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# The Gods of Satomiya

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

THE GODS OF SATOMIYA

By

Patrick K. Sung

A CREATIVE THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2014

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THE GODS OF SATOMIYA

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The Gods of Satomiya

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In a town by the sea in mid-2000s Japan, a young boy and his twin sister grow up under the influence of human politics and the whims of the gods. As their father withdraws and the sister becomes unable to take care of herself, the life of the twins becomes increasingly isolated and unstable. In this environment, old childhood resentments and sexual tension culminate, finally, in incest and self-destruction.

## Dedication

For all my family and friends.

## Acknowledgements

I owe great debts to many people, more than I can put down on a single page. But I will try to name just a few:

Jane Alison, my thesis advisor, for her deep expertise and inspiration.

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And my family, for their patience and love as I pursued this difficult dream.

May everyone be happy.

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Part One: Kizu and Miwa

## Chapter 1

In the beginning, we were two. My sister Suzu was the firstborn, and her crying was so loud that it echoed into the night, cutting straight through the darkness to prepare our way. I took my first breath hours later, as day was breaking over the three mountains of Miwa, pressing the shrouded coast and the edges of Kizu-cho, where we were from, with the faintest morning light. And then Mother died.

The people of the town said that she used her very last breath to kiss and bless us, our heads crowned with blood and a shimmering layer of amniotic fluid. That woman whispered benedictions into our blue-tinged ears, moving her lips until the moment she died. To the adults of Kizu-cho, this was the only respectable thing Mother had ever done. I couldn't tell you if that's true. But I do remember: As my sister and I were put into the bath, dipped into warm waters that smelled of the sulphur of the earth and of the infinite ocean, we opened our eyes to a world of death and our father's tears, and the very first thing we saw was each other.

Suzu and I lived like spirits, wandering the foothills where the forest god's shrine still stood. The other children in town had mothers, and those mothers tried, at first, to include Suzu and me in their lives: at the playground, on holidays, and at the great autumn festival where the entire town worked together as one – all except for our house. But we only wanted to be with each other. We were twins, and tradition said that we were a message from the gods. That was how it was. Everyone watched and waited.

Each night, when it was time to go home, the only eyes that saw Suzu and me return from the woods were the crows and the rabbits, and the bordering street lamps as they flickered awake, granting us safe passage back to the town. And in the nighttime, we held dominion over the house: two children, just like the first of the gods. Just like the gods of Kizu-cho and Miwa, lately known as the city of Satomiya. That was the place where we were born, where my father was born and my grandfather became cursed, and where I lived with my sister for her entire life.

The house where we lived was nearest to the foothills that separated Kizu-cho and Miwa, only a few field-lengths away from the main road connecting Kizu-cho to the rest of Japan. Going up the mountains, leaving Miwa and past a long tunnel, you would first reach Hiroshima after a long while, and from there you could go west to Osaka, or far east to Nagoya, Chiba and the great city of Tokyo. The only other direction was backwards, to the ocean.

Trains didn't exist until after the tunnel, but you could travel the road by bus or car, which we never did as children. We never knew a civilization beyond our own. Stepping onto the porch to face our backyard, the trees toward the mountain grew so large that their leaves blocked out all but traces of the morning sun, leaving our house in a state of starry darkness.

Ours was the only family in Kizu-cho that didn't farm. Father worked every day for the big city, and when the Internet came from beyond the mountains, we were the first house to get it. Our home PC wasn't as good as the one the Hasegawas down the road

owned, a sleek, matte gray VAIO 505 from Yamada Electronics. Our computer was much older, with a CRT monitor that bulged out like a fat belly from its boxy plastic confines. But, after all, Father was an important man, so one hot and muggy morning, large vans from Softbank came with men and boxes marked “ADSL.” And for the rest of the day, people from town finally found a reason to walk by and say hello.

We had visitors from Miwa as well. But they didn't come all the way down here to admire our technology; they were angry at Father, and they were in town because they knew he would be home today. There was talk in the house about merging, about losing identities and becoming weaker. The adults used words like capitulation, and situations most regrettable. They lowered their voices when Suzu and I came home from a half-day at Kizu Elementary, but we knew them by their faces: Even Miwa's head priest, dressed not in his ceremonial garb, but jeans and a linen button-down, had shown up to complain. We bowed politely, and they said nothing to us.

“No-Shrine Town” was what the residents of Miwa called Kizu-cho. Unlike them, we had no money to maintain any of the old rites except the autumn rice festival. The fishers on the coast maintained simple rituals for the sea spirits, but our shrines were unmanned and in a shameful state. The last dedicated priest had moved away years before we were born. Even the great forest god of the Kizu foothills was nearly forgotten, unmentioned except by old men and children.

Treating Miwa and Kizu-cho as a single entity, even just on paper, was an unforgivable insult. The people of Kizu surely agreed as well, they said, speaking with an indignity that was nearly religious. But my father told the visitors that it was already

decided and done, delicately touching the thin necktie that he wore every single day without fail. Municipal mergings like these would help poor country districts all over Japan. We were merely one more name on the list; nothing could be helped. Crying to one city employee wouldn't stop anything.

After the Softbank vans and the visitors from Miwa had left, on the following Sunday, Suzu and I sat at the kitchen table, our red randoseru backpacks hanging on the chairs, with a bendy swivel halogen lamp hanging above our heads like a mutual halo. Between us was an open piece of newspaper. And in the center, taking in all the light, was an opened package.

The device was rectangular, gray and ridged in the center like the shell of a living crab. Four black ovals peered out from the front, shrouded by bubble wrap and foam peanuts. We maintained a respectful silence as I pulled the device out of its packaging, this shockingly light piece of plastic, which our father had brought to us like an artifact from another world. We weren't ever to touch it, he said.

I set the modem on the table, brushing off flecks of styrofoam. Suzu stroked the device with the side of her thumb, cocking her head and pulling her hair away from one ear to listen to the sandpapery sound of the textured plastic. My sister's eyes were closed in mysterious satisfaction. When I told her to stop, she didn't listen.

“Just let me,” she said quietly.

The manual for the device, a fold-out piece of paper at the bottom of the box, was dense and nearly unreadable, a cryptograph of cross-sectioned diagrams, kanji characters that I hadn't yet learned in school, and foreign words that I would simply never know.

Setting it aside, I plugged in the adapter, a black and heavy thing that I feared wouldn't even hang from our ancient wall socket. A few years earlier, I belabored to stick a long screw into one of the socket holes. I received a good shock, and the burn marks on my fingers never completely went away.

Now, when the teeth of the adapter plug slid tightly into the electrical outlet, I felt that same power surging in, but it wasn't the fickle force that I encountered in childhood. The electrical power warmed up the black plastic in my hand until the adapter was the same temperature as my skin, and then warmer still.

"I need to put this in," I told Suzu, not letting go of the adapter, using my other hand to hold the A/C cable. She moved away from me, but kept her fingertips in contact with the modem's shell. I pushed the metal cylinder at the end of the cable into its matching hole behind the modem, where it connected with a solid click.

On the front of the modem, a single red eye blinked to life and became a solid light. A few seconds later, next to it, another light flickered and kept flickering steadily, this one bright green. And above each light was a label, which Suzu read aloud as they turned on.

Red.

"Power."

And green.

"Internet."

When Father came home from work, he responded with fury, taking away our books and games, throwing away the convenience store dinner he had bought for us,

ordering us to go straight to bed. And we listened through the wall, as Father played games and watched videos in the living room by himself, until we fell asleep. And in the morning, he was gone again.

But before all that, as Suzu and I listened to the device tremble and breathe, not knowing what it was for, but knowing that we had been the ones to bring it to life, we looked at each other, and we thought we had done quite well.

Tokyo, present day. The girl has gotten lost.

The buttons on her clamshell phone require her to press her thumbs hard into the plastic. She wants to upgrade badly. Even grandmas and office ladies, in this day and age, have touchscreen phones. But the girl's medication doesn't come cheap, and the rest of what she has to spend goes to the necessities of makeup and clothes. An ironclad rule of her world: The good-looking freelancer gets the job.

She sighs, her breath turning white as she types out her search request: A cafe and bar in Shimokitazawa.

She finds it. And as the crosswalk turns green, she sends her client an email:

“I'm going to be late!”

He's waiting for her when the door chimes and she comes in a rush, her cheeks red from the cold, a tinge of frost melting on her nose. The frost turns into a droplet, perfectly round and reflective, in the center of her face like a star. That's what makes him smile at first, and the smile is what makes her recognize him, even though this is the first time they've ever met.

The place is dimly lit and smoky, but that's where the air of romance ends: The walls are covered with a hodgepodge of plastic figurines, photographs of music idols, handwritten notes tacked to the wood panels above the bar, some with faded photographs. The lights make pink heart patterns on the walls. The music playing on the speakers is electrical and complex, but it's a song the girl recognizes from Zelda, or Dragon Quest. Perhaps a mashup of the two.

She takes a chance and sits down without introducing herself. The boy is dressed all in black, a light brown scarf half-unwrapped from his neck. He looks her in the eye immediately, not sizing her up, the way that she's used to from other men. It takes her aback.

“You chose a weird bar,” she says.

“It was close to where I'm staying,” he replies. “Are you the psychic consultant?”

“Practitioner of the esoteric sciences,” she corrects him. She bows politely and recites her online name. The warmth of the air in the bar makes her hair loose, and it falls carelessly over her face. She brushes it aside with acrylic nails. “It's nice to finally meet.”

The smile on his face from when she first came in is mostly gone. The boy's default expression is disarmingly serious. “Will you help me find what I'm looking for?” he asks. His voice is higher-pitched than she was expecting.

“Yes,” she says.

“But will you listen to me first?”

“Of course,” she says. “We'll do whatever you want.”

The boy nods. He seems relieved. He pulls out an envelope and slides it to her.

“Then I'd like to begin now.”

The girl takes out a notepad and pen, envelope ignored for the moment. And she motions to the bartender so that she can order a drink.

## Chapter 2

A few months after Suzu and I woke up the modern, in our last year of elementary school, I received my first dreams of my father and mother. The bed that Suzu and I shared was an enormous mattress, which barely fit into the room where we slept. It used to belong to our parents.

Father was a native of Kizu-cho, the child of a disgraced fisherman. That fisherman died long before Suzu and I were born, before Father even left the town and came back with Mother, but his influence stayed with us: in the shadows in which we lived, in how the elders from town treated us, in the way Father bought groceries in the city instead of shopping at Kizu-cho's market. There was an incident in the middle Showa years, the 1960s, during the era of student protests. The town never spoke of it, but they never forgave us for it either. So we stayed at the border, where the trees grew tall and hid us from sight.

Father, for his part, acted as if he'd never had a father, like a man spontaneously generated from the ether, fully formed, in suit and tie. He went faithfully to work in the city, and sometimes he came home with microwaved dinners for us, and always with gadgets and movies for himself, to be enjoyed after we went to sleep. When Father had to be back in Kizu-cho for longer than a night, he slept in a chair in the kitchen, or in a quickly made futon in the living room. As long as we didn't interrupt him in his pursuits or ask questions, and as long as we weren't causing problems in school, he left us for the caretaker to deal with.

Photos of our grandfather were taken out from albums, leaving clean white squares in the paper where they had once been. If we had any photos of Mother, they were surely hidden from us.

In my dreams, my parents were young, and my mother was beautiful, with long brown hair like sepia ink. She was more incredible than I imagined, like a magazine model, or a music idol. Her ears and eyes were perfectly formed, her legs smoothly infinite. To my young mind they seemed to be fighting, my parents locked by their hands and mouths in a ferocious struggle. I heard the ocean as their bodies moved, the pounding surf, the shivering of rice stalks in strong wind. They pressed into each other, and at the height of their battle was when I woke up, gasping, staring at the dawn light against my wall.

There was a large white curtain between Suzu's side of the bed and mine. This wasn't our idea. When Suzu turned ten the previous year, our caretaker insisted that a lady needed a special kind of privacy, and so the border went up. Moments after I woke up, Suzu's index finger pressed through, prodding my sweaty back.

I stayed as still as possible, denying the urge to squirm or cry out. After a minute, she withdrew in silence, and I heard her breathe slowly as she shifted to be closer to me, her feet making mysterious shapes in the curtain. Then she lunged, her hand breached the barrier, and the pinching began. I gritted my teeth, because if I made any sound now, I would be at Suzu's mercy tomorrow. That was the game we played, again and again.

Her overture movements were soft and ticklish, to try and make me laugh. She practiced this in a steady rhythm at first, massaging my skin in a way that was almost

pleasurable. Then the next instant, Suzu grabbed at my flesh and squeezed so brutally hard that I could only suck in my breath from an all-encompassing pain. She repeated this pattern on different parts of my body – pleasure, then pain, and back again.

In response, I bit my lip, chewed the inside of my cheek, and twisted my own fingers until I was sure, with just a bit more pressure, that they would break. Then, and only then, could I endure. But it was a matter of minutes before she magically found my breaking point, twisting a spot of vulnerable flesh at the side of my belly until I screamed.

Immediately, Suzu stopped. She hovered over me like a ghost. And then she snorted and turned over. Catching my breath as I listened to her fall asleep, I gently probed the place where she had pinched me, which was still throbbing and warm, until I slept as well.

I was the first to come down in the morning, only a few hours later, when our caretaker was cooking breakfast. When Suzu appeared, her hair in fresh twin braids, she dropped her red backpack into my lap, which nearly made me spill a bowl of eggs and rice. And she said, under her breath, so that the caretaker wouldn't hear:

“Carry it, slave.”

For the rest of the day, I was her servant. That was the punishment game for losing. At school, I gave my sister half of my miso mackerel, and a huge helping from my own tin of rice.

“You're not hungry, Fumi?” said the teacher.

“My sister's very hungry,” I said. Suzu ate without a word, her portion and mine both.

No one outside of us could know-- not teachers, not other students. When school was over and we skipped playing with the other students to go to the foothills, I carried her things up the road like a work animal.

“Did you save your milk for the forest god?” Suzu said, skipping over the large stones in her way. Obediently, I produced the box of milk that I saved from lunch. She poked a hole in the top with her teeth and squirted the milk in wide arcs as we walked along the wilder paths, watering the trees and tall grass as we passed. I was thirsty, but we needed to give offerings regularly, or the gods would get mad.

“They told me they would,” said Suzu, when I asked why they would get mad at us.

Since we were little, the gods talked to Suzu. Only I knew this, catching her in first grade muttering to her lunch bowl. We had learned from the teacher that there were seven gods in every grain of rice, and Suzu told me they sang. She told me to keep it a secret from everyone, and I didn't tell a soul. When she read the first stories about the forest god in the library, she began talking about that, too, which was when we began taking our hikes into the foothills. Only now was I beginning to conceive of the idea that she wasn't telling the truth, that Suzu had made it up to seem special compared to me. But when she said something came from the gods, I obeyed. It was easier than not doing it.

“Hear us,” said Suzu, splashing the milk offering into the grass, the bark of the trees, the soil upon which we walked. She spoke to the gods. “Hear us.”

The punishment game lasted until we went home in the evening, after which I was free, until the next time I lost. But I never won, not once. My sister was the greater one:

the first to walk, first to speak, and then she made me crawl after her until I walked, talked at me until I could talk. Even now, I believe that – like a pounded rice cake, or a poorly-made figure of clay – I was always destined to be crushed.

“Why didn't you fight back?” asks the girl, when the boy tells her this story.

“I couldn't,” he says. “She was my sister.”

The girl shakes her head. She is an only child; this makes no sense to her. In the pink light of the bar, the circle lenses in her eyes make her retinas shine purple. Her way of speaking is slow, deep-voiced, and it takes her a moment to think of the correct words for things. The boy doesn't mind. To him, it's comforting.

The boy and the girl are finishing their drinks. Tokyo is large and loud, even in a relatively quiet corner like Shimokitazawa. It gives the boy a headache. Were it not for the girl, sitting across from him in a white dress and stained canvas shoes, he would not even be here. She's much like what he expected her to be, and a little more charming too.

Her vodka tonic is done, and she rolls the cup around in her palm, watching the last globules of ice travel like mercury around the perimeter of the bottom. “What's it like, having a twin?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever notice how you're different from other people? I mean, even compared to other people who have siblings.” Her eyes brighten. “It's like Gemini in real life, you know?”

“I think our relationship would have been forbidden, if anyone knew the truth.”

She bites her lip; she wants to ask. But a moment later, she nods.

“Are you sure you can find the person I'm looking for?” the boy asks. He has asked this question before, through instant message and e-mail, but this is the first time he's voiced the question in person.

“Maybe. Once I've heard enough, we can try to seek her out. No guarantees,” the girl says carefully. She watches the boy for any signs of skepticism, or worse, desperate belief. Internet psychics are too often the final recourse, and the people she gets have been transformed: by stress, by fear, or by the simple realization that they're willing to do anything. That's why she makes clients meet in public first, and why she keeps one hand always on her bag. Too many close calls.

But he gives none of the usual warning signs. The boy leans in. And although they're alone in the bar now, she reciprocates, as if they're about to share a great secret.

“To tell you the truth,” he says, barely above a whisper. “To me... life without a twin doesn't even make sense.”

### Chapter 3

We had no mother, after Mother died. We only had our caretaker, who came during the day.

The caretaker was a well-dressed woman, and her glasses were very fashionable, red and rectangular and thick, as was the style on TV. Whenever she cooked, with one hand she tasted miso soup with a wooden spoon, and with the other hand, fingers curved, she slowly adjusted her glasses. Ka-clink, ka-clink.

But in most other ways, she wasn't beautiful. The caretaker was short and plump, with poor skin, and legs that were the same width from the thigh all the way down to the foot, which Suzu and I called radish legs. She had a shiny keloid growth in the center of her nose, and when she talked, it was hard not to stare at it, the smooth, hard reflection like a fingernail trying to come out from her face. When she was angry at us, which was often, every part of her skin would turn red except for that part. At those moments, it looked even more like she had a twin, unborn, almost but not completely subsumed by her body.

Perhaps that was why she hated us. Whenever the caretaker thought we had misbehaved, she would bend us over her knee, whipping our backsides furiously with the thick end of the same wooden spoon that she used to do the cooking.

“It handles the heat from the stove better than a metal ladle,” she explained in the kitchen, not expecting me to understand. She would let me taste the food if I was hungry,

and sometimes even offered a piece of rice cake, dipped in sweet bean flour. Since I so often gave my food to Suzu, I lingered in the kitchen when I could.

One week after I lost the pinching game for the tenth, the hundredth time, she gave Suzu a swift beating for not putting away her colored pencils. I looked at Suzu's eyes through her upturned hair. My sister refused to shed any tears. And once it came time to beat me as well, which was for the sake of being fair, I cried and screamed and lamented my fate as a bad child, just as our caretaker wanted. She lifted me up, adjusted her red glasses and patted me on the head. Her hand was still warm and dry from gripping the wooden spoon.

“Good,” she said. “Your sister should learn from you.”

I was rewarded in the night by vicious pinches and mutterings from Suzu, who turned her body far from me on the other side of the bed, even though it was getting colder in the night, and we weren't allowed to operate the kerosene heater by ourselves.

“The gods will hate you,” she said spitefully. Then, after a long while, she whispered, “That woman isn't even our mother.”

“I know,” I said, because I had seen my mother in my dreams, and because I knew that sometimes the caretaker stayed at our house without telling us. The caretaker had the key, and at those times she waited for Father to come home.

I had seen them together one night, while I was going to the bathroom: Father with his head in the caretaker's bosom, seated on the floor, the caretaker sitting up on her knees and stroking his hair. They were fully dressed, doing nothing else, the gray light

from TV static making them appear like statues in love. And when I deliberately made noise in the hallway, the TV turned itself off immediately, and they became shadows.

“I have something to show you,” said Suzu.

“What?”

“I know who our mother really is.” She pulled the curtain so she could look into my eyes, perhaps expecting me to have a look of surprise. Her eyes were so dark and wide open that one might have expected to find stars inside. After midnight, in the living room, she showed me the tapes.

In a cabinet behind our old TV, a row of black analog tapes sat like volcanic stones, each with a white label listing a month, a year, and some with the English word “LIVE.” People in the cities, and probably in Miwa too, now owned DVD players. But we and most of the town still used VHS for most things. Picking one carefully, Suzu placed it in the VCR and pressed Play. And even though there wouldn't be anyone coming home until daybreak, Suzu set the volume to just short of mute, so that the sounds from the video were nearly overwhelmed by electric static.

