

Sleeping Bunny

Konohara Narise

It all started with one letter. It all started with the letter that he had sent as a joke.

The letter was lying around on top of the kitchen table. On the surface, an unknown script neatly spelled out, "Satomi Kouichi-sama". Kouichi flipped over the envelope, a piece of bread left over from the morning's breakfast dangling from his mouth. He couldn't find the sender's name. Thinking that it was a suspicious DM(Direct Mail), he carelessly ripped the letter open.

< Greetings,
Pardon me. Thank you for your letter. >

Kouichi cocked his head curiously. For the last few years, he had written nothing but seasonal greetings and get-well-soon letters.

< I'd like to meet you. >

He couldn't tear his eyes away. It was as if his gaze was nailed to the spot. Confused, he ran up to his room on the second floor, tightly clutching the letter in his hands.

"Stop running in the house; it's noisy!"

His mother's angry voice, which was louder than his stompings, rang throughout the house. He locked his room's door and spread the letter open, the tips of his fingers trembling.

< I will wait for you this week Sunday, 2 PM at coffee shop "Malrene", located at 2nd floor of Haruka building, next to Kase Station's main street. >

The corners of his mouth loosened up and his face became a bright red. He was sick and tired of hearing about other guys who received "love letters", but Kouichi himself never received a love confession, much less a love letter, even though he was already a high school sophomore. This was the first time in his life. He read up to the last line (meanwhile, Kouichi's mind quickly went through the faces of all the girls he have met up til now, concentrating on the cute ones) and then he thought something was wrong with his eyes.

< Ito Hirokazu >

No matter how many times he stared at it, it didn't change from "Ito Hirokazu". There was a slight problem... actually, a huge problem with it being a girl's name. He started to read the letter all over again.

< I like you. I'd like to meet you. >

Words that made him happy to the verge of tears were written there.
But it's Itou Hirokazu.

"Hey, that's not even funny..."

His masculine pride that had bloated up sank down to the ground in a matter of seconds. Of course, he knew himself better than anyone else did. He was nearly 180 centimeters and his face was okay, but somehow girls didn't really like him. It may be because of his relaxed personality. He wasn't popular at all.

"Something is different about Satomi. Like, he doesn't push a girl to the edge... He's boring."

Girls seemed to think that guys' hearts are made out of steel. The carelessly tossed comment hurt Kouichi's feelings deeply.

Thanks to the letter, he was reminded of his short-comings. He was beyond getting pissed off. It was at a point where he became depressed, so he harshly wrinkled up the letter.

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The sun sets quickly in winter. After school, while he was being lectured by his homeroom teacher Iwamoto, the surroundings became completely dark. Kouichi returned to his classroom to retrieve his coat and bookbag. Seeing the cold classroom devoid of all other students, he sighed heavily. Why the hell did mathematics exist? He knew there was no point in continuing to angst about it, but... Since he was little, Kouichi and math totally didn't get along. But they had always been careful around each other and up til now their relationship wasn't that bad, but with yesterday's pop quiz, they completely broke up. At his score that was way below the passing grade, his homeroom teacher clutched his head, too upset to even get mad.

Not only was he not into math to start with, but he didn't feel like studying at all that day. It was the day that he received *the* letter.

"Hey, there you are, Satomi."

His classmate, Endou Minori, suddenly popped her head in at the other end of the exit door.

"What were you doing all this time?"

He uneasily laughed and changed the topic. He was too embarrassed to admit that he had to see the teacher because his quiz grade was so horrible.

Endou walked up to Kouichi's desk and looked up at her classmate, who was at least a head taller than her, with huge eyes.

Her long hair was neatly braided into two braids. Her small and thin body looked good in their school uniform, which was checkered coat. Her face, rather than being beautiful, was cute. More than anything else, she had pretty eyes.

But she was called the weird girl by their classmates. She liked reptiles, so it seemed that she had lots of pets of that sort.

"So, I heard a letter came?"

Who the hell went around, babbling that?! He shuddered at the question he heard again and again since yesterday and answered.

"Yeah, it came."

"Then let me see."

With her eyes full of interest, she held out a hand.

"No way."

"Can't you at least give me a little peak?"

She puffed up her cheeks.

"I threw it away."

"Huh? No way! Why?"

"I talked it over with Kakimoto and decided. We were just having some fun, but that other guy was probably for real. You can't mess around with other people's feelings."

"I know that, but... You didn't really throw it away, did you?"

She looked at Kouichi, looking like she couldn't just let it go. Come to think of it, the reason why he got the love letter from a man was because of "Endou". Kouichi lightly sighed so that the little devil wouldn't notice.

A month ago, Tanaka brought a homosexual magazine to their school. At that time homosexuality was the hottest issue both in TV shows and newspapers, so everyone had fun with the magazine that Tanaka said he picked up from the train station.

The book contained photos of half-naked macho man in different poses. To a healthy male high school student, it was just about as helpful to his life as a health textbook. Endou was mixed in with the boys, reading the book with them.

What really cracked them up was the pen pal section.

-Wanted: Sweet Older Man-

-I'm looking for a oo who can really show my cute ★★ a good time-

The obviously seductive lines like those were so funny that they laughed their asses off.

"Guys, do you want to try writing a letter?"

Endou was the one who spoke up.

"We can't do long distances. He won't write back if we're not close enough."

"This guy's close to us. He's right next town."

"But he's just normal. He's not funny."

『I am a 27-year-old office worker. I'm looking for a hard-working, kind person. My hobby is reading, so I will be happy if we can discuss books together. -Itou- 』

They wrote the letter while laughing. They wrote all kinds of crap, like I'm a 22-year-old college student, I love reading, if you're interested in someone like me I'd like to go out with you, etc. On the way back home, Endou asked for Kouichi's address.

"Can I send it using Satomi's address?"

"Sure, whatever."

That's what he said, but he had completely forgotten about it.

He never thought in a million years that Endou would really send the letter, not to mention the guy would actually answer back to him.

"No way, no way, totally no way."

Her prettily-shaped eyebrows became wrinkled, which made her look a little angry.

"I already said you can't."

"But I'm the one who sent the letter."

Kouichi glanced down at Endou.

"I have no problems showing it to you, but I *know* you're going to ask to go see him next."

"I've never seen a real gay guy before, so I want to go see him."

"Well, I don't."

"Oh, boo hoo."

When Endou clung to Kouichi's arm, it felt like he brushed against the swelling of her breasts, so he didn't know what to do. His heart started to beat rapidly.

"Pretty please? Let me see just once."

She gazed at him with her huge eyes. When she asked if she could send the letter under his name, Endou was looking at him just like this. So without thinking about it, he told her to do whatever she wanted. Kouichi loudly sighed.

"...You can't tell the other guys."

Endou's face brightened right away.

"I mean it."

She tightly grabbed Kouichi's hand. Her hand was small and cold.

"I'll take you out to go see him. But just for a little while, and from far away."

"Okay."

"You can't tell other people."

"I get it."

"I'm supposed to meet him at two at a coffee shop, so let's meet up somewhere else before that."

"Okay."

Endou smiled. He was doing great. He was going to say carelessly, "Let's go home together", but she looked at her watch and gave a small cry.

"I made Miyuki wait at the entrance and I completely forgot about her..."

Before he had a chance to call her back, she left the classroom.

At the door she turned back and waved, so Kouichi hurriedly raised his right hand. Endou was a weird girl. She liked reptiles and wanted to see gays. But Kouichi was growing quite fond of that weird girl.

