it all the better. It will require careful planning and a high degree of cunning, but that too makes it all the better. It will probably come down to luck in some ways, to good timing and a knack on my part to strike when the iron is hot. That’s yet another aspect to welcome. And then in the final analysis the deed will be completely mine, purely me, a huge stamp I’ve left on this putrid society and its grinding disdain for its own people, for us average women who only want a little more than the shopping and sweets and hours wasted in cafés that’s offered to us as some kind of placating “reward”. Empty garbage.

And as far as all that garbage goes, Kochi doesn’t even offer much. This sweaty town’s nothing merely compounds the vacuity of the whole filthy business. Nothing from nothing to nowhere.

Life: Take it to have it, that’s what I say. That’s what I’ve realized. I’ll take his all right, and doing that will be a grabbing hold of mine. So there.
2019, November 29 (Friday)

I keep going back and forth on this. I’ve never killed anyone, not a single creature; well, aside from cockroaches, mosquitoes, and a rat once that somehow made her way into our kitchen when Shoichiro and I were first married. Violence does not come easily to me. I even feel bad after smacking one of the girls on her head when she’s being particularly naughty or fussy or annoying. They don’t cry, they just suck it up and push it all inside, but Terako looks like she wants to cry, and even Manae has a bit of a quiver around the edges of her mouth and a watering at the corners of her eyes. But now here I am, peaceful me, planning and plotting and yes, dreaming and fantasizing about taking a grown man’s life. My ex-husband’s, no less.

Oh, he deserves it I know, and there are a thousand reasons why I should do it, but actually doing it is something I’m not sure I can face. I think I can, and then I think I can’t. I go through it in my head and it seems so clear, so easy, but then everything blurs and I try to imagine how I’ll feel putting the chemicals together, how it’ll be to hand the spiked drink over to him, how I’ll react when he inevitably gulps it down and then sits there like the rotten and stupid – but sadly still lovable – waste he is
while the poison works its way through his body. It’ll take time before it takes its toll, and I won’t be there when he breathes his last, but I’ll have it in my head. And on my hands. Just writing this now makes me trepidatious, makes me timid. It makes me hesitant. Doubtful. It’s one thing to smash a cockroach and quite another to smash a person, even if that person is an awful lot like a cockroach. Or worth about as much as a cockroach.

I don’t know. But I do know working towards this has definitely made my life better and far more interesting. That’s something, and you know what Diary it’s true, my life has gotten much better. It sounds unbelievable, I’m happy to admit that, but all this work towards tackling the puzzle of how to kill and get away with it has given a real purpose and direction to me. It’s made me feel in control: for the first time in my life really in charge. Like now I’m the creator of my own fate, at the mercy of no one and nothing. Maybe all I need is to go ahead with my planning up until the final moment, and then simply refrain from following through. Maybe only the preparing to kill will be enough to kill this desire to kill that’s been boiling up in me – but then cooling. Waxing and waning, waxing and waning, just like the moon.

Of course the problem with that is that if I think
about it in those terms the planning loses its reality and becomes merely one more game, one more daydream, any luster the thoughts hold wears off pretty quickly. I should know, I’ve tried. It’s only when I truly wind myself up and manage to fully convince myself that this will happen that it seems real enough to make me feel something. And that “something” is exhilaration – that’s no lie. It is a thrill, a heart-racing, hair-on-end mental high. It’s like a drug, or anyway how I imagine drugs must feel.

Getting the details on the cleaning chemicals has been surprisingly easy. So far I’ve only asked a couple of questions, completely nonchalantly, of Tanaka-san but my method has worked like a charm. He has immediately looked it all up on his stupid smartphone and told me much more than I needed or wanted to know. He’s even seemed to enjoy it. Maybe it’s that he’s happy I’m talking to him without accusing him of anything or rubbing his nose in his failures with Sakaichi-san – both things I’ve really enjoyed doing.

It’s hard to tell anything with that man though, he is such a mouse. He hasn’t asked why I want to know any of this either, which makes me suspect I could probably just keep on asking him until I’ve got it completely worked out and nobody – not even him – would be the
wiser. I honestly have my doubts that even after the deed, if or when there is the deed, Tanaka-san would be able to put two and two together. He seems to run on empty most of the time, and bluster the rest. But a weird and hollow bluster, a scared bluster that’s so obviously covering up a sad lack of confidence. There’s nothing less attractive than a man without confidence, it’s no wonder Sakaichi-san won’t give him the time of day. I don’t blame her. If – when – this does go through and he ends up in prison it’ll actually be doing him a favor, he’ll finally get a chance to toughen up a bit.

It’s so funny now that I think about it like this, but I really am re-making a person with my little plan. Incidentally re-making a person I guess, or maybe coincidentally considering that it’s merely a side effect, but it’ll still be a result. That’s taking charge of fate too, isn’t it Diary? Not my fate either, but his. That almost makes me want to go through with it more. It would be giving Tanaka-san the shock he needs to grow out of himself, get out of his parent’s house and into the real world. The years he spends after prison will be the best of his life. He won’t know to thank me for it, but I will. It truly is worth it to carry on, isn’t it? Good for me, good for the girls, good for Tanaka-san and who knows who else,
and only very slightly bad for Shoichiro. Maybe not even bad for him, good for him like I wrote before; after all he’s got nothing to live for anyway. He might be better off dead; he would be.

A few more weeks and the girls will be on their winter break. I’ve decided to have a little Christmas party at home this year. I’ll ask Mom to pick up some fried chicken and a cake, maybe we can watch one of those American movies that are so heartwarming. I know Terako’s discovered Snoopy recently from a pencil case that one of her classmates has; if there’s a Snoopy Christmas movie that could be fun. I’ll need to check at the video store the next time I’m there. If not we can always find something on TV. And then New Year’s and the fun and food and taking it very easy that that brings. A wonderfully quiet time, mostly at home, toasty warm sitting under the kotatsu heated table, eating sweets and half watching the annual Red and White team celebrity singing contest on New Year’s Eve. I’ll take the girls to a shrine on the second or third when Mom and Dad usually go to avoid the crowds on the first. I wonder what our fortunes for the coming year will be? No, I don’t wonder. And do you know why, because whatever the paper I draw from the box says it won’t matter, not any more. This
coming year I’ll be making my own luck. It’ll be mine, in control, and it’ll run and run and run the year through.

Yes! Empowerment, yes. Just like Mom’s, but unlike hers mine will be real, not illusory. I actually will change the world, or at least my corner of it, my little part of it that surrounds me and my family. I’ll set us all free. 2020, the Year of Change, the Year of Destiny. How fitting it should be the Year of the Rat. I killed one rat many years ago and in the next I’ll kill another. Full circle, fate winding round.
2019, December 04 (Wednesday)

Sometimes Diary I wonder if I’m not going a little crazy. All week I’ve been thinking about nothing but how to kill and what it might feel like to kill. Quietly, of course, I couldn’t do it violently, but then how is killing ever not an act of pure violence? It’s an extreme taking, a ripping, it’s the most explosive push I can imagine, and whether it’s done with poison or with a box cutter shoved into a stomach it all ends up the same. A life that was become no longer. It titillates me – and that shocks – even as it terrorizes me.

A few more quietly dropped questions, another thirty minutes or so of Tanaka-san dim-wittingly doing my research for me and laying out the details – leaving a deep digital trail behind – a positive comment here and there to Sakaichi-san about my ex, a spark in her eyes at the thought of him, at the picture I’ve painted of him. It’s coming together so very easily. It’s too easy!

Oh no, Sakaichi-san, I wouldn’t mind at all. Go ahead and send him a text, befriend him on some social media, anything you like; I know he uses Instagram. That’s right, he takes all kinds of photos of the boxed lunches he makes, his father is so proud of how he’s helping out the family business. A real food lover. He’s a

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good man, he is, it just didn’t work between us, we lost our flow and couldn’t get it back. You know how that is, I’m sure. What’s that? Your boyfriend still hasn’t proposed? My, my. Are you sure he’s really serious? He may not be the marrying type. Shoichiro, now he’s the marrying type, and I should know. This guy? Well… I’m not so sure.

Doubts laid out Diary, nice and evenly spaced in long mental rows, thoughts planted, information harvested, all coming together so very easily. So easily, too easily. It’s as if the universe wants me to do it. Can it really be that this is why I’m here, alive on the planet? Is this my life’s great work? What if I enjoy it enough that I want to do it again? No, I can’t think like that. This is for a reason, this is for justice, this is for setting things right. There’s plenty in the world that needs to be set right, far too much for me, but this one bit of work, this I could handle. And then that’s it for me. This one time to steer the world in a better direction, to set the course for this tiny group of people. Helping but maybe harming, harming to help, harming as help. Piece by piece by piece the puzzle gets put together, the picture completed. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before.

Of course I can’t talk to anyone about it. Only
you Diary, my truest friend. I used to have more friends, I used to have human friends. You’re better. They were always causing me trouble – a lot of happiness, a lot of fun, but always trouble mixed in. My girlfriends, they used to get me so riled up, how I got so sick and tired of listening to them all the time. As if they ever returned the favor. We finished high school, I had Manae, they went on to university or moved to other cities, they found work in Osaka or Kobe, a few up in Tokyo. Even one in Fukuoka, now that I think about it. Me, I stayed here. Hometown girl. Life for me got smaller and smaller and we drifted apart. They couldn’t relate to being a mother and I couldn’t relate to living a single life in a proper city. They had flings and went from boyfriend to boyfriend, eating out at great places, discovering new trends and hidden niches, being urban and having full youths. Me? I had Shoichiro and we had our baby. Everything shrank.

There was no time to make new friends, no time for anything but caring for Manae and seeing to this here, now, today. Laundry, cooking, diapers, dishes, feedings, baths, more diapers, more feedings: rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. The cycles spun, I turned around and ten years had passed, another baby come and grown, a decade spent in a bubble of busyness. How could anyone make room
for friendship with all that going on? My social life was just what I had at work, and I didn’t work much those first few years. Too many mouths, even when there were only two mouths: Manae’s and Shoichiro’s. That was enough! And then along came Terako and if I thought things were chaotic before, that was nothing. Another newborn on top of a toddler and a man who might as well have been a toddler. I lost touch. With everyone I ever knew and every aspect of life in the larger world I lost touch. Poof!

Even today my primary outside connection is to the girls’ school. And we’ve changed that twice already this year. I suppose I’ll get to know some people in the PTA, and maybe kind of superficially know their teachers, but it’s all shallow and passing. None of them would become a friend to me, none of them would give me any ideas or feelings like my high school group did. We won’t share anything except that common point of duty, whatever little job the school needs for whatever little event or whatever little this or that. Nothing major. My co-workers; they’re nice enough and I see them and chat with them every single day, but I don’t feel close to any of them. They’re like tools almost, or part of the background. Wallpaper. I don’t belong to anything, merely get a paycheck, ride the tram, go to our local supermarket. I see
the same faces but they’re blank, they could be anyone. They are “anyone” for all practical purposes. Anyone and no one, and I have no question that it’s the same for them as far as I’m concerned. We’re each living in our splintered little worlds, nothing between, no bridges, no connections, not even the air we breathe in common.

It was different for my parents’ generation, I know that much. Sometimes I envy them. They had to struggle through everything together and so they were always together, they got in each other’s faces every single day, there were no monitors or screens blocking eye contact back then. They believed in things, they believed in the need to rebuild the country, they believed in doing that in unison, they believed they really were doing it, and in fact they did do it. That was the big common cause after the last disastrous common cause of winning the war. The war was lost, the peace won. They did it. Stinkily and dirtily and sweatily they did it. The postwar rise, Japan becoming Japan! Then the bubble burst and everything sank into a forlorn used-to-be: it was the rise of escapism, the advent of the age of video games, computers, ever bigger TVs, handhelds, smartphones, the internet. All that togetherness splintered off into a hundred and twenty million different directions. Individuation and isolation, a
world reduced to what you can hold in your hand – and that thing, it doesn’t hold your hand back. A machine’s warmth can comfort, but can it compare? I wouldn’t know.

Life has become cheap, Shoichiro’s the cheapest. That I do know. Maybe I am going crazy. I can’t talk to anyone about it, but maybe I should. Another viewpoint might help. Shed some light. But then who is to say? She could be just as wrong as I think I am. Maybe I’m right, right about everything. Maybe this really is the path forward, the only path. Anyway it’s the path I’m on, and crazy or not I’ve got to see it through. I will. I don’t owe anything to anyone, and this debt I’ve been saddled with I haven’t even benefited from. It was borrowed to finance floozies. He deserves it.

Money: that’s all that connects us these days. Money: plain, simple, clear. Yet as soon as it changes hands the bonds disappear. You got what you wanted and you left; me too. *Sayonara.* We have to behave like this; it’s how the world works. Buy and toss, then buy some more. Buy my time and take yours, I’ll do the same. I don’t see you, you don’t see me. Gains and losses, profits rising and profits falling. My parents might have built this world, but how they fought to make it better. Better than it is. They failed.
Modern society: These soft couches we sit on, these sweet and sugary ready-made meals we munch, these streams after streams of broadcasted empty banter we space out to; it doesn’t add up to something human, it can’t. We’re already beyond the human, we’re what our futurists have started labeling the “transhuman”, and what a pathetic and paltry set of plasticized figurines we’ve become. We’re toys, and in the midst of all this who can blame me for being crazy? I’m not crazy, the world is. I just live in it. You can’t fault me for doing what I want, taking what I want. Everybody does that anyway, everyone each on their own, spinning around a core of nothing. Zero gravity, falling sideways.
2019, December 10 (Tuesday)

Here’s a poem Mom wrote today, it’s a kind of half-tanka, or maybe just a bad tanka. Anyway, see what you think Diary:

There is no snow in
Kochi but winter here is
Unending for we
Are bound to one cold master,
Wage slaves between the rivers.

What I like about it is that she uses the old set of characters for Kochi – 河内 – which of course actually means “between rivers” or “within rivers”, and it’s how the name of our prefecture was previously written, although nowadays it’s 高知, using the more commonly encountered characters that have the same reading but mean “high” and “knowledge” – not at all appropriate, I know Diary. Maybe you didn’t realize that, even a lot of locals aren’t aware of our name’s history, but remember I once wanted to be a Japanese literature teacher so I’m versed on a thing or two about such matters. Or at least I used to be, I’m sure my memory would fail me now if I put it to the test.
Winter and wage slavery, that’s the way Mom thinks. Everything in terms of class, and class always in terms of class warfare. She can’t see that each of us is really only trying to get by, just striving for a grasp – any handful – of a tiny bit of happiness here and there. Oh, she may be right, and we may be much better off under different economic systems and pressures (I mean the lack of pressures), but what’s the point in living in a world that either will never be or is so far away from what we have that it might as well never be?

I guess her reply would be that a true revolution would accomplish such massive changes it would shift the world in no time, and possibly she’d add that the revolution was much nearer than any of us may believe. My response to both would still be the same: Dream on. There’s the thing though, as much as I fault her for being so out of touch, it’s her dreaming that lets her live as well as she does. She honestly enjoys life, and frankly I’m jealous. Life for me is a chore, a grind of daily necessities and stresses, and my only outlet has become this constant imagining about the murder of Shoichiro. Her fight for political power is much healthier, even if my fantasy has a far better shot at coming to fruition. After all, I only need to take care of mine myself and there it will be: fait
accompli; hers depends on the entire social structure. I don’t have to change a thing in the world really, simply remove one parasite; she has to excise the entirety of the parasitic forces of history that combined to make up planet Earth in the year twenty-nineteen, and do it with her friends acting in unison to boot.

That must make it fun though, that unison; it sure seems to anyway. I watch Mom go about her business and she truly is a social dynamo, darting from this meeting to that, reading her poems out loud at the local izakaya pub, organizing rallies, shouting into loudspeakers, campaigning, gathering signatures, distributing newsletters and manifestos. She’s a whirlwind. That absolutely every bit of her frenetic activity has come to essentially naught as far as real world consequences goes doesn’t faze her; if it did she certainly would have quit a long time ago. On the other hand, she might well recognize it, she might understand her own futility, but refuse to acknowledge that because such would suck all the precious meaning she’s built up right out of her life. And then where would she be? What would she be? Just another energetic retiree, one more among the millions that Japan has, only a senior citizen figuring out how to pass the time because she’s now got plenty of it and will have for many years to come,
barring some kind of unfortunate accident. My mother the freedom fighter.

Maybe in the end simply having something to struggle for, something to do, is what truly matters. Nothing will be solved, nothing will get better, the world will just keep on spinning and we’ll all just just plunge into our graves sooner or later. Humanity’s ridiculous self-obsession is so banal, so laughably empty. The universe doesn’t care one twit whether we come or go, and my life is the same as yours Diary when it comes down to it: be a wage slave, eat, drink, sleep, repeat, die. That’s it.

We fool ourselves so much with this screaming into the wind. But you know what? Fooling ourselves really does seem like the best shot at some joy, the only chance that any of us have. It’s my terrible burden to understand how deeply nothing matters, and no road leads to any better life. No life whatsoever is truly the best life. I wish I weren’t but I am, and I have to deal with that. Compelled to live; somehow.

What’s the point? There is no point, it’s only a passing, a shimmering, blinding illusion with no yea or nay or hooray. Be born, put on a stiff upper lip, then croak. That’s our lot, and it’s little different from any other animal’s. Well, except maybe in that self-obsession I
mentioned, that so-stupid-it’s-funny way we skitter around taking ourselves so very seriously. There is nothing of or to anything, and if I didn’t have kids I’d either off myself and be done with it or join a temple somewhere and idle my time away eating brothy rice and pretending to wait for enlightenment to strike. That there’s no enlightenment en route is the real enlightenment; nothing can alter the fact that we’re meat sacks bound for short and empty moments in the glare of a light we didn’t ask for. Like poop that’s left to sit in the toilet for a few seconds before you flush it. Now there’s an image for Mom’s next poem.

I can’t save anyone and I don’t want to try. I can’t save myself and I would rather not even if I could. My girls – I want them to have lives that contain some happiness, some good times, more so than the bad. I never want them to wake up to just how horribly empty, how insipidly blank it all actually is. How I wish they never fall out of their dreams! That’s what Mom has managed in her life, staying stuck inside her dreams. She could have done that in any number of ways I guess, but for her – based on her personality probably – it was radical politics. What can Mana and Terako find? I hope it’s not mine, because that’s rapidly become nothing but Shoichiro’s premature demise, and that dream will end one way or another far
before I breathe my last. I’ll need something else after it; I shudder at what that might be. Goodness, I might have to find a way to kill myself that looks enough like an accident that no one will be emotionally scarred from it. Thank heavens my life insurance pays out either way, at least our money troubles would be over.

Now hold on Diary, are you suggesting that instead of taking Shoichiro’s life I simply take my own? I know I told you my parents are probably better parents to my kids than I could be, but don’t you think that’s going a bit too far? Why not? One murder is the same as another? Murdering myself is more ethical and it hurts fewer people? I don’t know about that. It’s a lot less appealing, but you may have a point. I’ll have to think about it.
2019, December 23 (Monday)

Today used to be another public holiday, for the birthday of the previous emperor. We got a new one this year after the man I grew up with stepped down, which turned out to be a really big deal and required all kinds of legal maneuvering. Apparently too this was originally going to be the last year we’d have today as a holiday, a sort of farewell as we transition from one imperial era into the next, but the government decided we already had enough days off with the added holidays back in May for the ascension.

I didn’t know this at the time but it’s actually very difficult for a Japanese emperor to stop being emperor before they die. A whole new law had to be put in place merely so that our last one could be legally allowed to retire, and then what the Diet passed was crafted so it only applied to him and for the one time. I’m not sure why lawmakers wanted to have it be a one off thing. I suppose the current emperor will have to stick it out until he passes away, unless an additional method for him to abdicate too is created. But we’re probably years and years away from that being an issue.

I liked the last emperor a lot; he seemed like a very good and compassionate person and obviously leaned
heavily on his wife, who also appeared to carry everything so well on those delicate shoulders of hers and to be genuinely devoted to the public. Maybe it was just a show, but if it was then it sure was convincing. The imperial couple regularly visited war remembrance sites, demonstrated remorse for Japan’s past adventures in Asia during the war, and almost without fail made trips to the many sites of natural disasters that this country too regularly has, always offering comfort and their time and attention to us common folk. The new emperor – of course the eldest son of our last –, his wife was actually a businesswoman before she married him and gave it all up. Apparently it was no fairy tale either because she developed deep and ongoing health problems related to the stress of joining the royal family and her new public position. I hope she does okay in her role as empress; she looks fine on TV whenever she’s shown these days.

Giving it up to get married: that’s what’s always expected of us. I honestly don’t know why there aren’t any societies around the world doing a better job of letting women just be. Not even as leaders necessarily, simply letting us make our own choices and run our own lives however we might want to. I guess some European countries are pretty gender fair or are close to being equal,
but look at it Diary, look at me. I got pregnant in high school and had to abandon everything. Maybe you think I didn’t “have to” because I could have gotten an abortion, but that’s a decision you’ve never faced and so no offense but you have no idea what you’re talking about. My love for my daughter started the moment I learned she was developing inside me, and it has never weakened since. Only grown. For me there was no choice, I was going to have my baby – our baby – and that was it. I never thought of a life as only an idea, no matter how small or how many cells were involved. She was and is the center of my whole being.

I don’t regret giving up my goals of university and getting a teaching license, but if I’m honest I’ll admit I do resent it a bit how trapped we women are by biology. First there’s the wear and tear on the body and mind, and then on top of that you get stuck with the burdens of managing a whole household, holding the lot together, keeping track of the money, and generally making sure everyone gets through every day. Men just work, they “get” to work, it’s like a great escape card out of the house and out of the responsibilities that rain down when there are young mouths incessantly squawking to have something put into them. Little birdies crying out for worms. Here’s
Momma to regurgitate some for you, half digested and ready for your little tummy, nice and snug in the nest. That old emperor of ours, he was apparently a scholar on one special type of fish. He should have studied birds instead because their roles are a lot more defined, just like his was and just like mine is. Born into what you are and cannot avoid: royalty, women, birds. That list could probably go on forever.

There are so many features that limit so many choices, especially for women. Maybe for the royals too, who knows? I’m certainly not going to complain on their behalf. These details, the way they combine into webs of causes and effects, life trajectories, pressures, moldings, it’s impossible to truly break free of them. Even if you run off on your own and never, ever connect with your birth family or settle into a new family, there are still those myriad internal and external forces pushing you this way and that: the most any of us can do is respond. That’s what the old Greeks used to call fate, or anyway that’s my understanding of it.

But the fact of the matter is that in one manner or another each of us ends up stuck in life, and then we struggle to make the best of the ruts we find ourselves in. Everyone everywhere just reacting to wherever and
however they happen to find themselves. The emperor, you, me. You’re born, this is what you get, now deal with it. That’s what the universe tells us, and if we weren’t so aware of our situation we’d be just like any other animal sniffing around for the next meal and a safe place to lie down and rest for the night. We’d probably be a lot happier if that were the case: only food and sleep. The joy of running and moving and resting your own body. Keeping away from predators, maybe sharing some captured prey with another now and then. Snuggling for warmth. I wish I were a cat.

My great act, my stab into fate’s belly, my revolt, my revolution, is this killing. It is me unbinding myself from my own fate. Succeed or fail it will completely derail my entire life as it’s been, I’ll be off the tracks, careening away into a total unknown. My girls, my core, they’re taken care of. I see that now – in fact you suggested it to me Diary – I see that moving back in with my folks, as much of a headache as it’s been listening to their unending comments and “life advice”, that was the best decision for us. It put Manae and Terako in good stead for a good long while, my parents are not that old and are still very healthy; their income, even as retirees, beats mine. Their house is paid for, they’re stable, they live in a nice enough
neighborhood, with caring, decent people around them, and they too are caring, decent people. Annoying, but caring and decent. The girls are set, fine, more than okay.

And that of course means I’m in a position to wrench myself out of this downward spiral I’ve been in, to wrest a single and totally unforeseen me out of the mould that fate has shoved me into. I’ll burst free, out and gone with an abrupt act of violence against the very person that loyalty and love kept me clinging to for so long. An attack. On him and on the whole of everything that has kept me kept, that has locked me inside this cage. Breaking the seal, blowing the bars asunder, exploding out out out – BOOM! Free, me, no one saw it coming. Here’s Kazenoko, you stinking bastards. What will happen to her next? At last, a real question mark on the horizon.

You don’t need to know the details because you’re already complicit in this enough Diary, but let me just note that I’ve got the information I need to concoct my special cocktail for Shoichiro. It’s not a large enough amount of anything to be noticeable, I can put it into any of his many daily drinks and it’ll do its job without him noticing. He might find the taste a bit funny, but with the bottom shelf crap he guzzles down he’ll probably never so much as blink an eye. Especially if he’s already half drunk

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or fully drunk. Likewise Sakaichi-san now has Shoichiro’s contact details registered in her phone and Tanaka-san knows it. He knows that his obsession is seriously considering getting in touch with my ex, he knows that although she might actually break up with her boyfriend he still won’t be next in line for her affections. He knows. I know. We all know that he knows.

The tool I need – check. No potential trail possibly linking the tool to me beyond some hearsay questions I asked – check. A motive established for someone else – check. Solid evidence connecting the tool to the same someone else – check. It’s all fallen into place, all nice and ready, the year is nearly out and twenty-twenty with its fully unpredictable fate beckons warmly. A Happy New Year to me.
2020, January 03 (Friday)

We were back to work today, but it was looser and easier than usual since most of the offices we clean were still closed for the holidays; they’re off till Monday. I could have used another day off myself, but only because I was enjoying Mom’s New Year’s dishes so much. She spared no effort, giving us tempura over toshikoshi soba bowls – replete with handmade noodles from a friend of hers – on the thirty-first, and then for the day itself she put together a full osechi meal stacked in our family’s generations-old lacquer boxes, three layers that sheltered all the traditional ingredients. Seaweed boiled and wrapped, lotus root, fish paste cakes cut into flower shapes, boiled river shrimp, rolled omelette in bite-sized squares, herring roe, carrots mixed with konyaku potatoes, steamed sweet potatoes, daikon radish, chestnuts, grilled salmon, sea-bream, and locally grown unhusked genmai rice with shiitake mushrooms and soy sauce. She even had the exact number of black soybeans that matched our ages to bring luck in the coming year. Extras for the girls too of course, they both love sweet beans and wouldn’t have been satisfied with the tiny handful their youth warranted. It was just what we all needed, a celebration, time away, a window into life outside of its routines.
Now that’s a feeling I learned last year: moving outside the norm. I’ve learned it, and the moment has arrived to apply it. This year I shatter all routine, break my life as it was, as it has been. Me. I’m going to do it. It’s the season to act, to move, and I don’t need any more rest to prepare. I’m too excited to rest anyway, too anxious, too pensive, too thrilled. My feelings are everywhere, up and down, up and down, sideways, backwards, floating. This is it, this is finally it, this is where the dreaming and fantasy I’ve let myself wallow in ceases being a wistful “if” and becomes a reality, an “is”. This is the year where I commit, where I actually do the thing I’ve set myself. Here, now. No more playing, no more potentials, no more maybes; for courage, for boldness, for seeing the thing finished.

I can hardly believe the time has arrived, that it’s really come to it, that I’ve followed through on the steps I plotted so carefully, that I was, after all, able to put each of the points in place. Everything is ready, everything prepared. I have daily access to what I need – my lovely ingredients –, and the last tiny piece, the remaining tidbit, that’s been taken care of too. Done and dusted, as the Americans say in their movies. I re-established contact with Shoichiro, he thinks I’ve forgiven him, he thinks we can meet and laugh and talk like we used to. The excuse,
fitting perfectly, is a New Year’s greeting. Only the girls won’t be there – maybe later, in a couple of days I said – it will just be him and me. Over drinks, naturally enough, at our old place, where he’s still living. I can put my special treat into an emptied plastic tea bottle I’ll take. It’ll be just one more of the many I’ll carry, not even enough for a full bottle, no reason to be suspicious and no one the wiser. No one but me.

I can barely sleep; it’s so close, the reality of it so at hand – unfathomable! I can’t even say it but I must; putting it down, reading it out, with you as my witness Diary, that lends the extra push of YES that it needs, the finality of THIS IS HAPPENING: I will kill Shoichiro. I will kill him. I will.

It doesn’t matter what happens to me. No one needs me, not anymore. The girls are in a stable place, they seem to be doing well enough with their classmates, they like their new neighborhood and have nice kids to walk back and forth to school with. I hear them regularly talking about the same group of girls, I know they’ve made friends. My parents are warm and kind caregivers, and both girls are certainly eating better than they were when it was just us. Far healthier, we can afford to buy decent food with no rent hanging over my head, and Mom

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has always been a crusader against chemical additives. Yes, my precious daughters have everything they need. Subtract me from that picture and nothing changes. I’m not being a victim here, I’m not playing the martyr; I’m an expendable in this picture. It’s sad but true, I can see that.

What did I do anyway? I only made a mess of things. My first mistake was getting married. I couldn’t see that at the time: I was pregnant, I was panicking, I was in love, most of all I was young. Like so many of my girlfriends I had stupid and romantic dreams of settling down, having a family, living a domestic life that I assumed would be blissful. I thought I was simply getting a head start on that, cutting out the crazy twenties most of those around me were heading towards and going directly to motherhood, to what was anyway our common destination. I accepted every aspect of that at face value. I made peace with it, and the tranquility that flooded me every time I patted my belly and felt little Manae move around inside confirmed it. Hormones, instinct, animality: forces of nature that blindsided.

I woke up a decade later to realize what a wreck I had attached myself to, me and our daughters. He’s not a bad man; he just isn’t a particularly good one. I thought we’d be better off on our own. But leaving him only made
things worse, it wasn’t the answer I expected it to be, it simply brought hardship. And then I compounded that with moving us – twice. I have made nothing but mistakes, and I think it’s because I’ve only ever reacted to life, never gone and grabbed it. That’s what I’m doing now. Maybe you still think this is a radical and stupid choice Diary, but you’re wrong about that. It’s not a stupid choice – okay, it is a stupid choice from a certain point of view, but stupid or not it’s the only choice. The one way to truly break free, to erupt from the framework of a life that was built without my consent. If all this ends up crashing down and I go to prison instead of Tanaka-san, then even in that worst case none of the people I love would suffer for it. And neither would I. I’m the expendable one, remember? It would be another new step for me. And you know what? The enforced schedule of prison life wouldn’t be all that different from my working life. Mom’s poem got that right too: Wage slavery.

I won’t fail though. My plan will go through, it has to. It will. Afterwards we’ll be debt free, I’ll be a new woman – a woman with a throttlehold on her own fate – and then, well then we’ll just see what happens. Maybe we won’t move anywhere, maybe living with Mom and Dad really isn’t that bad, maybe there’s no need. Or maybe
we’ll plunk ourselves into somewhere nearby, come over here to visit a lot, and let my parents have their own space back. As good as they’ve been to us I’m sure they’d appreciate not having to sleep in what’s always been their living room. Manae and Terako could stay at the same school and with their same friends and same daily walking group. Everything would be the same but better. Everything, that is, but me.

Me, I won’t be the same at all. I’ll discover the depths of the strength I’ve already found and had no idea I had. I’ll search out just how deeply it goes. Using that strength I’ll launch myself into something – I don’t know what but it’ll be grand, far reaching. A shining new Kazenoko. You’ll see Diary, I’ll do it fully, and then you’ll have to admit that I’ve been right from the start and your endless cynicism and naysaying hasn’t helped one tiny little bit. Thanks for nothing Diary.

