

Second bone: Juliet's Confession

Part 1

For breakfast at my grandpa's house, we have pancakes with clotted cream and milk jam made by a cafe that's run by ranch owners. Sakurako-san is in a good mood because of it. I feel energized afterwards. I must have been an ant in a past life.

My brother and I got into a bit of an argument last night. He hasn't blatantly ignored or insulted me this morning, but he's clearly in a bad mood. Thanks to him, I'm not feeling so good today.

We decide to go back to Ashoro city, then head to Abashiri through Akan. It's a coastal town, famous for having Abashiri prison there. Even when I go fishing, I usually only go to the ocean on the left side of Hokkaido.

"This is actually my first time visiting Abashiri."

"I came here a few times when I was little," Sakurako-san says.

I'm excited to visit a place I've never been to before, even if it's just to see some bones.

"I'd like to try digging for clams in lake Notoroko."

There aren't many places in Hokkaido where you can dig for clams. When I was little, I used to visit my mom's relatives in Esashi, and I'd dig up basket clams for miso soup with them. It was fun and delicious, so I'd like to try it again. Unfortunately, we'd have to take the tide into account, and they probably wouldn't be good anymore by the time we got back to Asahikawa. Fishing season ends next week, too, so there probably wouldn't be many clams left.

On the way, we stop at the Aioi roadside station, and check out the bear themed taiyaki place. My brother gets a "brown bear" with anko, I get a "polar bear" with tapioca flour on the outside, and Sakurako-san gets a "cream bear" with cream inside. After just over two hours of traveling, we arrive in Abashiri. Along the way, I thought I saw a black kite flying overhead, but it turned out to be a white-tailed eagle. I'm surprised at how big eastern Hokkaido is. I can't believe there's such big birds of prey just flying around here.

Abashiri is a bigger town than I expected. The town is long and narrow, since it was built along the coast. It reminds me of Wakkanai, but maybe a bit more lively. The blue sky against the sea is beautiful. I'm glad the weather is nice. I love port cities. Towns by the sea like Hakodate, Otaru, and Mashike have a unique feel to them. The town I grew up in wasn't by the sea, so maybe I put too much stock in it.

At my brother's request we had seafood for lunch before heading to the trip's main event: the Abashiri Folk Museum. The road to the museum is really twisty as it heads toward the mountains. The facility is smaller than I expected. The building has a unique, retro atmosphere, though. I'm pretty excited. There's a large semicircle above the front entrance, and I can see a red dome roof behind it. It's a lovely building. As I'm taking some pictures with my phone, Sakurako-san gets impatient and yells at me to hurry up. As soon as I step inside, I'm thrilled with the sound the floor makes, and the peculiar, old scent of the building.

Light pours in through the stained glass at the top of the stairs. Unfortunately, the spiral staircase that leads to the dome is blocked off. The permanent exhibits include taxidermy of animals that live in Abashiri, the history of the area's development, and pottery, among others.

It's quite compact inside, so it gives off the impression that everything is tightly packed inside. I find it exciting and fun. It's like a toy box for adults.

"The taxidermy is so cool," my brother mumbles.

The white tailed eagle I saw earlier is as big as a dinosaur now that I'm seeing it up close. I'm astonished by the gigantic turtle that's covering an entire wall. The cute marine mammals really feel like wild "beasts" from up close. I get to touch the sea otter's splendid coat.

"Giovanni's father risked everything when he left to go fishing," my brother murmurs.

"Giovanni?"

"From Kenji Miyazawa's *Night on the Galactic Railroad*. Giovanni's father was caught poaching and couldn't come home, so Giovanni desperately took work at the print shop to support his mother. Didn't you read it as a kid?"

"Well... It was sad so I didn't like it."

A child without a father was too heavy of a subject for me when I was young.

"..."

My brother smacks me on the back of the head, then goes toward the inner room that Sakurako-san disappeared into. Apparently that's where the bone exhibit is.

"Wow..."

Just like the other rooms, the exhibition room is packed to the brim with skeletal specimens. Birds, beasts, marine animals, and bugs. There's a superb pair of male and female deer skulls, along with the skull of a fawn. There's even an entire brown bear skeleton! I'm surprised at how large and complete the bone exhibit feels, even though it's on such a small scale. Or rather, it's really fun. Of course Sakurako-san is, but even I'm super pumped up about it.

"An owl! Its bones are so long and thin."

There's an Ural owl skeleton suspended from the ceiling, posed to look as if it's about to catch a prey item. Sakurako-san is absolutely lovestruck by the ezo flying squirrel and Asian particoloured bat specimens. She seems like she'd be more into large creatures, but she actually really likes making specimens of small animals like those. The squirrels all look the same, except the slightly-less-cute Hokkaido red squirrel, which has bigger bones. The tiny squirrels with delicate bones are a lot cuter. They have cute hands, though. The coolest ones are the bird skeletons. I find their skulls really fascinating. I've seen plenty of skeletons at Sakurako-san's house, but I don't normally take the time to inspect each one like this.

For about an hour, the two of us thoroughly examine and admire all the bones. As soon as I notice my brother is missing, I hurriedly search for him, only to find him happily chatting with the receptionist.

"Sorry..."

I drag Sakurako-san back to my brother while she grumbles that she wasn't done looking.

"It's fine if you want to keep looking, but..." My brother sounds like he's given up, and is shrouded in a dissatisfied aura.

"Do you not like skeletons?"

"I'm amazed at the size of the big ones, but the small ones are just... there."

"Really? I think it's neat to see all the tiny details in the small skeletons, and think about how they work. Like a machine or something."

The big skeletons are awesome, but the small ones are cool, too.

“Look how long this owl’s legs are. You can’t tell normally because they’re so fluffy.”

“I guess so...”

He’s always loved building plastic models, so why doesn’t he have any interest in bones? Is it because he didn’t assemble them himself? When I actually tried putting a skeleton together for the first time, I thought it was amazing, and I learned a lot. I realized partway through that I’m no different from Sakurako-san and Sawa-san.

“I thought you’d like this place, since you like machines and all...”

“I like machines better. I can never tell how close I should get with living things.”

“Really? But it seems like living things tend to like you.”

Even dogs seem to get attached to him in no time.

“Machines will always love you, as long as you take care of them.”

“Heh.” Sakurako-san laughs a bit after listening to our conversation.

“...What’s so funny?”

My brother glares at Sakurako-san, since he feels like he’s being made fun of.

“It’s nothing. I just think the two of you are similar in how you view ‘love.’”

“You love bones, don’t you?” My brother asks angrily.

“Yes, I do, but I don’t seek love from the subjects of my research.”

I can see my brother’s stress level rising before my eyes.

We stop in at the Hokkaido Museum of the Northern Peoples to learn about the lives and history of the people of Hokkaido and Siberia before meeting up with Shouko-san at the hotel. We all hardly speak to each other the whole time. The hotel is built on the shore of Lake Abashiri. It’s decorated with beautiful embroidery. I can tell from the way my brother is looking at me that he’s thinking “won’t this be expensive?” Shouko-san says she can cover the cost as payment for “babysitting Saa-chan,” but my brother refuses. I think the cost is higher than what he’s expecting, though. Shouko-san had already checked in, so I introduce my brother to her while she’s drinking matcha tea in the hotel lounge. She sounds delighted.

“You’re pretty easy on the eyes!” Shouko-san pats his upper arm. He looks at me for help.

“You’re good as you are, but I feel like I could polish you up even better. Itsuki-kun is handsome, too, but it’s annoying that he’s aware of it, so he’s hard to hang out with.”

“Shouko-san...”

In the middle of the confusion, he wraps her arms around my brother and I and leads us to our room. Isozaki-sensei does look pretty cool, though. But, well, it can’t be helped. She’s our benefactor for tonight. Besides, she came all this way for Sakurako-san. The least I can do is let her relax.

“You’re very kind. I’m a bit jealous of your little brother. I don’t have any siblings and my husband didn’t get along with his brother, so I hardly even know my brother in law.”

“If you go back to your parents’ house, I’m sure you’ll find lots of people close enough to be considered your siblings,” Sakurako-san says, referring to the Toudou family.

Shouko-san has a displeased expression.

“Oh, but you wouldn’t be able to go on this nice trip if it weren’t for them. Maybe say thank you instead, next time.”

They've known each other for a long time. Sakurako-san is Ariwara-san's fiancée, as well as the grandchild of Shouko-san's grandfather's close friend. I think the reason Sakurako-san cherishes Shouko-san so much isn't only due to Shouko-san's kindness, but also because of loneliness. She loved her younger brother so much, so maybe she eventually decided to treat Shouko-san as a sister. Perhaps it's precisely because they're not blood related that Shouko-san loves Sakurako-san so much. Blood is thicker than water. For Shouko-san, that thickness is a chain that binds her. Sakurako-san, who believes that water is thicker than blood, is a blade she can use to sever those chains.

"What's wrong?"

I didn't realize I was staring at her. Shouko-san smiles.

"Nothing..."

Which am I? Water or blood? I look back and forth between my brother, who's not even trying to hide his sullenness, and Sakurako-san, who does everything at her own pace. I'm happy that Sakurako-san came on this trip. Traveling with my brother is a new experience, and I'm grateful he took me all the way here - but he's so irritated and seems unwell. Maybe I'm the reason, and maybe I'm mad at the wrong person, but being with someone so angry is really bringing me down. However, I'm sure his melancholy will be blown away the instant he sees the room Kouji-san prepared for us.

"We're in the room next door. Take a breather first. You must be tired from driving, right, Atsushi-kun?"

With that said, Shouko-san and Sakurako-san disappear into their room. It's just my brother and I now. The room is so big that it feels wasted on just two people. There's a large TV with a sofa set, a small bar counter with a built-in bench, and a window with a panoramic view of Lake Abashiri. The bedroom is separate from the main room. The bath is made of Cyprus, and uses water from a hot spring.

"..."

"It's a beautiful room. You can see all of Lake Abashiri."

While my brother silently looks around the room, I unpack our luggage and grab the coffee grinder. At Kouji-san's hotels, they always let you grind your own coffee beans.

"Is something wrong? Why don't you sit down?"

I make some coffee for my brother to thank him for driving me, but he doesn't seem like he wants to sit on the couch.

"No..."

This is a really nice room. There's no way either of us could normally stay in a room that costs tens of thousands of yen per night. It's clear that he isn't comfortable and doesn't like the room.

"...Okay, what the hell is your problem? You've been acting gloomy this whole trip. If something's bothering you, speak up!"

"I just-"

As soon as he opens his mouth, the intercom rings, causing us to both jump in surprise. Before we even have a chance to answer, they start ringing repeatedly. Ah, it must be Sakurako-san. I open the door, though I'm not sure if I should wait for my brother to finish speaking first.

"There's somewhere I want to go," Sakurako-san says with a wide smile.

“And where’s that?”

“It’s a museum, it isn’t far from here. It’s small, but I went there before when I was little. The director is my uncle’s mentor.”

She can only smile like that because she has no idea what’s going on between my brother and I. Actually, she has probably noticed but just doesn’t care. Anyway, I’m interested in checking out this museum owned by Shitara-sensei’s mentor.

“Umm...” I turn back to look at my brother.

“...I don’t mind. I don’t feel comfortable in this room, anyway.”

He picks up his jacket with a big sigh. I feel guilty that we’re just doing what Sakurako-san wants, even though this was supposed to be a trip with my brother...

Part 2

The “Abashiri human history museum” is a tiny museum located near Lake Abashiri. It seems to be an old building that was dismantled and rebuilt in another spot. It reminds me of the museum in Higashikawa. I’m pretty sure the building next to it is an old town hall that’s been repurposed. This building has western style architecture, so it looks more like the Kujou house than the other museums we visited. It even smells the same on the inside. It smells time-worn. Unlike the Kujou house, this place is quite lively.

They seem to be holding an event for the consecutive holidays. Today’s events are “lighting fire the old fashioned way” and “making jomon pottery.” They’re hands-on events to get kids interested. Apparently this facility is trying to get more kids interested in academic subjects. There’s a bulletin board in the middle of the foyer covered in origami and fall themed decorations. There’s an event schedule for this month and next month, and a poster for a lecture aimed at kids called “let’s listen to Dr. XX!”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but it feels like there’s a lot of museums in this part of the country, despite how small the towns are. Like... It’s really museum dense.”

“Yes, there are. Humans are always driven by the desire to ‘learn.’ If the objects of interest are different, people will naturally want to learn more.”

“I definitely want to try making jomon pottery,” my brother says when he sees the kids playing with clay. He’s following along behind us, looking bored.

“It’s a shame that it’s only for elementary school kids.”

I wanted to try it, too, but the poster was clear that only elementary school aged kids can participate.

“...Go insist that you’re in grade 6. I’ll just tell them I’m your guardian,” my brother says, lightly patting me on the head.

“Then you’ll be my dad and Sakurako-san will be my mom? No way, that’ll never work. There’s way too many issues.”

I’d understand if he said I should pretend to be a middle schooler, but an elementary school kid... Sakurako-san crosses her arms and looks me up and down.

“I think if you tell them confidently, they’ll believe you.”

“I don’t want them to believe me!”

That's just mean! I'd normally be offended, but it's so rare to see my brother and Sakurako-san laughing together that my dissatisfaction fades away. Joking around earlier and the sound of children playing lightens the mood considerably. We may not be talking to each other, but I feel better about going on this trip now. I want both of them to be smiling. Sakurako-san, as well as my brother.

With a pamphlet from the reception desk in hand, the three of us head to the permanent exhibit. I don't mean to be rude, but the contents of the exhibits aren't very different from the other museums we went to. Everyday tools, such as fish hooks, carved out of animal bones, items excavated from kitchen middens... Still, I can feel how much effort they put into displaying everything as clearly as possible. Of course, there's a large amount of bones here. I have a hunch I know why Sakurako-san wanted to come here. My brother seems sick of it, though.

"Romeo and Juliet from 300 years ago, huh..."

Along with the flavor text "Two people torn apart", there's a space the size of two tatami mats with a pair of skeletons holding each other. They're sets of skeletons that were excavated about 100 years ago near Lake Notoro. The corpses are thought to be around 300 years old. The display recreates the position they were in when they were found. The bones themselves are replicas, but all the ornaments are actual excavated items.

"Beaches with lots of coral mixed into the sand will have a large amount of calcium, causing bones to deteriorate slower."

It reminds me of the skull we found in Mashike before. It was when I first met Yamaji-san. The explanation says that they were found in remarkably good condition. Since the two bodies were found wearing clothes from different villages, it's suspected that they committed suicide because their love was forbidden.

"They wanted to be together, even in death..." My brother mumbles.