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He wore T-shirt and jeans, and over that he wore a corduroy jacket. His shoes were Converse. He had been waiting for Endou in front of the Kase Station for the last thirty minutes. Just when he started to suspect that she was standing him up after all that fuss about wanting to go see, he saw Endou at the train platform.

Endou, who was looking this way and that, finally found Kouichi and ran over to him. She was wearing water-colored sweater that tightly fitted her body and a white skirt beneath that. The same

colored over-jacket was tied around her waist.

"I'm sorry for being late."

Her straight hair silkily rustled. Her lips were glazed with pink. Kouichi stared at her, unable to say anything. Endou tilted her head this way and that, looking confused with his look. He finally snapped back to the real world, nervously noticing her look.

"Should we go?"

"Okay."

They walked side by side. He suddenly wondered how others were seeing them. He lowered his head a little and walked, looking at Endou's profile. Would other people think that they were going out?

His tender feelings couldn't be described, happiness and embarrassment all mixed together.

As if throwing cold water on his light-heartedness, Kakimoto's face flashed across his mind.

Kakimoto was the first person he talked to in regards to the strange letter. Kakimoto and he were friends even before they were out of their diapers. They attended junior high and high school together. They were completely unseparatable friends.

He was the valedictorian, being the owner of an impressive brain. His face was well-shaped and his words were harsh. He said, "Throw that way."

"There's nothing we can do about a letter that already came, but we can't do anything about his waiting for us, either. Not only is it a horrible hobby to go see him and having fun at his expense, it's terrible manners."

Kouichi thought like Endou that it would be okay to just have a look at him, but at Kakimoto's words, he couldn't say, "I want to go see him."

Kakimoto was always right. He almost pissed him off at how he was always right. But when Endou begged him, more than his regards for what is proper, his curiosity got the better of him.

To be honest, he wanted to become closer to Endou, using the "man" as an excuse.

I threw the letter way. I'm not going to go see that guy.

That's what he told Kakimoto and everyone else. So now he felt guilty about secretly coming to see the man. So even if he saw the man who sent the letter to him at the restaurant, he won't tell Endou.

He was just going to keep it to himself.

They had a little trouble because it was hard to find the entrance to the promised location. Ten minutes after 2 PM, the two of them pushed open the door of 「Marlene」.

It wasn't a big shop, but it didn't feel narrow and cluttered, perhaps because the tables were spaced quite widely. The sephia-themed interior of the place felt comfortable, and jazz flowed throughout the store at a sound level that didn't get on one's nerves.

It somehow felt like it was a 「Store For Adults Only」, so the two of them quickly settled at a seat near the cash register. Kouichi carelessly observed the window seats that the man had mentioned.

All seats next to the windows were taken. The right side was taken by a middle-aged office worker, and left seat was taken by a couple. They were out of the question.

In the middle there was a sophisticated man clad in black. He looked uneasy like a pimp, and he looked like he would be annoying. He looked about mid-twenties. He was certain that that was the man who sent the letter. But his image didn't match with what he had imagined from the letters. He had written that he enjoyed reading, so he was thinking of someone more quiet.

Weird, he thought, while continuing to observe the man. In the letter, the man had said that he would place a scheduler on top of the table to indicate himself. On the man's table, he only had a package of cigarettes and a lighter.

"So, do you see him?"

Unable to wait for Kouichi's words, she tugged at the end of his shirt with her fingers. He hadn't told Endou that the man would be sitting by the window, nor did he tell her that he was supposed to place a scheduler on his table.

"I don't think he's here."

"Is he supposed to be at the window seat? Isn't it that handsome guy over there?"

She asked as if she followed Kouichi's gaze. His heart sunk at her sharp observation. Without answering her, he glanced around the shop. There was no one who had placed a scheduler in sight. Kouichi felt better.

"Hey, it's that guy in black, isn't it?"

"He doesn't have the indicator, so he's not. I don't think he came. Maybe something came up so he couldn't make it."

"You're lying, right? That sucks."

Endou sipped at her cream soda. Lifting her eyes, she looked at Kouichi.

"He's really not here?"

"Yeah."

Kouichi also took a sip of his coke.

"He's not here, so it's just too bad. Do you want to go back?"

Endou stood a little on her toes, as if upset, and glanced at her right side. She suddenly made a small noise.

"It's Takahashi-sensei."

He turned to look. At the end of Endou's pointing finger, a slender man in his mid-twenties sat. He

was wearing eyeglasses. Kouichi had never seen him before.

"We had someone like that?"

"He's Takahashi-sensei, teaching modern Japanese literature. You don't know him?"

"I never had him."

"Well, yeah, our school has tons of teachers and students, so. He's teaching freshmen right now, so he's not dealing with us sophomores. He's nice, so he's pretty popular among the girls."

He turned to look at him again. The house plant leaves got in his way, so he couldn't really see his face. After they finished their coke and soda, they stood up. Kouichi picked up the tab as if it was his duty.

"We didn't get to see him, so I'll pay for you."

"Arigatou."

Endou gave him a smile and left the shop first. While he was paying the bill, the window seat guy who got on his nerves passed him buy. He looked like a steady customer, since he friendly told the cashier, "Put it on my tab."

Before he left, Kouichi looked around the room once more. Where it should have been empty, a man was sitting. Even from far away, he could see the scheduler on top of the table.

"It's him."

His heart jumped. He stared at the man's face. A small face encased by eyeglasses. Kouichi's eyes opened wider. It's him. The modern Japanese literature teacher that Endou was talking about. "Takahashi".

"No way."

He mumbled to himself. He realized that the cashier was giving him strange looks, so he rushed out of the store.

"Do you want to hang out?"

Endou, who was waiting for him outside, smiled and asked him, but his rapidly beating heart couldn't be calmed. Endou kept talking to him, but he was preoccupied. He turned back to look after walking a little. He was able to see neither the man by the window nor the store itself any longer.

"Um... The guy we were talking about before. Is he really a teacher at Touzai High?"

"Definitely."

"What's his full name?"

"Takahashi... Hiro... Hirokazu, or something like that... Why?"

Endou cocked her head. He was the one who wanted to ask, "Why?" He had no idea what the heck was going on. Kouichi received a letter from an office worker named "Itou Hirokazu". But the man over there was his school's teacher, "Takahashi". Was it a mere coincidence that he had left a scheduler on top of his table? Or... His head was getting muddled up.

"Hey, do you want to check out that store over there?"

Endou held his hand. He should have been happy at this situation, but because of the unanswered questions, he couldn't be excited at all. As if she was dragging him along, Kouichi walked by Endou's side.

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After watching a movie and hanging out at the arcade and having hamburgers together at the park, the sun started to set. They backtracked the road they had taken and headed back to the station. When they reached the coffee shop in question, Kouichi lifted his lowered head without thinking. In the middle seat, he could see shadow of a person. He saw eyeglasses. It was the man. He nervously ducked his head.

He bought a train ticket at the station. It was only a piece of paper, but it was strangely heavy.

"I'm sorry. I forgot to buy something. I'm going to quickly run and get it, so go on ahead."

Endou lowered her head slightly.

"Really? Then I'm gonna go. See you tomorrow."

After seeing her off to the platform, he ran to where he could see the coffee shop again. The man was sitting by the window. He looked at his watch. He had made him wait nearly four hours. He felt really uncomfortable. Why won't he hurry and go already? Kouichi's thoughts couldn't reach the man and he seemed to have no intention of leaving, either.

Just how long is he going to wait?

Kouichi was upset over even the thirty minutes that Endou had made him wait. Even if he went into the store and met up with the man, the only thing he could say was, "I have no intention of going out with you." If he said that after making the man wait for so long, of course the guy was going to be majorly pissed off.