No I’m sorry, that’s going too far. You’ve been a great listener and a true friend, I can’t blame you for having your own way of thinking. I wish you were more supportive, but I know my ideas might come off as extreme. It’s only that sometimes the most mundane situations require exactly the most shocking solutions. You have to be ready to break the walls that are holding you in,
and that means destruction. I admit that Shoichiro isn’t the sole cause of my trouble, he isn’t the only source of the misery that haunts me when I look back on my life as I lived it compared with how I dreamed it. It’s not just him, I know, but he has come to be that for me, and since he has, well, as far as I’m concerned it is just him. He is both the symbol and the reality of the universe’s malignity towards me. And now, in twenty-twenty, it’s time I fight back. I’ll see him on Saturday.
2020, January 06 (Monday)

I don’t know what happened. Something happened but I don’t know what. No, I do know what, but I don’t know how. Something happened. It’s a worse mess than before. It’s either time to panic or the beginning of something wonderful, something dreadful.

I was completely, totally prepared. I was ready, ready physically and ready mentally. And chemically. I’m not sure if it was being back in our old place, that apartment we shared for so many years, or if it was being with him again as just the two of us, or if it was the alcohol, or if it was some combination of all three or none or what – who knows? All I know is that it happened, and now I’m more confused, more lost, more adrift, more in a panic, more out of sorts, more out of my head, more out of my self, more, more! Gone and more, more and more, less and more. Less in more. The whole thing, it’s simply… I don’t even how to describe it. You’re the only one I can talk to Diary.

It’s been two days and I still can’t process this properly. I’ve been in a haze, I’ve been a ghost. I feel like a rokurokubi fairy, only instead of my neck being all stretched out and twisting my brain is, and instead of having the strength to entangle foes it hangs there limply,

Yes? No. I wanted to. I have to admit that. Only maybe I didn’t. It’s his fault, that much I can say. Whether he meant it or not, he’s the one to blame. It all just happened though you know, one thing morphing into another. Slip, trip, crash, oops. What a colossal disaster.

I know you’re confused. Me too! I’ll try to get it out, you deserve to hear the details. You’ve been such a good listener this whole time; you’ve been my sounding board despite not agreeing with most of my plan. It could be that you were right. Possibly. I doubt it, but I admit that could be the case. Still, there’s no way that even with all your wisdom and insight you could have foreseen this. No way. Enough. Argh! I can’t get it out, can’t feel right, can’t know how I feel, or how to feel, let alone understand this feeling. A wisp, aether, vapor. I am a piffling. But here goes: my sad attempt at an explanation, or at least a coherent story.

I went over there as planned. I had everything
prepared: a few drinks for myself, some small treats to share – *mochi* cakes and *odango* skewered rice balls, I know how much Shoichiro likes the traditional sweets – and of course my cocktail, my final gift to my former betrothed, disguised as a little bit of leftover in a plastic tea bottle. I bought it all from a Lawson outlet and purposely carried it there in the shop’s eponymous plastic bag purely as a way to rub in his failure at keeping the second job he so spectacularly bombed out of. He’s “still searching” for another one now, he said. What a waste. How in the world did *that* happen? How did I let myself?

I had all that stuff, and I got there on time, and he had prepared a nice little *nabe* hotpot set for us to enjoy as we drank. Seasonal vegetables cut up and separated into bowls, large chunks of stiffened tofu, *udon* noodles, leaves of winter cabbage, chunks of chicken meat, and rice too if I wanted any. Plates of soy sauce with *yuzu* citrus juice mixed in for dipping. A *miso* soup based broth for the pot. We could sit over it on its portable gas grill at the table, boiling and eating everything at our leisure, little by little, exactly as we used to do on special occasions or those very rare times when we hosted a house party. It was nice, more than I expected from him. He made an effort, and that’s probably the first thing that threw me off.
Of course I was so nervous I was trembling. I’d been thinking about the moment for so long that it had achieved a kind of spectacular unreality for me, a larger than life presence or transcendence, and with its arrival I found myself completely incapable of handling it. I was going to kill someone? With poison? Who was I kidding? It was so easy but so impossible. I could barely speak, I wanted to laugh and wail and shatter-scream-shriek all at once. Naturally I needed a drink, I desperately needed to calm myself, to do anything to stop twittering around like a bird or lost little puppy. I was behaving like my teenage self again, overwhelmed by the force of this boy I had a crush on, unable to merely and properly sit in the same room. I was too excited to do anything normally.

Only it wasn’t just a crush I was feeling – although what was so terrible, so rattling, was that seeing him and his work at getting ready for me did bring back the love I’ve always carried for the stupid waste – it was also the tremendous pressure and thrill and joy and grief and, above all else, intense trepidation at my true reason for being there. I drank. I very quickly went through the three cans of plum saké I had for myself. True to his nature Shoichiro had plenty of beers and assorted Chu-hi mixes on hand, and I wasn’t shy about accepting his
generosity. He was strangely restrained himself, drinking to be sure, but not in his usual totally out of his head drunk way. I thought he was doing that for me too, another part of his making an effort. It was charming, damn him, and I fell for it. He truly is a shape shifter, a sorcerer.

The moment came, I had a chance. He went into the kitchen to chop some more onions and carrots for the pot, he left his beer at the table, it was still half full. I saw that, I thought about it, I thought about what it meant, I thought about what it would mean to pour my concoction into it. That was all that was required: a tiny movement, grasping a bottle and opening a cap, a slight depression of my wrist to pour, gravity would take care of the rest. I steeled myself. I looked over at him. He wasn’t paying any attention to me, he was focused on the cutting board. Still chatting about an idea he had for a new side dish to go into the boxed lunches at his father’s place. It was eggplant centered, locally grown, and he wanted to make it part of the “Celebrate Kochi” set his father had come up with as a marketing gimmick. They were trying to get into the convenience store located inside City Hall; his father was convinced that if they sold their lunches as being town pride fare then they could get some shelf space without paying for it, or without paying much. I only partially
listened, I was floating with the alcohol and crashing with my plan to kill him. My head was one of those Zeppelin balloons you see in history textbooks at school. In the air but clumsily, flying but barely so, ready to plummet to earth at any moment. I reached for my bag where I had left it under the table. I felt the tea bottle with its precious contents. I looked at Shoichiro again. He had opened a fresh can of beer from our – no, *his* – refrigerator and was sipping as he cut. He had finished the vegetables and apparently decided to fry up some shrimp. I suddenly saw a number of spice bottles on the counter. Had they been there before? The man loves his cooking. The man loves, alive, living, acting, breathing, being. He is.

My hand was on the tea bottle. He had a new drink, but he would never leave a can unfinished. I knew when he eventually got back to the table he’d return to his previous beer. He’d drink both, there’s no way he’d dump one out. It had come. THE MOMENT. I could so very easily put the poison in, make my delivery, death’s welcome sign and homeward trail. No one would be the wiser. He “is” into “was”. I could eat the shrimp he was preparing to be polite, make an excuse – or not even bother to make one – and then leave. Go home and let the mixture do its work. Read about it in the newspaper.
tomorrow. Maybe the day after tomorrow. The perfect plan, months in the making, months in the setting up. Finished and ready. Now.

I let go of the tea bottle. I pushed my bag back under the table. I had some more noodles and cabbage. My Zeppelin brain turned, adjusted course, drifted up a bit higher in the sky. Something clicked, but I didn’t notice that till later. It was all done without a thought.

Yet it was a kind of decision. A default, passive choice to let the man live. A gift? An acceptance, but also an action. A surge of power swept through me. I had his life in my hands and I presented it to him. I felt like a god. I bestowed on him the gift of life: I am woman, I am mother, I am Earth, I create as a part of who I am, it is my being, my duty, my privilege. I have made two beautiful daughters and now I have also made their father, my husband, my ex-husband. I did it, and only I could do it. I realized – unconsciously, unformed, in my core – that somehow in granting him life I had taken more than I ever could have by killing him. He owed me himself. Indebted. I was drunk on the enormity of my gesture as much as I was drunk on everything I’d put into myself that evening. Goddess, life-giver, creator, merciful judge. I let you live, you filth, you unworthy, lovely man. I did that for you and
you’ll never know.

Feeling like that it’s no wonder I slept with him.
2020, January 07 (Tuesday)

I know I left you on a little cliffhanger yesterday Diary, and I’m sorry about that. I simply couldn’t write anymore, it got to be too much. In putting it down I had more clarity about what happened and about how I felt, more than I could handle at the moment in fact. I needed a break. You know how it is, sometimes in the middle of a good talk you just need to sigh and take a deep breath. We always have good talks; you must tell me more about yourself Diary, I feel like I’m the one who always says everything – too much maybe. Don’t be shy and don’t hold back, simply share. I’m ready to listen.

But yes, I did sleep with him, and that’s what I really can’t believe. I can but I can’t. It was so natural, so right, so unexpectedly foreseeable. I suppose I owe you an explanation on that count too.

To be frank, even after these past few days of constantly turning it over I can’t understand the details of what went on that evening any better than I can my specific failure to act as planned within it. And of course that failure too was something unplanned, a complete surprise. I had convinced myself, I was certain. If you had asked me an hour, or even half an hour, beforehand I would have told you. It happened though, everything
happened. It always happens, doesn’t it? Looking back maybe I should have seen it coming, the way I felt after I decided not to kill him. I guess I never really could have done it, but at the time it seemed like something I had chosen. A decision to give and not to take. Thinking that, I mean I felt triumphant, in that moment I was an empress, a goddess. All in my own head of course, but I was floating, flying, stuck in a world of my creating, a separate Earth.

He came back to the table with the vegetables he had chopped and the shrimp he fried and everything was so good, he was so kind, and suddenly I was back in my bedroom as a high school student and there was my old Shoichiro, the one man in my life who has been everything at every time. We ate some more, drank some more, sat a little bit closer, he leaned over, I don’t know… One touch led to another and the next thing I knew I was putting my clothes back on in his living room – our old living room – the food gone cold, half eaten bowls left for Shoichiro to clean up. I bicycled home in a dream, biting my lower lip, shivering a little against the night but in my core burning with a warmth I hadn’t felt for months.

Is this the start of Shoichiro and me getting back together? Do I want to get back together? Does he? He signed the divorce papers but I prepared everything; as far
as I know he never wanted to break up in the first place. Maybe he would… But what about me? That’s the real question Diary, and tonight I have no answer. Tomorrow I might, who knows?

Yesterday I was convinced he had manipulated me into it, that he merely wanted to have sex. Today I think he still loves me, and I think I may still love him too. Tomorrow, well, tomorrow will have to tell me what tomorrow thinks when it’s today. Tonight I can only tell you that being with him was both wonderful and terrifying, and when I remember that I went over there with the intention of ending his life I can’t believe how naïve and childish my whole scheme was. I could never kill anyone, why and how did I persuade myself otherwise? So silly, so stupid. I love and don’t love the man; he’s a waste but a charming one. He’s all I know, the comfortable familiar, the only one I’ve ever had. That’s worth something.

It’s so strange being at work now, surrounded by the very chemicals I spent so long thinking about, getting Tanaka-san to research for me, weighing out, taking measurements, mixing and combining and putting together, taking apart. My inner world for such a long stretch; in some ways I feel like I lost a friend: I invested so much time and energy on those chemicals that now that they’re
back to only being cleaning agents it’s like a presence I had grown used to is suddenly gone. But it’s not lonely, only different.

I find my thoughts trailing off to him despite myself. My head tells me it was just a momentary slip-up, a mistake, a drunken misadventure that shouldn’t be repeated. I left him for a reason, for many reasons, for many good reasons. That happened too, my moving the girls and me out. We’re all happier and better off now, I keep repeating to myself, or we would be if it weren’t for this debt. His debt. His that became ours.

He made no mention of that, come to think of it, merely a single comment that he was still looking for another side job. Maybe that was designed to placate me? How can I even consider going back to him knowing how he is? Yet still, he is managing to keep our old apartment together, and he’s somehow making the rent on his own, so he’s either possibly being more responsible with money or he’s living at the edge of his pay simply in order to keep what he’s always had with us. Is he staying there for us? In the hope that we do reconcile and that the girls and I simply move in again, that everything returns to the normal as known, as was? He might be; it’s at least reasonable to think he might think so. I would probably do
something like that in his situation.

Although on the other hand he doesn’t seem to be doing much to free us of the debt that he’s the one to blame for in the first place. But if he’s so selfish then what was with his being such a good host? Too many questions, too many crossroads! I guess in the end all I can really think is that he’s the same old Shoichiro: loving, often kind, usually fun, always irresponsible, short-sighted, lazy, rough around the edges. Everything I accepted about him, everything I loved and hated at once. That’s life, that’s a relationship, that’s a part of the big show we call being human. If I only have so many years left how do I want to spend them? With him or without him? I’ve got to decide, but naturally I can do nothing of the sort.

There is one part of my plan that’s still salvageable, although I’m not sure how much appetite I have for it anymore. It’s maybe worth doing, it’s definitely doable, I’m just wondering how much I care, especially if Shoichiro and I are going to get back together. Are we? Maybe that’s my fate, my real fate, being with him.

Anyway Diary, the part I mean is about framing Tanaka-san. That stupid man is so dense, such an oaf. He has it coming. Of course he’s innocent of everything, except being the clod he is. He almost deserves to be
punished simply for being such a weakling. No, not “almost”, he does deserve it. I could do it too, I could clean him out. Imagining that is nearly as much fun as it was to fantasize about killing Shoichiro.

Yes fantasize, I recognize that now. It was a dream, I was never up to it. When it came to it I couldn’t go through, I never would have been able to. Maybe I would have if he had been different that night. Only a few days between now and then and what a lifetime it seems. So much has changed while nothing has really changed. Everything internal, everything jumbled, tossed up, thrown into the air and landing in a whole new shape, another pattern. An arrangement just like the one I had for years and years, with only the outside a bit blurred. I love Shoichiro, the waste. Yes, my waste. He was. Is? Oh goodness Diary.

Tanaka-san. It’s all in place, he’s got the evidence in the search records of his phone. He’s got the motive I established with him learning about Sakaichi-san and Shoichiro making a connection. Everyone at work knows that he’s had a crush on Sakaichi-san for a very long time. He would be – and is, everyone knows that too – very jealous of anything that might happen between her and Shoichiro, even if nothing happens. Nothing has happened,
at least nothing that I’m aware of. Shoichiro is mine. But no one knows that except me. I could report Tanaka-san to the police. I could make up any story, anything that makes him appear suspicious, anything that makes him worthy of investigation. Who knows what the police might find if they looked into him.

The man has probably never done anything criminal in his life – he wouldn’t have the gumption – but his existence is criminal as far as I’m concerned. The mouse. He has it coming all right, any comeuppance he can get, and I can give it to him. I can take it out; I can be justice to him, I can deliver him up.

There would probably be a lot of paperwork involved, I would certainly have to sit there and talk to the police for longer than I wanted to. It could be a waste of time, but it could also be good fun. I’m not sure; I’ll have to think about it. I would like to see him suffer; no, I would like to make him suffer.
2020, January 10 (Friday)

Here’s another life lesson for you Diary, don’t ever try to do anything and don’t ever trust anyone. Efforts go unrewarded, and any feelings you might have will only be betrayed. I can’t believe I didn’t go through with it when I had the chance, that stinking rat. The rotten waste. And to think I actually dreamed we might be getting back together! I half wanted to, I three-quarters wanted to, I had already started planning what it would be like to return the girls and I to our old place, what changes to the furniture I’d make, how I’d rearrange the two bedrooms and the living/dining area, what I would add and what I would take away from the kitchen. As much as that bastard likes cooking he did at least share that space. I had it figured out, it was laid out in my mind, but for nothing. If I were in that kitchen with him right now I’d put a fillet knife in his belly, let him try and digest that.

But I’m doing it again, and I should back up. Sakaichi-san was all aflutter at lunch today, there was something she absolutely had to tell me she said, something she desperately needed my advice about. She’d been holding it in but couldn’t any longer, and it was for my ears only so could we please, without being too obvious, eat in a different section from Matsumoto-san
and Tanaka-san? Of course, of course. Then she comes out
with this, just blurted it straight, absolutely indelicately:
She and Shoichiro are a pair! They had a date at the end of
last year, their first, “the beginning” she called it. She’s
been dying to tell me but wanted to make sure their “love”
was “genuine”. And not just on any of those late winter
days either, but on Christmas Day, the most romantic day
of the year, the day when everyone single and childless in
this entire country hopes to have a date, to be asked out, or
at least to have commiserating single friends to spend a
long dinner with.

The two of them had apparently been texting each
other for some time but it was always light and casual, just
fun. She mentioned to him that her boyfriend – she has
long since stopped calling him a “fiancé” – which was
never really accurate given that he never actually
proposed; I’m sure she’s given up on that too – was busy
and how sad she was that it would be a lonely Christmas.
Nice play, Sakaichi-san, very coy. Naturally that idiot
Shoichiro fell right for it and asked her to join him for the
evening, he didn’t have any plans after work either and
they could go to karaoke or something. She said great and
added that since she’s heard so much about his cooking
from me she was dying to try some of his Christmas
chicken. That fox, she was really going for it with him, I couldn’t believe it when she told me she had been that direct. A fox and a *tanuki* raccoon dog, what a pair those two are. The both of them!

They met at the tram-side entrance to the Obiyamachi shopping arcade in the late afternoon. We start and finish early here and as Shoichiro has hours about the same at his father’s place it was easy enough to drop in for a few songs at Big Echo Karaoke before it got busy, have some drinks and snacks in their rented booth and then leave to go back to “his place” – *our* place, I nearly interjected but caught myself – where he fulfilled his culinary promise – which she then described in far too much detail – and after that – I know! I wouldn’t have thought so either but it’s so obvious you’re right to see it coming – they slept together. *In our old futon!* The filthy bastard, the dirty whore, I don’t know which of them I hate more. I don’t know *how* to hate either of them more. He pulled the same trick on me only a few days later but wasn’t even kind enough to pull out the bedding. Rat!!

I know what you’re going to say Diary, that it’s entirely my fault for introducing them in the first place. But it most certainly isn’t my fault and honestly I’m offended you would suggest it. How could it be my fault?
Did I tell Sakaichi-san to mention she would be alone on Christmas? Did I order Shoichiro to ask her out? Did I put them together into our bed? Come on! Get out of here with your insinuations! Some friend you are, throwing that in my face. I can’t believe you.

I heard her out, I locked my expression into place, I pushed everything deep inside just like I was always taught to do, like Manae’s learned and Terako is learning: one mustn’t ever show one’s feelings, it ruins the harmony, it spoils social living. Those rules don’t apply to family though, and certainly not to ex-family. If that street dog filthy scum bastard tries to contact me again, if he has the nerve to query meeting me or the girls, you can bet he’ll get an earful. And then some.

Maybe I will kill him after all. I certainly feel like I could right now. I’d probably stop myself when it came to it, the way I did the other day. I hate his rotten guts, but I love him. Enough to kill though, maybe, enough love for that. I still know how to mix the chemicals, and despite my throwing out and wasting the batch I had before I could easily make another and see to it that the job got done. I could practice first on Tanaka-san.

You know, when it comes down to it this is really his fault. He was supposed to take the blame for what I did.
He completed the research for me – yes I know that Diary – but he completely failed in taking the blame for what I didn’t do. Which he was meant to and he needs to, it serves him right. Come to think of it, that’s even better than killing him, and I don’t really have any reason to end his life other than the fact that he’s so pathetic. I’ll just frame him. That’s what he gets. If he weren’t such a little weakling he would have taken the opportunity fate granted with Sakaichi-san’s blazingly obvious dissatisfaction at her boyfriend’s inability to properly commit and gotten himself into her affections. If he were any kind of man.

He couldn’t manage that one simple task, despite seeing her every single day at work, and now thanks to him she’s gone and pursued my ex, a man who had the inexplicable lack of foresight to fall into bed with her. And then to trick me into bed only a short time later. Tanaka-san has absolutely got to pay. He’s the common thread, he’s where each of the points meet, it’s so obvious that none of this would have happened without him. Shoichiro needs to be punished too, somehow, but it’s more complicated with him. I’m confused with him. As for Sakaichi-san, I have no idea. She’s definitely a predator, but I always got the feeling she only wanted to be loved and chased men to feel accepted by them, by
anyone. I’m a little sorry for her, stuck in her schoolgirl dreams. Men are useless: dependent worms like Tanaka-san or selfish slugs like Shoichiro. One or the other. Take your pick? No thank you! None of the above.

I was so stupid to be duped by Shoichiro in the manner Sakaichi-san was too. But both of us are really the victims of Tanaka-san. Yes. I’ve figured it out, and I know what to do. I’m going to call the police.
2020, January 14 (Tuesday)

I’m not going to call the police, of course I’m not. You must have foreseen that too Diary, you who know me so well. I’ve had a few days to calm down and think a bit more, and I’m sorry for what I said to you earlier. Accusing you like that was unfair of me, I admit it. You were right that I never should have given Shoichiro’s contact to Sakaichi-san in the first place, but how could I know then what would come of it? It was part of my plan with Tanaka-san you see, and I thought it needed to be there for framing him to work. It did need to be there, it was unavoidable; I mean, without that it wouldn’t have made any sense.

Yes, everything adds up to being his fault, Tanaka-san’s – there’s no doubt about that –, but I probably did go too far in my reaction to what you said. You were only trying to help. Sorry. I’ll need your advice more than ever now so please don’t leave me; you have to show me what to do next. I ache for what to do next. My heart, my head, it’s too much and I really can’t take it. I have no idea what I’m doing, what I’ve done.

The girls have been back at school for a week. I’ve just put the first full week of work in twenty-twenty behind me too. The days are stretching out normally,
stacking up like they always have. Nothing is exciting, nothing is interesting, nothing is worth doing. I wake up early and make breakfast for my daughters, sometimes with Mom there beside me and sometimes not. I get dressed and ride a bicycle to a tram stop, rainy or clear, it doesn’t matter. I get on the tram and ride it east to downtown, right into the rising sun. I clean office spaces for people who wear better clothes and get paid more than I do. I have no idea how they spend their days, or why sitting in front of a computer deserves so much more money than keeping an area spotless and in order, than maintaining a germ-free and healthy environment for the body, for the mind.

I do all that every day and no one thanks me for it, I doubt they even notice, let alone appreciate, what I do. None of the “important” office staff so much as extends a greeting to me or to any of my co-workers when they show up two hours after we’ve gotten there, after we’re already hard at it. We’re invisible to them.

My mother’s words on class, on economic realities, they ring in my ears, but I know nothing will come of them. Pretty words, nice poems, but life goes on the same for everyone, and it all comes down to the gods’ moods when you happened to be born. My cards fell badly,
or maybe goodly. Who knows? In the end I’ll die just the same as the salaried types. Maybe they can eat better and be more comfortable along the way, but I’ll see them burned in the same wooden coffins, bones and ashes placed in the same stone family graves. Just like me. The absolute worst of it is that my girls will have this road to tread too. Where we live nothing is offered, especially for women, and their only shot at some decency is getting out. Will they? Can they? I couldn’t. Go or stay, in their lives they’ll still only find death, and little more than a passing of the time in between. I’m sorry I did this to you my loves, I’m sorry I gave you life.

I’m too depressed to do anything to get back at Tanaka-san. Fortunately I’ve been rotated to work with Matsumoto-san this quarter and we’re now in charge of vacuuming and doing the interior windows and trash. That’s something of an improvement from last year. My empty days drift along a tiny bit easier.

Matsumoto-san’s nice, not very chatty, which I welcome because I certainly don’t feel like talking myself. I see Sakaichi-san at lunch every day, and no doubt she’s noticed that I’m not in the cheeriest of moods. I don’t know if she suspects that it’s connected to Shoichiro or not, she hasn’t said anything else about him since her big
confession to me and I haven’t asked. Maybe I will. That gnat Tanaka-san mostly sits there silently with meals his mother has probably made for him, staring at Sakaichi-san but otherwise keeping to himself. He may have felt like we were making a connection or something since I asked him all those questions about the cleaning materials we use, but if he was under the impression we were becoming friends he hasn’t made any attempts to engage me. Not that he would, he’s too much of an inert pile of dung to do anything proactive like that. The man disgusts me, he really does. One more useless “vegetable boy” that Japan seems so full of these days, parasites on their parents their whole lives through. Goodness, that could describe me.

It’s not my fault though, at least I can protest that. I don’t live with Mom and Dad by choice. We were forced into it, pushed there by Shoichiro’s ridiculous spending habits and inane loans. A debt I got stuck with. It might be never-ending. I pay the interest every month but I have no idea if Shoichiro is paying down the principal. Maybe I should tell Sakaichi-san about his money troubles if she’s serious about sticking with him. I don’t want to talk to her though, not about anything and certainly not about that. Not yet. Did she break up with her old boyfriend? Is she Shoichiro’s girlfriend now? I can’t remember if she said so,
or if she’s in the middle of the two, juggling. I doubt she’d date both of them at once, but she might be. What a lot of work that would be, balancing a couple of stupid fools like those two.

Shoichiro. I was so thrilled after our time at New Year’s. It was like a new life, a completely unexpected, unpredictably fresh and cooling and cleansing breeze had swept through me. I let myself dream about what could be, about happiness, and I honestly did feel truly happy being there with him again, eating his food, laughing and talking and touching, and yes sleeping with him too. I gave myself over to everything that was coursing through me, and it was so good. I stopped thinking, only felt: the evening, the night, it carried me into a heaven I had forgotten about.

My worries melted away. The girls were safe, I needn’t be concerned. My parents are kind and decent people, caring grandparents to both. School for them is fine, no one is being bullied, friends have been made, homework is getting done, classroom lunches have been paid for, and at the end of the day there’s always someone waiting when they get home. I put each piece of my anxious puzzle out of my mind, I could put it out of my mind, all the stresses, the worries, the endless thises and thats of everyday slipped out, and I was sitting eating a
hotpot with my Shoichiro, drinking plum saké, drinking Chu-hi cocktails, drinking beer. I let myself go like I haven’t been able to do for months, maybe years. And he was so charming, so thoughtful, so anticipatory. I love the man but can’t be with him. I was convinced I couldn’t be with him. I divorced him – and sometimes I think I made a huge mistake.

But it’s gone now. No more second chances. My plans for making everything better, for revenge, for changing my life, taking charge, being in control and pushing forward what I want rather than only receiving what’s offered: gone. Smoke rising out of a crematorium. It’s mine, my funeral for a life that still clicks over physically but has long since died spiritually. It was fate, my dooming of myself to my own fate: the way I tried to take my life’s course into my own hands simply sealed it as what it already was. I lost. Life got me in the end, and now there’s nothing before but to trudge through day after broken day until I’m finally allowed to die. Forgiven enough to let me pass, to wither, to disappear. In that moment I’ll look back and see it all as meaningless, and it will have been. A duty done, not one speck more.
2020, January 27 (Monday)

What was that with Shoichiro at New Year’s? I keep going back and forth on it, reliving the evening and the way it made me feel. Safe, warm, comfortable, right. It felt right, it was good, it was natural, it was exactly where I belonged. It was honest meaning, it was meaningful. It was as if all those years we were together had simply rolled on naturally, never paused, never had a break or a schism. Never had the halt that I put to them.

Why did I leave him? Oh I know Diary, there were hundreds of reasons and every one of them true, each had its place and it wasn’t a decision I made lightly. But then, after a single night of being with him again the way we used to be years ago, the whole of my carefully built reasoning and rationality disappeared, evaporated up into smoke. I don’t know why he slept with me. He had only begun something with Sakaichi-san, after all. Maybe he was just drunk, maybe he just wanted sex, maybe he just felt like I did and the familiar was simply too overwhelming to be resisted. I have no idea. I sometimes imagine he might still love me, and then I try to understand how I feel about that, but it puts me into such a state of disorder that I do what I can to keep my mind from going down that road.
I’m so confused Diary, you’re the only one I can talk to; like I’ve told you so many times. You’ve become my truest friend, you have. I feel as if I’m losing myself, breaking down into a kind of madness. I’ve been mad. Shattered. I’ve forsaken my place, position, role. All my interactions with others merely float on the surface, skimming shallow, everything automatic and concerned solely with necessities. That’s even the way I speak to my parents. I’m not there, anywhere.

Mom has become mother to my daughters, and she does a better job of it than me. I think I’ve mentioned that too; I’ve felt it. My entire being is voided, my purpose removed – or vanished. When the girls and I lie down to bed at night I’m a robot turning itself off next to my dozing darlings, and if it weren’t for their love I think I would be totally lost.

Yesterday I finally brought Manae and Terako to see their dad and very belatedly celebrate the New Year with him. I had no motivation to do that, it was solely obligation. We met him at a Coco’s chain restaurant for dinner, and I’m glad we chose there because I certainly couldn’t have been alone with him again. The other people in the crowded dining room gave me the needed background noise and commotion so I could disappear, so
I could sit silently and not seem out of place while I avoided eye contact and conversation with those at my own table. Terako ate a kid’s meal but Manae ordered from the regular menu; she’s growing up so quickly. Shoichiro had a steak which he complained about and two beers before trying to pay for everyone. Typical. He’s run us into debt and still thinks he can pick up the bill.

I did my best not to look at him the whole evening. Sakaichi-san gushed to me on Friday about how well things were going, about how she’s almost finally ready to break up with her old boyfriend – that playboy, as she calls him now, that man who can’t make up his mind – and fully commit to Shoichiro. For all I know they’re very happy together; from what she said Shoichiro appears to be at least. And I know she is.

I was too depressed – no, I am too depressed – to really hide my emotions, and I regret not doing a better job of that with Sakaichi-san. She was ecstatic telling me her updates, and I ruined it for her by being too obviously hurt. She pulled back, muttered an apology, her expression a little horrified, a little hurt. I wonder what she must think. I was the one who suggested the two of them make contact to begin with, yet now here I am acting like she’s stolen my man.
I’m sorry Sakaichi-san, you can’t know the full details but you have stolen my man. A woman never stops loving someone, especially someone she’s had kids with. You’ll understand that someday, if you ever have your own baby. With my Shoichiro — oh goodness Diary, I really am on the edge of a breakdown. Over the edge. An absolute collapse. Tears are staining this ink.

Shoichiro asked how I was doing at dinner, and even acted genuinely concerned. He didn’t mention Sakaichi-san, nor anything about the night we spent together. We did exchange some texts in the days afterwards, and it was so much like when we were in high school, so fun. But then I heard from Sakaichi-san about them and I simply stopped, I never replied to anything after that until we made the plan for him to see the girls. I’m sure he knows that I know. I don’t know what he thinks about it. He gave no indication anyway, but he was cautious, careful with me, giving me plenty of space. Maybe he was testing the water. Frigid, that’s how this water is; I wouldn’t step in if I were you.

Manae and Terako chatted endlessly about school and their plans for the otoshidama New Year’s pocket money they got from my parents. Of course Shoichiro forgot to prepare anything even though he brought stuffed
envelopes for both of them from his own parents and had those in his coat pocket. He clumsily gave each girl a thousand yen note from his wallet, which they received very politely and graciously. I was so proud of them. I know parents don’t usually give their own children otoshidama, but that’s when they live together. Any decent father in his situation would have done a lot better than he did, it should have been obvious. And presented it far more nicely too. Naked cash, honestly the man is hopeless.