It was a live concert, with an idol who, the title screen told us, was named Aka Sakurai. In frilly outfits and short bobbed hair, she danced onscreen to pop music that sounded like it came from twenty years ago. The stage was haphazardly built and cheap, and the crowd of men before her, swinging glowsticks and pumping their arms in rhythm to the music, was small. My father could have been among them, these single men who didn't belong at a concert for a teenage girl, who shouted and sweated the most. The camera shook along with the cheering.

“There she is,” said Suzu, pointing at the idol. “She has to be.”

“Mother?”

“She has to be,” Suzu said again, looking upward and blinking against the light as the scene changed to a summer beach video. The girl Aka, lovely even through the horribly grainy, overplayed resolution, was twirling gracelessly in a pink bikini, wearing an enormous smile. She was very petite, her legs slim and smooth like quince wood. The cameraman asked an embarrassing question, and instantly she turned red all over.

That person wasn't our mother. I knew my mother's face from dreams, her sepia hair and her dark, deep expression. The girl on the screen was someone else completely. But the next day at school I saw Suzu's smile, and the way she twirled at recess while the other girls were playing jump-rope. And for a short while, there was no pinching game, and Suzu's eyes really did have stars inside. So I said nothing.

At the beginning of winter, our caretaker said we could finally use the taps to wash ourselves. The water pipes had been broken for a long time, and we were getting by on lukewarm water from the kitchen. Suzu was the first to take a bath – I had meant to be first, but Suzu snuck her way in while I was doing chores. I didn't realize until I was halfway undressed and saw her underwear in the hamper, with the light coming from the bathroom. A mixture of curiosity and righteous anger, seeing her clothes there where my clothes should have been first, made me decide to stay and peek.

Suzu's hair, which she had kept in a short bob until the fourth grade, was now grown past her shoulders. Freshly rinsed, it flowed like ink across her back. Traces of

acne dotted the space between her shoulder blades, accented by the droplets that trailed down her skin and brought out the shape of her body in the steam. She clicked her tongue as she wrung out the water in her hair, preparing to step into the bathtub, and when she turned, I nearly saw the buds of her breasts. And that was when the floor creaked under my foot, and she saw me.

If Suzu had screamed then, if she had hit me and called me names and told me to get out, perhaps things might have been different. If I had run, too, we may have entered a different universe. But we were silent.

Suzu stood up slowly, covering her front as best she could, and a flushed face, she closed the door. Feeling hot and embarrassed, I went to the kitchen.

“Dinner is almost ready,” said the caretaker. “Do you want a taste?”

“Are you going to marry Father?” I asked.

She turned around, adjusting her red glasses. She blinked once. “That’s a strange question. Why are you asking me that?”

“I want to know. You were hugging him that time in front of the TV. Did you kiss?”

The caretaker began to flush red, except for the growth on the tip of her nose. But rather than grabbing me and spanking me straight away for being a bad child, as I wanted her to, instead she turned around and lowered the heat on the stove. It smelled like she was making sweet beef stew.

“I’ve known your dad since we were in middle school,” she said. “Even before he got married to that woman... your mom.”

“That woman” was the only other name we knew for Mother. Father had brought her home from Tokyo, and she was already pregnant with us by then. She had been an entertainer, or something of the kind, which the adults in town said with jovial scorn when they thought we were out of earshot. That woman. The entertainer. Perhaps she had been a bar hostess, the kind that poured drinks for rich businessmen and lit their cigarettes. I tried to imagine it.

The caretaker tapped the ladle against the edge of the pot with a sound of finality. “Your dad is hopeless, so I'm here to help him where I can... And good friends always hug each other. That's just natural. You'll understand someday.”

After dinner, Suzu and I went outside to play. Wrapped in the chill of the night, on the street outside our house that bordered a small rice field, the two of us steamed like fresh meat buns. Suzu was almost ghostly, emitting a haze that trailed from her whole body, even her arms as she held them out in the air, and from her hands as she opened them, palms up, to catch the first tiny snowflakes that were beginning to fall. And catch them she did, one or two against her fingertips, that melted as soon as they touched.

She threw off her jacket. She was wearing a white pajama shirt underneath, and the leftover moisture from the bath made the fabric hold against Suzu's body as a cold breeze passed through. And for the first time I noticed the grown-up shape of her shoulders, the curve of her neck, the growth of her breasts that were now covered with a bra.

The snowfall was so weak that even the light of the streetlamps seemed to ward it away for now, and so I stood under one, watching my sister as the wisps of steam

ascended and disappeared in the air. I thought of what the caretaker said, and wondered if I could hug my sister, like the caretaker had with Father. Perhaps we, too, would sit in the dark together, content in each other's arms, not even needing to move. I realized that I had only one friend in this world.

And then Suzu shivered, putting on her coat, and the moment was gone.

## Chapter 4

“Look,” said the caretaker, showing me a small booklet with printed numbers. Father had left a bank book, saying he would leave money in it for our use. She put the bank book away in a music box with a key lock, and put it in the closet.

By our first week of junior high school, the dissolution of Kizu-cho and Miwa was finished, and the creation of the city of Satomiya was officially underway. There was a founding ceremony at the old town hall, which we didn't attend. Among other things, more roads between the two regions would be built with money from the city, which meant that Father would be home even less than before. As for us, Kizu Junior High School was officially closed, and its few remaining students moved to the new Satomiya Junior High School. Classes were to be held, until further notice, at the building that was once known as Miwa Junior High.

At dawn, the farmers were already up and active, preparing the rice fields to be planted by pressing the earth with machines and underfoot. The town didn't look any different to me, as Suzu and I walked to the bus stop. Even while riding the bus, up through the foothills and into the Miwa Valley, I thought everything looked the same as it did the day before, and in the months and years before. As we sat together in our starchy new uniforms, in a block of seats with the other Kizu students, I wondered what exactly had changed about our world.

The new name was nice, at least. Satomiya.

After we passed the former Miwa town limits, tilted ever so slightly upward as we went deep into the mountain, the road went from gravelly concrete to smooth asphalt with a decisive thump, followed by luxurious silence. The other five children on the bus, fellow graduates from the one class at Kizu Elementary, peered out the windows as if for the first time at Miwa's myriad of hot-spring resorts, the quaint network of cobblestone roads and bridges off the main road, the beautiful convenience stores where one could buy anything.

Ancient legends said that Susano-o-Mikoto, the most august god of the ocean, bathed himself in the natural springs of Miwa after his marriage to Princess Kushi-Inada, whose hand he had won after slaying the dragon Orochi. According to the story, the warmth and healing powers of the sulfuric water so pleased the god and his wife that they blessed the valley and uplifted its god to become the protector of marital bliss. For as long as anyone could remember, the town of Miwa was a popular anniversary spot for married couples, and many local honeymoons were planned around the summer festival for Miwa's god.

“You're never out of money in the mountains,” went the saying in Kizu-cho. School tried to spin it as a proverb of self-reliance, but most of the children had grandparents who taught them what it really meant. From a young age, we all looked up in the mountains and felt a sense of quiet indignation, anger over an injustice that was beyond anyone's memory.

In Kizu-cho, the ancient legend went differently: Susano-o-Mikoto was delighted not just with the waters of the Miwa Valley, but also with the plentiful hunting in the Kizu foothills, and the gods of both lands were supposed to be blessed. But Miwa's god

became selfish and took both blessings for himself, and so they became rivals. Another variant myth, less known even among the oldest residents, said that Miwa and Kizu's gods were actually twin siblings, and that Susano was their father, testing their worth. But Kizu's god had won the competition in that version of the story, and it was clear that this was not the case. Gods were supposed to protect their towns, and keep them from falling apart.

Now that we were one city, would there be a new god for Satomiya? I didn't know.

The first procession of Miwa children began to enter the bus from the next stop. They were pale and talkative, but they didn't look at us or talk to us. Their shoes were a parade of shiny new leather. The boys had fresh, styled haircuts, unlike the cheap buzz cuts that I and the other boys from my town had. The girls smiled easily, and had perfect ribbons on their shirts. Their teeth were fine, clean, and perfectly white.

“It won't be easy to go to the woods anymore,” said Suzu. She was staring out the window, ignoring all the new faces.

We never mentioned the forest god by name anymore, but we still left the milk offerings in the wild grass without fail. Our stack of empty milk boxes, filled with dirt and left from years and years of offerings, was now a pyramid that nearly reached our waists. The bottom layer was ancient and crumbling, old paper returning at last to the earth, while the top was shiny and new.

“We should focus on studying now,” I said, copying the words from the principal's opening speech at the entrance ceremony. “We're not just kids from now on, so...”

She gave me a withering glare. I was quiet.

We saw the sign for Satomiya Junior High School, a makeshift canvas over the front of the building, which became larger and larger as we drew close, like a crudely gift-wrapped reality. The students from Miwa kept talking comfortably, in their own world, enveloping the students from Kizu-cho in our own embarrassed silence as the bus pulled into school.

The boy has finished a scotch and soda. Now he warms the empty cup, rolling it between his hands. It's his second drink. The cup's mouth has an odd shape, like a wide grin. It looks strange against the boy's mysteriously blank expression, enhanced by the overhead lights that have flickered on after dark.

The boy is incredibly good-looking, the girl realizes. He's shorter even than most Japanese, a slight figure almost like a bird's. But his hair is long and full like ebony wood, and his hands are thin, delicate. A raven, perhaps.

Next to him, the girl feels frowsy and unattractive. She scratches an itch at the nape of her neck and feels the layer of makeup on her face, the pimple by her left temple, her hard jaw line. The girl has worked hard to be the girl she wants to be, but sometimes she wonders if it still shows.

“I've never heard of Satomiya,” said the girl. “Or Kizu-cho, actually.”

“That's okay,” he says, an apologetic smile about to form on his lips. “Nobody has.”

Science was my strongest subject, English and art the worst. Suzu would have done well at social studies, if she paid attention outside of folklore. But she was exemplary at PE, and her sense for music was masterful. We were both only decent at math.

There were four first-year classes at Satomiya Junior High, and none of them had more than two of the seven students from Kizu-cho. The idea was to encourage integration, rather than forming cliques based on our regions. But the students from Miwa had grown up with each other, attended North Miwa Elementary School from kindergarten to the sixth grade, so the only real effect was to isolate us from our fellows. Suzu and I were placed in neighboring classrooms, watched over by homeroom teachers from Miwa. All of the Kizu-cho faculty had been moved to departments in the Board of Education, to do their time as administrators.

I was fine with not talking to anyone. At the end of every school day, Suzu and I walked together to the bus, and from there to the woods behind our house, to hike and look at things and talk to the gods. I didn't know how the other students fared; it didn't really matter. And then, one month after starting school, as the air was turning towards the warmth and wetness of the rainy season, I found sharp tacks inside my school shoes.

All of them were pointed upward, in the center of the sole, to stab the soft arches of my feet. If I hadn't noticed a slight metallic shiver as I pulled my shoes from the locker, I would have stepped on them for sure. Suzu's shoes, we discovered, had biting insects in them, which were harder to clean out. I emptied both pairs of shoes in the trash can of the boys' restroom.

It happened to us and three other students: Kenji Miyamoto, Mayu Hasegawa and

Satomi Nishida, all from Kizu-cho.

The objects in our shoes were all different: Shards of a broken CD-R, under a mixture of ketchup and mustard in curliques, as if freshly squeezed from a packet. Whole, room-temperature eggs, placed carefully to shatter at the toes. A dead forest frog, arms drying into fragments and mouth agape. Aside from the last item and the insects, they could all be acquired from the convenience store a few blocks away. The other children from Kizu-cho were slow to talk to my sister and me, but when we convened over the lunch break to ask around, an idea slowly began to emerge among us.

“They did it,” said Mayu Hasegawa, the daughter of Kizu-cho's former police chief, who now worked for a junkyard. She rubbed the shoulder of Satomi, who was visibly shaken by the dead animal in her shoes. Mayu was short, even shorter than me, and had a look about her like a nervous mouse. But the light in her eyes then was like a tiger's. “It has to be one of those kids.”

Suzu started a fight that afternoon with a girl from Miwa, behind school. I was her slave that day, so instead of letting me go home, I had to hold her bag as she shoved Nanako Oie from Class 1-2 into the dirt of the empty garden.

“Oh, sorry. I tripped,” said Suzu. The tone in her voice didn't match at all.

The girl, looking up at my sister, and then at me, with an expression of uncomprehending anger, was pale and pretty. A perfect Miwa child. There was now a spot of dirt on her cheek, and I had no doubt that her bottom was soaked with wet compost.

“Are you going to tell your friends?” said Suzu. “Go ahead. Tattle.”

“Was she the one that did it?” I asked, after Nanako brushed herself off and

stalked away, tears rimming her eyes and threatening to spill over like water from an overfull bucket.

“I don't know,” Suzu replied with a shrug. “It doesn't matter. Just do it once, and whoever's behind it will know we aren't playing around with them.” She dusted off her hands. “Did you save your milk?”

I nodded.

On the bus back, the Miwa girls kept a wide berth from us until they got off, but the other Kizu students acted as normal. There weren't any cross-friendships between the towns, so our side probably hadn't heard about what my sister did. At the woods, Suzu sprayed my milk with absent-minded pleasure. We were taking shorter walks now, since more of our time went to school than before.

“Hear us,” she said, to the open twilight. “Hear us. We are your loyal servants, your priest and priestess.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. I was just past the age to believe in gods. But I gathered the dry dirt as usual, filling up the empty milk box and packing in the dirt with my finger. Another brick for our great pyramid, which stood next to a bent evergreen tree.

“They're telling us to watch over the other students from our town,” she said.

“Who?”

“The forest god. And the rice god. And the little gods of the sea.” She closed her eyes and clapped her hands twice.

“You know,” I said, “this isn't fun anymore.”

“What isn't?” She opened one eye to look at me.

“All the god stuff. Messing with other people is serious. I don't want to get in

trouble.”

Suzu stared at me. Several sentences formed in her mouth, were about to be spoken, were abruptly aborted. Then her lips became a hard line, just like the caretaker's whenever she got angry at us. Suzu turned her back to me.

“Fine. Go away. You're not allowed to come here anymore.”

When I lingered silently, she scowled and pinched me hard, in the soft spot that always made me cry out.

“You don't care about me, so go!” she said.

“That isn't true,” I said lamely.

“You're just a heathen,” she spat. A word we had learned only recently, but it stung me like the greatest insult.

“I'm not!”

Now she ignored me, closing her eyes tightly and praying over the pyramid of milk boxes, as if this monument itself were the forest god and she was communing with it. I kept talking to her, begging her to listen to me. I talked until I became angry, and with an accusatory finger, I threatened never to do anything for her again. And then I burst into tears, and I said I was sorry, that I would take everything back. But all the while, she said nothing. When it was time to go home, she ran ahead of me, leaving me to go back to town alone.

## Chapter 5

The following morning, Suzu left before me, not even looking at me as we waited at the bus stop. I had cried all night until Suzu threatened to hit me, and in the morning I felt dry, but the freshness of rejection made me want to cry again. We rode the bus far apart from each other, Suzu watching construction begin on the highway through her window.

When we got to school, Suzu's indoor shoes were missing. We found them during the lunch break, in a trashcan in the girls' restroom, covered in dirty tissue. Kenji Miyamoto's shoes were also gone, but they were in a bush right outside the entrance. No one else's had been thrown away or tampered with, so the discussion at lunchtime was little. Even if we did come from the same town, the three of them knew who our father was, and they didn't necessarily want to be allied with us.

That afternoon, Suzu retaliated for her shoes by grabbing a random pair of shiny leather shoes from a locker, making me watch for any onlookers as she ground them into the muddy gravel outside. Then she put them back, scratched and damaged into a truly awful state. I was terrified of getting caught and punished by the teachers, but Suzu seemed to have forgotten my apostasy from the other day, so I didn't complain. In fact, I felt happy to be by her side again, and I appreciated what it meant to be in my sister's good graces.

When it happened yet again the following day, this time with the disappearance of

Suzu and Mayu's PE uniforms, rather than seeking vengeance, we just went home. Suzu fumed in complete silence as she ate dinner and took her evening bath. The developments of the past few days so consumed her that I was only a shadow to her, not ignored, but unacknowledged. She forgot even about the pinching game. That night, hearing her turn in her sleep, I felt a burning desire to help my sister, and to discover who was behind it all.

I woke up before Suzu, when the stars were still out, leaving a note for the caretaker that said I was leaving early for sports.

Taking the earliest bus to Miwa, in which I shared seat space with old fishermen and few others, I arrived at school two hours before usual.

At this time of day, even the pre-rainy season warmth gave way to a brisk morning chill; I regretted not having an extra layer under my uniform. But, warming my hands by shoving them in my pockets and trying to make myself as small as possible, I crouched quietly by one of the bushes by the front gate and waited, my eyes fixed upon the door with the shoe lockers.

After half an hour, a girl hopped over the short gate and went inside. She was wearing our uniform, consisting of a jacket and plaid skirt in the new colors of Satomiya: A field of navy blue, to represent the old town flag of Miwa, with accents of viridian and green standing for the sea and Kizu-cho. I stayed still until I heard the sound of a shoe locker opening up. There was no PE today, so either this mysterious bully would try something new, or as I guessed, they would go after Suzu's shoes again. I had gotten lucky.

I stood up. "Hey, what are you doing?"

My voice wasn't very loud, but it echoed and made the perpetrator jump, dropping Suzu's shoes to the floor. It was Mayu Hasegawa.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I thought I might come early today,” I said. “What about you? What are you doing with my sister's shoes?”

Her gaze darted from the shoes to the locker, as she played with one of her twin tails.

“Wrong locker,” she said.

It wasn't entirely unlikely; their lockers were close. But each door was labeled with a white piece of tape and a name in black marker. It was hard to mistake her family's name with ours. And aside from the teachers, who seemed to live their entire lives in the office, Mayu and I were the only ones here this early. Even the sports teams wouldn't be coming in for another half hour. The judgment was set.

“What's in your other hand?” I asked. “Show me.”

“Nothing.”

“More tacks? Broken glass? Bugs?”

“I said there's nothing!” she showed me her hand.

“Heathen,” I said. I turned around and began to walk away.

“Are you going to tell someone?” said Mayu. Her tone was half pleading, half angry, like she was daring me to tell and yet terrified. She followed me outside. “Are you going to tell the teachers?”

“No,” I said, firmly. “I'm not a tattler.”

“Then what are you going to do?” She reached out to grab my arm and turn me

around. I remembered my sister's wrath earlier that week, how it felt to be abandoned by my own twin in the woods, and I pulled my arm roughly away, so that Mayu stumbled and nearly fell. I wanted her to fall on her face.

“I'm telling my sister,” I said.

“You'd better not!” she said, as I went in the direction of the convenience store to warm up. Her voice, loud and high-pitched, carried far down the road, heard by me and the morning joggers. “You'd better not!”

But when Suzu arrived on the normal bus, that was exactly what I did. Suzu didn't say anything to me then, not even to ask how I'd thought to do it, or to thank me. But her vengeance was most swift and certain: At the first break of the morning, Suzu marched into Mayu's classroom, which Mayu shared with Satomi Nishida along with the Miwa students, and slapped Mayu in the mouth with the back of her hand. A boy from Miwa said that my sister had hit her so hard that Mayu fell out of her seat and bit down on her lip, drawing blood. There was a commotion afterwards.

“They're scary, aren't they,” the girls in my class whispered as they shared the news, almost outside my earshot, but not enough. “Those people from Kizu are so violent. Why don't they just put them in their own class?”

At lunch, I was sent to the office, and found Suzu silent and sitting in a chair in the corner, far away from the teachers. She was allowed to eat, and she did so in belligerent silence, shoveling rice and today's shrimp salad in her mouth. The caretaker was called to take us home early.

When Suzu returned to school a few days later, the bullying began anew. This time, they targeted her schoolbag. She told me to go home before her, and she came back home much later, when it was almost dark. The bag was dripping with dirty water, the buckles broken, with fine slashes all over.

She said, "It's nothing," when the caretaker asked what happened. "I fell into a gutter." I corroborated her story, even though her bag had been fine until I left. She was the only one who had this happen to her. In our room, I let her copy my finished homework.

A week later, she went home before me, with her shoes missing. She had lost them somehow during PE, she said, and her school shoes had to stay at school. Suzu's feet were bruised all over, and her stockings were in shreds. She threw them into the trash and spent the rest of the day barefoot and lightly bandaged, her heels leaving touches of blood on the floor. I followed her, cleaning up the red marks from the floor without saying a word.

