

“Narcissu”

Translated by: Randy Au

Contact me, with subjects that I can easily identify as “not spam” at: “agi (point) projectmail (et) gmail (dotty) com”

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Change log:

(8-10-2005) V. 0.0 – Project started on a whim to help a friend appreciate the game, leading to a sloppy start that soon turned serious because I’m compulsive that way.

(8-20-2005) V. 1.0 – Declared “finished” and posted to the public, less than 24 hours before Insani.org’s release to the masses ^_^ . But they had to do so much more work I’m impressed.

(8-22-2005) V. 1.2 – Restored a number minor missing descriptions previously glossed over in the early sections, corrected some insanity issues and did some general editing. The sort of things that only come up with a tedious line-by-line comparison to the original script again. Most of this fixing occurring between the beginning and the middle of chapter 3.

(9-12-2005) V.1.3 – Began the process of back porting this novelisation version into nscripter format. Along the way, little nuances in the translation have been tweaked in this version so that the two match up better. I STILL refuse to change the name errors in this version, but the nscripter version will follow Insani’s data-file conventions. Many thanks for their letting me simply replace their text versions with my work, since I really have no idea how to work nscripter. Also, threw out the non-story sections. They’re not that great anyway.

(10-2-2005) V2.0– Finally finished with the de-novelisation process. LOTS of weird translations in all versions corrected, tweaked, whatever. The more times I read through this and the script, the more nuances I uncover. I just wish I had the attention span to do it all in one solid sitting.

Preface and Translator’s notes:

“Narcissu”, a.k.a. “Narcissus” is a dojin work of Kataoka Tomo, one of the primary scenario writers for NekoNekoSoft. He was also the director of most if not all of the NNS games until their May 2005 game “Sa-na-ra-ra”.

What's nice about this work is that it comes in either a CD version, which has some simple extras like wallpapers, and the music is in CD-DA format instead of Ogg Vorbis, or a totally free web version for download. As of this writing, the URL for the project page is <http://stage-nana.sakura.ne.jp/>

The original goal of this translation was to help people without any Japanese skills to enjoy this beautiful story. It is also a semi-hasty job and while I think I could have done a far worse job at translating, I would personally peg the quality of the translation, where 100% was a perfect professional paid translation job, perhaps somewhere around the 80-85% range, while my ideal target of quality for similar projects that I'm doing is around 90-95%.

In an amusing twist of reality, I've learned that the insani.org group has published their own translation of Narcissu for download. Going so far as to rebuild the script for Onscriptor in English form. They've managed to beat my slacking completion time by fair bit. I have deliberately kept from peeking at their work to avoid contamination, and I am quite excited read their work for comparison.

I have gone to an utter extreme, my version is the ultimate "No Voice" version that Kataoka Tomo talks about in his notes. Heck, it doesn't even have pictures or music! Dare I call this a "novelisation project?" But, who knows, perhaps my version has some merits of its own. We shall see in the coming days.

~Translated by, Randy "Agilis" Au. August, 20, 2005.

(Aug. 22, 2005) Translator's Postscript:

Insani's Narcissu release day has come and gone, and I have excitedly downloaded their work. I am quite amazed at the amount of work they have done in the background, the research into medical practices, the research into geography. As for the translations, reading through and comparing them all, there were places that I didn't quite agree with, places where I wish I had thought to render it as cleverly they did, and places where I finally noticed I had glossed over early on before I seriously attacked the script almost line by line and forgot to put back later, many of the omissions I've retranslated into later versions. I have no particular criticism since, after all, I am a biased speaker. I'm sure each version will find its own group of people who like it more than the others.

In the end, I did this all alone, just as a young guy, with some grammar knowledge, a dictionary, very little knowledge about Japan proper, and quite a bit of love for the story. And so to me, the locations, the nitpicky minutiae could have been real, could have been imaginary, and it wouldn't have mattered – the story did not rest upon those details, and so I didn't worry myself over them. I didn't do research into geography or much anything else, just went as the words carried me. But still, I shall stubbornly leave these incidental place names, these one-use 'technical' terms, however right, wrong, or missing, as they are now, even when I've seen what they should have been. I'm sticking to my guns. The telling of the story does not rest upon them, and so long as I have told a good story, I'm satisfied.

I have also found watching the two separate game translations unfold, in parallel, while being compared to my own and the original Japanese text, to be utterly fascinating. After all, with three translators, we have three different interpretations of how or even whether to say what was said or left unsaid, three different renderings of the tone that Kataoka Tomo has laid down for the telling of the story, and finally, even different cultural backgrounds, which are reflected in our differing use of English. That final one, perhaps, is what I found the most interesting.

Much of the value of any story is in the telling, and the world at large is lucky to have such different storytellers attempt the same work for free comparison by all. Even if I do say so myself.

~Randy “Agilis” Au

Prologue:

On the opening frame, the girl states the thematic quote of the story “Those shining days, those winter days” The 3 series of numbers are suicide statistics for successive years.

1996 Setsumi

“... Certainly, since I was a child, things weren’t well.”

But even so, I went to grade school, I played normally in the summer sun until I was tanned very dark. In June, soon after I first entered junior high, the day after we ordered our school uniform swimsuits was the first time I experienced being admitted into the hospital. It was a little before midterms, and the rain that began to fall made the day feel awfully cold.

In the middle of the pure white sky of the rainy season, in the beginning, everyone in class came to visit. When I was released from the hospital, they would come over to play during the weekends. But that was only at the beginning.

Fall came, winter left, hospitalized, released, outpatient care, and then once again hospitalization. Classmates who were once called friends, all unawares became acquaintances, and then, strangers. As the seasons turned one by one, it seemed that I was disappearing from their memories.

“It seems somehow that to people who lived normally, my existence to them made them uneasy.”

“That is why, I seemed to have been erased.”

“However many seasons passed, looking at the white rain clouds, I lived without the need to exchange words with anyone.”

“My English textbook, from my first year junior high midterm, remained in the same state. It was there, that my time seemed to have stopped.”

~Main Protagonist (he has no name) 2004, early summer~

8 years after

Summer, flowing sweat.

At the DMV license examination room* there was a large lit sign. The lights came on all at once and the man searched for his own number along with other people.

”237... 237...”

Among the lights, he finally found his own number.

Ka-thunk.

The man relaxed in the mostly empty train car of midday, returning home from the examination center. In his left hand was a copy of the traffic regulations book. In his shirt pocket, was his new driver’s license.

“With this, I’m also generally exempt eh?”⁺ He murmured to himself keenly, though he felt no particular strong emotion.

* Japanese driver’s licenses aren’t easy to get

⁺ I believe this is some kind of license class.

It's not like he really wanted to drive a car. Nor did he really have any other sort of goal in mind. It's just that his colleagues were all taking training courses and he had been encouraged to at least get a driver's license.

That night, he reported to his parents that he had obtained a license, and they simply replied "I see." When he tried and asked if he could borrow the car, they replied with a short "No, you can't" It's not like he had wanted to drive the car. Their responses were as he imagined, they were those kind of parents.

The next day, when he woke up, his chest was in pain and he was sent to the hospital. Normally, he didn't have any familiarity with illnesses, and so waiting in the waiting room was extremely boring.

Finally when he thought the examination was over, he was sent to take X rays and blood tests. He was forced to take them. Again, after a long, long time of waiting in boredom, without thinking, he finished 3 books of "Jump" manga and was reaching for the 4th. It was then they completed the paperwork for his admittance into the hospital. The driver's license that still lay in his chest pocket. It seemed that the time for its debut was a ways off.

Main Protagonist, 2004, Fall

Around the time when the noisy cicadas stopped crying, he was in the hospital as was usual. It's not like he was in admittance the entire time, he came and went, back and forth. A month ago was his first experience with surgery. After being released, he was originally supposed to be a 5 minute commute to outpatient care.

From then on, hospitalization, release, outpatient care, then re-hospitalization, bit by bit he returned to the hospital. He didn't know anything about PET scans or IRESSA, but if he paid attention, he'd notice a few months had gone by during his comings and goings. Along with his appetite decreasing, the amount and type of medicine he was required to take increased. Even he could feel that his own strength was decreasing. His legs felt a bit thin, and he was told by the scale that it wasn't his imagination, that his weight was decreasing.

And yet, all he could do was watch himself objectively, as if watching a stranger in a single scene on television. Unexpectedly, the things that were happening to his body didn't communicate to his head. Things that occurred in reality didn't seem to be real. And so, even though it was supposed to be his body, all he could do was watch on with the cold detached eyes of someone far away.

Main Protagonist, 2004, Winter

Winter. Roughly when Christmas trees disappeared from the streets. He was allowed to return home because of the New Year. In the end, it seemed only temporary, but

even so, he was a bit happy. In the sleeting rain, he returned home after a long absence. For some reason, the entire family had been gathered.

His parents, who normally did not speak much, spoke often, and smiled a bit stiffly at him. The sister that he always quarreled with made him his favorite cream stew and shrimp stir fry. He got to sit inside the kotatsu⁺ and eat mandarins^{**}. It was very kind and impressive. At that point in time, he had a bit of a feeling. That brand new driver's license that remained in his pocket, untouched all this time. He thought that the license might not give birth to any value before terminating.

Awkwardly accepting the unnatural smiles directed at him. Calmly, vaguely, somewhat distantly as if talking about someone else, he thought that.

Main Protagonist 2005, January

The New Year had come and again he was admitted into the hospital. For some reason he was not taken to the usual 4th floor, but instead went to a conference room. Was forced to go to a conference room. And there, with his father, and a doctor, he heard many things, was forced to hear them.

It seemed to be a notification of something. It was an extremely distant talk, but he understood the meaning. It seemed that he was going to die.

"I see" was the only thing he said. He was unable to find any words. From when he entered the room until he left, those were the only words he said.

Upon his answer, the doctor's ballpoint pen moved. Most likely it was the letter for the hospice. To the very end, he remained very businesslike. Much like his father.

This was such a simple thing. That was his true impression of the event.

And from that day, he moved from the 4th floor to the 7th, from a 6-patient room to a single room. The 7th floor was slightly different from the other floors. For one thing, the floors were sparkling, the ceilings were much higher, the rooms more spacious. The hospital rooms were also extremely beautiful and the large windows seemed to have been designed to let in lots of light. However, the windows could only open a tiny bit. Upon examination, the windows would open slightly to smaller than the size of one's head. Also, the color of the wristbands they had to wear was different. Since the time of his first admittance, the vinyl wristbands carried his name and blood type information, and their color changed from blue to white.

High ceilings, white vinyl wristbands, windows that could only open 15cm. When he was transferred to the 7th floor, the new years programs were still being broadcast. His first meeting with that girl, was also during the beginning of the year.

Narcissu

Chapter 1: 7th Floor

2005, Winter, 7th Floor:

⁺ A low covered table with a heating element under it, an energy-efficient way to keep warm in the winter.

^{**} A traditional kind of thing to eat in a kotatsu

Down the hall by the nurse's station, there's a lounge-like place. That unpopular place held a number of sofas and pipe chairs and had a large television. On that 28 inch* CRT some random New Years program was playing. Watching the boring television, acting equally bored, was some girl. She was of a small build, and wore pink pajamas; on her wrist she wore the same thing he did, a white wristband. Her hair seemed long enough to reach her waist.

"Say, is that interesting?" he said. The man didn't find any particular deep meaning in all of this, but since there was no one around, he tried to speak to her profile.

"Not particularly" was all she replied back to him. She didn't even turn towards him when he spoke to her. As if she had absolutely no interest in him, she just kept watching that boring-seeming television.+

"If it's that boring you don't have to watch it," he thought to himself as he sat down in one of the pipe chairs, turning to face the television. There was nothing to do, nothing he could do.

They continued to sit and watched the television in silence, watching those New Years shows shown on the screen. They watched pointless comedy acts and talent shows. Occasionally the high-pitched laughter of the host would ring out, in the white room with good exposure to the sun, the sound just dryly echoed.

"Say, you," the girl suddenly spoke to him, still continuing to gaze into the television. "How many times is it for you?"

"How many times? I don't understand your meaning."

"That you've come here to the 7th floor"

"Sorry, I don't understand your question at all."

"I see, you're new here," the girl just decided that on her own, as he sat there not understanding. "Then, since there isn't anyone else here, it's my duty..."

"Duty?"

"There's that kind of rule." It seemed that there was a rule to tell newcomers to the 7th floor. The man didn't know what it was yet, but the girl seemed to ignore him and continue talking.

"Well, then, listen carefully."

The girl spoke, her words coming by ones and twos. It was a speech that was slightly different from the one given by the doctor. According to the doctor, this place was for awaiting the progress of medical treatment. It was a place to heal the heart. And most likely, in general that was right. But from the girl's words, that was just so much public position. The 7th floor was not for unique medical treatment, but a place to await the exhaustion of life. That was what the girl said, and also what he had thought.

"This is my second time," she told him.

"Second time? What's that mean?"

"Coming here," she replied.

* The literal text is 'model 28'? I'm fairly sure TVs come in 27" and 29", but I have no idea on this one.

+ The girl uses the phrase "betsu ni..." often throughout the story, it's a convenient catchall negative statement that can mean many shades of "not really", or "not particularly" depending upon the context

Then she explained to him that people who come to the 7th floor don't usually die on their first admittance. Even if someone isn't cured, if their physical condition is good enough, they're allowed to go home, but as their condition worsens, they return. And among those comings and goings, they die. The only difference being whether their life runs out at home or on the 7th floor. It always ended in death, there was no avoiding it. That was what she meant about her coming here for the second time.

"Well, I'm only going to say this once, so listen well from here on."