I’m not sure when we’ll meet him next. We didn’t make any plans, simply left it at goodnight and goodbye. I paid for his meal, he cycled back home and we walked to the tram stop. He and I barely glanced at each other and spoke even less. The girls had fun, but I know they realized how uncomfortable it was for their Papa and me. But in a day or two they’ll forget about that and be focused on the latest school gossip, who in their class said what to whom and when, that night’s homework or its grateful lack, the next test, the next event, what kind of chocolates they’ll share with their friends on Valentine’s, the next next. How I envy them, life just rolls on from one excitement to another. They haven’t yet had to learn how to daily die.
2020, February 09 (Sunday)

I don’t think I’m busy enough. I keep noticing how empty and pointless everything is; it feels like I’m paying too much attention. I need to be distracted, I need to take my eyes off of living. Before we moved in with my parents I was constantly sprinting, shifting from one activity to the next, bang bang bang. All I knew was what had to be done; it was great.

Get up, make breakfast, prepare lunch, fold the laundry from the day before, put it away, double check that the alarm is set so the girls wake on time to get themselves ready for school. Then off to work, run to catch the day’s first tram, put in a full shift, clock out and race home to try and be there before, or at least only a little after, Manae and Terako get back, start them on their homework, cook dinner, eat, wash the dishes, shepherd everyone into the bath, run the laundry machine, hang the clothes so they dry – or almost dry – by morning, fall onto the floor for an hour or so of blessed blank time with the TV, listen to the girls talk about their days. Then pull the futon bedding out, spread the sheets, place the pillows, and finally sleep – bliss – before oh my goodness here’s another day.

I didn’t have the space to think, and in hindsight
I’m so grateful for that. And nostalgic. Now I can think, and unfortunately I do, and what I see far too clearly is how vacuous it is, how life is a thief and that even the best, most comfortable way to spend it leads straight to the same cold end. What’s the purpose in spending it anyway? Why do I have to be alive? Why was I forced into this? It’s like a kind of torture; no one will let you die no matter how much you may want to.

Who has the courage to kill themselves? If you did, what would it solve? Rejecting life is just as stupid as embracing it. Running on automatic, passing the time purely on instinct with no awareness of the hours as they fade, that’s the only real way to live – or die. That’s how nature probably wants it, that’s how everyone who isn’t human gets by. Now that’s lucky, they’re lucky; all those frogs and toads and dogs and cats and fish and turtles and beetles and ants. Being born human? I don’t know if it’s a blessing or a curse. I suppose we don’t have the fear and worry other animals do, but we certainly still have our share. Plus the share we then make. On top of that too the burden of being capable of figuring out what to do – and then having to either do it or not. It’s a chore. That’s what it comes down to: life is a chore, and one that’s far more of a pain than doing the laundry ever is.
Mom does the laundry for us these days. She’s trying to help, I know, but it only adds to my having too much time on my hands. She also does the dishes since we all eat together, although I do still cook most meals for the girls and I while she prepares hers and Dad’s. He’s pretty particular and I wouldn’t want to have that duty. He’s also been increasingly forgetful lately, little things like where he left his keys, but bigger things too. His speech will sometimes slur, or drop off completely in the middle of saying something. And then he’ll ask a question only to re-ask the exact same question a couple of minutes later. The other day he even lost track of where he was on his way home from the shop, for some strange reason he had to call Mom to get directions. He’s never done that before, especially not in the neighborhood where they’ve been for years and years. I hope it’s nothing serious; he should probably try to drink less. That’s what he lives for though, and I have to admit that his nightly bourbon on the rocks – or two or three bourbons on the rocks – certainly does have a classic touch to it, a real style. My dad, the retired postal worker, the once and still hippy, the letter writer, the sometimes cartoonist: the pure style of him. He has always carried himself so well, it’s such a pity to see how age is tearing him apart. But then I suppose it does that to each
of us, men just seem to wear out faster.

No, men definitely aren’t built to last. They’re made to burn bright and then smolder pathetically, pitiable reminders of the creatures they were. With their strength gone what good does their supposed wisdom do for them? For anyone? I’ve never understood why the old men in this country have been allowed to run it for so long. Japanese men especially live far too lengthily for their own good, and when they’re put in charge of things – as they always are – you end up with the mess we have outside each front door. It’s the little things they don’t get, the daily lifestyle things, the average needs for average people. For instance, I could barely get Terako into a kindergarten and both Shoichiro and I were working when I tried to register her, yet the country has plenty of money to spend on new highways and duplicate bridges. It’s crazy. How about building something for children if you’re so concerned with the population’s decline? A Diet full of Shoichiros that happened to have been born into families with better connections. Idiots. I know Diary, I’m sounding more and more like Mom every day, but what do you expect when I live with her?

Actually now that I think about it, listening to Mom talk is a pretty pleasant way to spill out the time, and
it does help me forget about myself. That’s probably what I need most right now, having my attention taken away from me. If not I’m too likely to dwell, to obsess over what I’ve done wrong and the impossibility of righting it. To focus on how stuck I am, and how the lack of an exit is mirrored in the meaninglessness of trying for one. Life is for living, people say, embrace it, enjoy it, fill it up and drain it down.

And after I’ve filled and drained it? No one has any answer to that query, not anything good. Do it again! comes the sole response. Great, then what? Loop, loop, loop, the circle spins and spins. I guess we have to take what little happinesses we can when they present themselves, but I still have trouble understanding why it’s worth the bother. It beats being in pain I suppose, but it sure doesn’t beat never being in pain, and there’s only one guarantee for that.

My period is a week late and still hasn’t come; I can’t begin to think what that might mean.
2020, February 13 (Thursday)

Still no period and I’m beginning to wonder. Beginning to wonder, and – I admit – to dream a little. She would be another child of Shoichiro’s, although I’d never tell him. Probably I’d never tell him. I don’t need anything from him, not anymore. I don’t want anything either. I certainly wouldn’t go over there and ask for his support or input, not financially and not emotionally. He’s useless in both regards anyway.

I’m not sure what role a father is supposed to play in the lives of his children, but my dad was always the shoulder I leaned on when I really needed someone; for Manae and Terako I think I’ve been more of that than Shoichiro has. He does listen to them well, and when they were smaller he was their playmate, but now they’re already old enough to play by themselves – and they have been for some time. But this new baby, if another little one is forming here in my belly, she would be a baby raised by women, by her Mama and her sisters, by her grandmother; but also too a little by her grandfather. She wouldn’t be entirely without a male presence, and knowing my dad he’d be enough.

I want to know but I don’t want to know. Half of me merely wants to wait and see without doing anything
to find out, the other half says that’s irresponsible and silly and that if she is down there I need to plan and prepare. That second half has basically won in case you’re curious Diary, and I’ve pretty much – more or less – decided to go and get a pregnancy test from the drugstore tomorrow. Goodness, I feel like I’m eighteen again. Excited, nervous, flitty, coasting and floating in daydreams of what-ifs that are both so very tantalizing and so very frightening. I know what to expect of course, I’m a mother and have been down this road, but it’s been so many years since a newborn was in my arms, and I’m not as strong as I used to be.

A newborn babe. A tiny darling that needs constant care, attention, warmth, love. Endless love – she gives and gets. A sweet little package of purity and innocence, pipe-cleaner arms and legs that get so pudgy so quickly, lungs that are bursting with power from their first breath, eyes that can’t focus but fingers that can and do, wrapping around yours and squeezing. A delight.

What a treasure a baby is, any baby, every baby. Miracles. My miracle, born of me, created within me, attached to me so directly – we are first literally physically one – and then still for so long remaining attached in dependence. The face at my breast, lips sucking, miniature
hands grabbing, spread out, feeling my chest as the milk of life that only I can provide flows into her eager mouth. That’s an incomparable high; those are the moments where life is most real, most defined, most absolutely worth it. That’s when life simply is, and everything makes sense. I want that again Diary, I do and I don’t. Another baby would change everything, I know that, but you can’t understand what it is to gaze into your child’s eyes unless you’ve done it yourself. You’ll never get that Diary, and I’m sorry. You deserve it, everyone does; it’s tenderness: simple, wonderful, blissful tenderness. Unmatched by everything else in your whole existence – unmatchable, untouchable.

The girls made some Valentine’s treats for their friends at school tonight, it was so cute. Mom took them to the supermarket earlier and they each chose a few boxes of different chocolates which they separated and then repackaged in wrappers that they decorated themselves, including some small origami folded swans and frogs, hats and flowers. In a few years I suppose they’ll be doing that for boys, and then having to wait an agonizing full month before White Day comes when the boys are expected to reciprocate. And hopefully they do reciprocate. I remember one year when I spent a good two hours making
a card and what I thought was the greatest selection of candies and even some homemade treats, drawing pictures on the plastic re-usable wrapper Mom had gotten me with a felt marker, seeing to every detail and filling the whole with young love, only to have him completely forget about me on March fourteenth and then – without enough embarrassment, I’ve always thought – hand me a cheap white chocolate candy bar he had obviously gotten at a convenience store the next day at school. In the American movies everything is done on one day, the gifts go both ways or only from boys to girls, and that has always seemed so much nicer to me. But of course we don’t live in a romantic Hollywood story. No, sadly ours is the real world and we simply have to make do. At least Manae and Terako won’t have their hearts broken by any boys this year. May they never.

Tomorrow, Valentine’s Day, I’ll find out if there will be another love for me, another child to cherish and dote on and worry about and feed and feed and feed and clean and clean and clean. No one realizes how much work a baby is, and no one remembers afterwards because the joy of it covers over everything. The universe is the mother’s to give; for a newborn her mother is her universe, and being that entirety is the single most valuable thing
I’ve ever done and will ever do. I’m ready. I’m terrified but ready. I’ll sleep with these dreams tonight and then – only twenty-four hours later – I’ll know.
2020, February 15 (Saturday)

It was negative. A little minus line, a dash, a tiny dark pink scratch inside a small circle on the fat end of an elongated triangular piece of plastic that I urinated on, no more than eight centimeters for the whole thing, a quarter centimeter for the reader, and even less for the displayed result. That’s what delivered my future, that’s what dealt the blow. Negative. A junky little thing like that, my not-baby’s fate.

I went to the clinic this morning to double-check and find out why my period hasn’t come if I’m not pregnant. In typical male doctor fashion I was told the cause is most likely a “lack of female hormones” and that I should try to eat more fish and less meat. In other words my period is simply off, not gone, and sooner or later it’ll make its regular and irritating appearance. Probably sooner now that I know and can stop worrying about it. As far as my diet goes, that doctor can stick it.

I’m disappointed Diary, and a bit angry. Of course having a baby would have been crazy at this point in my life, but I need some crazy. Do you know what I mean? Can you understand that? Living with my parents is stable and safe, and it’s great to be okay with money since we don’t have any rent to pay. Manae and Terako love their
grandparents and have really fit in with their new classmates and teachers, they’ve almost finished this year of school and are actually looking forward to starting their next. For Manae that’ll mean her final year of elementary school, for Terako her second. I won’t move them, I won’t change their school again, no way. We’re staying put at least for a while, a good few years probably; certainly in this neighborhood if not in this exact house – that is, if we can get debt free and afford our own apartment again, afford a little more privacy if not necessarily more space. I see our lives unfolding in predictable and reassuring ways. All of that’s nice, it is, wonderful really.

In time Manae will begin a whole new chapter in her life and she’ll do it at the local public junior high, I won’t have to search for another that way and she won’t have to worry about an entrance exam until high school. That’s convenient and comforting too. Even if we were to stay put with my parents and continue having no rent we wouldn’t be able to afford a private junior high, not with my pay. Terako will go through the full set of grades where she is, having all the experiences of seeing the same kids in the different mixes that each year brings. I’ll keep cleaning offices and more likely than not with the same co-workers, riding my bicycle to the tram stop in the
mornings and back in the late afternoons, seeing the same sights, the same sun-bleached buildings, the same rusted corrugated metal walls on houses leftover from a generation ago. The same wreckage that anywhere else in this country would have been torn down and re-built. Thank goodness my parents don’t live in one of those. Yes, everything for us will simply click right on along. Predictable, secure, and entirely depressing.

That’s our life then, the three of us, the five of us. The days will pile up and rise to the ceiling, nothing will change and nothing will excite, nothing will surprise. Safe – yes – but fun? Challenging? I was supposed to be a Japanese literature teacher, I was supposed to live in a world of books and ideas, I was supposed to enthrall students and set them off on their own unique journeys through a universe made fuller and better because of the stories I handed down to them, the collected legacy we’ve built on these islands over thousands of years, each writer contributing a bit here, a bit there, each adding a piece to the great edifice of “being Japanese”, to the dance on this earth we’ve spun out in the peculiar way we have. None of that happened.

My only connection with books now comes in those few minutes during my commute when I can sit and

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read and bury myself in Shiga, Tsushima, Mizuki, Oe, Kaneko, Sagawa. I feel like my life never took place, that the only really good thing about it is my daughters: they are the only meaning I can take from any of this. Stuck in a backwater, isolated burgh, a left behind from the last century, a dead town with dead-end work and nothing on the other side of a very dark tunnel. Another baby would have been so jarring, so unexpected in the whole of this cut-and-paste that she would have turned the entirety upside down. Ecstatically upside down; she would have upended the barrel and spilled the soy sauce everywhere. It would have been madness, beautiful madness.

But it won’t be. Minus. Negative. Nothing. No new life growing in my belly, and with that no new life for me. Nor anyone. The girls will be fine; they won’t know and would have adjusted no matter what, carrying on with their daily cares of play, feelings, secrets, joys and duties. My parents won’t know either, they would have taken it in stride but surely would have balked a bit. I though, this little me, I would have been more fully me, I would have taken the stand to have my precious third child, even as divorced and even if she was the result of what must have been only a one night accident, an unplanned rendezvous that surprised the both of us involved. She would have
been the final testament to the love Shoichiro and I once shared and that, in whatever way, I suppose I still harbor. My memory will have to fill that role now.

Those feverish dreams and plans I had to go and kill him, that man who nearly became a father again. How silly, how infantile. I was acting like the child we didn’t make. I was floating free in an illusion, projecting all my disappointments into something I thought would make life right and firm. It gave me a meaning, it gave me a purpose, and how I crave something like that now sitting here with a comfortable but empty tomorrow staring back at me. Can I make peace with this? I have to, there’s simply no other way.

I wanted to empower myself, I wanted to take charge, I wanted to shake and shape the world into a form of my own choosing, not only drift along in it like I have since that night back in high school. I thought getting pregnant again, in nearly the same circumstances as I did all those years ago, I thought that would have brought everything full circle and made my existence into much more than it is. But it didn’t happen, and somehow because it didn’t I have this terrible clarity about what a fool I’ve been. These past months, it’s like my mind has been stuck in a fever, clouded thinking, running on
overdrive, sputtering along on spent fuel.

I could never kill anyone, definitely not the man I still love despite it all, and I’ll never have any power over anything; except maybe deciding what to cook for dinner. That’s my lot, that’s how it is for women in Japan, and I am a Japanese woman. I accept it, but at the same time I don’t. There’s a road here for something more, something else, there must be, but I can’t see it. I mean, I can’t change the whole wide world, now can I Diary? What might I change in my own?
2020, March 03 (Tuesday)

The days have merely been grinding on. I don’t have much to write, don’t have much to say, don’t even have much to think. I’m considering winding this diary down. Maybe. You’ve served your purpose, I guess, it’s been a good release and a good relief for me over the past year when I’ve been in short supply of both. You’ve – it’s – been a crutch, a friend. I’ve needed each.

Has it been a year since I started? It feels like so much longer. I’m a little afraid to flip back and check, and I’m very afraid to read my old entries. Goodness, I’ve bounced back and forth so much since my divorce it’s like I’ve been someone else, like I was having a nervous breakdown but not really aware of it. I’ve even been addressing these pages as if they were a person, as if I were speaking to a friend named “Diary”. That’s something I never want to share with anyone. Even in my last entry a few lines back I can see that I did that. Have I done it today too? How embarrassing. I’m so glad this is just a B5-sized notebook and I didn’t go out and buy an actual diary with a hardbound cover and all the extra decorative claptrap. If or when I do decide to actually quit these little writing exercises I can just throw the whole thing away and no one will be the wiser. Life will go on as
it always has, stuck here in Kochi, coming from and heading towards nowhere.

Sakaichi-san told me this morning that she and Shoichiro are now “officially” a couple. She dumped her old boyfriend and apparently was quite gleeful to do it. She said he seemed honestly surprised, that he claimed to be planning to propose to her, that he didn’t see it coming and wanted to know what she did wrong. He said that: what she did! Then, she went on, in the very next breath he announced he didn’t really care and that he had been seeing someone else anyway. Someone younger and prettier. What a thing to tell a lover, even a former lover; she’s much better off without a man like him. How petty, how very small.

Sakaichi-san thanked me more than once for introducing her to Shoichiro. I didn’t know how to respond; she might end up regretting her gratitude. I would like to be able to thank myself for what I did but I don’t. My reasoning at the time was worse than base, something I’ll never be able to admit to anyone and nothing I want to think about myself. That’s been the major benefit of you this diary, I will say that, being able to put it all down here on paper has definitely helped me work through a lot of these personal issues I’ve had. Things I’ve brought on
myself – I know you might think that – but not really.

Hold on a moment, who is this “you” in “you might think” in that last sentence? I’m not cured yet it seems, here I am addressing imaginary friends once more, fantastical readers of lined white pages glued to a piece of cheap cardboard paper, folded in half and sold for a hundred yen at Daiso discount outlets across the country.

I still wrestle with whether or not I should tell Sakaichi-san about Shoichiro’s debt. It’s his problem, it’s for him to deal with, it’s between him and her and not me, but it isn’t that simple. It’s not just his problem because he’s involved me and the girls in it. I want it cleared, I want to be free of it. I don’t know what I’d necessarily do if I were free of it, but I still want it gone and out of my life. Who knows? Reassessing our monthly finances I might find we really could do something, try to go somewhere, or I make good on my life beyond what it’s been this past decade. Maybe I could enter a school, maybe get a teaching degree. It’s never too late they say.

“They” say: of course that’s what universities who want tuition money say, and at the end of your long course of studies and millions of yen of student payments there’s no guarantee of anything. There isn’t even a guarantee I could get a teaching certificate – a lot would
depend on luck and how many Japanese teachers the prefecture happened to need when I went to take the licensing test and then, if I were to pass that phase, the interview by committee. If there are already too many teachers at the time you apply then only a tiny portion of the hopeful would be allowed to pass; if there are too few a great deal more. Once you’ve got that qualification though the prefecture has to place you in a public school, pay your salary, benefits, the works. That’s a good deal.

It’s a popular job, stable, secure, and has a pretty good status. Much better than working for a cleaning company. The catch is you could get sent to any junior or senior high anywhere across Kochi, from Muroto in the east to Sukumo in the west to way up to Otoyo in the mountains in the north. I have no stomach to move the girls again, and Kochi City is already small enough. Imagine living in a tiny village! It would be something though, and in those years of study I could pretend I was pursuing my dream. But who am I kidding? It’s a ridiculously expensive daydream, one a single mother can never afford even if she could “afford” it.

The really funny thing about this is how, in going through my whole silly plan of killing Shoichiro, he has anyway basically ended up dead. Dead to me, that is. Ever
since I started hearing about him and Sakaichi-san my feelings have changed subtly but steadily. I’m growing indifferent towards him. He’s just a piece of my past now; I don’t know if that means I’ve moved on or outgrown him or simply become numb. I’ve never brought up Sakaichi-san and neither has he, but I know he must know that I know. How could I not? He isn’t that stupid to think he could hide it from me, not when she’s my co-worker. Well, he is that stupid, but I’m sure Sakaichi-san has probably talked about me on more than one occasion. She certainly doesn’t know how to keep her mouth shut about very much at work.

Shoichiro claims to have gotten another second job, this time at the K’s Denki electronics store next to the main train station. I guess that means he’s paying down his debt, although by how much and at what date he plans to finish I have no idea. I’d like to find out but I don’t want to talk to him enough to get the details. I’ll have to eventually I realize, just not today. Or tomorrow. I suppose that means I haven’t fully gotten over him yet. We’ve arranged for the girls and him to meet regularly at the pace of once a month, every third Saturday for dinner. Our first time to do that will be this month, on the twenty-first. I don’t think I want to see him myself, I’ll likely only drop
the girls off and wait somewhere nearby. If he really has
gotten a second job he should at least be able to pay for
everyone’s meals.

Another face I don’t want to see but have to every
single day is Tanaka-san’s. The man infuriates me. Simply
looking at his dumbstruck and pasty expression makes me
want to puncture the tires on his bicycle or something.
He’s too indecisive, too weak, far too useless. He isn’t
even a man, not a proper one. He reminds me of my plan
to get back at Shoichiro too, which embarrasses me and
that’s entirely his fault. He’s to blame for being the person
he is, the kind of person I could easily frame for
something he didn’t do. He never should have crossed me;
if he were more competent I wouldn’t have had to
indirectly plant all that search log evidence in his phone.

It’s still in there too I’m sure, tucked away in his
browser’s history; I might as well make use of it in some
way, although I don’t know how I would go about that.
Maybe I could report him for some misdemeanor, let our
boss or the police dig something up. Or maybe I could just
keep glaring at him during our lunch breaks.

He isn’t even smart enough to stop pining for
Sakaichi-san, she told me he’s finally gotten up the
courage to start trying to talk to her now that they’re

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paired for shifts opposite Matsumoto-san and I. What he
discusses is beyond me, but I’m sure it’s nothing of any
consequence and probably a real bore to listen to. The only
times I remotely cared about what he said when we were
working together was when I was getting information on
toxins out of him. What a waste, maybe I will do
something to his bicycle if I can find out which one it is.
Talk about people who have it coming.
2020, March 06 (Friday)

I’m getting more and more worried about Dad. His behavior is increasingly erratic and his memory seems worse by the day. He’ll even forget what happened that morning by the evening – and that’s if we’re lucky, sometimes he can’t recall what took place only a few hours before. When you speak to him too you can see by his face that he stops following the conversation, it’s like he’ll just zone out. I’ve watched him do that especially with Mom, and I don’t think it’s simply one of those things people talk about husbands doing after they’ve been married for years and years and feel like everything their wife has to say they’ve heard before and don’t need to hear again. His concentration will break off with the girls too, and I know that he loves little more than sitting and listening to them prattle on about their days, worries, happinesses, childhood adventures. Once or twice he even seemed not to recognize them, or to mistake who is Manae and who Terako. He had trouble just making a cup of tea recently, imagine that. He seems anxious and depressed.

I’ve tried telling him to get a proper check-up but of course he hates hospitals and won’t go on his own – he’s far too stubborn for that – and Mom isn’t much help either. She thinks the healthcare system is only designed
for private profit. She’s probably half right, but that doesn’t change anything that might be happening inside Dad. In the end I suspect the real reason for her reticence is that she doesn’t want to, or simply won’t, face up to it, she won’t admit that there’s a problem. She can’t. She needs him, I know, but just pretending everything is well because he isn’t physically visibly injured won’t mean keeping him – and that’s what really matters. We all need him, we all want to keep him. I want to keep him more than anyone, I need to keep him, he’s my Papa, he’s my rock, the one man I’ve been able to count on, one of two that have been there for my whole life.

Him and Shoichiro: they’re the central characters in this drama, the male leads in this Hollywood tragedy. Maybe tragicomedy, if that word is still being used; I read about the genre once in a book on Japanese novels by some Belgian man. I’d never heard the term before; I remember loving it.

I find myself wanting to talk to Shoichiro about Dad, wanting to get his advice even though I know he wouldn’t have anything useful or really relevant to say. It would just be nice to have him listen. He always was a good listener: he asked questions and paid careful attention. Sometimes it took him a good while to figure
out what I was feeling or trying to explain, but whether he understood my reasons or not he always accepted them.

I realized I’m not over Shoichiro, far from it. He’s not dead to me, and I’ve certainly not become indifferent towards him no matter how much I may think so as my moods bounce along. My numbness – any occasional numbness – for him is simply blocking the pain of having lost him. I know that, but yet feel it. I know that I’m blocking my pain and that makes the pain come as more real, and then I try to block it again. It’s some kind of game my brain and heart are playing.

Leaving him was the right choice, I’m still sure of that, but how I doubt myself, and how hard it can be to reassure myself that it was the right choice. It’s like a constant battle, daily or semi-daily, a sometimes battle, a fight that goes hand in hand with worry or depression or both. Angst? What’s the best way to put it… I’m a wreck. No, I’m fine, I’m holding myself firm and I’m holding my family, I’m keeping it right for Manae and for Terako. We’re well, safe, fed and secure, and I know I’m a big part of that – I’m a mother. First, foremost, always. But beyond that… These days I’ve got nothing, I’m simply empty. When the girls were babies or toddlers it was enough, they needed so much that only I could provide. Now I see that
Mom can do everything I can, and do it better; I need something else. Something – but what?

Something. I need Dad to be okay, I need Mom to be the family’s foundation, I need the girls to laugh and frolic and bring the sun on every rainy day. I need to find a way to fill the time that isn’t merely busyness, that isn’t only running errands. I need something to work towards, something to aim for, a goal, a project. I need a purpose. I can’t believe that killing Shoichiro filled that role for me – goodness, I was out of my mind! Crazed, mad. It’s so humiliating to admit that, I’m glad you don’t talk Diary. Though sometimes I wish you did.

I should be careful, it’s so easy to slip into addressing you – it – as a person. I got too into that when I was at my worst, in the deepest parts of living the fantasy of being a murderer. I still can’t believe it, can’t really acknowledge it. I’m beside myself with gratitude that I couldn’t go through with it. I would have been put in prison, put on death row – I found out completely by accident while watching the news the other day that murder in Japan almost always means being executed: lucky me for failing.

Maybe; execution itself might not be so bad. It would be an end at least. It’s what’s before it that would be
hardest: you get stuck there in a tiny cell, waiting to be hanged for who knows how long. Nobody who is going to be killed knows when it’ll happen either, one day a guard just comes up and says it’s your time. Family members aren’t even informed until after the fact, when they’re coldly told to come and retrieve the remains. That would have been me! Of course I would have tried to pin it all on Tanaka-san, but as the ex-wife I think some attention would have inevitably fallen on me. I’m living clearly enough now to think that, anyway. And I don’t handle pressure well. The police would have gotten to me with their tactics of sleep deprivation and mental and physical stress, with their twelve hours of daily interrogations, withholding food, keeping me cold, hungry, tired, with the psychological pressure built up over three weeks of being held in detention without formal charge I would definitely have cracked. I would have admitted to anything. I did crack and wasn’t even under arrest.

I’m still fragile, a year later and I’m still dealing with it. Leaving Shoichiro. You can’t be with someone for more than a decade and expect them to go away. Longer too if you count junior high and high school. How we intertwined into each other’s lives. How long will these feelings go on? Maybe forever.
I need something else. I need Dad to be okay. I so need that. And I’ve got to work on myself. I’ve got to find something to work on, work for, something beyond the next paycheck. I’ve got to make it, make me. Me alone, me without Shoichiro.

Manae and Terako have just finished their school year, maybe we’ll be able to take a short trip during the break. I’ll have to go through our finances again. I’d like to invite Mom and Dad along too, and it would be so nice to be able to pay for them. I know we can’t do much to show our thanks for letting us live here, but we might be able to do that. They’ve been extraordinarily good to us; they’ve always been good to me, those old hippies, those revolutionaries. Japan must be the only place in the world where the radicals are over sixty years old. And Kochi must be the only place in Japan that still has a weekly militant poetry club, unless there’s another one of my mothers out there.

Come on Dad, pull yourself together.
2020, March 11 (Wednesday)

Today’s the ninth anniversary of the terrible earthquake and tsunami that hit the northern Tohoku region with such devastation. So far away, but part of us, part of our country, and we remember. We honor and think on, we recall our dead, those who have been and gone. And we live now.

With that in mind it feels a bit irreverent to write this, but my personal news for today is about a personal triumph. I finally got back at Tanaka-san. I did it Diary, I did it! Oh don’t you start, I know I shouldn’t be calling you “Diary”, but it’s so much more fun when you’re a person. I like thinking that way and so let me indulge myself, okay? No not you, I let me indulge myself; I don’t really need to ask your permission. I am asking though, for what that’s worth or whatever that might mean.

Anyway, I did it. This is actually the second time – or the third if you count my abortive framing of him for murder – that I’ve been able to really repay that worm for the wrongs he’s done me by being the kind of man he is. Yes it’s true that he hasn’t actually done anything directly to me, but seeing him every day and having to put up with his mousiness, his docility, his excessive politeness and quietude – you know quite as well as I do that the man had
it coming. Has it coming really, he always has it coming. Simply seeing his face annoys me to no end.

My first revenge was when I took those photos of Sakaichi-san and put them in his locker where they were later “discovered”, that was great. It deeply embarrassed him and caused what had been Sakaichi-san’s basic aloofness to morph into an outright dislike, sometimes boiling over into hatred. That has since provided endless fun at lunchtimes as I watch Tanaka-san squirm whenever Sakaichi-san feels like putting the screws in.

Unfortunately though now that the two of them have started working in a pair this year opposite Matsumoto-san and I they seem to have found a way to get along. I couldn’t believe it either, but somehow they’ve apparently even started having fun going about their various tasks on the floors they’re assigned to. It’s so strange. I know Sakaichi-san’s not interested in him romantically – I’m kept much more informed than I want to be about her love life these days, though only from her and not Shoichiro – and maybe he’s found a way to live with or reduce the long-term crush on her that he’s had; whatever it may be, despite it all the two have become almost friends. Of a sort. At our lunches the bickering is gone and replaced with a lighthearted, good natured
chatting. It’s terrible. Disgusting. Matsumoto-san seems much more relaxed with the new atmosphere, but I can tell you Diary it’s far less entertaining. Far less. I can’t even egg Sakaichi-san on like I used to, she’s much too calm, too settled. Talk about boring. Don’t they know I need something?

Anyway, last time my revenge was psychological so this time I went for the physical, and it was so funny, it worked out perfectly. I noticed this morning when I was getting breakfast ready for the girls that there were some very old sashimi fish slices tucked away into a corner of the refrigerator behind the leftover curry Mom prepared for us as a special treat last night. The expiration date on the package was the eighth, and it also had a twenty-percent off sticker so whoever bought it must have gotten it after the supermarket staff had already marked it down to try and get rid of it before being forced to toss it out. That means it was probably packaged and placed for sale in the morning; it would already have sat on a shelf the whole day before finding its way to our place and thereafter getting lost in our kitchen. Nice and old. My guess is Dad picked it up on his way back from somewhere intending to eat it for dinner but was then presented with something else and so he left it where it
was and promptly forgot about it, letting the pack get buried by other plastic cases and foods that don’t spoil nearly as quickly. And that fish was spoiled, let me tell you. As soon as I picked up the box I could smell that, and the bile that rose from my stomach made me think of only one thing: Tanaka-san.

We already had plenty of fresh rice – Mom always sets the timer on the steamer to finish three cups by 5am – and I knew we had some fresh and good *sashimi* slices too because I bought a small set of locally caught Pacific bonito with garlic chips on my way home yesterday to go with the curry Mom told me she was making. There wasn’t much of that left, and we would easily have finished the bonito today before it spoiled if I hadn’t decided to use it. But I did. It was a flash of inspiration, it came to me in a moment and I knew just what to do. I wet my hands, rubbed a bit of salt into them, and rolled up four big, fresh rice balls, three with the good fish inside and one with the bad. Then I wrapped each in a thick strip of dried seaweed, making sure that Tanaka-san’s wrapping was slightly different – a little corner ripped off of one side – to make sure I could tell them apart. That was it, I was ready. Easy.