The students from Miwa were taking their revenge: For Nanako Oie who was shoved into the dirt of the garden, for the boy among them whose shoes were ruined on the gravel outside school. The truth was that they loathed having to share their school and to act like everything was fine, but none of us had any choice. Our welcome was tenuous to begin with, but now Suzu gave them an enemy.

The other students from Kizu-cho kept an even further distance from us than before. After what had happened with Mayu, they wanted nothing to do with Suzu anymore. When they dealt with me, the best I got was monosyllables. Perhaps they even joined in tormenting Suzu in secret, perpetuating the resentment that their families had

for Father, who destroyed their town and ran away; or for our grandfather, who committed his unnamed sin. I didn't know.

When Suzu came home in the heat of summer, wearing her long winter gym clothes, she sweated heavy droplets from her hands and face, like an over-abundance of tears. That day, there was no story to tell. She ran to her side of the room without a word. I wondered where her school uniform was. Suzu's gym clothes were in the hamper, soaked and warm in their crevices.

Every night after dinner, I had to make a show of putting on my headset, talking to myself about what I was going to listen to on my CD player. That way, Suzu could growl and retch, cry and bite her pillow, without fear that I could hear her rage and weakness. The mornings after, her eyes were bloodshot, and she would have only a bite of breakfast before she stepped out into the sun, her skin gray, her lips a hard line.

Physically, as the weeks went on she seemed to be getting smaller, losing substance. Perhaps it was because she was no longer keeping up with baths or meals, no matter how much the caretaker beat her for being a dirty, misbehaved girl. It became easy for Suzu to hide behind the hair which she was now growing longer and unkempt, as if to obscure her face. And now, when we were supposed to go to the woods together after school, she saved her own milk, and she ordered me to go home by myself. I made myself useful to her by doing homework, so that she could copy my easy answers, and by telling the caretaker that my sister had gotten involved in the literature club at school.

At night, the pinching game became much worse. Now, even when I screamed, Suzu continued past the point of pain, leaving red marks on my skin that became dark bruises the next day. I endured each time, biting back my cries because I didn't want to

lose, but also because I knew that making sound would be useless. She attacked me single-mindedly, an easy target, for no other reason than to hurt someone.

“How long did this go on?” asks the girl.

“A year,” says the boy. “A little more, actually.”

They have moved to one of the few places where a person can expect not to be bothered all night: a twenty-four-hour McDonald's. The dining room is not yet full of sleeping heads on tables, but the dinner crowd has all but disappeared, replaced by people who look drunk, or exhausted, or both. Heads with matted dyed hair, smelling of alcohol, dip precariously to sleep under florescent lights. The boy, watching everyone around him with childlike curiosity, picks at a french fry. His cheeks are red with alcohol flush.

“How is that even possible?” she says. “What were the teachers doing?”

“They talked to us in the office, and a few kids got suspended... And sometimes she had lessons in the nurse's office, so she could come to school without anyone seeing her.” He shook his head. “But you can't fix something like that so simply. We were cursed. That's how it was.”

The girl sucks her teeth in contemplation, an unsettled feeling at the pit of her stomach. She takes out her pill container and begins counting out her dosage, to have with a sip of the boy's Coke Zero.

“Are you not well?”

“I'm fine,” she says flatly. “These are my girl pills.”

“Oh,” he says.

Even as she arranges her dosage in front of him, she isn't sure why she's doing it. Her usual way is to excuse herself to the bathroom, or she schedules her appointments so that she doesn't have to leave home when she takes her pills. But the boy has begun to irritate her somehow, and the ritual of the pills makes her feel at peace.

“I got bullied a lot too, you know,” she says as she organizes.

“Hmm?” The boy has taken back his drink, looking up at the girl as he sips.

“Moved schools twice, because it got so bad. But I always fought back. I never took it sitting down.” The girl is aware of the growing pride in her voice, but she wants him to know.

The boy nods. “You were very strong. I don't think many people could endure the kind of treatment my sister got. Even in a family like mine, you could only take so much.” He pauses, before giving her a slight shrug. “It was fate.”

There it is, the girl thinks. That's what she hates about him.

But she listens.

One night, in a moment of madness, I pinched Suzu back. It was the only time.

The flesh I touched was so soft that I could hardly believe it belonged to another human. My fingers sank in, and with a feeling of sick excitement, I relished trying to get my fingertips to meet somewhere inside her. Suzu, who had been attacking me until just a second before, let out a shriek that made the walls rumble. Then quickly, I withdrew, licking my lips that were suddenly as dry as sand.

In the stillness that followed, I held my breath, listening hard for what Suzu might do. It was another moment before she yanked the curtain aside, rubbing her thigh where I had pinched her. In the violet darkness brought out by the streetlamp through our window, I saw my sister's greasy, tangled hair, her eyes puffy and ringed dark, her Rilakkuma pajamas loose, showing the frilled elastic waistband of her underwear.

Without a word, Suzu grabbed me and pinned my body to the mattress in a judo hold. My arm twisted in a bad direction, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Stop, stop," I yelled, hoping that by making sound, it would somehow mean that I had forfeited for the night, and she would leave me alone. But Suzu threw off my blanket with her free hand, pulling open my nightshirt with such force that a button ripped and fell to the carpet. For a moment, I felt the air cool against my chest. And then she bit me.

It was more than just a motion of the teeth; she sucked at my skin to get the most volume possible, pulling me into her with her lips. Suzu gnawed hard at my flesh, to the point where I was sure she was drawing blood, that she was eating me like a monster and now I was going to die. I felt her tongue licking the wound, swirling like a paintbrush into the dents left by her teeth, only then to bite again, even harder. I clenched my teeth

and bit the inside of my cheek, so that instead of the scream I wanted to let out, the only noise that escaped my mouth was a sobbing groan.

And then she let go, wiping her mouth as she stared at the bite-marked bruise in the middle of my chest. It felt cold and numb, but also so sensitive that I didn't dare to touch, even though my arms were now free. There was no blood after all. But Suzu's lips were trembling and moist, and before she closed the curtain, I thought I saw, perhaps, a smile. Vengeance.

I felt the pain throughout the next day, the crown of pain on my chest, which stabbed at me when I slung my bookbag over my shoulder. The pain made me walk to school next to Suzu with my shoulders hunched over. I hid the wound with my hands when it was time to change for PE, and on bathroom breaks I admired it: the horrible purple and black, the hint of scarring, the memory of being held against my will, struggling, and finally giving in. I hyperventilated in the toilet stalls, thinking of how I would get my revenge, and how horrible it would be if I were to fail and she would dominate me again.

There was no talk this time about becoming her slave. When I came home in the afternoon, wondering why I hadn't seen her at lunch or after school, Suzu was on the computer in the living room, still in her uniform. Someone had thrown away her school shoes again. This time, without even stepping past the threshold to her classroom, she turned around, passed the bus stop, and walked the several kilometers from Miwa to home.

## Chapter 6

After the first week that Suzu refused to go to school, Father had to come home. We hadn't seen him in over a month. But we knew he was working in the city, and everyone in Kizu-cho knew. From the continuing progress on the highway, and the new streetsigns that showed up reading “East Satomiya” above our town, it was clear that he was working hard. Whether it was to give us a needed hand or to destroy us – that depended on who you asked. He used his own key to come into the house, wearing a half-sleeve business shirt and a thin tie.

“I'm home,” he said.

The caretaker took his things, asking if he wanted any barley tea or lemonade. She was wearing jewelry and a layered long skirt, even more fashionable than usual. When he refused the drink, she said, with her eyes downcast, “She's in the room.”

I was in the kitchen. Father handed me a bag, with something approximating a friendly smile. I peered inside. It was clam spaghetti with roe, purchased hot from a convenience store. After a long train and bus ride, it was lukewarm, and droplets of moisture collected under the clear plastic lid like the inside of a cave, dribbling on deflated salmon eggs.

“Here, I bought this for you to eat,” he said. I nodded gratefully, as I was expected to, and sat down at the table to consume it immediately.

From the room, I heard Father shut the door, and then I heard his raised voice in a series of staccato beats. Suzu's voice was low and quiet, and it was frequently interrupted

by Father's angry interjections. But I couldn't hear what they were actually saying. The caretaker watched me anxiously as I ate, not really looking at me or what I was doing.

On the first two days, Suzu's excuse of having a fever worked, and she left my sister alone. Later, when beatings and threats of kicking Suzu out of the house didn't get her out of bed, for the first time I saw real concern in the caretaker's face. She visited the school and talked to the teachers, and in the end, it was decided that Father needed to be called. She was embarrassed to have to go so far, so as I ate, the caretaker asked me meaningless questions:

Is it good? Yes, it's good. Am I glad to see my father? Yes, very glad.

Father came out, droplets of sweat forming a constellation on his forehead. There was a sound from inside the room, like Suzu was throwing herself into a corner of the bed and covering her whole body with her blanket. Then he shut the door, standing behind me. He didn't make any attempt to sit down.

“Is she feeding you right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. The caretaker nodded along with me.

“Are you having any trouble at school?” I noticed the emphasis, the subtlest hint of exasperation around the word *you*, which would be almost perfectly hidden, if you didn't glance at least once at Father's eyes. He wasn't much taller than me, but the lack of movement in his body gave Father an air of authority.

“No, school is fine,” I replied.

Father nodded, and turned to the caretaker. “I'm going to be settling some issues at town hall, then I'm going straight back to work.” If he meant that in a kind of code for

her, to say “wait for me tonight,” I couldn't guess. Perhaps he and she met at love hotels far away from here. The caretaker simply indicated that she understood, obediently placing his briefcase into his hand. She glanced at his collar, and so did I, at the hint of a pink-red smear that was just under the neck line. If it weren't for the powerful smell of garlic and clams from my father's gift to me, I wondered if we might have smelled some perfume on him.

“Work hard,” was all the caretaker said.

“Take care of your sister,” said Father to me. And then he left through the front door, waving politely. Suddenly, I felt that I might never see my father again, so although it was a foreign gesture to us, I waved right back, until the caretaker shut the door.

## Chapter 7

In the middle of my second year of junior high school, Suzu said, on a day that I got out early,

“Let's go to the woods.”

We hiked far that day, taking a route that went past a fence of wood and stone. This was closed property, and technically, we were trespassing. But as we walked on washed-out roads, where metal poles that once marked a bus stop now choked in climbing weeds and nettles, where things man-made bended, twisted and broke to the absolute force of tree branches and roots and flowers, Suzu and I both knew this was false. We saw the true boundary, where the rice fields and buildings ended, and the trees and long grass began, where the ground stopped being perfectly flat and began to rise to heaven. Past this point, there was truly no one to ask permission from except the gods.

“The forest god is welcoming us,” she said, so quietly that I almost didn't hear her. Listening to the birds and the trill of insects around us, I could nearly believe her. It had been a while since she had said anything about them.

Suzu walked ahead of me. She moved freely, straight and forward. I straggled behind her, awkward, fated to trip on every loose rock and hole in the earth. She was wearing her school uniform after a long time, and as Suzu walked, her skirt swayed from side to side, navy and viridian. Occasionally she turned around and told me to hurry up, and I would. Her voice was louder than it had been in many weeks.

It was getting cold, but I felt warm, wrapped in a feeling of familiarity that put a bounce in my step. Once again, after a year of going without her by my side, I was following my sister like a shadow. Perhaps we could be like we used to be. She looked up at the canopy of the leaves, at the specks of cloudy light coming through, and for a moment, I thought I saw my sister smile.

A flock of crows gathered at a flat spot in the hills, where the air was unnervingly still. They cawed loudly as we approached, taking to the sky with such sudden violence and sound that Suzu jumped. And after they cleared the way, as if to fill the empty space, the winds began. There was supposed to be a typhoon coming, which was why I was made to come home early.

When the broken road ended and I saw what was ahead, I shuddered. A building, once pure washed white, now its exterior spotted with bits of gray, stood among the encroaching flora. Half of its windows were so filthy that they were now ghostly translucent, almost opaque. Another third were broken, each a jagged mouth revealing nothing within but darkness. In front of the building, a bronze statue, once of a studious traveler, now seemed to be a living beast, green and hideous, guarding this place. We had taken a roundabout way to get here, but at last, I recognized where we were.

The former Kizu Junior High School had not done well in three years of solitude. The building was officially abandoned while we were still elementary school students, with plans for demolition that were forgotten with the building of the roads. Now it looked the way it probably would for fifty, a hundred years hence: Wild, forbidding, utterly quiet.

"Come on," said Suzu. "We're going to the roof."

I shook my head. "We can't go in there. What if there's somebody there? Or a bear or something?"

"We'll be safe."

My knees shook, and I felt my nose burn in preparation for tears. But I was too old for that now, and I wouldn't turn back. I was too afraid to return home by myself, to navigate the unfamiliar woods alone, and then try to explain to the caretaker where my sister had gone. Suzu knew this, and she waited with her arms crossed. This was how it was going to go. I would obey.

We slipped through a crack in the front door without touching it, Suzu's hair brushing against the nettles that were growing out of the cracks. Once inside, I could see that what I had imagined to be total darkness, in fact, was broken through by gray from the windows in the upper floors, making everything just barely visible in a translucent web of light, speckled with floating dust. The school smelled like old textbooks and mold, like the mountains that still surrounded us. The walls creaked and shuddered against the wind.

None of it mattered to Suzu. The handrail at the stairs was so rotted through that it crumbled like caked earth to the touch, and she took pleasure in tapping it as she walked, leaving footprints in the fallen dust. I did my best to follow her exactly, walking step by step to avoid making a new set of tracks, because for some reason I feared making fresh marks in the earth. But very soon I failed and left a double impression on the floor, her footprint and mine, like the hoof of a large beast. Thinking about it frightened me, just as the dead hallways we ascended through frightened me, with their dirty single shoes and broken blackboards with streaks of dust and chalk. But Suzu wouldn't like it if I clung to

her back. We were much too old now.

We passed the barricade of stacked chairs tied with jump-rope, which blocked the doorway to the roof. When she thrust open the door, a gust blew Suzu's hair so that strands of it tickled my nose, making me sneeze and take in a gulp of terrible wet air. I coughed and rubbed my eyes, and I saw in an instant that Suzu's skirt was flipped up by the wind, which she pressed back down upon her thighs. Her legs were absolutely white.

"Let's do a courage test," she said, as the rain started getting heavier. She pointed to the edge of the roof where a fence should have been, to keep us from falling.

Climbing the ledge, my legs shaking, I imitated Suzu who had gone first, standing up and spreading her arms wide in a T pose. I looked toward the horizon, arms spread and eyes open, not daring to peek at the cobblestones many stories below.

From this vantage point, I could see the rice fields bowing to the wind so hard that they looked like tatami, and the gray, distant line of the ocean as it crashed against the concrete barriers protecting our town. We were above all the trees, and could see them shiver in rhythm with the sea waves. Suzu took a deep breath beside me, and for the space of that single breath she and I were two primal entities, gods beholding the birth of a new universe.

Then a gust of wind almost pushed me forward, and in terror for my life, I fell backwards onto the concrete, soaking my pants in a grimy puddle. Suzu looked back at me triumphantly.

"You chicken! I knew you couldn't handle it!" she shouted, the wind sweeping her hair, making it appear like a dark corona around her face.

Then Suzu turned around and screamed into the typhoon, stretching her chest

precariously beyond the outer boundary of the rooftop. But it didn't seem like she would go over the edge; rather, it looked as though she might take a step into the air, and the storm would carry her aloft and she would fly. She screamed, long and loud, to forget me and everything around her. And her voice in the storm became a roar in itself, mingling with the force of the elements in such a way that, for a moment, they were indistinguishable.

I shouted something as she fell. I must have. Though I couldn't tell you what, now.

When Suzu and I descended the hill hours later, it was well past dark. We went home to a vicious beating from the caretaker: for being late, for being out in a dangerous storm, for being soaking wet and ruining our clothes. Suzu didn't say what had happened. And we had no dinner that night, which was fine, because I wasn't hungry at all.

Lying in bed, I remembered the height of the storm, and Suzu's broken neck. Looking down from the ledge where my sister had fallen, she had looked like a rabbit: her hair, with the blood from her head making a pattern just like ears; her lower body completely exposed and white, the skirt reversed and torn. Her arms curved from the sides and embraced the cobblestones in a pattern like a mandala, broken and twisted all the way down to her fingers.

I resisted the voice that told me to jump after her, to end my own life, and when that quieted down was when the tears came. I ran down the stairs, smashing the rotted wood floor with my feet where I went, covering myself with a layer of dust and dead things and insects. I burst into the courtyard where my sister was.

“There you are,” Suzu said, when I reached her. She was standing, alive, her face

unreadable in the pouring rain. It washed the blood and grime from her body, so that you couldn't even tell anything had been there. But her skirt was torn all the way to the angular edge of her hip bone, and her shirt torn open to expose one breast. I stared at her body.

“Let's go home, Fumi,” she said.

That night, pretending to sleep, I shuddered from the memory. And as the rain fell more strongly outside, I began to touch myself for comfort, massaging my groin as I tried to think of something, anything else. This was a habit I had learned over the past few months, something that felt new and good, and could distract me.

I didn't know what I had seen. Instead, I thought of parts. I thought of Suzu's white legs, her smooth and perfect hips. And when terror and anxiety intruded, I responded by rubbing myself harder and squeezing my eyes shut, mumbling just so I could hear my own voice in my throat, like a chanted prayer. And when I finally convinced myself that I had imagined everything, when I was lost in pleasure and my body was about to reach a strange peak for the very first time, was when Suzu called my name in the dark. Her voice cut like a claw against my ear, lower and hoarser than I remembered.

I turned away and pressed into the corner of the bed, furthest away from her. In that moment I was only a shadow, nothing but darkness and sound and a persistent hardness that I was trying to make go away. I was afraid she would try to bite again; not only that, but that I was in bed now with a real monster, a ghost or something worse. And if she did try to bite, then she would turn me over, and she would see everything: my arousal, my terror. But without a word, Suzu crossed the curtain separating our beds and

held onto my back.

Outside my window, lightning flashed behind the cover of clouds, bursts of white that filled my eyes and, seconds later, shook my body with the force of their destruction. All the while she held me, her soft breasts and her belly pressing against my back through the thin boundary of the curtain, her lips pushing ragged breaths against my ear. The heat between us then was overwhelming-- was enough, I was sure, to fuse us, to make from our flesh a brand new and forbidden god. She was alive. And she whispered desperately:

"Let me stay here. Please let me stay."

Her hands dug into me, into my shoulders and my chest. Those hands now are what I remember most. They kept me wide awake through the night, long after the lightning and thunder and the shivering of my body had stopped, smelling her sweat and the scent of callery flowers, as I stared out the window at the sky and wondered at the heavens.

## Chapter 8

The storm was over, but the sky was still dark with clouds. In the morning I prepared for a half-day at school, and when it was time to leave the house I did, eating my breakfast quickly and heading out the door to take the bus.

At lunchtime, the school nurse stopped me in the hallway.

“Where's your sister? She was supposed to come by to see me today.”

“She caught a cold, so she's staying home,” I lied, thinking of what I had seen the previous night.

When I returned from school, the cicadas were buzzing in full, a noise that penetrated the walls and made everyone talk with just a few more decibels. I entered our bedroom to put down my bookbag, and the first thing I felt was a stillness in the air. Everything was musty, and there was the smell of matted sweat. I called my sister, looking for her shadow in the curtain. There was no response. I walked over and parted the curtain, hearing the buzz of the computer from her side.

I caught then just a glimpse: clothes everywhere, books in disarray, Suzu's school uniform rumpled and cut up in the corner, like the bedding for an overgrown animal. The internet modem sat in the corner, its red and green eyes blinking in a contemporaneous pattern. And then I saw the angry face of my sister, sunken and tired, as she slapped my hand away and pushed me.

“Go away,” she said from behind the curtain.

When I tried to speak, she just said it again.

“Go away. Go away. Go away!”

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“Go away.”

“Hey.”

“Go away.”

I wanted to tell Suzu that the nurse had been asking about her, that the caretaker would notice that she hadn’t gone to her appointment, that we hadn’t gotten a beating in a while. I wanted to say that the caretaker might even tell Father again, if she kept misbehaving like this, and then we would really be in trouble. But at the moment when I should have opened my mouth, instead I just listened. Without stopping, my sister repeated herself, her voice distant, as if the curtain wasn’t just an arm’s length away but an entire world. The words were the same again and again, until they lost meaning to my ears and became pure noise:

Go away. Go away. Go away.