"When you die, it's all over."

"Yeah... But we can't know that for sure."

I don't know anything about the thoughts or lives of these two people, but couldn't they have just run away together? My brother seems to be thinking the same thing. If I were in a situation where I loved someone so much that it was a matter of life or death, what would I choose to do? I'd want my loved ones to keep living, even if I died. I'd want her to have a happy future, even if I'm not part of it. I'd want my death to serve as nourishment for a cherry blossom tree to grow even more beautiful flowers. I look at Sakurako-san. I'm sure if I tried to explain that to her, she'd just tell me it's "nonsense."

"...What's the matter?"

Sakurako-san is staring at the exhibit with an unusual intensity. Maybe the story of a tragic lover's suicide touched her a bit. I thought she'd be heading off to the next exhibit already, but she looks truly captivated by the sorrowful display. Is it really *that* interesting?

"Well... It's a pretty generic story. It's cool that it's 300 years old, but..." I start to say.

"Boy!"

Sakurako-san violently wraps herself around my arm.

"W-what's wrong? You're hurting me."

"Lend me your shoulder."

“Huh?”

“Your shoulder. Actually, give me a shoulder ride.”

“What?”

“I need to see this exhibit from above.”

“Come on,” Sakurako-san says, holding her arms out wide.

“Huh? Uh... But, like, here...?”

Rather than “here?” it’s more like “in front of my brother?” My ears instantly feel hot from embarrassment. Well, I’ve given her a shoulder ride a few times before, and I feel bad about declining since it’s so rare for her to want to be close or touch another person, but—

“Sitting on your shoulders somewhere else wouldn’t be much help, would it? Wait, actually, Atsushi, you’d be better.”

“Huh?”

Just as I’m about to be burdened with the role of shoulder ride duty, Sakurako-san turns to my brother.

“Why me?”

“You’re taller. I need to see the exhibit from above. Lend me your shoulders.”

“For real...?” My brother and I shout at the same time. Our complaints are the same, but their meanings are a bit different.

Sakurako-san is so eager, though. My brother glances at me for realizing he can’t get out of this... and accepts her demand. It would have been better if he’d refused. He crouches on the floor, then lifts Sakurako-san high into the air. I’m suddenly flooded with memories of watching fireworks by Ishikari river from my brother’s shoulders when I was in kindergarten.

“Don’t move, stay there.”

“You’re kind of... no, you’re really weird, you know!”

However this time, the rider isn’t a child, but a full grown woman. She hasn’t been eating properly lately, likely because of gran’s situation. Her bones are showing through her skin, so naturally, she isn’t too heavy.

“Hm, a lover’s suicide, huh...”

My brother doesn’t care about what she’s looking at one bit. He has a pained expression as Sakurako-san relentlessly gives orders like “stop trembling” and “take one step to the left.”

“Boy, give me your phone,” she soon asks, reaching her hand down to me.

“My phone?”

As soon as I hand it over, she starts taking pictures. Photography is allowed here, but... Despite my unease, Sakurako-san continues capturing the two corpses from all angles.

“The bones are replicas, though...” I think to myself as I also examine the display.

They’re buried in some kind of white, gypsum-like material to simulate the soil where they were found. They’re discoloured and dirty in some places, but there’s no way real bones this old would be so beautiful. Bones are only white when they’re degreased and bleached. If that were performed on old bones, they’d break down in no time. That’s why there’s no doubt that these are replicas.

I look at the waist of the skeleton in front of me. The corpse’s pelvis is poking through the worn out fabric. It’s dull and faded now, but I can tell from the careful embroidery that it used to be vibrant. The pelvis has a gentle slope to it, but it’s quite wide, so... This must have been a

woman. I can't see the other person's pelvis, but the whole skeleton looks more angular and stronger than the woman's. He must have been rather muscular while he was alive.

"A lover's suicide..." Sakurako-san mutters to herself. "No, these two... Even if they died together, they should have suspected the alternative..."

"Hm?"

"I can see a fracture on the man's thyroid cartilage. It's from compression... He was strangled."

"What...?"

"And look here, at the base of the woman's teeth. There's some faint discolouration from deterioration. It could be a sign of long-term violent abuse. When a strong force hits the teeth, the tooth's nerves die and cause inflammation in the surrounding bone. If it isn't treated properly, it leaves marks like this."

"Then you're saying... One of them was strangled, and the other was being abused?"

"That's right. I can't tell if the abuse was the cause of death, but it could have something to do with it."

"..."

What a horrible story. I cover my mouth with my hand.

"Wait, this is a replica, isn't it? Couldn't it just be a mistake when they recreated it...?"

Sakurako-san laughs at my brother's question.

"This isn't a replica," she declares.

"Huh? But..."

No, that can't be. These bones are...

"Oh, you're right about the rest of it being a replica, but the skull is different. It's from a real human skeleton."

"No way..."

A chill runs up my spine. I'm not afraid of bones or anything, but it's creepy knowing that only the skull is real.

"But can old bones really be such a nice colour like these ones?"

"You're right. The bones wouldn't be in such good condition. At the very least, the shape of the lower jaw bones doesn't indicate them being 300 years old. I'd have to look up the exact figures, but just from eyeballing it, these bones are at most... Around ten to twenty years old."

"Wait, you're... joking, right?"

I can see the colour draining from my brother's face. Unfortunately, Sakurako-san isn't the kind of person who would joke about this, and she doesn't misread bones.

"This is quite an innovative exhibition," Sakurako-san says, looking up at the two skulls.

I don't think they were going for "innovative". I sigh as Sakurako-san hands me my phone back. I don't want to have to report this.

"F-first we should talk to the museum curator. Yeah, let's start there!"

Now that he mentions it, I guess there's no need for me to call the police. Sakurako-san doesn't look like she wants to let anyone know.

"As long as no one notices, it's not a problem."

"It's a huge problem!"

I try to stop Sakurako-san from grumbling about how "It'll just be a pain to deal with!" and "if we leave it alone we can enjoy it at our leisure next time!" while my brother hurries off to fetch

the curator. Geez, this always happens. Even with my brother, and at a museum in a distant city, corpses are always found where Sakurako-san and I go.

Part 3

My brother drags Andou-san, the curator, over and frantically tries to explain that “these are real bones!” She appears friendly and smiling at first, but I can tell when she glances between my brother and I that she’s scoffing at us. I think she must be around 50 years old? It’s hard to tell through her heavy makeup, but she’s pretty.

“There’s no way these can be real human bones, ufufu,” she says, carefully looking over the Romeo and Juliet exhibit.

I can tell she’s thinking “you’re already an adult and you can’t tell the difference between a replica and the real thing?”

“It’s just an extremely accurate replica. The former curator was an expert in bones, after all.”

“Even if that were the case, it doesn’t change the fact that these skeletons definitely aren’t from 300 year old remains.”

The curator clearly thinks we’re off our rockers.

“Of course they look new, the replicas aren’t that old. The real bones don’t look this nice.”

“That’s why I said it was weird. Why are only the skulls real, especially when they’re from recent remains?”

“Like I said, they’re not real...”

Sakurako-san calmly repeats her explanation, while Andou-san gets angrier by the second. She was treating us like idiots before, but eventually the smile disappears from her face.

“No way... It couldn’t be...”

“If you still don’t get it, call over someone who does! This is going nowhere.”

Andou-san leaves to bring over another curator, clearly displeased. Two male curators rush over to us. They must have just finished the jomon pottery event, since they’re holding dirty aprons. Sakurako-san has no choice but to explain her findings for the third time today. Fortunately, these two seem to know more about bones than Andou-san. They bring over the step ladder and carefully examine the skull.

“Uh oh...” Hata-san, a young curator in his mid 20s, says.

“What do you mean ‘uh oh’...?”

“I can’t believe it... I see this thing every day.”

Shouji-san, a curator around my mom’s age, almost falls off the step ladder in surprise.

“This exhibit is only around 15 years old. The year before last was the museum’s 15th anniversary, so I’m sure of it. This exhibit only needs basic cleaning and maintenance... I never thought someone could possibly replace the skulls...”

Shouji-san rubs his chin, apparently forgetting that his hands are muddy.

“Yeah... It was most likely replaced when the exhibit was being installed.”

“Then... Does that mean the former curator is the culprit? Did he murder someone? No way! This is scary!”

“You’re jumping to conclusions. Honestly, you used to be able to buy real human remains online from overseas. These are certainly relatively recent bones, but we can’t conclude that they’re of illegal origin yet.”

Andou-san’s having a slightly exaggerated reaction, causing her whole body to tremble.

“Even if they’re genuine bones, we don’t know if it was an accident or a crime. Sure, the former curator was a bit odd, but...”

Hata-san sighs.

“Well... Either way, we can’t contact the former curator. Geez, this has turned into a pain.”

Andou-san heaves a big sigh.

“You can’t contact him? Why? Did Nishio-sensei die?” Sakurako-san seems surprised, and presses Andou-san for an answer.

“Oh, did you know him? Well, he hasn’t passed away yet, but it’s only a matter of time. He has advanced dementia. He’s living in a care facility near Sapporo.”

“I see... It’s true, he’s quite old...”

She doesn’t speak very respectfully about the person who used to be her boss. I sort of understand, though. If Sakurako-san calls him “Nishio-sensei,” he was probably pretty weird.

“I helped a bit with putting this together... Back then, at least, I’m quite sure the bones were replicas.”

“Isn’t Shouji-san the real culprit?”

Shouji-san gives Hata-san a slight nudge for that comment.

“In that case, isn’t Yoshimine-san the most suspicious? She helped with making the exhibit from start to finish... Oh!” Andou-san starts to say something, but cuts herself off and nods at her own statement. “Either way, we can’t ask her, either. She’s dead.”

“Since when?” Sakurako-san asks. Andou-san sighs again.

“Who knows? It was quite a while ago... I just happened to hear about her death, anyway.”

“You seem very uninterested considering she was your coworker.”

“I am uninterested... She and I had nothing to do with each other. We weren’t close at all,” Andou-san says, shrugging. Shouji-san smiles wryly.

“She was an office worker who did odd jobs... We really didn’t talk much. Just the bare minimum amount of conversation to do our work. The only person she was close to was the former curator. Apparently she was interested in bones, too.”

“Oh, but I think she quit a year or two after this place was remodeled. The new office lady said it caused her a lot of trouble, since she just suddenly stopped showing up,” Hata-san continues the story from where Shouji-san leaves off. Andou-san is glaring at us the whole time.

“This is none of their business, there’s no reason to tell them any of this!” Andou-san is clearly annoyed by us. What happened to the friendly woman from earlier?

I suspect it’s because we noticed the problem with the exhibit, but she didn’t. From the curators’ perspective, this is a huge problem that has suddenly been forced on them. Andou-san leaves to help another guest. Shouji-san and Hata-san put a cloth over the exhibit and put up a sign saying it’s undergoing repairs.

“Then... Should we leave?” I say. It’s not like there’s anything else we can do. Sakurako-san turns and glares at me.

“What? But we don’t know anything about these bones yet!”

“So? That’s the museum’s problem, not ours. We don’t have the right to poke our noses into it.”

She reluctantly listens to me.

“Well, I don’t think it was the result of a crime, so... I’ll just check the remains quickly to see if they need to be reported to the authorities. The back room is actually a complete mess... We don’t know all of what’s back there. This will be a good opportunity to organize it,” Shouji-san says. He walks with us back to the entrance.

It’s definitely hard to tell whether this incident is criminal in nature, given the location.

“That sounds tough. I’d love to see the collection, though,” I say to Shouji-san before leaving.

It’s an honest wish. I remember helping sort the science prep room when I found Natsuko-san’s remains. Organizing was kind of fun, and I learned a lot.

“It’s been a long time coming, but we’re finally almost ready to open a special exhibit. Come see it once it’s open.” Shouji-san forces a smile. “Well, I don’t know what’s going to happen after all of this... So please keep this a secret.”

Shouji-san explains how it would impact the investigation if word about this got out before the police knew. I think he’s mostly worried about the museum’s reputation. Word spreads quickly on social media.

I look over at the children playing in the playground in front of the museum, blissfully unaware of what’s inside. Who could hide human remains in a place where children will see? I wonder if my brother feels the same way.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone,” I say to Shouji-san with a slight bow.

The only one displeased is Sakurako-san.

“Umm...”

“I’ll only keep quiet if you tell me where Yoshimine lived.”

Shouji-san looked troubled by Sakurako-san’s request. Her proposition blindsided him.

“We won’t cause them any trouble. I won’t bother you anymore. In exchange, I want to know just a little bit more about that woman. You could say it’s my hobby.”

“...”

“Whether this case is criminal in nature or not, don’t you think it’s strange to switch the display? If it was the work of Nishio-sensei, it’s even stranger, isn’t it?”

Shouji-san silently stares at Sakurako-san for a while. The only thing I hear is the sound of a brown eared bulbul calling in the distance, and the rustling trees.

“I’m... Sure it was just a prank. There were a few incidents before he retired...”

“A few incidents?”

“Yes, he basically took over the museum.”

Shouji-san eventually decides to speak up. He takes a deep breath. Nishio-sensei was an expert on bones, and used to be a professor at Sapporo university. This museum was originally started to display his personal collection.

“Back then, running this place was just the former director’s hobby. It wasn’t a place where children enjoyed visiting like it is now. There were hardly any guests at all.”

The former director thought that there was no point in having a museum with no visitors, even if it had historical value, so he made his nephew the new director. The nephew became a licensed curator, as his uncle suggested. Once his uncle was hospitalized, he took over the museum in a coup d'état. He wanted to make the museum more lively. A year later, the original director beat his illness, but the changes had already been made. The bones and artifacts were neatly organized and spaced out so it wasn't so cramped, and the exhibits were redone. Shouji-san and Andou-san both worked hard to improve the museum's atmosphere, too. The new director believed that a place for learning should be open to everyone. He only closed the museum one day a week rather than two like before, and started hosting events for parents and children every week. Even with all the visitors from near and far, the one person who never approved of the museum was the former curator.

"He didn't like hearing noisy children... He was a lifelong bachelor and misanthrope... He was really an old fashioned person. In the end, he made that last exhibit, then entrusted the whole museum to the current director. It was right after the exhibit was finished."

Shouji-san smiles sadly as he looks at the children laughing, their voices even higher than the bulbul's. Unlike Andou-san, Shouji-san seems to have liked the hard-to-please Nishio-sensei.

"Yoshimine-san in particular always sided with the former curator. Just between you and me, things weren't very smooth between her and Andou-san. That's why Yoshimine-san quit just before the former curator resigned."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, she certainly didn't get along with the rest of us. Still, she was charming enough. Kind of mysterious... She didn't have any experience or qualifications, but she was smart... Anyway, she was intelligent and modest."