"I shouldn't have came."

He softly muttered to himself. If he hadn't came, he wouldn't have saw the waiting man. He

wouldn't have felt this guilty...

"I'm sure he's going to give up and leave soon."

He said as if reassuring himself and turned around. After he took three steps, he turned back. The image of the man who kept waiting wouldn't leave his mind. He couldn't make up his mind whether he was going to meet him or not, but his legs slowly took him to the coffee shop. He stopped in front of the store. He decided that no matter what, he had to meet the man and apologize to him for being late because something came up, and he had to tell him clearly that he had no intention of going out with him. He tugged on the door.

At the same time, someone pushed the door open from the other side. Kouichi was stronger, so the person at the other side got dragged to the outside, holding on to the door handle. The man looked startled at the door that was suddenly pulled open. When his eyes met Kouichi's, he lowered his head and apologized.

"I'm sorry."

He couldn't speak. It was the man.

He was the man that he forced to wait like there is no tomorrow. He looked confused when Kouichi stood like a statue, unable to move.

"I'd like to go outside. Pardon me, but..."

"Oh! My bad."

He quickly stood aside. The man passed Kouichi and slowly descended the stairs. He suddenly stopped in the middle. His gaze that looked back and Kouichi's gaze that had been staring at his back crashed together.

"Please forgive me if I am mistaken, but could you possibly be Satomi-san?"

His voice was low and gentle.

"...Yes."

He couldn't lie. The man awkwardly laughed, using only corners of his lips.

"Nice to meet you. I am Itou. I thought you were unable to make it, so I was just about to leave. I am so glad that we did not pass each other by."

"Ah, um... I'm sorry for being late."

"If it is all right with you, shall we go somewhere else?"

There was no way that Kouichi was able to say that he wanted to leave.

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The place that the man went to was a coffee shop right across the street. They sat together at the corner seat. On top of the hard wooden seat, Kouichi was very nervous.

The man asked while pushing the menu towards Kouichi,

"Would you like to eat anything?"

"I, I'm okay. I'm not that hungry."

He didn't feel like eating, and he didn't want to stay for a long time, either.

"Would coffee be all right with you?"

"Yes."

Kouichi lowered his head, doing his best not to meet his eyes with the man. He felt so uncomfortable that he felt like his waist was itching.

To tell the truth, he wanted to run away and go home right now. The man didn't say anything. He looked like he had no intention of speaking, either. He felt like they were not going to go anywhere if he didn't speak up, so he determinely opened his lips.

"Um... Uh..."

"But..."

They spoke at the same time. They stared at each other, their mouths half-opened.

"Go ahead, Satomi-san."

"No, uh, you first, Itou-san."

They tried to let each other speak first, and they ended up being silent again. Kouichi wanted to cry. Just why did he have to sit down and stare a gay guy in the face like this, drinking tea with him? He regretted feeling strangely sorry for him and wished that he just went home.

The waitress brought two cups of coffee... As if he had been waiting for it, Kouichi took a sip. Of course the glass of water that he had initially received was empty. He kept being thirsty.

"Ah, um, I..."

At Kouichi's voice, the man's hand which had been stirring the coffee jumped up. The knock-back caused the spoon to fall on top of the saucer.

Crash!!

The noise rang loudly, so the man suddenly blushed.

"I'm sorry. Please continue."

The man tried to feign casualness, his head lowered. But his fingers were clutching so tightly so that the tips became white, and he was trembling a little. For the first time he realized that the man was also nervous.

"...I'm sorry for being late."

At Kouichi's words the man lifted his face. His slender oval face looked a little anal, but it didn't have any special features. He looked like he would be a quiet, weakly man. If he had a class with him, he wouldn't have hated him, but he wasn't someone Kouichi would have gotten close to.

"I came late, also, so I did not wait for a long time. And I just decided upon the date and hour without considering your schedule, so I'm sorry. Aren't you busy?"

The man uneasily smiled. Not only did he not get angry about being forced to wait, but he quickly lied so that he wouldn't be troubled. His kindness pressed heavil upon Kouichi, so he became quiet again.

"You said you were in your fourth year of university, right, Satomi-san?"

The man continued to talk to him.

"At first I hesitated in speaking to you, because you seemed like a high school student."

"Eh, aah... I hear that often."

As if not noticing how he trailed off his words like he was avoiding the topic, the man continued.

"What is your major at the university?"

He felt cold sweat running down his back. Major? What major? Nothing came up in his mind.

"Um... Japanese literature. I like Natsume Soseki, so."

Kakimoto was the one who said he enjoyed Soseki. Kouichi only knew the first part of the 「I Am a Cat」 that he learned in class.

"I also like Soseki."

He'll dig himself into a deep hole if they continued talking about literature. He shouldn't give the man an opportunity to talk.

Forcibly cutting off the man who continued to say something, he threw him a question.

"What kind of work do you do, Itou-san?"

The man lowered his head a little and avoided Kouichi's gaze.

"I am in the Sales Department."

He lied in a small voice.

"That's impressive."

"Not at all. The place where I work at gives more slack compared to other places. How is school? Isn't your graduation thesis difficult?"

"Not really..."

It was like a fox and raccoon tricking each other. Why did he have to keep up with these painful lies and talk about things that were so transparent? He started to become anxious. They were the same. As if reassuring themselves, they bore with endless conversation saturated with lies. But it became more and more annoying to talk. The man talked as if he was checking Kouichi's reaction to everything, and his weak personality got on his nerves even more.

"This is stupid."

When Kouichi softly muttered as if annoyed, the lips stopped moving as if he had been paused. The man suddenly stopped speaking.

"It's boring talking to me, right?"

He asked as if tossing the question. He was being rude. The man's answer was so small that he couldn't quite catch it.

"What did you say?"

He finally heard the voice that barely reached his ears.

"That's not true."

They both became silent. A glance at his watch told him that it was just a little after 8 PM.

"May I leave now?"

"Ah, go ahead. I'm sorry for holding you up until such late hours."

Before Kouichi stood up, the man hurriedly grabbed the check.

"I'll pay for what I drank, so..."

The man shook his head to Kouichi's words.

"I've forced you to come, so I will pay."

At his stubborn voice he thought it would be annoying to argue with him, so he let the man pay.

"Thank you for the drink."

"I'm the one who troubled you."

The man apologized to Kouichi. He bowed his head so much that Kouichi wondered just why he had to apologize to him.

"Then. Bye."

He felt like he had pretty much done his duty, so he felt more relieved and he started for the station.

"I want to meet you again."

He turned back. At Kouichi's surprised face the man nervously dropped his gaze.

"If it's not too much trouble for you."

He must have known from his attitude that he had no chance. But he still says he wanted to meet again. Was he a dense person after all? Or did he already know, but he was just pretending to be ignorant to his feelings?

Now was the time to say that it was just a joke, that this was a one-time thing. As far as feelings were concerned, Kouichi had the upperhand.

"Ah, but I..."

The man's head was lowered, and the ends of his shoulders were shaking. His unnaturally tight-fisted hands were white at the tips. He realized just now that the man was serious. If he refused, he'd get hurt. When he realized that, he couldn't continue his words. Kouichi remembered the girl who laughed and said, "You're joking, right?" when he confessed to her with all his heart. He couldn't tell her that he was being serious, so he just ended it like a joke, but for a while, everytime he saw her his heart would ache painfully.

The man lifted his face. The edges of his lips were pushed up to resemble a smile, but his eyes were strangely clouded.

"I'm sorry for asking you something so troublesome. Thank you for staying with me today."