On the second day, I waited for her to leave. The caretaker had the day off, leaving us a pot of chicken curry to last us until Monday evening. A squeaking of the bed was the only indication to me that Suzu was feeling displeasure.

“Are you staying there forever? It’s Sunday. Let’s go to the candy store.”

“No,” she said. Even this No felt quieter than before, as if it died in her throat at the second she made the sound.

Her bed kept squeaking; she was shaking her leg. I waited, eating a strawberry

popsicle. She would have to leave eventually. It was inevitable.

Finally, she emerged from the curtain wrapped in her blanket, which obscured her entire body from her head to her ankles. A strand of her black hair stuck out from an opening at the top, where the blanket didn't completely cover the top of her head. Her feet were bare, her orange-painted toenails growing out to show crescent moons of untouched cuticle. She had painted them before we went to the abandoned school.

Suzu shuffled out like a hermit crab, going to the bathroom downstairs and dropping the blanket at the door. Then I heard the trickle of urine, a long jet, and the sound combined with the image of her walking to the bathroom completely covered made me laugh. I looked down the stairs at the bathroom door.

When she finished, the door opened a crack. Her hand darted out to grab the blanket and drag it inside, and I saw the scars on the underside of her arm, red and noticeable against the paleness of her skin. The shiver in her fingers was noticeable even across the hall.

Like this, she came out again, wrapped better this time, so that she appeared like a walking cocoon, no skin visible at all. She shuffled back to the room, and I opened the door for her, not daring even to breathe as she passed me and returned to the other side of the curtain. Even from the safety of her side of the room, I didn't hear the blanket drop. She stayed tightly wrapped in it, sitting in bed, nearly motionless.

From then on, I said no more about going out.

On Monday, the third day, my class had to complete a mural for the school's culture festival, which was to take place at the same time as the old Kizu-cho rice

festival. The parents in Kizu-cho suspected that it was to take hands away from an activity that no longer had the official weight it once enjoyed, but there was nothing to be done about it. Satomiya's PTA was mostly adults from Miwa, and the PTA's word was final.

Suzu's class was going to do a play. I heard them practicing in the next room, as we painted and glued glass baubles to cardboard. They seemed to be having fun.

I was the only student from Kizu-cho in my class. From the first day of our second year, I had prepared to endure as my sister once endured. I dreamed feverishly, with terror and anticipation, of tacks in my shoes, and my desk effaced with graffiti every morning. When a boy would approach me in class, I wondered if I could hold my own in a fight-- probably not. I even nurtured fantasies of attending supplementary lessons in the nurse's office with Suzu, of being hidden from the other students like a pair of ghosts.

But to my surprise, the other kids didn't make me a target. There were enough Miwa children that most of the ones in my class didn't know or care about Suzu. To them, she was a rumor long past, and I was nobody. My grades were average. I studied with some of the boys in the library, though I never got close enough to visit anyone's house. When we were required to pick an after-school club, I joined the table tennis team, and I was decent at it, but not a superstar. While my sister lived in shadows, I had accidentally achieved the unthinkable: A perfectly ordinary school life.

We worked that day on the festival preparations until we couldn't stay at school anymore, talking about teachers, and music, and what we had seen on TV. It was a pleasant evening. The sky was the color of the sea, viridian and gray as we closed the gates and went our own ways. But when I walked home from the bus stop and reached

the steps of the house overshadowed by trees, a feeling in my gut made me kick off my shoes and run inside. I heard the yells of the caretaker before I even entered the foyer, and my sister's animal-like screaming.

I opened the door to the bedroom so hard that the doorknob accidentally cracked against the wall, staying imbedded in the plaster. Curled up in a ball, in a dark corner of the room, was my sister, in a pile of blankets and what once was the barrier, torn down and wrapped around her body like bandages. The caretaker was grabbing at the sheets, trying to unravel her. I saw Suzu's side of the room fully for the first time: her side of the bed stained with sweat, her bookshelf of comics, her desk layered with dust.

"She refuses to take a bath," said the caretaker, strands of gray hair sticking to her forehead. "You filthy girl! What have you been doing?"

I grabbed the old woman's wrist and pulled her hand away. The opal ring on her index finger caught against some of the fabric, making it tear.

"Get away from her," I said.

The caretaker's eyebrows rose. Her skin flushed, all except the scar on her nose, as the whites of her eyes shone against the streetlights that were coming on outside. She looked tired, and even older than I remembered, the gray roots of her hair showing from the front. I heard my sister crying inside the sheets.

Then the caretaker slapped me with the back of her hand, hard, across the cheek. Despite her age, she still had the strength to make me fall over, and when I landed on the floor was when I saw Suzu's face emerge from hiding.

She had turned sickly pale in just a few days, and thin, and she stared at me so long that I thought for a moment that she didn't realize what was happening. But then she

looked up at the caretaker and said, with a voice so clear and calm that it gave me shivers:

“My father doesn't love you.”

The caretaker stared at Suzu, her lips quivering as if to shout. But before she could decide one way or another, Suzu continued.

“He has a new woman in the city. He's going to marry her. She already has his child.”

“How do you know that?” she said, breaking her silence.

“You saw it,” I interjected. I got up on my elbows. “On Father's collar. It was lipstick--”

“Shut up!” the caretaker shouted, lifting her fist at me. I flinched away. But my sister didn't move a muscle. Her gaze was steady and long, as if she were seeing a vision far away, and she just kept talking.

“He never loved you. He hopes you'll take care of us until we don't have to bother him anymore, and then he's going to go away for good. He'll never come back.”

Suzu received a slap across the face. But it was weak, perfunctory, and the caretaker finished the motion hunched over, as if she would keep going and fall over onto the floor. Her legs swayed. I stood up and went to her, ready to catch her if she stumbled. But the caretaker waved me away, her head still down and looking at her feet, which shuffled slowly to the door.

“You have to take your bath,” she said without moving her head, her voice so low that it was nearly a mutter. “Fumi, make her do it.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I'm going to go...” she began, meaning perhaps to say “I'm going to go to the kitchen,” or “I'm going to go home.” I didn't even know where she lived in town. But whatever she was going to say, she stopped, and then left the room.

Once the caretaker was gone, my sister put her head on her knees, wrapping the sheets and the blanket around her with new resolve. It was as if she intended to disappear, like a parlor trick.

“Were you lying to her?” I asked her. “How did you know about that stuff you said?”

Suzu didn't bother lifting her head.

“Why did you say those things?”

“Fumi,” she said.

I waited. She reached her hand out to me.

“Help me.”

I took her hand and led her back to her side of the room. I felt warm and suddenly happy; I was needed. Suzu sat curled in a ball at her corner of the bed, as I replaced the string that had fallen to the floor. I placed the dividing curtain back where it was, separating my sister and me with the white blanket. My side of the room, which had enjoyed some of the fading light of the evening, was in total darkness once more.

When I reached to turn on my desk lamp, I saw the blue light from Suzu's window, and the shape of her body as she, once again in solitude, unfurled and stood up. She went to the barrier where I was and poked it, with one finger, so that the curtain protruded and nearly touched me. I shivered.

And as we listened to the caretaker in the living room, dialing our house phone

again and again in an attempt to reach Father, Suzu whispered,

“I hear them.”

“Who?” I put my ear next to where I heard her voice, to be as close as I could to her mouth.

“Everything.” I felt her heavy breaths as waves in the fabric, the start of a sob. It echoed the sound of crying that was beginning to come from the living room. “I hear everything, Fumi. Everything.”

It was now so dark that I could only just see the faint outline of my sister's body. It blended with the shadows, as if Suzu no longer existed on the other side. She had melted with the entire room and become just that: an invisible presence, like an enshrined god.

## Chapter 9

We fell asleep together; I don't remember when.

In my dreams, we were two: Izanagi-no-Mikoto and Izanami-no-Mikoto, the first gods of Japan. When the world was an endless ocean of emptiness and energy, Izanami and Izanagi were born. They were brother and sister, and husband and wife. They gave birth to the islands of Japan, and to the many gods thereafter, including the gods of Kizu-cho and Miwa, which we called home.

The legend goes that Izanami, the younger twin and the female, died while giving birth to the god of fire. And in his grief, Izanagi went down to the world of the dead to retrieve his bride. But in the darkness, Izanami told him softly that it was too late: She had eaten the food of the underworld, and now she belonged there forever. When they slept together in the dark and he beheld her face in the light of his torch, he saw that it was true. Once the most beautiful being in the universe, now she was being eaten by maggots and worms, her body decayed to tatters. Izanami had become a being of death.

As Izanagi fled from his sister, in bitterness and rage Izanami screamed that she would kill a thousand living beings every day, until the world was just as it was in the beginning: Darkness, emptiness, nothing.

In Kizu-cho, the tale was special, and it continued like this: Izanagi emerged from the gate of the underworld deep in the waters of the ocean, swimming to the surface and letting the filth of the dead wash away as he touched the white surf. From there he started

his journey back home, beginning from the land that would be named Kizu, caked in the white sand of our beaches. He walked to the three mountains of Miwa, using them as his stepping stones to knock upon the gateway of heaven.

Kizu and Miwa, our legends said, was a blessed land, the footstool of the gods. And it was a cursed land, where the original sins of the universe were born and spread to the rest of the universe, traveling through the currents of the sea.

When I awoke, the caretaker was long gone, and Suzu was still asleep. A pot of soup was on the stove, chopped tofu and leek left on the side and never added in. I ate it cold, slurping the grainy soup and letting it dribble down my chin. I was starving. Then I put on my shoes and jacket and went outside.

The night sky was clear. I guided myself by the North Star, the way we were taught to in elementary school, even though I didn't need to. The moon was gibbous and bright, and I knew the pathway through the foothills better than I knew anything else. Even though I normally hated being alone, tonight I didn't fear wild animals, or the nameless terror of the dark. Before I even realized where I was going, I was where I intended to be from the beginning, standing before the milk boxes in the forest.

Our pyramid of offerings was falling apart, the top boxes scattered by the typhoon winds. Only the bottommost layers remained, more silt and dirt than paper, a pile with a vaguely geometric shape. Suzu had been visiting and adding to the pile by herself since last year, when she started to order me to go home without her. And she kept visiting, adding more and more, box by box, as I built up my perfectly ordinary school life. Even

without the ones that had blown away, the stack went almost to my chest now.

The tree that guarded our offerings seemed to lean more to one side than before, its branches damaged and bare. Standing by the tree, in the shadows made by the moonlight, in a white dress, with her sepia hair and long legs, was Mother.

She was looking up at the moon, and seemed to only notice me as an afterthought. But when she saw me, she smiled.

“Good evening,” she said. Her voice was sweet and calm.

“Hello,” I said. And then, after a moment: “How are you?”

“I’m fine.” She had a warm expression. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. The night insects buzzed around us. “Why are you here?” I asked.

“I’ve always been here, ever since your father brought me to this town.” She put a finger to her lips, like a secret. “People who die become little gods. Did you know that?”

I shook my head.

“Your sister was keeping me company. I’m really grateful.” She stepped into the light, to run her hand along the pyramid of offerings. Dirt should have crumbled to her touch, but Mother’s hands were impossibly light, like they were made from the moonlight itself. “Fumi?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to take good care of your sister from now on. Your father started something, and now she has to bear the burden.” She looked sad. “I’m so sorry.”

I thought of the other night. About rain, and my sister’s broken bones, and what she said to me from behind the curtain.

“What's going to happen to us?” I asked.

“It's going to be hard, but please try your best,” Mother said. She turned around. The full length of her hair almost reached her ankles. “Can you do that for me, dear?”

I nodded.

“I knew you could.”

Her smile made me want to cry. The words I wanted to say were coiled in my throat. It was too strange to say them all now, and even Mother seemed to know.

“Don't forget to pay your respects to the forest god,” she said.

Obediently, I closed my eyes and prayed. If the great forest god was there, he didn't talk to me like he did to Suzu. There was nothing but silence, and the dying tree above, shivering its last needles in the wind. A few seconds later, when I clapped my hands and opened my eyes, Mother was gone.

I returned to town with the light of early dawn, a perfect golden beam peeking through the mountains of Miwa. Later that day, a fishing boat found our caretaker just beneath the shallows of Kizu's harbor, her body already half-covered in the rough sands.

She had taped heavy stones to her legs, beneath her finest and most expensive skirt. With stiff, blue fingers she clutched a purse to her chest, which was filled with even more stones. They were smooth and dark and perfect, each selected by hand from the beach, in the middle of the night. There was no note. Her shoes, red heels the color of wine, were placed neatly at the edge of the harbor where she had walked off.

In our town, it was called embracing the sea, and sometimes it was called for: To

restore honor and pride, to rectify a situation that has become hopeless. We were all children of the gods, and no matter what impurities you brought with you in this life, the great sea would take them all back.

When I called Father to give him the news, he was busy at work.

“That's terrible,” he said. The sounds of the office were far away, but I could make out chatter on the other end. “Truly regrettable. I'll send some money for the funeral, so... Take care of that for me, would you?”

“Did she leave anything behind at our house?” I asked. “Maybe her family would want those things back.”

He was silent. “You can look around, I guess. Use your best judgment. And the videos by the TV were hers, but they aren't worth anything. Go ahead and destroy those.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Is your sister going to school now?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” I said.

“I don't need her getting into trouble,” he said. He must have sounded snappier with me than he intended, because his voice then softened a degree. “It's busy at the city office now, but I'll see you when I have time. Have you been eating right?”

“Yes.”

“You're not having trouble at school too, are you?”

“No.”

“You can take some of the funeral money for yourself to buy food. Take the bus to Miwa and buy things from the convenience store. Make sure you eat healthy.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Take care of your sister,” he said, sounding just like Mother. And then Father promised to call again.

After I hung up, I went to the closet, and I found the music box with the bank book inside. I got to the bank book by opening the locked compartment, smashing the hinge on the floor and beating the box viciously, until it ceased to make any sound remotely like music.

In the videos I threw away, there was one filmed many years ago. The quality was shaky, and the girl in the video was working in a classroom – the classroom of Kizu High School, which had been demolished the year Suzu and I were born. The girl wore a blazer and skirt in the colors of our town, and her glasses were round and unfashionable. She seemed like the class president type, and indeed, the work she was doing appeared to be paperwork.

“What do you want to be, Aka?” said the voice from behind the camera. A young man.

“Why? What do you want to be?”

“I just want to get out of this shitty town,” he said. “But I asked you first. What's your dream?”

“You're so hopeless. I'll find work at a big company,” she said simply, not taking her eyes from the desk. It was hard to see her face.

“Eh, really?” said the voice playfully. “That's such a waste. Hey, have you ever

thought of wearing contacts?”

“Why would I do that?”

“I heard you sing at the last festival. And you're pretty. You could be an idol or something.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” she said.

“I'm serious! Hey.”

A hand reached out and brushed her hair, moving a lock behind her ear. She jumped.

“Aka,” the voice said. “Aka. Look at me.”

Slowly, the girl looked up at the camera. Every part of her body, her hands and ears and face, was a bright shade of red.

“Smile for me.”

Just as she was about to move her lips, the video cut to static.

Part Two: East and West Satomiya

## Chapter 10

Twice a day, at morning and night, I paid obeisance to my sister. Today's offering was sweet strawberry mochi and a chicken katsu bowl, left unheated. To drink, I gave her a glass of cold coffee, black, with packets of gum syrup.

There was a new convenience store, the very first in East Satomiya, where I bought most of our meals. It was called the Kizu Express Market, and even though it was probably owned by Lawson, Family Mart, or one of the other big chains, it was well-received by the locals for its name. I went nearly every day for our food.

It was meaningless to cook for two people, for only two meals a day. So our refrigerator was stocked with premade rice bowls, vacuum-wrapped treats, bottled water and juice. Suzu had stopped talking after the first few weeks of her enclosure, so I didn't know if she liked eating this way or not. The food suited me just fine.

The barrier between her side of the room and mine was free of dust, but after a year, the sheets were now yellowed and crackled, unraveling at the edges where there remained some lace trim. I couldn't replace them anymore, and they were so threadbare that in the late afternoon, bits and pieces of the marigold sun slipped from her domain to the shadows in mine. Pinholes of light, like false stars, covered the posters on my wall, my body, my darkened face.

The opening I made in the curtains was just enough to slide a plastic lunch tray across the bed—just enough, in fact, to peek at my sister's world, if I wanted to. But as I

placed the food on the tray, enjoying the sun on my skin, I averted my eyes. She allowed me to open the curtain for her meals only. Sometimes in the night, I heard the firelike crackle of cellophane, the breath that escaped her nostrils as she consumed her offering, but I couldn't picture it. I didn't know what she looked like anymore. She could have absorbed the food through her hands, for all I knew. Perhaps her face had disappeared in the months since her enclosure, the way cave moles over generations lose their eyes.

I slid the tray across and closed the curtain, returning myself to darkness. The next morning, the tray returned to my side of the bed. The contents were cleanly consumed, down to the very last drop in the glass.

Junior high ended in the early spring, and I was accepted to Satomiya High School. It was brand-new, built where the old Miwa town hall used to be, right next to the mountains that separated Satomiya from the rest of Japan. Unlike the other high school in town, which was prestigious and girls-only, Sato High was co-ed, and the entrance exam was embarrassingly simple. Most of us, who had no ambitions higher than to continue our parents' jobs, tilling the earth and pulling nets, went here automatically. Only a few students managed to escape past the tunnel.

Satomi Nishida, who had found a dead frog in her shoes when we were in junior high school, was one of those students. Her parents were moving, and she won a scholarship at a good school near Ise. At the class's goodbye party, she said she would miss us all dearly, and cherish the memories she had made. But in her eyes was fierce triumph.

Classes were fine. I was still good at science, and I got better at math. I had no ear for music. Since it was high school and I no longer had to join a club, I didn't bother. If I just got through school and went straight home, that was fine with me.

“We were thinking of having dinner at Big Boy,” said one of my classmates, a transplant from Tokyo whose father ran a hot spring resort in town. It was afternoon, in the second month of our first year. “Maybe karaoke, too. I'm inviting Hasegawa and her friends. Did you want to join us?”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I've got stuff to do at home.” He seemed disappointed.

“You shouldn't bother him,” said Kenji Miyamoto, the boy who had fresh eggs in his shoes three years ago. He was sporty back then, and he was tall and sporty now, tanned and angular, like a boy cut from wood. “Fumi doesn't do that kind of stuff. He likes to play games at home. Right, Fumi?”

“Would you stop it,” said Mayu Hasegawa, the tormentor. Aside from Suzu, I never told anyone that she had been the one behind our first bullying in junior high. Three years later, she still looked mousy behind her adult-like makeup, dark eyeliner drawn on her eyelids like Cleopatra. Sitting at the edge of one of the tables, she glanced at me for only a second.

“I'm just trying to look out for the guy,” said Kenji, with a wide grin. He and Mayu had started dating after our third junior high festival, and it seemed like they were still together. We all shared a classroom this year.

“He's right,” I said to the transfer student, packing my things into my bag. “I just play games at home. I don't like to do things like karaoke. Sorry.”

“See, what did I tell you?” Kenji elbowed the air in my direction. “Sorry old pal.

He doesn't know any better.”

“Thanks,” I said. “See you later.”

“Ken, just leave him alone, he's weird,” I heard Mayu whisper as I left the classroom. Kenji snorted and muttered something I couldn't hear, and they went on planning their after-school outing. As for me, a box of milk from the school vending machine was still cool and fresh in my pocket, as I walked to the bus stop in the heat of late spring. The asphalt road out of school sloped downward at a curve, until it reached cobblestone and dirt.

The inner roads of West Satomiya, which was once called Miwa, stayed much the same as they had for the last half century, a network of stone paths that connected each of the area's famous hot springs. Only when standing completely still, with no other people around, could one listen to the busy traffic of the expanded tunnel highway, and the rumbling construction on what would someday be Satomiya Station. Father was probably very pleased with himself.

To the elders, it was heretical: He had brought the two towns together by force, creating a whole new city from scratch. In just a few years, the ancient separation between Kizu-cho and Miwa was made meaningless, their names just a footnote in the new city records. Perhaps Father hated our old town that much. Or at this point, he just didn't care anymore. But the old people were beginning to die off, and young folks didn't care about those things. We liked having bus lanes, and new people, and Starbucks.