I know, I know Diary, bonito is not really a rice
ball choice, and putting fish in the center of a rice ball isn’t terribly common either, at least not the big slices that you get with *sashimi*. But I had a plan to cover that too: I would simply tell my co-workers I was experimenting with a new style for my girls and wondered if they’d be willing to try them and give me their opinions. Everyone likes to have food shared with them, and everyone likes rice balls. They’re as Japanese as sushi. And the best part was that the rotten pack Dad had forgotten about even had a couple pieces of bonito in it so it wasn’t like Tanaka-san would be getting anything noticeably different. At least not right away. And it worked, oh it worked like a charm.

Sakaichi-san and Matsumoto-san clearly enjoyed theirs and were very happy to have received them. Sakaichi-san even took it a bit too seriously and actually gave me some ideas for how I might better match the seaweed with the choice of fish in the center. I listened politely and pretended to be very interested in what she had to say but naturally kept a surreptitious eye on Tanaka-san. His reaction did not disappoint.

He ate it – he had to, it would have been so rude to decline – he finished the entire thing, and I got to watch his face turn a deeper and deeper blue as he did. He even told me it was delicious! Then about twenty minutes later
he suddenly said he needed to use the restroom and shot off. I imagined Shoichiro as he ran. I didn’t see Tanaka-san come back during the full lunch break, and Sakaichi-san told me later he kept racing to the toilet all afternoon. I coyly asked if she thought my rice balls had anything to do with it – feigning surprise, worry, concern and whatnot; I deserve an academy award for that performance – but she kindly reassured me it couldn’t possibly have been them. It must have been something he ate for breakfast, or maybe something from his own lunch. How I hope he’s still sick tomorrow!
2020, March 21 (Saturday)

Manae and Terako had dinner with Shoichiro today, the first in our new arrangement where they’ll meet him every third Saturday of the month. I got the impression he would have liked more time with them, probably the whole day or getting together every other week or something instead of once a month, but he hasn’t said so directly, and since he certainly knows where my parents’ house is he could easily drop by to see them but doesn’t. Maybe he’s being careful, maybe he’s enjoying his single life. I’ve decided not to care.

Mom offered to drive us to the Chinese place on the corner of the Minami-Mama strip’s shopping street but I told her we’d take the bus, maybe I’d call later if we needed a ride home. It was kind of her, and I did end up asking that she pick us up afterwards, but on the way there I wanted to be alone with the girls. I needed to explain to them once more that their dad and I still love them both very much no matter what’s going on between the two of us. To be honest, I think I felt like I had to say that mostly for myself, to simply put it out there, acknowledge it, reaffirm it. Manae and Terako have heard me give that same speech many times over the past year or so, and they barely listened today. For me it became a sort of ritual, a
necessary preparatory rehearsal prior to seeing “him”. It was a personal reminder that pretended to pass through the girls, a shoring up of my heart. Before today I hadn’t seen Shoichiro since New Year’s, and I was strangely very nervous. Imagine going to meet your ex-husband – and on top of that with what happened last time I had no idea what to expect.

The whole bus ride over as I babbled on and on and Manae and Terako acted like they were paying attention I kept thinking that I wanted to keep a bit of distance, that maybe when we got there I wouldn’t even see him at all, or only just for a moment. I had zero intention of eating with them. But then as we got closer I realized I didn’t know how I feel, that I still don’t know – or even really know the way to feel – when it comes to that man. I love him, but of course I also hate him. How in the world can you reconcile a package of emotions like that? I’d like to be with him if only he weren’t him, and then I have to admit I still allow myself to drift back into fantasies of mixing up some more poison and slipping it into one of his drinks. The only difference between my mental murder now and when I was actually planning it is that these days I’m aware it’s merely a daydream – most of the time, anyway. Some of the time I think I’m serious.

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What I am is a full-time wreck.

Maybe I should let them be together more, Shoichiro and our girls, maybe at the least more often than once a month. I know how unfair it is to drag the girls into this emotional cauldron I’ve been living in, but there’s no good way to separate them from me and from Shoichiro, the poor things, we’re all in this mess together. My mess, his mess. No, only his. He’s the root cause – I can’t ever forget that – he made me leave him, if he weren’t such a waste of a man I would have stayed, I would have been happy. I could have been. He could have made me happy. That was his job, and he failed. The bastard. He’s made us all miserable but I can’t help still having feelings for him. I will get over him though, I will – I hope.

I had a glimmer of that tonight, that getting over. Almost. He was waiting outside for us by the restaurant’s entrance and when I first saw him I very nearly felt nothing, I was very close to being on an even keel. But then he said hello and smiled at the girls and went and ruined everything. As soon as I heard his voice I was flooded with too much to sort out. I told Manae to text me when they were ready and got away as quickly as I could. I walked a few blocks up the street towards a ramen noodle shop I used to like, but before I even arrived I had
completely lost it. I had to hide myself in a little residential side street that shot off at an angle from the main one, trying desperately to disappear against a concrete wall next to a vending machine in a tiny three-space parking lot. I buried my face in my hands and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, it was so humiliating. Kochi is far too small a place; I felt exposed and surveilled in my utter helplessness, someone you know is always looking here.

I tried to stifle my wails but that only turned them into halting whimpers, throaty ones, half exhaled and irrepresible, coming out in gasps. I knew my face would look distorted from the tears, that seldom used muscles would be pulled in all manner of directions, my eyes and forehead ripped out of position. Everyone would know I had been crying. I had to wash my face, I had to put it back into public order, I had to conceal, I had to breathe. I couldn’t though, not properly. I howled. Actually howled, the grief and frustration and anger and regret and – yes – determination poured out of me. As silently as possible I howled for the loss, for what was, for what could no longer be, for this thing that felt like a death, an irreplaceable hollow, a torn out chunk of the me that was me-and-Shoichiro: lovers since high school, wife and
husband, mother and father. Two but one, a half remaining. I am become half. A rotted discard, a buried and decayed left behind. I wished I were dead. I still do, maybe.

I’m no killer no, I’m a death-wisher. For myself. No one would miss me, no one needs me, I have nothing and offer nothing to no one, nothing to everyone. What I do is clean, eat, read, watch TV. Anyone could do that, and do it better. My daughters don’t need me, they have my parents, two people with so much more going, and so better put together. Oh my beautiful girls, I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I’ve stolen their Papa from them, I’ve sent him away and he’s got somebody else now. Somebody else, somebody Sakaichi-san. It’s my fault. I did everything, the broken parts fell just so.

I don’t know how he can love her, but he does. I honestly have no idea what he sees in her. Sakaichi-san? Are you joking? She’s pretty, she’s bubbly, but she’s got the depth of a kitchen sink. But then so does Shoichiro. I hate that man so much. He has completely undone everything he’s ever touched. I won’t let him destroy our girls. No, the one thing that I can do is to protect them. And I will, that’s the one power I have.

Maybe that’s my role, enough to keep me going, enough to keep me living. They can see him fine, but only
once a month. I know they need him in some ways, or anyway need to have him there, just to feel normal, just to be like the other kids. But I won’t give in on more than that. No way, I’ve got to shield them, I do. What if he marries Sakaichi-san and she becomes their step-mother? Goodness, think about holidays spent with them. Their two terrible faces, twisted up with drinking and imbecilic laughter. Not me, I wouldn’t go. No, I couldn’t, I couldn’t.

It’s too much, I have to stop. I can’t write, can’t think, can’t feel. I can only feel. This anger, I know it’s just a defense. But I don’t know what gets into me. I’m so useless. Why can’t it all make sense? What is this life for?

I left the parking lot and walked on to the Tsutaya video store across from the supermarket, I knew its public toilets are by the rear entrance and no one could see me if I slipped in to clean up my face and try to regain a bit of composure. I made every effort to duck the whole way there, keeping off the main street, staying away from the lampposts and cars’ headlights. Shadows, dark. I am dark, I am naught.

I made it, no one saw me, I locked the door on the disabled access toilet, I was alone, private. I rearranged myself, I did the best I could, I left. I breathed in, out, I pushed everything down, deep down inside. I was normal,
just a woman out for a walk. I had a bowl of noodles. I sat at the counter and flipped forlornly through a magazine while I waited for Manae to let me know they had finished. I was normal, so normal, merely one person eating. I sent Mom a text and asked her to pick us up in their car; I couldn’t bear to wait for the next bus. I heard from Manae and made my way back.

I didn’t even look at Shoichiro when I met them again in front of the restaurant. I couldn’t. It’s over. I know it, but I don’t. I caught a pensiveness in his eye as I avoided him. I can’t admit it but there was a hope in me. He’s with Sakaichi-san, maybe, but he was always mine. I know him better than anyone, better than she ever will. I know what makes him tick, I know how to make him tick, how to jump and dance. He could be on my strings again. It’s over, but maybe not. Maybe I don’t want it to be. And if I don’t…

Well I don’t know, maybe this time I overdid it. I pushed him too far. Maybe there has been too much, too much of everything over this past year. I guess I’ll find out next month when the girls and him get together again. I’ll ask them to tell me what he said about me tonight. I’ll be clever. But I have to be careful, our little ones have been through enough already, I can’t let them think for one
minute that I’m going to drag them into more drama with their Mama and Papa, not when things are finally settled and stable and safe and they both seem so happy, so content. Not now, no.

Next weekend we’re going for a night at an *onsen* hot springs resort down in what was Nakamura – it’ll be my treat, a gift from me to Manae, to Terako, to Mom and Dad. The town and its former neighboring villages have been incorporated and are called Shimanto City these days, but it’s still quiet, still a sleepy and sunny small city, unbelievably pretty and right on the coast, scenic and subdued. No one needs a little time away like we do, like I do. I can forget about everything, especially me.
2020, March 30 (Monday)

Nakamura was a disaster. Well it wasn’t a disaster, but it was a mess. The *onsen* resort was nice, the room was comfortable, the baths great, food very good, and we were surrounded by the relaxed atmosphere that we – I – so needed. Nothing was wrong with any of that. The rides down and back were okay too; Mom drove most of the way, only letting Dad take the wheel for a half hour or so all told. Their car is small, a little Honda Vamos ultra minivan and so with the three of us lined up on the backseat it was a tight squeeze, but the trip takes less than three hours one way even driving as slowly as my parents do and of course we took plenty of breaks to stretch our legs and get some roadside snacks. None of that was a problem. What was a problem happened when we were there, and it was entirely about Dad.

I still really can’t believe it, and after the way Mom reacted I’m a bit worried about her now too. As if I didn’t have enough on my mind. No you’re right Diary, I’m sorry about that. It’s not about me; I know, I know. It’s about family, it’s about my parents, and I’ve got to do what I can for them. It might finally be my time to grow up, to stop obsessing about myself, to give back a little. I’ve received too much not to.

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We got there and checked in on Saturday afternoon with everything fine up to that point. I couldn’t afford two rooms, but the one we got was big enough and honestly it was nice to be together. Fortuitous even, and possibly a lifesaver for Dad as it turned out. Our room was visually – but not structurally – split into a dining section and a sleeping section: six straw mats for eating and about eight or nine for resting with a sliding door between that we just left open the whole time. There was a nice low and long wooden table in the dining area with a set of the little seat-and-back-only legless types of chairs that are used when you’re supposed to be sitting on the floor. That was a nice touch for my parents; even though they grew up only sitting on the floor for basically everything outside of school their backs are not what they used to be, and having something to lean against is a big help for them. Manae and Terako enjoyed those too, I think they got a kick out of the novelty since we’ve never owned any.

Our dinner that night and breakfast the next morning were spent right there, with the food brought to our room inside lovely lacquer trays, a full kaiseki course for dinner and a miniature version for breakfast. Lots of local fish, which Dad loved. Everything was done for us, right down to the staff setting out our futon mats in the
bedroom area while we were in the baths. We each had a single sized one, and they really were quite nice, very soft and very warm. With the beds out we didn’t have much space left but that hardly mattered, between our time soaking and then Dad, Mom, and I having some beers and cups of saké and the girls a big glass of milk each, after a couple of hours watching TV with our robes on we were more than ready to sleep. At least, I thought we were.

Dad, as it turns out, wasn’t. At some point after we were all asleep – him included – he got up and decided to head out on the town for a nightcap. Of course no one knew anything about this until much later. Mom was the first to realize he was gone when she woke to use the toilet and found him missing in the dead of night, but instead of doing the sensible thing and waking me to at least tell me what was going on she went out too, I heard the door shut as she left.

Shaken awake like that I was too groggy to know what was happening at first, but after a few minutes I found my phone and called Mom to ask what in the world was going on. She told me she was looking for Dad and to go back to sleep. How could I possibly go back to sleep after hearing that she was “looking for Dad”? I made her stay on the line and tell me exactly what was happening.
She said that she didn’t know where he was, that he had left his phone in the room, and that she was wandering around the resort searching for him. I told her to come back immediately. She refused, insisted on keeping to her so-called patrol, and hung up. About a half hour later she did return, but by that time I was beside myself with anxiety, fully dressed and pacing back and forth next to our dining table.

As soon as Mom was inside I asked her to stay with the girls, who thankfully were sleeping through the whole thing, and ran out to the nearest police station. I filed a full report, gave a full description, and then – because I have always been of the opinion that the police are mostly useless – I went in search of Dad myself, though I hardly knew how. Or where. I walked up and down the street our hotel was on, entering and exiting every place I could find that was open, scanning the customers, worrying, worrying, worrying. I desperately felt like calling Shoichiro.

About another hour later the police phoned to inform me they had found him and that he was with them at the station, they said I would need to go and sign some papers before he could leave. I was wrong to doubt them, and never have I been so glad to be mistaken about a
presumed incompetence. I won’t forget that.

When I got to the station there Dad was, sitting in a chair and chatting with one of the officers, a cup of tea in his hand, like he was having the time of his life, still wearing his pajamas – silly hotel robe and all. He looked like an unimaginable buffoon, a public drunkard, a ruined old man whom you wouldn’t expect to have his full set of teeth if you caught a glimpse of the inside of his mouth, or to be clean-shaven if you took in his face. He appeared homeless; it was so embarrassing.

Relieved, grateful, humiliated, angry, I could barely contain myself and after repeatedly telling the officer with him how thankful I was while hurriedly doing their paperwork I ushered Dad outside as gently but as forcefully as I could. I marched him back to our hotel – it was only about a ten minute walk – and hissed at him the whole time. What did he think he was doing? He worried us sick. He was acting like an idiot, he looked like an idiot, had he lost his mind?

Dad just put up with it good-naturedly, he didn’t seem to think anything was remotely amiss, and he certainly didn’t feel any need to defend himself. He had gone out for a little drink, what’s wrong with that? he said. He couldn’t recall the way he’d come or the name of our
hotel, but the local tavern he stumbled upon was so nice, he made some new friends and was having a great night until the police showed up and suddenly took him to the station. He couldn’t understand why anyone would be worried. That actually made me panic the most, that he couldn’t understand the problem.

We got to our room and I put Dad back in bed. Mom was sleeping again. She was actually sleeping again. I couldn’t believe it – how could she have fallen asleep with her husband missing, minus his phone, not even properly dressed, in a city we don’t live in and in the middle of the night? She should have been beside herself. I was. I still am.

Dad started snoring almost right away so I knew he’d be fine, and he certainly seemed too drunk to get up again, that much was clear. To be extra careful I still piled some of the chairs in front of the door before lying down myself between Manae and Terako in the half of the room opposite my parents, trying to work out what in heaven’s name had just happened. I replayed the whole thing mentally, start to finish, and saw even more clearly how deeply upsetting both of my parents’ behavior was. They were not acting right. They weren’t themselves, and they clearly weren’t being very responsible. Mom had always
taken good care of Dad, for her to simply doze off while he was missing was terribly wrong. Dad had always taken good care of himself, for him to go missing, to not tell anyone, to not remember his phone or even dress himself – that was unthinkable.

The next morning at breakfast no one said a word about anything. We put on our best faces. No, cross that out, I put on my best face but I’m convinced Mom and Dad didn’t need to because they somehow, in some bizarre and inexplicable way, acted like they couldn’t see the necessity. Dad ate like a horse and praised the miso soup, genmai unpolished rice, and the broiled mackerel as if they were gifts from above. He was less effusive about the rest of our dishes, but everyone could see he was enjoying them too. He was hungover, no doubt, but jovially so. Mom just laughed, getting a kick out of him, having a great time with her granddaughters. It was so odd, so perplexing, I even started to doubt myself. Was I wrong to be so upset? Wasn’t what had happened really very frightening? I couldn’t have imagined the whole thing, but the way they were behaving made me feel like I was stuck in a dream – or had only dreamt it on my own and was now returned to the real world. Nothing seemed right, and I spent the full way home more concerned than ever. I
didn’t want to let either of them drive, but I can’t myself – Shoichiro and I were never able to afford for me to attend a driving school and I didn’t want to take the money from my parents for that – and between the two of them at least it was Mom at the wheel and her cautious, incremental pace that got us back.

They both ought to see a doctor. It’s too weird, they’re too weird, I don’t know what’s going on. The whole situation, it just scares me. I have to get them checked, I have to force them to take whatever tests are necessary. They shouldn’t be on the roads, that much I can say. Dad definitely not. They probably shouldn’t even be left alone. Again, Dad definitely not. How would we manage that though? I’ve got to work and Mom’s got to go out and tend to the thousand household things that crop up each day. We don’t have much flexibility to maneuver our lifestyles around.

I spent all day at work trying to figure out how I can get them into a hospital. If they don’t – or won’t – see the necessity I’m not sure what I could really do. But I have to do something.
Another new school year, another term for Manae and Terako. They’re growing up so fast. I know it’s a cliché to say so Diary, but they really are. This will be Manae’s final year in elementary school; I still can’t believe it.

I couldn’t get work off to attend the opening ceremony again, but Mom took the girls and said that everything went smoothly. I would be very surprised if it didn’t: schools tend to run those ceremonies like clockwork, like a military drill, but it was still good to hear. I didn’t ask if Shoichiro was there or not, but then Mom didn’t mention seeing him and surely would have if he had been present. He probably forgot, not that it matters much. I suppose it might matter to the girls a bit, but neither of them remarked on wanting to meet him or made any indication of missing him. They’re stalwart, those two, and they seem fully and absolutely adjusted to the shape their lives have taken. Unbelievable resilience. I really do admire them: they’ve got a strength that I wish I had. In the end I’m sure the girls were both simply bored by the whole thing anyway, and whoever was there or wasn’t there left little impact on their day. I mean, who enjoys the rigmarole of standing, bowing, sitting, standing, bowing,
marching, and finally listening to the principal drone on listlessly about the upcoming year?

My mind has anyway been on Dad a lot more than the girls and their studies. They’ll be fine, I don’t need to worry about them. They’ll enjoy their new teachers, and for the most part their classmates will be the same as last year. Some new faces here and there, but our local school only has two sections for each grade – except for the fourth which has three – and so there isn’t that much mixing of the students between classes that the administration could do even if they wanted to. I was a little surprised by that when we moved here last year actually, I thought there were more kids in this area. I guess not.

Manae’s in the sixth dash one class and Terako’s in the second dash two. I remember how cute the class names were for their kindergarten years: Squirrel Class, Rabbit Class, Rose Class, Violet Class. I wish that creativity continued into the elementary years and beyond. Way back in my teenage years when I was still dreaming of becoming a teacher myself I read a book about schools in other countries and it said that for both elementary school buildings and for the classes in each grade clever and unique names were chosen that weren’t remotely
related to the geographical area or the second-of-three kind of organizational structures that Japan uses. What’s wrong with us? Honestly Diary, this country can be so boring at times.

But back to Dad. I finally convinced him to see a doctor this morning and we went to the big National Hospital in the nearby Asakura part of town. I had to go with him of course, and I had to pretend that I was there for a general check-up too so he wouldn’t think there was anything specifically wrong with him, although there certainly is. He’s so strange about that, he’s convinced – probably due to Mom’s influence – that medical doctors are quacks only out for money, meaning that even on the rare occasion when he admits he’s genuinely sick he’ll only go to a traditional kampo powder Chinese medicine place. He thinks any Western treatment would only make him worse – and naturally much poorer. The man is usually pretty easy to get along with but on this point he’s incredibly stubborn. In the end though I got him there, and he did grudgingly go through the tests and even consented to having his blood drawn.

After it was finished the doctor asked to speak with me privately and confirmed what I had dreaded: dementia. It’s still in the early stages, probably, and the
doctor did say he wanted a specialist to check on everything and confirm the diagnosis he arrived at, and hopefully too to rule out a more serious version of the disease like Alzheimer’s. For now what he would only say is that it’s broadly one form of dementia. I’m sure he would know though because he must see a lot of cases. It’s in the news all the time these days, about how greying Japan is getting fuller and fuller of seniors with cognitive problems and related issues as the population tilts ever more elderly. I suppose in some ways we Japanese might live too long for our own good. Some people my age even kill their own parents after spending years caring for them; they just crack under the stress, maybe the cost. That won’t be me, I’ll do absolutely everything I can for Dad, and that starts with getting him to a specialist. The next big challenge.

I told Mom what the doctor said but she just scoffed at it. She replied I was getting worked up over nothing, that Dad’s gotten a bit forgetful, that it’s normal and he’s fine. I shouldn’t worry and I definitely shouldn’t be wasting any money on doctors and hospitals. Preying on the sick is the number one pastime of big business, she added. I hear you Diary and I agree, it sounds crazy but that really is her point of view. The “number one pastime”
– as if treating people could ever be a pastime. I have no idea what to do about Mom. She should probably have the same tests done on her to be on the safe side, especially since she drives as much as she does. And that’s another thing that’s been in the news a lot: elderly drivers mistaking the gas for the brake and running their cars into people on sidewalks or into the exteriors of buildings. Japan is falling apart; I really should watch less of the news, it only gives me stress.

I feel lost. We have to be sure about what kind of help Dad needs and then we have to be sure that he gets it. I don’t know if I can do that on my own, but I don’t know if I can trust Mom to do what’s necessary either. Not if her attitude stays the way it is now.

I won’t make it without her support and cooperation, beginning with convincing Dad to visit a specialist, and then with whatever myriad things are called for after that. I can’t deal with her resistance, not on this. It’s too big; I’m overwhelmed, depressed to be honest. But I have to make it happen; my parents need me, even if they don’t realize that yet.

Maybe it’s for their best and not ours that the girls and I ended up living here. I never could have imagined anything remotely like this way back when I was thinking
about divorcing Shoichiro – something that now feels like eons ago – my mind was only on me and what would be in the girls’ long term interest. I didn’t spare a second for Mom and Dad. Yet there you have it, look at what has happened, see how life has unfolded. Another surprise, another twist, and the pieces of my past line up just so, it almost looks like it was planned. I’m here to save them, the way they saved me. The big wheel of family turns again, the big wheel of fate. We’ve always been in this game together, and I won’t let them down; tomorrow I’ll call a family meeting and I’ll make them see my way. I will. We’ll get Dad his help, we’ll do it, we’ll coalesce as one and we’ll make it happen. It’s on me to start us off and I’ll do it, I’ll do everything. This is why my whole past year has been like it was, I’ve been brought to this here now for this very purpose and I won’t fail, no way. Not again, no never.
2020, April 05 (Sunday)

It was a miracle, an absolute miracle: my mother listened to me. It wasn’t only down to me of course, it’s not like I was a persuasive speaker or anything – I know myself better than that Diary –, instead it was that she had already been thinking about what I told her the doctor said, she apparently spent all night turning it over and over, and when she woke up this morning she knew it was something that couldn’t just be ignored. I guess you could say she was mentally prepared for what I had to tell everyone in our little family meeting, and that internal foundation was probably what caused our breakthrough. But thank goodness and I’ll take it, because I feel like an already too heavy load has gotten a bit lighter.

Manae and Terako didn’t really know what to make of everything, and although I tried explaining about dementia and mental issues the fact of the matter is I hardly know anything myself, only what the doctor said and what I was able to read online. What they did clearly understand is that Grandpa is sick and needs help. He needs help now and will certainly continue to, more and more and more as his symptoms progress.

But I admit I may be getting ahead of myself. It might not be dementia, it might be something less severe
or possibly something else entirely. The doctor could have been wrong, he himself recommended we see a specialist first before doing anything else. Goodness I hope whatever it is it’s not Alzheimer’s. To be frank I doubt that it isn’t some kind of dementia – something is definitely going on with him – and I think everyone else doubts that it’s nothing too. His actions, behavior, even speech, it looks too much like dementia; I’m sure that’s why the doctor tentatively made the same call too. As for what Mom and Dad make of this, they’re potentially coming around, or anyway at least approaching the idea of needing to see a specialist. “Approaching the idea” – maybe that’s a good way to put it since despite Mom’s openness she’s not there yet. As for Dad…

Let me explain: We had our meeting, I shared with everyone exactly what the doctor told me and what I’ve noticed the past few months, my own worries and concerns about Dad. Mom immediately added that she had some of the same concerns, but wasn’t convinced that only seeing one doctor would be enough. I cut in and agreed, I used that as a segue to suggest as soon as possible – this week or next at the latest – we get an appointment with the specialist that yesterday’s doctor mentioned. I have the letter of introduction from him so we won’t have to pay
any additional registration fees at the next hospital; and I made a purposely big deal out of that last point because I know what my parents think about the healthcare industry and money. Mom grudgingly accepted that, but she still didn’t want to rush into anything. She said she would prefer to keep an eye on Dad for another month or two and see what happens. I argued that if it is – “if it is” only to be diplomatic – if it is dementia then leaving it untreated would only make it worse and it’s better to know right away. Mom pursed her lips but said she’d think about it. Maybe score one for me.

Dad, for his part, was surprisingly quiet and non-defensive while we talked about him, he looked like he was both having trouble taking it in and wondering what the fuss was about. From his point of view he must think everything is fine, naturally he wouldn’t notice that his own behavior has been odd, and if he does have dementia then anyway he couldn’t notice it much either. He’d probably recognize that he’s less able to do what he had always done, and that in turn would probably frustrate him, but his brain wouldn’t work well enough in the right ways, in the right functions, to really be capable of assessing the whole picture. And I can’t imagine how terrible that must feel. He seemed to understand that we’re
worried about him, and he looked moved by that, but I’m not sure how much he’d admit to, or whether or not he’ll agree to the decisions we’re going to have to make. And there will be decisions – many of them.

If I can convince Mom to at least commit to getting him to see the specialist we’ve been recommended that would be a start. A necessary start. After that I guess we’ll need to – I’ll need to – take it step by step. One thing at a time and grab what victories I can. I really hope Dad doesn’t try and fight me on this; I found a discussion group on a dementia website I was browsing and it seems like older men often do. They can have trouble accepting the fullness of what’s going on inside their bodies, don’t want to see and so don’t, and that only adds to how their pride gets in the way. Men and their pride – honestly, they can be so tiring. Some of the women posting in the forum I read remarked how their husbands were able to get through to their sick fathers much better than they were, that the fathers seemed to take it better when it was coming from another man. In my case that’s not possible, not unless I want to try and enlist Shoichiro’s help, which I don’t. I don’t even have time for Shoichiro anymore, this is going to take everything I have.

I need to face this, but I can also see my life
disappearing into it. It’s not like I had any big dreams or goals left – I gave those up years ago – but I was starting to think the girls and I might at least get our own place again, even if we do stay in the area to be close to my parents and above all to avoid having to put Manae and Terako into yet another new school. I was also toying with the idea of waiting a year for Manae to finish elementary school and then moving – and maybe if so a bit further out. She’s the one I really worry about; Terako can adjust to anything. Manae heading into junior high would have been the perfect break to allow for a fresh start.

I indulged myself in a couple of fantasies about going back to school for something as well, getting some training and qualification, maybe even earn a full degree and a teacher’s license once we’re clear of Shoichiro’s debt. I know our local university has a night program I could attend and still work during the day, it wouldn’t cover the teacher’s license part but it would at least lead to a Bachelor’s of Arts. The girls would need to be old enough to be okay on their own a few extra hours in the evenings for me to do that. I even considered actually leaving Kochi and trying life in a different city. Imagine that: this hometown girl getting on a Kobe subway line or something every day. I know how unrealistic those flights
of fancy are Diary, but don’t blame me for my fun. It’s possible that I might have had a life of my own too, right? Well it doesn’t matter, what has happened has happened and here we are and I’ll deal with it, like I always have. It will take everything though.

Shoichiro is with Sakaichi-san. I still can’t get clear about whether I want him or not, but even if I did there doesn’t seem much chance of that so it’s best to just close the question off. He might be a little help with Dad if I asked but probably not. Shoichiro has always felt intense pressure from his own dad, and the need to live up to his expectations – despite constant failure – has pretty much ruined any ability he may have had to get along with older men. It’s a wonder they can work together; I’m sure Shoichiro simply keeps his head down every day. That also must be why he stays at the job despite his own culinary dreams; his goals must be dead by now too.

He and my dad were always polite with each other but they never bonded. Maybe it’s for the best, this whole mess. It gives me a more realistic picture of how much I’ll have to carry. The entire thing is on my shoulders, and the most I can hope for is that Mom pitch in as she can, as she takes it in her own stride in her own way. If she stays healthy enough, that is. Goodness, things
just keep piling on, don’t they? Life and its demands, life and its commands. I guess I’ll bend again; I’ll put myself into the shape and form that’s being required of me. Future plans? Wishes? Those are for little girls, and I grew up a long time ago.
2020, April 11 (Saturday)

It isn’t Alzheimer’s, thankfully. Thankfully! The specialist doesn’t know what form of degeneration it is exactly, but Dad’s symptoms are all dementia related even though they aren’t specifically Alzheimer’s itself. He – I hear you Diary, doctors are always men and it’s so tiring – confirmed what I’ve read that “dementia” is really more of a broad label given to a lot of different illnesses that each result in general and – unfortunately – irreversible mental decline. What Dad has we can’t call by this or that name, but it is dementia of some kind, or anyway it falls under the dementia umbrella, and it’s going to get worse.

Because of those unknowns the doctor could only give us a prescription for a few general medicines. Without being able to pinpoint a particular subtype that was the best he could do, he said. He added that we might try another specialist, or we could wait and see: take the drugs he’s offering now and pay attention to what happens. We’ll have to get a follow-up done in six months’ time anyway, and depending on how things go the doctor – Doctor Okuyama is his name – would be able to change the prescription then. Everything depends on Dad and how his body responds to the medicines. That plan seems best to me, and I’m not sure that the added expense of another
specialist would be worth it as we’d almost certainly get the same answer. I’ll consult with Mom on it though, at least one more opinion definitely couldn’t hurt.

The vagueness around Dad’s mental trouble is apparently a fairly common problem, at least here in Japan anyway. Doctor Okuyama told me most seniors who get diagnosed with dementia simply have to be deal with it, which of course means their families simply have to deal with it, which in turn essentially means babysitting the sick person around the clock. If we had more money we could hire a trained caretaker to come and look after Dad – somebody with the right experience and knowledge – but we don’t. On the other hand we don’t really need to, Mom is retired and home with him most of the time as it is. She’s no professional of course, but for now while Dad’s still relatively healthy she should be able to handle things. Most of the time.