As the girl continued to speak, she remained staring at the television. What she spoke was not what time the lights get turned off, or anything else that you'd normally tell someone new to a hospital. It was something entirely different.

"The 3rd time they let you go home, prepare yourself. There's rarely a 4th time. You won't be able to return home any more."

"If you want to run away, go not to station A, but to station B."

"Don't eat anything. It's the shortest way. It is the least burden upon your family."

All the girl spoke about were such striking things. Most likely, those were the words passed down from the people who came here, the people who were heading to death.

"The duty that you spoke about earlier, this was it?"

"Yes, that's right. Someday, you tell it to someone new, okay?"

After saying that, she slowly got up. Softly, her hair swayed and brushed the tip of his nose.

"Well, it's time to have my temperature taken..." she said before she turned and walked down the hall.

He was left alone in that room, with the laughing voices coming from the television and the white flowers growing by the window. In the end, that girl had not once looked in his direction.

A few days passed. Finally, the New Years programs stopped airing, and for middle and high school students, the 3rd term was about to start.

Once again, the man and the girl were sitting in the lounge, just blankly staring at the television.

"It's boring isn't it?" he said.

"Yes it is..." she replied to him, but they both kept looking at the screen while speaking.

"Say, is this place always like this?"

"...I don't understand the meaning of your question."

"Ah, I mean how there's no one around," he said. Other than nurses, doctors and helpers, he never saw anyone except other each other's attendants. "Is it because it's the beginning of the year?"

"Do you want to know the reason for that?" she asked.*

"Ah, no, I didn't mean that..."

"...Then, I won't say," she said.

They had these kinds of disinterested exchanges often.

* Such direct questioning is kind of shocking to the Japanese if I understand properly.

A small breeze blew in from the window that could only open 15cm. Occasionally, it would sway the girl's long hair, in the same way it swayed the flowers decorating the window. These were days of watching boring television, merely passing the time.

"Ah, so that's where the two of you were," said an elderly nurse rushing up to them. From glancing at the nurse's station once in awhile, she seemed to be the chief of the 7th floor.

"So, Setsumi-san, you don't have a fever?"

"...It's alright, I don't have one..."

Setsumi, apparently this was the girl's name.

"You shouldn't be loitering around outside okay?"

Setsumi remained silent.

"Okay? Everyone gets worried."

"...It doesn't really matter..."

"My, what kind of comment is that?" the nurse murmured, "Really, girls these days, what's there to do with them?" Afterwards, the nurse continued to make a bit of small talk.

During that time, the girl, the one called Setsumi, pretended to not to hear and ignored it. Pretended to ignore the slightly noisy nurse, and continued to watch the boring screen.

"Well, later, we'll go collect a blood sample," the nurse said finally before returning to the nurse's station.

"Say, you..." he started, "no... is it alright if I call you Setsumi?"

As he asked, he looked at the white vinyl bracelet on the girl's wrist, there, her name and blood type were written.

She remained silent.

"Is something wrong? Setsumi?"

"...Why is it without a suffix?*"

"Wha?"

"Even though you're the younger one..."

"Hey, why am I the younger one?"

"No particular reason, I just thought that."

It's not like he was upset at the word "younger". But no matter how you looked at it, he thought he was 5-6 years older. So, he pulled out the driver's license from his shirt pocket and showed it to her.

"How about this? Even though I look like this, I'm 20 you know."

"...As I thought, you're younger..." she replied with a single glance at the license.

"I don't get it."

"It's not something to worry about, I'm only older by a little bit," Setsumi murmured with her usual lack of emotion, on that day, even though she was gazing at the boring television, he thought she was looking at someplace far away...

The next day, after the morning temperature taking, the man snuck onto the elevator, making sure the nurses couldn't find him. He went to the first floor, out the door,

* She's referring to the "-san", which he so casually dropped.

and began to head to his destination. Not station A, which was close by, but station B, far away. It's not that he wanted to escape or anything.

The 7th floor or home, he had heard that no one had died anywhere else. He also had heard that Setsumi had gone to station B a number of times, and so he just went, wanting to see the place once for himself.

"It's not like there are guards around..."

He walked slowly, taking his time. He thought about how he was a person of the 7th floor, and how they were different from other patients. He thought of many 'what ifs' as he walked along the early morning road. Glancing at the rushing people commuting to work or school, his feet slowly continued walking.

After a bit of walking, about 25 minutes worth, he finally reached the station, which was about 4 bus stops away.

"This place has lots of people," he said aloud. That was his first impression of Station B.

He stood a bit out since he was wearing pajamas, but he thought that if he bought a ticket, he could go anywhere that he wanted without any trouble at all. He didn't know why he was supposed to go to station B and not A, but if he really wanted to escape, it made sense. What made him wonder was, that girl must have come to this place numerous times. Why was it that she was still in the 7th floor? He thought that while he stood in front of the morning station, gazing at the people rushing by.

That night, after the lights had been turned off, back at the 7th floor, the man held onto a book of manga, unable to sleep and hanging about the hospital. Normally, roaming about after the lights were turned off earns a severe scolding, but people of the 7th floor had relative freedom. And there, in the lounge that had turned pitch black, he saw her figure.

"Hey, looking outside today?" he said.

"... Un," in the dark room, she answered him, but her face remained facing the window. He began to tell her about what happened today.

"That reminds me... Today, I went to the station."

Silence.

"I went to that B station, just like you told me to."

"I see..."

Her responses were the same as ever. He had thought that since she must have also had gone before, there'd be some kind of response. He started thinking as to why the girl was still fixed here. Did she never really intend to sneak away from the start?

"Soon... I'll be able to go home..." the girl opened her mouth suddenly, sudden words that seemed to see through to his heart.

"Eh?"

"But this is the 3rd time, so we might not be able to meet anymore." She continued.

"Ah... That's right..." Most likely, she was saying that her temporary leave has been decided. There were practically none who were able to get temporary leaves more than 3 times. And unlike the older patients, thinking about the rate of development of their conditions, even fewer of those were of young age. That was the meaning behind why they might not be able to meet again.

“Say, which would you choose?” Setsumi asked as he sat in stunned silence.

“Choose?”

“Where do you intend on dying?”

At the sudden word of “death” his words were blocked for a moment.

“Well...I haven’t thought about it.”

“I see, well it’s your first time,” she said in a lonely murmur.

Of course, even for him, he won’t be here forever. Just like everyone else, he’ll be admitted in and released from the hospital, gradually weakening, until someday... In the end, he’d have to choose between the 7th floor, or being surrounded by the thin smiles of family.

“I don’t like home...” she said, “but I also don’t like here.”

“Then, what will you do?”

“Nothing in particular, neither one. I’ll just go off somewhere while I can still walk by my own power.”

“Somewhere? Wait...”

The man thought, well obviously if she wanted to run away, she could, but yet she was still on the 7th floor.

“...You have somewhere else to go?”

The girl paused. “Do you want to hold me back?”

“Eh?”

“Or do you want to come with me, together?”

“Well, I didn’t mean that...”

“Then, please don’t ask.”

She started to gaze out the window. Again their conversation had been one where she did not once look at him. However, that one time, her usual emotionless expression was instead sad. Having been told that 3 times is the end, and looking at this girl who had already come a second time, as a first-timer, he was still unable to absorb reality just now, but he wondered whether he, too, would someday make that face.

Another rainy day, occasionally, it would change to sleet, or snow, but gently continued to fall. In the middle of all that, the man sat in the usual room, watching the television, while the 7th floor was devoid of people.

“Is it interesting?” came Setsumi’s voice as she came over.

“Nope. Boring.”

After that exchange, she silently sat down in a pipe chair, and they both again passed the time silently watching the boring television. He had nothing to do, nothing he could do, and he was sure the girl was the same.

“Ah” the girl suddenly said, surprisingly responding to something on the television.

“Is something the matter?”

“...Not really,” she said as she always did, but her reaction was different. There was something she was interested in on the screen and he looked more closely. The screen was showing a nature scene, there were beautiful hills covered with trees and flowers. The main focus of the scene were a great many white flowers. The man remembered seeing these flowers. Looking around, they seemed similar to the white ones that decorated the windows.

“Are those the same? See, they look exactly the same.”

“No they’re not.”

“Really?”

“It’s the same type of flower, but speaking more strictly, they’re different,” she said after giving them a single glance before returning to the television. Even knowing they were different, the man couldn’t see the difference. Not that it mattered to him. But the normally quiet girl had spoken to him, and so he tried to strike up some conversation.

“Are you familiar with these things?”

“Not really.”

“Really? But, I can’t tell the difference you know.” The man said, indicated the white flowers that bloomed on the screen, and the flowers in a vase past the girl.

“Say, these flowers, are they orchids or lilies?” he said, trying to continued the conversation.

She remained silent.

“Well, they’re white.”

“.....”

Even though he had no interest, he kept speaking. But the girl remained quiet, simply watching the boring television. Eventually he gave up and returned to the television also.

“...Narcissus...”

“Eh?”

“They’re narcissuses,” she told him. And for the first time, she turned to face him. Her long waist-length hair swayed as she pointed to the television with a hand with skin as white as the flowers, along with a white vinyl wristband, looking at him. He thought he saw the briefest of smiles on her face the first time she faced him.

Chapter 2: Silver Coupe

A few days pass and winter was coming into full strength. In the world^{*}, it was the middle of the “juken season”⁺ and the two of them continue to spend their days watching the boring television.

“It’s boring isn’t it?”

“... yes it is.”

^{*} The word for “the world” is the same one spirits or gods would use to refer to the “worldly plane”.

⁺ The cramming time for national university admission exams.

They had their exchange that couldn't even be called a conversation. These were days where both of them were simply passing the time.

"Oh yes, when were you...?" the man asked

"It's today."

"I see, today."

It was the day that she was to be released to go home again.

"We... might not be able to meet again," she said.

"Ah, that's right."

Even if she were to return to the 7th floor again, that would probably be her last time. It was likely that sometime during her absence, he too would be allowed to go home. The timing of their next meeting would probably be impossible.

"Have you decided?" she asked.

"You mean where I want to die?"

"Un."

"No, not yet."

"I see," she nodded in a slightly lonely fashion, probably because this would be her second time going back home. He hadn't experienced those feelings yet, he was still on his first visit here, not even having his first temporary leave yet. Speaking of which, did she decide upon her answer yet?

Patter, patter, patter.

"Setsumi, the preparations are done," said some lady that came over. Most likely it was the girl's mother. She even bowed her head slightly to him.

"Well, it's about time to go, are you ready?"

"...Un."

"Well, then, excuse us," the mother spoke again. Once more she gave him a little bow and made ready to leave the area. And she had stretched her hand out to her daughter... but the girl didn't move to leave. Even when her mother tugged on her hand, for some reason, the girl didn't stand up from the pipe chair.

"Is something wrong Setsumi?"

"It hurts... a little..."

"What? Where does it hurt? Your chest? Stomach?"

"...Chest..."

"J-Just wait a bit, I'll go call the doctor."

The mother runs off to the nurse's station the sound of guest slippers echoing. The only people left in the room was the girl sitting bent in the pipe chair and him. He didn't know her condition, nor its advancement. All he knew was that her name was Setsumi, and her blood type was O, the only things written on her wristband. But, being residents of the 7th floor, at the least, her condition was more serious than his.

"Say, until the doctor comes, you want to lie down there?" he said, pointing to a couch that furnished a corner of the room, "Here, I'll prop up your back."

"It's nothing... I'm fine."

With that single answer, she quickly stood up on her own.

"H-hey, you..."

Before he could say not to strain herself, she quickly walked down the hall.

Nighttime. Holding some books of manga with him the man loitered in the hospital since he couldn't sleep. And with the lights turned off, the lounge was dark like it always was, and there, he saw her.

"Hey, you're still here?"

"...Un."

"What's wrong? You don't feel well again?"

"...Not really," she replied while gazing out the window. It seemed that her temporary release had been stopped after all. He wasn't sure when the next opportunity is, but with this, most likely it would be delayed, not a few days, but a few weeks.

"Say, I'm guessing, but... today, you were faking sickness?" Though saying they were faking illnesses might be stranger still. After all, they originally couldn't be called normal people.

"Is it because you don't want to leave the hospital?"

"...I don't understand your meaning."

"Well, you won't have another chance after right?"

She fell silent, and he thought about the conversations they had before, where she asked him many times where he intended to die. And while he hadn't decided yet, she had said that she wanted neither home nor the 7th floor.

"As I thought, you...don't have any other place to go?"

"... And if so... then what?"

"No, nothing..."

In that dark room, as always, she continued to gaze out the window, not once looking at him. It was barely 11pm, but the lights were mostly down here at the hospital. Here was the dividing line between ordinary and extraordinary days. Moreover, here, as people of the 7th floor, they both could not choose anything other than the 7th floor or home.

Looking out the dark 7th floor window the girl gazed at the world outside, the ordinary world. The lights of buildings and houses were still shining brightly, the streets full of people rushing to get home.

The man wasn't fully conscious of his position yet... but in the end, he was a resident of the 7th floor, a resident of the extraordinary. Most likely, he would never be able to return to that world...

"...The me whose time has stopped..."*

I lived through a number of seasons, looking at the white rain clouds, without needing to speak to anyone. In the beginning, I gazed out at children going to school, or people walking quickly by. And when that became tiresome, I watched the television. There was nothing else to watch, nothing else to do. Outside had the clouds, the television screen had the sun. There was no coldness, no heat, no pain. Before my eyes spread a world of dreams.

* I simply prefer to preserve the peculiar reflexive nature of this line.