Shouji-san looks embarrassed as he praises the woman known as Yoshimine-san. I'm glad that at least he had positive feelings toward her.

"Anyway, she was a rather serious person. Andou-san hated her, and would often bully her. The former director knew about it, so he paid extra close attention to Yoshimine-san. That's why I said before that I didn't think she was the type to stop showing up out of the blue, but... Shouji-san's voice trails off.

"But what?"

"Nothing... There was just a rumour that she committed suicide after leaving the museum, that's why Andou-san was on edge. It was a pretty nasty rumour going around that Andou-san bullied the curator that worked here before Hata-kun until she was forced to quit," he says in a low voice, so the people around us don't overhear.

I can't help but believe him. I don't want to speak ill of someone I hardly know, but I don't like Andou-san very much.

"That's why I thought the former director might have done this as some type of revenge. He must be laughing at us, since it took almost 20 years for someone to notice..."

"Is there really no possibility that this was the work of someone who doesn't work there?"

"I can't say for sure, of course. There's lots of people working today since it's a public holiday, but there's normally only 2 or 3 staff members on any given day. Security is pretty lax, so there's a possibility of someone sneaking around."

Shouji-san shrugs his shoulders, saying that it's still pretty unlikely.

“If it was someone who worked here, they wouldn’t have to hide it in such a conspicuous spot. They could just put the bones in the storage room where nobody will find them.”

He forces a smile and explains that the storage room is a complete mess.

“Doesn’t that just make this whole situation weirder?”

“Oh! There’s also the possibility that it’s just a replica that’s so well made, even an expert can’t tell the difference. The former director made it, after all.”

Shouji-san says that he knows a lot about bones, but has never met someone who could make replicas as good as the former director.

“I guess so, but...” Sakurako-san groans. “It’s still strange. The exhibit isn’t even factually correct. Even if it isn’t a crime, I want to know who did this and why. First, I want to learn more about this Yoshimine woman,” Sakurako-san says seriously.

She’s more interested in this than usual. Maybe she wants to protect Nishio-sensei’s good name, or something. Of course, when the “bones don’t connect,” that means there’s a dislocation somewhere in the story and she just has to get involved. Shouji-san probably just thinks she cares about Nishio-sensei’s reputation, though.

“Well... Please just be careful not to cause trouble for the family,” he says with a big sigh while he takes out his phone.

“It’s an old address, so I don’t know if it’s still there.”

He emails the address to me. Sakurako-san is looking at him suspiciously.

“Why do you still have the address of a woman who has been dead for over 10 years?” Sakurako-san asks after I get my phone back from Shouji-san.

“Well... I don’t really know.”

He ‘doesn’t know’ why he kept the address of a woman who hasn’t worked here in 15 years? Was he planning to pass it down as a family heirloom or something? It’s definitely weird. He slides his phone back into the pocket over his heart, covering it with his palm. He lets out an embarrassed laugh.

“I know it’s silly, but I felt like if I deleted it... it would be like she never existed.”

My chest feels tight. The ring on his left hand, covering his heart, doesn’t shine anymore.

“I wonder if I’m just trying to preserve my memories of her, like a specimen from the museum or something... Hahaha, I’m just kidding. I just haven’t found the right time to delete it yet. There’s no special meaning to it.”

He laughs again and urges us to head back. I have no idea what his relationship to Yoshimine-san was, or how he felt about her, of course. But even if I never met Sakurako-san again, I’d never delete her contact information. I’d keep it for my whole life. To preserve my time with her in my heart.

Part 4

After we get in the car, Sakurako-san leans over from the back seat.

”S-Sakurako-san?”

Despite my surprise and my brother’s suspicious glances, Sakurako-san starts up the car navigation system.

“...What are you putting in?”

“The address.”

“You don’t have to bother if it’s for the hotel.”

“It’s not. It’s for Yoshimine’s house.”

“I knew it,” my brother mumbles while holding his head like he’s getting a migraine.

Apparently Yoshimine-san’s parents’ house is only 10 minutes from here.

“Let’s just go back to the hotel! I’ve been waiting to try out the open air bath attached to the room!”

“The bath isn’t going anywhere. We’re going.”

The bath might not go anywhere, but time is fleeting. I can’t put my thoughts into words. I feel bad for my brother, but I also want to know more about Yoshimine-san.

“Why are you going through the trouble?”

“Why... Don’t you think it’s strange? Human bones on display like that?”

“You don’t even know if they’re real. The curator said they could just be replicas!”

My brother strikes the steering wheel in a fit of anger. Sakurako-san smiles widely.

“First of all, those weren’t replicas. Second, no matter how sparse security is, it’s no small feat to replace an entire skull without being noticed. You’d have to climb over the barrier.”

In contrast to my brother getting emotional, Sakurako-san replies in an indifferent, matter-of-fact tone.

“So what are you going to do? If it’s a crime, it’s the police’s job. This has nothing to do with any of us!”

“I don’t know how far the police will be willing to pursue the case, or if they’ll even rule it as a crime. Above all, however, it’ll weigh on my mind. I don’t understand. Why go through the effort of displaying the bones? Whose bones are they, in the first place? I don’t feel right leaving things as they are. If it was a crime, I want to know why they took the risk of public notice.”

“Then think about it on your own.”

My brother snorts and cancels the car navigation. Sakurako-san wrinkles her brow deeply, then holds out her hand to my brother.

“The key.”

“What?”

“I’ll drive myself. I’ll drop you two off at the hotel, so lend me your car. Otherwise I’ll have to rent one,” she says.

“...We’re just visiting a bereaved family... That’s not so bad, right? She’s just going to talk to them for a bit, then leave. It’ll really only take 5 minutes.”

I know I can’t say anything to change her mind, so I helplessly try to help the two of them reach an understanding. The blame doesn’t fall entirely on Sakurako-san.

“I’m sorry, nii-san. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested.”

“...”

Ignoring my request, he puts his hands on the steering wheel and pulls out of the parking space.

“...Okay, fine! I get it! You seriously only get 5 minutes, though!” He finally says after letting out a big sigh. He abruptly stops the car.

He puts the address back into the navigation system from the recent search history.

“In 300 meters, turn right.”

I can’t help but smile when I hear the car navigation lady speak.

“Sakurako-san, you’re just going to listen when we get to Yoshimine-san’s house, okay?”

“Geez... We’re absolutely going back to the hotel in an hour!” My brother warns Sakurako-san. “That means you, too,” he says, lightly pushing my head to the side.

“I don’t mind if you two head back first.”

“It’s my mom’s car and only the family is insured to drive it! I can’t let you drive it!”

“Besides, I don’t know what you’d do if you were set loose,” my brother says as he continues driving where the navigator indicates. The roads weren’t very busy and we didn’t get lost, so we arrived after 10 minutes, just as the navigator said.

I could tell from the address that it was an apartment rather than a detached house, but it’s smaller and older than I expected. I think it’s a 2DK or something.

“So this is it, huh...”

We search for the room with the right number. It’s on the second floor. After finding it, naturally we discover that there’s a different family living there already. The nameplate has a different surname, and there’s a tricycle with a handle for an adult to push it along by the door. Sakurako-san and I look at each other.

“What should we do?”

“Let’s talk to the neighbours,” Sakurako-san says, as she walks briskly down the hall.

“Why didn’t you ask the people next door?”

She walked right to one of the rooms, and stopped in front of the corner room furthest back.

“This nameplate has been sun bleached.”

She’s right, the nameplate with “Sakuma” engraved on it is in a position where it’d get hit by the afternoon sun, and it looks worn by time.

“They’re not going to know anything, we should just stop here,” my brother warns from behind us.

Sakurako-san makes a slightly pouty face as she rings the intercom.

“Coming!” A friendly voice immediately calls out. The door opens.

A white haired, elderly woman who appears to be around 70 years old stares back at us. She’s holding a rubber stamp in her hand.

“Um...?”

She keeps a smile on her face as she tilts her head, wondering why we’re here.

“Sorry for coming so suddenly. We actually wanted to ask about Eimi Yoshimine, who used to live in this building.”

We really did show up too abruptly. However, rather than surprise, her eyes widen with delight.

“You... Know about Eimi-chan?”

“We weren’t acquainted, but we’re here on behalf of the former curator of the human history museum,” Sakurako-san lies as easily as she breathes.

My brother frowns, so I put my finger to my lips to tell him not to say anything.

“I see... Eimi-chan said that the director was grumpy, but she loved him... It’s been around 15 years since she died... No, it must have been before they built the campground....”

Sakuma-san is only wearing one sandal, so she leans out the door to welcome us in rather than stepping out. There's a shoebox with a colourful, but dusty, kusudama on top. My brother and I smile at each other, remembering how our grandma used to make them for Tanabata.

"So what do you want to know?"

"As much as you can tell us," Sakurako-san says, leaning against the door before it can fully close.

Sakuma-san shrugs her shoulders. Sakurako-san's request is far too vague.

"Were you close with Yoshimine-san?"

"Yes, we used to play together after school when we were kids. Her mom had to work late, so she had to watch the house alone. Also... Well, there were other things."

"What do you know about her death?"

I'm more interested in those "other things," but Sakurako-san just asks her next question. Sakuma-san's expression grows cloudy.

"Her body hasn't been found, but the police said her odds of survival were low, given the circumstances... At that point, the police wouldn't say whether it was an accident or suicide. They think she drove off the cape at Lake Noto."

"Do you think it was an accident, or suicide? I want to know your own thoughts."

"There's no way I could know that!"

Sakuma-san is upset by the insensitive question.

"Really? Since you were close, you must have some thoughts on the matter. Or maybe you haven't thought about her death even once over the past 15 years?"

"..."

Sakuma-san covers her mouth and looks away from us. Tears gradually well up in her eyes. There's no way she hasn't thought about Yoshimine-san's death if she still cries over the thought of it after all this time. But it's far too cruel to ask her.

"I'm sorry, we should really-"

I try to intervene, but Sakuma-san holds up her hand to stop me.

"No, it's fine. It honestly didn't surprise me when I heard that it could have been suicide."

Sakuma-san beckons for us to follow her further inside.

"Come inside, there's no point in standing over here. I got some dango as a gift, but it's too much for me to finish alone. You'd be helping me out."

"No, we should really..."

"I have too much to say, you'll want to sit down."

My brother tries to turn her down without a moment's delay. Of course he would. There's no way he'd want to listen if it's going to take a while, especially when it's about a dead person he doesn't even know. We've been rude to her, but she's still willing to talk to us... Maybe she actually wants someone she can talk to about this. Besides, that kusudama clearly hasn't been touched in a long time. She probably hasn't been visited by any young kids in a while. When I was little, I always wanted to touch the pretty, intricate kusudama, but I always broke them right away. My grandma would fold them little by little over the year, then give it to me on tanabata. Sakuma-san's kusudama is more intricate than the ones my grandma used to make. It's beautiful, but for some reason it makes me feel lonely.

Before my brother can make a decision, Sakurako-san heads into the apartment. I follow right after her. My brother reluctantly follows after me. Sakuma-san leads us to the living room. There are lots of potted plants on the veranda. Isozaki-sensei would be excited to see how big and amazing her clivia is.

“It was a gift, but go ahead and eat up.”

“Oh, these are bekomochi! Those are nii-san’s favourite.”

Sakuma-san sets bekomochi and daifuku down on the table. My brother loves bekomochi. He doesn’t usually like sweets, but bekomochi and our Nagayama grandma’s ohagi are the exceptions.

“It’s been a while... You can’t get these in Tokyo.”

“Yeah, it’s only in Hokkaido and Touhoku that we call cows ‘beko.’”

Bekomochi is mochi made with high quality rice flour that gets kneaded in brown sugar after it’s steamed. They’re shaped like leaves. There’s a theory that they’re called bekomochi because they’re the colour of a cow. Some people think they’re named after rice flour (beiko). They’re usually made for festivals in May, but they’re eaten all year round. The flavour hasn’t changed in a long time.

“The shinkomochi is good, too, so go ahead and try some. Even if there’s some left over, I won’t be able to finish it all,” Sakuma-san says while brewing some tea.

I want to help carry it over at the very least, but she just says “it’s fine, you can just sit and eat.” I take her up on her kind offer, and reach for a delicious, brown and white bekomochi. The mochi is nice and plump. As I bite into the brown sugar portion, it gives a satisfying resistance.

“There’s walnuts inside... It’s delicious.”

My brother isn’t even just flattering her, it’s genuinely really good mochi. Sakurako-san grins while reaching for an irresistible mugwort shinko mochi. I quickly finish off my bekomochi so I can grab one of the shinko mochi. The sweet red bean paste inside the soft, mugwort mochi makes a strong statement. It’s a staggeringly good balance. Absolutely incredibly tasty.

“I’m so glad. I can’t eat all this alone. I keep my freezer full for times like these.”

Sakuma-san tells us about how she feels terrible needing to throw out such delicious food. No, food should never be wasted. Sakurako-san ends up devouring another of each type of mochi. She won’t be able to eat dinner, I’ve seen it happen before. I silently apologize to gran as I reach for my third shinko mochi. I glare at my brother. He doesn’t eat a lot of sweets, so he’s satisfied after just one bekomochi.

“Take the leftovers with you,” Sakuma-san says, laughing as she watches us.

“...Eimi-chan really loved the mame daifuku from this shop...”

Sakuma-san murmurs while drinking her tea. She’s sitting at the dining table, rather than on one of the two sofas the rest of us are using.

“I’m really glad you came. Not just because of the mochi; I’ve been wanting someone to talk to.”

Sakuma-san gazes at nothing in particular with both her hands wrapped around her tea cup. She looks like she’s remembering something.

“About what?” Sakurako-san asks after clearing her throat.

"I'm not young anymore, but it was never something I could talk about... This feels wrong, but... Now's the time. I always thought I'd take it with me to my grave, but I've finally decided..."

"So, what do you know?" Sakurako-san asks sharply, clearly starting to get irritated.

Sakuma-san lowers her head, and gently sets down her cup.

"Her parents... they disappeared."

"They... disappeared?"

"Yes. It was quite sudden. They used to live in the room Eimi-chan lived in. Eimi-chan moved out after high school, but one day when she visited... The two of them were just gone."

"Could they have... moved out, or something?"

It doesn't really feel like "disappeared" is the right word. However, Sakuma-san shakes her head.

"Is there a missing person report, or anything..." Sakuma-san shakes her head again.

"Then what happened?"

"When Hiroshi-san, her father, got drunk he was... quite violent toward Eimi-chan and Tomoko-san."