And that’s the real rub of it, so to speak: time. Dad needs someone nearby all the time, absolutely all the time. Nothing might happen – probably nothing ever – or something terrible might. Who can say? These stories that are on the news nowadays: a person with dementia of whatever sort gets confused and stands around in the street or on a train track. Usually somebody helps them out of
the way to safety, but what if no one else is around? Tragedy – and it happens, it does. Or let’s say Dad, or anyone like him, decides to go to the shop, a totally normal thing, and then ends up lost. That has already happened to Dad and I feel like we were very lucky he had the wherewithal to call Mom for directions. Then he went and did one worse by wandering off in the middle of the night on our trip to Shimanto. We were really lucky then. What next? He could fall down the stairs, anything around the house like that could turn deadly. Goodness, it’s like having a toddler underfoot again, only more dangerous because Dad’s so much more capable of hurting himself after a lifetime of doing the things he felt like doing but is now suddenly incapable of doing. Who knows what could happen at any time. It’s the most unbearable sort of stress; I don’t even want to think about it. But I have to, I have to.

I’m glad we went though, I really am. In the end it wasn’t that hard to get Dad to agree to the extra tests. He can see how worried we are, and whether or not my explanations got through to him in a way he could grasp my concern certainly did. Mom’s too. She even went and had herself checked out, and the silver lining in this giant mess is that Mom is still in great shape, no problems whatsoever, not even her cholesterol or blood pressure or
anything. Given the way she drinks that’s a real relief. The only thing now – the “only” thing now – is figuring out how best, and safest, to handle Dad.

I’ve already told them that the girls and I will keep living here for as long as they need us, and the part that I didn’t want to say out loud, and neither did Mom, is that we both know “as long as they need us” means for the rest of Dad’s life. Dad might realize that too, he probably gets it to at least some extent or other, but he hasn’t said very much and I can’t get inside his head to find out. The poor man, his world has collapsed. How would I react? How would you Diary?

Mom appreciated my offer and accepted it, albeit reluctantly. She had to, she recognizes that she’ll need the help. I know she doesn’t want us to give anything up for them, and I love her for that, but she’s also come around to accepting how much work this will be, and how much uncertainty remains. Those terrifying question marks.

She won’t stop her poetry reading nights with her comrades at the pub, and I don’t blame her. That outlet will be her lifeline: nearly every minute of every hour it’ll be her that has to keep an eye on Dad, and when she doesn’t it will fall to me. We’ll arrange our schedules, take it day by day. Right now Dad’s still in the early stages so
we have some time to adjust before his memory, motor skills, and concentration seriously decline as his confusion grows. Like I said, we simply have to keep an eye on him – always. He’s started his road to death. It’s so terrible to think that way; my dad, my Papa, I don’t want to lose him. I will, we will, naturally we know that and always have, but now we’re forced to face it a lot sooner than any of us would have liked. It might be in five years, it might be ten, but this thing – whatever it is – it will take him, sooner or later it will.

It’s this big wheel, you know? Life. I really can’t understand any of it. We’re born without ever being asked what we think about that, and then we grow up somewhere and get pushed into what society wants us to be, we get shoved into some kind of labor force, we struggle and strive to get the money we need for the basics, and all we can do about any of it is try to find some joy and peace along the way. We look for the little things. And then we have our own kids and plaster them into the same situations in some kind of disgusting self-medicating, stealing meaning for our own meaninglessness by creating more humans.

What on earth for? I certainly don’t know. I didn’t plan anything that happened to me, and the plans that I did
make didn’t amount to a bowl of rice. Basically nothing in my life went the way I wanted it to. But then I look at Manae and Terako, and you know what? I immediately feel like it was worth it. Every second, every moment, every tiny drop in the great river of time’s flowing that I went through. They’re gems, they’re diamonds: my whole universe. And I know my parents look at me that way. I have no idea why they only had one kid, I would have had another if Shoichiro were a better man or we could have afforded it.

Oh he’s not that bad, I shouldn’t be so hard on him. He wasn’t up to being a father again though, and I couldn’t do it on my own. At least, I thought I couldn’t. Maybe I could have; it’s too late now. There were those days back at New Year’s… Well life, it just happens, and we merely go along with it. Who can say anything more than that? Fate, it’s fate, like I’ve always said. Goodness, I haven’t had that thought for months. I’ve been so caught up in being tossed through life I haven’t had a chance to stop and take a look at it.

It’s my journey though, and I feel like it’s mine and it’s something to protect, to defend. Nobody can tell me otherwise. Matsumoto-san, she said the rudest thing yesterday, I couldn’t believe it. We were cleaning the

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toilets together on the fourth floor and she mentioned that I’ve seemed distracted lately but that she didn’t blame me given what’s going on in my personal life. I didn’t know what to say so I just agreed with her, but inside I was fuming. I’m still upset. What does she know about my personal life? And who does she think she is to comment on it like that? She’s probably been talking to Sakaichi-san, who knows what Shoichiro has told her. That man could never keep a secret about anything. Except his three loans, the bastard.

I suppose I have to assume my details are out, that what I’d rather my coworkers didn’t know about me they do know or will come to know. What rotten luck. Even Tanaka-san will learn things about me now, that little rat. I never should have introduced those two, between them it’s like having a walking loudspeaker in my life. Shoichiro and Sakaichi-san, what a pair. Thank goodness no one knows my really dark secrets, no one but you Diary. Can I trust you with them? I hope so, but maybe I need to be sure.

Anyway I have much bigger issues to focus on than any worries about coworkers. Dad is sick, he won’t get better, he needs help, he needs attention, he needs care. He does today and will tomorrow. That’s my world, I’m
not orbiting around only myself and the girls anymore, this solar system of me has gotten bigger and my options have gotten fewer. Not like they were ever very many. Life, it just keeps rolling along and we keep spinning with it. Unfolding; I won’t say flowering.

Let Matsumoto-san think whatever she wants to, I don’t care. She might not have anything better to keep her mind on, and if she doesn’t then lucky her. I have my own problems. I’m sure she meant well but she certainly crossed a line. Now I know to be even quieter with her. It doesn’t matter, I’m there to do my job and collect my pay; I don’t need anything more from work. Home: that’s my focus, as it always has been. My family needs me, and I need them. I’ve needed them to need me, that was missing, and now they really do – but of course I wish they didn’t; not like this at least. I guess I’ve found my place, if only Dad didn’t have to get sick for that to happen.
It’s been a while Diary, over a month, I’m sorry about that. I’ve wanted to connect of course – you’re such a dear friend – but one thing has led to another. You know how it is. I wish we could meet in person, but then you’re only a bound pile of paper and that’s impossible. Still, it sometimes feels as if… Well I’ll take what I can, what you offer; I’m grateful for that.

We’re slowly adjusting at home here, and it’s been something of a struggle. It’s hard to tell for sure but Dad seems to be getting worse faster than I thought he would, although maybe I was overly optimistic when all this got underway. Possibly naïve. It’s such a strange disease – grouping of diseases – dementia; not even a proper “disease” as I told you before, it’s a general term for any number of symptoms related to mental decline. Apparently those could hit anybody, but maybe a person’s genetics are involved somehow; very little about any cause or causes appears to be clear. I guess in the past people simply didn’t live long enough for these things to manifest in the numbers required to garner enough research attention, it’s only lately that doctors and brain scientists are really looking into it. I wonder what they’ll find. I hope they find something. Dad isn’t even that old yet but

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he’s facing this, and being with him day by day I can see any sharpness he had is for the most part already gone. It’s such a shame; it’s a tragedy to watch the person you’ve known and loved your whole life simply melt away.

He has his good days, but recently most have been bad, then worse. I don’t want to wait for the scheduled six month follow-up; I’d like Doctor Okuyama to see him right away. Maybe the medicines Dad’s been taking don’t agree with him for whatever reason. Or maybe it’s something more serious. Maybe it is Alzheimer’s and we simply missed it the first time around. I have to know, but I also have to be patient – it isn’t only my decision to make.

Aside from the help I give in keeping an eye on him, Mom has taken over Dad’s care. She’s actually insisted on taking over, and hasn’t brooked much from me in the way of input. He has become her latest project; all that energy she used to pour into the Party has been shifted into him, his care, progress, routines. The fact that Dad doesn’t chafe at the extra attention more than he has only goes to show how reduced he is, how much his trouble or weakness – his fragility – has set in. Most of the time he seems like a lost child, barely aware of what’s going on, a little scared. That look in his eyes, that wondering,
apprehensive look – I can’t stand it. Whenever I see it cross his face childhood memories of my Papa reading to me, explaining things to me, helping me with school, asking how my day was, listening to me chatter about friends and worries and silliness and homework, test scores, lunches, recesses – those details that fill any child’s day – they come rushing back and it’s heartbreaking to compare the man before me now with the man so central in each of them.

We wanted to take a little family trip the beginning of this month for the string of public holidays collectively called by the weird name “Golden Week” – this year the dates fell so that Saturday to Wednesday was time off – but in the end Mom and I chose not to risk anything happening with Dad while we were away and settled on a day trip instead. It was okay. We took Mom and Dad’s car – just Mom’s now, I guess – up to Takamatsu City and did some browsing in the Marugame shopping arcade and also the Kawaramachi building by the central train station there. It was nice enough as far as the day went, but one constant depressant was how docilely Dad went along with everything, stopping at each store that caught one of our eyes and then simply finding a place to sit and wait until Mom or the girls or I were ready.
That made it easy but also really sad; Dad always used to complain about the way we shopped, and I actually missed that. It was kind of like he wasn’t there.

The girls didn’t seem to notice, they were too caught up with being in a real city. Good for them, it warmed my heart to see their smiles. Manae found a pair of shoes she wanted – purple and black of all colors – and Terako picked out a cute toy makeup set and magazine based on a girls’ band she likes. For myself I got a fun tee shirt from Zara which will probably become a pajama top but I still like it. It has one of those American “Sesame Street” puppets on it, a blue one with a big open mouth and wearing some kind of helmet and cape like a superhero. Mom very uncharacteristically splurged on a ceramic tea set from one place and then a hardbound bright red notebook from the stationary and bookstore where Terako got her magazine with the toy attached.

Ever since Dad got sick and we committed to living with Mom and Dad – and I mean fully committed, ever since I stopped thinking about it as being temporary and gave up saving for us to get our own apartment again – since then I don’t worry so much about money. We just bought what we liked on our trip, which wasn’t a lot but it still felt nice to be able to do that. It took some convincing
but Mom finally agreed to let me pool our family resources so that everything is together now and much easier to manage that way. Their retirement and pension incomes do go into a separate bank account from my pay, but I’ve put myself in charge of the household budgeting and I run it completely as one. I’m – we’re – still paying for Shoichiro’s interest on the loan he took out in my name, but that’s become such a normal monthly expense that I hardly notice it anymore.

We just saw him too. This past Saturday was the third of the month and his time with Manae and Terako. He looked healthier than the last time I saw him, his skin had a kind of glow to it. I might have been jealous about that once, but in the moment I was a little happy for him. He asked about Dad – Terako told him he’s sick – and I explained as briefly as I could, really only saying that he has dementia. He responded sympathetically but didn’t offer to help in any way. I don’t mind.

I also pointedly told him not to relate anything about Dad to Sakaichi-san and he nodded his consent. I asked how his work was, he said fine, no changes. He asked about mine and I replied with the same. It was all very light, almost formal. I think I might be getting over him. He might be becoming merely one more person in
my life – no longer *the* person in my life – as far as that’s possible anyway, given our history together and our two wonderful children. He apologized that he hasn’t cleared the debt yet but said he’s nearly there. He’s thinking about moving, about reducing his rent. He didn’t mention anything about finding another second job, and I didn’t pursue it. I’ve really stopped caring about that, it appears so minor in light of everything else. Funny how your perspective changes when something happens. And something always happens.

My whole focus now is on Dad, on managing things with him and with our home to make it as smooth and as comfortable as possible. For everyone, for all five of us, right here in this two storey house where I grew up, where my life has now wound full circle to the point that my old schoolgirl bedroom is the play and study area for my own daughters, my parents’ former room is ours and they are just below us, right downstairs, we see them every day and have our nightly dinners together. One year ago I never could have imagined any of this, it would have been unthinkable, yet here it is. One year ago the cosmos was an entirely different place. One year ago I wasn’t even today’s me, I didn’t exist yet. That’s some food for thought. What in the wide world might another year bring?
2020, May 19 (Tuesday)

My thoughts have been going back to Shoichiro, I feel like there’s something left unsaid in my comments about him yesterday, some thing or things I couldn’t say or didn’t know what to say or how to say, bits and pieces I still need to work out myself. Hear me on this Diary, please listen – as you do, you always do – and I’ll try to pull these strands together. Maybe in doing that I can get some clarity for myself too. Maybe I’ll figure out one or two of those somethings. All these emotions you know, they keep on welling up.

Mom wanted to drive us again to go and meet him, but I only agreed to let her take us as far as the tram stop. Naturally we had to bring Dad along – we don’t feel free enough to leave him on his own, not even at home or even for a few minutes because the worry would simply kill us – and as he seemed so tired I wanted them both to head back as quickly as they could. I would have preferred for them to stay put the whole time, to be honest. But I also wanted to try and prepare myself for seeing Shoichiro, which I didn’t mention to Mom in my list of reasons for not accepting her full offer. She probably knows that, or can anyway guess it, but she’s never been through a struggle like this – like divorce – and so as much as she
can understand she can’t really understand, if that makes any sense.

Leaving Shoichiro was like cutting off my own arm; I don’t know how to put it other than that. Like losing my left arm, my good arm, my dominant arm, the one attached to the hand I write with, the one I do everything with. Shoichiro was that everything, but not by dint of his being extraordinary or special or super somehow, simply because we were together for so long. So very, very long. Mom and Dad may have us beat for pure longevity – that’s true enough – but they weren’t high school sweethearts, and that kind of youthful bonding, that adhesion through the travails of your teens, I think that’s worth another twenty years of counting out in the real world, in the working world. I really do.

Shoichiro wanted to take the girls to a new steak place that opened recently. It’s part of a national chain but this is its first outlet in Kochi; somehow this city always seems to be the last in line to get anything that the rest of the country has. I can’t remember the exact name – Suddenly Steak or something along those lines – but it’s right on the main east-west thoroughfare that the tram runs along so it was easy enough to get to, and only about a five minute walk from where we alighted. I didn’t want to
join them for dinner again this time – I’ll probably never
join them, but we can talk about that later – and so on the
way I tried to decide where I was going to eat by myself. I
couldn’t settle on what I felt like having. But really
musing on that was partly to take my mind off of thinking
about Shoichiro, even though I did want to think about
Shoichiro so I could emotionally prepare to see him. Then
out of nowhere I started wondering what it would be like
if he showed up with Sakaichi-san, and that thought alone
completely ruined any pleasantness I had built up
regarding food choices for the evening.

On the tram the girls mostly chatted gaily but
then started squabbling about one of the TV shows they’re
currently addicted to, luckily though before they could get
deeply into it our stop had rolled up and all the tiny
busyness of having to stand, pull out the coins I gave them
from their little purses, and drop those along with their
paper tickets into the depository at the tram’s front exit
broke their argument off mid-stream and it never re-materialized. I’m always thankful for distractions like
that when Manae and Terako begin digging at each other, otherwise they’d never stop.

We got off and waited for the tram to pass and the
traffic light to change so we could cross the street. It was
just coming onto evening and Manae remarked on how pretty the sky looked. She’s great like that, she is. Gazing up at the pinks and blues offset by a smattering of greying clouds did the trick and what was only about two minutes down our path flew kilometers away. It will probably rain tomorrow, I remember thinking, and in fact it did, the whole next morning.

Shoichiro was waiting in front of the restaurant again, beaming at the girls. They tried to hug him but he’s too much of a Kochi man for that so he just rubbed their heads. I paid careful attention to how I felt when I first saw him, but after that the details blur a bit. He looked good – as I told you – but in thinking “he looks good” I just thought “he looks good” and didn’t connect it with anything to me or to us. I clearly remember leaving it at “he looks good”. I feel like being able to say that means I’ve made some genuine progress, like I’ve taken a big step forward in my relationship with him, wherever that might be. He’s becoming a man, only a man. I’m very proud of that; maybe I’ll be all right.

We had our little talk, our pleasantries, dry and light, words that floated and which the breeze took as soon as they were uttered. I continued to feel very little. When he asked about Dad my heart stabbed out, but I knew that
was for Dad and not related to him, and then when I told him Dad has dementia and that we’re scared but learning, that we’re trying, and in response he only mentioned being sorry to hear it, well then I knew that the last bonds between us as lovers were fraying, frayed. Even if we had still been married I wouldn’t really have expected him to do much to help with Dad or anything, but what he said was merely the minimum, it was the kind of thing a person might say to an acquaintance or to a stranger, not your wife. I’m not his wife – of course I know that – but in that moment, and for the first time since I was sixteen years old, I felt forcefully that I wasn’t his and he wasn’t mine. I understood it, way down there, inside, it sunk in and it clicked. A turning.

Not completely though, I admit that, I recognize that. We’ll never be totally finished; well maybe not never, but at least not until the girls are grown. But despite that I do think, and I do feel, as if something is happening to me, something good, like I can actually live in a world that has Shoichiro in it without also having an impression of being trapped. I used to imagine that it was either him or me, that this crumbling last-stop-on-the-line kind of a town wasn’t big enough for the two of us – as those American cowboy movies have it – but now I know there’s plenty of

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space. Space between. Even for Sakaichi-san to be with him and for it not to bother me. Tonight I can whisper that to you Diary, it really does seem possible. I hope I still feel this way tomorrow.

I had a big bowl of *ramen* noodles again, with a slab of fatty pork and a boiled egg. It was greasy and salty and a wonderfully guilt free pleasure. The girls enjoyed their food but not the restaurant itself – too loud they said – and we took the tram back home. Another day passed.
2020, June 01 (Monday)

Something strange happened at work today. It was totally unexpected, and in a good – but weird – way I caught myself by surprise; or maybe it makes more sense to put it as I surprised myself. However you want to word it, I’m feeling very proud so you’ve got to forgive me for bragging a bit. I know you won’t hold it against me Diary.

But enough introducing, I’m sure you’re eager for me to get to it. As you know, I’m currently rotated in to work with Matsumoto-san, and as both she and I arrive at work a few minutes before Sakaichi-san does we usually go and retrieve our equipment from the storage area and then make our way to the first work station without waiting to greet her. Tanaka-san typically beats both of us in – I have no idea when he gets there although it’s definitely before 6:30am – but we generally ignore him. He must have to sit and wait for Sakaichi-san to show up so they can begin cleaning their own assigned areas. My guess is she probably comes blasting in exactly when we’re supposed to punch our time cards, that’s how it was when I was scheduled with her last year and frankly it fits her personality. Anyway, whatever the case these days it generally results in neither Matsumoto-san nor I seeing her till lunchtime. And that’s what happened today, when we
did finally meet her she was clearly in the middle of some spat with Tanaka-san that had probably been going on all morning. Well not a “spat” exactly, more like a one-sided drubbing. You can guess which side was beating on which.

Tanaka-san was looking generally sheepish and browbeaten as always, but there was also a hardness to his face that I hadn’t seen before. Sakaichi-san, true to form, was tearing into him with thinly veiled barbs until, most unusually, he suddenly retorted. I nearly dropped my chopsticks. He yelled – or half yelled: he raised his voice a little, which for him was probably a big effort – that he’d heard enough already and it wasn’t that great and he knew where much better ones could be found, ones that would additionally prove a lot more reliable in the years to come. He knows what he’s talking about, he insisted. That was the most – and most forthrightly – I’ve heard from Tanaka-san ever since I started at our company. It was so exciting but I didn’t dare make eye contact with either combatant so I kept my gaze squarely on the rice and scrambled egg with chopped leeks I made this morning.

My attempt to avoid butting in – duplicated by Matsumoto-san who obviously wanted to keep her distance too – didn’t work. As much as we tried to simply eat quietly in the break room it quickly proved impossible
because as soon as she noticed us Sakaichi-san came rushing over and shoved her wrist in our faces, gushing about how beautiful her new watch is. That’s what the fuss was evidently all about. We dutifully admired the device and made some comments to the effect of it suiting her perfectly and being absolutely lovely and then – assuming her to be mollified – tried to return to our lunches. Of course it wasn’t going to be that easy.

Sakaichi-san started relating how during our morning shift “that fool” Tanaka-san – she actually said that, and he could hear her – had failed to properly appreciate her watch and how it must mean he has the absolute worst judgment. Isn’t it so wonderful? she asked us, Had we seen anything like it in our whole lives? Oh no, never. It’s beautiful, amazing, a treasure, we both quickly replied. Matsumoto-san, in what really was a very nice gesture, added that she was sure Tanaka-san thought so too, he was merely having trouble expressing himself because the watch is simply too exquisite for words.

That hint wasn’t taken though, in fact quite the opposite. Tanaka-san – more upset than I’ve ever seen him, even compared with his wailing bouts – insisted that it isn’t that good of a watch, and that without a digital back-up and wireless transmitter it will eventually go out
of sync and need to be adjusted. He added that the really smart thing to do would be to take it back and get a solar powered model that would never need a battery. He invited us to look at his own watch.

I was shocked, I never expected him to be that straightforward about anything, and I certainly never expected him to challenge Sakaichi-san. She must have been berating him for hours for Tanaka-san to get to that point. I could easily imagine it: As soon as Sakaichi-san got to work this morning she must have displayed her watch to him, got a reaction she wasn’t satisfied with, and then refused to let it pass. A month or two ago I might have done the same thing if I were in a similar situation with the man – not about a watch, of course, but I know how annoying he can be – but these days I’m… Well I’ll get to that, but let me finish telling you what happened.

After his surprising display of grit Sakaichi-san turned and whipped out a curdling line directed right at Tanaka-san, saying with dripping sarcasm she’s sorry her boyfriend and her aren’t as sophisticated as he is, but for simple people like them it’s a great watch. Two things about that statement hit me: the first was its pure nastiness in labeling him “sophisticated” when everyone in Kochi can see that Tanaka-san is an exemplar of the little mousy
shut in type and about as far from being pretentious as it’s possible to get. She wanted to insult him and she did – with gusto. The second thing I noticed was a lot more painful for me than it was for Tanaka-san, but then my reaction is what set me aback when I reflected on it later. And I mean it really startled me – about me. Sakaichi-san had said her and her boyfriend, which means her and Shoichiro, and she followed her attack with a reflexive backwards glance at me as she let it loose, a look that had enough embarrassment, but more so remorse, to start everyone’s alarm bells ringing and not just mine. I had to ask, I had to: Did Shoichiro buy her that watch?

He did. He had. It was a lot more than he had ever done for me, and we were married for over a decade and had two kids together. Which is fine, that part didn’t bother me. So he went out and bought her an expensive watch – at least it looked expensive, very expensive. What did creep up under my skin – what invaded its way to under my skin – was that he did this while supposedly struggling with money to the point that he had decided to move somewhere cheaper, as he only just told me at the girls’ last dinner with him. He did this, buying this watch, while purportedly explicitly striving to try and pay down the debt he took out in my name, the debt I’ve been
making monthly interest payments on, the debt that forced me to relocate myself and those two kids of ours back into my parent’s house, clear across town, and shoving them into a whole new school. In the middle of the academic year. He did this with all of that going on, and the expression on Sakaichi-san’s face told me I wasn’t supposed to know any of it. She had spilled the beans, split her mouth as they say, and she regretted it.

I wasn’t angry though, I couldn’t believe it but I wasn’t angry. I accepted the fact flatly, and I was aware even at the time that I was accepting it flatly. I never would have thought myself capable of such a feat. I don’t know why, and I don’t know how, but I simply told myself it was okay, that whatever was going on with Shoichiro and his income and the loan it would somehow or other work itself out. In the meantime I had Dad to focus on, and right now since we can afford his care that was enough, the costs at present were more emotional than financial. That was the important thing, and with luck by the time Dad’s treatments started really costing us Shoichiro would have cleared his debt. Today the girls and I were fine, we were eating and keeping comfortable and we enjoyed the luxury of a shopping trip recently. We weren’t hurting for money.
I never would have thought myself capable of largesse like that, especially not towards Shoichiro. I honestly didn’t care. Hearing it, realizing it, was only one more detail to my day. More than anything I actually felt a little sorry for Tanaka-san, and that really sent me for a spin. Since when have I been a smidgen concerned about Tanaka-san? It hit me then and for the first time that he’s got his own life, his own world, that he’s not just an accessory in mine or in Sakaichi-san’s. I know that’s obvious Diary, but it’s easy to forget when you’ve got enough problems to keep your mind constantly churning away on yourself. Tanaka-san’s worries are important to him, and he must have been especially hurting to act out so boldly and with such uncharacteristic strength. Maybe it’s finally sunk in what a lost cause his crush on her really is. The poor man, nobody ever deserves a broken heart.

Goodness, what’s gotten into me? Letting my ex splurge despite it sticking me and our daughters with probably a few extra months’ worth of interest payments? And caring about the grief of that little cockroach Tanaka-san on top of it? It doesn’t make any sense; have I suddenly become a different person?

I like it though. I like this new me, and I really liked not feeling my blood boil this afternoon, which on
any other day it probably would have and must have been what Sakaichi-san was expecting. Somehow I’m a new woman. No more explosions, no more outbursts, no. I’m centered and calm and way beyond any of that. So kudos to me Diary, you’ve got to admit that your old friend Kazenoko has really grown. Congratulations are in order.
2020, June 08 (Monday)

Mom finally agreed to get Dad in for another check-up ahead of his scheduled six month one. We had a long talk about it yesterday afternoon, and although I understand her perspective I really can’t see why it should have led to her putting this off for so long. It did though, but thankfully now that’s done. She took him to our specialist Doctor Okuyama today and he apparently agreed with my hunch that the general medicines Dad’s been taking aren’t agreeing with him. As much as I welcome the assessment it has left us with some even harder decisions to make, and the real sticking point is that Mom and I aren’t exactly seeing eye to eye.

Since we don’t know specifically what’s causing Dad’s dementia, or even if there is a single cause rather than any number of causes, the best that our doctor – any doctor – can do is basically guess and check with what’s available. Different amounts, different combinations, more of this, less of that, none of X, double Y; we have to trust his instincts and experience, and that’s one area where Mom is ill-equipped to be a fellow traveler.

She reflexively mistrusts pretty much everyone involved with any kind of official institution, at least outside of the Party. She’s no stranger to conflict with
leaders inside the Party either, but luckily for her – or maybe as a result, I’m not sure – the Party for the most part encourages free thinking and open debate, regardless of who the partner in that debate may be. I’ve heard her and Dad reminiscing fondly about some of the heated arguments she’s won with one after another of the local chapter heads. Her wit is sharp, her tongue sharper, and she’s not the type to back down – about anything. Time’s also no concern to her, and neither are the desires of others who may be seated in the meeting where she’s holding forth and repeatedly checking their watches – she’s definitely used that extending tactic on me in the past. The funny thing is though she’s also always refused to become a chapter head herself, despite multiple opportunities and plenty of support from amongst the members. I have never been able to figure out why; I think she’d be a great leader.

At any rate, that being the case Mom wasn’t especially willing to let Doctor Okuyama experiment with Dad’s drugs. I wasn’t there because of work so I’m not certain about the details of what happened, but according to Mom’s – no doubt extremely biased – version our doctor told her that with patients in the past who have responded the way Dad has he’s initially tried a particular re-structuring, and that’s often proved helpful but not
always. Mom responded that she needed to talk to me about it first, and I feel very honored that she would have said that since pretty much everything else with Dad she’s decided on her own.

Doctor Okuyama indicated he understood and thought that was a good idea, and then Mom asked him what could happen if Dad simply stopped taking any medicine whatsoever. The doctor replied that he didn’t know, but given Dad’s progressing conditions he wasn’t sure that would be for the best. It might help, he admitted, or anyway not hurt much, but we would have to monitor Dad extra closely and be vigilant that someone was with him at all times just to be safe. That’s basically what we’ve been doing already.

My position is we should try this other drug set that the doctor’s used and had success with. Dad’s increasingly forgetful, his speech slurrring more and more, and he has trouble these days even following a simple conversation if it lasts longer than about five minutes. He’ll fail to recognize old friends or get exasperated trying to count out coins at the local shop. Sometimes he seems like a whole other person. I feel like he’s falling into a black hole and I want my Papa back, I want at least a little of his old self to be there while we still have him around.
physically. Living with him as a shell of who he was, as an unresponsive ghost basically, it’s too painful and I don’t think it’s fair to him. I want to try everything that might even possibly help, if only a little. Mom, on the other hand, wants to let nature take its course, and she’s convinced that if we can get him off the drugs he’ll get some clarity back if nothing else, that he’ll be able to enjoy whatever time he might have all the more. She means he himself, not only us enjoying being with him.

I’m not so sure; it’s true that some of the side effects of what he’s been taking are things like drowsiness, and that would certainly affect him in the ways we’ve been experiencing, but the doctor wouldn’t assign things that weren’t bound to help, right Diary? I mean, it’s not like he’s doling out drugs for the fun of it.

Mom, in her revolutionary way, thinks he might be. Maybe not “for the fun of it” that is, but she does suspect some foul play is involved. She doesn’t think Doctor Okuyama is a bad man, but she assumes that because he’s part of the system he’s subject to the system’s stresses, and of course with healthcare and insurance being run the way they are a part of that is profit. Money, making money. It’s so funny and so stupid how everything turns on that. In this world we’ve got slipshod spendthrifts
like Shoichiro and profit magnets like big companies. I guess the latter need the former, but if there’s a way out of this back and forth I can’t see it.

As with everything else on the national plan we only have to pay thirty percent of the costs for his hospital visits, treatments, prescriptions and whatnot, but it still adds up, and if you flip that and think about the other side you can see where Mom’s coming from. Private drug manufacturers would naturally encourage doctors to have patients take their products – it doesn’t matter to the head offices that thirty percent of their revenues are coming from us and seventy percent from the government’s funds, it’s purely the same income to them. The source is probably a totally irrelevant consideration when they’re working out their business plans and models and the rest. People trust doctors, and the drug and related outfits could easily take advantage of that trust even if the doctors themselves truly are completely trustworthy. As long as the entire thing isn’t publically run, from national hospitals to neighborhood pharmacies to the schools that train the medical staff and everything in between, Mom sees potential for abuse. And I have to agree with her that it does seem like a possibility. The potential is definitely there, and it probably still would be if everything were
publically run, although less so, in different ways, and maybe a bit less perniciously. But I don’t know; I’m just worried about Dad.

What are we going to do? Part of me agrees with Mom and her stance that we shouldn’t force anything on him, at least not in these early stages, instead we let the process take its own course for a while longer and wait to see what happens. If it gets really bad we can respond as needed, but if not then doing nothing might indeed be best. It’s impossible for him to get better, she keeps saying, and we need to recognize that. Why make it worse by having him half asleep all the time? He had his moments before we started on the medication, and sometimes we’d have our old Dad with us for the whole day. But then sometimes not, and I can’t forget the horror of when he disappeared during our stay in Shimanto, nor Mom’s disturbing casualness at the time. She took that far too well. Is it just that she’s a fatalist and has learned to simply roll with everything that comes her way?