In my imagination, I wished for calm. I only increased my knowledge greatly. I just gathered and gathered more and more useless and meaningless knowledge. All unawares the things shown on television lost their sense of reality. Next were books, then games, and then, family. Finally, even my body. As if watching a stranger, I couldn't recognize the reality of my body. That is why, when I came to the 7th floor, I wasn't surprised. If I close my eyes, the world always disappears. That's why I thought I was fine with it. I made myself think I was fine.

And then before long, I was released a second time. The next time I returned, I might not be able to walk on my own. Even though I knew that, I thought that my unresisting self was wretched. I thought that my destination-less self was ridiculous.

“Stop time. Stop my heart. Make a large scar over my chest...”

“Nevertheless....”

“Even though I've lived 22 years. I thought it was sorrowful.”

A few days later, the cloudy days ended, and the high, high, winter sky spread out. The man's father surprisingly came for a visit. In the beginning, the father had a pained expression on his face, but he told his son about his insurance, at that time his eyes weren't sad.

“I'll speak a bit with the doctor...” the father said before running down the hall, most likely to that dark conference room from before.

Alone in his room, the man looked at the things his father brought him, the weekly magazines, the juice that they always bought for him. And by the fruit basket, just in front of the melons that he disliked, were car keys. The keys to his father's silver car, the silver coupe with the interior that his father was so proud of, the keys to the car that he was always unable to drive. And then, in his chest pocket, was that driver's license. The license that lost its debut, and that he had carried with him since – the proof of his once ordinary life.

Without a word, he picked up the keys. Even then he had no reason for doing that. He just felt like it, as if watching a scene on the television. And then, gathering up a few days worth of medicine and placing it in a bag from the convenience store, he turned down the hall. He walked by the nurse's station, towards the elevators, the bag in his right hand, the keys in his left, the license that should have lost its chance to be used in his breast pocket.

In front of the lounge, the next thing he saw was the figure of the girl sitting in a small pipe chair, again watching the television.

“Say, is that interesting?”

“Does it seem that way?”

“No, not at all.”

Their usual exchange. The girl's eyes were, as usual, seemingly looking far away.

“So, do you want to go together?” he asked her.

“Eh?”

He showed her the keys.

“I... don't like home either.”

“I... don't like the 7th floor,” she answered.

“Then, shall we go together?”

“Un,” the girl got up from the pipe chair, her hair swayed, brushing the tip of his nose, and after placing a few days worth of medicine in the bag, the two of them left the 7th floor. The man turned off the ever-boring television. The shrilly laughing voice of the host was silenced.

The two of them entered the elevator in their pajamas, and went from the highest floor, down to the first. And on the first floor, they deliberately did not head towards where the admittances were conducted, but instead went towards the true exits towards the parking lots.

Going out into the cold air, the air struck their faces like a cold board. In a parking lot with few obstructions, the wind was that much stronger. They searched for the car a bit in the parking lot while the cold wind blew. When they found it, the man quickly used the key and opened the doors.

“Get in,” he told her.

“Un. Okay.”

He sat in the driver's seat, while she sat on the passenger side. Her small size made it so that even if she sat normally it would be difficult to see outside. Next, the man placed the key in the ignition, lightly stepped on the accelerator, and started the car, the sound of the engine filling the interior. Everything was just like the original driving lessons. Next he had to disengage the parking break, and then open the clutch. With this, they can go anywhere.

“Here we go.”

“Un,” the girl replied with a small nod.

Putting the car in gear, he slowly pulled out, and they slowly drive away as he managed the unfamiliar clutch.

“You're a bit shaky aren't you?” Setsumi commented

“Yeah, this is my first time in this car after all... and since we're on the subject, this is the first time driving since I got my license.”

“I see...”

They drove around to the hospital exit, and drove onto the large roadway towards a large light-less intersection. From behind came the sound of a car horn, blaring at them as they pulled suddenly into the lane. The gears ground as the clutch was shifted improperly while the silver coupe ran. The car behind them hadn't stopped honking, even though it was hardly necessary, but the man drove on without worrying too much about it, all the while feeling detached from reality.

“Say,” he spoke.

“What?”

“Are you scared?”

“Is it better if I were?”

“No, not really...”

It was just before noon. The sun was high. Through the windshield, the January winter sky seemed for some reason so blue and clear as to be sad.

It wasn't as if they had a place to go.
The day where the unaccustomed clutch shook the car in the cold weather.
The day when the two of them aimed at the national highway in their pajamas.
Those winter days.

2005-1-19, (Some road name I don't want to look up, a street in some town)

They've been driving the whole day, and the sky had turned orange as the sun began to set. All that time they had just driven, and driven, and when they came to a place that they didn't recognize, the man finally spoke. "We're going to stop for awhile."

"Un"

They pulled over to the side of the road, away from some nameless town, and for the first time started to check what was in the car. They had just up and left without any preparation, and so the man was hoping to find anything that would be of use. Searching around, he found a few hundred yen in change intended to pay tolls, some books of manga, and a one-use camera.

The two of them didn't have any particular destination in mind, but the car's navigator system seemed to be broken. And finally, all that the man carried on him was about 8000 yen, all the money that he brought with him in the rush to leave. Combined with all the coins he found before, he could barely make 9000 yen. Of course, he hadn't expected to find much in the car from the start, but with this they can't even afford decent lodging. Plus, he doubted that the girl had any money.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked him.

"No, nothing."

Well, it didn't matter, they had no grand plans from the start, they had just wanted to go somewhere, they didn't want to just sit still. In any case, he started the car up again and began driving under the darkening sky.

"By the way, are you hungry?" he asked the girl, come to think, they hadn't eaten anything since morning. "For now, let's go to the convenience store."

"No."

"Hey, hey, don't be so picky. Compared to the food at the 7th floor, it has to be better."

The girl stayed silent. She glanced at her clothes, the pink pajamas that she wore.

"Ah, that's why," with the pajamas they were wearing, they'd stand out far too much. In the car it wasn't too much of a problem, but in a store? Making a decision, he turned off the main road and headed into town. They should be near a train station, there a number of people around. There ought to be one around here.

Searching around, he found it, a coin-op Laundromat. It was a small place on the first floor of an apartment building; it just might be the perfect place. He stopped the car some short distance from the building.

"Just wait a bit here."

The girl looked at him with a mysterious expression as he left her in the car and headed toward the laundry. The automatic door slid open, and he was assaulted by the scent of bleach and detergents. Inside the run down place were lots of old washing machines, and

no one else. One of the machines was in use. Quickly checking the machine, he found that out of a 30 minute cycle (for 200 yen) there were 5 minutes left. Moving to the entrance, he checked again to make sure no one was around, and once he was sure of that, he returned to the machine, opened the door and stopped the machine. Paying the humidity no heed, he grabbed a pile of half-dry clothes, and while keeping an eye around, he left the shop.

“Ah” the girl said, as he returned with the clothes, raising just a slightly surprised voice.

“Okay, we’re leaving,” he said, not minding her reaction, tossing the clothes in the back.

Examining the clothes that he took with one hand on the wheel, he found that they were mainly gaudy jump suits and sweats, the sizes were probably on the large side. They were also only half-dry but the car’s heating should take care of that.

“Later, wear what you want,” he told the girl.

She didn’t say anything, but kept looking at the pile of clothes.

“We had no choice didn’t we?”

“I know.”

It’s not like he liked doing this sort of thing, it’s just that with the money they had, they couldn’t afford to buy clothes.

They drove into the night, until the moon showed its face. The man drove the car to a public park and stopped. Most likely it was some kind of children’s park in a residential neighborhood, and there they started sifting through the clothes that had dried nicely from the car’s heating.

“As I thought, all men’s clothing...” he said. There was nothing else except jump suits and sweats. Most likely the original owner was about the same age as him, and about the same size as well. While staying in his seat, he started to change into a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt.

“You should change too,” he said to the girl.

“... Everything is too big.”

“Then you’re going to stay in pajamas the whole time?”

“Okay,” she said reluctantly. She grabbed some jeans and clothes and opened the door.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“To change,” she replied, before heading straight to the restroom in the park.

She came back holding her pink pajamas, wearing a pair of jeans and a white sweatshirt.

“That was fast,” he commented, “but it’s good that you managed to find something to wear.”

She didn’t say anything. As anticipated, the clothes were too big for her, and both the jeans and the sweatshirt were rolled up numerous times to fit her size.

“The pajamas were better,” she said.

“Don’t say that, it’s warmer this way.”

She gave him a slightly dissatisfied look.

“As I thought, something more feminine would have been better?”

“Not particularly,” she replied with her usual answer.

No matter how much he thought she was dissatisfied with the sweatshirt, soon she returned to her usual emotionless expression.

It began to rain, as if it had forgotten how to stop, the rain fell from the cold January sky. From inside the car, they watched the rain wash down the windshield, and flow in rivulets. They had stopped in some parking lot, some lonely place in the mountains. After buying some things at a convenience store, they were spending the night there. Between them their dinner menu was, 2 nigiri (rice balls), 500ml of Pocari^{*}, and half a potato.

“It’s been awhile hasn’t it?...” he said.

“Un,” she replied with a nod, holding a nigiri.

It wasn’t spectacular fare by any standards, but compared to 7th floor food, this was enough.

The girl stretched her hand toward the split potato, when suddenly her hand stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing in particular,” she replied, turning to the windshield. Outside, a number of white flowers could be seen. Flowers soaked in the rain. The man didn’t know whether they were natural, or cultivated, but they seemed familiar.

“Those are Narcis?”

“Narcissuses... they’re daffodils.”

“Ah right, so that's what they are” The man didn't know much about plants, but he has at least heard of daffodils. He remembered that this usually silent girl was interested in those flowers, and so tried to start up a conversation again.

“Are the ones here different from those too?”

“Un, strictly speaking, yes.”

“Ah, how splendidly rare they are then.”

“Not really, they’re everywhere.”

“Everywhere? Where then?”

He had just spoken without any particular intent, just something to keep the conversation going. But the girl fell into deep thought, and slowly opened her mouth.

“West.”

“West?”

“Awajima^{*} is known for them.”

“Wait a minute, Awajima, you mean...” He wondered how far away that was, For someone who had just started driving, he couldn’t even imagine the trip. Most likely, it was another 700km away. And even if they used the expressways⁺, it would take awhile. With

^{*} Pocari Sweat, the Japanese equivalent of Gatorade

^{*} Awajima is an island in the Hyogo Prefecture (wherever That is). It is also called “Awaji-shima” and the single voiced instance uses “awaji-shima”, Awajima is a colloquial contraction. My dictionary listed both, and I just happened to prefer this one for its look on the page. This is perhaps the single most major departure for the ‘official’ script that I consistently use.

⁺ They’re probably just toll highways, but I’ll refer to them as expressways because literally they’re called “high speed roads”

the money that they had, he didn't think they could last. And even if they didn't take the expressway, they probably didn't have enough gas.

"Don't say unreasonable things like that. We can't possibly go that far."

"Who... said anything about going?"

"Eh?"

"You asked, so I just answered," she told him before gazing out through the windshield again, at the cold rain on the other side. Even when the cold covered the interior glass in white, her gaze remained fixed. It's not like he wanted to go there himself either. But, neither of them held any other destinations in mind.

Chapter 3: Map

"...The me whose time has stopped..."

Just gathering meaningless knowledge, worthless information, always gathering information from the CRT. Before I knew it, reality became faded, dulled.

"But, I loved looking at maps."

I liked cars and trains, things that carried people places. Spreading out a map on my narrow bed, tracing the numerous main lines, tracing... Riding sedans, coupes, convertibles, of various models. Always running forward along the ever-continuing Route 1.

The indigo blue sky and the beautiful seaside road heading towards that place painted in dreams, going around a gentle cape under the bright sunlight and looking out over the white sand. If I closed my eyes, I could go anywhere. To places with scenery that I had never seen before, while thinking of lands that I could never go to.

"There was no meaning to it, it was just gathering information."

"All it invited was yearning in vain."

2005-1-21

The rain stopped the next day, and the clouds were racing high overhead, and the still-wet asphalt gave a unique "shaaaa" noise as they drove. They continued to drive on as they had been doing, without any destination, just simply driving on. It's not like they were aiming at that Awajima they had talked about last night. After all, the problem of gasoline came long before that. The man just drove on straight along the road that he didn't know, thinking these thoughts.

But where in the world were they? At some point he wound up thinking about it. After all he wasn't really familiar with geography, and all the place names were totally unfamiliar. He intended to just continue going, but without a navigator he just didn't know what he was doing. So without thinking about it, he was staring at the signs closely as he drove.

"Mmmm, I don't really know..." he'd say.

"What is it?"

“Oh nothing, I’m just wondering where this is,” he replied, he figured that even if he asked the girl she wouldn’t know.

“It’s Iruma... of Saitamaken.”

“Eh?”

“At the next intersection, if you go right, it’s Route 16, which exits towards Hachiouji.”

“Wait, you know?”

She stayed silent.

“Maybe, you lived here before?”

“Not really, nothing like that.”

The man found it very mysterious that she would know where this place was. It didn’t look like she was the type to have been driving around all over.

“Then, perhaps...you know how to get from here to Awajima?”

“I don’t understand the meaning of your question.”

“Well no, then without going onto the expressway, and only using the smaller roads, we might be able to go there can’t we? Plus, our money might hold out long enough to pay for gas.”

“You... want to go?” she asked after a pause.

“Well, no, that’s not what I meant...”

“Then, please don’t ask,” she finally said before becoming silent, once again gazing out the window with a hard expression. It seemed that she wasn’t looking at the scenery flowing before her eyes, but instead someplace far away.

The man wondered about the “please don’t ask” she said just then. What in the world did it mean? Did she mean that if he said he wanted to go, she would have answered?