"Do you want to meet up one more time?"

He couldn't take back the words that he had blurted out. The man looked at Kouichi with widened eyes, and then slowly dropped his gaze.

"You don't have to care about my feelings."

He knew that Kouichi wanted to say that this was the first and last time. He knew that Kouichi was saying this only because he was feeling sorry for him. But he couldn't just grab this chance and go, "Then goodbye", either.

"Let me know your phone number."

That was more to be social than anything else. The man who was staring at him dazedly hurriedly took out his scheduler and wrote his phone number, and then handed it to Kouichi. Kouichi grabbed it. Just like that, they said goodbye to each other and parted.

And Kouichi realized on his way back. The man didn't ask for Kouichi's phone number. Of course he wanted to know. He said himself to Kouichi that he wanted to meet him again.

If Kouichi had no intention of meeting him again, they would never meet again. On the train heading back home, Kouichi really, really felt bad towards the man who considered Kouichi's feelings above all others.

Touzai High that Kouichi attended was a recently built private high school. It didn't require any special entrance exams and the GPA that earned you acceptance wasn't very high, not to mention it was located at the center of the town, so the total number of students was a huge number of nearly 2000 students. There were nearly 100 teachers as well.

Each grade had a different section dedicated to it, so there was no reason to bump into the freshman's teachers unless you were moving from class to class or walking near the teacher's lounge.

After yesterday's incident, Kouichi saw *him* just after a day, which was today. During lunch, Kouichi was standing in front of the only juice vending machine in school. He was about to insert a 100 yen coin, but like a fool he had dropped it. So he had lowered his body to pick it up. At that moment he had felt the presence of someone passing behind him.

He straightened himself and turned to look. When he realized that it was the man from yesterday, his heart grew cold. The man numbly wandered down the hallway wearing stereotypical teachers' clothing of brown pants, long-sleeved shirt and unfashionable neck tie. His head was lowered. He passed by Kouichi, who was just one of the students, without recognizing him. Even though they were within touching distance of each other, even though he had said "I want to meet you" to him yesterday, he did not recognize him. It was a strange feeling.

After he returned to his classroom, a straw attached to the pack of juice in his mouth, Kouichi took out the post-it with phone number written on it that he had stuck in his wallet. After he went home

yesterday, he kept thinking about it--should he call him or not?

If he called and told him honestly, the man would get hurt for sure. But Kouichi wouldn't continue to feel guilty over this. If he didn't call him, this whole incident will fade out. It'll be easier to do, but he'd continue to feel bad about it.

Even though it was annoying, he really should give him a call. Just when he decided that, the crinkled note was snatched from his fingers.

"What the heck is this?"

He tried to take the note back, but Kakimoto flipped his hand over like a butterfly.

"Just whose phone number is this? Since a while ago you kept glaring at it and looked constipated, so you were getting on my nerve."

"None of your beeswax; give it back."

Ignoring troubled Kouichi, he lightly flipped the note over. Kakimoto sat across from him and whispered near his ear: "Is it Endou's phone number?"

Watching Kouichi's startled eyes grow wide, Kakimoto grinned.

"Not that I really wanted to see, but I happened to see the two of you walking together in a really friendly manner. I think Endou has strange hobbies, but everyone has his or her tastes, so it's cool."

Kouichi wrinkled up the note in his hands and bluntly replied, "It's not a girl's phone number."

Kakimoto frowned for a second. Kouichi hurriedly avoided his eyes. Kakimoto was a man with almost frighteningly sharp instincts and Kouichi had never lied to Kakimoto before.

"Whose phone number is it then, a man's? Come to think of it, weren't you supposed to meet that letter dude yesterday?"

"I, uh, have to go to the bathroom for a sec."

He stood up, but Kakimoto hung on to his right hand tightly. When Kouichi turned to look at him, Kakimoto smiled up at him. But his eyes were not smiling.

"I'd like to hear what happened yesterday in detail."

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"You MORON. What, is your brain filled with sex?"

Kakimoto glared at Kouichi, deeply frowning. The rooftop was windy and cold, so no one else was

there. Kouichi got angry and yelled, but in the end he roughly confessed what happened yesterday. However, he didn't tell him that the other guy was their school's teacher.

"No matter how much you wanted to go out with Endou, just what are you going to do from now on? I've already advised you against this mess."

Kouichi retorted in a small voice.

"He just wouldn't give up. I made him wait for so long... And he liked me..."

"No matter how sorry you feel, it's not like you can go out with him. Then it's kinder to tell him right then and there. But don't you think it's so cruel to say things to him so he'd look forward to the next time? If he's such a diligent, straight-forward man like you say he is, he'll probably wait for your call every single day."

At Kakimoto's announcement, it really felt like that's how it would be.

Kouichi clutched his head in his hands and muttered, "What do I do?"

"Call him, even today, and tell him the reason and end this. That's called good manners."

As if chasing after Kouichi, who had lowered his head, Kakimoto heavily sighed.

*

The man answered the phone after just one ring. Even though he had prepared for this, he became anxious right away.

「Yes.」

"Is, is this Mr. Itou's residence?"

「Yes?」

"I'm Satomi... Um... Last time we've met, right?"

「Ah, yes.」

Unlike Kouichi who was very anxious, the man's voice was quiet and relaxed.

"I've called you because I had something to say."

The man said nothing from the other side. He wondered if he had hung up and asked again without

thinking, "Itou-san?"

「Ah, I'm sorry. I was spaced out for a minute there. I never thought that you would really call me, so I was really surprised...」

Image of the man who walked down the hallway numbly flashed in Kouichi's mind.

"Did you think that I wouldn't call you?"

「To tell you the truth, yes. You didn't seem to like me very much, so I thought I had no chance. So I am very happy that you've called me.」

He really did sound happy. Kouichi thought, 'Oh, crap!' but it was already too late.

「I wanted to talk to you more. It's weird for me to say this about myself, but I'm not good with people and I can't really talk with someone I've met for the first time. So I knew I've made you uncomfortable.」

"Oh, really..."

It was difficult to say something to the man who was chirping so happily from the other side, so Kouichi replied shortly. If he told him the truth right here, right now, what would the man think? He remembered the slightly shaking shoulders he saw when they were parting the day before yesterday.

「Can we meet this week's Sunday?」

He couldn't think up of an excuse not to go at that moment.

"Uh, yes... Okay."

「2 PM, at the same store as before.」

He thought he was in a deep shit, but it was already too late. The Sunday appointment had already been decided upon.

"Okay. ...Um, I'm sorry, but I'm busy, so..."

He wanted to hang up as soon as possible.

「Is that so? Thank you so much for calling me despite your busy schedule. Then I will see you on Sunday. Sleep tight.」

After replacing the receiver, Kouichi sighed.

Kakimoto you stupid bastard, he screamed inside his mind. What the hell are you talking about,

saying he was waiting for my call? He said he hadn't been expecting my call at all. If I hadn't called him, it would've just ended like this, he thought. Instead he became all anxious and called him, and not only did he raise his expectations, he couldn't even tell him that he didn't want to meet him any longer.

Anyway, he had to meet him and talk to him one more time. He looked at the calendar. He didn't even need to make sure that this Sunday was 5 days away.

*

As soon as the man saw Kouichi, he smiled a bit nervously, just like the first time they've met. As if infected by the man's nervousness, Kouichi also forced his cheeks into a smile. He slowly walked to where the man was waiting for him. If he walked faster, he felt like he would completely forget the "words of good-bye" that he had practiced again and again yesterday.

"Today's warm, isn't it?"