I want my father back, I know that can’t happen, I know that this disease has taken hold and will slowly or quickly eat away at his brain until there’s nothing left of him, but I simply can’t face it. I refuse to. Or I think I refuse to. If it were up to me I’d try absolutely everything
available, one after the other, give every chance to anything that might do something. But maybe Mom’s right that too much meddling with a human body is rarely a good thing. Maybe mortality is a blessing. Maybe Dad was right in his old conviction – when he was still able to articulate it – that treating the whole body with traditional methods is far preferable to taking aim at one tiny area with modern technical methods. I honestly have no clue about any of it other than the way I’m feeling, and right now that’s at a loss.

Mom and I left it at that. We’ll talk it over again tomorrow and probably every day thereafter, but for now she’s planning to call Doctor Okuyama and say she’ll have Dad quit his drugs for a week and keep a constant eye on him to check how he is. She said when she was at the hospital today and explained how she was thinking of doing that the doctor did reluctantly agree, but only on the condition that she bring Dad back after the week is up so his blood markers could be checked and other tests done. If nothing can fix his dementia I guess we can try Mom’s idea, and it’s not like Dad’s in any pain or discomfort. I’m thankful for that. His mental decline is maybe a kind of benefit in a way if he isn’t able to notice how sick he is or what’s going on inside of him. Although really that’s the
perspective every one of us is stuck with if you think about it: afloat in the sea of our own rotting bodies without ever being aware what’s decomposing by how much.

I want my Papa. He’d know exactly what to say to make everything better. He’d rub me on the back and give me that half smile of his and life would be worth it, would be livable. Those sunny weekend afternoons growing up, ice cream cones on a park bench, telling him one thing after another; remembering Dad as he was only makes seeing him now the more tragic. Maybe Mom’s right, maybe we should simply let him be, let his body do what it’s doing. I don’t know, I really don’t.
2020, June 16 (Tuesday)

We did it Diary, we passed the week with Dad off his medicine without any major incidents, or anyway without anything resembling what happened in Shimanto. What a relief.

We took turns watching him as usual, and the first two days were pretty much as they had been when he was still taking his daily dosages; I suppose it needed a while for the drugs to work their way out of his system. But by the third day we had Dad back. Well, not back exactly, but closer. He was still forgetful, still confused, still slurring, still repetitive, and still having trouble keeping his mind on much, but he also had some definite ideas of his own and signs of his classic stubbornness surfaced here and there, breaking through the overall haze his medicated out-of sorts had produced. At one point he even insisted on walking himself to a convenience store to get a chocolate bar that he *had* to eat at precisely that moment. I nearly cried, it was so like Dad, so like the man I have always known and loved. His appetite was back!

In the end, after some extended negotiating – this happened on Friday evening while Mom was out with friends for her weekly “poetry battle” – I was able to convince him I was dying for a walk too and would go
along if he didn’t mind, and that way I could keep an eye on him worry free. We got his treat, he ate it on the return journey, we made it safely home, everyone was happy and satisfied – especially me, able to take another old-time stroll with my Papa.

Yesterday, however, was not so good. Bad enough in fact that Mom wasn’t able to get Dad in for his appointment with Doctor Okuyama, which got pushed to today. I’m not sure what set him off, but Mom called me during my lunch break to say he was extremely irritable, very cranky, very angry, and that he refused to go anywhere and certainly not to a doctor. He was babbling a lot, she said, not making sense. It could have only been confusion I guess, but based on Mom’s description his behavior sounded more like paranoia, maybe a reticence to be in a crowded area. He might also have been frightened, there’s really no telling what was happening inside his head, but whatever it was it hit him hard. Poor Dad. He’s trapped in there, and any flashes of lucidity he has get buried again under the weight of the illness; whether or not they’re remembered later is probably impossible for anyone to say.

Things like that are what have Mom and me feeling in a real bind. We’re stuck, and she won’t simply
listen to what the doctor says, which at least would take
the decision out of our hands. Don’t get me wrong Diary,
it’s good that we’re able to make these kinds of choices,
but the one in front of us is so hard that I’d gladly
surrender it to simply deal with the fallout of whatever
someone else thinks. That strikes me as so much easier
and attractive than taking it on myself. It’s the coward’s
way out, the kind of thing Shoichiro does, running away or
being a child or whatever, I know that, but it’s also guilt
free because responsibility free. Of course Mom’s right to
insist that we have to come to it ourselves, that we have to
be strong enough to face it, but I simply don’t want to. I’m
scared.

She won’t let me off the hook with her either, I
have to help think it over and we have to talk it out and out
until it’s clear what ought to be done. Again, she’s right –
and I’m honored that she’s including me to such a large
degree – but I’m petrified of taking the worst of the
available paths because I can’t understand everything
clearly enough. Maybe from a big picture perspective
there aren’t any wrong choices in this, but it sure feels like
there aren’t any right choices either.

What’s best for Dad? That’s the question that
really haunts me, and along with it: What would Dad want
if he could tell us? On the one hand, these days when he hasn’t been taking his pills we’ve had some instances of a nearness to the man we knew, an almost-Dad. He has been feeling better and it’s showed, his whole mood has been lifted. Yet it has also meant a few wild mood swings and some real chances that he might have hurt himself by doing something neglectful or rash if Mom or I hadn’t been there to stop him.

On the other hand, when he was on the drugs he was so fatigued and clearly so generally uncomfortable that he nearly wasn’t him – but then he isn’t really him when he’s off the drugs either, his dementia has already set in that far. And on top of it we don’t know what he himself would prefer, and he can’t communicate that to us even if he does know or is capable of mentally working it out. Mom tried asking, and I tried too, during the times this past week when he seemed closest to being his former self again – just about there, just – but both of us got nothing. He couldn’t understand our questions and didn’t seem to realize what’s been happening. He knows enough to appreciate that he’s sick, but not to what extent, and by all appearances he isn’t able to comprehend what it is to have dementia, what it means. He repeated the word when I told it to him, but I could see that it signified nothing, that it
was only a few sounds he strung together.

Mom is leaning towards keeping him off everything for as long as we can, but this afternoon when she did finally get him in for the tests the doctor warned her that doing so would probably shorten his life. Maybe only by a little, but maybe by a lot, there’s no way to tell. Dad’s tests were for the most part fine, physically anyway, but he shows serious mental atrophy and he more or less flunked a judgment test he was given. He could walk out the door and right into traffic, that’s a possibility and it truly scares me.

Not taking anything would also mean his dementia would progress more rapidly than if he were on medication, although again by how much or to what extent no one can predict. The disease – the group of diseases – is too individuated for that, too broad, and as yet too insufficiently studied. Mom’s reasoning is that whatever else it might mean it’s our only shot at having Dad be Dad, and she’s convinced that he would cherish every opportunity to be himself, or as much of himself as possible, and also that he would choose the natural way. I do think she’s right, and no one knows him better than her, but it’s very hard for me to admit it for the simple reason that I want to keep him with us for every possible second.
we can.

I want to keep him alive, keep him here, and the medicine would do that, it would extend his life. That’s selfish of me, I know. Dad probably wouldn’t like it – I suspect he wouldn’t, but I don’t want to say that out loud – but then the Dad that wouldn’t like it isn’t there anymore. How are we supposed to deal with this sickness? It’s taken him, Dad’s already gone, and even at his best now he’s a sliver of what he was, a crescent. Dad’s full moon will never shine its light on us again; that breaks my heart and having him still present every day re-breaks it with each glance, each memory that the sight of him pulls up, but I can’t let go. He can’t die, I won’t let him. He will; I can’t do anything about it.

Treatment might help, a different mixture of drugs might bring a breakthrough – wishful thinking. Doctor Okuyama said as much when I called him from work after I heard from Mom they were home again. I had to get it directly from him and not filtered through Mom’s words. Anything Dad takes from here on out would have the same general side effects, the same numbing and mellowing, the same slow erasing of vigor, the added headaches, nausea, sore muscles, dizziness, but also the same suppression of symptoms and maybe – maybe – a
retardation of brain decay. But there is no cure.

On the way back after my shift I stopped by a Chinese kampo herbal medicinary to see if they had anything, the way Dad would have done. All I could get were some powders to mix with tea to help aid his memory. It’s better than nothing, Dad would have been happy with it, but I can’t tell you how sad it makes me not to be able to write “Dad will be happy with it” or “Dad is happy with it”: he’s too far gone for “will” or “is”. My Papa, my Papa.

I guess I’ll agree with Mom and try it her way. It’ll be a lot harder for us to watch him if he’s not taking anything, if there aren’t any sedating effects to help us manage, but those glimpses of our old man, the Dad we love so much, they brought such joy this past week that I can’t deny them to Mom, to the girls, to me. What’s shattering to think is that the cost of those glimpses is a shorter life for Dad; but then what good is a longer life spent half asleep and in pain? If only Dad were able to make this choice for himself.

This Saturday is Shoichiro’s time with Manae and Terako again. I wish I could join them and share everything with Shoichiro, tell him each tiny detail like I always used to. I know he wouldn’t have much to say and that he can’t help, but he could listen, he was always such
a good listener. Maybe I will join them, maybe I’ll try. It might be nice to spend some time with him again, to simply be with him, to lean on his shoulder. How I need that now.
2020, June 21 (Sunday)

That was a mistake. I shouldn’t have gone, or at least I shouldn’t have stayed. I never imagined I could feel as uncomfortable with my own family as I did, but that assumption is maybe why I didn’t see it coming. “My own family” only covered two thirds of the participants, and that remaining other third is something of a giant. What a miscalculation. I’m sorry my girls, I must have ruined your night.

For his dinner with Manae and Terako this month Shoichiro chose a little mom-and-pop *okonomiyaki* pancake outfit that specializes in the Hiroshima style variant of the dish, adding either *udon* wheat flour based or *soba* buckwheat based noodles to the batter on top of the standard cabbage and whatever other ingredients you choose. The place is right on the main tram street so it was easy for us to get to again, and within the city it’s also located further to the west – in the Asahi area – so nearer too to where we live. I guess maybe Shoichiro has gotten a bit more considerate and started thinking about what might be convenient for us when we go meet him. I’m not sure if I have Sakaichi-san to thank for that or not. Even if I do I still won’t.

When we got there he was waiting outside as
always, and said he had reserved a table since the diner – I don’t think I’d call it a “restaurant” – tends to get busy on weekends. That was another sign of maturity I didn’t expect. After our usual empty greetings he turned, smiled at Manae and Terako, and started to go inside; I followed. As soon as I entered and saw the look he gave me when he realized I was evidently planning on joining them I regretted it. Disgust is really the only way to put it, and I had never seen his face like that before.

I immediately tried to think of a way to leave, something to say that would be noncommittal and face saving, but Shoichiro beat me to the punch in providing an excuse. He wasn’t rude about it, he simply said he was sorry but he only made a reservation for three. The wife half of the married couple who runs the joint overheard us at just that moment though and quickly interjected that it was all right, don’t worry, every table seats four and I was welcome to go ahead and sit down. What did we want to drink, she added. It was all very brusque and business-like, almost an order, no trace of any of the polite language forms or markers you’d expect in a service setting, and she barely made eye contact. I thought given the unnervingly casual atmosphere she exuded – no “the customer is God” attitude there – I might be able to quietly duck out, but it
wasn’t to be. Shoichiro shrugged, pointed me to one side of the table the staff had indicated, and went and sat down with the girls obediently following behind. What else could I have done but the same? I felt stuck, hemmed in by the circumstances.

The interior was a bit dirty, to be honest. Linoleum flooring, every color from top to bottom bleached and faded, no decoration save for some old posters with peeling corners taped up here and there, and walls that looked like they had never had any of the accumulated grease from the past thirty or forty years washed off them. We sat at a booth with upholstered vinyl seating – also original, also fading, also never been taken care of since being installed – and around a table with a grill built into it, typical for an okonomiyaki place where it’s do-it-yourself. I’ve been to more modern versions that have the staff actually do the cooking for you, but knowing Shoichiro I’m not surprised he opted for one where the ingredients you want are simply brought to your table in a mixing bowl with the batter and then you take care of everything else.

It is nice to be able to make your food exactly how you want, although some people – such as Mom – don’t see the point in going out if you’re still preparing
your own meal. It’s not a full preparation, I always say to her, the fillings are pre-cut and the batter pre-mixed, but my protests fall on deaf ears. I wish Mom had been there last night, having that same argument with her would have been such a welcome distraction.

Even as we ordered I felt like the proverbial nail sticking out, and as the saying goes that gets pounded down. How I wanted to disappear like that pounded nail! Shoichiro kindly asked the girls what toppings they wanted – pork and cheese for Manae with *udon* noodles; green onions, corn, and shrimp for Terako, also with *udon* – and then he called the staff over, ignoring me. The whole dinner more or less continued that way, and I even got the impression from the girls that they too would have preferred me not to be there. With Shoichiro it was like I was stepping on his territory, with Manae and Terako it was like I was getting in the way of them being able to talk freely with their dad. Each of them were surely correct in that.

At first I coped by going into my regular motherly mode, trying to help cook everyone’s meal, keeping an eye on the grill for the precise moment when one rounded mass or another needed to be flipped, adding vegetable oil to the surface, passing the mayonnaise,
okonomiyaki sauce, and shredded dried seaweed around. No one wanted me to do any of it. After about twenty minutes and enough annoyed glances from Shoichiro to last a lifetime – with exasperated looks from our daughters thrown in – I gave up and tried to sink into my seat, silently focusing on my food, only expressing a strained smile here and there as the conversation continued happily along without me. It was the most out of place I have ever felt, the biggest blow to any confidence I might have had, the rudest awakening that things are not now as they were, and never will be again. Our family isn’t anymore.

Of course in hindsight I realize how stupid it was Diary, you don’t have to tell me. I left Shoichiro, I took him out of our family, and although he will always be the girls’ father he isn’t my husband any longer. Until Saturday I never noticed – or maybe never acknowledged – just how much that must have hurt him. And then there I was, walking all over his toes, acting as if he and I were still possible in some manner, as if being friends after divorce were an option for us. Someday it might be, but not anytime soon, he made that clear enough. It was a lesson I should have learned after New Year’s.

Then for Manae and Terako it was their private time with their Papa, and I know more than ever how
precious such moments can be – I long to have one with my own dad again. They couldn’t relate to Shoichiro the way they’ve gotten used to since we split because I was there, the spoiler. Both girls must have had a lot more they wanted to say to him but thought they couldn’t with my two extra and unwanted ears present. I’m so sorry about that, so embarrassed.

In the end I was beside myself to such an extent that I went and paid for everyone’s food and stood outside alone until the three of them came out and we could catch a tram back. I didn’t even say goodnight to Shoichiro; he farewelled the girls a few meters away and walked to where he had parked without so much as a wave or a thank you for picking up the bill. I didn’t deserve to be thanked, that’s true, but it still bothered me he didn’t at least do that much. Of course I apologized to Manae and Terako the whole way home, and of course they both said it was fine and I shouldn’t worry about it – they are real sweethearts at times, those two – but I took it to heart. Never again. The world, my world, has changed. Partially of my making, partially of how the others in it have responded. I have to accept that.

The thing is Diary, aside from you I don’t have any genuine friends to talk to, and I really need one right
now. I’ve needed one for a very long time. I wanted to spill everything to Shoichiro, to unload on someone who isn’t Mom and isn’t in the same day-to-day situation of caring for Dad. Ever since high school Shoichiro had been everything for me, and me for him, although he maintained his network of school friends a lot better than I did. Me? I kept myself at home, I kept my eyes at home, on my beautiful new daughter and then on her plus her younger sister. I didn’t have time for friends and didn’t need any – or want any. Family life was so busy and so fulfilling that the years simply glided by as I drifted further and further apart from anyone I knew, right here in my own hometown.

Oh, I did get to meet some other mothers through this or that event, but no one I could really talk to about things that mattered. But until recently there wasn’t anything that truly mattered, not aside from those motherly issues which I could talk to them about. Maybe I should have reached out to one of them before I left Shoichiro, maybe I should have gotten more advice or other points of view before I took such a huge step, but that’s all done now. And there is no return; that much is as clear as the bright blue sky after a typhoon has passed. Whatever terrible mistakes I might have made they’re
done, there’s nowhere to go but forward. It comes down to you Diary: you’ve got to be the help I need. Can you?
2020, July 09 (Thursday)

Dad is still completely off his drugs. For the most part that is, his blood pressure went up a little and he’s taking something for that, but he isn’t on any of the dementia related medications that Doctor Okuyama had initially prescribed and then reluctantly agreed to let him stop. I wouldn’t say things are going well, but they aren’t terrible either. Sometimes very frightening, most of the time simply very tiring. Lately his bad days have far outnumbered his good ones, and I’m not sure how much longer we can keep this up without some kind of medicinal assistance.

For example, Dad will say something about a topic he evidently considers important, we’ll respond, he’ll appear satisfied, but then only a few minutes later he’ll say the exact same thing as if he had never mentioned it. If one of us tells him that he just said that he gets confused and upset, he refuses to believe his memory could have such broad holes in it, and he’ll insist that it’s us who are mistaken and misremembering. He’ll try to prove his case by recalling something from years ago – and he can do that quite vividly actually – but then if I gently ask him what he ate for breakfast the day before he’s at a total loss. He can be extremely aggressive at such
times. It’s really difficult to know how much he understands about his own illness; we’ve tried to explain it to him so many times but he has trouble staying focused on what we’re saying, and then there’s his forgetfulness about anything new. What has gotten through, and what hasn’t, I’ll probably never know.

In those instances – when he’ll put his foot down about being right – I’ve found it best to simply repeat my earlier response, or try and make what I said even more positive while ignoring the repetition, but naturally it ends up being rather automatic and empty, making me feel as if I’m with someone who isn’t actually there. I don’t want to say he’s become a ghost, and it’s definitely not always that way, but it’s hard. Very hard. I miss my old Papa.

One odd aspect to this is that point I just mentioned about how he can lucidly recall what happened ten or twenty years ago but not yesterday. It’s a common feature of dementia apparently, but such an unsettling one to witness. He’ll fumble through conversations, struggling to find even basic words, slurring and stuttering, and then he’ll turn around and fondly and eloquently reminisce about things he and Mom did when they were in their twenties. His brain, I guess, is unraveling in bits and pieces, in fragments, and there’s no stopping it.
I’m grateful his two bank accounts are also registered in Mom’s name. I’ve read online about some people who are taking care of one or the other – or both – parents who have dementia and they can’t get access to their own mother’s or father’s money despite the fact that they’re looking after them. The banks have such stupid policies. I asked Mom to look into having all our finances transferred into a single account, to set it up so that their retirement and pension benefits now start going to the same savings as my paychecks, but she only said she’ll think about it. Doing that would probably be a pain – and a lot of paperwork – but only in the short term, and I think it would give us more stability in case something happened to her too. That’s what I find myself constantly worrying about nowadays – what if something happens?

I’m sure Mom’s still reluctant to admit that the girls and I are going to have to be here for the long run. I know she wants us to be able to be independent again, and to live a bit more fully away from the pressures they can’t help but put on us, but I’ve told her time and again that it’s fine, that I want to be here and helping with Dad, that the girls are doing well and loving their time with her and with him, that I wouldn’t and couldn’t take any of it away. Even if we could find an apartment nearby and keep
Manae and Terako in the same school I would prefer to live right where we are. And it’s not only a matter of having gotten used to it, I honestly do like being in the house I grew up in and having the role in the family I now have, as annoying as Mom can be. It also beats wrestling with money and worrying about the girls stuck home alone after school, that’s for certain.

This is the new me, the old me, the always has been me, this is where my life has brought me, and looking back at where I’ve come from I don’t see how it could have been any different. It’s as if each of those times when I merely followed the path that was already at my feet have added up, like there was never any need to struggle or be anxious or make huge efforts to “get somewhere”. It happened so naturally, the whole picture simply unfolded, like one of those magazine games where you move half the page in and out and the image transforms before your very eyes. When the page is half in you think that’s the way it is, but then you pull the edge out and realize something else was there all the while. That’s how I see my life these days, it’s been complete from the start, no striving involved, only an unseen force pushing things along at their own pace, putting the pieces together, snapping, connecting, tearing, breaking,
rebuilding. Things might have been different but they weren’t, and if they had been otherwise they still would have been alternate in the same general way: pushed along, one to the next. I might have had another fate but I didn’t, I had the one I had. The one I have now. And that’s okay.

I guess that’s why I haven’t reacted worse to this letter I found. I haven’t even opened it, and I’m not convinced that I want to – or can. I came across it when I was going through some of Dad’s old stuff, trying to tidy up a bit. He’s never been the best at throwing things away, and over the years Mom either learned to tolerate it or simply gave up. Whatever the case, he’s left some big piles of miscellanea in a few drawers in a corner of what’s been our bedroom all these months and I finally got around to going through them. Maybe I should have asked Dad first, but given the circumstances I decided to just go for it when the idea hit me again the other evening as the girls and I sat on top of our futon beds and watched the small TV we brought over from our old place. There, tucked away amidst some back issues of Shukan Bunshu magazines and clippings from the Aka Hata newspaper he evidently wanted to save, was a single envelope addressed to me and sent from Shoichiro.

The postage date stamped on the front was right
around the time I left him. I don’t know why he would have written me a letter or why he sent it here. I suppose that’s all explained inside, but like I mentioned I can’t open it, not yet. It’s entirely unlike Shoichiro to actually write a letter, or really to use his hands for anything remotely involving a pen. The man is not an intellectual, not a reader, certainly not a writer. It’s also not like Dad to keep something from me – he’s never done anything similar before, not in my whole life – which makes me think his dementia may have begun a while ago, maybe in starts and stops or the like, but that we never noticed it until it got bad enough to stick out. But then too he might have simply forgotten, although the Dad I grew up with was pretty sharp about things like that, and about caring for me and what concerned me. Maybe it’s even that Dad wanted to protect me from what he must have assumed was bad news. It’s clearly never been opened and so no one really knows what this letter may say, but perhaps when Dad saw it in the post box he had some kind of premonition. Or he might have only grabbed it along with his magazine, set it down somewhere, and then the thing immediately left his mind. Who can guess? Anyway, in the end the letter ended up in that drawer and now I’m going in circles with all this speculating. I could ask Dad about
what happened or what he was thinking at the time, and maybe on one of his better days I will, but I suspect that this is one more mystery I’ll simply have to live with.

As for the mystery of what the letter does in fact contain, that’s not one I simply need to live with; I’m aware of that Diary. I don’t need to but for the moment I am. Call it contentment, call it tolerance, call it a mere lack of curiosity, but I’m tucking this letter I found unopened into your pages. You read it first and decide if I should or not, I trust your judgment. I’ll leave it up to you.
2020, July 12 (Sunday)

We noticed this morning that Dad seemed to be having a good day so Mom and I decided to risk it and take everyone out for some fun. We haven’t been able to get away and be active like that – with all of us together, no one left behind – for a long time, a very long time, and it was a much needed respite from the monotony of everyday. Nothing fancy of course, and nowhere too far either, but it was nearly a full day spent outside the home, and thankfully a largely peaceful and worry-free one.

After breakfast I suggested visiting the big park behind the Nitori furniture store over on Tosa Thoroughfare, the one that’s across from the Fuji Grand shopping complex. I thought that would be distant enough from our neighborhood to feel like a change of pace for Dad but still near enough that we could get back quickly if anything were to happen – it’s only around a twenty minute drive or so, depending on the traffic. Manae is just about too old to care for such things as jungle gyms, a zip line, and a big metal slide that goes all the way down the hill it stretches the length of, but I know her heart is still playful enough to have a blast if she lets herself go, and with her younger sister’s encouragement I was sure that wouldn’t be a problem. It wasn’t.
The girls ran and screamed and slid and swung and generally wore themselves silly for a good couple of hours before the temperature really started to climb. Mercifully we had open skies and not a drop of rain, not even a hint. That park has also installed some exercise equipment for adults – little metal contraptions that move this body part or that, and one that’s shaped like a set of handlebars with rotating feet discs that make for a full lower body twisting, as fast or as slow as you like – and so I got into the spirit of things too. In fact even Mom and Dad joined in a little, and it was absolutely wonderful to see their smiles again, especially Dad’s. There was the Papa I’ve always known.

Moments like that, watching him gleefully walk in his bright red socks across the “foot massage” two meter long stone path lined with concrete bumps and pyramids to stimulate the soles of your feet, hanging on for dear life to the banister and giggling like a kid through the pain of it because he knows his hooves will thank him once he puts his shoes back on, what a treasure they are, what a treasure such things have become. The fact that Dad is usually not able to really be present with us – mentally I mean, not aware enough, not “there” – it makes those times of clarity for him so much the sweeter. What a
pity we didn’t have days like this more often when he was still healthy. But then we don’t really know when he stopped being healthy, when his dementia actually started, and like everyone else we were always busy with something. We still are, naturally, but today was something special and I’ll keep these memories for years to come.

As the sun kept ascending and it grew hotter and hotter we happily and exhaustedly said goodbye to the park and went for lunch. We let Dad choose – I’m still amazed at how focused he was able to stay – and knowing the girls like he does, and not caring about money like he does, he chose the Korean barbecue restaurant that’s right near there. It’s for our stamina, he said, we’ve got to survive the summer. Yes we do Dad. You especially.

Dad was still in his element as we ate, insisting on doing the cooking himself after the staff had lit the grill at our table for us. He carefully laid out, one by one, each strip of beef from the family-sized meat and vegetable set we ordered, followed by the chopped Shiitake mushrooms, leeks, onions, carrots, and blocks of tofu, balancing amounts, timing and flipping like a pro. He handled it so well, I was so proud of him, and he wasn’t shy about ordering another platter of beef to share. Between that and
the bowls of rice we had everyone was very pleasantly full
and more than satisfied by the time we left.

As the morning had gone so smoothly and enjoyably no one wanted to go home after our feast, least of all Dad – who I now, in thinking about it, suspect was attuned to how rare a day it was for him, which makes me think he might know his sickness better than we’ve been giving him credit for – and so we walked over to Fuji Grand to spend a little time browsing in the clothes section of the department store and also at the stationary store on the second floor. Terako is still at the age where stickers are an enormous amount of fun, and she spent a good fifteen minutes choosing the very top package she could find while Manae, I noticed, rather wistfully looked over the advanced kanji Chinese character writing practice notebooks which she knows she’ll need when she starts junior high next year, but in the end she only got herself a new pencil case. Other than those two none of us bought anything – although I did notice myself thinking Shoichiro could use a recipe pad that caught my eye – which was fine, and when the girls were finished with their shopping we each got a hojicha tea flavored ice cream cone from the little café in the corner of the building. I certainly didn’t need any more food but what a treat that was, made all the
sweeter by the simple perfection of family and fitness. Temporary fitness, I know, but fitness all the same.

After arriving home late in the afternoon Mom started to prepare a light dinner, the girls went to finish up their homework for tomorrow, and I sat with Dad in the living room to watch a little TV together. We didn’t – we don’t, never – dare leave him alone, but more than being worried at that moment I was feeling ready to pour my heart out to my dear Papa about how sad I am with how things went with Shoichiro when we last met, about the turn my life has taken that brought the girls and I here, about what he thinks of the whole thing, what he thinks of me as his daughter in this crazy mess, and maybe even about the letter I found, but then the crash happened and I couldn’t. It was almost as if Dad had been willing himself to keep it together and, after such a strenuous effort no longer could. We lost him, he faded, he disappeared into his dementia and I saw that blankness pass across his eyes as I began to talk. He struggled, I could see that, he so wanted to stay with me and just listen to what I had to say, but his brain wouldn’t cooperate. What could I do but give up? We sat and watched a news program in silence; I recalled the day that had been, and Dad, well I don’t know what went through his mind. I wish I did, I wish I could.
After an hour or so I took him to the bath for his evening cleaning and to help him change into his pajamas, the girls popped in to wash after him, and I brought Dad to the dinner table where Mom would stay nearby while I bathed. I ate dinner last so I could keep an eye on Dad as Mom washed the dishes and then finally got to shower herself. It was a bittersweet ending to the day, but what a sweet day of small adventures it had been, and really the nighttime rhythm we had is the same one we’ve gotten used to. It did make me wonder though if it hadn’t been the change of pace and location we undertook that sparked Dad’s good – Dad’s great – mental day. Maybe we should try to do things like that more often, maybe we should call Doctor Okuyama about some more medicinal options, maybe we should work at engaging Dad in activities a bit harder. Maybe, maybe, maybe. I know we’re simply doing the best we can, Mom and I, and today I think we did well. I do, I do, and I’m grateful. Thank you today, thank you.
2020, July 18 (Saturday)

Another third Saturday of the month and another evening where I had to meet Shoichiro when I dropped the girls off for their dinner. Yes Diary you heard me correctly, I used “had to” because that’s exactly the way I’ve come to feel about it. At least today. And today turned out to be only slightly less of a disaster than last month’s meeting.

Of course I know why he takes the girls out to restaurants instead of cooking for them, despite fancying himself a chef: it’s more fun, it’s a treat, it lets him be the “cool parent”, the one who is relaxed and doesn’t discipline and gives his daughters whatever they want. Some chef, he could be saving all that money he’s doling out to this eatery and that – except last time when I treated him and the waste never even bothered to thank me – to pay down the debt he dumped on us that much faster. But has he ever thought of that? I doubt it.

Some chef! I mean, he is a chef when it comes down to it, he’s skilled at the art and he does have a real sense for it too, but he isn’t a man, not really. A chef but not a man. If he were any kind of man he would have put his hands where his heart is a long time ago and actually started making full meals for people instead of the factory line of little side dishes he’s been banging out for the
boxed lunches at his father’s place. Ambition: that’s what he’s always lacked. Him and just about every man in Kochi as far as I can tell; only one look at Tanaka-san can teach you that. I’m so glad I left that worm; it was absolutely the right choice. The only choice. Goodbye Shoichiro! I don’t care how good he looks these days.

Tonight for the girls it was sushi – his choice as always – and way over by the big Aeon shopping mall north of Kochi Station. Getting there meant we had to take a bus and couldn’t use the far more convenient and more frequently running tram. I wouldn’t let Mom drop us off since I didn’t want her to have to make two long round trips or instead wait somewhere with Dad in the meantime while Manae and Terako had their evening with their father; frankly I also wanted some time to be alone. If Mom and Dad had been there they would have joined me for dinner, and even before we left the house I knew that wouldn’t be a good idea. Not tonight. Then as soon as we got there I realized why, I saw how perfectly right my intuition had been.

Shoichiro’s pick was the Sushi Ikkan, the older, more expensive, and far better of the two conveyor belt style sushi restaurants that sit across from the mall. He does have good taste in food, I will give him that. If he
had suggested the other place over there I would have doubted his judgment. But he didn’t. What he did do though – the stunt he pulled; unbelievable, absolutely outrageous – what he did do that made me question not only his judgment but his sanity and morals too, what he did… Aah! That bastard, the rat, he brought Sakaichi-san along! It was her first time to meet the girls, and he chose for that to happen while I was there. What an idiot! What a complete fool.

As we got off the bus just beyond the mall’s stop and walked the few tens of meters to the entrance I knew something was amiss. Shoichiro wasn’t waiting for us outside like he always had been before. I was sure I had the location right, and we arrived more or less on time too – despite having had to rely on the bus network – thanks to the way that the route transfer worked out, but not seeing him there made me question myself all the same. I strode on though, starting to think that if he weren’t there then the three of us could have a great dinner by ourselves and call Mom afterwards to ask that she and Dad come retrieve us. It was nice to think about that, and I even begun to get a bit hopeful that he wouldn’t show up, but my pleasant expectation was for nothing because once we reached the front doors I saw it: Him standing around inside near the
ticket seating machine, waiting for his turn to get a table. And not only him, but her too. I saw her, right there next to him and wearing an obviously new dress that was way too nice for conveyor belt sushi. I saw her then and I see that same woman at work every single day, I’d recognize her from any angle. She might have had her back to me but I knew who she was, and I knew what it meant that she was there. I happened to be holding Terako’s hand at the time and I’m afraid I gave it a squeeze much too hard for her little bones.