Without destination, simply driving; from they start, they left without any plans or destinations, simply a dislike for both the 7th floor and their homes, they drove. However, at the very least, the man felt he might have wanted something to be pointed out to him, anything at all would do.

2005-1-22

The sound of waves.

“It’s cold isn’t it?”

“Yes it is.”

They stood on some beach with an unknown name, gazing out at the sea. The man had originally intended to head west, but before he knew it, he was moving towards the south. A strong, cold wind blew across the beach under the dark sky. They both left the car, and gazed at the dark sea. The always despondent girl was looking far into the distance as usual, at the horizon where the pitch black sky and sea met. And after gazing at the sea for a while, she slowly began to walk towards the waves.

“Say, how do you think it’ll turn out?” she asked him.

“Even you don’t understand the meaning of your question,” he replied.

“Do you think I could die comfortably...? If I go like this into the sea?” she said with her back facing him, as she slowly walked towards the waves.

The 3rd time is the last, there is no 4th. There is a choice between the 7th floor and home. It doesn't seem like there has been anyone who avoided it. The man remembered the words that she had once told him, and how this was her second time, and how she said she hated both her home and the 7th floor. She had already told him these things. Already, her duty was over... Therefore, that's what he thought she meant.

“I don't know. I never drowned before.”

“Then, perhaps... if I went into the sea right now...”

She turned around and looked at his face, “...will you stop me?” The moon hung behind her back in the dark sky. The eyes that always looked somewhere far away were looking directly at him.

“I don't know... not until that time.”

“You're right,” she replied, once again turning her back towards him, once again walking slowly towards the waves.

“Say, you...”

“What?”

“... perhaps... you want me to stop you?”

At his words, the girl stopped just a few steps before the waves. The strong wind blew the spray from the waves up into a mist that struck their feet.

“If you want me to stop you, I'll stop you.”

“Not really, it's not that...”

“Then, I don't have to stop you?”

She also didn't reply to that question, but her feet that stopped, and didn't move forward any more. And so, he thought of that as her answer.

The next day, the winter sky was so clear and blue as to be sad. The strong north wind blew strongly, making the power lines overhead whistle. The metallic paint of the silver coupe reflected the sky as it ran. The man was driving, and as usual the girl was sitting in the passenger seat next to him. He had no idea where they were, and reality presented them with a problem, the gasoline seemed to be about out. From the start, they didn't have all that much money, but after their purchases at convenience stores, they had about 7000 yen left. Of course, he didn't know how many liters the car needed, but he thought they had enough for at least one refill. They didn't have a destination in mind, but losing their mode of transportation would mean the end of their ability to travel.

“I'll go get some gas,” he said, turning toward a gas station and pulling up.

“I see.”

“Welcome, Credit card or cash?” said the attendant.

“Um, with cash...”

“Will it be regular gasoline? Or high-octane?”

He blinked. Regular? High-octane? He had no idea, he really didn't know much about that car to begin with, he had just gotten his license and never learned about these kinds of things.

"Which will it be?"

"Um... ah..." he floundered as the attendant beyond the window waited for a reply, and just when he was about to say "anything would do" the girl sitting next to him spoke.

"Regular."

"Eh? Ah, yes, regular."

"Yes, will regular, cash, full tank be all right?"

"Ah, yes, please."

"Yes, certainly," the attendant replied brightly while skillfully operating the pump. From the window that was open only 10cm came the smell of gasoline.

"Say, is regular fine for this?" he asked the girl, but she didn't answer him. She just pointed at the price listing. Of course, regular was cheaper, that explains it. He didn't really know about these things, but he didn't think it would make much difference in the end.

Then he looked at the gasoline meter. 25, 26, 27, 28... the digital counter was racing up, could the thing be broken? Did he screw up? As he watched the numbers, he started to become a bit nervous. He had randomly said to fill up the tank, but he didn't really have that much in the way of money, including coins, a combined wealth of 7000yen, and he had no idea how many liters this car held. Glancing at the prices again, he figured that it should hold up for about 60 liters. Beyond that, what would he do?

38, 39, 40, 41... the meter continued to race up, without slowing, and as he was getting more and more worried.

"Damn, it's still going?" he blurted out without thinking.

"It's alright, it'll stop soon."

"Eh?"

"Because this car takes 50 liters," she told him.

And just like she said, the meter stopped around 47, 48. There was the sound of a receipt being printed, and then the attendant came over.

"Sorry for the wait, it comes to 5240yen."

The man took out from his pocket a 5000yen bill and a wrinkled 1000yen bill, and handed them to the attendant.

"Here is your change of 760yen and your receipt, thank you very much," the attendant said in a bright voice before they pulled out of the station back onto the road.

Once again the coupe was running along the road. With this, the urgent fear of the gas tank was gone, and now they only about 2000 yen left. He was worried about that point, but then again, he was worried about it before also.

"Say," he spoke to the girl, "I was just thinking, but you're familiar about cars?"

"Not particularly."

"Not particularly? You just said this car was 50 liters didn't you?" Of course, for all he knew, she had been guessing or that fact just happened to be a popular spec for cars. But then, the girl was knowledgeable about the roads before. Taking a chance, he picked up the vehicle registration off the dashboard.

“Of course you know the name of this car don’t you?”

“Is that a question?”

“Well, think of it as a quiz.”

“Integra, Type R, Coupe.”

“Correct... and the specs?”

“‘99 model. 5-speed transmission, maximum output, 200horsepower...” she replied in a disinterested tone.

He didn’t think she would really answer. Without thinking, his eyes followed the text on the registration.

“Total length, 4380, total width, 1695, general displacement, 1797cc... do you want me to go on?”

“No, that’s enough, correct...” he replied, returning the registration. She had unbelievably memorized all the specifications. He didn’t think human memory could do that, let alone. And if asked “why would someone memorize it?” he simply couldn’t even imagine. But before his very eyes, this girl answered him. And also, before, if he thought about it, she seemed to know many things about the roads, and flowers.

“Say, how come you know so many things?”

“No particular reason, I’m just older than you is all,” she answered before falling silent again. Looking out the window, she gave no indication that she would answer any new questions he posed.

“Older.” Even though it didn’t look like it, those were the words that she had used before. Her name was Setsumi, her blood type, O, those were written on her white vinyl wristband. And then, she seemed to be older than him. That was all the little he knew of this girl.

It was when the day was slowly beginning to darken. The silver coupe continued driving without destination, simply driving. There wasn’t any worry about gasoline now, but their money was rapidly depleting, only 2000 yen left. Thinking about their diet of convenience store food, it was probably enough to buy 3-4 days worth.

“Say, from here, what should we do?” he asked.

“I don’t understand the meaning of your question.”

“I mean, we don’t have much money left.”

“And so?”

“ ‘and so?’ you...”

The girl remained as she always was. She held the nigiri he had just bought at a convenience store in her hands as they talked. Also, as they continued to drive like this, they were definitely using up gas. For all he knew, it would be better if they just stopped right here. But to stop, without doing anything, unable to do anything, was tough. It was because of that, that the man continued to drive on. If they continued as they previously had, running along the smaller roads, they had about 3 days worth of gas. Just like their 2000 yen could buy them 3-4 days worth of food. Obviously, he could see they were heading towards poverty.

“Say, that Awajima place. Do you want to go see it?”

There was no reply; she just kept looking out the window.

“I, want to see it a bit,” he said.

“Why?”

“Well...” he floundered, they hadn’t left the 7th floor with any sort of plan, so to him, it didn’t matter whether they headed east or west. Anything would have done, so long as they had some place to go, he thought.

When it became totally dark, the man stopped in the parking lot of some pachinko shop.* Of course, it wasn’t his intention to raise money at pachinko or slots. With just 2000 yen, he knew there was a problem before playing. But, he figured it wouldn’t be too hard to expect to steal 10-20,000 yen. He had been thinking about it since they passed a pachinko shop long before. With just that much money, they should be fine, and it might even let them go all the way to Awajima. And so he told his plans to the girl.

“How about it? You want to try?”

“...No.”

“I see... Alright.”

She had answered as he expected, quickly dismissing the idea. He didn’t really hope that she would do anything. It’s not like he was asking for her help. He explained his plans to her more like a declaration.

“Well, wait here awhile.”

Leaving the girl in the car, the man walked towards the pachinko shop. Inside, the shop was busier than he had expected. There were many large game machines and change machines, and there were quite a number of people and cash boxes. Here and there, there were people stacking cash boxes...things might just be perfect. The man moved unerringly towards his target, the slot area.

For a while, he assessed the situation from the hallway. From his observations, he selected one table. There was a middle-aged a man who looked like a salary-man⁺. At that salary-man’s feet were 4 cash boxes, and another two were above his head on the machine. On top of that the machine just around the corner from the salary-man was free. During the whole time, the salary-man didn’t look like he was waiting for a friend. The conditions were perfect, in this situation, even if one of the boxes under his feet were stolen, he probably wouldn’t notice. In this store, most likely, one box would be worth 20,000 yen. With just that much...

The man just hung around, waiting for that salary-man to go to the bathroom. After a bit, around 30 minutes, the salary-man finally got up. The man quickly followed after, and when he confirmed that the salary-man had gone to the toilet, he quickly dashed back to the slot machine. Next, while checking on the people in the neighboring slots and for the shop owner, he slowly moved toward the machine. And then, trying not to look suspicious, acting as if everything was perfectly natural and right, he picked up one of the cash boxes on the floor.

Ga-shaaaaaaaaaaaaan.

* Pachinko shops are effectively gambling parlors involving lots of steel ball bearings in pinball like machines.

⁺ A white-collar worker.

A horrific sound was raised. Slot coins scattered all over the floor. The coins he was supposed to have picked up. Actually, he was sure he picked up the box with his hands. However, he couldn't withstand the weight of the box, and it came crashing to the floor.

Everyone's eyes immediately turned toward the source of the sound. The man thought he heard the sound of voices, and felt the presence of people running...but those voices were behind him. Already, by that time, he had run to within 2 meters of the exit.

Slamming the car door shut and panting, he quickly started the engine and slammed on the accelerator, and just when he twisted the wheel to depart quickly.

Gan, garigarigari

"Kya," the girl gasped.

The man tsked. As they were leaving, they had driven up onto the curb or something, and then rammed into something. Paying it no heed to the horrid sounds coming from the body, he drove the silver coupe onto the dark road before them while he gasped for breath. He was worried about what he had slammed into earlier, but leaving the area came first.

Soon, after 10 minutes of driving, when they were totally clear of the pachinko shop, he stopped the car by the roadside and went to inspect the damage.

"Is it okay?" the girl asked, sounding just a bit worried.

"Yeah, I don't think it's anything serious," he answered while examining. The tail bumper was definitely dented, and the end of the muffler was a bit cracked, but the car should be able to run without a problem.

Returning to the car, he gave out a sigh of relief. "What a waste", he thought, remembering the events of the pachinko shop. He had failed while being so close to his objective, but he thought that the next time, he should be able to do it well. It was probably the fact that he hadn't carried heavy things in a while, and so he couldn't carry that cash box away. If he was prepared for it in the beginning, he probably could have managed.

"You're misunderstanding something aren't you?" came the girl's voice.

"Eh?"

"The present you, should be different from the you of the past," she continued, as if she could see through him.

"But, if it was just that weight I could..."

"...It's better if you don't think of it as the same."

Most likely, the girl's words were right. He didn't want to admit it, but he was different from how he used to be. Certainly, with his stamina as reduced as it is now, he didn't think he could succeed.

"Then, what should we do?" he asked.

There was no reply; she just gazed at the dark night through the window...it probably meant they should give up.

Chapter 4: Emerald Sea

"Stop time. Stop my heart..."

"Days of just gathering information..."

Days of gazing at maps, closing my eyes, visiting unknown towns...

One day. On the cover of the monthly magazine that I always bought, my eyes stopped upon the picture* decorating the cover. There was a model wearing a fancy swimsuit, posing upon the beach. Behind her smiling form, was the emerald sea that I had always watched in my dreams. Certainly, we were the same age. With pre-eminent style, so happy and relaxed, she smiled at me. I don't think I was particularly envious. For one thing, I didn't even have a swimsuit, nor the need to wear one... for me, pajamas were all I needed.

"Watching the many seasons, the white cloudy sky, passing the days without the need to exchange words with people..."

That day, in the middle of June, the day I was first admitted into the hospital... I remembered the swimsuit that I had ordered years ago; the swimsuit that had lost its debut that day. I took it out of the drawer after so many years, the school swimsuit that remained brand new. I took off my usual pajamas and timidly put on that navy blue swimsuit.

It was a perfect fit, even though how many years had already passed? It was as if, just now, I had ordered it. The model from the magazine with the emerald sea behind her smiled at me. With that pre-eminent style, so happy and relaxed, she smiled at me.

...That was...sorrowful.

I didn't think that I was particularly envious, but in truth, I might have longed for her. Because I knew that it was impossible, it might have been an unnecessarily strengthened yearning.

"But..."

"... the large scar on my chest, warned me to give up."

"It admonished me saying, until my death, my companion should be...the world of my closed eyes."

2005-1-22

It was around the time when the sun was slowly staining the western sky orange. As always, they continued driving. What should they do from here? Their money supply was just about gone.

"Say, you..." surprisingly, the girl spoke while the man was contemplating their situation.

"Can you take baths?"

"Ah, presently, other than long baths, I can."

"I see, the same as me then," she responded. What she wanted ask was probably whether the doctors prohibited him from taking baths. For people with kidney or other digestive treatments, which required various pipes, there were many that were strictly prohibited from bathing. Thinking upon it, the girl probably had a circulatory condition like his.

"What, you want to take a bath?"