Like that, the man started a conversation with Kouichi who was about to sit down.

"Huh? E, excuse me?"

The man looked uncomfortable as he lowered his head at Kouichi's stammered question.

"Nothing; I was just saying that we have a nice weather today, so it's warmer than normal today..."

"That's right."

By the time he sat down, the "words of good-bye" that Kouichi prepared so hard yesterday had completely been wiped out from his brain.

"If you have nothing to do after this, won't you go to the art museum with me? They're doing a show on wood printings right now."

"I'm sorry, but I..."

Whatever. A blank mind or not, there was only one thing he had to say. Kouichi prepared for the worst scenario.

"I won't go," he firmly said. The man cocked his head.

"Do you have something else to do?"

"No, I... To tell you the truth, I've lied to you."

The man's eyes widened, and then he slowly dropped his chin to his chest. Just by that he looked

hurt. But he couldn't just beat around the bushes now.

"I... am not a college student. I don't really like reading books, either. I wrote all kinds of stuff when I was writing that letter to you so that you'd like me."

He rushed out all those words at once. He was sure he could say it at this rate. Kouichi sighed lightly and opened his mouth to continue talking.

"I don't mind."

It was in a small voice, but that's definitely what the man said. His mouth hanging open, Kouichi couldn't say the next words.

"Don't worry about it."

The man smiled, as if he wanted to put Kouichi's mind at an ease.

"I'd much rather you tell me now than you continue to tell me lies."

"Ah... Um..."

"I'm so relieved that you're an honest person."

"Er..."

He couldn't get the next words out. *Why the hell does it always turn out like this?!* He wondered as he lowered his head, drinking his coffee.

"I really don't mind at all. Honestly," the man kindly said, as if he was worried about Kouichi. That kind of attitude pissed him off. 'Even if I get dragged around by you, I'm not going to become a gay,' he muttered only in his mind. He gave up.

"Do you like pretty pictures?" The man suddenly asked. When Kouichi sort of nodded his head, the man gave a small smile. "Wood printings are just like pictures. They're very beautiful. They'll make you happy just by looking at them."

He had absolutely no interest in either the wood printings or the man. But he couldn't just go home, either. Today, he even felt the ease of an older man from him. Perhaps it's because he thought Kouichi felt down.

Kouichi thought, I'll tell him on my way back. He could just tell him when they were returning home. He could be nice enough to spend one more day with him. He reluctantly followed the man who left the store ahead of him.

*

Kakimoto had been telling him since early morning, "You're a REAL moron," but he had nothing to say to that, so Kouichi spent the day stretched out on top of his desk.

"There's a limit to how stupid you can get. I mean, if you say you've decided to change your interests and want to go out with him for a long time because you like him so much, then I have nothing to say to you, either, but."

He had no come-backs ready. He really did think of himself as an idiot. In the end, without being able to say any excuses, he went to the museum to look at wood prints with the man. He had no interest, but in the end he really enjoyed it. They've talked a lot.

"But the wood prints were pretty cool. They were pretty, too."

"Oh, really."

Kakimoto's reaction remained cold.

"He's a REALLY nice guy. I mean, I already knew that, but."

Kakimoto placed his hand on top of Kouichi's shoulder.

"Kouichi, dude. I really don't want to attend a wedding with two grooms," he said, sounding only half-joking.

"Next time I'm really going to tell him off," was the only thing Kouichi was able to say.

*

It was like a game, sort of like high school life that could be over any moment.

The third time they met was also that the coffee shop 「Marlene」. The man no longer forced himself into a stiff smile like the first time, and his fingers stopped trembling at Kouichi's every word.

Whenever the man did something, he politely asked for Kouichi's permission. He never coerced Kouichi into anything. He was sweet. Kouichi always had a choice.

From Kouichi's point of view, he had always hung out with boys his age. It was fascinating to get to know an older man.

Even though Kouichi was younger, the man always spoke to him politely. It felt good to listen to the deep and gentle voice.

The man who looked gentle and delicate was simplistic inside and out. His gentleness was very vague, so he didn't stand out at all. He never forced his opinions on others, so he felt like he would be practically invisible at times.

"I'm sorry you have to meet me every Sunday. Aren't you tired because of work?"

The man thought that Kouichi was working. Before, he asked Kouichi what kind of work he did. He couldn't tell him that he was a high school student, so he said he didn't want to talk about work even on his days off, and after that the man never asked him about it again.

"Not really..."

"If you are, don't hesitate to tell me." The man smiled. "The weather's really nice today. Do you want to go somewhere?"

Black polo shirt with grey jacket. Brown pants. You couldn't even half-heartedly say that he was fashionable. Looking into his eyes, the man tossed the question out at Kouichi.

"Um... I want to go to the beach."

"Beach, you said?"

It was a whimsical thought. They hopped onto a train. They were shaken up for 30 minutes by the train and they had to go 30 more minutes by bus. They finally reached an ocean with a small sandy beach.

It was the wrong season. The winter sea was cold and polluted, so there was not a children in sight. Somehow Kouichi only had the image of summer ocean in his mind, so he felt disappointed while looking at silent but violent waves and foams. He was the one who wanted to come, so he couldn't just say "Let's go back already." He took a sit far away from the water, on top of the sand.

The man beside him became really excited and taking his shoes off, he walked out to where the waves were.

He couldn't see his ankles because of the crashing waves. He was just standing there. He didn't move at all. While Kouichi was watching him and thinking, 'Just what's so much fun?' the man returned to his side.

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm not cold."

His purple-colored lips slightly trembled.

"I was so happy to see it again."

"The sea?"

The man dusted the sand under his feet with the tips of his fingernails.

"I lived by the sea until I graduated junior high school. I was so close that when I was sleeping, I was

able to hear the waves. After I got into high school I moved out, and since then I've lived alone and have forgotten that I used to live next to the ocean."

"Oh."

"I was so happy to hear the sound of waves again."

"You lived by yourself? You must have applied to a high school really far away."

"I wanted to leave my home town."

"Why?"

The man closed his mouth. As he wondered if he asked him about an uncomfortable topic, the man opened his lips.

"I had a crush on someone. He was my junior high school classmate, and my friend, but I loved him so much that I couldn't bear it. I knew it was weird to love a man, so it made me feel so terrible that I couldn't think of doing anything except leaving."

Silence descended. He had forgotten up til now. This man liked other men. And he was also of an interest to this man. The man looked up at Kouichi sideways. He wasn't sure if it was on purpose or not, but his eyes strangely looked inviting.

"Did I make you upset?"

"Not really."

The way he put both of his hands on top of his curled up legs and put his chin on top made him look like a child. His neck and fingers looked too thin to be that of a man's. His face looked like that of an average man, but it was cleanly organized. Like a bee attracted to sweet honey, he suddenly drew his face near him. The man took his eyeglasses off and softly closed his eyes.

The man's gesture was like a slap to him. Startled, he pulled his body back. The man opened his eyes when his lips were not covered by Kouichi's. He seemed to think Kouichi was playing around with him, because a hurt look crossed his face.

At his face Kouichi became hurt, too. He could've at least given him a kiss. His own thoughts scared him. At least a kiss?! This was a man we're talking about here! His old self would've never thought like this in a million years. He started to become frightened.

They felt awkward towards each other and faced away from each other. After a while, when he glanced at him, the man was stirring the sand with the tip of his finger. His finger was long and delicate. He wanted to hold his hand. If he did something like that, he knew he was making the man expect things from him, but he just couldn't hold back the urge so he gently touched him. The man's finger stopped moving and he lightly held the tips of Kouichi's fingers that pulled at him.