This is my friend Yuko, is how he introduced her to our daughters. *Our* daughters – they have nothing to do with “Yuko”. Such a waste that man is. “My friend” he said. The look on Sakaichi-san’s face as she saw what must have been the volcanic look on mine told me she either hadn’t anticipated running into me or had assumed Shoichiro would have had the good sense to tell me in advance she would be there. He did no such thing. It probably never even crossed his mind. I can’t believe I spent one minute on that dolt, let alone the better part of my entire life. I don’t care what he wrote in that stinking letter, I’m certainly never going to read it.

The girls – bless them – had no idea what to do but I’ve raised them well enough to respond politely no
matter what happens. Yes me, I raised them; okay, Mom and me fair enough, you’ve got a point there Diary, but not Shoichiro. What did he ever do? Both Manae and Terako, such good girls, they both said it was nice to meet her – this stranger to them, this random woman with their dad – and then they kind of nervously glanced over at me. I still hope, but am not sure, that my face was under control by then. I made every effort to put on my best fake smile and an appearance of calm. One must always hide one’s true feelings, I’ve always been told, one must never let anything show except in the privacy of the home.

It’s wonderful to make your acquaintance, I managed to say – the biggest lie! – and now you girls enjoy your dinner with your Papa, I added for good measure. Just call me when you’re ready, I told Manae before storming off as nonchalantly as I could, leaving Shoichiro to work out the rest – as if he were capable of such – and immediately thinking of the hundred things I wanted to hear from Manae on the way home.

I couldn’t put my mind on anything else. I crossed the street and walked down to the mall, taking the exterior staircase to the second floor food court entrance where I ate a box of crappy takoyaki octopus dumplings, fuming through each one and really caking on the
mayonnaise. They were awful, and the stupid kid behind the counter didn’t even cook the batter all the way through. Who did she think she was, stepping into my world like that? Talking to my precious girls, my treasures, smiling at them as if she could ever be their mother. She can’t, she’ll never be anything but some fling my lame ex had while he was confused about his feelings for me. I’ll never take him back though, I don’t even want him back, and there’s no way he could have moved on enough to introduce that tart to our children. He must be crazy. She must be crazy. “Yuko”, pah!

Manae said later that she seemed nice but didn’t talk much at dinner, just smiled a lot and was helpful in placing orders for the back kitchen items they wanted, all those things that don’t get put on the belt as it rotates round and round with its pre-made nigiri and temaki pieces. French fries and grilled portions and sweets and whatnot. Shoichiro was evidently quite the entertainer – Dad was so funny tonight, Terako remarked – the buffoon. Moron. Showboating for his little trophy. I couldn’t even bear to see her face again afterwards and sent Shoichiro a text telling him to bring the girls over to the Aeon mall when they were done, that I’d meet them – but not him – inside the makeup and accessories store next to the Sanrio
outlet at the west side of the food court. Mom thankfully said Dad was having an okay night and it would be fine to pick us up. Hearing her voice did help settle me down a little, but not for very long. You wait till Monday young Miss Yuko, it’s going to be one interesting day at work.
2020, July 20 (Monday)

I gave it to her Diary, right in front of everyone too. She had it coming and I gave it to her. That’s what she gets, stepping out like that. Meeting my kids – as if she had even bothered to ask for my permission first. What does Shoichiro know? Nothing. Sakaichi-san should have thought twice about that dinner if she had any inkling of sense and respect. She doesn’t – obviously – and she proved that all right. Which is exactly why I gave it to her. Victory! She’ll be a lot more careful the next time; but I won’t allow a next time. It’s goodbye to her, at least as far as Manae and Terako are concerned. Maybe Shoichiro too. Maybe. Wishful thinking; or we’ll see what happens.

She fought back of course, she tried to defend herself. I knew she would. I also knew I wouldn’t let her get away with it, and I didn’t. You should have seen me Diary, it was a fanfare, an explosion, a performance that could never be matched. But more than simply a performance because it was real. There was no doubting how I felt, none of these little niceties we play around with, none of the deferential stances and half measures we’re always supposed to display to maintain our precious social harmony. Forget whatever you learned in school, today I was me and purely me. One pissed off Kochi woman, a
toughie born of this shared Tosa region ruggedness, a pure *hachikin* no one would ever mistake for anything else. Or anything less. Maybe in Tokyo people can be angry politely, but not down here. That’s what she gets.

Naturally I didn’t see her till lunchtime since the lay-about probably skated in right when our shift began like she always does. Not one to be early, her – except when it comes to my daughters. Unbelievable. Matsumoto-san and I were already at the table in the break room when she and Tanaka-san came in from their morning duties. We had our boxed lunches open and had started eating. I smiled at her as she sat down, the snake. I could see how nervous she was and I wanted to toy with her. No, she’s not a snake, I am. I slithered around my prey, wrapped her up nice and taut in my coils.

Good afternoon, how are you? I knew how she was – and how she’d be after I had swallowed her down, whole and without chewing. Snakes don’t chew, we digest. Tanaka-san was oblivious to everything as usual, he crashed down and opened a bag from 7-11, dumping his convenience store rice balls, potato chips, and a chocolate bar onto the table. Mommy must not have made his lunch today, and the only way he could cope was by buying processed garbage. Pathetic. But not as much as her. She
parked herself timidly and tried to avoid eye contact with me, keeping her gaze on her food. That really set me off, and I mean BOOM! because I noticed right away where her lunch came from: Shoichiro’s father’s outfit. Swine!

That looks like a nice selection, I said, pointing at her open tray with my chopsticks. That was intentionally rude, naturally I know much better than to use chopsticks like that. Wherever did you get it? I said mockingly. She merely smiled a little – painfully, faintly – she knew that I knew exactly where, and she knew what was coming. Tanaka-san tried to join in the almost-conversation by telling me the name of the company clearly printed on the box’s plastic lid but I ignored him and leaned forward a fraction, casting my shadow halfway across the table. So how was your weekend, Sakaichi-san? I continued. Did you do anything fun? Meet anyone interesting? That was a loaded question of course, whoever asks a co-worker if they met someone interesting? She didn’t reply, eyes still downcast, but I could see that I was getting under her skin. I kept at it.

I had a terrible weekend I said loudly, jilting both Matsumoto-san and Tanaka-san because just as no one would ask about meeting anyone interesting no one would admit to a terrible weekend. Oh yes, I went on, Saturday I
took my daughters to meet their father and there was this other person with him. At that Matsumoto-san moved her chair a few centimeters away from me and shrank back as much as she could without looking like she was trying to escape, although she certainly was. She bent double over her food. Tanaka-san also actually seemed to recognize what was happening – incredibly enough, I have to give him credit for that because he’s usually so impenetrably dense – and stared first at me and then at Sakaichi-san like someone slowly passing by a traffic accident. He’d get his carnage soon enough.

Yes, this other person was there and I was really surprised, I went on. Sakaichi-san could barely contain herself as I ratcheted up the pressure, that much was plain for all to see, and it was probably even visible to the security camera perched in the corner of the ceiling. I guess she’s seeing my ex-husband now, this other person, I said. I was so surprised to see her there, I repeated. “So surprised” – that means you shouldn’t have been there, you rouged up owl. But then you know that, and I’ll bet you knew that at the time too. She looked nice, I remarked, but my daughters didn’t seem to connect with her if you know what I mean. That really put the knife in. Can you imagine hearing that Diary? I would have burst into tears
if someone said that to me. I probably would have run out of the room and never come back, pulled a Tanaka-san maneuver. Not Sakaichi-san though, she’s made of hardier stuff than I realized. No matter, I was merciless.

The only thing they talked about later was the sushi they ate, I added, and mentioned that their dad had been in a good mood and was pretty funny. Nothing about her really, I said. She evidently didn’t leave much of an impression, I explained, twisting that buried knife.

At that point Tanaka-san cut in, he appeared to be enjoying it – it was entertainment for him I guess, and maybe too a small bit of revenge on Sakaichi-san for her not liking him back the way he’s always liked her – he egged me on, asking what else was so terrible about my weekend. Well, I said, glancing over at him and for once enjoying speaking with the turd, while my girls were with their dad and this other person – “this other person!” can you believe I got away with continually saying that? – I ended up having takoyaki dumplings for dinner and they tasted so bad I almost couldn’t finish the box. Oh that is terrible, Tanaka-san replied, smirking as he did. I hate when that happens, he put in, so much depends on how the person who makes them handles the grill. Oh definitely, I agreed, it’s not like sushi where you know the chef has had
good training. And I emphasized the word “chef” as well: a further hinting towards Shoichiro. Ha!

Sakaichi-san finally couldn’t take it anymore, she’d been insulted too much, and not just from me but even that tiny mouse Tanaka-san. She set her chopsticks down, smacking them on the table, and said that she was sorry I felt that way but she didn’t do anything wrong and had no idea I’d be there. She simply accepted his invitation to dinner. “His” she remarked; she couldn’t bring herself to use his name. I know his name. I know more about him than you ever will or could possibly even hope to.

How do you think two children are going to get to a restaurant? I asked. Now that was really direct, that was staring straight into the eyes of the monster – only the monster was me. Is me. Matsumoto-san broke down at that point too, it must have been terribly uncomfortable for her, and she mumbled a few words about forgetting something before very quickly finishing her food and heading over to our locker area. Tanaka-san, of course, just sat there beaming like the fool he is.

I guess I thought they would get dropped off outside, Sakaichi-san said in answer to my question. I don’t drive, I told her coldly. Look, I’m sorry, she
responded loudly and without a hint of remorse in her tone, but we’re in love and you’re going to have to get used to it. That did it, that pushed me way over the precipice. In love! I nearly shouted, you must be joking. The only thing that man loves is fooling around. Has he told you about his debt? She stared at me in wonder, suddenly deflated. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned that. For some reason my mind flashed to his letter and I realized that Shoichiro must have been keeping some things from her; he might have thought he could get it paid off and she’d never have to learn about that part of his past. Or that he wanted to wait until they were closer or something. She knows now though. But no Diary, I’m not sorry I said that. Sakaichi-san should know what she’s getting herself into. She should, she’s not a bad person and she deserves that.

Everything kind of sunk following that exchange. I lost the heart for it. I had been nasty, but so had she. Looking back maybe I went too far. It’s up to him to tell her those kinds of details; whatever’s going on between them is between them. Although not really, not if he involves our kids. And not if she goes along with it. And then there’s that new watch he bought for her. Well, everything’s out in the open now.

Tanaka-san tried to get me going again but I was
spent. Too much rage had already been unloaded, and I could see how crestfallen Sakaichi-san had become. She would have been turning over quite a bit in her head, trying to work things out, questioning and maybe regretting, maybe making plans. Definitely making plans. A problem that she needed to fix if she were going to continue with her romance had just been shoved right into her face. The poor woman. She does need to know what she’s getting into, what she’s already involved in. Everyone should. And she did have it coming – though perhaps not quite like that. But I’m not sorry.

Okay fine, I am sorry. Thanks a lot for ruining my fun Diary.
2020, July 28 (Tuesday)

The Tokyo Olympics started four days ago and I couldn’t care less. What a scam “the games” are, one excuse after another for governments to waste tax money, politicians to slosh it around from one hand to the next, companies to wring yet more public funds out of governments, and then for those same companies to coerce us everybodies into spending what we barely have on further crap we don’t need, including the so-called entertainment of corporately-sponsored athletes running around as living billboards. On top of that the government gets to beat its most fervent patriotic chest and distract everyone from the fact that our social services are failing and each yen we pay in with the trust it will benefit us disappears far too quickly from the nation’s coffers. Somehow they can build dozens of stadiums but can’t shore up hospitals, schools, roads, and waterworks in the countryside? Goodness I’m sounding more and more like my mother!

I guess I’m not surprised, I do live with her and she has become – aside from Manae and Terako – my main conversation partner. She’s right most of the time, and I think whatever ideas on this particular topic I picked up from her must be true too, or anyway mostly true, but
she’s also just as powerless as I am. It doesn’t matter, I haven’t and I won’t watch any of the Olympic nonsense on TV, and I certainly won’t give one second to checking up on the medal count and what it implies for Japan’s international standing. There is so much more of actual substance happening in my life right now.

Dad’s increasingly on a string of bad days only. And Mom’s still reluctant – and for the same reasons as before – to get him back on a daily soup of medicines. In a lot of ways I don’t blame her; the problem is I really don’t think we can afford the luxury of waiting anymore. Certainly not for much longer. If Dad’s become more of a danger to himself through the mental deterioration he’s suffering, and if he isn’t likely to give us those flashes of the old him – the Dad we’ve always so loved, those glimpses that have comforted us and given us what may have been false hopes – if he isn’t going to get there then we need to make a change in his treatment. We simply have to.

It might mean he returns to the lethargy and clear discomfort that afflicted him and haunted us the first time we tried the prescriptions the doctor assigned, but then again it might not. Right Diary? A different combination could work better, it’s possible that he won’t be irritable
and vacant all the time. I mean, who knows? Doctor Okuyama himself told us that contending with dementia is basically a game of guess and check, try and see. And we have to do something, his mood swings are too severe lately, and honestly I’ve been a little afraid when I’ve witnessed his frustration and then anger and seen both matched by a look in his eyes which says he has no idea who I am. If in his mind I’m – or any one of us, my sweet daughters most especially – merely a perfect stranger then anything could happen, whatever his peaceful disposition has always been before. I mean Dad is increasingly not himself, and although it’s no fault of his own we have to handle the him he has become.

It won’t be cheap, but I know money isn’t the reason Mom’s holding out on a daily dosage regimen for him again. But the fact of the matter is it will be pricey. Even with the national health insurance plan the extra costs will mean cutting corners elsewhere; of course Dad’s worth it, and if we stretch things I’m sure we’ll be fine. The sacrifices we’ll need to make we can manage without any real pain – fewer of the fun things we enjoy maybe, and less of the travel we already don’t do – but we’ll be okay. As long as nothing else major happens between now and when the girls start university I think we can make it.
And that’s something I won’t compromise on, I don’t care what it means for me and my own spending habits: if Manae and Terako want to go to a university I will absolutely see to it that they do – and see to convincing them to go if they happen not to want to. I won’t let either of my girls miss out on the chance like I did, no matter what it takes.

There is potentially some good news on that front though. I know, “good news”, I can hardly believe I’m able to write that myself. Not on studies Diary – you know I’ve considered that but decided it’s too much of an impracticality – no, I mean good news about money, which is a real miracle because I haven’t had any good money news for so long I can’t remember. Today a little sliver of fortune poked its head out at me. A little lucky maneki-neko doll beckoned some grace to me from around the corner. Maybe.

Once Matsumoto-san and I returned our cleaning equipment to the storage room and I got back to my locker after our shift finished I found a little folded slip of paper resting on top of my pile of street clothes. It was from Sakaichi-san, she must have dropped it in one of the locker’s air slits after I changed into my uniform and started working. The note said simply that she was sorry,
that she had spoken to Shoichiro – although respectfully enough she addressed him by his family name of Takebayashi and added the -san suffix – and that she would see to it that everything got straightened out as soon as possible. She also wrote that Shoichiro would very shortly get in touch with me himself regarding the details. She must feel it’s not her place to be talking to me about whatever it is between Shoichiro and I that she’s referring to – and that “whatever it is” could really only be his debt and my interest payments on his behalf, my payments to clear my name of his idiocy. If that is what’s happening then I have to be thankful to her, in the big overall picture she really is not so bad. I know, I know.

Sakaichi-san is a decent person, I’ve always thought that, however many ups and downs we’ve had. If her kicking Shoichiro into actually taking action is the result of my blurting out the fact of his debt to her the other day then I’m doubly not sorry for having done it. Think what it would mean to be free of that monthly bill but still living here with Mom and Dad – we’d have some honest to goodness spare cash, maybe even after Dad’s extra health bills. Financial breathing room! What would we do with that?

Finding Sakaichi-san’s note that way reminded
me once more of Shoichiro’s letter, the letter I hid from myself because I haven’t been able to work up the courage yet to actually open it and read it. He wrote that right after I left him; I wonder what he might have had to say? And too how very different it must be now, with so much having already passed between. What he wrote then was for that moment, and that moment is long gone. What might it mean for today? Is it even worth reading considering the kind of feelings it might stir up? Wouldn’t it simply complicate things, be better left undone? He probably thinks I read it long ago and how he’s been acting towards me is based on that assumption. Well, I didn’t. Would it have made any difference? Would I be otherwise with him if I read it now? Would I have done it differently if I had read it back then?

All of these what-ifs, they’re so impossible. What happened is what happened, and I can only deal with that in the day-to-day of living. Every day. Naturally that means I read or don’t read the letter now that I’ve found it, but I have to take a decision here – which just as naturally is the one thing I can’t do, can’t bring myself to do.

Weren’t you supposed to give me some kind of advice about this Diary? Well let’s have it: Yes or no?
2020, July 30 (Thursday)

Instead of calling like a man would have Shoichiro sent a text explaining what he and Sakaichi-san have evidently been discussing. Maybe not *explaining* so much as “explaining” since his message was pretty sparse and basically only gave me an outline. But it was enough to go on for now, and certainly enough to brighten my day a bit, even if its source was my stupid ex-husband.

The gist of it is that I’m off the hook, or anyway will be soon. He said he’s decided to take over the interest payments I’ve been making in addition to the principal payments he claims to have been sending in, but which I doubt he’s done very regularly. And in case you’re curious, the main reason for my dubiousness is that in the last statement from the loan provider I got it indicated the principal on the debt assigned to me – the one in my name, I refuse to call it “my debt” – hadn’t decreased much in these many months where I’ve been faithfully maintaining its interest due. It’s barely budged.

But that is neither here nor there really, not once I no longer have to make those installments. It was a big deal at the time to see that missive – I went through the roof – but tonight I’m sailing. Just how it will all work out I’m not entirely sure thanks to Shoichiro’s typical...
vagueness, but he wrote that I’d be getting a notice in the mail about the debt being re-registered, and then after that I won’t have to make any more monthly anythings. Free! What a relief. Goodness I hope it’s true, and I hope it happens very, very soon.

My guess is he’ll have the debt legally transferred over to his name. I’ll ask Mom to check with the volunteer lawyer from the Party – Moritomo-san I think her name is – to make sure that kind of thing is legitimate and possible given the overall situation, but it makes sense that someone could do that. After all, what the lender wants is their money back plus as much interest as they can wring out of the poor sop; why would they particularly care where it comes from as long as they’re getting paid? I might have to approve the change on my end, and there might be some paperwork to fill out, but that would be one stamp of my official hanko seal that I would be very happy to make. Officially debtless, in the clear after months and months and countless yen down the drain of Shoichiro’s poor choices and dishonesty: Oh it will feel so wonderful! Just thinking about it is exciting. He added that it might take some time – and I guess by that he means I may need to make another payment or two – but he promised that things are in motion and I’m letting myself trust him. Only
because Sakaichi-san is involved, but even so, even so.

Of course Shoichiro tried to word it so everything sounded like it was his idea and he’s some kind of hero in this, like he’s awoken to what’s right and is working towards making amends, but I know him well enough to read between the lines and see the traces of Sakaichi-san’s hands here, there, and everywhere. Basically nothing happened until she suddenly learned of his debt – inadvertently and from me – and then, well, then this blessed development landed in my lap. For all her annoyances she has a good head on her shoulders, I’ve always thought so. When have I ever disparaged her? Yes, she has bad taste in men, but so did I for way too many years. That’s behind me now though, done and done, and soon enough this needless burden will be too.

The only hint I got from Shoichiro about how he would actually be able to pull it off is that he’s going to move into another apartment, way over in the Goza part of town, which will probably make his commute a nightmare but I certainly don’t feel sorry for him about that. If that’s what it takes for him to finally put things right by me – me and our daughters, the deadbeat – then that’s what it takes. It only comes at the behest of Sakaichi-san and has nothing to do with his own gumption – I know – but I’ll
take it, I’ll take whatever I can get by way of good fortune and positive developments.

I wonder if his letter’s any better written than his text; I very much doubt it.

Things are looking up for me Diary! And with me of course for Manae and Terako too, and for Mom and Dad. All this money I’ve been carefully keeping separate from our household account to make sure it goes to the lender every month, all this to try and keep what remains of my credit and avoid any repercussions that would only end up hurting my kids, every yen of it will soon be a sweet extra padding in our account. And like I mentioned before, how we could use some extra padding! It’ll probably feel like an unexpected bonus every time I see those inflated numbers; how nice, how very nice. A break in the clouds, that’s what it gives us. The light and space to start to think a bit more widely, maybe even to dream.

Most of it will probably go to Dad’s treatments, but in no way do I begrudge that. I would do anything for my Papa, and if there’s more I can do than what I’ve been doing, I will be only too happy for that. I told Mom already what Shoichiro said and even let her read the text for herself. She’s a bit hesitant to make any big moves just yet because she doesn’t altogether trust that Shoichiro will
come through – and I don’t blame her – but I could tell she’s started to play with ideas a bit herself.

She mused that we might want to take another family trip, give Dad another chance at a good and fun and fulfilling time away, because we have no clue how many more will be possible or what his condition will be like a year from now – or a month. I replied that anything we do would have to come after Dad’s back on some medications, that he’s too unpredictable otherwise, which means it would be too dangerous. She nodded, she understands that, she does, but she still has trouble accepting it. With her experiences and her background – and with Dad’s, with his outlook and what he’s always said and done when it comes to illnesses and to letting nature take its winding course – I hold nothing against her, but I do disagree. I’ll keep working on her Diary, it’s for Dad’s sake, and when it comes to it what Mom and I both want is only and ever what’s best for Dad. She’ll come around, she mostly already has I think.

Looking back I really can’t believe the path these months have taken. So many twists and turns in such a short time. It started with a huge decision: I knew what it would mean to leave Shoichiro – or at least I thought I knew – but I never imagined that each of the parts and
parcels which would fall out from that choice would end up forming the puzzle picture they did. The half put together puzzle that is forever still being completed, the puzzle that you think kind of seems to make sense when you’re focused on this one corner of it but that when you pull back becomes simply baffling and then – a moment of glory – you see that it really does click, that every piece fits just so, and you start to wonder if there isn’t actually some meaning to it even if there never seems to be any logic. Life, fate, unfolded.
2020, August 03 (Monday)

After only another tiny word from me Mom agreed, she’s on board, she admits that Dad needs something more than just us keeping a constant eye on him, helping with his daily necessities like eating right and at the right times, bathing, washing, staying away from traffic and other dangers, and the rest of it. She agreed, and she even took him to see Doctor Okuyama again on her own initiative.

We won’t get the full test results for another week or so, but from what Mom could find out today although Dad is still in a fairly decent general physical condition his brain appears to be deteriorating more rapidly than the doctor anticipated. He stressed to her again that because dementia isn’t a single disease the effects of the different types vary quite a bit, just like the types themselves, many of which remain unknown. That’s Dad. We don’t have a specific name for what Dad has, only that it isn’t Alzheimer’s. What we can do, the doctor said, is to simply copy what’s worked for other patients with symptoms similar to Dad’s and see how he reacts, adjusting as necessary, going along, being careful. He reminded Mom, who reminded me, that there’s no cure, that Dad won’t get better, and that medically speaking our best chance –
really the only thing that can be done – is to slow and ease his brain’s negative progress. I didn’t need the reminder.

It’s a start, and I’m grateful for that. Doctor Okuyama gave us a new prescription and Mom went and had it filled after I got back from work. I really hope it eases his discomfort, but I also hope it doesn’t disappear Dad down the drain of a drug-induced stupor too much, the always-half-asleep side effect that too many medicines seem to have. At least that’s what I’ve come across on some of the blogs people have kept about their experiences, and too in some of the comments others have made on those posts. Reading those now and again has proved to be a real release for me, a real comfort. I know that some places in the world have support groups or whatever where people actually meet face to face and share coffee or tea and snacks and really talk, talk, talk – it does sound wonderful, but in the absence of anything like that I’ll take what I can get. These blogs and the call center, talking with professionals. Everything helps.

If Dad can be more at rest and safer, but still there enough to give us our beloved Papa from time to time, you know Diary that would be a dream come true, all things considered. What’s so hard is waking up and wondering what kind of Dad we’ll have today. And then on top of that
wondering throughout the day what kind of Dad we’ll have. It’s anxiety, always. A constant worry. There’s no way of knowing, no way of predicting, and even the nights can bring their own unpleasant surprises if he can’t sleep or if he thinks he needs to get up or – heaven help us – if he decides that he absolutely must go there or do that at exactly that moment. It’s almost like having a little one in the house again, only much more demanding and far more intense, far more stressful. And frankly a lot less cute. I hate it, I hate what’s happening to him, but the fact is that Dad’s brain is rotting, it’s unraveling, and no one can stop that. Doctor Okuyama was very kind to call it “negative progression”, but it’s a slow death, that’s what it is.

I started re-reading my very old copy of Natsume Sōseki’s Botchan tonight. One unexpected bonus to living again in the house where I grew up is that since my parents never threw anything of mine away I suddenly have access to everything I didn’t realize I missed. This book, this old and worn and beat-up book which came to me already well used, it was a gift from Dad. Way back when. As soon as I told my parents that I wanted to be a Japanese literature teacher he ran out and found it at a used bookstore near Kochi University. He really did run out too, our house is not that far from the university and he was too
excited to bother with the car. He jumped on his bicycle, I remember. I can still picture him coming home breathless about an hour later announcing in triumph that he had found it. The one hundred yen price he paid is still penciled into the inside cover; I wonder what the sales tax was back then.

I was in junior high and Dad thought it would be perfect, it’s a classic and he loved the book when he was in his early teens. At the time he was only half right, at least when it came to me. Even though I was at the right age to read it, and even though its main character is a junior high school teacher, and even though it takes place right here on the island of Shikoku – although up in Matsuyama City where my family and I once went for a vacation and a trip to the famous Dogen Hot Springs – even with that much going for it I could never really connect with its titular hero. He was simply too male for me; I remember one climatic scene where he and a friend literally beat up their rivals from the school they worked at. Imagine that.

Then too there was the historical gap. It was written in 1906 and so I had trouble transporting myself into the mentality of pre-war and empire-holding Japan. We hardly learn anything about that era in school, aside
from gawking at maps of how much land Japan used to control, and so it was simply too much of a world away. Which is kind of funny because reading things from further back in our history I feel a lot more comfortable. I don’t know, somehow the whole Meiji to Taisho periods just carry a blank for me, an excess of walls or something. I tried to get Shoichiro to read it once, I thought maybe he would relate better to it, but he didn’t make it past the first twenty pages. He was never a reader, nor a writer, well except for that mysterious letter of his.

But anyway, re-reading *Botchan* now I find myself making a lot more inroads; maybe I only needed to grow up a bit, get some life experience in me. Or maybe I only needed to be around more men. The novel is beautifully written, and although its story isn’t pretty it is fun; a touch tragic, but heartwarmingly so. More than anything it’s a loving memory I have of my dear old Dad, my Papa whom I would do anything for.

Here we are then Diary, Dad’s back on meds and we’ll see how it goes. If things start to turn bad we’ll ask Doctor Okuyama to take another look at him and re-assess, and then we’ll try that next road. I doubt he’ll ever be off drugs again for the rest of his life, not at the point he’s already gotten to; too much disease has happened inside.
We’ll lose him, but if we can lose him slowly, if we can get used to saying goodbye, and above all if he’s free of pain and able to enjoy whatever it is he can with the days and weeks – months, years, I’ll be optimistic – he has left, I’ll count that as a blessing. A grace. Maybe not like a tragedy that’s heartwarming exactly, but at least like one that’s been defanged.
2020, August 04 (Tuesday)

Ups and downs, downs and downs, downs, downs, downs. It can seem like a lot of downs, can’t it? This past year or so has been that way for me. It started on a high – I thought at the time – but that was false, an illusion, a fantasy I couldn’t see past, couldn’t even see that I was in, and then – then the bottom dropped out. I got pushed into a hole and the opening got covered over. Buried breathing, I was in so deep I didn’t even want to live, but I still was. Stuck with a life, stuck in a life. What are you supposed to do when you feel like that? It stops being a matter of living and becomes one of simply coping. Getting by. That isn’t a very fun experience, I can tell you that much Diary.

Life though, maybe God, the universe, the natural way, the unbending we go through, maybe it provides these moments of such clarity, such sparkling and ringing and shining “Yeses!” that those hard times melt away. A bump in the road you’re on, a little dip that in hindsight was worth it, even helpful, one more stone along the garden path of you. Perspective, that’s what those times give, and when at long last you get there, through all the haze and fog and smoky blindness of the trouble you didn’t realize was purely of your own making, when you get there then you sigh, you exhale, and you live again.
Just live. That happened, okay I’ve got it, and now this, and – gratitude. That’s it. Another day, then another, one more, until there aren’t any more. Dad’s getting to his aren’ts quickly, but he’s surrounded by love. May each of us pass that way.

I had one of those insights today, and it taught me so much about myself and where I stand now in the midst of my life. Peace, finally. And a peace that helped me win some peace with Dad, for Dad, between me and my facing Dad. It wasn’t about him though Diary, no not at all. It was about that other man that’s pretty much never stopped winding his way around this garden path, that other guy, you know the one, Shoichiro. Following me like goldfish’s poop, as the saying goes. Trailing along, always there just behind, forever sensed but only seen if you make the effort to turn and look. He was held up to my face today, I directed my vision, I finally saw. And peace came.

Sakaichi-san, somewhat delicately and surprisingly deftly, pulled me aside at lunch right as the four of us were finishing our food and getting ready to return to work. She asked for some help with her phone, mentioning that she had left it in her locker and would I mind taking a look at it, it won’t take a moment. I don’t think Matsumoto-san was fooled by that – if she overheard
it is, which she may not have considering that she was already a few meters away by that point – but it was probably enough deception for Tanaka-san. That man is a dolt, and I’m sure he doesn’t realize I’m far from being an expert when it comes to electronics. He’s also not the type to really listen or even pay attention to anything that doesn’t directly concern himself, so it might have been that Sakaichi-san’s subterfuge was unnecessary. Still appreciated though. At any rate, that’s what she said in order to get a private word with me, and I understood that immediately and played along.

She wanted to make sure I’m okay with everything Shoichiro said. She knew he had contacted me – I don’t know if she was aware he merely sent a text or not – but she didn’t appear to know much about the content, only the fact of it. What I am certain of is that whatever Shoichiro told her before she hadn’t heard the full details of the message prior to today anyway – no, let me rephrase that, I’m certain she had heard only the scantest trace of details, let alone anywhere near the whole, because of the way she reacted. What I’m trying to say is she knew almost nothing.