Sakuma-san has a hard time getting the words out, as if just saying it will curse her.

"In other words... domestic violence, huh."

She bites her lips, and despite trying to be reserved about the severity, nods several times.

"Eimi-chan was a good student, but she left home to work right after high school, rather than go to university, because of her father. Tomoko-san insisted that he was a good person when he was sober... She refused to divorce him because he'd have a hard time living alone."

I can't fathom why someone would worry about the person who abuses them. I remember Sakurako-san saying something before about how suffering through abuse atrophies the brain, so it's harder to make rational decisions. It reminds me of the Heisei era Lizzie Borden incident.

"But... One day, I just stopped seeing them."

Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

"I thought it was strange... Eimi-chan started living in that apartment after that, so one day I asked her about what happened. She said her mother left, and told her father she wasn't coming back, so he found a new girlfriend."

I wonder why Tomoko-san would leave so suddenly, when she was worried about her husband? Maybe she left because he already had another girl... It still doesn't feel right, but I guess it's plausible.

"She asked me not to file a missing persons report. She said that she didn't want to bother her mother, now that she was finally free. She didn't want anything to lead back to her mother if her father came back... Since she asked, I didn't tell anyone."

Sakuma-san gently strokes her teacup with her fingertips and lets out a heavy sigh.

"...But Tomoko-san said she didn't have anyone she could rely on since she eloped when she got married... It'd be nice if she was truly free, but..."

"You don't think she is?"

Sakuma-san shakes her head at Sakurako-san's question.

"I don't know. I think it's possible that Hiroshi-san, Eimi-chan's father, did something, but then I don't think Eimi-chan would protect him... I wanted to protect Tomoko-san, too. If she was in trouble, then..."

Even after telling us all that, she keeps saying "but..." and trying to go back on her words.

"But... in the end, Eimi-chan passed away two years later... I regret not going to the police right away."

Sakuma-san covers her face with both hands, taking deep breaths to try to hold back her tears while her muffled voice says, "it's my fault Eimi-chan died."

"What exactly do you think the cause was?"

"I don't know, but... I don't think it was suicide. It's possible her father tampered with the brakes on her car."

"I don't think so," my brother speaks for the first time.

"What... makes you say that? After all..."

"Well... Regardless of her father's motive, you can't just mess with the brakes in a car."

Sakuma-san gives me a perplexed look after my brother's blunt assertion.

"Umm... Why can't you?" It can't be helped, so I ask for an explanation in her place.

My brother takes a sip of his tea, then leans forward slightly.

"Cars don't have just one brake system. If one of the brakes isn't working, another can compensate for it. It'd be dangerous otherwise, right? Cars are designed to stop safely if they're damaged," he says, and grabs a nearby paper and pen to draw a rough car shape. "Well... I can't speak for all cars, but domestically produced ones that are currently running should have three brake systems. I can't imagine all of them failing at the same time."

He adds the foot brake, engine brake, and emergency brake to his picture.

"The engine brake can't be tampered with, and there would be no point in messing with the emergency brake, so it would probably be the foot brake... But even then, it's not like you'd suddenly drive into a lake or something. If the brake hose was cut, the brakes wouldn't work from the start. If the disk rotors had been oiled, she would have crashed as soon as the car started. If the Servo unit was tampered with, something would feel wrong as soon as the engine started. Well... I guess a particularly dense person might not notice, but the car wouldn't run for long like that."

My brother takes a deep breath after his rapid-fire explanation. Sakuma-san is staring at him with a blank expression. Sakurako-san looks a bit surprised, too.

"Umm... My brother is attending a technical school in Tokyo," I explain.

Sakurako-san and Sakuma-san look like they're convinced now.

"I want to be an automotive engineer. I actually want to develop bikes, rather than cars, but... Anyway, the tampered brakes theory is unrealistic. It's not impossible, but it would require a lot of technical knowledge, luck, and good timing. It's nearly impossible to make the brakes only fail when she's about to drive into a lake, though."

My brother draws an X across his page.

"So the problem wouldn't be the car, but the person driving it. That is, if it was even an accident to begin with."

I look at Sakurako-san. Maybe it's because of my brother that I've always liked her vast knowledge of, and obsession with, bones. I remember back when I was in middle school, my

brother looked dazzling when he told me he was moving to Tokyo because he wanted to learn more. Back then, I didn't have anything I actually wanted to do. Will I ever find something I can be as passionate about as my brother and Sakurako-san are?

"I don't think anyone would go so far as to use her car to fake her suicide. There has to be a simpler method with a higher chance of success."

Sakurako-san seems to accept my brother's explanation. I don't think Sakurako-san knows too much about cars, so his well organized explanation must have helped. For some reason, I feel like she sees him a little differently now. When presented with all the information, we'll have to give up on Sakuma-san's "killed by tampering with the brakes" theory. She seems very reluctant, though.

"But... It was a suicide? But why..." Sakuma-san murmurs with a lonely expression.

"It could have been an accident. Sometimes humans make mistakes that surprise even the person themselves. It could have been something like that."

Sakuma-san quietly nods at my attempt to comfort her. I wonder if it's true. People prefer having someone to hold a grudge against over having someone to understand how they feel.

"How long after the parents disappeared did the daughter die?"

"Let's see... I don't quite remember, but... Around one or two years later?"

Sakuma-san replies in a frail, exhausted voice as Sakurako-san mercilessly digs through her memories.

"A year or two, huh... Well, either way, you're an outsider. You don't have to feel responsible for anything that happened to the people involved. The Yoshimine family didn't want you to intervene."

"I know that! But still... I can't help but feel like I could have done something!"

Sakuma-san argues back, finally losing her patience with Sakurako-san.

The regret she's carried for so long overflows.

"...She was such a lovely woman, it's only natural to feel sorrow after what happened. May I ask you a little more about Eimi-san herself?"

I decide to steer the conversation in another direction. I'd rather have her talk about her happy memories than her regret.

"Let's see, she was a kind girl... Really, such a gentle person," Sakuma-san says in a hoarse voice after wiping away her tears with the handkerchief that was in her pocket. "She did very well in class, despite not going to cram school. Ever since she was little, she— Oh! I have a photo. It's from when she was young. She forgot it here when she visited once... I still have it around somewhere," she says. She takes a photograph out of a drawer in the adjacent altar room.

It's very old, and the colours are faded. I wonder how many times she's held it for it to be so worn. In the sepia-tone picture is a woman wearing a dress and boots, as well as a young girl wearing a polka dotted bathing suit. They're both smiling happily at the camera. Between the girl and woman is a bucket... They seem to be by the sea, probably on a tidal flat. Sakuma-san and everyone at the museum described Eimi-san as being an "intelligent person." I'm startled by how strong the look in the eyes of the girl in the photo is. They were right, she gives the impression that she was a really smart woman.

“This picture is from when her family went digging for Manila clams in Lake Notoro. I wonder if Hiroshi-san was too drunk to join them... After he hurt his back, he kept taking time off work, and he kept drinking more and more each day...”

Not long afterwards, he started abusing his wife and daughter. Sakuma-san just watched from afar. Sakuma-san tried to secretly call the police once, but it only caused the father to blame Tomoko-san. She can think of all kinds of things she could have done to help now, but at the time she felt hopeless. I almost feel like crying.

“Thinking about it now won’t change what happened. It’s pointless,” Sakurako-san says heartlessly.

“I just can’t help it... Especially since a young couple moved into that room last year... I feel crushed by regret every time I hear their child playing happily. I should have done something to help Eimi-chan...”

“She didn’t ask you to help.”

“...What?”

“Am I wrong? Did Eimi Yoshimine or her mother ask you to help?”

“No, but...”

“Then you have nothing to do with it. It’s not your responsibility.”

“It is so! I knew about the abuse!” Sakuma-san raises her voice in protest. She sobs into her handkerchief.

“No, you’re an outsider. Do you think you’re the only one who knew? Her school and her mother’s work would have noticed something was wrong. The people who lived beside and below her probably noticed, too.”

Even just listening to the story, I can’t help but think that she could have done more, so I can’t imagine how much regret she feels. But what could she have really done? Sakuma-san couldn’t put herself in danger. After she reported it the first time, things only got worse, so she ended up being more cautious the next time. If she tried to help again, the abuse would have escalated again.

“...But if I’d helped her, Eimi-chan could have lived a different life. She could have studied properly, gotten a good job, got married—”

“That’s only in hindsight. Even if her life had gone differently, it might not have been the happy future you’re imagining. You don’t even know if that’s what she wanted in the first place,” Sakurako-san’s words are detached.

She has a point, though. It’s all in the past now. Sakurako-san lets out a long sigh.

“Is the child living in her old apartment really happy? Isn’t it possible that they’re being abused, too?” Sakurako-san asks, looking over at the door.

“No... That child is well cared for. They’re a cheerful, kind family.”

“Then that child isn’t a current version of Eimi Yoshimine. You never know what kind of evil is lurking outside the house, though. You should watch over them carefully. No matter how peaceful the town may be, if there’s more than one person around, an incident could occur,” Sakurako-san says gently.

Sakuma-san nods, her face stained with tears. Watching out for that child will make her happier than trying to change the past.

So, we leave Sakuma-san’s house. She gives us the leftover mochi and some cans of coffee to have in the car. Before we leave, I beg her for the kusudama.

"It's beautiful. My grandma used to make one every year."

"Up until a few years ago, I'd make them every day as a brain training exercise. Maybe... Maybe I'll start doing that again."

"Please send me a picture of your next masterpiece."

I exchange email addresses with her.

"Eimi-chan loved them, too. We often used to make them together. But.. She always used to apologize, rather than saying 'thank you.'"

Sakuma-san lets out a lonely sigh as she sees us off.

"I wonder if... I was really nothing more than an 'outsider' to her..."

"Even if you were, I know you still made a difference to her. Do you have a family?"

My brother is surprised by how straightforward Sakurako-san is. Sakuma-san can't help but let a laugh slip out from how unexpected it was, but her smile doesn't look happy.

"I had a son with my ex-husband... But I haven't seen him in around 40 years for various reasons. I'm sure he must hate me."

"Then you should ask for forgiveness. If they're still alive, at least."

"What?!"

Perhaps she's gotten used to the way Sakurako-san speaks and acts, because Sakuma-san replies in a clear, yet self-deprecating, voice. Sakurako-san puts her shoes on, then taps her toe against the floor as she says,

"Wouldn't it be more constructive to reconnect with them? Rather than daydream about someone who's already dead?"

Sakuma-san has a stiff, bewildered expression. It's true that it isn't easy to get back into a family member's life after you've been out of touch for a long time. But still—

"No matter what you think or say, the girl in that photo isn't going to reply to you. You aren't immortal. Neither is your son. There's no point in wallowing in regret. Humans have the capacity to learn."

"Yes, I'll think about it... Thank you," Sakuma-san says with a bitter smile.

I don't know how much Sakurako-san's words resonated with her.

"No," Sakurako-san says. "As soon as this door closes behind us, you have to contact them. You're in an emotional state after meeting with us. You're not in your usual mentality. It's best if you ride the emotional high and contact them now."

Sakurako-san holds her fist by her ear like it's a phone, and gives Sakuma-san a mischievous wink. I don't know what Sakuma-san did after we left. I hope she becomes happier than before, though. She's such a kind, lonely person.

Part 5

As soon as we get back to the car, my brother rests his head against the steering wheel without doing up his seatbelt. Meeting and talking with people you don't know is unexpectedly exhausting. Even more so when you're faced with that person's sadness, anger, and regret. In contrast to Sakurako-san, who is sitting in the back seat with her legs crossed and thinking about something, the two of us in the front seats are completely worn out.

“Well, let’s go back. After all... Those bones have nothing to do with Eimi Yoshimine, right?”

My brother slaps his cheeks to work up some energy, and does up his seat belt.

“We don’t know that for sure. But both of her parents disappeared unnaturally, huh.”

“So then... The bones in the museum might be her parents,” I mutter with my cheek pressed against the window.

The woman’s skull we found had evidence of domestic abuse. Pictures of that poor skull are recorded on my phone. I feel my cold, inorganic phone with my fingertips in the pocket of my cargo pants.

“So that’d mean the one who was strangled was her father?”

“I can’t say for sure if it’s the father, but the features on the skull indicated that it was likely male. Assuming that the corpses are from the Yoshimine couple... The mother may have killed the father because she couldn’t take it anymore, or she killed him to protect her daughter.”

I make myself nauseated imagining her witnessing the death of her daughter, then strangling her husband out of rage.

That child with beautiful eyes, and her lovely, kind mother... Although it can’t be determined if there was a delay between when the two people died with the naked eye, Sakurako-san said that at the very least, they didn’t seem to have died on the scale of years apart.

“Given that the mother’s skull is also at the museum, she either committed suicide, or lost her life some other way. Then Eimi Yoshimine dealt with the bodies herself, rather than reporting it to the police.”

My brother was about to get out of the car, but suddenly stops in his tracks.

“She dealt with her parents’ bodies herself...?”

“There would have been no other options. She couldn’t leave the bodies just sitting there... Who else would have helped?”

“But... How could she do that...?”

“Simply because she couldn’t let anyone else find out. Depending on the time of year, the corpses would start to decompose quickly. She had to do something fast, otherwise someone would notice. Well, in that case we can assume Eimi Yoshimine was involved in the murder of her parents.”

“No matter what happened, I would never want my mom to murder someone,” I say.

Even if it was indirectly, or if she was trying to protect her family.

“Exactly... No matter how many reasons someone had, there’s no way they could dispose of their parents’ corpses.” My brother’s voice sounds shocked.

I understand how he feels, but... I also know that people can be surprisingly cold and calculating when something is important.

“Maybe she wanted to see her parents’ bones,” Sakurako-san says, just to disgust my brother even more.

“Wh... What?”

“One of her former coworkers said she loved bones. Even if they were her parents, it’s not like they could hate her for it if they were already dead.”

“But... Well, it’s true that the dead can’t speak, but...”

“It’s possible that she wanted to find out why they died. When my pet cat died, I investigated the cause of death myself.”

My brother glances back at Sakurako-san through the rear view mirror, completely dumbfounded.

“Though Atsushi has a point. It would be difficult for one person to dismantle two adult corpses on her own without raising suspicion. It’s a big undertaking.”

“No, that’s not what I meant—” My brother tries to say that he meant it from an emotional point of view.

But sentimentality means nothing to Sakurako-san. Maybe Yoshimine-san felt that way, too.

“Either way, would one woman really be able to do all that alone? She must have had to dump the bodies in separate pieces, since it’s unlikely she could carry a whole corpse at once.”