The man did not look at Kouichi. His head lowered, he was continuing to look across at the ocean.

*

I went to the beach.

He asked him where he went over the weekend, so he answered truthfully.

"By yourself?" Kakimoto asked, making slurping noises as he ate the school cafeteria's *udon* (thick noodle soup) in their classroom.

"No."

"Then with whom?"

Kakimoto frowned when Kouichi did not answer.

"It's not *him*, is it?"

"What do you mean, *him*?"

"Him. The guy from before."

"It is."

He knew he couldn't hide it, so he gave up and answered. Kakimoto's eyes widened as he stared at Kouichi.

"You're still meeting him? What the hell are you thinking?"

"I didn't have the opportunity to break up with him yet."

"Something smells dangerous, man. That look in your eyes? It changed," Kakimoto seriously said. Thinking he was a weirdo, Kouichi laughed and replied.

"I'm still cool. I only held his hand."

"So?!" Kakimoto made a wide gesture, lifting up his hands. "So normally you think you want to hold my hand or something? No, huh? The fact that you wanted to hold his hand, that you felt like that means something's wrong."

Kouichi was laughing at first, but when Kakimoto kept repeating, 'it's dangerous, it's dangerous', he felt more and more anxious. He had been feeling comfortable, thinking, 'Oh, it's only holding hands. It's only kissing.' He had been feeling confident that he would not do anything beyond that.

"Uh, Kakimoto. Are you seriously thinking that I'm going to want to do it with a guy?"

"I don't know," Kakimoto answered, his face serious.

"We've been friends for like, forever, dude. Of course you'd know."

"I never thought you'd go out with a guy. I never thought that you'd wonder if it's okay to kiss a guy, either. So I can't gurantee that you're never going to want to 「do it」 with a guy."

He swallowed his breath. Hiding his anxiety that made cold sweat run down his back, Kouichi laughed.

"You don't trust me, do you."

"Because you do shit that makes me lose trust in you," Kakimoto spat out.

"It's cool. I know what's right, like everyone else. This is the perfect time."

"What the hell do you mean "perfect time", when you're so deep into it already?!"

That was the last thing they've discussed about the man. The topic moved onto something else quite naturally, but Kouichi was thinking about his next date with the man.

*

Their fourth date was also on Sunday. But he didn't go when the time came. He felt like if he called him and heard his voice, he would not be able to refuse him. He knew it was a terrible thing to do, but he stood him up. The man did not not Kouichi's phone number. There was no way that the man could contact him. If he just let it be, they would naturally break up. He decided to do that. On the day that he stood him up, he felt like crap all day. He thought that the man would wait for him for hours and hours. The thought made him feel so bad that all day he was fighting with his conscience. A day after that, he felt a little better about the whole thing. At this rate, he felt like he could naturally forget about the man.

*

He saw the man.

2 weeks after he stood him up. He passed him by on his way back from the school cafeteria.

The man had lowered his face as usual, and he obviously did not notice Kouichi. For a second he raised his head, so he wondered if he found him out, but he quickly dropped his gaze. He wondered if the man ignored him on purpose, but knowing the man, he realized that the man couldn't make his face expressionless in a matter of seconds. Even if he saw his face among the students, he would make excuses to himself, saying things like, 'I must be really tired today.'

He was a quiet man whom you could find a dime a dozen in the streets. After he passed him, for some reason he suddenly stood still. He turned to look back at him.

"What are you doing, Satomi?"

Seeing the man stop, Kouichi hurriedly turned his back to the man. He ran to his friend who called him. So he didn't know what the man did after he stopped.

*

Before he called him, Kakimoto's face flashed across his mind. He felt like he was saying, "You're a REAL moron."

"I'm sorry for standing you up last time."

The man did not say anything.

"So, uh, something came up..."

No reply. Nothing.

Cold sweat ran down his back. He felt like the man saw through his lies. Of course, no matter what happened, normally he would give the person a call if he couldn't make it to the meeting. If not on the day of the appointment, at least the day after.

Even if he made up some bullshit excuses, he felt like he would just dig himself into a deeper hole, so he stopped.

"I want to meet you again."

「I'm sorry.」

The man apologized. He had no idea why he was apologizing to him.

「I feel it would be better for us to not meet each other any longer.」

"How come?"

「Satomi-san does not wish to meet with me, correct? You don't have to force yourself, then.」

There was a brief pause.

「There is no point in us continuing to see each other. I do not wish to expect things from you, Satomi-san, that you're not willing to give me, either. Please do not call me any longer.」

He felt like the man was angry with him. The ends of his words were gentle, but somehow cold. He really was very mad about getting stood up. He was shocked. Normally, if you got stood up like that, of course you'd get mad, but Kouichi didn't even think that the man would be mad at him. He couldn't imagine his angry face. The man was always sweet, so he thought he would forgive him even if he didn't say anything.

"Did you wait for me that day?"

「A little. But I didn't wait even for one hour.」

"Didn't you wait at least half a day?"

On the other end of the line, he caught his breath.

「Were you watching me that day?」

"I was just guessing."

「I can't believe you'd like to me like that.」

"I want to see you."

「Well, I don't.」

He sounded like he would hang up any second.

"I'm going to 'Marlene' right this second. I'm going to wait for you until you come," he hurriedly said. Before he had the chance to hang up on him, he hung up. He hung up without even listening to the man. He didn't think that the man would not come if he knew Kouichi would be waiting for him.

*

It was a little cold. Kouichi lightly sighed after pulling his rather thin jacket closed. 'Marlene' was closed, so he had no choice but to wait for the man in front of the closed store. He knew he was coming. He was sure of it, so waiting was no problem for him.

Not even 5 minutes after Kouichi arrived, the man came. He was running. He was wearing the same thing he had been waiting when he saw him during lunch. He was in such a hurry that he didn't even wear his coat.

"Don't be selfish," was the first thing he said when he stood in front of Kouichi.

"Were you going to continue to wait for me if I didn't come? Like I did before?"

"I didn't think you would NOT show up."

"Oh, don't we have some confidence."

He never saw the man like this before. His face looked like it was heated up with a light fever, and his voice and body were slightly shaking. He was expressing his anger with his whole body.

"Please listen," The man started. "I have already told you this over the phone, but if you have no interest in me, please don't raise my expectations. I cannot stand you playing around with me, telling me you want to meet me or standing me up."

"Did you wait for my call all this time?"

"Are you paying attention to what I'm saying at all?"

His emotions nearly bursting out of his chest, his voice sounded choked up, as if he would start crying. His tightly clenched fists were slightly shaking.

"Do you love me?"

The man glared at Kouichi, biting into his lips.

"Why are you asking me that?"

Why DID he ask him that? He wondered, looking at the man who was glaring at him. Why did he call him out in the first place? Because he wanted to see him one more time. If he just wanted to meet him, if he wanted to just see him from the distance, he could have done that. But he wanted to talk to him. Talk to him about what? They've never talked about anything really important. They were both 'lying' to each other, so they avoided talking about themselves and talked about stuff that didn't really matter at all.

The man bit his thumb nail. It made clicking noises. A nervous habit. Ivory-white, slender fingers...

"Can I hold your hand?"

The man seemed to notice his unconscious behavior and hurriedly stopped biting his nails. When Kouichi reached out with his hand, he hid both of his hands behind his back. So Kouichi wrapped his arms around his back, trying to catch his hands. The distance between the two of them closed up. Their lips got closer. The man kept on glaring at Kouichi. He didn't close his eyes even when Kouichi's lips got near his own. He lightly kissed him. He quickly pulled away, surprised by the cold yet soft sensation.