Anyway, I told her that he said he was working towards having the loan he took out in my name
transferred over to him, and that sooner or later I wouldn’t have to make interest payments on it any longer. Also that he was moving to a different apartment. She then repeated her question as to whether I was fine with that or not, and I replied absolutely, I was really looking forward to having one less monthly expense and we could use the money that’s been going towards his debt. I emphasized the “his”, but I probably didn’t need to. A force of habit, I guess. She apologized on Shoichiro’s behalf for that – very noble of her, even if it was only empty form, a social maneuver – and then restated her query. Again. That repetition confused me Diary, I couldn’t see the why of it, and so I asked her for some clarification. She grew very obviously uncomfortable at that point, so much so that she wasn’t able to hide her unease behind the expressionless countenance our teachers mold us into affixing as we grow up, and then that in turn made me uncomfortable. If she can’t disguise her feelings it must be something major, I thought. It was.

I apologized next and said I wasn’t really catching her meaning. She met my eyes for a few long seconds – very directly, which was also off-putting – pursed her lips, forehead wrinkling, and dropped her gaze to the floor before adding that she meant about his
apartment. I was still lost and simply said he told me that he’s moving into the Goza area, which I thought would make for a troublesome commute. She asked was that all, I said yes. She then appeared even more at a loss and covered her face with her hands. I told her whatever it was I could handle it, just let me know, come out with it. Her face still buried she informed me that Shoichiro is moving to the Goza area because he’s moving in with her. Suddenly the lights went off – and blazingly back on. Suddenly it all made sense and a thousand cards flipped over, into place, lined up. I see.

I saw. Dearest Diary I saw. A spotlight, that’s what it was, a pure high beam. And I felt – nothing. I expected to feel rage, I realized that I expected to feel rage, I noticed that I wasn’t feeling rage and wondered how that was possible. I ought to be through the roof, in the stratosphere, I told myself, but I’m not. Not even a bit. Now what in the world does that mean? And I knew what it meant. Shoichiro: Was but not is, at last. He has turned into nostalgia for me. I wish him well but wish him nothing more, nothing beyond. I couldn’t believe it. He has become a was for me, somehow when I wasn’t paying attention, sneakily and most likely when I was distracted by other things with Dad, my heart turned Shoichiro into a

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somebody I know instead of the somebody I love hate love that he has always been these many stretched out years. I have no idea how that happened, of course, only that it did.

My back was turned, I was so busy, so otherwise directed – and I healed. Now how about that? One of life’s miracles, a ray of moonlight I wasn’t expecting, bursting through the shadows, the clouds, pulsing through my brokenness. I’d been pacing back and forth in the dark depths without any awareness that I was getting closer to the surface, to the sun’s reflecting shine. I have no words for the tranquility that this revelation – this blossoming of enlightenment – has brought to me. No words, none. But then again perhaps some, perhaps these: Thank you. Once more, always, thank you.

I might be ready to open that letter.
So far so good with Dad. He seems to be responding well, or fairly well, to the new mix of drugs that Doctor Okuyama prescribed. He’s more lethargic, but I suppose that’s probably inevitable. His mood swings have remained to some degree, but they’re less intense than before, and his focus is clearer too. He seems more at rest. He’s also able to follow a conversation much better than he could even a couple of weeks ago. Don’t get me wrong Diary, there’s no miracle here and his short-term memory yet poor, but he can at least keep it together enough to be engaging when he’s engaged. There are limits, and of course better moments and worse.

For instance, if we happen to be watching a drama on TV he’ll ask for details about characters and storylines that were already given, and I don’t mean in previous episodes but right there in the same show. It must be a lot to keep track of for him, and it makes me a bit awed at the wondrous way memory works when it’s functioning normally. I have no clue how it is that I can remember everything I do, but there it sits, waiting for me to call it up. For him all that information must still rest, paused at a place in his brain, but then too soon flitter away, falling through the cracks or being replaced by
something else. Or to simply disappear.

I wish I could have just one day of Dad’s life so I could better understand what it means to be him and to have his sickness, to feel along with him and experience his fear, his worry, his frustration. More than anything it must be that: so very frustrating. It would be maddening to know that you know but can’t bring the knowledge up, to know that you could before but now can’t, to know that your body isn’t working as it should, as it used to, to have to wrestle with your own mind day in and day out – no, hour in and hour out, minute in and minute out. You’re aware of what you want to do and aware that it’s too far gone, outside your grasp, you realize it ought to be so simple – and it used to be so simple – but now it isn’t and won’t be again. I’d probably give up, I couldn’t handle it.

I truly admire Dad for the way I see him struggle and fight to stay with something, to keep at it and seize – to never let go – of those simple things that the rest of us take for granted and spare no thought for. Something like watching a lame and completely formulaic TV show. An endless effort that would be, and how exhausting; poor Dad, poor Dad. Fortunately for him he’s always preferred the celebrity talk shows to dramas anyway, his favorite programs usually only involve people sitting around and

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making comments to various degrees of funniness regarding whatever video of this or that event or place gets shown to them right there in the studio before our watching eyes at home. Those programs really do require nothing of the viewer, it’s no wonder they’re so relaxing. Brain killers, as Mom calls them, but they have their place, or anyway they do for Dad.

The girls are on summer break from school and the annual Yosakoi Festival is about to start. I’ve heard the university’s dance team practicing for it every night, blaring out from loudspeakers the same tired song that each of the teams in the competition use as they rehearse their group synchronization. To be fair they do typically wrap it up at a decent hour, but talk about noise pollution.

It’s in good fun, I know, and Yosakoi is really the only reason any tourist would ever willingly come to Kochi, but I’ve been putting up with this every summer for my entire life. I guess I will till the day I die; but that means something totally different for me now. Ever since Dad got sick – ever since we came to know that Dad’s been sick – I’ve slowly learned that these stupid annoyances we make so much of are really the core of what life’s all about. Dealing with this little crap truly is the whole of being alive, the essence of whatever it means

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to be a human and to pass your days on the planet with a brain that’s way too big to ever give you any rest. We’re forced, compelled, to stare this beast of existence in the face with each ticking second and warm breath, and then we have to go and make something of it. Other animals get off easily, they only act and never have to ponder.

Dad did, he made something. He was involved – up to his shoulders – he figured it out, he fit where he was and when he was. Maybe he got lucky and was born in the right time for his temperament, or maybe he shaped himself to his world, his corner of it, I don’t know. He did it though.

He got plopped down in the postwar years, right here in this dead nothing port town of Kochi, he grew up basically outdoors, his best toys were the dirt and sticks and rocks and rivers and sky that surrounded him. He studied, went to school in Osaka, met Mom, through her met some radical ideas, and then he grabbed onto those and never let go. Maybe not to the extent that Mom did, maybe the fires of social justice and a better world never burned as brightly in him, but they were there. He and Mom got married, they settled here in his hometown, they both went to work for Japan Post and they both loved words with everything in them. Art too for Dad,
illustrating, his funny little comics that he contributed to the Party’s newsletters from time to time, even a few in the Kochi Newspaper, though never regularly.

They had me, their only child, and they did their best by me, I know they did. They taught me to love words too: their form, interplay, shape, whispers. So very, very much that we can do with merely a few strokes of a pen. It is remarkable. I never had the courage to write, and I think Dad was a bit daunted by the sheer magnitude of language too, but he was a soldier about sending New Year’s greeting cards. I’ll bet he gets his mailing list out again this December and insists on handwriting a note to each and every person on it. Those touches, those traditions bursting with human stickiness, I worry that they’ll only keep fading away. I don’t do my part to keep them up, but I should, I should. You’ve got me there Diary. Maybe this year I’ll start.

I would never ask the girls to help take care of Dad, but now that they’re off school for a bit and have evidently decided to forget about their summer vacation homework until – probably – the day before it’s due, they have been spending a lot more time with him. On their own doing too, I’m so proud of them. They could sit and play in the privacy of our room when they’re home but
they don’t, they head downstairs and take up whatever has caught their fancy in the dining room if Dad’s at the table or on the floor in the living room if he’s in there. I think they realize a lot more than I give them credit for, and I think they’re aware too of how much he enjoys simply being around them, having them around him as they chat and giggle, jostle and fight, make peace and carry on. Sisters being sisters.

Terako has recently discovered drawing and Dad, when he can, when he’s there enough, has been only too happy to give her pointers or to join in and add his own silly sketches to hers. How that makes her smile – and him most of all. Manae too, with her new calligraphy club at school this year, has made good use of her grandparents, putting them to work helping her improve her Chinese character writing: the thickness of lines, balance of components, placement on the page, and whatever else goes into fine traditional penmanship. You’ll have to ask somebody else for the details on that Diary!

Next weekend I’ll take them to see their father again – the girls, that is. The third Saturday and their dinner with Shoichiro. I wonder if he’ll bring Sakaichi-san along again. Somehow I doubt it; I don’t think she’d go even if he invited her. Maybe next month. My hunch is
she’s sensitive enough to give me some distance during this interlude after their relationship has taken its recent big advance.

Moving in together – I remember when Shoichiro and I got our first apartment. A tiny one-room type, six tatami mats for the whole thing. Us and a baby; can you believe it? That was another lifetime, that was another me.

I appreciate it Sakaichi-san, I do, but you needn’t worry. This is where I am now – with everything – and it’s okay, it’s just fine. It’ll be strange to see him – Shoichiro – it might be strange. That letter might make it stranger, if I can get to it that is. But in either case I’m sure it won’t be jarring. He’ll be more nervous than I am, knowing him. He’ll know that I know about him and Sakaichi-san’s cohabitation, and that he didn’t tell me. He easily could have but didn’t. He’ll know what that means. I bet he’ll be afraid of what I may say or how I may react – I always did enjoy having that man be a little frightened of me. Well let him be, he’ll find out soon enough how much of a mellow mama-daughter I’ve become. And that’s enough.

I wonder how we’ll spend this weekend. It will all depend on Dad, on how he wakes up and is tomorrow when tomorrow’s today. One step, one day – that’s now become enough.
2020, August 15 (Saturday)

It wasn’t quite as steady as I thought, but neither was it that much worse. Not as bad as it could have been. I mean, it wasn’t the tranquil affair I imagined, but it also wasn’t the rollercoaster the last two times were. Sorry Diary, I jumped right into that, I’m talking about seeing Shoichiro tonight, and naturally you need some context first. You can’t read my thoughts and you don’t live in my head. But no, really…

Thankfully he – or Sakaichi-san behind him – had the decency not to ask me to cart the girls way out to the other side of town where he’s living now. I’ve been out there before and I know there are some nice little places, especially a couple of local cafés that are anything but your standard chain affair, but unless Mom – and Dad riding with – were to drive us to and from it would be an almost impossible task to handle. Not with the bus routes, and not with the tram street being so far away from the main part of the district. I wouldn’t ask Mom to do that, I don’t even like asking her to only pick us up; we all have to think about Dad’s comfort first and foremost. And what happens if he’s having a bad night and refuses to get in the car? Or gets in and then suddenly opens his door and runs out? That could happen, it absolutely could, and I won’t
have that on my conscience, nor on my list of worries. No way. Keeping Dad safe and as healthy and happy as possible, that’s priority number one. It falls way higher on my ranking of concerns than my own comfort does, and most definitely Shoichiro’s. Who really cares about him? Well Sakaichi-san does, I know, and the girls, that’s true. Probably his own parents – anyway, you see my point.

The place he chose was actually once more easy to get to, I will give him credit for that. We could take the tram the whole way both going and coming, and that’s just what we did. The restaurant was the mom and pop \textit{udon} and \textit{soba} noodle shop near one end of the downtown Obiyamachi shopping arcade, the immediately noticeable eatery with the fake water wheel outside. You can’t miss it. It’s nice, very traditional in its interior and menu, and it’s been there for as long as I can remember. It probably started sometime around when my parents were young, although I’ve never asked the owners exactly when. They’re lovely people, a wife and husband team that do everything for their business. I think I’ve maybe seen one or two part-time servers in there now and again but that’s it, the cook-owners handle the rest.

The broth in their bowls is standard but decent – you wouldn’t complain about it – and the \textit{tempura} fried
fare is passing – not great but good enough, and hearty. The noodles though, they are the standout, which is perfect really, if you think about it. The restaurant is a noodle shop and it serves quality noodles, it is what it says it is and nothing more. Showa Era practicalities, no nonsense and none of this try-to-be-everything garbage that these modern establishments go for. But here I am sounding like my mother again.

It was just him, and he did look nervous when he saw me. He still looked good – happy – but nervous. I know he wasn’t happy to see me, it was for the girls and maybe too he’s happy in general. With me it was only the underlying anxiety that showed. I was a touch proud of that, to be honest.

I said hello and asked how his move was. No problems, he replied, it went smoothly. He immediately added that he had started the paperwork to have the loan transferred, but that it was a lot and would take some time. I suggested that perhaps Sakaichi-san could help him with it. He reddened – which I have to admit was cute – and said that yes, maybe she could. I got the feeling he was going to pussyfoot around the obvious and that suddenly became very irritating to me so I decided to have at it. Why tiptoe about what we both know and both know that
we both know? We aren’t colleagues at work, we aren’t classmates at school, we have no reason to uphold the stupid rules society makes us play nice by. I just said it, I didn’t care. I still don’t. I told him that I know he’s living with her – Sakaichi-san – and I don’t mind one bit. I wish them well. I have much bigger things to focus on.

The relief on his face could have been painted. It could have been photographed and stuck in the dictionary in lieu of an actual textual definition for the term. It was obvious even to Terako, who is usually oblivious to things like adults’ emotional fluctuations. Manae was probably surprised too that he let his feelings be displayed so clearly, although she, true to her own character, didn’t let on what was happening beneath her surface – I sometimes think she’s a bit too Japanese for her own good. He responded that he was worried I might be angry. I reminded him that we’re divorced, that we haven’t lived together for over a year, and that anything he does to get rid of the debt he put on us – I emphasized that us because I was still annoyed with him, still am in fact, and somehow his expression had also begun bothering me – is welcome assistance. He didn’t apologize for the loan like he should have, but he did say he appreciated it and was thankful for the payments I made. It was for our daughters I said, to
protect them. He nodded.

Then, completely out of nowhere, I sent myself for a loop by mentioning I found the letter he sent way back when we first split up. He was of course more surprised than me by that and asked what I meant by “found”. I said that’s it, I never received the letter before and only recently stumbled across it. He said he had sent it to my parent’s house, why didn’t they give it to me? I confessed I didn’t know, I explained how I came to discover it in the midst of some of Dad’s things, and added that I thought Dad may have simply gotten mixed up or forgotten about it. He has dementia you know, I reminded him, and the doctor thinks Dad’s probably had it for a long time but we didn’t notice anything until after his symptoms became much worse. Shoichiro nodded again and mumbled that that made sense, and then – without looking me in the eye or even glancing at my face – wanted to know what I thought of his letter. I said I hadn’t read it yet. That floored him. He was totally taken aback. I suppose I don’t blame him, but he should understand the overall situation a bit better and my reasons should be obvious. Can’t he understand anything? Although really he never has been one for the obvious.

Since I brought it up I asked him what was in the
letter and if it would be worth reading after all this time has passed. He said he worked very hard on it, he was as honest as he could be and must have re-written it ten times or more. Please read it, he implored simply. It’s old and those things were about then and not now, but please read it. I said I would, although I don’t know if I will. I haven’t yet, but then we only got back home a few minutes ago and I thought the first thing I should do is consult you about it. Unlike me you’ve actually gone through the thing Diary, I stuck it right here in your pages.

The main thing is, I don’t think I need it. Everything’s such a long time past, whatever Shoichiro put down then in the midst of the chaos of separating would probably only drudge up old emotions I don’t want to feel. Merely seeing him and talking to him for all of the ten minutes I did tonight was enough to bring me more ups and downs than I wanted. Almost entirely downs too. I thought I could meet him and not feel anything, but that wasn’t how it worked. Maybe I’ll never be able to feel nothing with him, around him; but today was better than before, so there may be reason to hope. It might keep getting better?

Who knows. I know I won’t be able to avoid him, I’ll continue to meet him at least briefly once a month for
years to come while the girls are young enough not to be able to go by themselves, and as long as I’m working with Sakaichi-san – and as long as the two of them stay together – there will be that connection too. Why risk further possible pain or frustration or annoyance or irritation or anything by reading his letter from almost eighteen months ago, one that was written out of a totally different set of conditions, a whole other environment, another world? Maybe I’ll just tear the stupid thing up and be done with it once and for all.
2020, August 18 (Tuesday)

I didn’t tear up Shoichiro’s letter. I couldn’t bring myself to do it Diary, I tried but in the end my curiosity got the best of me, and by the way you were right about it being worth reading. It was unpredictably enlightening – totally unlike him to have something of real substance to say – and if I hadn’t known its author I would probably have been utterly perplexed because it showed a Shoichiro that I truly had no idea existed. It expressed a side to the man I’d seen maybe once or twice in all our years together. Where had he been and why wasn’t he there more?

I not only read the letter, I read it four or five times. It wasn’t that long, but it had nuances to it – I know, actual nuances, and considering its source I was as amazed as you must have been – that rewarded the extra time spent. It forced me to really reflect in a way I haven’t for a long time, not since right before I made my decision to leave. I had to look at everything anew, and I changed my mind, changed it back, changed it again but differently, thought about changing it once more but talked myself out of it, and then came full circle to where I am, sitting here in my old bedroom and writing to you on top of my old desk which has – this world is simply much too much – become the primary place where my own daughters now
do their homework.

None and all of this could have been foreseen. It’s like someone wrote out my days as a plotline and I’ve merely flipped through them. One last twist to the tale? Hardly: life will keep on unwrapping, and whatever it does to me next I’ll be taken off guard – probably – but end up fine. I don’t know if that means I’m charmed or that we each are, or simply that none of it really matters, not ultimately, and that being human is not so different from being anything else except in that extra layer of awareness our brains spread on. We think, and thereby suffer more, but most of that pain is of our own making. And can be unmade. Few of us appear to want to know the former, I wish I didn’t. More of us should know the latter. And I wish I did – I do.

Considering when Shoichiro dated the letter it’s surprisingly coherent. He must have put an enormous amount of hours into it, I remember him telling me the last time we met that he re-wrote it more than once. He has never been a writer so even that in itself should have signaled something to me about his seriousness, but it took actually going through his words, one by one and then again and again, to realize how very much he felt. There is a depth laid bare that I honestly didn’t have a clue was in
him. Well maybe not no clue – let me cross that out – but only an inkling of a clue. Shoichiro poured forth his soul to a degree that forced me aback, firstly because of its profundity and secondly because of its literacy. He communicated far better than he ever had – and likely ever will – face to face. Where was this clarity of introspection when we were trying to deal with our problems together? It must have been the shock of his sudden solitude that pulled such out of him.

He didn’t apologize for anything, at least not directly, but he showed a lot of remorse, and not only for his excessive drinking, floozy chasing at all the “hostess” bars he frequented, and general lack of effort at home. He mentioned those things in passing, in a single sentence, remarking that he would probably do it differently if he could – probably, he wrote, a caveat of sorts, or anyway a deflating. He also made no excuses for his work, which I have always taken to be a mark against him since he could at least have gotten a job with better pay and a more fulfilling role, he could have tried to use his skills. None of that was it though, he wasn’t sorry about those points, not really, not deeply. Where his contrition came in, and where it then spread out, was in the lengthy middle section he wrote about how he’s always felt like he’s held me back.
I was surprised, saddened, moved, and honored all at once by his sentiments. He saw, or sees, something in me that I never did myself. In some ways I feel like a new woman having read the way he thinks of me.

He actually admitted I’m better off without him. He put that flatly. He told me straight that I never should have married him. He didn’t mention Manae, and whether he thinks she should be here or not – if I should have listened to my friends and aborted her –, and he didn’t seem to recognize that if we hadn’t stayed together Terako wouldn’t even have had a chance to be conceived, instead he simply kept it at me and him, and that was a waste he wrote, a spoiling of my possibilities. He explained that I had so much more in me and that I could have done amazing, remarkable things if only I hadn’t settled for him and a life at home, a life as a homemaker. That’s very male thinking, I have to tell you Diary, it’s just like a man not to see the importance and centrality of being a mother, a parent, and how that far exceeds anything a person might do in broader society. Like most men he’s blind to that and focused on “doing things” I guess, but I was still very touched. He believes in me, he related, he thinks I have a potential inside that has never gotten to experience the light of day. I don’t know about that myself – I won’t ever
have that level of self-assurance – but I cried freely when I read it.

He never knew how to tell me any of that he said, he never knew what to do about anything, and so he simply took his situation for the way it was and did the best he could. I doubt that he did “the best he could” on very many occasions, but I forgive him and now at least feel like I have a stronger understanding of his heart. He has more spirit than I gave him credit for – that much is certain – he has far more depth than I could have predicted. Or he anyway did at the time of writing; but of course he still would now. I have to ask again: Where was this Shoichiro? He seemed to predict I would think that way, that I would put the question to myself. He answered it too, saying that after I left with the girls he spent an entire day hungover and staring into the mirror. He might have meant that literally.

He suggested I use this opportunity I’ve given myself to start over, to move to make things right – he must have meant it in the sense of what he thinks would be “right”. He was incredibly unrealistic in that part of the letter, but it was still sweet. He wanted me to fulfill the dream I abandoned those stacked up years ago, the one he blames himself for ruining and – this too was a real shock
to me – he has never forgiven himself for. Go to university, he told me, get a degree and find a way to be the Japanese teacher I talked about being. Again, it’s always about *doing* something with men, they can’t seem to realize that simply *being* is enough – except, oddly, in Shoichiro’s case, and all the other lay about Kochi men like him. But that’s behavior without recognition, simple sloth more than anything else.

He said he knows how much I still love books, and he remembers how many we had to read in our Japanese classes when we weren’t memorizing new Chinese *kanji* characters or the different noun and verb forms that go with polite speech. I could be the one giving out that homework, he encouraged. Frankly I’m surprised he could describe anything from those courses, because I recall him sleeping through pretty much every one of them, and then having to basically do his homework for him as a result. He added that it’s very easy to take out loans these days and so I could afford to support the girls and still be a full-time student. Given what’s happened since between him and me and money that comment really upset me – through the roof, actually – but after my third or fourth reading I decided he was only trying to be positive, and at least it showed that he did have some tiny sense about
monetary matters, or a sense that such would be an issue for us. He didn’t offer to support me or the girls financially, but neither did he ask that I keep contributing to the rent on our old place. Maybe in his mind that made us even.

He closed the letter by acknowledging that although he was convinced everything bad in my life was his fault, from his point of view he wouldn’t have had it any other way. I’m sure he meant that purely in reference to himself. He wrote – and I still can’t believe it – that my time with him was a gift, that he considered our years together as a beauteousness he was blessed with. Okay you’re right Diary, he didn’t put it in those precise words, but that was what he was getting at. It was a bit clumsily done, as you know, he actually stated that I was a present he didn’t deserve, but I’ll embrace the sentiment and I’ll treasure it. He warned me not to think about taking him back – a bit too overconfidently, I must say, as if I would necessarily come to think that way – and that even if I tried he wouldn’t let me. He encouraged me to move beyond him and make of myself what he knows I can. Be great, he put it, you are great. What a lovely gesture, and if I didn’t know him better I would be so impressed by his powerful finish. He got that phrasing from a drama series we watched together, which he may not recall since it was
a few years back and because he tended to drink through most of the episodes. It doesn’t matter though, even if he stole the line he still meant it.

So much has happened between this letter of his and the present, but not so much that our world has changed. We’re still divorced, still in each other’s lives all the same, and still caught up in the daily thinking and stories we tell ourselves. At least he is for me. I have tried and tried to rid myself of that man but I haven’t been able to yet. I even tried to physically rid myself of him, but we both know how that worked out. For the best, of course, but hardly as planned. Shoichiro: my life’s grand story, its central motif, the core that I’ve rotated around, or that has revolved around me, I don’t know how to think of the enormity he has signified in these travails of mind, these joys and sorrows and efforts, efforts, efforts that have been me. He isn’t a what-if, his place in my personal narrative is a was but also an is, he was my fate and our dual journey’s ending must be too. This is how things are, there aren’t any leftover could-bes or maybes, there’s only the now and its shape, its current contours.

Today is Dad, caring for Dad, staying by him while I can and giving Manae and Terako the gift of him, and he them, during the window that’s left to us. Shoichiro
was right about people being presents, and I wish we could remember that more often. I wish I could, and I will, I’ll make that a part of this new me. I’ll be better.

In his letter Shoichiro related that he saw something in me that I gave up; I don’t know about that, but I do know that I don’t need to become any kind of job to find and follow what I love. A teacher’s career didn’t happen for me, life unfolded in its differing ways and made its mark on me and my footsteps – and that’s absolutely okay. I’m a mother, a daughter, and those are the only labels I need. Besides, I have my books and I have plenty of chances to be with them. I can always teach literature to my daughters, they already are the best pupils anyone could ask for. I recently read about a newly discovered collection of letters from Natsume Sōseki to his haiku poet friend Masaoka Shiki; maybe that will pique their interests. It certainly has mine.

Thank you Shoichiro, and good luck. You were, and are, that you in ways that can still surprise. We will always love you.
2020, September 04 (Friday)

Mom actually went and found a senior’s care home for Dad, one that specializes in residents with dementia. She undertook that completely on her own, we never discussed it and in all honesty the idea hadn’t even occurred to me. I was actually a bit taken aback when she told me; she seems to have really accepted things. I guess witnessing how the medicines have been helping with Dad’s decline has brought her around to what can still be done for him. Who knows, practicality might for once be winning out over ideology in the old radical poet. Well that or enough time has simply passed.

The staff at the place she found are trained not only in the regular duties of cleaning and feeding but also in methods for engaging the women and men living there to keep them active, keep them doing as much as they can for themselves. It’s meant to help the brain maintain its limberness to try and mitigate dementia’s debilitating effects as much as possible for as long as possible. There’s even a special café menu for the residents’ afternoon drinks to make keeping everyone hydrated a lot more fun, and meals are served with standardly steamed white rice to encourage bowel function instead of the rice gruel that other care homes use. No diapers either, rather scheduled
and regular trips to the toilet. How many accidents still end up happening I have no idea, but between those details and the private and well equipped rooms, socializing time with others, and round the clock nursing care, I have to admit it sounded very good. The brochure was nice too, glossy photos of everyone smiling. It would be a little hard for me to get to without driving, but not impossible.

I know Mom doesn’t want him to go though. Her whole sales approach to me about the center felt like it was aimed more at herself. Naturally I don’t want to move him into any kind of facility either, I want my Papa at home for each minute he can be here and we’re still able to provide what he needs. The day will probably come when we can’t, but it hasn’t yet. That day is – I sincerely hope – a long ways off.

I’m sure Mom’s worried about me being home and what that may be doing to me and the girls. When we relocated here everything was supposed to be very temporary, but then Dad got sick – I mean we found his sickness – and temporary became semi-permanent and now, I gather, she’s concerned that semi-permanent is turning into permanent. I’ve told her a thousand times that we like living here, that we’re very grateful to her and to Dad for letting us stay, and that I’m more than willing to
help with him because he really does need it – and you too Mom, I always add. Of course she thinks she can do everything, and equally of course she can’t. She also needs her time off, her nights away, her escapes from the pressures and stress.

Maybe she wants it to only be her and Dad again, she might feel like we’ve become a nuisance. But whether we’ve overstayed our welcome or not – and knowing Mom I doubt that very much – somebody has to be the extra pair of hands called for. Outside of placing him in somewhere like this care home, what’s the other option? Hiring an expensive nurse to come and visit? Mom wouldn’t trust anyone enough to leave them at home with Dad in order for her to sneak out for a trip to the supermarket or something. And as far as that time away goes I’m completely fine, I get the relief of being gone simply by going to work. Not Mom, she’s Dad’s primary caretaker and has no such luxury – if you could call what I do for work a “luxury”. Anyway, maybe it was these factors or others that led to her decision.

As we went through the materials she picked up I mentioned this perspective of mine and said that for the moment we shouldn’t put Dad anywhere, but if we ever do then it’ll be this place. She seemed relieved but didn’t
want to show it. I still noticed all the same.

According to the service’s pamphlet our national health insurance would cover most of the costs so paying for it wouldn’t be a tremendous burden. Given the demand we would have to register on a waiting list, but once we got Dad in the insurance side would be automatic. And we’re doing well enough from month to month these days. We don’t have a lot of extra money but we do have some, and we’ve figured out how to meet Dad’s medicinal needs without having to cut much else from the budget. We live simply, eat locally grown, and although we couldn’t take a family trip this summer that wasn’t because we couldn’t afford it. A jaunt in the car down to Shimanto City again would have been entirely possible if we hadn’t been so worried about Dad. Maybe our fears are holding us back, maybe we’re fretting a bit much, but put yourself in our shoes Diary. Wouldn’t you want to be doubly sure? That night when Dad disappeared – I’ll never forget it, and I’ll certainly never allow a repeat. And you know what? Manae and Terako don’t seem to mind one bit. They’ve got their friends to play with, school to keep them busy, and enough gossip and giggling to last for years.

On top of that Manae will be starting junior high in the spring and we have plenty to do to get her prepared.
She’ll go to the local public one for this area, and thankfully she’s completely fine with that. She never so much as mentioned wanting to get into a private school. She will have to work a lot harder at the entrance exams for high schools this way – attending a private junior high would almost certainly have involved an “escalator” into a connected senior high and therefore no test – but she’ll manage. Probably nowhere at a top level, I suppose, but she’ll be okay. Kochi is hardly known for good schools anyway: even our best is merely nationally average, or slightly below average, from what I could find out.

Terako keeps talking about how she wants a dog. A puppy, actually. I don’t know where she got that notion but she won’t let it go. She has no idea how much work that would be, and I don’t want to help her. I mean, I’d be fine taking her or him out for a walk now and then, and reminding Terako to fill up the food and water bowls we’d have to get, but house training? No thank you. I did that with two humans. I bet it would fall onto my shoulders too, I don’t think Terako could do it, not at her age, and who else would? Mom’s on board though – she thinks a pet would be good for Dad and from what I’ve read online she’s probably right – and so I guess sooner or later they’ll break me and we’ll have a little snapper racing around
here and causing all sorts of fun trouble.

When it comes to it I might try to find a shelter that has dogs and cats who have already been broken in, a previous owner or that kind of thing. It would be a good lesson for the girls about animal lives too, although with that there would admittedly be other risks involved. One thing we’ll never do is go to a pet shop. I’ve heard way too much about the hardships those poor creatures have to face, and apparently many of them are illegally bred, the parents forced to live in tiny unpadded cages with terrible conditions and kept pregnant and birthing so the horrid men running the outfits can turn a quick and easy profit. Men, it’s always about efficiency with them, no heart whatsoever. Not all men Diary, I know that, but far too many. I’m so glad the only one I have to put up with on any regular basis is that slug Tanaka-san. Dad too of course, but he’s a gem. I don’t ever “put up” with him.

And now how about that? At just this instant, in the midst of musing on these tiny little nonsense nothingnesses called living, these floatings on the day-to-day and the girls and boys inside them, I suddenly realized I’ve spent my entire waking hours without a single thought for Shoichiro – not one. A first. Finally.
About the author:

Andrew Oberg is a human being – and that is a wonderful thing. He is an associate professor in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Kochi, Japan. He currently lives in Kochi City with his wife and two daughters.

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His other books currently available are: Freedom’s Mask (philosophical novel: visionary and speculative fiction), Tomorrow, as the Crow Flies (contemporary philosophy: ethics and political theory), Randolph’s One Bedroom (twenty serial short stories: surrealist humor), and Green Skies (graphic novel: historical adventure, with artist Eric Uhlich).