A lot of corpses in Japan are cut into pieces before they’re abandoned. It might seem like it’s to hide the victim’s identity, but it’s usually just because it’s easier to transport. Heisei Lizzie Borden also chopped up her mother in law for the same reason.

“Then the answer is simple. She wasn’t working alone,” Sakurako-san says with a rising whistle.

It’s like she’s trying to say that this is getting interesting.

“The one thing that’s bothering me is that the skulls were likely buried underground. Based on my experience, the bones didn’t seem to have been simmered or soaked. Even if they’re chopped up, it’s not easy for a single person to dig a grave big enough for two,” Sakurako-san says, and holds her tented fingers by her lips while she thinks. “It’s Occam’s Razor. ‘Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.’ In other words, it’s better to think about things in their simplest form. If one of you killed your parents alone, what would you do? And don’t say that you’d turn yourself in.”

My brother looks at me again with a face like he’s wondering why he would ever do that. Although, my brother and I would have a line of thinking more in line with the general population than Sakurako-san would.

“Well... If you had a car and an accomplice, I don’t think it’d be that hard to get rid of the body. There’s lots of good places in Hokkaido to leave a corpse if you were so inclined. Familiarity with the area would help, I think.”

“Then where would you dump a corpse in Asahikawa? Assuming you had the corpses of two of your family members, where would you ditch them?”

My brother responds to her question bitterly, “...Asahidake.”

“Why? There’s plenty of other mountains.”

“Because... It’s just a place I know well. I used to climb up it with my dad and grandpa a lot when Taro was a baby.”

“So it’s a place you have memories and emotional attachment to.”

“Well, if it was a total stranger, a spot where the corpse won’t be found would be top priority, but... If the corpse is someone you were close to, I think that would factor into their judgment.”

“That’s true... If I had to bury someone I love, I’d pick a special spot...” I add to my brother’s honest response.

“I see,” Sakurako-san says, and leans forward to manipulate the car navigation system.

“...I thought we were going back?” My brother groans.

“One more place won’t kill you, though.”

“Creating a new destination,” the lady in the navigator says in her cheerful voice.

“There’s still many things we don’t know about Eimi Yoshimine, but thankfully, we know one place where she has important memories.”

Sakurako-san grins as she plops back in her seat and does up her seatbelt.

“Her neighbour mentioned that she used to dig for Manila clams, right? Atsushi, we’re heading for Lake Noto.”

Part 6

My brother hasn’t uttered a single word since we started heading for the lake. I think he’s mad. He always used to lock himself in his room when he was mad. He’s probably only driving us because it’s a tourist spot. It might just be because he’s too exhausted to fight anymore. Maybe it’s even because he knows it’s important to me.

The lake is famous for its Sango grassland. There was a time when it seemed like it was going to dry up and disappear, but it’s made a comeback. In the fall, the whole marsh is dyed completely red. It might be a little too late in the season for it, but I want to take a look if we have time around lunchtime. So far, this trip hasn’t been what my brother wanted at all, and he hasn’t seemed to enjoy it one bit. I’m really grateful that he’s taken us here, though.

I’m still curious about why he’s doing all of this, though. Is it just because we’re brothers? Do we get along well enough for that? Did he just feel like doing something nice for me? Well, even if it’s a bit uncomfortable, I still want to go to Lake Noto. But if Sakurako-san is right, there might be human remains buried there. Even worse, there were signs of strangulation on one of the bodies, and the mother was being beaten every day... Then they both disappeared one day. Besides that, the only person with any answers is already dead. We don’t even know if it was suicide or an accident... There must be something more going on here. But it’s hard to dig up the past. And there’s also the possibility that we’ll stir things up and upset the people who we ask questions to. Knowing the truth isn’t always a good thing. Some answers should stay hidden away, like bone under flesh. How far should we go? At what point should we stop digging, and leave it be? I personally think what we’re doing is already pushing it. But I just can’t stop. I can’t blame Sakurako-san for this. I want to know the truth, too.

The sun is setting, dyeing the sky pink. The country road seems like it keeps going forever. Eventually, after driving down road 76 for a while, we finally see Noto Lake Park. It’s a big, lakeside park with cottages for camping, and a golf course. There’s athletic equipment for kids to play on, too. By the time we park and get out of the car, the sky is already completely red from the sunset.

Lake Noto used to be a brackish lake that connected to the ocean, but now there’s a levee, making it a lagoon. The water doesn’t smell like a lake or the ocean, but something unique. You can dig for clams at this time of year when the tide is low, but unfortunately, it’s high tide right now. The sunset reflected off the lake, along with the deep red coral grass, makes the whole area look like it’s been soaked in blood. I get goosebumps on the back of my neck. The three of us stare at the scenery in silence. Sakurako-san eventually gets bored, and walks

towards the reception area with shower rooms. As I chase after her, I hear her mumble, "it looks nice here."

"Yeah, the sunset is really pretty."

It's rare for her to admire the scenery... Is what I thought, but she's glaring at me suspiciously.

"No, that's not what I meant. I meant that it's well maintained."

"Huh?"

"The facilities here are still new."

Now that she mentions it, the park and buildings are well maintained, but they don't seem new.

"Oh, but this park opened on June 1st, 2002. It's not exactly new."

I check when it opened on my phone. It's older than I expected. I think the cottages at the campsite were built more recently, though. Sakurako-san grins when she hears the result of my search.

"I see, so that's how it is," Sakurako-san says with a nod. "That means it was 15 years ago."

My brother finally comes over to join us with a sigh.

"15 years ago... So what?"

"You haven't realized it yet? That's when the neighbour said Eimi Yoshimine died."

"...Oh..."

She died around 15 years ago... No, it was longer. It was before the campground was built.

Sakuma-san's words spring to mind.

"This is just a guess, but I think Eimi Yoshimine abandoned the corpses somewhere around Lake Noto, probably by burying them. It's deserted here at night. When she heard about the new development, she panicked and dug up the bodies before the construction work did. If she dug them up just before she committed suicide, two years would have passed. If they were buried in regular soil, they'd just barely be skeletonized. Since the soil here has a high salt content from the sea water, they'd skeletonize a little bit faster. How does that sound?" Sakurako-san asks my brother.

"What are you talking about?"

"How she dealt with her parents' corpses. It's a reasonable guess, isn't it? Since boiling a skull produces such a strong smell, it would only make sense to have the ground take care of it instead."

"..."

My brother ignores the question, and goes to buy water from the vending machine. I want one, too, but when I reach out, my brother pressed the water bottle against my forehead. I guess he's telling me to stay coolheaded.

"Still, it's incomprehensible."

"Haven't we found out enough?"

My brother bought Sakurako-san a water bottle, too, but basically throws it at her while handing it over.

“No. We still don’t know anything. The bones still don’t connect. Why did Eimi Yoshimine dig up her parents, but then only put their skulls on display at the museum... It’s incomprehensible. I just can’t understand! Why?!”

Sakurako-san quickly gulps down the water, then lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Well... For now, let’s go back to the car. We can go back to the hotel for today, and take our time thinking it over, okay?”

I don’t want to ruin my brother’s mood anymore, and I’m starting to feel tired from moving around so much. If I’m feeling worn out, my brother must be even more exhausted from driving all day. I feel bad for Sakurako-san, but my brother needs a break.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“No. I want to think it over here for a bit longer.”

“The sun has already set, though. It’ll get colder at night... See? Your hands are getting cold.”

I grab her hand to lead her back to the car, but she throws a tantrum like a child. If I let Sakurako-san catch a cold, gran will scold me. I desperately try to reason with her to coax her back to the car. Fortunately, she eventually gives in and reluctantly climbs into the back seat. My brother slowly starts to drive off.

I’d love to go on a nice, slow drive down this lakeside road toward the cape, if it wasn’t so dark out. It’d be fun to look at the scenery under the big, blue sky. But we’re headed in the opposite direction from the cape. Toward the darkness.

Part 7

I start to feel sleepy by the time we start heading back to the hotel. Sakurako-san looks angry. My brother glances back at her in the rear view mirror and sighs.

“...What is it?”

“Nothing, I just don’t know why you’re in such a bad mood.”

“I already said, it’s because the bones aren’t connecting. Besides, you’re in a bad mood, too. Why are you so angry all the time?” Sakurako-san says with her arms crossed.

My brother glares at her through her mirror.

“Did you only come so you could drag my brother around?”

“This always happens. Whenever I’m with this kid, we always find a corpse.”

I’m not feeling drowsy at all anymore.

“That’s ridiculous...!”

Sakurako-san snorts and turns away. My brother glances at me, like he’s trying to ask if that’s true. It’s... True. Sakurako-san and I always seem to stumble upon a dead body when we’re together.

“...”

My brother stays silent for a while after I explain that to him. This is business as usual for us. I feel like I have a lot to apologize to him for.

“...Well, for better or for worse, we discovered those skulls, and I’m more interested in investigating this case than anything else. This trip with you two is only my second priority now. I simply can’t understand why that woman would put her parents’ skulls on display in the museum. I have to find out,” Sakurako-san says with an exaggerated sigh.

For a while we watch as the sun gradually sinks below the horizon, its yellow-green rays stretching past the trees, and listen to the low rumble of cars driving by, as well as the soft murmur of the radio. Soon, Sakurako-san lets out another sigh. My brother heaves a big sigh, as well.

“...You really don’t know?”

“What?”

“The reason the skulls were displayed. I don’t know about all the complicated stuff, but... For now you just want to know the reason they were in the exhibit, right?” My brother says, sounding a bit excited somehow. Sakurako-san leans forward as far as the seatbelt lets her.

“What is it?! Tell me, quickly!”

My brother looks a little happy while looking at how annoyed Sakurako-san is through the rear view mirror.

“You seem like you know everything else, but you don’t understand something so simple.”

My brother stops the car in a nearby parking lot, then turns around to face the back seat.

“Even on my own body there’s areas I can’t see, like the back of my head. I don’t care if you’re going to be rude about it, just hurry up and tell me,” Sakurako-san begs my brother for the answer.

He sits back in the driver’s seat properly, and takes a deep breath.

“It’s probably... Because she loved them, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“She loved her mother. She may have felt the same way about her father, too. We were told he was a good father when he wasn’t drinking, right? Perhaps she liked her father when he wasn’t drunk.”

“...What do you mean?”

“When alcohol wasn’t involved, her parents loved each other. She was in a violent situation, so she probably wasn’t thinking clearly... The daughter probably thought that if he stopped drinking, the father that she loved would come back.”

Sakurako-san doesn’t seem to grasp what my brother is saying. Somehow, I know what he’s getting at, though.

“Romeo and Juliet from 300 years ago...” I murmur. My brother nods.

“As you said, once this Yoshimine person dug up the corpses, she had to figure out what to do with them. Since they’re the bones of her parents, she would have wanted to mourn them in some way. That’s why, at the very least, she wanted them to imitate those people who chose love in the face of death... So she took the risk.”

She wanted them to be together, even after they died. Even if the people around her thought what she did was unforgivable, Yoshimine-san wanted her parents’ bones to be together forever. She buried their bodies by the lake, then dug them up later so they wouldn’t be discovered by the construction crew. Then, all she had to do was replace the skulls from the replica she was making.

“Even if she was found out, she was already gone... Maybe she actually wanted someone to notice what she’d done to her parents.”

Sakurako-san listens with a complicated expression, unable to accept what we’re telling her.

“Why do it in such a roundabout way? If she was going to commit suicide anyway, why not take their remains with her? At least then they could be mourned together.”

“Human love isn’t that logical. It’s a lot of things all mixed together, like a mudflat. She hated her dad, but also loved him. I’m sure her mom did, too. She put them in the display so they could be remembered for their love. And also... I think she was struggling with her conflicted feelings about whether she should confess to what she did or not.”

I should turn myself in. But I can’t. I’m scared. I can’t keep living like this. I can understand the guilt and fear she must have felt. Because I’m human.

“...Also, I think she wanted to convince herself that if her parents loved each other, there’s no way they wouldn’t love their daughter. She wanted to hold on to that image of a perfect, happy family.”

Sakurako-san looks like she still can’t understand my brother’s reasoning.

“Isn’t that just your imagination running wild? Why do you think Eimi Yoshimine wanted her parents’ love in the first place?”

“I don’t think there’s a single person who doesn’t want their parents to love them,” my brother says, like it’s obvious.

Sakurako-san and him are both looking at each other with the same frown.

“Your reasoning is rooted in emotion, it’s not logical.”

“Emotions don’t have to be logical, people aren’t robots. I’m guessing you were good at science and math in school, but you weren’t good at Japanese, right?”

“That’s not true. All you have to do is work out what the teachers expect you to answer. I didn’t expect an engineering major to put emotions first.”

“That’s because the people who will use the machines I work on have a heart- unlike you.”

“Nii-san, you’re being rude!”

I can’t stand listening to my brother speak in such a cold, malicious tone anymore. Sakurako-san is not “heartless.” She’s just a bit different.

“...Whatever. Let’s just let the police investigate it. There’s no need for us to play detective. Honestly, the fact that my little brother is doing stuff like this on a regular basis makes me wonder if he should stop hanging around with you.”

Just as I’m about to object, my brother gives me a glance that’s clearly telling me to shut up.

“A year ago, my little brother would never have said he wanted to be a forensic pathologist - not that little kid that was shaking after passing by a car accident.”

I know exactly what he’s talking about. I still remember that pale hand. Now, I don’t avert my eyes from corpses, even in much worse condition.

“He’s accustomed to death. Especially corpses. At first, he would tremble with fear, but after so many times—“

It's just as Sakurako-san says. My brother hasn't come face to face with a dead body before. My brother angrily slams on the steering wheel, interrupting both my thoughts, and Sakurako-san's words.

"Ordinary high school students don't see dead bodies enough to get used to them!"

"Those that live must die. It's the next stage of life for any organism. Why loathe it?"

"He isn't ready for it! Even if he's grown physically, he isn't mentally ready. He's still so fragile! How many times have you seen a corpse, and been touched by heaps of human cruelty and ugliness, to think that it's just 'the same as always'?" His shouting feels like it's pounding on my head.

Have I... Changed that much?

"You've taken over the small, fragile boy my mother and I have raised and instilled morals on, and forcibly overwhelmed him with twisted ideas about 'death' and 'corpses.'"

My brother is furious. It's true that most ordinary people rarely happen to come across a corpse in their daily life. It's not like I find them because I want to, though. But... If I hadn't met Sakurako-san, I would never have discovered so many bodies. And if it weren't for her teaching me about the human body, I'd never have gotten an interest in forensic pathology. But that's all in hindsight. I have seen many corpses. Now I'm finding my own values. I finally know what my brother and Sakurako-san have that I don't. Ambiguously swaying between good and evil; white, black, and grey... My sense of justice is still wavering.