"It's dangerous," he muttered without thinking. By "dangerous", he meant exactly how he felt. He wanted to see him, to talk to him, to kiss him, to embrace him, his heart was thumping quickly. He couldn't calm his violently shaking heart. This was the first time he felt like this. He didn't know how to take care of this strange, strong urge.

This was the first time he felt like this.

The man lowered his face and covered his lips with his hand. His sensitive earlobes were bright red. He was blushing so hard that even Kouichi felt embarrassed. he tightly clutched his cheeks.

"Let's meet again."

The short sentence might have sounded cold. But to Kouichi right now, that was the best he could do.

"I don't want to wait for you again."

The man's voice was small.

"I won't make you wait. I promise."

The eyes that looked up at Kouichi somehow looked red. Instead of answering, the man tightly held Kouichi's hands.

[\[Konohara Narise\] Sleeping Bunny \(Part 3\)](#)

- Oct. 8th, 2008 at 3:58 PM

Translating novels take too much time. Hahaha. XD XD XD

They kissed every time they met, hiding from other peoples' eyes. After they kissed lightly many, many times, it felt insufficient so their kisses became deeper and deeper.

When he wrapped his tongue around the man's, he wanted to know more about deep inside of him. He wanted to see and hold everything about him. More, more. Like a spoiled child, he wanted more. He didn't know that love would make one so greedy.

He had a date with the man in the afternoon. So as soon as his Saturday afternoon classes were over, Kouichi grabbed his bag and stood up. But someone stood in his way so he couldn't hurry out.

"Just give me few seconds."

It was Endou. Until recently he thought her huge eyes were the cutest thing in the world, but now they just looked dumb. He learned that there were eyes that made his heart beat much more faster than hers ever could

"Sorry, but I'm busy."

Thus refusing, he stepped aside. However, he stopped when he felt her clutching at him. Thin fingers were tightly holding on to Kouichi's elbow.

"Did you promise to hang out with someone?"

"Uh, yeah. I'd feel bad if I made them wait."

Endou stared into Kouichi's eyes.

"Who are you meeting?"

He told her that he was busy, but ignoring him, Endou got closer to Kouichi. The girl in front of him was starting to really annoy him.

"What's it to you? You don't know them, Endou."

"You're going to meet Mr. Takahashi, aren't you?"

She suddenly got right into the heart of the matter. No one should know about this secret. He didn't tell even Kakimoto that the man was their school's teacher. He couldn't lie for few minutes. Kouichi stared at Endou's forehead as if he wanted to bear a hole into it. His throat felt dry.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You shouldn't lie. I saw you last time."

He was scared to hear exactly what she saw. What did she find out? Endou innocently smiled.

"I saw Sensei and Satomi kissing. You guys were at Maebashi Park the night before, right?"

Kouichi grabbed Endou's arm and left the classroom. He dragged her to the northern stairway, where people rarely came. There were still people left in the classroom, and others might hear them.

"So you guys ARE going out. The person who sent you that letter was Sensei, right? Why didn't you tell me?"

She pretended that she was mad, but she was laughing a little. Endou lightly glared at Kouichi.

"Just what made you change your mind to go out with a guy? Or did you always swing that way, Satomi?"

Endou's blunt words caused pain in his heart. Of course he wouldn't like a man. He came to love him because it was HIM. He couldn't help but be attracted to him.

"Tell me. You've lied to me, so I think I have the right to hear it."

"I don't want to talk about it," he shortly replied. Endou wanted to hear it half-jokingly. Her eyes were full of interest. Just what did she want to do after hearing his story? Or did she just want to be entertained? The thought made him pissed off. Endou sighed when Kouichi clammed up.

"Okay. If Satomi won't tell me, then I'll go ask Sensei."

"Hold on a second."

He grabbed Endou's wrist when she turned. She's going to ask that man? That's not even funny. He knows nothing about Kouichi being a student, nor the fact that Kouichi already knew about his lies. If he learned the truth this way, even HE would be angry.

"No, let me go! You're hurting me!"

He didn't let go of her arm.

"Don't even think about asking him. If you do that, I'll NEVER forgive you."

"What's with you? Looking all scary like that. What's wrong with wanting to hear what happened?"

"Anyway, just don't."

Endou sniffed.

"Oh, wow, you're SERIOUS about this. That's kind of sick. Doesn't it feel disgusting to kiss with a guy?"

It felt like someone whacked his head. At first Kouichi thought it would be really sick, too. But he really, really wanted to kiss him, so he couldn't do anything about it. He easily crossed his own taboo. He kissed him because he loved him. He never questioned that logic. But from Endou's point of view, men kissing each other was nothing but disgusting. She'd never understand how Kouichi felt. He didn't want to talk to Endou any more. Kakimoto's words popped into his mind.

[You shouldn't play around with someone who's serious.]

He knew that too well. He understood what he meant now.

"If you don't tell me, I'm going to tell everyone in our class that you're going out with a guy--our school teacher on top of that."

Endou might have been only joking, but Kouichi did not have the presence of mind to just accept it as a joke.

He grabbed Endou's arms and violently shoved her against the wall. Her huge eyes trembled in shock and fear. He heard her breathing in sharply.

"I'd never forgive you."

Her thin face slowly paled.

"Why did you become so serious? What a moron."

Her voice shook. She tried to act tough, but he could tell she was scared. He knew that, but he didn't care. He roughly threw down Endou's school uniform jacket. Endou looked at her jacket on the floor, disbelief written across her face, but she looked more and more like she would cry until she collapsed to the floor.

He left the crying female and walked down the stairs. Only anger blazed in his heart.

The man noticed right away that Kouichi was in a bad mood. He didn't pay attention to the man's words, and even when he asked him something, his replies were half-hearted. Kouichi himself made no attempt at conversation. The man lightly tried to strike up a conversation again and again, but when Kouichi didn't respond at all, he stopped talking.

Even at the movie theater, Kouichi didn't say even one word to the man. Sitting next to him and staring at the movie screen, he kept thinking about the incident during lunch time. Endou had been crying. He had been beastly. No matter how angry he was, he couldn't believe he'd be so awful to a girl. He felt disgusted at his reaction and violent response.

What upset him even more was Endou's words.

'Are you for real? That's totally gross.'

Her half-amused eyes. It felt as if she had raised her nails and scratched at his heart with all her strength. He finally learned his lesson after he became the 'victim' and became depressed. He had been no different, if not worse. He had been making fun of them, laughing cruelly. If he had not met this man and totally became obsessed with him, if he had not fallen in love, he was sure he would've been still laughing.

Eyes full of morbid curiosity. The only thing he did was to fall in love, but that was enough to tear him apart. He was hurting others. He was changing. But he didn't want to stop loving him.

I left my hometown because I wanted to forget the man I fell in love with, the man said. He had no idea how he felt as he made that decision, but did he become sad and cry? Kouichi suddenly realized that he was jealous of the man's first love that he had never even met, and he bitterly smiled.

They always parted at Kase Station. The man and Kouichi slowly walked down the sidewalk illuminated here and there by few road lamps. Even though it wasn't very late, when they came out after the movies it had become completely dark.

While Kouichi was thinking about various things by himself, the man's expression slowly crumpled. By the time he noticed, he had lowered his head, not even raising his face towards him.

In front of Kase Station, Kouichi stopped walking. The man also stopped.

"Aren't you going to buy your ticket?" The man asked after a long silence. Kouichi grabbed the man's

hand. The startled man tried to pull his hand away, but Kouichi didn't let go of him.

"I want to go to your home."

The man looked surprised, and then he lowered his head.