"...Is something wrong with that?"

* Literally, they use a word that's listed in the dictionary as "gravure photo"

“No, I want to take one too after all,” he said, though they didn’t have the money to stay at an inn or hotel.

“Then, why don’t we look for a bath house someplace?”

“... Bath house?”

“Yeah, we should have enough money for that much.”

“... As I thought, I’m fine...”

“What, you’re fine with this?” Since the day they left the 7th floor, 3 days had already passed. There, they only bathed twice a week, and then had a warm sponge bath twice a day to keep the body dry.* Well, even so, because of the season they weren’t sweating, and since they spent most of their time in the car, they didn’t have much chance to get dirty.

“Don’t tell me, you don’t want to because a bath-house is embarrassing.”

“...Not particularly... I didn’t mean that.”

When the sun had totally set and the large moon was showing its face, after driving a while the man found a school-like place. Here should be just right for their purposes. He stopped the car on the road near the entrance and began to rummage through the lump of clothes in the back seat. There should have been 2-3 towels in there. After carelessly tossing aside some clothing, indeed, he found some shabby towels. They had “Shiraishi⁺ Engineering Shop” printed on it, and were probably cheap things.

“Wait here a bit,” he said, taking two of the towels he headed toward the school. Looking around first, he climbed the closed gates. Searching around, he found a water faucet, most likely for watering the flowerbeds, and walked over. When he twisted the faucet, a strong flow of water flowed out, so cold as to slice through one’s body. He soaked the towels he carried and then wrung them out before returning to the car.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said, “here,” he handed one of the wet towels to the girl. Then he removed his top sweatshirt and began to wipe his body. Inside the car, with the air warmed by the heater, the pleasantly cool towel felt good.

“You don’t have to be hold back, wipe your body,”** he said. “It’s cold and feels good.”

“Okay,” at first she seemed to be hesitant but with that reply she raised her hands to the buttons of her clothes, the baggy button-down shirt and jeans. Then she placed her hand inside her clothes and began wiping.

“Say...” she murmured with her hand holding the towel and her clothes undone.

“Something the matter?”

“...Don’t look.”

“Ah, sorry, you’re right.”

She wore this slightly troubled, slightly embarrassed expression. The first time he saw her wear that expression.

Inside the cramped car, they sat with their backs facing each other.

“How about it, it feels good doesn’t it?”

* The words used is “warm towel twice a day”

⁺ For all I know, the pronunciation could be “Hakuseki” or something else.

** The phrase he uses carries the sense of what you say to guests i.e. “make yourself at home”

“Un.”

In the pitch blackness, with the little bit of light inside, the glass in front of them would reflect the images of them washing. Beyond his image, the man saw the image of the girl with her back towards him. She had also taken off her top and was wiping her body. Though it wasn't his intention, he saw her image... and saw the large scar on her chest. Most likely, it was the scar from a surgery. He couldn't be sure of the details, but it seemed a larger scar than his own.

“...Say, you,” she spoke, her back facing him.

“Eh? Ah, what is it?”

“Is it that ... unusual?” came her words as he watched the reflection in the glass.

2005-1-25

Under the cloudy sky, the silver coupe ran. As always, the car drove without any destination, and thinking about it, 3 days have passed. In that time, nothing special really changed. To be really particular about it though, along the way, they found a free open-air bath. It wasn't a very popular place, so they managed to at least take a bath. Other than that, they've reached the bottom of their money, and once again the bottom of their gas tank.

“Are you a bit tired of this?” the man asked.

“Not particularly,” she replied while holding a convenience store nigiri. Compared to the food from the 7th floor, it might be delicious, but even so, they've been eating only these for days and they were boring of it. But even with this kind of food, with their money, even that would be over in a few more trips.

“The sound is noisy,” the girl complained.

“What's this all of a sudden?”

“The sound of the car, it's becoming louder than before.”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

It must've been from the time they ran away from the pachinko shop and damaged the muffler. He hadn't been worrying about it, but it was true that the sound had been getting louder. Well, he shrugged, it probably won't get in the way of driving. And also, the problem before them was the gasoline, the meter was reading empty, and they had been running for 5 minutes like that. And with their remaining 900 yen, this time it'll be different from before, clearly, they don't have enough. Since if they ran out of gas on the road, they couldn't do anything, he made a decision to go to a gas station, and searched for one with room.

Soon, he found one, and pulled up to the first open pump.

“I'll get some gas.”

“I see...”

“But, don't get out of the car.”

She didn't answer, but most likely she understood what he meant.

The man got out of the car, opened the gas tank, and pumped the gas, imitating the other customers. Nearby was one other customer, and in the back near the vending machines he could see someone that looked like a worker in a building. Most likely, they were supposed to pay over there. Reading the plate on the wall, it seemed that after filling,

you take the receipt over there... If that's the case now, the man felt as he watched the pump that they could run off like this.

23, 24, 25, 26...

The meter was counting, and it seemed to go much slower than the first time. He felt irritated, wanting the tank to fill up faster. Finally, after passing 40 liters and the tank was about to be filled...

"Welcome!" said the employee that was just before in that building, and now was for some reason rushing over.

"Is your ashtray, tire pressure okay?" began the employee, apparently running up to provide services.

"Ah, yes, they're fine."

"I see, it's cold, so please be careful," Now, the employee started washing the windows as a service.

And it was during that time that the pump reported that the tank was full, made a practical noise, and spat out a receipt.

"Ah, please pay over there," said the pointing clerk, his hands pausing from washing the windows.

The man was holding the receipt silently, not knowing what to do, and wound up standing stock still.

"Is there something the matter, sir?"

"Ah, no, nothing..." for the moment, he returned to the interior of the car and started the engine. What was he supposed to do? That clerk had now started cleaning the rear window. He could just accelerate away, but without question, the license plate number would be noted down. If there was an investigation, they would easily be captured. But now, in this situation, in order to get away...

Preparing himself, the man stepped hard onto the clutch and went into neutral. Just as he was about to go into second gear...

"Here..."

"Eh?"

"... You can use it."

Suddenly, the girl had taken out an envelope. And from inside, she handed him a 10,000 yen bill.

"Y-you, had money?" just when he was certain she had none. If that were the case, he wouldn't have had to go through all these hardships.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he demanded.

"Did you ask?"

"Ah, um, well, no... because..."

"Because you didn't ask..." she replied simply before once again staring out the window.

Once again the silver coupe ran. For the time being, the gas tank was filled, and in addition, there was a 5,000 yen bill in change left. But the man was more interested in what happened earlier.

"Say, you..." he began hesitantly.

“Here, here’s all of it...”

“Eh?”

Before he could say anything, the girl just offered him the entire envelope from before.

“I can use this?”

“I doesn’t matter... you can.”

Looking inside the envelope, there were another four 10,000 yen bills inside. With this, they would be fine for a while. But, what he was interested in was something else... Why was it that this girl carried so much money with her? At least, from the start, the few thousand yen he had carried was something he happened to just be carrying at the time. But from the looks of it, he couldn’t help but think that the girl had been prepared before hand.

“Say, you...” he began, “before, you said that you hated the 7th floor, right?”

“...I also hate home,” she replied.

“Ah, I’m that way too... then, well, where did you intend to go?”

She stayed silent.

“This envelope, this money was for that purpose wasn’t it?”

And the man remembered her words from before. She said that while she was still able to walk by herself, she’d go someplace. She had asked him, would he stop her? Would he go with her?

“As I thought, you really did have a place you wanted to go?”

“Not really...”

“I can’t understand if you say ‘not really...’”

“...Nowhere,” she murmured, so sadly, seemingly so alone.

Then that meant that she gathered this money, alone, for all this time, without a destination in mind, but still planning for someday? He was a bit concerned about her doing such an empty thing. And yet, her lonely profile seemed to affirm the statement.

“...Then, what about you?” she asked.

“Even I... have... nowhere in particular...”

“...Don’t copy me,” she told him.

“I’m not copying you.”

Without a destination, they continued to run. He who left the 7th floor unexpectedly, and she who had only been vainly preparing to leave, without a place to go. And yet...

“...Right now, I just want to go see any place...” the man said.

“Eh?”

At the very least, for him, he didn’t care what it was, so long as someone pointed out the way.

“Say, how about that Awajima place we talked about earlier?”

She didn’t say anything.

“The money we have now, is enough to go there,” he told her. He was positive it was enough to go just about anywhere. To neither the 7th floor nor home, to just keep on going. But not meaningless wandering... the man wanted to move with purpose, it didn’t matter where.

“Don’t you think you want to go see it too?”

“Not particularly,” was her only reply, in the same way she always did, just gazing out the window; unchangingly, her eyes looking as if they were looking at someplace far away. The man wondered what in the world could she be looking at. What was she thinking, what did she expect, coming here?

Chapter 5: Route 1

“I loved looking at maps...”

I loved the Route 1 that continued running forever, unknown places, cars that would take me anywhere. But no matter no matter how much information I gathered...

It was just imagination. Reality, my heart, both steadily grew more fragile. I had a swimsuit. I had a map. But I had no future. Outside the window, there was a world. But it wasn't a reality that I could touch. If I closed my eyes, I could go to a world of nothingness, but in that world, it wasn't as if my body would disappear. I knew that.

I resigned myself to have as my companion for life, the world of closed eyes. And yet, I only kept imagining “maybes.” I would hope and dream about maybes, but in the end... longing never went beyond longing, right along with the bikini, along with the emerald sea...

...The large scar on my chest, told me to give up.

“But...”

Passing my life in a hospital room, living only in the world behind closed eyes, not being able to choose anything by either the 7th floor or home, was sorrowful. To be given so little margin to choose between... But even so, I thought that I was even more pitiful for not being able to find that place. Even though I've lived 22 years...

“Just once... let me do as I please...”

When I murmured that, I felt the time that had was supposed to have stopped, swayed.

That day, the heart that was supposed to have stopped, hurt.

1-26, Route 1, (Some place name I didn't look up)

The clear winter sky was reflected upon the car's top as it ran. As always, it continued without a destination. But, where didn't seem to be any looming problems of gasoline, or shopping.

Before long, they were coming close to a large intersection. The man didn't receive the girl's approval, but he turned west because he felt like it. It was just that, he had no clue about geography, and using the expressways would be hard on their money supply. While he was thinking about that, the large intersection came closer. Without thinking about it, he was going to head straight through...

“Over there, left turn.”

“Eh?”

“Turn to the left,” the girl said, her finger suddenly pointing. While thinking what this was all about, he followed her direction and entered the left lane and they then entered into a large road.

“What's the matter?”

“... This is Route 1, for the moment, go straight...”

“For now?” he asked. Her sudden directing surprised him. Up until now, she had seemed to know about anything they came across, but this was the first time she spontaneously pointed something out to him.

“... Does this mean, you want to go?”

She said nothing.

“Ah, I mean, to that place, Awajima...”

“... Is something wrong with that?”

“No, that’s not that I meant...”

They had been going without purpose. He had been wandering, wanting some purpose, and that hard to understand girl was always gazing far away. The words that came from the girl’s mouth unexpected.

“... It doesn’t mean I’m hoping for anything...”

“Eh?”

“It’s not like I wanted a swimsuit...”

“... What are you saying?”

“... It’s nothing...”

1-26 Route 22: (Some name)

Under the clear winter sky, the silver coupe reflected the sunlight and went on. It had passed Hakone, full of steep climbs and sudden curves, and now it was running on extremely easy to travel roads.

“Say, where do we go after this?”

“Aichiken^{*}, and soon after, we’ll enter the city of Nagoya.”

The man was thinking about their remaining money, and how they were running on the lower roads instead of the expressways. Alone, it would have been impossible for him, but he just followed the girl’s directions. The pointing girl who knew more than a navigator. He didn’t know the reason, but he thought it was likely to be the right route.

“At the next intersection, enter Route 22.”

“Gotcha,” he replied, following her directions and turning the wheel.

From their windows flowed the scenery of a place they had never seen before, a city that stretched far to the north. And before they noticed, the scenery around them slowly changed to more calm things.

“Say, do you want to go visit there?” the man asked, pointing at some family restaurant near the national highway. “Look, haven’t we been eating only convenience store food?”

Of course, they hadn’t been eating only convenience store food because they liked it. They had to think about their money, and for that reason, kept their excesses in check. It also required little planning. But now, since they had a bit of extra money, he made the proposal.

“Once in awhile, going to a restaurant’s good isn’t it?”

* A prefecture in the Chuubu area (says the dictionary)

“... I’m fine with the convenience store...” the girl said, lowering her head just slightly. It seemed to him that she was looking at her clothes. Ah, she was still wearing those baggy clothes.

“I understand, then, why don’t we go there first?”

“‘There’?”

“Look, that shop over there, the jeans shop,” he pointed at the shop easily seen from the road. It looked like a wholesale shop dealing in jeans and casual wear.

“I’m sure in that kind of shop, the things won’t be that expensive.”

She said nothing.

“Okay then, we’re going in. We’re going in okay?”

There was no reply. But there was also no refusal. Maybe, with her, if she doesn’t object, then he could think of it as agreement.

They entered the shop. Inside, the girl went around to many corners of the large 2 floors of the shop, looking very curious. She was silent as usual, and perhaps she hadn’t changed from her usual appearance. But nevertheless, it was slightly different from the lifeless, dull expression that she had watching the television.

Over and over, she’d pick something up, look at the price, and then seem to enter deep into thought. Then, while trying on clothes, she would run up to him...

“... How is it?”

“‘How is it’ you say? It suits you just fine.”

“... It’s not strange?”

“Yeah, probably.”

They had similar exchanges over and over, as the girl kept trying on clothes and returning to show him. Never did she smile or show an emotion, but he thought he sensed that she was having fun.