"You're just messing around with his future! What does your fiancé think of you-"

"That's enough! Just shut up!" I shout. I'm on my last nerve.

"...Did Naoe say something?" Sakurako-san asks in a troubled tone.

"Nothing. Ariwara-san has nothing to do with this. Nii-san is just misunderstanding." I quickly respond before turning back to my brother.

He doesn't understand anything.

"You don't know anything! She's not deceiving me, and she's not messing around with me! It's true that my moral values are different from before, but that just means I've grown as a person!"

"Shoutarou..."

"I haven't even seen you in a year, then you suddenly show up and act like you know what's best for me," I say, then turn away from him.

I can see through the reflection on the glass that he's surprised... And maybe... Hurt, too. I know that he's worried about me because he cares, but he didn't have to go that far. I'm allowed to live my life however I want. I have people I cherish, too. He can't just barge in and try to change whatever he wants.

"..."

My brother stays silent for a while. Eventually, he turns the car back on. The song playing on the radio is too cheerful, so I turn it off. I'd rather listen to Diavel. His screaming would fit better.

"I'm not very good at writing book reports."

Sakurako-san suddenly says while she watches the scenery fly by.

"I'll confess. I always took the work home and had Ms. Shouko help me." Sakurako-san huffs defiantly.

My brother stays silent for a moment, then bursts out laughing.

"Isn't that just cheating?"

"Probably, but that statute of limitations is up. Things like 'write about what you think. Not a synopsis, but your favourite scene' was too hard for me because... I didn't have any thoughts about it... In other words, you were right. I can't write book reports, and I can't guide the boy the way you did... I wanted to apologize for that."

"...That wasn't even an apology."

I thought Sakurako-san's words were quite earnest. My brother seems perplexed, though.

"I see... In that case, let's go see live whales tomorrow. Today was really fun, so... tomorrow is your turn," Sakurako-san says with a smile.

My brother nods with a strained smile. How much longer will this bitter taste in my mouth persist?

Part 8

I peer through the window of the hotel room at the beautiful, starry sky. But between my brother and I, it's overcast and tempestuous. It doesn't feel like we're on speaking terms. I'm grateful that my brother is so genuinely concerned about me being accustomed to seeing corpses, but a broken egg can't be put back together. I can't go back to being that trembling child for the rest of my life.

My brother is laying on the couch, exhausted, so I decide to make some coffee. Kouji-san always puts a manual coffee grinder in the rooms he prepares. Once I open the vacuum sealed packs for each cup, the rich, slightly sweet aroma of the beans fills my nose.

"It smells good," I mutter without thinking. My brother looks at me.

"What?"

"What... That's what I should be asking. What's your problem?"

"Me?"

I put the beans into the grinder and feel the crunchy sensation as I turn the handle. My brother looks at me with a strange, scary expression.

"...So? What's your problem?"

"I just feel like you've changed."

"Of course I have. I'm in high school now."

I used to only drink Yukijirushi Megmilk coffee, but now I can drink regular coffee just fine without sugar, as long as I add milk.

"I wasn't talking about your age... Do you really feel like you belong in an extravagant room like this? Who are you now? Are you still Shoutarou Tatewaki?"

"What?"

"It's only been a year since I last saw you, but you're a completely different person now."

"..."

My brother covers his mouth, like he feels nauseated. He seems so far away now. Just as he said, extravagant things like this hotel don't suit "Shoutarou Tatewaki." But I'm also "Soutarou Kujou." That's why I'm allowed to stay in this room. I'm a replacement for Soutarou-kun. I bet Kouji-san thinks so, too. And Shouko-san. I'm sure Ariwara-san and gran do, too. Ah, but still.... It's frustrating and depressing to know that they only ever see the ghost behind me. Now that my brother brought it up, I feel uneasy about using Soutarou-kun's position.

"I... I'm me. Both in the past, and now."

My voice is hoarse. I don't want to be Soutarou-kun. But what am I supposed to do about it?

"People can grow a lot in just one year. I haven't changed. Having Sakurako-san around just triggered that growth that would have happened anyway. From now on... A lot of different people are going to help me grow. I already have my own world."

It's not just corpses that I've come across. I've seen how cruel the world can be, sad people, unfortunate people, and people who have completely overturned my moral values. All these people still live on deep in my heart. Like a curse. But my brother has a point. Shoutarou Tatewaki has no business being in this room.

I take a dip in the public bath, then ask Shouko-san to let me change rooms. I switch rooms with an old man that I met in the bath who said, "we live off our pensions, so the only thing my wife and I get to do as a couple is go on a trip once a year." It won't make things better between Sakurako-san and my brother, but at least it's something...

Anyway, the food at the smorgasbord they have looks good. My brother smiled when I told him about my plan to switch rooms. The Tatewaki family consists of a long line of big eaters. The old man and woman are pleased about it, too. It feels like this is the way things should be. It may not be served to us by waitstaff, but the food at Kouji-san's hotel is delicious!

"There's meat!"

"There's sashimi!"

While I get my freshly grilled steak, my brother ecstatically loads up his plate with fresh caught sashimi. My brother starts off by going after all the Japanese foods, mainly seafood. I'm starting off with my steak, raclette covered in rich cheese, and other western foods. Well, we'll both end up eating some of everything, anyway.

"...Hokkaido really does have amazing fish, huh?" My brother says happily as he digs into the plump, firm sashimi.

"Is it really that different? I thought it would be pretty much the same anywhere near the sea."

"Well, you just get different kinds of fish. I was disappointed that the fish I used to eat were more expensive, and worse quality. Salmon and pacific saury cost twice as much over there, compared to here. It's too expensive to justify buying it."

"Ah~ I'd hate it if pacific saury was that expensive here."

I'm glad I live in a place where you can cover the dining table in saury for under 100 yen when it's cheap. After a bath and some dinner, my brother is in a much better mood. It's almost like we didn't just argue.

"Oh, but the tuna from the Tsukiji market is delicious."

"Tuna is always good."

It's nice to chat about trivial things while eating together. The only downside to a smorgasbord is that you have to get up every time you run out of food, so it interrupts the conversation. I pile a bunch of sashimi on top of some rice, then go back to my seat. This would normally be an expensive meal. My brother is just getting back with a plate full of fresh tempura and lamb steak. Before he sits down, he grabs my head with his big hands.

"Stop it! I'm trying to eat!"

I can't even count the number of times he did this to me when we were kids. I've always been jealous of how big his hands are.

"So... What are you going to do? Which university are you going to go to?"

"Huh?"

"Are you trying to get into medical school?"

Usually when he grabs my head like this, he usually tackles me to the floor. He'd always do that when I didn't do my homework over summer break, or when he was trying to get me to tell him something. It's been a long time, so I let my guard down, but I know he doesn't want a half hearted answer. I straighten my posture.

"If you're going to university in Tokyo, I think it would be better if mom came and stayed with you. Depending on where the school is located, you'll want to live somewhere with convenient public transit options. I had to think about that stuff before I moved."

"..."

I stare at him blankly. I'm at a loss for words.

"What?"

"Nothing, just... I thought you were against my career path... And I thought you came to visit so you could see what I've been up to lately, so..."

I thought my brother was completely against me going into forensic pathology or anthropology. Anything that would involve me investigating human corpses and bones.

"If I disagree, are you going to give up on it?"

"No... Mom specifically told me to make time to talk to you, though."

"..."

So the reason he took me on this sudden trip really was to persuade me. Our mom probably asked him to talk to me because she knows I'm no match for my brother. I can't believe he's not only not rejecting the idea, but even thinking about me going to Tokyo. I was expecting a lecture, so I don't really know how to react at first. But when I look into his eyes, and he looks straight back at me, I can tell he isn't joking. He isn't the type to trick people with jokes like that.

"Have you decided yet?"

"Oh, no, I haven't, but..."

My brother got impatient waiting for me to reply. I take a sip of oolong tea to ground myself.

"But... I'm thinking of going to Asahikawa University."

"Not Sapporo?"

"Yeah. I feel safer in my hometown. I can't leave mom and the grandpas behind. There are people who I'd like to learn from in Sapporo, but the best teachers are supposedly in Asahikawa. Asahikawa is the best place in Hokkaido for anything related to DNA testing."

"...Is that really everything?"

I've really thought about it thoroughly. But upon hearing my explanation, my brother frowns.

"Isn't it because *she* is in Asahikawa?" He asks suspiciously.

I immediately know what he's talking about, and my ears feel hot.

"Quit it with the weird assumptions. She's an extraordinary person but... There's no special meaning behind it!"

"Then what is it?"

"I don't really know, but compared to when I'm with my teachers, and my friends... I learn a lot. It's fun, and I feel like I can't leave her on her own, even though she sometimes annoys me, or acts so childish I can't believe she's older than me... Anyway, it's not what you think!"

Despite how long we've been together, I still can't find the right words to describe my relationship with Sakurako-san. All I know is that she's so important to me that I would put my life at risk to protect her. My brother lets out a deep sigh.

"You know... Most people just call that love."

"W-well it isn't!"

"Yes it is. You're describing love, but calling it something else. You need to admit it to yourself. Things will change in the future."

"I know myself better than you do. And what do you mean by change? The relationship between Sakurako-san and I will never change!"

I suddenly notice that the sashimi I was about to eat has been sitting in my dish of soy sauce this whole time. I don't need that much soy sauce for sashimi this good... My poor, precious sashimi... I toss it in my mouth anyway. As I expected, it's offensively salty.

"Ugh!"

I'm getting irritated. He always just says whatever he feels like. He has no idea how I feel. If I were to admit that I love Sakurako-san, I wouldn't be able to stay by her side any more.

"You know... You should just admit it to yourself. Whether you say it out loud or not, it's a fact that won't change."

"That's not true. If I kept telling myself that I love her, eventually I'd start to think it's true. They call that the power of words, right? That's why I'll never admit it."

If I let those thoughts out into the world, they might have the power to influence me.

"What do you want from me, anyway?!"

He keeps tugging me around in different directions, whether it's about my career path or Sakurako-san. Seeing how calm he is when I'm feeling so emotional that I could cry just makes me angrier.

"All I want is for you to be free."

"...What?"

"You're always trying to take after the adults around you. I just want you to know that you don't need to do that."

He's been drinking the same oolong tea as me, so I know he isn't drunk... He flicks his glass.

"Do you really want to go into forensic science? Is it your own decision, independent of her? Did you only choose that path because you like her?"

"No, that isn't why!" I shake my head.

That honestly, truly isn't the reason why.

“It’s true that Sakurako-san was the reason I first took interest in the field... But I want to be a champion of justice.”

Two years ago, I thought that investigating corpses was insane, but now I’ve realized that people are people, whether they’re alive or dead. Even if someone dies, rots, and turns to bone, they’re still the same person. Everyone hopes that their loved ones will pass away peacefully of natural causes. But if they don’t, then they’ll want to know “why?” There aren’t many people who can answer that all important question. Without knowing that, it’s hard to move on. I’m sure there are other people like Kougami, who was worried she was the reason her grandma died. People who don’t know how to listen to the voices of the dead. I want to help those people hear their loved one’s final message, so they can greet tomorrow and keep living. After I explain all of that to my brother, he just silently stares at me for a while.

“When I was a kid, I thought that everything was clearly defined as good or evil, but now I know that isn’t true. However, I still want to do the right thing. I want to help people. I firmly believe that I’ll be able to find justice in forensic pathology.”

“...Dad wasn’t a hero,” my brother says.

He knows that dad is the reason I’ve always wanted to be a champion of justice.

“I know that.” I grimace.

Of course I know that, I’m not a child anymore.

“Then why do you want to be a hero?”

“Because I want to... There’s a simpler reason than that, too.”

“A simpler reason?”

“Yeah. Because it’s fun.”

“...”

My brother pushes his tray forward, and leans his elbows on the table. I feel a bit relieved that I got to pour my heart out to him.

“To be honest, I don’t really understand it myself, and I’m still a little bit scared of corpses, but... Forensic science is a mystery. You have to piece together all the clues to figure out what the dead are trying to say. Above all else, the human body is interesting. It may sound morbid, but I find the human body fascinating. The more I learn, the more fascinating I find it. Forensic science gives me a sense of purpose, and it’s something I’m really interested in studying.”

People who think it’s grotesque to perform tests and examinations on corpses are making a big mistake. Forensic pathology is medicine. The only difference is whether the patient is alive or dead. Since the patients can’t tell you about their condition, forensic scientists have to infer their words. Forensic scientists heal the trauma inflicted on those left behind, and give dignity to the dead.

“Forensic scientists face the dead because they love the living. They feel anger toward crime. That’s true for the ones I know, anyway - they’re incredibly kind, unique people. If it’s possible, I also want to become a wonderful person like that.”

I want to be like Professor Shitara, the person Sakurako-san admires. Maybe it’s because of Sakurako-san’s pretense, like my brother says, but that’s not all. I also admire Professor Shitara.

“Of course, I know you must be reluctant about the word ‘corpse,’ but-“

“Enough! I get it. If you’re that serious about it, I won’t oppose you.”

My brother crumples his face, begging me to stop talking about dead bodies while we're eating. He's right. I was being thoughtless. I'm already able to eat normally after seeing a corpse that day.

"I still think you should be flexible with your plans. You should think it through more before deciding not to leave Asahikawa."

"But..."

"No buts. Mom and grandpa wouldn't want to hold you back, anyway. But we can worry about that later. I did whatever I wanted, even though it made you angry."

"...That's not true."

It's true that I was shocked when my brother suddenly said he was going to university in Tokyo, though. My mom looked really lonely after my grandma and brother both disappeared around the same time. After seeing my mom and grandpa like that, I started thinking that I'll definitely stay in this city.

"Even if mom and the others get lonely, or sometimes get burdened, they still want you to choose the path you truly want to pursue, Shoutarou. Going to university somewhere else isn't casting your hometown aside. The place you were born and raised is something that won't ever change. Besides, coming back to Asahikawa after a while makes the sky feel bigger, and my heart feel lighter. Also, eating the ikura mom makes is the best thing ever."

"That's true... It's a bit too sweet, though."

We look at each other and laugh. Salmon roe has gotten more and more expensive lately, to the point where it's a luxury food now, but for the people of Hokkaido, Ikura is basically a rice topping we eat in fall and winter. It's not just ikura, either. The same goes for tarako, mentaiko, sujiko, and tobikko. Whether it's roe from a sculpin, saffron cod, or octopus, there's a high probability that any given household in Hokkaido has some kind of fish egg in their fridge that they'll put on top of rice without hesitation. Ikura in particular tastes like home. It's something I've always eaten. It's always delicious, but the Kujo household and Tatewaki household make ikura differently.