I got onto an eastbound bus, one of the same old diesel junk-machines that I knew from the last days of Kizu-cho. Only in the nicer parts of Satomiya did one encounter the clean buses, the newer, quiet ones that ran on natural gas. The east side, where the land

met the infinite sea, was still mostly a ramshackle town. On the bus, I watched the scenery of cafes and shops go by, until they became small markets in isolated lots, and then lonely, half-empty vegetable stands, and then nothing but forest. I got off at the stop closest to my house, and I doubled back on foot the way I had come, walking into the woods.

Once upon a time, the gods talked to Suzu. That was why we had gone deep into the foothills that day, and why she let the typhoon carry her past the precipice, into the air and onto the crushing ground. I had my doubts about what I had seen, but I was certain of it now, just as I was certain that they still talked to her now: my sister, the last priestess of Kizu and Miwa's forgotten gods. They demanded retribution for my father's sin.

In the first days of her enclosure, Suzu talked constantly: to herself, to the walls, to me. She spoke and swore and cried in waves, trying to get the things she could hear out of her head. In a voice hoarse and thick with sadness, she told me the terrible things that the gods were telling her to do. Then, as I started to give her offerings and tried to keep her distracted, giving her games to play and books to read and other ways to quiet her mind, she talked less and less, her babbling becoming a mumble, and then complete silence.

I emptied the milk box onto the ground, and then I opened it up and filled it with fresh earth, to become an offering. The offerings were partly collapsed, with time and the weathering of the elements, but I had made an impressive mound. Weeds and flowers and grasses were beginning to sprout from the box-hill's extremities, like the graves of the ancient Jomon, bellies rising out of the earth.

During the day, I went through my perfectly ordinary school life, and in the

evenings, I took care of Suzu. I distracted her as best as I could from things like gods, and divine missions. But someone still needed to be in the forest, and to keep Mother company in the afternoon. I decided that would be my duty, too.

When I started to notice a foul odor during the start of the rainy season, I scratched the boundary and spoke to my sister. My eyes were cast to the floor, at the black spots of mold between her part of the floor and mine.

“You're not bathing. You need to keep clean,” I said. “This won't do.”

I heard Suzu get out of bed and turn on the computer, idly scratching her toenails along the floor.

For our birthday last year, Father had sent some extra money. It wasn't much, but I took the bus to Yamada Electronics in West Satomiya, past the department stores that still said “Miwa” on their plaques, and I bought a used laptop for Suzu. I wanted her to be entertained while I wasn't at home. As for me, I still used the old tower with the CRT monitor in the living room, its screen speckled with dead pixels.

After a few days, when the smell in the room became intolerable, I left by the curtain a plastic mixing bowl full of water, a new sponge, and a white towel, fresh from the dryer.

“Please use this,” I said. “I'm going to buy dinner.”

When I returned from the convenience store, Suzu had cleaned herself. I emptied the dirty water from the bathing bowl, now gone cold, filled with hair and gray flecks of skin, and I lit a candle to clear out the remaining smell from the room. I thanked Suzu by

leaving a piece of strawberry cake on a tray. It seemed to please her, from the hint of tongue-smacking I heard on the other side.

Twice a week, like this, I left her alone to bathe. Sometimes she did it when I was still in the room, because I needed to do homework, or I was about to go to bed. At those times, when I heard the dripping water, I listened carefully. Eyes closed, I tried to remember what Suzu looked like four years ago, now an aeon ago, the day that I had first peeked on her in the bath.

## Chapter 11

After the rainy season ended, bringing with it torrents of sunlight and punishing heat, I came home from weekend lessons to a scream that shook the walls. Remembering what had happened with our old caretaker, I dropped my bag and ran into the bedroom, looking for my sister. For a second, when I entered, I thought I saw Suzu's rash-covered skin, her messy bed, the dark tangles of her hair. Then the curtain shut so quickly that I wasn't even sure I'd seen anything. Looking around to see what was the matter, I stepped into a puddle.

Suzu had thrown the bowl for her bath across the room. It rolled along the floor, making a swishing sound like a cymbal against the hard wood. Crawling up and around the bowl, swimming in the spilled water with needlelike legs, were two bright red centipedes. A third, black, was in the bowl, convulsing madly against the walls. They had to have been attracted to the standing water.

Killing them was simple. As I mopped up the corpses with an old rag to throw out, I heard Suzu's sobs behind the curtain, her gagging, her shuddering breath. The sound was deep and unmodulated, like the crying of a wild beast, and it carried.

I went out of the bedroom and looked through the window outside. Even with the housing developments of the last few years, we were still far away from other houses, separated by fields and empty lots by the forest, as if to say that we wouldn't forget our place. Or maybe it was Father's doing, to keep people away from the embarrassment of

his family. But I still didn't want to risk anyone getting curious. Nobody talked about Suzu anymore.

I went back into our room and crawled onto the bed, on my hands and knees.

“Don't cry,” I said. “Please don't cry. Come back into the world with me. You're safe, it's fine. Don't think anymore.” I repeated these words until they had no meaning. My hands on my knees, I begged her not to think. And eventually, when I begged enough, promised enough, Suzu's crying stopped.

In the fullness of summer, Suzu's smell became unbearable. It would assault me the moment I walked into the room, a stench of sweat, of the residue of food, of mold and dust and smegma. It was the smell of unwashed skin, of something sticky and half-decayed. I could sleep through it, if I stayed in it long enough; I didn't want to sleep in the living room and risk having Suzu feel lonely. But going to school and back always made the smell like new.

A bowl of water sat on my side of the room. I had left it fresh for her this morning, steaming and hot, but it remained untouched. The barrier between my sister's side of the room and mine was like a misty gate between us: At times, when the hour was right, I could see Suzu on the other side, a hazy, long-limbed shadow moving back and forth in a field of light. She would be playing games, or reading so that her arms were extended to the sky. Right now, she was a shapeless lump of darkness, sitting on the floor on the other side.

I left the door open and swallowed the urge to gag, switching on the fan.

“You didn't bathe again,” I said. I hunched down and swirled my finger in the

lukewarm water, watching the bubbles form and instantly pop. The water level seemed lower than before. With Suzu's computer constantly on, the room was like a greenhouse.

I still talked to my sister as if she would respond to me.

"This can't keep going," I said. "The water's clean. Look, no bugs."

I pushed the bowl toward the curtain, and her foot suddenly protruded through the cloth, kicking the bowl away. Soapy water spilled all over the floor. Then Suzu shuffled to a far corner, throwing the covers over herself, all of which I could hear. As I cleaned up the mess and struggled to breathe, I wondered what to do.

That night, I touched the curtain once again, to request an audience.

"Let me clean you," I said. I had to raise my voice above the oscillating fan, which was running on full power on my side of the room. Several burning candles and sticks of incense gave the air a waxy, funereal thickness, through which my voice became nasal. The window was open, but that only mattered for Suzu. Breezes died before they entered my side of the room, the barrier of the curtains keeping the air utterly still.

She was playing a computer game, but I knew she had heard me. The mouse clicks and typing paused for just a moment before they started again. There was also the sound of hair-scratching, which had increased over the past few days.

"Let me clean you," I said again. I was on my knees, my mouth close to the curtains, almost touching the fabric with my lips. "You don't have to leave the room. I'll have the water with me, and you can put yourself out a piece at a time. I'll wash everything for you."

Suzu's chair creaked back.

“You must want to be clean. It’ll be quick. It’ll be safe.” I repeated the word safe under my breath like a prayer. “Will you let me do it?”

I sat in silence, listening to her typing, until the twilight turned into real darkness, and it was time for us to eat. I went to the kitchen, put wrapped sandwiches and a can of melon soda on a plastic tray, and set it on the bed, sliding the edge of the tray just past the boundary. The tray slid through the curtain. I heard Suzu pick up the sandwiches, examining them one by one. I tried to imagine her hands, if her nails had grown long like talons, if her wrists were bony. Or perhaps I had fed her too poorly all this time, and now months of poor diet and inactivity left her obese and hideous.

The curtains stirred again. I looked up from my meal. Slowly, Suzu’s left hand, pale and thin, exposed itself. Her fingers were spread out, her palm facing the ceiling, as if to collect rain. The hand hovered in the middle of the curtain, like its own creature, trembling and alive.

I reached out and held her wrist. Her fingers twitched from my touch and pressed into my forearm, long, dirty nails digging sharply into my skin. I had a memory of the pinching game, so long ago now. Suzu was terribly thin; my index finger and thumb, joined together, could encircle her wrist completely. But when had my own hand become so dry, like leather and paper against hers? Her skin was so soft.

I let go.

“Let me get ready.”

I came back with a bowl of freshly drawn water, hot. A sponge. Shampoo and body soap, in a conjoined bottle, with twin spouts at the end. Her hand was now resting

on the bed, her nails scraping against the mattress. I took her hand and pulled gently, until nearly her entire arm was exposed to the shoulder. She was wearing her old pajamas, with the sleeves bunched up.

Holding the waterlogged sponge above her arm, I squeezed. It dribbled warm as blood around the dots of acne on Suzu's upper arm, water droplets falling back into the bowl like rain. Suzu shivered and made as if to pull away, but my grip was steady. I ran the sponge along her skin, pressing. Dead skin curled, dark and fragmented like human crumbs, from her arm. The skin underneath it was red and irritated. I added a drop of soap and continued, making a grimy froth from her shoulder down to the tips of her fingers.

Her feet, when I pulled them out, were smaller than I remembered, their bottoms black and ashy. I let her feet soak in more hot water as I sponged her calves, the bony plane of her shins. She jerked when I began clipping her nails, but I hushed her by stroking her ankle and holding her heel with a firm hand. I let the clippings fall into the water, where they floated like petals.

Her pants could only roll up a few inches past the knee, bunched so tightly at that point around her thighs that her creamy white flesh bulged. I washed everything that she could lay bare to me. From her arms and legs alone, I had to change the water three times, pouring it down the floor drain in the bathroom. Suzu waited each time, in a state of perfect peace, her limbs sticking out from the wall like parts left to hang.

And when each part was done, I toweled her dry with both hands, pressing the fabric to her clean skin, from the crook of her armpit, to the crease at the top of her head where the hair parted, to the delicate webs of her fingers.

The next evening, I bought a cake. It was strawberry chiffon cake, from a new bakery that had opened after Suzu stopped going outside. I saw the place being built as I walked to the bus stop, in my second and then third year at junior high. When it opened, it seemed like everyone in West Satomiya was there, buying melon bread and brioche rolls and mousse cakes, as if they had never seen such delights before. I thought of the cleverness of the town planners in the big city, and of Father, building more roads.

A month after the caretaker had passed away and we were left alone, we received a postcard in the mail announcing Father's elopement. His new wife in the picture was lovely, with short hair and a beauty mark under her left eye. They were dressed more elegantly than anyone I'd ever seen, standing in a dining hall with everyone in tuxedos and gowns, the kind of clothes you would never have seen in old Kizu-cho and Miwa. Perhaps now, in Satomiya, it was more possible. But he still never came back to see us.

"Is this a gift for someone?" asked the lady at the bakery. She placed the chiffon cake in a pink box, which was decorated with images of ribbons and stars.

"Yes," I said, "it's for my sister."

"You're a good older brother, buying presents for your siblings."

"She's my older sister."

"Oh my, how cute, your older sister, I see." She seemed a little flustered. The box was wrapped in a bow and placed in a small gift bag.

"Here," I told Suzu, putting the cake on a plate and setting it by the curtain. The matches were old, and I went through several before I found one that worked, lighting a sparkling candle that hissed as I slid it across the opening in the partition, almost burning the sheets.

“Just because,” I explained.

The glow of the candle wasn't quite enough to illuminate her room, not like when she used her computer and turned the room into a shadow puppet show, in pale blue and white. The landscape implied by the candle was mostly in shadow. Suzu raised the cake to her mouth, sitting next to me, and with a puff, the light went out.

It was our second anniversary. Perhaps; I had lost count. But it felt about that long. If we were a more complete family, if it weren't just her and me, perhaps one or both of us would have clapped. Instead, we sat in silence and darkness, until I got up to do my homework, and Suzu ate her cake. She ate it all, and when I did the dishes later, I saw the plate smudged with her fingerprints and the marks of her tongue, where she had picked up every last crumb.

## Chapter 12

I met Amadori in the early fall, at night, in front of the Kizu Express Market. Under flickering florescent bulbs, she smiled like a saint. That's exactly how I want to remember her – the mysterious girl standing in the light, me standing next to her, with the taste of sweet bean flour in my mouth.

It looked like she was from Miwa Private Girls' Academy, still wearing their carmine and black uniform in the late evening, carrying a heavy-looking book bag slung around one shoulder, and a plastic bag in her other hand. Her hair was inky, loose and long. She had an ineffable sense of style about her, even though the only extra thing she wore was a set of black prayer beads, a long chain of them wrapped several times around her wrist. I was in shorts and sandals, embarrassingly plain, and in the middle of reading a comic magazine when she started talking to me.

"Hey, what's all that?" she asked, pointing at my bag of groceries. Her nails were unpainted – the strictness of the girls' academy was well known – but they were perfectly filed and polished.

"It's dinner," I said.

"No way." She knelt down and peered into my bag. "Is it okay to look?" she said, taking a peek before I even answered. She recited each thing as she saw it. "Rice ball, rice ball, yakisoba, chips, lemon tea... Are you eating just this?"

"What would be wrong with that?" I said, trying to place her face. She didn't look

like anyone I knew from junior high school, and between Miwa Academy and Satomiya High, we received students from all over the region, even past the mountains. Moreover: She was stunningly beautiful, like someone who didn't belong here. Her eyes were almost too bright. I thought I would remember someone like this, even if all I had were acquaintances.

She tutted. "Just this and Starbucks coffee every day isn't very healthy. You need a balanced diet."

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

"You go to Sato High, right? I think I've seen you around town. And I like that comic you're reading." She shrugged, as if this explained things just fine. "My name's Amadori. You know, I make a full breakfast every morning! Grilled mackerel, miso soup..."

"Wow, you're like a perfect Japanese wife," I said, beginning to smile. This girl was cute, cuter than anyone I knew at my own school.

"I know, right?" She beamed. "And I can make other things too. I just moved here from Hiroshima, you know."

"Hiroshima?"

"Yup. And I don't have any friends here. Everybody at my school is the worst."

"That's what I hear about Miwa Academy," I said. "No offense."

"None taken! I hate that place anyway." She swung her own bag of groceries, which looked like a bunch of bottled drinks. "I gotta go. It was nice talking. Do you have a Mixi?"

"A what?"

“Mixi? It's a website... Guess not, huh.”

“Oh, I believe I do,” I said, remembering something I heard about it on the news.

“I just don't use it much, so it took me a second.”

“What, you should totally use it more! I'll add you tonight! We can chat.” She nodded, as if confirming for herself. She waved, her prayer beads jangling. “See you later!”

I waved back, an odd feeling in my cheeks. I was smiling harder than I could ever remember. When I left the convenience store for home, I nearly forgot my bag of offerings for Suzu.

On the way home, I stopped at a payphone. Taking out my old address book, I looked up a number and dialed it carefully.

An older woman picked up the phone. “Hello, Hasegawa residence.”

“Hello,” I said. “I'm a friend of your daughter's from school. I need to speak with her about a homework assignment.”

There was a pause, and the sound of chopsticks being put down. I must have interrupted their dinner. A moment later, the voice of Mayu Hasegawa popped onto the other end of the line, hushed and curious – her mother had probably specified that it was a boy calling. I wondered if her family knew about Kenji.

“Hello?” she said. “Ken?”

“Hi, no,” I said. “It's me, Fumi. Sorry for calling so late.”

She sighed through her nose, probably so that I wouldn't hear. In our third year of junior high, Mayu and I ended up exchanging phone numbers for a history project. Hers

was one of only two phone numbers I had, the other belonging to a boy from Miwa who had moved to Osaka at the start of the year.

“It's fine,” said Mayu. Her tone became noticeably flatter. “Can I help you?”

“Actually, yes. Do you have a Mixi account?”

“I... do,” she said, carefully. “But why?”

“It's invite-only, isn't it? I heard that I need to know a Mixi user if I want to get a Mixi account myself. Right?”

“Uh, yes, that's right.” Mayu adjusted the phone.

“Then...”

“Do you want me to invite you?” she said. “I'll do it.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” she said. She sounded more surprised than I did. “It's pretty easy. But why do you want to join all of a sudden? Mixi's for sociable people, you know. You gotta have friends.”

“Well, do you know any students from Miwa Girls' Academy?” I asked.

“Wow. Never mind, you're terrible. Are you asking me to set you up?”

“No. No, no,” I said quickly. “It has to do with my sister.”

A pause. “Okay, relax. I already said I'll help you,” said Mayu. “Let me call your house later. I'm eating right now.”

“Do you have my number?”

“Yes, I have it, I have it,” she said. I could imagine Mayu in the kitchen, waving her hand annoyedly at an invisible me. “Just do me a favor and don't start stalking my friends. That would be too creepy.” Before I could thank her, she hung up.

When I arrived at home, I gave my sister her offerings. Other than a slight shift in the curtain, there was no hint that Suzu was even awake. And later that night, coached by Mayu over the phone in my living room, I logged onto Mixi for the first time.

Imagine our world like a city street, a street in a great city like Tokyo, except that the crowds of people you bump into are people that you've chosen, just for yourself. Social networks seemed that way to me. There were hundreds of groups that I could join, and I saw that almost everyone in my class was here. Mayu was my first friend by default. I found the transfer student and added him too, just for appearances.

Amadori found me almost immediately. Her full name, according to her profile, was Tsuneko Amadori, recently moved to Satomiya.

## Chapter 13

Fifty thousand yen a month.

With that kind of money, you could buy six or seven rice balls every day. Or three rice balls and three or four sodas every day, approximately. Seventy pieces of mackerel for frying, stored in the freezer. Forty plates of hot pot beef. One hundred Big Mac sets at McDonald's, if there was a deal going on. You could stuff an entire room with bean sprouts. Fill a casket with rice. Fifty thousand yen wasn't much.

The leaves were turning into brilliant colors, and the ATM made a buzzing noise as it spat out my bank book. It wasn't the original book that the caretaker showed me; that had been all printed through long ago. I treated this bank book as my own. I had the passcodes, and a copy of the family seal, and I kept the book up to date all by myself.

I tried to save a few yen here and there, in a piggy bank, but it was never enough. Something would break, or food and bills wouldn't add up the way I thought they would. The money always disappeared, as if it had never existed at all.

I stared at the number printed at the bottom. Again, this month, there was less left than I thought. Enough for the usual offerings, maybe even a fast food splurge here and there, but barely. It would have to be done very carefully.

Now was supposed to be the time when Father sent us money. A week or two weeks from now, perhaps, it would come through, and I would get a message on my phone from him, never apologizing, but asking how we were getting along. I would tell him I didn't even notice.

On the first night that Amadori and I talked one-on-one, over the phone, we didn't stop until we heard birds at dawn. Whether they were outside my window, or if they were actually outside hers and I just caught their sound through her earpiece, it was time for everyone else to wake up. The city was opening its eyes. The buses were already running, and if I tilted my head away from the phone to listen, I could hear cars on the streets.

“So bright.” Her voice crackled warmly in my ear. “Do you see the sun?”

“No.” I looked out the window of the living room, where I had moved my things for the night. “I'm surrounded by trees.”

“Wait for it. Tell me when you see it.”

Over the phone, Amadori told me stories about Hiroshima, about the adventures she had with her only friend, who she unfortunately didn't speak to anymore. There was drama involved, and some bullying. I told her about Mayu, and about how much better things were in Satomiya versus when it was still Kizu-cho. When I told her I was good at science, Amadori made me promise to tutor her. In exchange, she would teach me funny phrases in her home dialect.

“A real fair trade, don'tcha think?” she said, taking on the accent of a stereotypical old man from Hiroshima. I laughed.

I was sure our breathing matched, in the seconds before the light peeked above the roof of my neighbor's home-- bright, but not blinding. It illuminated the dust spots in a beam of light that hit my lap.

“I see it.”

“You want to go?” she said.

“Go where? McDonald’s?”

She laughed. “Why was that your first thought? No, another place, for breakfast. Meet me at the bus stop in front of the academy in half an hour, and we’ll walk.”