“How about it, decided?”

“... Un, I’ll take these,” she replied, showing him the cute shirt and short skirt that she had last tried on. The clothes that she chose was certainly in the vicinity of junior high or high school clothing, but she seemed to wear them happily. Certainly, she had said that she was older than him, but combine that with an appearance that no matter how one looked, was younger than him, and instead it suited her so well it was charming.

“But, isn’t it better to give up on that skirt?”

“Eh?”

“Well, no, it’s not that it doesn’t suit you. I didn’t mean that.”

She said nothing.

“Look, it’s cold isn’t it? To be wearing an outfit like that.”

“... T-that’s not particularly a problem, I’ll endure it.”

Just when she answered, the man could see her white face become just a bit red, even though she was normally one who would never show a facial expression. Could it be that she was embarrassed? It was the first time he saw her show any facial expression.

They continued driving. Under the winter sky so high, high above. The silver coupe continued to run with a slightly noisy exhaust.

“Next, enter Route 21.”

“Gotcha.”

As usual, the girl was the navigator. By the time he noticed, they were in Gifuken* . Usually, when she was not needed, the girl would be staring out the window. But now, again and again, she was happily looking at herself in the side mirror. It was as if she were trying to hide from his eyes her peering into the mirror.

“...What is it?” she asked him.

“Nothing, it just seems like you really like those clothes.”

“It’s not really anything like that,” she replied, stopping her use of the mirror.

But then, after awhile, when he wasn’t looking, she began looking again... In the end, he decided that she does have a cute side. Even with this little thing, to him, she was ordinary, and only ordinary, and cute.

It was when the sun had totally set, at some roadside, when they were once again eating their convenience store dinner.

“Say, what do you think has happened...?” the man murmured, looking at the hospital nameplate on his wrist. Even now his wrist was still bound by the white vinyl bracelet that held his name, and his blood type.

“You think there’s a big uproar?”

“...Probably.”

“Yeah.”

Parents, friends, moreover, the hospital doctors, the thought of them worrying about him, even if they were only worried on the surface, pained his heart a bit.

“Sorry, Dad, everyone, I went off and did something selfish,” he thought.

“Say, you...” the girl spoke.

“Mm? Something the matter?”

“The first time... that you heard you were going to die... did you cry?” the girl asked suddenly. For just a moment, he was surprised, and then he thought about the heaviness of the question.

“... If I’m not mistaken... I don’t think I cried.”

“Then, did you say “why only me?”... and curse fate?”

“I don’t remember that very well...”

At the start, he couldn’t recognize what had happened in reality. He thought of it as something that couldn’t be considered real. However, he might have, just a little bit.

He had went with his friends who went to the same driving school together and they bought a new car. There were those who complained about how troublesome the 36-payment loan would be. There were those people who decided what work they were going to do. Those who had to repeat a year of school. Those who just had children. Those who were just dumped by their girlfriends again. But he was denied a future. That’s why, speaking truthfully, he thought he must have felt “why only me?” Even hearing that it was just fate, in spite of that, he thought he must have felt that he couldn’t give up.

“And you? How was it?”

“...Me?” the girl asked.

* Another prefecture in the Chuubu area.

“Yeah, were you sad and crying? Did you curse fate?”

“...I was, fine with it.”

“... Why?”

“...Because, from the start, I didn't wish for anything...” she said, “because...I had given up.”

“I see...”

If one gave up from the start, there would be nothing to be despondent about. Turning away, there wouldn't be anything enjoyable, but there wouldn't be anything painful either. However, the man felt that that way of thinking was just too sorrowful. Or was it that in that girl's position there wasn't anything else that could have been done?

“A movie that I saw once said,” the girl said, “...wolves only live for 3 years.”

“Wha? Wolves?” the man boggled at her sudden story.

“But... Donkeys can live for 9 years.”

“What's this about? Wolves can live 3 years, donkeys 9?”

“...Donkeys, because they are useful, live long lives,” she said, “it seems that's why.”

The girl spun out her words while looking out the window with a lonely expression. This must have been, for this girl, the excuse she used to accept herself, the excuse used so that she would give up.

The winter sky was darkened while they were driving straight along Route 21. And in that darkened sky danced flecks of white. It looked like the snowfall was going to gradually get worse.

“... Is something the matter?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, the snow is coming...” the man replied, looking to the side of the road, he noticed that snow was appearing on the ground. He didn't know when they had entered a snowy area, but everywhere he looked around was dyed white.

“Things might be a bit bad,” he thought. Looking before, as best he could tell, they weren't studless tires*. If they keep going, and they entered an even more snowy area, it might get dangerous.

“Say, does this area get heavy snowfall?”

“Eh?”

“Well, if it snows much harder than this, things would be difficult.”

Even if the road surface didn't have snow yet, it wasn't impossible for the road to be frozen over. And now that he thought about it, he hadn't learned anything about driving beyond what was in the textbook; it might be that he needed chains.

“How about it? Do you know?”

“Coming up is Sekigahara.”

“I asked you that before, what I want to know is whether it's a place that snows heavily.”

“That... I don't know...”

* I have no idea. I don't know much about cars. This is what's in the dictionary.

The girl answered him with a mysteriously lonely expression. From that expression, the man remembered just a little that didn't match up. To know this much about the roads, and before, even though she knew so much about the car, comparing this to those things, he thought this seemed like something she'd know.

"Alright, at any rate, I'll just drive carefully."

"...Un."

A beach. When they got out of the car, they gazed at a lake. The strong wind stirred up here and there the white snow that dyed the surface of the frozen lake. And in all that, facing towards a beach that looked like it was an ocean beach. The girl slowly began to walk... a scene that had occurred before.

"...Say, what do you think?" she asked.

"That if you kept going, would you die comfortably?"

"Un, I have a feeling that it would be more comfortable than the sea..."

"To me, I don't understand the basis for that answer."

"Because, sea water is salty, and your body would float wouldn't it?"

"... Well, that's impressive reasoning..." In the middle of the snow blown by the cold north wind he argued with his companion, unable to tell whether she was serious or joking. And then, the feet that had paused briefly, once again moved towards the waves.

"...Still, you're not going to stop me?" she asked.

"Because, you don't intend on dying today right?"

"...Un, that may be so."

Until that place, until Awajima... How much farther is it, the man wondered... It's not as if he wanted to go there, nor did he have a prejudice against it. But, even though they had been wandering without a destination, they had a destination now. Even if he didn't stop her, that girl whose feet had paused a step before the waves...he was sure that's what she was thinking.

1-27, Route 8-Route 1 – Seda Interchange

"From there, go back to Route 1."

"Gotcha."

They went from Route 8 once again to Route 1. The girl acted as navigator, and now they were headed towards Kusatsu

"Say, are we okay with money now?" she asked.

"Yeah, there's still at least 30,000 yen left," he replied, they had bought clothes before, but other than that, they were living as usual on convenience store food.

"Is something the matter?"

"... Then, you want to go on to the expressway?" she asked.

"The expressway? We can't go using only the lower roads?"

"Well, it's true that we can go just about all the way..." she said, "but, in the end, we'd have to use a toll road..."

“I see, it’s Awajima after all.”* He wasn’t sure about the details, but to get to Awajima, he’s sure that they’d have to use some kind of straight-crossing bridge or some other kind of bridge.

“Then, from Kusatsu, go into the bypass.”

“Gotcha.”

Under the girl’s direction, they went from the Seda Interchange, onto the Meishin Expressway. Compared to the common roads that he had been driving all this time, it was apparent that this road required some adjusting to. There weren’t any traffic signals, and the roadway was nicely cleared of obstructions, for the first time driving on the expressways, he thought that he could easily drive on it.

It was just that, entering into the right lane of the expressway, the cars coming from behind at such a rate was scary. In the beginning, he didn’t know what passing and right wipers were⁺ but with practice he came to think of driving on the high speed roads as fun.

“That car is amazing...” he said, referring to the car that came up from behind their casually running car at a staggering speed and they came face to face.

Even the girl sitting in the passenger seat had on a slightly different expression. Normally, she would be gazing out the window looking far away, but today, she was curiously looking at the cars all around them.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered that she knew a lot about cars. He pointed at the car that easily passed them.

“Hey, hey, what car was that just now?”

She stayed quiet.

“Come now, think of it as a quiz.”

“...Toyota Celica, Overview.”

“And the one passing now?”

“Citroen, Kusara”

“You know them well, don’t you?” he said. To be honest, he had no idea whether she was right or not. But, he thought that the girl who would never open her mouth carelessly seemed to enjoy answering these. That’s why he continued without resting.

“The blue one is a Yuunosu (Unus?), the red one is an Alpha Romeo *...” she answered the pair that had passed them at the same time.

“But, you don’t know about those right?” he said, pointing at one that was different from all the cars before, a truck. He wanted to see a slightly troubled expression from the girl who didn’t really show facial expressions.

“As I thought, you don’t know about trucks?”

“...Nissan...Atlas, 10”

“... Hey, hey, you’re amazing,” he said, even though he had intended to pick on her, he never thought that she would know even trucks.

“If you know that much, it’s on a level you can boast about, isn’t it?”

“... Is that so?”

“Yeah, I think you can puff your chest out,” he said.

* He’s referring to the ‘jima’ part of the name, which means “island”.

⁺ And neither do I. =P

* I can barely tell a Ford from a Toyota. Can you tell?

She fell silent at his words, and seemed a bit embarrassed. She probably really liked cars.

“Say, how about when we go over there, you want to try driving?”

“Eh?” she said, “but I don’t have a license...”

“It’ll be fine, I’m sure driving on the beach or something will be fun.”

He was sure that if they went as far as Awajima, there would be plenty of places where no one was around. And plus, the car was a manual transmission, so once she got used to it; he’d think it’d be interesting.

“If anything, I’ll teach you.”

She remained quiet.

“Ah, even if I say that, I’m just a total beginner though.”

“...Un...”

Chapter 6: Echo

The sun was still high up, but it was becoming a bit darker. The silver coupe continued to run along the expressway. Soon, at the Katsuragawa parking area, they moved slower, at a pace that was like a short rest.

“Say, you want to take a rest at the next one?”

“Ah, u, un,” the girl replied haltingly.

“... Something wrong?”

“It looks like, I’m a bit tired.”

“I see...” he said, for all he knew this wasn’t an impossible thing. He was thankful it was just that much. After all, they were originally even sicker than the normal sick person.

“Then, I’ll go buy something for you.”

“... Un.”

“Well, I’ll go buy something quick then,” he said, leaving the car. He quickly went to a nearby shop and bought the usual things that he always bought at a convenience store.

“Here, a Pocari and nigiri, and also a potato.”

“Ah, un...” she responded, but she only took the things and didn’t move to consume them. Even though usually, she’d go for the potato first...

“... Are you alright?”

Silence.

“Is it that your health is getting worse?”

“... It’s just that... I ran out of medicine...”

“... I see...”

Running out of medicine, it was something fearful. Well, ever since they left the hospital, it was something that they could easily predict. Of course, he didn’t purposely forget about it. But up until now, he hadn’t thought about it, and before, he didn’t even consciously try to think about it.

“Since when? When did you run out of medicine?”

“...Last night...”

“Then, it’s almost been a day...”

For him, he had been told that his limit was 2 days without taking medicine, most likely, in her case, it was a shorter time. Now that he thought about it, it has been already 8 days since they had left the hospital. The medicine that they had brought with them, sooner or later would turn out like this... What should he do now?

“Say...” the girl spoke, “I hate the 7th floor...”

“Yeah, I know, and you also hate home right?”

“Un...”

The car began running again. The man took the next exit and left the expressway. It's not like exiting did anything, but in a place like that he couldn't do anything at all. From the dreary exit, he drove towards the town areas. And instead of searching for a small town doctor, he searched for a large hospital. Most likely, where there was a large hospital, there would be pharmacies nearby. Going to the hospital might have been the best thing to do... and if this were an ordinary sickness, he'd have probably gone without hesitation

... But they were people from the 7th floor. The vinyl wristbands on their wrists were a distinctive white. And, moreover, they were people who had fled the 7th floor. Thinking about these things, he searched around the area, grasping the wheel. Certainly, a pharmacy near a large hospital would have the general things they needed.

“Found it.”

On some large street, standing on the corner, was some large university hospital. And just nearby were 2-3 awnings of pharmacies. Just when it seemed that finding parking was hopeless, he found an empty spot and immediately stopped the car.

“Hey, lend me the bag of medicine?”

“Ah, un...” with a mysterious expression, the girl handed over the bag of medicine. Taking the bag that was for holding medicine inside hospitals, he looked inside and took out the medicine explanation sheet. With this, he'd probably be okay.

“Okay, I'll be back soon,” he said.

Leaving the girl in the car and running to the pharmacy nearby, he passed through a slow and randomly opening automatic door into the store. He headed straight to the counter.

“Welcome,” said a worker, a middle-aged sort of man who wore white clothing, he really did look like a pharmacist.

“I need this medicine please,” he said, handing over the sheet.

“Eh? Ah, please wait a moment...” the man said, taking the paper and heading to the back of the shop. Most likely, unlike normal medicines, the man had to get the medicine from the hospital. He remembered that sort of thing happening while he was released from the hospital before and went to get medicine. Since this place was clearly near a large hospital, he thought most kinds of medicines would be gathered here.

“Sorry for the wait, it comes out to this much,” the older man said when he returned after a while. In his hands was a clear bag of capsule-like medicine, and there were two bundles of them. With that much, it would probably be alright. From the looks of it, there was about a week's worth.

Just when the man went to take his wallet out...

“Ah, right, can I have your prescription?”

“... Prescription?”