We resume our dinner. I wonder if a day will come when I miss Asahikawa while eating ikura that tastes different from home. Asahikawa is a comfortable place to live. It has most things, and is fairly prosperous. Anything we don't have you can get in Sapporo or online. It's painful when we get a book released a day or two late, though. I never really thought about leaving. But just like he said... I can always come back, so I should think about studying in a different city.

"...Did we come here just so you could say that to me?"

He lifts his gaze from his seafood.

"There's another reason, too," he says with an embarrassed smile.

"I thought you just wanted to lecture me, or object to my plans..."

"Well if you want a lecture, I can do that. Mom worries about you, and you don't have a father around... What kind of older brother would I be if I wasn't worried about your future?"

I can feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"But this trip has been absolutely awful. I'm sick of hearing about bones constantly," he says, pushing the bones from his meal off to the side of his plate.

"We booked a whale watching tour for tomorrow morning as an apology for you."

“You only get to see them if you’re lucky, right? If you’re there, the whales definitely won’t show up.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, are you still eating?” Someone says cheerfully.

Shouko-san and Sakurako-san came to find us, since they had already finished eating.

“It’s Shou-chan we’re talking about, he’ll probably keep eating for a while longer. Come find me in the bar lounge once you’re finished. Saa-chan doesn’t like alcohol because it’s bitter, but do you drink, Atsushi-kun?”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you over there.”

Shouko-san looks younger and more energetic today, probably because of the beauty salon and hot springs. My brother looks a bit troubled, but he doesn’t seem unhappy. Even if she’s a bit older than him, he can’t refuse an invitation from a beautiful woman.

“There’s a sunken hearth next to the bar lounge where you can roast marshmallows. Shou-chan, can you keep an eye on Saa-chan so she doesn’t eat too many?”

“Understood, I’ll be there in 10.” I answer with a salute.

I’ve been entrusted with a task of the utmost importance. But I still have more food to eat before I can head out.

“Actually, make that 20 minutes...”

“Fufufu! You can eat and talk as much as you’d like.”

After eating a hearty dinner with marshmallows for dessert, I take a dip in the open air bath under the starry sky. The next day, early in the morning, we head out to go whale watching. Shouko-san and Sakurako-san must be extremely lucky to counteract my bad luck. The captain looks delighted to see minke whales, Baird’s beaked whales, and Dall’s porpoises in rapid succession. By the final day, Sakurako-san and my brother can have normal conversations with each other, and even laugh together. The sky is a beautiful shade of blue, and the food is delicious... I’m really glad I came on this trip.

I was too busy having fun, and missed a phone call from Kougami. When I call her back and tell her I’m on a trip, she asks for a souvenir. I decide to buy her a white, glass pendant that looks like a konpeito candy from the Ryuhyo Glass Museum. It was expensive, but it got the Shouko-san seal of approval that she’ll like it and it’ll suit her, so I had no choice but to get it.

After returning home and filling our stomach’s with mom’s ikura, my brother goes back to Tokyo, and I return to my everyday life. His only regret was not getting to go to Asahiyama Zoo, so he’ll definitely have to come back in the winter. Asahiyama is cold in the winter, but the penguins and wolves are most active then, so it’s the best time to visit. And so, our little autumn trip came to a close. A feeling of loneliness remains in my chest.

Part 9

Several days after the trip, I get a call from Sakurako-san.

“Gran’s going to the hospital in Sapporo for treatment? I want to go, too, then. I have a school trip coming up, so there’s some things I want to buy.”

I've been invited to go to Sapporo on the weekend. I'm grateful to get to go before the field trip at the end of the month.

My mom is watching TV, and I'm still on the phone, so I write "can I go to Sapporo for the weekend?" on a notepad and hand it to her. She writes back that I can go as long as I bring her a souvenir. It's exciting that I've gotten to go on so many trips lately.

In fall, Hokkaido is nice no matter where you visit. We head out for Sapporo on a clear morning. Since I just got back from a trip last week, Sapporo doesn't feel that far away. Gran has to go to the hospital for an examination, apparently. It'll take a while since it's a big hospital, so we decide to go shopping in the meantime. However, when I get into the car, I find that we're headed in the opposite direction from the city centre.

"...Where are we going?"

"Ishikari."

"...Ishikari? Why?"

"I have business there."

"The former curator retired in a villa in Hlatmari."

"The... Former curator?!"

Sakurako-san nods without saying anything. She must still be hung up on that case.

Ishikari is right next to Sapporo, and I honestly don't know where the boundary between them is. After driving through the countryside for a while, we eventually reach the ocean. The water is the same shade of blue as the sky. I open the car window while we go over the hills next to the river. The wind feels good. I can see a big, white wind turbine. I'm excited to see the ocean in an unfamiliar spot. It's always fun to drive along the coast, even if it's the same beach you've seen a million times.

Eventually, we arrive at a row of villas with a beautiful view of the sea. The houses are in all different shapes and sizes. Although not all of them are particularly nice, they give off a different feeling from normal houses. Apparently Shitara-sensei knew former curator Nishio-sensei's address. The two of us have to search for the right house using only the address given to us. We end up getting a bit lost, but eventually arrive at the one-story building we were headed for. One of the windows is open, so Nishio-sensei must be home.

I ring the intercom, and a woman's voice answers back. When I tell her that we're visiting on behalf of professor Shitara, she opens the door right away. Unfortunately, the woman who greets us is a caretaker in her 40s, not a relative. She has short hair and laugh lines by her eyes. She looks friendly and approachable. I explain to her that we heard from professor Shitara that Nishio-san lived here. Sakurako-san actually met Nishio-sensei when she was a kid, since she visited with her uncle before.

"How unusual, Nishio-sensei hates young girls."

"I was never a noisy child. He liked me since I was mature and intelligent for my age. He used to always say, 'honestly, adults are so stupid—"

"They can't even tell the difference between a child and a wild beast'?"

The caretaker laughs as she finishes Sakurako-san's sentence. Apparently that took care of verifying our identities, though, since she lets us into the villa.

"The house is lovely, it's so spacious."

The high ceiling continues from the entranceway to the living room. You can only get this kind of high ceiling in a single story building. Bright, gentle light envelopes us. The large window in the living room gives a view of the evening sun sinking below the sea.

“Sorry, it’s so dark and cramped when guests come over. He prides himself in his misanthropy, so he doesn’t care much about things like that.”

She tells us about how he chose a single story house out of consideration for his advanced age, and also because he has so many books. The floor could fall through from all of them.

“Sensei isn’t married, and he’s quite stubborn so even relatives don’t visit often. There’s a few people, like you, who still come by every year to study.”

Despite her soft voice, she’s quite straightforward. Nishio-sensei seems to be a moody person, so maybe she has to be outspoken to look after him. At least she’s giving us a warm welcome. She heads off to prepare some tea.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Sensei will get mad at me if I don’t serve you any tea. He always says that I’m not good at housework,” she says, urging us not to hold back. “But... Recently, his dementia has been progressing. He remembers things about bones, but he doesn’t seem to remember his students or friends much anymore... So don’t be offended if he doesn’t recognize you,” she says before directing us into the living room.

There’s a shadowy figure sitting on the couch, illuminated by the big window behind it.

“Sensei, you have guests!”

He must not be able to hear well. I’m startled by how loud the caretaker’s voice is. The figure jumps in surprise, too. I guess he isn’t asleep. As we step closer, I can see that he’s an old man. He has a long, white beard like Santa Claus. He’s wearing glasses, but I can see that his eyes look tired. He has a book about anatomy on his lap, and piles of difficult-looking books written in English piled around him.

“I’m Sakurako Kujou... Masamichi Shitara’s niece. When I was little, I visited you with my uncle.”

Sakurako-san kneels in front of the old man, and speaks more clearly than usual. But he mumbles something unintelligible and looks past us, out the doorway. He must be looking for his caretaker. He looks back at Sakurako-san and grabs her hands tight. He gestures for me to come over, pats me on the back, then points to an empty chair. He must be telling me to sit down. After we both sit down, he opens the book on his lap and seems to be trying to teach us something. I don’t really get it, but Sakurako-san looks like she understands. She answers his questions in English, points to things in the book, and nods along with his explanations. Eventually, he looks satisfied and smiles. I just quietly watch them. If I knew more, I’d be able to take part in this, too... It’s frustrating.

“Oh dear, looks like he caught you.”

I turn to the voice behind me, and see the caretaker standing there holding a tray with a tea set on it.

“He has a bit of a sharp tongue, but he has a good sense of humor, and he’s so knowledgeable... But it’s lonely how he forgets about me every day,” she mutters. It’s hot in the sun, so the tea in the glass pot is chilled, and has ice in it. She pours some into cups for us.

“But the human brain is strange, sometimes a memory comes back to him. Occasionally we can have a normal conversation. I look forward to those times every day.”

She hands me a glass of tea after placing some in front of everyone else.

“I’m sorry, I’m planning to go shopping tomorrow, so I don’t have any tea cakes to serve you.”

“Oh no, don’t worry about it.”

Before I can apologize for not bringing a gift with us, she says, “you’re a good kid” with a smile.

“But at this rate, it’ll be hard to free your big sister from him, right? Is it okay if I ask you to watch the house for a moment? There’s a splendid bakery nearby. I’ll be back in 10 minutes,” she says as she rushes out of the villa.

I feel bad about how considerate she’s being. We’re definitely going to be here a while, though. Sakurako-san and Nishio-sensei seem to be having fun, flipping through the pages and chatting like it’s a class. While listening to the ice occasionally clinking against the glass, I look past the two of them, and out at the sea. There’s seagulls happily soaring across the blue water and vast sky. It’s a quiet, gentle Saturday. I’ve had school work on Saturdays lately, so today feels very luxurious. But we didn’t come here to enjoy the scenery of Mourai, or to take classes from elderly scholars.

“Sakurako-san,” I softly urge her.

If we’re going to ask something we don’t want others to hear, now is the best time while the caretaker is still out.

“..”

She looks really sad about it. She must have been having fun with her lesson. There’s no getting around it, though. I open up the picture I took at the museum on my phone, and hand it to her. I’ll leave the rest to her. I don’t mind if we have to go home without hearing anything. We can always come back another day. It might be better to leave these bones buried. Sakurako-san looks down at my phone for a while, then quietly closes the book the two of them were reading. She takes a deep breath to prepare herself.

“Sensei... I came here to ask you something. It happened a long time ago... I want you to tell me about Eimi Yoshimine.”

Nishio-sensei doesn’t seem to understand what she’s saying. Sakurako-san hands him my phone. It’s open to a picture of Romeo and Juliet’s skulls.

“Just the skulls in this display were replaced with skulls from people who died recently. I know you wouldn’t make a mistake like that,” Sakurako-san says in a quiet, calm voice.

Nishio-sensei glances at the phone... Then readjusts his glasses and carefully examines the picture.

“You made this display. If you were involved in her crime in any way, please tell me. Did you help her? At the very least, you didn’t tell anyone about how she replaced the skulls. Did she bury them in Lake Notoko? Then she dug them up when she heard about the construction so they wouldn’t be discovered, right?”

He groans, rather than reply. That isn’t the answer we wanted.

“Why are those bones in the exhibit? What do they have to do with Eimi Yoshimine?” Sakurako-san asks frantically.

But Nishio-sensei loses interest in the picture, and hands the phone back to Sakurako-san.

"I would really like to know. Did you go along with Eimi Yoshimine's sentimentality, against your better judgement? Why? And... What happened between her and her parents? Do those bones really belong to her parents?"

Sakurako-san grips Nishio-sensei's arm tight, her voice growing hoarse, but... He suddenly loses interest in her, and stares out at the blue sea. Only the empty, blue expanse fills his eyes.

"Please... She's already gone. If you die, too, her memory will vanish."

"Sakurako-san..."

No matter how much she pleads, Nishio-sensei won't look at her. Eventually, she lets out a short sigh like she has given up. Then, she looks through her pockets. She brings out a dice caramel. I have fond memories of them from when I was a kid, but you don't see them much these days.

"Did you forget about this, too?"

Sakurako-san opens the die and takes out the caramel.

"You always gave me these when I was young. I knew gran would never allow it because the caramel would stick to my teeth. But we ate them together in secret. I always looked forward to seeing you, 'Caramel-sensei.'"

Sakurako-san opens the package and puts the treat in her mouth with a lonely, downward gaze. The professor doesn't reach out for a caramel, as though he's forgotten the flavour. Deep down, we were both hoping that those memories still existed within him somewhere. Even if just for a moment, even just one word, I hoped the bones would connect. Time is cruel. The news hasn't reported about the bones found in the museum yet. As things stand, those bones will be forgotten among the plethora of other specimens. The existence of those parents and their child will quietly disappear, as if waves washed them away.

"...You really don't remember Eimi Yoshimine?" Sakurako-san has to force the words out of her throat.

The door opens. The caretaker is back from the shop. She brought back freshly baked croissants, and steam baked pizza for lunch. She suggests we have an early lunch together. We can't ask the professor anything more. Even if we persisted, we wouldn't hear what we want to hear. I feel bad after she went to all the trouble of buying food, but we have to leave. Gran is waiting, too. Sakurako-san has a cold, detached expression. Perhaps she's angry. I'm not sure where exactly the anger is directed, though.

"But Nishio-sensei will only eat Japanese food. I'll have to eat the clam chowder he received as a gift on my own, so please stay for lunch," the caregiver says, stopping us.

Does she get lonely while taking care of him in a place like this on her own? I don't know how to react to her being so insistent.

"No thank you," Sakurako-san says, clearly intent on leaving.

She speaks coldly as she puts on her coat. The caretaker grabs Sakurako-san's sleeve.

"But we haven't gotten to talk at all."

"I didn't come here to talk to you. I was here to see Nishio-sensei."

Sakurako-san briskly moves toward the entrance. I helplessly chase after her. The caregiver leans against a post behind us, reluctant to part. She watches Sakurako-san put her shoes on.

"If you leave now, you'll definitely regret it."

The caregiver murmurs just as Sakurako-san touches the doorknob. I grow increasingly wary from her creepy, threatening words. Suddenly, the caretaker tosses something to me.

"Die caramel?"

It's one of the caramels Sakurako-san has just eaten.

"It's an astragal caramel."

The caretaker narrows her eyes. Sakurako-san was just about to open the door, but she suddenly stops.

"...How do you know that?" Sakurako-san turns around to ask.