Our second meeting. She was dressed nicely in a scarf, long coat and boots. I felt grungy in my puff jacket and jeans, but there wasn't much time to prepare. I had to sneak out, so that Suzu wouldn't wake up from my leaving. But Amadori was truly beautiful.

“You want a hot pack?” She offered me one. “I already have one right here,” she said, and pointed at her chest. I shook the chemical warmer and put it in my pocket. The warmth of it was like holding her hand.

We went to a small, Japanese-style coffee house.

“Sorry,” said the owner, an older man with tight, dry skin around his hands. “The coffee will be another ten minutes. Are you kids in a hurry?”

“No,” she said, smiling, waving her hand back and forth. “We have the day off. We haven’t even slept at all.”

“That’s incredible,” he said.

“We’re dead tired,” I offered.

He placed melon buns on display, shaking his head good-naturedly. “Well, at least you have each other.”

It began to sprinkle outside, a sunshower. The owner brought out plastic chairs, and Amadori and I sat under the awning, watching the bright prismatic sun. As we waited, she told me more about her friend.

“To tell you the truth, her boyfriend wanted to have an affair with me.” She looked away. “But it was scary, like he was obsessed... I thought she was my best friend, so I told her about it as soon as I could. I don't know why she blamed me for it.”

I chewed on a day-old macaroon. “Oh, I see.”

“What is it?” she said.

“Nothing, really.”

She waited for me to keep talking.

“Do you get a lot of attention from guys?” I asked.

“Hmmm.” The coffee made her breath into enormous, wispy clouds. The tips of her ears were bright red. “You know, infatuation only lasts about six months to a year. I mean new love,” she said, like a recitation from a book I'd never read. “After that, you start to re-experience reality, and that's when most people decide to cut it off and move on to somebody else. Someone else who gives them the feeling of infatuation. It's like a drug. Does that make sense?”

“That's true,” I said, hoping my lack of experience didn't show.

“That's what it's like for me. Guys get infatuated all the time, but it's not like they really love me. They just think I'm beautiful, or something, and I can tell. I think that's why I've never had a real boyfriend... I don't want you to think I'm conceited,” she added. “But it's tiring.” She took a deep breath. “Ah, god, suddenly I could use a smoke.”

“Wow. That's pretty cool, Amadori.”

“Smoking? Oh please.”

“Why don't you, then? Nobody's here.”

“It's okay. I like the store owner, and it doesn't seem respectful first thing in the morning, in front of a nice place like this. Besides, he might tell my school.” She laughed.

I nodded.

She twitched her thumb in her lap, which now looked like the motion to spark a lighter. “And then, you know, girls hate me all the time. Because they say I steal their boyfriends from them. But it's not my fault that those guys get tired. Why is that my fault? I want to tell those girls to work harder, and stop blaming me for their lack of sex appeal.” She smiled. “This all sounds terrible, doesn't it? I'm a really bad person. Sorry.”

“Not really,” I said.

“You get quiet when you're uncomfortable, huh?”

I thought it over. “Doesn't everyone?”

“It's okay,” she said. “I'm saying all this and we've barely met. There must be something wrong with me.” When she took out a cigarette and held it in her mouth, I raised an eyebrow. She gave me a look. “What? I'm not going to smoke.”

She sighed through her teeth, through the unlit cigarette, her eyes shut to the bright rain falling only a meter or so beyond where we were. Her eyelashes were long and dark.

“I'm not going to. I just really, really want to.”

When I came home in the late morning, there were three dead birds outside the house: a pigeon, a crow, and a treecreeper in a triangle. I wanted to believe that a stray cat

had gotten to them, the way they were so perfectly arranged. I swept them up with a broom and threw them into the garbage.

Suzu was waiting when I got up to the attic. The slowly brightening sky, filtered through the windows of my house, made for a suffocating gloominess. I glanced at the curtain as I entered the room, and I knew without having to see that Suzu was awake. Enshrinement, darkness, stillness. Like an abandoned shrine, with its god still present.

She wasn't typing, but I could tell Suzu was doing something on the computer. I waited for her to stop before I spoke.

“It’s time,” I said.

She was silent.

“Your bath, right?”

The shadow nodded.

“I’m sorry. I should have done it last night. I was busy.”

I prepared the water and soap, and then I beckoned for her to come out. From the curtain, Suzu's hair emerged. I saw the black, and her scent hit me first, a pungent thickness that closed my throat. Her hair was thick and messy, heavy, pendulous, like a mass of snakes. She breached the barrier with her head down, so that everything was hidden by her hair except the faintest crevice of white skin.

I placed my hands on Suzu’s head, massaging her scalp with my fingertips. It was warm, and the skin tight. My fingers trailed through the coils in her hair, from the base down to the ends, which nearly touched the floor. I rubbed my fingertips together; there was an oily feeling.

I put the bowl of water below her face. Even though it was freshly drawn, the water wasn't quite still enough, or clean enough, to make a reflection that I could see. But it was hot. A touch of steam swirled up past us and dissipated at the ceiling.

“I need to get it wet first. Hold still.”

I ladled water onto her head, aiming for the white crevice. Rivulets fell from the surface of her hair like water off a duck's back, leaving droplets precariously suspended. She didn't get wet at all. Another ladle. This time the water penetrated her oily layers, and she shivered.

“Too hot?” She shook. I poured another ladle of water, watching the water dribble from her head. Then I set the ladle down and squeezed out a palmful of shampoo. Whenever I washed my own hair, I used the cheapest shampoo at the convenience store. Maybe that was why my hair was so unremarkable, untextured, in comparison to hers.

In the early morning, when I dozed off in my chair at the coffee house, I woke up on Amadori's shoulder, and my first thought was how graceful she looked, the way her hair streamed down, perfect and silky, to almost touch my face. My second thought was how I looked, and I tried to find my reflection in her eyes.

“You okay?” said Amadori.

I nodded.

She smiled, and gently nudged my head with hers. “I'm glad.”

In my hand, Suzu's shampoo looked like liquid pearls. I stared at my sister, pale and bony, with her hair hanging almost to the floor. I thought of how much work it would take to clean her today, and suddenly I wanted to drop the bottle and strangle her.

Instead, I rubbed my hands together, carefully, so as not to spill any shampoo. Bubbles formed between my fingers. I swiped one palm across the top of Suzu's head, then the other, in the opposite direction, making a cross. I worked her hair with the tips of my fingers.

"You know," I said. "I went to a cafe today. A really nice one. And I got some macarons. You've never had them before, right?"

She didn't say anything.

"I'll give them to you. You should try them. If you like them, I can buy more."

I poured more water onto her head. The lather was thin, and it washed out into the bowl in shades of gray.

## Chapter 14

As the weather turned colder, I agreed to have Amadori come over on a weekend evening, so we could cook together. I cleaned the house obsessively, looking for any spot of dust. I felt on the other side of the curtain a sense of malice.

“I have a friend coming over today,” I said. “I’m leaving your dinner here early, so just take it when you’re hungry.”

Suzu was nearby. The curtain moved back and forth like breath.

“Don’t worry, it’s nobody you know. Just a friend of mine.” I hesitated. “We’re just going to eat together and study. She’ll be gone in a few hours.”

I thought I heard her scratch her hair. And then Suzu’s side of the room shuddered: She jumped back onto the bed and threw the covers over herself. She was going back to sleep.

When the bell rang, I opened the door to greet Amadori. In her hands was a plastic bag filled with groceries.

“I wasn’t sure what you had already, so I decided to just bring what I could. How does omelet rice sound?”

She took off her shoes, and I realized then that she was barefoot. Her second toes were longer, like a Greek statue, and the nails were painted bright blue. I tried not to stare. She had always worn kneesocks or stockings before.

Today, Amadori was wearing blue shorts with faint white stars printed on the

front, and a gray Hiroshima University hoodie. A clip held up her hair in a messy tail. But her makeup, as always, was impeccable. Maybe it was even better than usual today, not like our casual meetings when she just put on some foundation and mascara. Her eyes were shining and perfect, and her cheeks rouged just so. My pulse rose.

“Where are your knives and cutting board?” she said. I brought them out, and she took an onion from the bag, setting the rest on the kitchen counter. “Do you like onions?”

“I like them.”

“That’s good,” she said. And she began to recite something she had heard, the way that she often did. “You have to include them either way, because onions provide the base of flavor. But for people who hate onions, you have to work really hard to hide it.” She smiled. “I’m glad you’re not picky.”

To make myself useful, I started washing rice. Amadori took out cubes of fish stock and added them to a pot of boiling water.

“Here, taste this,” she said, holding a tiny plate to my lips. I tried to take it from her, but she protested with a whine. “Just drink it,” she said.

I did, but the angle was off. A drop of soup trailed from my lip.

“It tastes great,” I said.

She wiped the drop from my face with the tip of her index finger, which was soft, and she licked it. “I’m glad.”

Kissing happened naturally; I don't remember who started it. I do remember the feeling of my ear lobe between Amadori's teeth – climbing upward bite by bite as if to scale me, how she moved to the top of my ear. I shivered, and she took that momentum to

move her tongue into the crevices of my ear, running along the inner concave path back down to the bottom. I never imagined such passion from this girl, her sweet laugh, and her delicate hands that were now grasping my shoulders in the tiny kitchen of my house.

She seemed unable to find a comfortable grip, grabbing me once, and then again in a different position, almost pinching. And I, in response, squared my body, making my shoulders taller and harder to let her hold onto me and climb on, her right leg lifting up in such a way that she had no choice but to fall toward me. And I had no choice but to hold onto her in return, one hand grabbing her thigh, the other pressed into the small of her back.

We became locked inescapably this way, and when the motion settled she jumped onto me harder, her lips mashing awkwardly against the bridge of my nose, because her eyes were closed. She corrected her trajectory and slid downward, her mouth against mine, the tongue entering without question. I tasted miso on the edge of her breath as she gasped.

The soup we were supposed to eat was boiling. But it wasn't like a movie, where it would boil over and everything would burn as we gave into mad passion. Instead, Amadori detached herself right in time, looking shyly at the floor, and she switched off the stove before taking my hand. It was my first time holding her hand, which was unbelievably soft. I followed her out of the kitchen. And only after a few seconds did I realize we were both breathing heavily, panting, trembling, as we adjusted our fingers around each other's.

“We can't go into your bedroom?” she said. She was being uncharacteristically

shy.

“Here's fine,” I said.

In the living room, Amadori smiled as I unbuttoned my shirt, a little mysteriously, as if she was biting the inside of her cheek. Reaching out, she put her hand on mine to stop it from moving, then with a flick of her wrist, she moved it away. It was so quiet that I could hear the plastic of my shirt buttons under the pressure of her fingernails, and I wished that I could turn on music. But all we had nearby was Father's old records on vinyl. Amadori's breath against my collarbones was warm and shivering, her eyes glowing.

Her phone vibrated. The girls' uniforms at her school had skirts with pockets.

“Your phone's ringing,” I said.

“It's okay,” she said. Her eyebrows knitted slightly. “They can wait.”

“Are you sure?”

She bit my chin, and there was an edge to her voice. “Did you want to stop?”

I put my hands up, hovering over her shirt. Amadori suddenly froze, looking down.

“Can I?” I said.

She nodded.

Her bra, which I had seen hints of under her shirt, was actually an elaborate and lacy design, pastel green with trim. The creamy white of the trim was just a shade darker than the pale valley between Amadori's breasts.

Her elbows shivered as her arms rose to cover herself, even though I hadn't seen

anything

“Take off your bra,” I said, in a commanding voice that surprised both of us. She obeyed quietly, the clicking of her straps coinciding with a rise in the warmth of the room, so that I had to swallow and lick my lips as she began peeling away the last layer, and I caught a glimpse of her pink areolas.

And then the shaking started. It was the creaking, metallic sound of an office chair rocking back and forth.

“What was that?” said Amadori, putting the cups back over her breasts. “It sounds like somebody’s here.”

The sound was coming from the bedroom. Suzu was awake after all.

Normally, Suzu didn’t make any sound. At best, there was an exhalation of the breath through her nostrils. If she were a monster, it would take the form of puffs of smoke. Not a laugh as such. It was surreal, a thing that I had never heard before. Her laugh lacked any of the bombast or loudness that might give it away. It was quiet and slowly rose, the kind of sound that comes from the throat when you feel like you’re alone and you don’t have to modulate. After all, laughing is a social mechanism; people don’t often laugh when they’re alone.

Listening, captive, were Amadori and me. Amadori’s eyebrows rose, and her gaze darted back and forth between the ceiling, where the sound came from, and me. She didn’t say anything.

“That’s my sister,” I said. “You don’t have to worry about her.”

“You have a sister?” She looked at me carefully. “You never mentioned her

before.”

“It’s a little hard to explain.”

The laugh continued, with the creaking.

“Is she okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, but listen, like I said, it’s not easy to explain.” I touched Amadori's shoulders, which were tense. She pulled away and nodded silently, replacing the straps of her bra on her shoulders. And Amadori smiled, her fingers looking for the buttons on her shirt.

“I’m sorry.”

She began buttoning it up.

Her cell phone vibrated again, and this time Amadori dug into her pocket and flipped it open.

“It’s my dad,” she said. “He wants to know where I am.” She paused. “I should probably go.”

I nodded. As I put on my clothes and showed Amadori the way out, the laughter upstairs continued, a spiteful trickle.

Amadori had left the groceries behind, so I finished up her cooking and ate. It would save us some money this month; I had to be grateful. I cleaned the dishes and went into the room, where Suzu was now asleep. It was as if she had done nothing at all.

Suzu’s hand was jutting out, crossing the threshold into my side of the room. Whether she found this to be a more comfortable arrangement, or if she had simply rolled

over at some point and wasn't conscious enough to correct it, I couldn't say.

I could have bent her arm gently to be closer to her body, but I feared waking her up. Her hand was white, not a creamy white like Amadori's, but an ashen and sickly hue, exactly the kind of pale you'd expect from a girl who hadn't seen the sun in over a year.

Spidery red veins trailed from the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger, through her hands and up into the knuckles, ending in fingernails like chalky pearl, long and dirty.

I listened for the regularity of her breath. And then I crawled up to her quietly, lying perpendicular to what I imagined was the position of her body, and I put my right hand close to hers. It was an awkward position where I had to bend back my palm unnaturally, but with effort, I aligned just one of my fingers with hers. Our index fingertips just barely touched, the warm pulse of her blood, the micro-movements of her skin creating a sensation, like a very tiny vibration between us.

Just one good pull. That was all the curtain needed to come down. I would invade her filthy side of the room, hold down her weakened body and bite her all over, suck her salty skin and leave beastly marks, just as she had done to me years ago.

Or I could pull her arm, not bothering to heed her screams or her resistance, until she was exposed and vulnerable in my domain. And then I could do what I wanted with her. I could thrash her with my belt. I could find the wooden spoon – bring that back for old times' sake – and I could pull down her clothes, bend her over and bruise her bottom good.

Maybe this time she would cry. I wanted her to cry, with ugly hot tears, into my

lap. I wanted to scar her, humiliate her, so she could never be able to take off her clothes without knowing that she had finally suffered. Screw the gods.

Then Suzu turned over and slipped her arm back through the threshold, and the wicked thoughts dissipated. I remembered my promise to Mother. Things had been too peaceful lately.

Shutting the door behind me, I did my homework in the living room, hoping that Amadori might call.

## Chapter 15

“We need to talk,” said Mayu after class. “Come with me.”

She met me at the east stairway of school, where I ate lunch and passed time by reading. Right now, I was working my way through *Confessions of a Mask*, by Yukio Mishima. It had been a week since my misadventure with Amadori, and the missed chance still tugged deep at my body and made me want to read violent things.

Mayu tried to tug my sleeve, to get me to follow her to the rooftop. I resisted.

“Just tell me what it is,” I said.

“Come on then,” she said, beckoning. Through the window of the doorway leading to the roof, the day was cloudy but bright, hiding Mayu's face like a solar eclipse.

“I'm not going up there,” I said.

Mayu huffed and looked around, checking the corner around the stairs. “Okay, fine. Can you do me a favor and remove me from your friends on Mixi? It's kind of a problem for me.”

“Okay,” I said. I wanted to ask why, but I held my tongue.

“And if Ken asks, I didn't introduce you to it, and we were never friends on it. Okay?” I nodded without saying anything, and she frowned. She blinked hard at me, though whether it was a sign of displeasure or the irritation of her eyes, I was unsure. She was starting to wear fashionable circle lenses outside of class; they made her eyes look frighteningly wide and amber-pale. “Do you have a phone? Can you remove me right

now?”

“I don't,” I said. “I'll do it when I get home.”

“Ugh.” She swept her bangs from her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, as if something up there annoyed her. “How is it, though?” she asked. “Do you like it?”

“Mixi?”

“Yeah.” She glanced at me, her arms crossed. “You been meeting people? I don't know what kind of interests you have, though.”

I thought of Amadori's green bra. “Yeah. I did.”

She sighed. “Well, that's good, at least. I did something nice for you after all.” She raised a hand to stop me from saying anything more. “I don't need to know what you're getting up to, as long as you're enjoying yourself, whatever it is.”

“Thank you, Hasegawa.”

“Just do that one thing for me and we'll be even,” she said, waving goodbye as she went down the stairs to our classroom. Probably to have lunch with Kenji, I thought. For the first time I felt a little jealous of them.

I didn't do as Mayu asked. When I got home, it was getting dark, the sky a pale shade of purple and deep blue, and Amadori was at my doorstep, still wearing her school uniform. Her head was resting on her knees, as if she had been just taking a nap in front of my house.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. During the week, I saw that Amadori still updated her blog on Mixi with pictures of food and cats, but there was no mention of her personal life. We hadn't exchanged any messages or talked on the phone since she left.

“I tried calling ahead, but I forgot you don't have a mobile,” she said. “It's late. I thought you didn't do club activities at school, Fumi.”

I had been in the forest, leaving my offerings for the forest god. “I walked around town,” I said.

“Can I come in?” Amadori stood up. “Would your sister mind?”

My throat went dry. “Sure. Come on in.”

The house wasn't messy, but messier than I would have liked with a girl around. I gave Suzu her bath the other night, and the washing bowl and soap was still in the kitchen, along with the tray for Suzu's meals. Amadori looked around with new, discerning eyes, at every corner of the house.

“So it's really just you two here,” she said.

“My father lives in the city,” I said.

She touched the bowl. “What's your sister's name?”

“Suzu.”

“Suzu,” she repeated. “Is she a hikikomori?”

“A what?”

“Like a modern hermit. They talk about it a lot on the net,” she said. “Sometimes people shut themselves away, and they never leave their room or do anything. Your sister sounds like one of those.” Amadori had been doing some reading, I realized.

“It's a little different with her,” I said. I couldn't explain the gods, or Mother, or the things that Suzu said to me.

“Can I talk to her?” asked Amadori.

“Why?”

Her lips turned downward, into a sad frown. Her expression just then was a mixture of curiosity and hurt. “We're friends, Fumi. You're my only friend in this town, but you were hiding this big secret. I think I understand, but I'd like to meet her, that's all.”

I nodded. With my legs slightly trembling, I led Amadori to the closed bedroom door, but no further. I didn't know how Suzu would react if I tried to let someone in.

“Let me talk first,” I said. I called out to my sister.

“Hey, I'm home,” I said. “I brought a friend over.” Pause. “She wants to say hello. She won't come into the room; she just wanted to say hi to you.”

Silence. As expected.

“Suzu?” said Amadori, in a gentle voice. “My name is Tsuneko Amadori. I came over the other day.” She looked at me. “She doesn't talk at all?”

“Not at all.”

“Don't worry Suzu,” said Amadori, kneeling down and putting her fingers to the door. “Don't be afraid. I just want to say hi and be your friend, if I can.”

The bed creaked, and I felt a sense of panic. But nothing else happened.

“I know,” said Amadori, looking at me and then to the door excitedly. “Your brother and I are on Mixi. Have you heard of it, Suzu? It's a website for people to make friends... I'll give you my number, so you can join too.”

“Amadori,” I said. “Let's stop this.”

“Let's just try it,” she whispered. Then to the door: “You don't have to, but I'd really like to talk to you more. We can chat on Mixi. Okay?”

In the kitchen, I offered Amadori sweets and tea, but she refused. On her way out

the door, she gave me a hug, her body carefully positioned not to touch mine beyond the shoulders. I felt her distance from me.

“I think I can help you,” she said. “Just leave it to me.”