“Ah, I’m talking about the prescription for the medicine. This here is for clinical use.”

The man fell silent.

“You received one from your doctor didn’t you?”

This was unexpected. Well, if he had thought about it rationally, this wasn’t medicine readily available on the market. One couldn’t normally buy these.

“Is something wrong?” the pharmacist asked.

“Ah, no, um...” the man’s words froze. Gradually, the white-shirted man began to look at him suspiciously.

“Eh?... That’s...” the pharmacist noticed the white band around the man’s wrist, saw the man’s name, his blood type, and, the name of the hospital.

“Ah” the pharmacist blurted.

The man reflexively grabbed the bundle of medicine upon the glass counter.

“Hey! Stop right there!” the pharmacist shouted.

The man heard the shout from behind him, but he was already running. He was 5 meters away from the exit. His legs were not holding out, and were becoming unsteady, but even then he ran in a daze. And just as he reached that slow and randomly opening automatic door...

Gan, Gashaaaaan.

“Ow, damn it...” Spontaneously, his consciousness went white for a moment. Having run head-first into the automatic door with such force the glass seemed broken. He shook his spinning head, and opened the automatic door that wouldn’t open with his hand. And then he started running from the store, he hadn’t been separated from that bag of medicine he was holding.

Unexpectedly, he was out of breath, his jaw moving up and down. The car was only a few tens of meters away, but it felt farther. It didn’t seem like there was anyone chasing after, but he didn’t have the luxury of turning around to check.

...If he were caught... what would happen to her?

Alone in the car, she’d probably sit there waiting for his return forever. For some reason, while he was thinking that, he ran in earnest. While staggering and out of breath and thinking this was all he had, it was sad, even if he was to say so himself.

Collapsing into the car seat, the man gasped for breath as he suddenly started off. He was more self conscious about how much his strength has declined than that day at the pachinko shop. And when he checked in the vanity mirror* as he thought, he had been cut by glass, and a little bit of blood was flowing from his forehead. If it were just this much, it’d probably stop soon. As he drove, he lightly pressed against it with a pocket tissue.

“... Are you alright?”

“Ah, I’m fine.”

“But, it’s bleeding...”

“... Don’t worry about it, it’s nothing.”

* It literally says “room mirror”, whatever that is.

The girl was looking at him with a worried face. He waved his hand, saying he didn't need her worry, and handed her the bag of medicine that he had been gripping with his left hand..

“Here, take your medicine.”

“Ah, un...”

With this, they were probably fine. One week's worth should be enough probably. But, he worried about when that was gone. It was good that today had been an accidental success, but it was clear his strength was weakening every day.

... Originally, they were without a purpose or destination. Without desires, there was also no fear of loss. But now, things were a little different. With the birth of purpose, also came the birth of the fear of loss.

1-29 – Fukida Junction – Kouge junction – Some place name...

It was a very sunny day. And the characteristic high, high transparent sky spread above them. Once again, they were on the expressway. And now they left the Fukida Junction and were running on the Chuugoku Automobile Road.*

“Say, what's next?”

“From the Kouge Junction...”

“Gotcha, the Sanyo Automobile Road then?”

“Un.”

The silver coupe ran according to the girl's directions. Now that they had come this far, on the road signs, once in awhile, they'd see the words “Awajima” on them. From the day that they left the 7th floor, the trip meter had gone over 900km. He hadn't thought that they could have gone so far, but they were now only a short distance from their destination. Before long, a large bridge appeared before them.

“That's the Akashikaikyō bridge⁺ right? It's an amazing bridge isn't it?”

“... Un.”

Both of them spontaneously expressed their admiration. It was like they were running on the ocean and could go anywhere. And then, after they drove for awhile, they came across a few people who had stopped their cars midway. Most likely, they were tourists who were getting out of their cars to take some commemorative pictures. The man imitated those people and pulled the car over to the side and stopped.

“...Stopping is prohibited here,” the girl told him.

“Well, a little bit should be fine,” he said, after all, there were a number of cars doing the same thing all around.

“Say, let's go outside and have a look.”

She stayed quiet.”

“I'm sure, the view would be amazing.”

“Okay...” she replied. She still sounded a bit reluctant, but she got out of the car to join him.

A strong wind blew across the bridge.

* Chuugoku here isn't China, but the area in the most south western part of Honshu, in the Hiroshima area

⁺ I've seen at least one web site refer to the bridge as the “Pearl Bridge”

“It’s a bit colder than I thought...”

“... Un.”

Normally, they didn’t get out of the car, so they felt it was excessively cold. And in contrast to them, nearby was a couple taking what was probably a commemorative picture, their happy voices coming over to them. Looking around more carefully, there were families and tourist groups doing the same thing.

... A commemorative picture eh? Certainly, this place required one.

“Speaking of which...” the man said aloud.

“... Is something wrong?”

“Ah, wait just a moment.”

“Ah, un.”

He was sure there had been a camera. He remembered that at the beginning, when they had first checked the contents of the car, they had found a cheap one-use camera. At that time, at a quick glance, he thought he saw that there were a few shots left on it. Finding the camera, he checked the film.

“Thank goodness, there’s still 2 shots left... Sorry for the wait, here, I’ll take a picture of you.”

“Eh?”

“A picture, since we took the trouble to get here...”

“... No.”

“Now, now, don’t say that. Strike up a good pose for me,” he told her while pointing the camera at her. “Come now, try putting on a happy face.”

However, maybe she was embarrassed, but when she finally turned to face him, she faced him with a pouting face. But... perhaps... for this girl, this might just be the best smile that she could make. While he was thinking that and was about to take the picture...

“Excuse me, could you please take a picture of us?” a random couple came up to him with a camera in one hand.

“Eh? Ah, sure... Okay, ready?”

“Yes, please,” the couple said with happy smiles, their shoulders entwined in an embrace. The man framed the two in the viewfinder and clicked the shutter.

“Thank you very much,” said the boyfriend.

“In return, we’ll take a picture of the two of you,” said the girlfriend.

“Ah, no, we’re...”

“I just press here on the camera right?” the boyfriend asked. Faster than the man could reply, he had accepted his camera, or more like the boyfriend had ripped it from his hands. Most likely he was trying to liven the atmosphere and ignored their hesitation.

“Come on you two, get closer,” the boyfriend said.

At those words, the man got closer to the girl’s body. The ever emotionless-looking girl also moved apologetically closer.

“Um, could you please pose a bit more?” the boyfriend asked.

The boyfriend just kept nosily adding more requests. And looking closer, his girlfriend was giving them exasperated looks. Thinking there was no helping it, he slowly placed his hands around the girl’s shoulders from behind.

“...Ah...”

It was the first time he had touched her body. The feeling of the childish clothes that she had bought a few days ago, along with her waist-length hair spread from his hands. Since he was facing the camera, he couldn't see her expression, but, just maybe, she was wearing that embarrassed, pouting face that she only showed him once in a while.

“Okay, ready?”

Click

Making sure that they had taken the picture properly, the couple then returned to their car. The man and the girl also returned to theirs.

“Girlfriend... eh?” the man mused when they got back in the car, “It looks like we've been misunderstood haven't we?”

The girl remained silent.

“Perhaps, we look like that?” he joked a little. For some reason it felt fun. And unconsciously, he continued to speak in that tone.

“Say, yo... um no... say, what do you think, Setsumi?”

“...What's that?... Despite being the younger one...” she replied. As she spoke, she was facing the window as she always was. Her expression was the same as always, and she didn't look at him. But, those weren't the eyes that were staring far off someplace; he thought it was because she was embarrassed, so she had turned her face away.

1-29, Someplace Interchange

If you looked up, the sun was high overhead. And the clear sky that was the mark of winter stretched all around. A little after the bridge, they had come to the Sumoto Interchange, and once again he got off onto the normal roads.

“We've finally arrived haven't we?” he said.

“...Un.”

Since the day they had left the 7th floor, the car's meter showed they had come over 900km, from a casual beginning, they had really struggled to arrive here.

“Well, from here, where should we go?”

“... To the south...”

“South, gotcha.”

He turned according to her directions. Truthfully speaking, now that they were here, even he knew where they were supposed to go. Before him, there were many sightseeing billboards. But she was the navigator. He thought he would be wrong if he didn't do this. For some reason, he wanted to do it this way...

Chapter 7: Narcissus

At the time when the sky was slowly being dyed orange, on a sandy beach with no one around, a strong wind shook a pine grove. Driving the car onto that beach, the man turned over the driver's seat to the girl.

“Okay, can you reach the clutch with your feet?”

“It's fine...”

“Good, then, next shift the gear from neutral to second...”

“... I know.”

“Yes, yes, then, do as you please.”

“Un. I know...”

The girl, with her short build, stretched her foot out as far as she could while she gripped the wheel with a serious expression.

“That’s good...” the man spoke, leaning over from the passenger’s seat, “after, slowly let go of the clutch.”

“...Un,” she replied, with a clearly nervous appearance.

Clack

As he had expected, there was a great knocking sound.

“Wah!” the girl shouted in surprise.

“Look, if you don’t release the clutch more quietly.”

“Un,” she replied.

It was easy thing to say, but no one can get that skillful so quickly. The girl was trying her best, even going so far as to chew on her lip a bit in concentration. Since she was a girl that normally wouldn’t show any emotion, when he looked at her he couldn’t help but find it charming.

“Hey, hey, it’s like you’re extremely drunk...”

“I-I know.”

The loud silver coupe, with the muffler that was slightly cracked, on the deserted beach, it reverberated almost like a howl.

When dusk was slowly turning into night, the constant sea breeze changed into a land breeze, and before they knew it, a large moon was showing its face in the sky.

“For the most part, it looks like you’ve grown used to it.”

“... Un,” she replied, while shifting the gear up to 3rd. She also completely gotten used to the clutch and was now driving around the small beach freely.

“Say, with this...” he said, “can’t you get your license without even studying?”

“...Is that so?”

“Well, I’m not all that credible, I’m just someone who got a license after all...”

By now, there was no meaning for either of them to get a license. Both of them knew that. They had a map, they had medicine, the muffler was a bit cracked and noisy, but they even had a silver coupe... But they had no time. No future. It was because they knew, that he thought it was unnecessarily trying.

“Well then... Instead, I’ll give you mine,” as the man spoke, he took his own license out from his pocket. It was the license that originally was supposed to have lost its debut. It was the proof of what was to him the ordinary world that he had already lost...

“Here, in place of your graduation certificate.”

“...Even if I take it... it doesn’t look like I have time to use it, you know...”

“Well, don’t hold back... I’m the same way after all.”

The 7th floor that no one had been able to avoid, the high ceilings, the windows that can’t open more than 15cm, the white vinyl wristbands. Where 3 times is the last, she was on her second, he his first...

“Well, here, congratulations on your graduation.”

“Un...Thank you...” she said with a little bow, accepting his license. Now, this girl was also generally exempt. Not just coupes, but sedans, even convertibles. She should be able to drive whatever kind of car she wanted now. And certainly, she should be able to go any place that she wanted...

From there, they had continued on as usual. They had arrived at the place that was their destination, a place where they could see narcissus flowers.* It seems that the area was supposed to be some kind of sightseeing spot, but whether it was because it was on the outskirts, or because it was night, no one could be seen. In the totally silent dark of the night, the two of them waited for sunrise in the car.

“Say, you’re not going to turn on some light?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, because the battery seems close to dead.”

“Un, that’s true...”

In the totally dark car with the engine off, the dim light from the dashboard lit their profiles. In that cramped car with almost no sound, no light, they didn’t exchange many words and waited for the dawn. From the lump of laundry scattered in the back seat, they grabbed a number of thick jeans, sweatshirts, and towels and wrapped them around their bodies in place of blankets.

“... It’s cold isn’t it?”

“...Un.”

“Then, you can come closer if you want.”

“Eh?”

“Come now, don’t hold back, come over here,” he told the girl whose body was shaking from the cold, pointing to his lap. “I’m sure it’d be warmer this way.”

“...I’m not particularly... I’m fine,” she said, her body still shivering. Even inside the car their breath misted, and it was obvious that she was just putting on a brave face.

“... Or is it, because you’re cold, you want me to come?” she asked him.

“Mmm, well, that’s fine too.”

“... Then... fine...” she replied, slowly moving over towards him, hesitatingly climbing into his lap.

“Well? It’s a bit warmer isn’t it?”

“... Un.”

The windshield had been totally frosted over from the cold outside, and between that whiteness and the darkness of light, nothing could be seen. But, before long, dawn. Surely, at that time, they would probably be faced with a blanket of white flowers...

Gradually, the night gave way to dawn, the sun slowly repainted the sky from a deep purple to a light white. And before them, along with the dawn, white flowers spread out. In the place that had been nothing but black, white and yellow appeared. Without thinking, the two of them got out of the car to gaze at the scene.

“Amazing...”

“... Un.”

* It should be noted in passing that the Japanese word for these flowers, ‘suisen’ means both daffodil and narcissus.

Before their eyes spread countless narcissuses. The sun on the morning dew leapt up, even further enhancing the lively prominence of those flowers. It was as if the flowers formed a carpet that continued into the ocean. And as the two exchanged words, their breath steamed a white just like the flowers... They had come to this place, since that day when the boring television showed the flowers, even though they had had no purpose, they had been able to come here.

“...I can say these are the same right?” he asked.

“Un... strictly speaking, these are the same,” she replied.

“I see, that’s good then isn’t it?”

The man didn’t know whether these were different from the other ones... That day, the ones shown on the television, the image that had no unguarded beauty, if he compared the flowers before his eyes to those, the size and the way they bloomed before his eyes were only loosely connected... But nevertheless, they grew here.