"I remember him talking about it a long time ago. He mentioned a little girl who liked bones that he gave die caramel to. Dice supposedly originated from an Egyptian toy called an astragal. They were made from the astragalus bone of sheeps or cows." The caretaker says cheerfully. Sakurako-san looks surprised.

"...It was all a miscalculation."

"...What are you talking about?"

"With Eimi Yoshimine's life... With *my* life, the dice would never roll the way I wanted them to."

Eimi Yoshimine's Confession

Go ahead and eat. It's okay, it's not poisoned. That's what sensei always used to say. A long story needs delicious food to go with it. The pizza is especially good. Now where should I start... Ah yes, meeting Sakuma-san. Let's get started, shall we? I'll tell you about that night.

On the night when I was told that the museum was officially changing the director, I decided to run away with my mom. I was considering quitting, but they told me they would raise my salary and hire me full time, so I held off on my decision. I didn't like the new director or my new coworkers, but it was better than living with my dad. Ever since I left home, I've been worried about my mom. I wanted to save some money, then move somewhere that my dad would never find me. I didn't enjoy working, but thinking about finally being free pushed me to do my best. But mom refused my invitation.

"I can't abandon your father," she said.

Without me, she would definitely die. They didn't even know how to cook rice. Can you believe it? What's the point of cooking if you're just going to get beat up after? I thought my mom was weird. Did all the abuse drive her crazy?

She blamed everything on alcohol. She said he was a good person as long as he didn't drink, and he was planning to quit. Isn't that ridiculous? My father drinks and beats us by choice. There's nothing okay about that.

Even after arguing with my mom, I couldn't leave her alone. I thought that no matter how much she's against it right now, one day she would open her eyes. But just as I was about to force my mom to leave with me with a few days worth of clothes stuffed in a bag, my father came home. He was drinking. He was heavily intoxicated, and incredibly angry. He knew we were trying to escape.

He shouted unspeakable things as disgusting, putrid foam formed at the corners of his mouth while he stuck my mom. He tried to kick me down while I begged him to stop, but the duffel bag acted as a shield. That only made him angrier. He struck me so hard I vomited. Even as a child, he never hit me in the face. He liked my face. But that day, that one strike to the cheek completely shattered my heart. He kept hitting me in the stomach and chest, over and over again... It hurt so bad, I could barely breathe. When I saw him sitting on my mom's back, repeatedly hitting her in the head, I knew I couldn't do anything to resist anymore. I could never forgive him. Soon, my mom went limp and motionless. My father kept hitting her, even after she stopped moving.

It's my fault.

I should never have tried to make her leave with me.

-No, that isn't true. It's all my dad's fault. If only he wasn't here...

...Suddenly, I was strangling my father from behind. It felt like my fingers were going to break. In the back of my mind, I was thinking that people like him never die. But once he stopped moving, I was relieved that I'd never have to be afraid of him again. But I also knew that my life was over.

My mom looked straight at me and said, "we have to do something about this."

I didn't do anything wrong. I just had to hide his corpse. And so, the two of us dumped his body. We left it at a place where he loved to watch the sunset. We spent hours, frantically digging a hole to put his body in. It was already dark by the time we were done. Eventually, I was too tired, and in too much pain from being hit, to stand. The sound of my mom digging lulled me to sleep. I woke up as dawn broke, but my mom was gone.

At first, I thought she had run away. She betrayed me. She abandoned me. But that wasn't what happened. At least, I wasn't betrayed the way I thought I was. My mom was laying in the hole she had dug. She was snuggled up with my dead father.

"I couldn't kill you in the end, so I'm going on ahead."

That was all that was written on a single scrap of paper. That's when I noticed... That hole was so, so deep in order to fit both me and my father. She forced herself to dig that hole all night so that I could lay there with my father, who I killed. As soon as I realised that, something inside of me broke. Mom must have thought that if I hadn't brought up my stupid idea to run away, he wouldn't have died. Maybe she was angry. Maybe she thought I wouldn't be able to live with myself after what I'd done. Maybe she planned to beat me to death in my sleep. Either way, she was planning to kill me. I know that she couldn't bring herself to go through with it

because she loved me. I picked up the shovel. My mom always took sleeping pills at night, so maybe she was just fast asleep. I didn't bother to check. It didn't matter, anyway. She wanted to die. I was disgusted, but I filled in the hole.

I thought it would have been nice if someone had come along and discovered what I was doing, but nobody showed up. I went back to the apartment alone. I cleaned up the apartment, then did nothing but sleep for 3 days. On the fourth day, I went back to my daily life. I thought about turning myself in, but... Once I went back to my day to day routine, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I figured that someone would notice they were missing and track down their bodies eventually. There'd be no point in turning myself in, since someone was going to find out anyway. But nobody put out a search for either of them.

Two years passed, and their bodies still hadn't been discovered. I couldn't do anything anymore. At least I didn't have to live in fear of my father anymore. I could enjoy a little bit more of this quiet life. But still, I'm a murderer. Never knowing when the police would come for me, I panicked at the sound of unfamiliar footsteps. The whole world looked grey. Then, I heard about the new development at Lake Notoro on the news. I thought everything would finally come to an end. I had just finished the last exhibition I worked on with Nishio-sensei. I didn't have any regrets. That evening, I left the house with a shovel. It was a moonless night.

Part 10

"Then you dug up the corpses of your parents?"

"Yes. I was scared. I knew it was impossible, but I was worried my parents would turn into ghosts and attack me."

She tells us about her life up until her "death" while occasionally checking that the tape recorder is still working.

"What happened to the parts besides the skull?" Sakurako-san asks impatiently.

Yoshimine-san smiles and shakes her head softly. "There's no need to be hasty," she says, trying to tease Sakurako-san.

"It's only the flesh that people are afraid of. I dug and dug, and just when I was about to give up... I found their skulls. They turned out to be much prettier than I expected. I was relieved to have found them. Seeing that they were only bones, I wasn't scared anymore."

It's true that bones are a lot less shocking than a full-on corpse. If she'd seen off a relative before, she probably would have seen the ashes and bones after they were cremated. Bones have a sort of silent tranquillity to them.

"Their skeletons were snuggled together, like they were just sleeping. I thought it was beautiful. They were like a perfectly crafted specimen. I thought that god had arranged them like that for me. That miraculous sight... Caused me great despair."

Lake Notoko's Romeo and Juliet. It must have been painful for her to relive the moment she buried her parents. Yoshimine-san's tone doesn't change, but her eyes are like an open book.

"I think that's enough."

Yoshimine-san lets out a deep sigh. As soon as she says that, Nishio-sensei calls from the other room. Yoshimine-san puts his book on the table, helps him lean back in his reclining chair, and covers him with a blanket. He seems to have fallen asleep already.

"I didn't think I would actually be able to dig them up on my own. I didn't even want to think about what I'd do after I was finished."

Yoshimine-san continues to talk while she helps Nishio-sensei, then comes back to sit with us once she's done.

"I was desperate. There was no point in anything anymore, so I didn't have any reason to keep digging. I didn't want to live in fear anymore, so I stuffed their skulls in her bag and drove to the cape. I was going to end it all."

"Was that the Misaki Line?"

"Yeah, that's the one. It was my favourite spot to go on drives with my dad. I held on to their skulls and walked to the edge just as the sky started to brighten. It was so quiet.... So beautiful..." Yoshimine-san nods softly.

I saw the sunrise from the same spot as she had. It's a strange feeling, knowing the scenery can transcend time like that.

"Watching the sun rise, I took her mom's sleeping pills. While I waited for them to kick in, I checked my phone. There was a message from Nishio-sensei. He said I was acting strange the day before, so he was worried about me."

After having lost sight of her own worth, Nishio-sensei's words warmly embraced her heart. Those words saved her, she felt as though she'd been forgiven.

"I was happy to have someone who was concerned about me at a time like that. I left my reply on his answering machine. I told him everything. I figured he was sleeping, so I said thank you and goodbye."

Yoshimine-san had given her final confession, and started to slowly drive the car toward the sea before the medicine fully stole her consciousness.

"It was a hell of a drive to heaven," she says with a lonely smile.

But then, someone forcefully hit the window of the car. It was Nishio-sensei.

"I was glad he was there. I was relieved. I figured the police were going to come arrest me."

Her desire to turn herself in to the police and her desire to run away were at odds with each other. She was glad that it was Nishio-sensei giving her the push she needed. But that wasn't what happened.

"Nishio-sensei dragged me out of the car, shouting at me to escape."

He wasn't taking Yoshimine-san to the police. The two of them left the cape after making it look like Yoshimine-san had fallen into the ocean.

"After replacing the models with the real skulls, I threw everything away and came to Sapporo. He was originally planning to retire and live alone in Ishikari. He had enough money to live the rest of his years comfortably, so he wouldn't mind supporting me, as well. He said all he wanted was for me to stay with him until he dies. Because he loves me."

She's the person that solitary, old scholar wanted to spend his life with. Yoshimine-san accepted his proposal.

“Since I’m officially deceased, I couldn’t make a living with no family register. I thought those two corpses would be found, anyway. At least I had some time I could devote to improving the life of this kind person. I don’t really know how to describe this feeling.”

While looking at Yoshimine-san’s sad smile, I wonder if her feelings are more ambiguous than love between a man and a woman. Did she choose not to reject his love because she wanted to be able to live, or because she didn’t want to hurt him? Perhaps it could be both. Or maybe that’s just what I want to think.

“But nobody found out about the skulls. My parents’ corpses weren’t found. I thought it was impossible, but I continued to live with no family register... It’s almost funny, isn’t it? For these past 15 years, I haven’t had a single illness, injury, or even a cavity!”

In an attempt to save her mother, Yoshimine-san killed both her parents. In an attempt to commit suicide, she found a peaceful new life. She gives a self-deprecating laugh at her own miscalculation.

“It’s been a long time... He seemed to feel guilty, like he was using my crimes to keep me here, but... The past 15 years have been nothing but bliss. I’ve learned a lot from him.”

She couldn’t go to university, but she could learn as much as she wanted here. Lots of scholars have come to visit, so she got to listen to them and talk to them. Maybe that was Nishio-sensei’s way of helping.

“My life was peaceful and happy... But it wasn’t the kind of happiness I wanted. I’m like a spirit, bound to the place I died, doomed to do the exact same thing every day for the rest of my life. I was already supposed to have died twice, so maybe I really am a ghost. I’ve thought of jumping off the cliff... But I was never able to go through with it.”

Yoshimine-san cries with her hands over her face.

“How can I wish for happiness after what I did?”

Was what she did really a crime? Is she a bad person? All she wanted was a normal life.

“But it’s over now. It’s finally over... I can finally break free of this monotony. I can go back now.”

The sun gently shines over the dining table through the window on the ceiling.

Yoshimine-san takes a deep breath as she basks in the light. She looks happy.

Then, the intercom rings. It’s a home care aide who comes to visit sometimes.

“I’m sorry, but something has suddenly come up, so I have to leave.”

Yoshimine-san tells the care aide that Nishio-sensei likes to have lunch as soon as he wakes up, and hands them the contact information for her relatives in case anything comes up. She says that if there’s anything they need to know, it’s in Nishio-sensei’s file. She already has detailed preparations made, since she’s been dreaming of this day for over a decade. Before she leaves, she gently removes Nishio-sensei’s glasses and kisses him on the forehead.

“I’m glad he doesn’t remember who I am anymore... I’d hate to betray my Romeo. I don’t want my lies to kill him.”

She sounds like she’s holding back tears.

“Because he’s the first real family I’ve ever had.”

Final part

Sakurako-san is taking Yoshimine-san to the police station in her car. She's holding on tight to the tape recorder with her confession from earlier on it. She's having Sakurako-san drive so she can't escape anymore. Yoshimine-san didn't want to drive herself, since she might get scared and run away.

As we move along the coast, I'm reminded of the scenery in Abashiri. I feel like I understand why they chose to live here. No matter where they move, people never forget their hometown. I'll probably be reminded of Asahikawa for the rest of my life. No matter where I go.

Soon, we arrive at the police box. Yoshimine-san is calm. Sakurako-san looks at her in the passenger seat, then suddenly stops the car in the parking lot across the street from the police box.

"Um...?"

Why here? Yoshimine-san stares at Sakurako-san, puzzled.

"Wait. Before you turn yourself in, tell me why you put them in the exhibit."

We know the details of her "death". We know what happened to her parents, too. But there was something else. We still haven't solved the mystery of the exhibit display.

"...Why do you want to know about that?" Yoshimine-san tilts her head curiously.

"You and the professor are both intelligent people. It's unbelievable to think you'd just abandon the bones there. So why?"

Sakurako-san really wasn't satisfied with the "love" explanation. Sakurako-san leans forward, craving the truth. Yoshimine-san's eyes turn wide with surprise before she breaks into laughter.

"Because it's a lie."

"...What?"

"It was all a lie from the start. The Romeo and Juliet thing."

"What do you mean?"

Before I know it, I'm leaning forward from the back seat.

"The exhibit was something the new curator wanted made. It was supposed to be the centrepiece of the permanent exhibit. It needed to leave an impact. So he came up with that exhibit."

"Then the display is...?"

"It's true that they were found together, but it wasn't actually a double suicide.

Nishio-Sensei said they were both covered in marks from violence. They didn't commit suicide for their love, they were beaten, killed, and then thrown away."

I look at Sakurako-san. In the end, the scars on those bones turned out to be real.

"Sensei said that it would be our secret, as his way of helping me shoulder the burden of my crime. Maybe it was his way of helping atone for what I did, or maybe he just wanted to get back at the people who drove him out of the museum."

Nishio-sensei probably figured that if he didn't, they would end up living together for the rest of their lives. He didn't want her to have to take care of him when he got old. Publicly displaying her crime would give her an opportunity to atone for it one day.

"I can't believe you were the first ones to notice! Those people have seen them every day for 15 years!"

She laughs at her "15 years of revenge." She looks so innocent, like a child.

"Umm... Do you remember Shouji-san?" I ask.

She pauses for a moment to think, then I can see on her face as soon as she remembers.

“Yes, he was a good person. He was always kind and considerate. When he started talking about an exhibit, he just couldn’t stop himself... He was a bit like Nishio-sensei in that way, it was cute.”

“You should contact him. I don’t think he would mind.”

Yoshimine-san doesn’t respond to Sakurako-san’s suggestion. She’s about to be arrested, but this is also the start of her new life.

After waking up to find that Romeo died, it would have been nice if Juliet found the will to live instead of following him in death. No matter how much she had to lie. I still wouldn’t want her to choose death. I’d prefer a strong Juliet who doesn’t give up on life.

I watch as Eimi Yoshimine-san walks straight into the police station.