Late at night, I was doing my homework in the living room. Suzu didn't need a bath today, and when I left the room she appeared to be reading. I turned on the computer, waiting as the CRT blinked once, then the image on the screen slowly faded into being.

## Chapter 16

The weather was cold. Mayu was waiting for me at the bus station, wearing a black hoodie over her school uniform, her face buried in a video game. She looked up when she saw me, taking off her headphones. Just like the previous day on the roof, the setting sun at her back framed her face in shadows, a halo of reds obscuring her eyes.

She already had a canned coffee in her hand, all finished. “Ready to go?”

“Sure.”

I was surprised when she had called me out of the blue, wanting to hang out.

“Do you like coffee?” Mayu asked over the phone.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Why?”

“I’m gonna go get some, and you’re the only one who’s free. Lucky you.”

“How do you know I’m free?” I said.

She groaned. “Just come, would you? You don’t have anything better to do, right? A lady’s asking you to go out with her!”

The first place we went to was the Starbucks in West Satomiya. With no evening commuters on the weekend, for once it was nearly empty. Mayu trotted inside first.

“Two cappuccinos,” she said to the barista.

The drinks at Starbucks were too hot. Mayu gulped hers down so fast that I was afraid she would scald herself. The coffee and milk foam made distinct impressions as they slid down my throat: one smooth, the other bubbly and meandering. Mayu tapped

on her mobile phone as she waited for me. It seemed like all the girls were getting the latest phones.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Beats me,” she said, snapping her phone closed. “You closed your Mixi account.”

“Yeah,” I said. I offered no explanation.

“Hmm... Hey, this is fun! Where should we go next? You think your heart can take it?” She drank hers all the way and set it down hard. “Next round’s on you.”

I looked at her fingers, white-knuckled, wrapped around her empty cup.

After a little over an hour, everything was closed for the night. That couldn't be helped at all; even with new things all over the place, Satomiya was still just two small towns, made into a small provincial city.

Mayu and I were squatting in front of the Lawson convenience store by our high school, cigarettes and cans of Boss Coffee in hand. We weren't wearing our school uniforms, so it was fine. Mayu was surprised when I offered her a pack of Lucky Strikes, but she gratefully accepted, a smirk lifting her small lips.

“Wow, you turned bad when I wasn't looking. I totally thought you were just a nerd.”

“Thanks.”

“Ah, sorry.” She lit her cigarette, the warm glow in front of her face making her eyes light for a second before the fire went dead, and she tossed the lighter to me.

After five cappuccinos, my heart trembled, straining against the rest of my body.

I pressed the wheel, watched the spark, but it wouldn't light. I tried again. I stared at the clear plastic chamber, at the droplets of lighter fluid at the very bottom. I shook it uselessly.

“Lighter's dead.”

“Did I get the last bit?” she said, a touch of smoke trailing from her mouth as she chuckled. “Lucky.”

“Sad for me.”

“Yes, sad for you. Here.” She stuck out her hand. “Give me yours.”

She took one cigarette in each hand, and she pressed the lit cigarette against the unlit one, taking a drag from hers to get the ember going. It took more than one puff, and for a second I was afraid she would put out her own cigarette. But soon, both tips glowed orange.

“Quick, before it goes out.” I took the smoke.

“You know, I could have just bought a lighter in there. It isn't illegal.”

“Next time,” she sighed, hands in pockets, balancing the cigarette between her teeth. “I wanted to try that.” She popped open her can of coffee, tipping it at me in salute.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.” She took a big gulp.

“That's a lot of caffeine.”

“It's a little late for that,” she laughed. “You too,” she gestured at my can, unopened, by my feet. “You're going down with me.”

I obliged, opening my can with unsteady fingers.

“You know?” she said. “Ken dumped me.”

I stared at the tip of my cigarette. The automatic door made a chiming noise as someone went inside.

“He hacked into my Mixi and saw all my guy friends. It was proof that I was cheating, he said.” She shook her head, the ash of her cigarette growing long. “And here I am doing it again. I’m really stupid... Even though I’m technically single now, so it doesn't matter anyway.”

“We haven't done anything, though.”

“Yeah, well...”

She looked up at me.

“Thanks for coming out,” she said.

I put out my cigarette.

“It’s late.”

“Yeah,” she said, and she nodded, smiling ruefully, as if thinking of something completely different. “You going to be a gentleman and walk me home?”

Our final stop for the night was a vending machine by Mayu’s house, in the nicer part of East Satomiya. The street lamp above our heads was flickering near death, its pulses of light dancing with several moths. We huddled in the florescent halo of the machine, one last can of coffee for the each of us. It was Dydo brand, sweet and milky and cheap, a mediocre end.

Mayu sighed. “This was fun.”

I nodded.

“It's too bad we couldn't be friends sooner. It could've been nice. Junior high was just a big mess,” she said. “What are you going to do after this?”

“In life or today?” I asked.

“Both.”

“I'll work for a company. And... sleep, probably.”

“Are you serious? I don't think I could. Just stay up all night and sleep when the crash comes, that's what I do.” Mayu scoffed. “I don't want to go to school tomorrow anyway. If Ken says anything, I don't think I could take it.”

“What would you do, Hasegawa?”

“I would...” she pounded her fists together, which looked funny from such a tiny girl. “Beat him up real good. Yeah.”

I laughed.

“I would! Actually, I'm thinking I'm going to run away soon,” she said. “Go all the way to Tokyo and find work. I'm so tired of school and... life. I just want to get out of this shitty town.”

We sipped in silence for a while.

“You got another smoke?”

“Do you have a lighter?” I said.

“Oh, right... Ah, I should've listened to you.” She laughed. It sounded more fragile than before. “You were definitely right. Too much caffeine. We should've had alcohol instead.”

“We're minors,” I said.

“So? To hell with it.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Mayu thumped her chest with her palm, leaning against the glass of the vending machine. “I’m fine. It’s just my heart hurting a bit.”

“Yeah.”

“Yours too?” She smiled. “Good. I don’t want to be alone.”

The street light finally died above us, making everything just a shade darker than before. I was used to this kind of darkness. But maybe Mayu wasn’t. She wiped her eyes, blinking suddenly very fast and hard, as if the light of the machine were too much to bear.

“Ah, god,” she said. “It hurts. It really hurts. I’m really, really stupid.” She sunk to the ground, squatting and folding into herself, as if to become smaller and disappear. It reminded me of someone.

I took two hundred-yen coins and put them in the machine, pressing a button. The vending machine thumped and dispensed a cold bottle of water, which I picked out and handed to her.

“Here, drink this.”

She stared at it, her eyes red.

“You need to hydrate.”

Mayu sniffed. She took the bottle.

“Thank you,” she said. Then: “Please.”

“Please?”

“Stay.”

I sat down, with my back against the vending machine, shoulder to shoulder with

her. In the absence of any other light, the moths eventually descended to orbit around us. Their shapes flickered in front of our eyes, increasing the number of shadows.

I came home to a message on our answering machine, the light blinking red and the number “1.” It was Amadori.

“Hi, Fumi?” she said. “It's me... I noticed that you deleted your Mixi. And you haven't called or anything, so I got a little worried. Are you okay? Is Suzu okay? I really think that she could be helped, if you'll just let me try –” I pressed delete.

When I entered the bedroom, the meal tray was on my side of the room. On it were empty wrappers, as well as Suzu's drinking glass. I turned on the light and picked it up.

In the middle of the glass was a trail of oily spots, a pointillist band that at first seemed cryptic. But on closer inspection, it made sense to me. Putting my hand around, I could match my fingertips with Suzu's, four fingers by four. I smudged the circuitous imprints left behind by her skin, replacing them with my own. There was no warmth left, but the realization that her hand had once been here sent a shiver down my back.

On the rim of the glass was half an oval, a once-wet curve ending in a rough whitish line, the shape of her lips having left an impression in sugar and skin cells. Raising it to my mouth, I pressed the glass against my bottom lip.

“Are you awake?” I said.

On the other side of the curtain, I heard the creak of the bedsprings, the sound rolling towards me. It was the sound of a person moving across their bed, putting their face close to the border. Perhaps she was peeping out of one of the holes in the fabric, a

pinprick eye that I couldn't see. I imagined that the light from my lamp, after midnight, left stars in her room just as the afternoon sun did in mine. What did she see?

I rolled my bottom lip across my tongue. The taste of coffee was bittersweet.

"I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

I turned off the light. Feeling my heartbeat in my ears, I waited for morning to come.

## Chapter 17

“You’ve missed assignments and quizzes,” said my homeroom teacher. I was at his desk in the faculty office. “We’re concerned about you.”

He was a young man. He had a tie on at all times, even though this was the summer and he still had to wear a short-sleeved shirt. It reminded me of Father.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry? Where have you been? Why haven’t we heard anything from your parents?”

“My father works in the city,” I said automatically. My eyelids began to close. I wanted to sleep.

“I’m talking to you,” said the teacher. “Look at me.”

“I haven’t been feeling well.”

“It’s true, you don’t look too healthy,” he said, frowning. “But you could’ve stayed with the nurse. I’ve asked around, you know. It doesn’t look like you’re playing hooky. But then where do you go?”

I didn’t reply. I was staying home from school, which was the truth. And I wasn’t feeling well, because I was tired. I was tired because, during the time that I was home in the day, I couldn’t make any noise, or move, or make any indication to Suzu of my presence. I was happy to be at home, silently watching over my sister, but the forced stillness was exhausting.

The teacher sighed, running a hand through his hair. “This can't keep going. Shape up, will you? Take things more seriously.”

“Yes, sir.”

My day began like normal: I made my side of the bed, brushed my teeth, prepared Suzu's breakfast as my toast burned in the oven the way I liked it. For her, I made a breakfast of grilled fish microwaved, and miso soup from a packet, with microwaved rice, bloated and hot in its plastic container. I left everything on a tray, with an egg and a packet of soy sauce, and then I got ready for school.

I dressed in my uniform and prepared my bag, just as if I were going to go for a normal day of classes outside. Those familiar sounds were crucial: By now Suzu was used to the click of my pants zipper, of the buckles of my bag as I stuffed papers in and closed it shut. I even put on my shoes, tapping the toe of each foot as I called out that I was leaving.

Then I turned the knob, opened the door just a bit and then closed it, and I didn't go anywhere. Sitting in the foyer and the living room until dark, I sat and listened.

Suzu left the room twice a day, to use the restroom. She used it once for quite a while, in the morning, just after I was supposed to be gone, and then once more, not long before I was supposed to come back. Beyond the bath and our bedroom, the rest of the house was a void, occupied by nothing but air. As long as I didn't reveal myself through sound, I could lie down right in the middle of the living room floor, and Suzu would

never know. The walls were thin, and I heard every noise: From the bathroom, her footsteps in the hall, and from the bedroom as she played computer games for hours. It was a peaceful sound.

“Please stop coming to our house,” I said to Amadori, the week after I saw Mayu. It was late afternoon, and I had only gotten inside my house when Amadori knocked on the door and asked to see me. “It's getting to be a problem.”

Amadori looked apologetic for just a second, but then her eyebrows knitted. The rest of her face was hidden in a thick red muffler. She played with one of her prayer beads nervously. “If you aren't online anymore and you never pick up your phone, how else am I supposed to know you're alive? What's going on? I thought we were friends.”

“Nothing. I just don't feel well. I'll call you later.”

“Is it about Suzu?” she said. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried. It's just such an unhealthy situation, and I don't think –”

“I'm busy right now,” I said. I tried to shut the door.

Amadori put her hand on the knob. “Wait. I don't understand. Is there something you don't want me to know?”

She pulled down her muffler with her other hand, exposing her white skin, her soft pink lips.

I pulled the door shut.

“Please, just today,” I said. “Please leave.”

For the next day and the day after, I thought I saw Amadori from the corner of my eye, as I got off the bus from school and walked home. At the corner, or in the bushes by

the fields, she seemed to be watching me. Or it was my imagination. On the third day, I gave Suzu her breakfast, and on a whim, I decided I would stay home.

I couldn't stay home every day, but at school I was consumed with thoughts of Suzu, if she was safe with Amadori around. I couldn't study. In the morning, the homeroom teacher adjusted his tie nervously, as he cleared his throat and requested that anyone who knew the whereabouts of Mayu Hasegawa, or even just a hint of where she might have gone and why, please contact the teachers. But I could barely listen.

In the afternoons that I did stay at home, I began to notice a creaking sound coming from the bedroom, and if I put my ear against the door I heard the sound of Suzu's heavy breathing. When I pretended to come home and went into the bedroom, the air was heavy with the scent of vanilla candles, which I had given her a month ago. They were partly a gift, and partly a way to deal with the smell of the room: the food, the growing dust, her body on the stretches of days when Suzu decided she didn't want to bathe.

When the noise began to happen at night as well, I forced myself awake and turned my head, inadvertently making my bed creak. It immediately stopped. Only a few nights later, when I lay perfectly still, breathing deeply like a person asleep, with my back facing the curtain, did it continue.

On the other side of the curtain, Suzu gasped. There was the sound of something wet and rhythmic, matching the pulse in my hands as I gripped my blanket and tried to listen harder. When the silence around us was perfect, I could make out tiny moans from Suzu's side of the room, just above the white noise in my ears. I was breathing too hard to

be sleeping – I knew it, and I tried to control it, but my pulse and the chill of adrenaline made it impossible, like trying to calm down the body during a marathon. My hands moved down, below the bedsheets, to where I felt the heat and excitement rise in my own body. It was fine; Suzu wasn't paying attention to me anymore. She shuddered, and made a sound like crying. Her voice as she climaxed was deep and full.

This was our new game, on the days I was staying home from school. I stayed without letting Suzu know, clinging to the foyer like a shadow. Then I went to the hallway and listened, and I waited for the sound of pajama bottoms coming off, the creak of the chair as she leaned forward to look closely at her screen. There was some fast clicking, and then a pregnant silence.

Suzu didn't make much noise even when alone, but her breathing was the giveaway. It got faster as she reached climax, then it would drop off, slowing down to a relaxed pace. That was her routine several times a day. I listened to it so much, staying home from school and lying on the floor of the living room, that I knew how she touched herself by her breath alone.

After two weeks of this, I waited for the sound to reach its most frenzied rhythm, just on the brink of what I knew was the end. Then, before I realized what I was doing, I opened the door with a bang, and all sound stopped.

The air smelled heavier than sweat. The early afternoon light was just beginning to turn a deep burnt orange, not the dying red that I was used to in the evening. In this light, it was easier to see motes of dust, and the strands of webs from long-gone spiders that hung above my bookcase, wavering in tiny movements. Perhaps it was Suzu's held

breath, or the thumping of her heart, having escaped from her chest and become a vibration in the air. I threw my bag on the floor.

“I’m home,” I said.

Before I could say anything else, Suzu threw something. I couldn’t tell what. She threw something into her own wall and it crashed on her side, leading to a cascade of dislodged comic books. They made fluttering sounds as they fell, like insect wings.

“Don’t do that.”

The next thing she threw managed to get through the crack in our boundary, scattering at my feet. It was my copy of *Confessions of a Mask*, dog-eared in several places, its cover bent backwards to oblivion. I heard Suzu throw herself under the cover and begin to cry, a sound thick with humiliation and shame.

Only when I shut off the lights to sleep that night did I see, from the faint light of the window, a dark shape by my bed.

“What is it?”

She stayed still.

“Do you need something?”

The shadow shook its head.

Carefully, I crawled into bed. She didn’t pull back; in fact she seemed to be expecting this. I remembered her gasps, and the squeaking of the bed when she thought she was alone and she pleased herself. The room was getting warm.

“Then what is it?”

Beyond the fabric, I could hear her lips parting, her tongue, her teeth, the soft suck

of her breath. So Suzu still had her mouth after all; she wasn't a faceless monster.

Out of curiosity and fear I leaned into the boundary, and so did she, like a mirror of me, her lips so close to my face that they almost made an impression in the cream-white fabric. On my hands and knees, I listened. The air, the sheets, everything in the room shifted upon the first thing she spoke.

Seconds passed of sound before I realized that she wasn't using words. A susurrus nearly below the threshold of hearing, floating just above the vast dark sea of everything unheard, she spoke into my ear:

*Sa-su-se-sa-so-su-so-sa-so-su-se-sa.*

The spot of the cloth that separated her mouth and me grew warm and moist. I smelled the tang of lemon tea from tonight's dinner, still on her breath, and I shivered with disgust. But I didn't dare pull away. If I did, I was sure our contract would be broken, and my sister would reach out through the boundary and grab my head, claws sinking into my scalp, her Gorgon hair and her warmth devouring me.

She spoke. Like pure transmission, without resting, she spoke. She stopped only to breathe with heavy, shuddering gulps, as if drowning or pulling away from a deep kiss, before I heard the sticky lick of her lips and she started again.

*Sa-su-se-su-so-sa. Sa-sa-se-su-so-su-sa.*

With her fingers brushing the boundary between us, making hills and valleys of the fabric, she spoke, until the darkness of the night took on shades of blue and my whole body burned with exhaustion.

When my knees reached their utmost, she went silent. Then, closing her mouth with a click of her small teeth, Suzu withdrew, and lay down on her bed, and she slept.

I went into the bathroom, with the door closed and locked, thinking of Suzu.

Her breath. Her hair. Her pale fingers, sticky, dirty. I wanted to grab her fingers and pull through the curtain boundary until I could see the full whiteness of her hand and arm, and more. I remembered her lips, which brushed through the fabric against my ear lobe—or perhaps I had only imagined this.

Where I couldn't fill in the right details, I imagined Amadori instead. Amadori's legs, the blue veins that ran through her breasts, the soft curve of the hourglass just between the small of her back and her hips. Her thin lips. Amadori's eyes, large and clear, like forest honey. I saw Amadori's face, but out of her mouth came the voice of my sister, a whispering moan that made my spine arch.

In my life, I had only touched myself to climax once, that night with thunder and rain, when I was ten. Then Suzu became a god, and I never did it again. Every few weeks I would release in my sleep, and on those days I washed my briefs myself, by hand, the sliminess of the fabric giving way to starchy dish detergent and hot water. Even with as much privacy as I had in the house, it felt wrong to touch myself on my own, like I would be breaking a hidden commandment.

I returned to the memory of Suzu's fingers, bony and cold. I wondered how they would feel against me, grabbing me by the full length of my penis. I would take her hand during one of our baths, and I would force her to touch me. I would be the first man she touched.

My sister. Amadori. Her hair. Her fingers. Rain and blood, in the shape of rabbit ears.

With such blasphemous thoughts I came, my first deliberate orgasm. My eyes

were open, but all I could see was black: a second of blindness, punctuated by afterimages of my eye's blood vessels in purple and blue lightning.

When I caught my breath, my hands were cold. I was still hard. I had made a mess on myself, my clothes, the opposite wall. I pulled on myself to test, and, finding that it hurt, I stood up and cleaned myself off with tissues.

I turned on the tap, waiting for steam to rise and fog my glasses. I plunged my hands into the stream of hot water. It was the hottest my hands could take, so hot that my entire upper body tingled with pain. There was no mirror, so I couldn't see my face, to confirm if it was as hot and flushed as it felt. But the heat of my skin was comforting.

When I returned to the room to sleep, my body raw and aching, Suzu was awake. The position of her shadow made me think that she was watching me.

## Chapter 18

On a chilly, dry afternoon in December, I took a chance and left the house for a moment. Amadori didn't seem to be hanging around all the time; she still cared enough about school to regularly attend, and that meant she wasn't watching us like a hawk. I could escape for a while. I went to the bank to check our balance. The ATM buzzed as always, followed by a strange click that I had never heard before.

Nothing.

The account was closed; zero yen. My fingers turned cold.

At the supermarket, I bought rice and discounted eggs, slipping a few mushrooms into my pocket on the way out. I heard a muttering sound as I walked home, like someone in a low voice counting off numbers. It took a few minutes to realize, as I looked around and saw that I was the only person walking down the empty street towards home, that I was talking to myself. I was counting to myself the money we had left.

There was some cash saved in the piggy bank, and I still had cash from the last withdrawal. But even in the worst case, we could survive another week. If we lived frugally, perhaps two.

I picked up the phone and dialed Father's number. Busy signal.

If Suzu minded eating eggs and microwaved rice for dinner, she didn't show it. The feeling of guilt ate at my stomach, until I couldn't take it. I knew it was a terrible waste, but I threw my food away.

I called Father again. Nothing.