“It’s beautiful...” the girl said.

“... Yes it is.”

Vague, tedious, commonplace, and yet, calm no matter who opposed it, merciless reality. In a world that overflowed with things that could not be seen, in a world of things where even if you stretched out your hands, you couldn’t touch... Right now, certainly, there was something before their eyes that could be touched. Fragments of those somethings that could not be seen were scattered about.

1-31: Awajima

Rain continued to fall, continued to spill out from the pure white sky of January. It had been two days since that time, but as always, they were in that place. They couldn’t go.

Cough

“Hey, you alright?”

“Un... probably.”

The girl’s health had turned for the worse. She lay in the seat, as if stretching her body, almost as unmoving as the car that had stopped here. She had been taking the medicine, but it didn’t really help much, as her steady decline in health didn’t change... But then, they were people of the 7th floor. From the start, this wasn’t surprising for a girl who was already on her second visit.

“Say... do you want to go back?” he asked.

“... You, want to go back?” she asked.

“Yeah, just a little bit...”

“To the 7th floor? ... or home?”

“W-well...”

...He didn’t know...all that he knew was, how things would turn out like this sooner or later. Obviously, he wasn’t in much better shape. But, it was painful to be able to do nothing but be nearby and watch.

2-2: Awajima

Rain that didn't seem about to stop continued to fall from the dark night sky. Through the windows of the stopped car, vaguely, shining white flowers could be seen through the raindrops.

"Say, these flowers..." he said, pointing to the flowers beyond the windshield, "...these were narcissuses weren't they? These daffodils?"

"...Un, it's from the word Narcissus."*

"...Narcissus?" The man remembered hearing about that word, though it was an unfamiliar word to him... "You mean, the Narcissus from 'narcissist'?"

"Un, originally it was a myth, so there are different tellings of it..."

And then, while he wore an admiring look on his face, she slowly explained it to him.

"Narcissus who was loved by many..."

"The fairy Echo was one of the people who loved him."+

"But Echo couldn't say anything but the same words as her partner."

"... Nothing but the same words?"

"Yes, and so, unless she got Narcissus to say the words "I love you" from his own mouth first... Echo couldn't express her own feelings to Narcissus."

The girl continued to speak with a lonely and sad voice. The man thought that her eyes also seemed to look at some place far away like she used to do.

"But...that was absolutely impossible."

"No matter how much she dreamed, yearned, Echo's wish would never be granted..."

"In the end, she cursed Narcissus."+

"... Is that the famous thing about falling in love with the image of oneself reflected in a pool?"

"Un, and Narcissus, who continued to gaze at his own reflection...at some time had changed into the form of a beautiful flower."

"And that is the source of this flower's, Narcissus's, name."

After the story came to an end, the girl lightly adjusted her breathing, while the man who had been listening also felt desolate... the Echo who held a yearning that could never be reached, he thought it seemed like just like them this moment.

"And then? What happened to Echo?"

"She's nowhere... she disappeared at the time when the curse was placed."

...Disappeared? Then, that didn't have any meaning did it? Even though she had gone as far as to place a curse, she accomplished nothing. In the end, all it did was make Narcissus unhappy also...

"... Is something wrong?" the girl asked him.

"No... but, you're different aren't you?"

"Eh?"

* The name she literally uses is "Narcis"

+ Yes, I know Echo's a nymph. I'm following Setsumi's telling.

+ Also different from the versions of the myth I'm familiar with, but even in Setsumi's telling, it's not explicitly said who laid the curse, however, the flow of the story context implies Echo.

“Look, before, you asked me didn’t you? ‘Did you curse the fate that you could do nothing about?’”

“... Un... because I had given up...”

“...The me whose time had stopped...”

I passed many seasons, many raining skies, without the need to speak to exchange words with anyone.

“...From when was it, that I was alone I wonder...”

“Even if I close my eyes, the world would not disappear...”

Even if I stop my ears, the sound of the rain won’t end.

I knew that.

Neither the bikini, the emerald sea, nor the happily smiling graphic on the cover...

...I didn’t think I was particularly envious.

With the world of my closed eyes, even without a map or car, I could go anywhere.

Even if the large scar on my chest didn’t admonish me.

Even if this reality wasn’t Narcissus, while I was Echo...

“...I will never yearn.... Never curse...”

Even though that was supposed to have been decided...

My heart now, was yearning.

The time that was supposed to have stopped, was moving.

Even though, if they did that by now, before long, it would end...

...Wounds...

“The deeper they are, it seems they require a proportional amount of time to heal...”

“If so, then if one had taken a long time, slowly letting go, is it too late for them to recover?”

“Then...”

“... What would become of me, someone who had lived 22 years?”

Cough Cough

“Hey, you alright?”

Before dawn. The man stretched his hand towards the passenger seat, stroking the girl’s back. Since then, another two days had passed. The medicine whose effect had been weakening, even that had run out... but the man thought it was better than nothing. In the end, he reached out to the car keys, planning on heading for a pharmacy. And, when he was about to start the engine...

“...It’s okay...” the girl’s weak voice stopped him.

“But, at this rate, you’ll...”

“...At any rate, it doesn’t work anymore...”

“T-that might be true, but...” he thought the girl was right, most likely, the same medicine would most likely not have any effect. But, even so, it was hard for him to sit there and do nothing.

“Then, then, let’s go to another place.”

“...another place?”

“Yeah, someplace that’s not as lonely as this,” he said, “ what do you say? Let’s decide on our next destination.”

Silence.

“Come now, anyplace would do, be navigator again,” he spoke in a voice that sounded even to him so bright as to be strange. Facing that profile that was looking far way, happily talking alone, happily continuing to speak... He knew that doing this was useless. He knew it just as well as he knew that the 2 days since the medicine had run out was becoming 3.

“Say, say something, there’s someplace isn’t there?”

“...Not really...”

“I-I know, you love cars don’t you? Don’t you want to go on the expressway again?”

“...Not really...”

“... Then, then, let’s go buy some new clothes, you want some too don’t you?”

“..... Not really...”

“‘Not really’ ... You...”

With those last words, the girl returned to looking out the window, not at the narcissuses spread out before her eyes, but like before, at someplace far away. That partly pouting, partly embarrassed, face that she sometimes showed him. She didn’t direct that face towards him any more.

“...W-why is it like that?” he said, “again and again, always just ‘not really’...”

“I-Isn’t it okay to be just a bit positive?”

Without thinking, the man’s voice rose. For some reason, he was sad. Even though he was supposed to have no true feelings for the real, his heart ached.

The interior of the car returned to silence. The flowers of January outside the window, the suisen, the narcissuses...In the middle of the darkness before dawn, they flickered a faint white. That girl who stayed looking at something much, much farther away than those flowers. Only the faint sound of waves ruled this place...

“...There’s no way... that I can be positive... is there?” that girl opened her mouth suddenly in the dark car.

“Eh?”

“To yearn, to be eager, to work hard, if it would be rewarded someday then that would be fine...”

“...but, what do you do when it doesn’t come true?”

“At that time, to say “it wasn’t possible” with a smile, I’m not that strong...” that girl who was always looking far away, was now looking at him directly from the passenger seat.

“W-what I can only do is, to give up from the start, to stay, wishing for nothing...”

“T-to say “of course it was impossible”, to look at myself with nothing but cold eyes, there was nothing else I could do...”

“...You...”

For the first time, the girl cried. Even though she was the one who almost never showed any facial expression, her small shoulders shook, and her tears flowed.

“To say, “T-that time... If I had tried hard...If only I...”... I could do nothing but take away what was to me, my last excuses...”

“B-because, I knew from the start it was impossible.”

“I-isn’t that much, fine?”

The night sky beyond the windshield, the sky before the dawn showed even the face of the moon. Only the sounds of the occasional waves and the girl’s weeping voice could be heard... For that girl, she might see herself the same as Echo. Able to only return the same words. Saying nothing from herself, wishing for nothing, seeing nothing... to be able to do nothing but give up. To that girl, to deny the both the 7th floor and home... it might just be her first, and her last, act of rebellion.

Chapter 8: Shiraishi Engineering Shop

The clear sea of January. The cold wind that pierced the skin. Once in awhile, the strong wind would shake a pine grove and the roar of the sea would quietly reverberate.

“Say, we haven’t anything except this you know,” the man said, handing over the towel that had “Shiraishi Engineering Shop” printed on it. It was the one they had used to wipe their bodies before.

“.....”

“Come now, don’t make such a strange face.”

“... Okay...” the girl replied, taking the towel with an unsatisfied expression.

When she suddenly said she wanted a swimsuit, he was troubled. At such a time, such a place, and on top of that, she said she wanted a bikini. Not knowing what to do, he went to the car hoping to find something there, and in the pile of that laundry, was that white towel.

After a bit of waiting, the girl appeared before him, wearing that skirt that she liked so much and the towel from before wrapped around her chest.

“...How is it?”

“Well, even if you ask me that...”

“It’s not... strange?”

“...Well... Probably...”

“.....”

“Ah, It’s perfectly alright, it’s absolutely not strange at all.”

“Un... Okay,” she said, and she started slowly walking toward the edge of the waves.

The gathering and retreating waves. The long hair that was swayed by the cold sea breeze. And from the sky, as if preparing for one final attack, snow fell intermittently. And in the middle of all that, the girl who was holding the shoes she had taken off in both hands was... happily, almost skipping in her bare feet, defiantly walking along the beach.

“Say...” she asked, “do I seem like it?”

“Hrmm... so-so, maybe?”

In the cold of deep winter, their breath was steaming white. And the man took out the camera that was in the car... that cheap one-use camera that only had 1 more shot in it.

“Well, I’ll take pictures for you.”

“Eh?”

“Because... it’d definitely seem more like it,” he told her, setting up the camera where she could see.

She didn’t say anything.

“Come now, don’t hold back. Okay?”

“...Un...”

The beach.

The girl seen through the viewfinder.

Whether it was from nervousness, or from embarrassment, she was making a face more complicated than usual.

“In that case... will you strike more of a pose for me?”

“...But...”

“No buts. Look, there isn’t a graphic idol in the world that stands stock still like that!”

“... Okay...”

She was a bit awkward... even then, she did it with all her might... Looking embarrassed, she placed her hand on her hip while her other hand was thrown out wide.

...The hand that was stretched towards the clear winter sky...

...It was as if it were to seize something...as if it would seize something...

...It was stretched straight towards the sky.

With the emerald green sea to her back...

“Then, one last thing...”

“... Un?”

“...Smile...”

“Eh?”

“...Smile for me, Setsumi...”

“...What is that...you’re the younger one....”

Click

...Saying that... for the first time, she smiled for him.

A girl wearing a skirt she liked, dressed in a bikini, smiled for the last shot of the one-use camera. Smiled with the emerald green sea to her back.... She directed a smiling face, like that of a graphic idol, to him.

“Alright, next, will you give me a pose with more movement?”

“Un.”

The girl pranced along the beach, looking so happy, so enjoyably. Even though the camera had already run out of film, he continued to take shots at her figure.

“Say, you’re getting caught up in this aren’t you?”

“I-it’s not that at all...”

While they spoke brightly, the snow that seemed to have been gathering for a final assault was falling with increasing strength. And in the middle of all that, the girl was

directing her happy face towards the viewfinder of a camera that ran out of film. Even while her small body was blown by the wind, she directed a smile he would remember towards him...

The crashing of waves.

"...Well, then..."

"Mm... Ah, it's already that time..."

"...Un..." the girl replied, at the same time starting to walk towards the sea like she had done before.

"Ah, speaking of which, the license..."

"That's alright. Take it as a commemoration."

"Un, okay..." she nodded while placing it in her pocket. It was the license that he had once handed over to her, the one that originally was supposed to have lost its debut, had they not come.

And then, the girl also took that white vinyl wristband off of her wrist... and offered it to him.

"You're... giving it to me?"

"Un. I'm giving it to you."

"I see... well then, I'll take it in commemoration then," he accepted the wristband in the same way, placing it in his own pocket.

And then, once again the girl started to walk towards the sea. And to that retreating figure, he spoke one last time.

"Say... Can I ask you just one more thing?"

"Un."

"Right now, do you...want me to pull you back?"

"....."

"Or, do you want me to give your back a push?"

While the gathering waves struck her legs, the girl stopped in place, but stayed with her back facing he who asked threw out the question. The strong wind turned the crest of the waves into spray and coldly struck at the girl. Before long, she turned around to face him...

"...Which is it, I wonder..." she said to him, laughing lightly and smiling at him just for one last time, "I don't really know..."

While being struck by the cold sea spray. Even while tears were welling up, she directed a smiling face towards him.

Those feet had before stopped upon the beach... but now, they didn't stop... that's why, the man thought that that was the answer.

"... Well, then..."

"... Goodbye..."

[Narucissu]

... And that ends our journey of 960km... To me, it was 15 days of time. To her, it was the end of a journey of 22 years. The girl that had, by her own will, avoided both the 7th floor and home. One of an estimated 35,000 suicide victims of 2005.

Blood type: O. Name: Setsumi. Age: 22. Female... The vinyl identification bracelet was white. That was the all of this girl... but I knew.

In reality, she liked bikinis, was more knowledgeable about the roads than a navigator, loved cars, she even had a license. She always wore no facial expression, and she rarely turned to face people, but once in awhile, she'd make this partly embarrassed, partly pouting face for me.

The emerald sea to her back...as if prancing, looking so happy, she smiled for me like some graphic idol. And yet, in this cheap one-use camera, there remained only one shot of that girl's smile.

...But then... even if it was just that one picture...

...It is the proof of us that we could leave behind...

2005-1, With Setsumi, "Those shining days... Those winter days..."