I stood in the bathroom to take a bath, with the hot water turned on all the way, until the mirror turned into a square full of steam. The only things I could see after a while were my hair and the pupils of my eyes, dark and clouded.

I shivered when I left the bath, from the chill in the air, which was when the ongoing math equation in my head led me to realize something else: There was enough money for food, and for kerosene to heat our room, but eventually, not both. Certainly not both.

There was enough money still to pay bills, so I did. The man at the convenience store, not much older than me, looked at me with a funny eye as I gave him the money. My hair was getting oily and tangled, just like my sister's, as I tried to save money on water by showering for only a few minutes at a time, filling the bathtub only halfway so that most of my body was exposed to the open air. I lathered my body and hair with a sliver of cheap soap, saving the good shampoo and soap for my sister. I probably looked terrible.

We were down to dented cans of mackerel, rice cooked with more water than was needed, so that it was halfway between regular rice and a porridge made for the sick. This we ate with discount eggs, flavored powder and MSG. When I finished paying bills, I drank water from a public fountain in the park until I felt like my stomach would burst.

There was a light drizzle on the walk home. When I came back, the inside of the house was so cold that my breath fogged inside. We really had no heat left. My fingers tingled at the tips.

The inside of our room wasn't as bad, but it was still too cold for comfort. Suzu had extra blankets, and under these she played video games. The events of that other night, the whispering and my sin in the bathroom, went unspoken, as if they had never happened.

"I'm taking a bath," I told her. "I'll bathe you after, so be ready."

In the bathroom, I took off my clothes, looking at the newfound thinness of my body. I hadn't been a heavy child to begin with, but now I was truly almost nothing, and it was all because of poverty.

"All you had to do was deprive yourself," I said.

I turned on the water, which was when a hand, pale and thin and completely icy, grabbed my chest.

If I had a mirror nearby, I could have seen my sister's face, but the mirror in the bathroom was behind both me and her. When I tried to look back, my sister bit me in the shoulder so viciously hard that I immediately obeyed. After years, her teeth against my skin felt exactly the same.

After the pain, I began to grow hard again, and to prevent it I looked at the ground. Her feet were by mine, side by side, like the legs of a crab. Strewn by my clothes were her pajama bottoms with her panties bunched inside them, as though she had taken it all off at once. Her sweater, her t-shirts, her bra. Her legs, by mine, were bare, and looked smooth from where I was looking, but when they rubbed against mine they had a stubbly roughness.

I felt her breasts, the softness of her stomach, the cavity between her stomach and her legs where her body dipped inward. I could touch it, if I leaned back enough. I

moved my hand. My fingers brushed the bony arc of her hip. She bit me again, but this time I ignored the pain, grabbing her bottom and pressing her body against me. She gasped, and so did I.

“The bathtub’s full,” I said, after a long silence. The room grew warm from the hot water and our two bodies, warmer than it had been in weeks. “I need to turn the water off.”

She turned off the water for me, her shoulder draped by her dark hair, and when she returned her lips were against my right arm, pressed, like kissing a precious thing. The space where our bodies connected grew moist with sweat, as I moved my hands behind me and she moved hers, exploring each other. And the entire time, we refused to separate.

Suzu was like a person not made of human material, but something like thick honey. When I pressed my hands into her thighs, she trembled with a sigh against my neck, giving me gooseflesh from the base of my head to the bottom of my spine.

Two years of inactivity had a sound, and when I grabbed at her flesh without looking that was the sound she made, like an animal, a deaf-mute’s groan. Her nipples hardened against my back, and she moved her breasts against me knowingly, pressing them harder until I felt the faintest resistance of her ribs. Only our skeletons kept us from total union, becoming one body.

Our house was cold, and her teeth were cold, when she opened her mouth to bite me and click against my ear. But her breath was hot like fire, her tongue like a salamander as she suckled at my skin. The water had been ready for a while. Too long

and it would go cold, each degree of temperature like precious money falling through holes in our pockets.

So I pulled her, and she followed me, her legs bumping awkwardly into mine as we shuffled as one to the bathtub. And when I put one leg into the bathtub, so did she, her calf making an elegant curve like a carving of marble from the bathwater, ending in quivering cellulite. My eyes were downcast the whole time; I hadn't looked at her directly once, even though she was next to me and I could smell on her a tang like coins after they've left the palm of the hand.

We entered the water, she and I, and she maneuvered herself in front of me, her massive hair and her white back against my chest as she pressed against my penis. Her head was down, and in the lukewarm water she sat on me, her hands moving me until something gave, and I was suddenly inside her.

It was when she made me come, the tub splashing water like the sea in a storm, that I saw her face for the first time in years: lips cracked and almost the white-gray color of her skin, eyes wide, her eyelashes dark and full.

"We're running out of money," I said to her in the dark, after we dressed and she was once again on her side of the room. "We won't last long. I've paid the bills, but we're running out of food, too."

She was tight against me, the curtain straining to the shape of her body. My body was still hot after the bath, and my breath left a fog as I confessed to her everything.

"There's only so much longer."

The shape of her head nodded.

“I don't know what we're going to do.” I shivered involuntarily, and Suzu moved in response, softly massaging my crotch through the fabric. It was a comforting touch, something gentle, as if to say: I understand.

## Chapter 19

The doorbell rang, but I didn't get it. I didn't even get up, because I didn't have the energy anymore. It would go away eventually.

In the days, the weeks after we gave in to lust, I learned another lesson: In the absence of food, the body reacts by saving energy. There's no glucose, no iron for the blood to even transport glucose, so without food, the body falls into a state like anemia. The limbs weaken, the eyelids grow heavy, the hours grow long with constant sleep. Amadori would be proud that I knew something like this.

Suzu and I were down to a single meal a day: rice porridge, then soup mixed with bits of rice. Then just soup, with canned meat so cheap that the taste of tin constantly coated my throat. There was no brushing of teeth, no bathing. The gas went off before the water, and there was no point in freezing cold baths when we were already freezing.

Instead, Suzu and I began to wrap ourselves in blankets and sleep, body to body, only waking up to rub each other for excitement, to have a meal if the hunger was unbearable and I was sick of drinking the tap.

Father never picked up his phone. After a few days of calling, the busy signal turned into an automated message, that the number had been disconnected. Maybe he had eloped again. Or he went with his bride to Tokyo, far from here. I wondered if Mayu was there, too, in the great city.

I turned to look at my sister, which took a monumental effort. Our hands were

linked together, finger by finger. The room was so cold that I was sure the living room and kitchen would be frosting by now. After we were gone, our bodies would be covered in frost too, I thought. There was a thumping sound, several times, but I didn't care.

I put my face in my sister's hair, the hair I had taken care of for years. Like a bundle of snakes, like a nest, it enveloped me.

With a loud bang, the door to our bedroom opened. Dark shapes burst into our room, man-sized shadows that said things in large, deep voices. I couldn't even cry out as the shadows became larger and larger, grabbing me and Suzu from our bed, until they drowned out my vision and everything was darkness.

I woke up to a perfectly white ceiling, with a florescent light in the center, turned off. My arm was stinging.

An old woman in white moved by my feet, with a covered meal on a tray. I smelled it, but strangely I wasn't hungry. She reminded me of the caretaker, and when she realized my eyes were open, she called another woman over. This one was younger, and wearing a white lab coat. She held my head in her hands, palms to cheeks, like a piece of pottery.

“How do you feel? What's your name? Do you know where you are?”

The questions fell like rain, some sliding past me like droplets on a duck's back, but some I could answer, and at length I tried to talk.

“What happened?”

“Your friend found you,” she said. “She called the police and they brought you here. You've been recovering for a while.” Just outside the room, it sounded like people

were talking. Above the antiseptic smell I detected the whiff of flowers. Roses, maybe.

“What happened to my sister? Where is she?”

The doctor and the nurse exchanged looks. “I’m sure she’s fine,” the nurse said.

I wanted to say more, but then it was time to eat. The nurse fed me mashed apples, and it was warm and delicious, which was the only memory I had before I fell asleep again.

In the night, I awoke with a terrible start, and Suzu was there, straddling my body. In the dark, there was nothing to make out of her, no impressions except hints from the light outside, but I knew she was here all along. Perhaps they had kept her in another room because she was too dangerous, her strength regained from the same clear liquid they fed into my IV drip. Now unrestrained by the limits of our bedroom, she was unstoppable.

Her hands were around my throat and her hair in my face, squeezing and smothering to the point where I had to make an effort to scream,

“I’m your brother, I’m your brother, stop.”

I felt then, maybe, that we would finally become one this way. She would press into me so hard that the cells in our skin would burst and fuse together. Our nerves and blood vessels would reach out from the darkness of our bodies, connecting with increasing complexity until we became a truly single monster, two-headed, our limbs twisted together.

The lights came on over my head, and two nurses came to hold down my arms and switch out my IV bag for something else.

I told them, “She’s here, she was here.” But they didn’t listen.

A week later, when the doctor checked me and said I could eat solid food and start moving around the hospital, I was relieved. I looked around the other rooms as much as I dared, but in none of them could I find my sister. There were a few girls: some thin, some with the same haunted eyes. But I never found Suzu, and every time I asked one of the nurses they looked at me and said: You should focus on your recovery first.

When I opened my eyes after a long, medicated sleep, Mother was cutting an apple beside me. Her hair was long, just as long as the night we met, curling around her feet on the floor. She carved the red skin of the apple slices like an expert, into the shape of rabbit’s ears.

“Awake?” she said.

I nodded. My muscles still hurt too much to do more than that.

“It was tough, wasn’t it? The gods aren’t very kind after all.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

I wanted to say more, about how I couldn’t protect Suzu, and how I ruined everything by having my own desires. But once again, the words coiled in my throat, and I couldn’t say anything at all except: I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

“It’s okay, dear,” she said, with a sad smile. “You did your best.”

## Chapter 20

The best part of working for a convenience store was that you never had to say anything more than what you were trained to do, and what you were trained to say, you said perfectly: Welcome, would you like to have this warmed up, here's your change.

Thank you.

I made the money I had to make. In the absence of my father, without Suzu, but with things that needed to be paid for, I had no choice. Staying holed up in one's room was a luxury for gods and their servants, and I was a regular human who had to work. At the midnight shift, dealing with boys and girls my age who drank and smoked outside and treated me like human garbage, all I had to do was smile and be polite.

It was during one of these shifts that I saw Amadori again. Her hair was short and dyed so that it took on an auburn color in the florescent light, and she was with someone I didn't recognize. Her friend looked older than her, with premature spiderwebs in the corners of her eyes when she laughed at something Amadori whispered in her ear.

"Just these, please," said the woman, not looking at me as she put the items on the counter. A lighter, a magazine, a canned coffee, black.

I was glad she found a new friend.

"Would you like the cold item in a separate bag," I asked.

"No, it's okay."

"Understood." Amadori paid for everything with a large bill, and as I counted up

the change was when Amadori realized who I was.

Or perhaps she did. It was only for a split second, after all, and then she averted her gaze and we said our goodbyes.

“Thank you very much, please come again.”

It was a look not quite of fear, but something haunted, like she had seen a ghost.

When I had left the hospital, the only people to celebrate my discharge were the nurses, who looked tired and ready to return to their shift after I left, and my homeroom teacher. I was officially no longer a student of Sato High, but he was the one to pick me up and give me a ride in his car, and it was then that I realized I had been at a hospital very far from home. Suburbs became rice fields, became more suburbs.

The day before I was to leave the house to the repo men, I tore through my father's things. He was from the old generation, and everything about his life was in enormous paper stacks, crinkling and frayed, some in manila folders and some loosely bound with rubber bands.

I had already sold everything of value. When Suzu and I were starving, I sold what I thought my father wouldn't miss. After it was clear that he wouldn't come back for anything, the rest of it went. The man buying my father's cufflinks saw me put the cash into an envelope, to which he raised an eyebrow and said,

“It's not safe to be just holding that much money. Somebody might rob you.”

The idea of it didn't faze me. I wasn't even sure why I was collecting the money, except to have the comfort of seeing real cash again. I wish I had done it sooner, before I had to go to the hospital.

Finally, deep at the bottom of the paper stacks, I found our family registry. Printed in old kanji characters were our hometown of Kizu-cho, my father's name, my mother's name. Below them, I found what I was really looking for: My name, and Suzu's name, just like anyone else's.

Epilogue: Tokyo

The girl shakes the boy awake.

“It's almost time,” she says.

The boy sits up and looks at his watch. A quaint old thing to have, in this day and age. The time is half past midnight. “Did you fall asleep too?” he asks.

“A little,” she admits. “Too much to drink. It's a good thing we weren't robbed. You want to know what I dreamed about?”

“Sure,” he says.

“I dreamed that I met your sister. She was beautiful, and she had the longest curly hair. It was amazing. Was her hair very long?”

“The longest.”

He no longer knew where Suzu was. His sister was in the care of the state, or Father, and he no longer had access. That was how the boy ended the story, staring into the window at the lights until he and the girl dozed off, with all the sleeping party people around them.

They leave McDonald's as it begins to rain. A spiderweb crack on the girl's screen catches the stray droplets that pass her umbrella, turning the light from her phone into a series of prismatic fissures. Those colors reflect in her eyes.

“Shall we find a place?” she says.

The boy nods.

The girl looks up. Even though her umbrella is tiny, they are under it together.

They go to a shrine. It's a small one, meant for the god of rice or one of his attendants. But gods have many advantages, and there is yet one more: Every shrine in

Japan is the same place. Whether it's the Grand Shrine of Izumo where the greatest of the gods gather, or a mound of earth and cardboard in the middle of nowhere, dedicated to a long-forgotten deity – The moment one steps through the torii gates, hands washed in fresh water, they are walking among the divine ones. The realm of gods exists like a separate dimension, with many doorways in and out.

But you are only human, after all: After you clap your hands and finish making prayers, you have to return home. The boy is very far from home.

Droplets of water from the statues, reflecting the light from a still-on mercury lamp, make the place feel like truly sacred. The boy digs into his pockets and throws two five-yen coins into the donation box at the door. They clap their hands and pray in silence.

“Is she here?” asks the boy.

The girl has her palms together, eyes still closed. She is not praying; it's one o'clock in the morning, and even Tokyo, at this corner, at this time, is quiet. She can start to search.

“Mayu Hasegawa, are you here,” she intones. The girl opens her inner eye and looks through the city for the girl that the boy has told her about, the small one, who ran away from home when they were still in high school.

“She said she was going to Tokyo,” he said at the end of his story. That was why the boy came all the way here, using his entire savings to fly to the great city, to hire detectives and look for her. But so far, no one was able to find Mayu. This, now, was his last hope.

The girl opens her eyes.

“She isn't here.”

If the boy is disappointed, it doesn't show. His face is a mask. “I see.”

“It could be that she's not in the city, and she's somewhere else,” she says. Not wanting to mention the other possibility.

“It's fine,” he says, after a moment of dark silence. “I don't think she would have wanted me to know anyway.”

As they walk away from the shrine to say their goodbyes, the girl looks at the boy, small and raven-like beside her. She makes a decision.

“The way I see it,” says the girl, “you now have a choice. Two options. I think that's actually pretty rare. Usually life gets a lot more complicated, even if you don't want it to.” She smiles, a crooked little grin. “You want to hear what I think they are?”

He nods. The girl points up one finger to heaven.

“Option one. You and I say goodbye here, as I think you were planning. And you walk to the harbor, or the highest bridge you can find, and you jump. It'll be a big mess, and everyone will read about it in the papers tomorrow. Or maybe you'll get lucky and the tide will take you away, and nobody will find you ever. That's what you'd like, isn't it?”

The boy is about to say something. She shakes her head.

“You were thinking about it. Don't lie. I knew it when you finished your story. Embracing the sea?”

His fingers are cold, but he doesn't want to raise his hands to warm them with his breath. The moment is too vulnerable for that. “So what's option two?” he asks.

“Option two...” The girl steps down from the stone platform of the altar, walking

back the way they came. “That is, we don’t say goodbye here. My apartment isn’t very big, but I’m not in it most of the time anyway. I’ll help you find work. Everybody needs a part-timer. But,” she turns around. “You don’t go back. Don’t go anywhere. Just be here.”

She looks back at me.

“What do you say?”

“Why?”

The lamp lighting the street ahead of them is dying. Its light dims, turns a faint shade of green, and it gives the boy's friend an unreal appearance, as if she is a ghost. Or perhaps an afterimage, like closing one’s eyes to brightly lit CRT and seeing the shapes behind the eyes. But she looks straight at him. Without lenses, her natural eyes are deep and black.

“Because,” she says. “No one would ever believe a story like that. The one you told me.”

“No one,” says the boy.

“Absolutely no one.” She extends her hand. “So will you come?”

He nods.

“You won’t jump?”

“I wasn’t going to jump,” he says, feeling annoyed. “Are you sure you’ll have room for me?”

“Positive.” She nods, eyes half-closed against the light drizzle that starts to fall. A sunshower.

“I won’t stay longer than a week, or two,” the boy says.

“You can stay until you find something.” The girl shivers and opens her umbrella.

“Now that that’s decided, it’s freezing. Do you mind if we get some coffee?”

“I don't drink coffee anymore.”

“Something else, then.”

He turns around, to face the shrine again. “Just one more prayer.”

The boy takes out another coin. Not five yen this time; this one is a hundred-yen coin, silver and shiny and hand-polished. A fitting offering for a great deity, and a long wish. The boy claps his hands, and then he closes his eyes.

He thinks of many things. Of Amadori, the day he first met her. Smiling in the light of the Kizu Express Mart, named for a town that no longer exists.

He thinks of the caretaker, long gone. But they're all long gone, even the ones who are still alive. He thinks of Mayu, and hopes that she is happy.

Father and Mother. He thinks of the mountains, of a hidden school with a high rooftop. Of a rainy day much like this, when a boy and a girl, sister and brother, were young.

“Hear us,” he says. “Hear us.”

And the boy prays to the forest god for the last time.

## Appendix: Process Letter

I started writing *The Gods of Satomiya* in August 2013. I finished the first version after five months – a terrible mess. Then the second draft came about two months later, at the end of February 2014. What you have now is number three. Despite having the most dramatic and extensive changes of them all, with entirely new scenes and characters, this version only took about three weeks to write. I think if I'm lucky, I'll keep narrowing the window of time between versions, and by the time I'm at draft seven or so, the story will finally be what I want it to be. One hopes.

I'm not sure what I was doing in the year before. I did write a little bit, here and there, but it always felt monumental, like I had to fight my own mind even just to attempt putting words on the page. I imagined myself to be in a personal crisis, withering away from the weight of responsibility, losing my mind and my reason for being... But to tell you the truth, that all seems terribly overdramatic now. Maybe I'm just lucky, but nothing's ever turned out to be quite so bad, once I've gotten to step back and process it. I was learning important life lessons at an inopportune time for my work. That's all.

And I don't think I did so badly as a student in the traditional sense. Manette Ansay, one of the great instructors of the program, would say that our job as new writers was to soak up everything we could, to be a sponge, so that we could be well-equipped to write whatever we wanted when we reached the fullness of our abilities. I read more books over these past two years than I thought I did. I managed to write more than I thought, too, and the things I produced weren't all awful. Experimental, perhaps. The first

year was a survey of possibilities, to prepare me (and my colleague Hallie Johnston) for the difficult choices we would have to make in the writing of our books.

The greater environment of the English department and the university was helpful. It kept me grounded, kept me sane, and it kept my eyes open to the world outside the writing desk. Taking a graduate class on seventeenth-century women's literature with Professor Mihoko Suzuki was a powerful experience, an opportunity to meet a truly great mind, and it left me with interests that I think will sustain my creative life to come. And truthfully, day to day, I saw the stress of the PhD students and thought, "Well, I suppose I should count my blessings."

But even just being able to mingle with the poets, as well as the creative writing undergrads (which I did in Maureen Seaton's poetry forms course), helped me step out of my own head and discover a little joy in the whole process. It's so easy to forget it, otherwise.

How all these experiences came together to produce a book set in Japan, about an isolated village caught between its gods and the march of urbanization and progress, and which I wanted to be about the line between love and the kind of religious devotion that leads to pain and ruin... I can't really say. I don't know if I even succeeded. But at the very least, I wanted to put down some of these memories, in the hopes that maybe these myriad moments I went through will make sense to me later. Things happened, I observed and learned a lot, I lived in this city with its blasting heat and incredible extremes, and at the end, I wrote a book. The only thing I can say for sure is that I'm glad I did it, and I'm glad to be done.