"...It's too late today."

He had been clearly refused.

"Just for a little while."

"My room is dirty. Can't you come next time?"

His voice sounded like a sigh.

"What are you going to do if I say that if you don't take me today, I'm never going to see you again?"

The man looked up at Kouichi. His eyes looked sad.

"Are you threatening me?"

He didn't answer. He learned exactly how to act and how to talk so that the man couldn't refuse him. He thought it was only temporary solution to the problem acting like this way, taking an advantage of his knowledge, but...

"Just for a little bit, then." The man said, lowering his head. His tone didn't sound welcoming at all.

The apartment building was 4-floor high made out of concrete, and the man had a room on the second floor. He slowly climbed the dimly lit stairs after the man.

The room was small, but clean. At the entrance, a kitchen about 2-tatami big was situated, and connected to that was Japanese style room about 6-tatami big. The room was organized neatly and there wasn't even dust on the floor.

Even though it was a narrow room, next to the wall were two large bookcases, and it was crammed with literature and new novels.

"Wow, look at all those books."

"It's my hobby. I'll make you come coffee so sit and wait," the man coldly said and disappeared to the kitchen. He chased after him and tightly hugged him from behind.

He dropped the kettle to the sink, and upset the water inside. Only sound of water flowing filled the room.

"What are you going to do if I say I don't want to go back?"

The man started to tremble.

"You can't do that."

He didn't say no. Sudden desire filled his body. It might have been only bravado. He forced him to turn around and when he tried to push him away, he stopped him and tightly held him.

"Can I kiss you?"

"No."

"Why?"

Their lips were not even 10cm away from each other. He stiffened in his arms. The man looked at Kouichi with terrified eyes. Ignoring his look, he kissed him. He gently eased his tongue inside. The man tried to pull away, but he held him and continued. He searched for the man in his warm mouth. He touched and wrapped his tongue around the man's small tongue inside. Like a coerced, tiny child, the man hesitantly responded to Kouichi.

He wanted to see him. He wanted to touch him. Not fighting his urges, he loosened the buttons on his shirt. When he made a direct contact with his skin, he jumped in his arms. Trying to be gentle with his touches, he started to touch him through the fabric of his cloth. The man suddenly started to protest. As if it had all been part of a nightmare, he started to squirm and push away violently, so Kouichi had no choice but to let go of the man.

"How come?"

The man collapsed, his back against the sink. He hurriedly gathered his partially opened shirt and covered his mouth with his hand. He was trembling a little.

"Don't you want to do it with me?"

"I can't," the man replied in a small voice.

"How come."

"I can't."

No matter what he asked him, the man would only say that he couldn't. After few minutes of futile exchange of simple words, the man finally clutched his head. He wasn't sure why he was hesitating, but... he gently hugged the man. Of course the man resisted. But when he realized that Kouichi wasn't trying to do anything else, he soon calmed down. Kouichi waited. He gently patted his cheek and his head, and like soothing a baby he patiently waited. He waited until the man would lift his head and look at him again.

After a long time, the man finally looked at Kouichi in the eyes. He gently stopped his caressing

fingers.

The man put a little distance between himself and Kouichi.

"I've... lied to you all this time."

The man tightly closed his eyes.

"My name... and the fact that I told you I'm a office worker... it was all a lie."

He opened his eyes as if he wanted to see Kouichi's reaction. His face was pale.

"Why did you lie?" he gently asked, so that the man won't be scared. So that the man could tell him anything.

"I'm a coward. I'm so scared of being hated by someone else. Even if I was going out with someone, I can't stand thinking about breaking up with him someday. So even at this age, I've never dated anyone before. I thought that was fine. Anyway, I knew that I couldn't love normally."

The man looked like he didn't want to hear his own voice, and covered his ears.

"I've told you before, haven't I? About my friend, whom I had a crush on. He married. When I heard about that, that really was a shock. When I thought about how only I would be all alone from now on, too, I couldn't stand it; I was so lonely... So I've sent a letter to that magazine. I wasn't going to lie in the beginning. But you were five years younger than me, and I knew there was no way my first meeting would work out well, so I lied without thinking about it too much."

The man had his head lowered. A droplet of tear dripped down his cheek.

"But that won't work any longer. No matter how much I lie, I'll get hurt. I think about you every day... I can't even concentrate on my work... Today you were so cold to me, but you suddenly changed your mind and tried to hold me. Your fickleness is going to drive me crazy. If we become deeply involved, I don't know what's going to happen to me."

He embraced the man. He was so cute that he kissed him again and again, tightly holding him.

"You must be sick and tired of me."

The man hugged Kouichi back. He clung to him like a drowning man.

"I'm so sick and tired of you, I don't even know what to say."

"But... Please don't hate me."

He covered his lips. He touched him. The man no longer refused Kouichi, who desired him with ferocity of a storm. Slowly, little by little, he accepted Kouichi.

The light shining through spaces between the curtains was too bright. Foreign scent made him open his eyes. Ceiling of an unfamiliar room. And something warm in his arms. At the beginning he wondered what the heck it was, and puzzled over it with his hand. The gentle curves reminded him that he touched this form again and again yesterday night.

He gently lifted the sheet. It was definitely the man who was curled up and sleeping. His eyelids were a little red. He didn't know how to do it, so the man was in a lot of pain yesterday, but when he forced himself inside he screamed. Kouichi felt so good that his eyes couldn't focus, but the man kept crying.

His body overlapped the sleeping form. He held him and eased his finger inside between his thighs. He touched and then gently squeezed it. The man squirmed, and then opened his eyes.

"What...are you doing?"

The man tried to twist away.

"It still hurts."

He tightened his hold. The man trembled. His tiny breathing became quicker. His body started to get heated up again, and started to have scarlet tinge to it.

"Cut that out. It's already light outside..."

"I want to see you."

The man started to protest, but he lifted him up to his lap and made him face him.

"No, I don't like this."

He kissed him and gently patted his behind. The man startled in his arms, again and again. When he explored the inside with his fingers, pain crossed his face and he tightened up. He tried to loosen him up again and again, patiently waiting for him to soften.

"Lift your waist up a little bit."

The man looked like he was going to cry, but he sat up. He wrapped his arms around the man's waist so that they would overlap more easily. When he slowly brought him down, the man easily swallowed Kouichi. His eyes met the man's eyes.

"Somehow, I think I became weird."

"Why."

"I'm doing this kind of thing..."

He moved his waist. The man let out a small cry and moved his body backwards. He kissed the ends of his chest. He thought his red, sensitive nipples and the man's nervous erection pressing into his stomach were all erotic and beautiful.

He usually met the man on Saturday nights. Kouichi made an excuse that he had work so he couldn't make it the other days, and the man believed that lie without any suspicion at all.

They made a date the week before and met one week afterwards. They repeated it. Every Saturday night, they spent the entire night holding each other. They didn't need awkward words that took time.

His body had been stiff the first time they've had sex, but the more they slept together, the more he softened up. He even gently seduced him.

When they met, as if to make up for the time they haven't seen each other, the man chattered about this and that to Kouichi. He didn't know his man was such a talkative creature.

The man seemed hesitant to do so, but he learned little by little how to act childish to Kouichi. If he wanted Kouichi to touch him and make him feel good, he indirectly begged him for it. He seemed to be aware of that, because he muttered as if embarrassed, "I've never acted like this to anyone else before."

That made him feel embarrassed yet happy. The man had confessed all of his secrets and while being fluidly held, he seemed relieved. Kouichi wanted to confess everything, too. Now that the man had told him everything, there was absolutely no need for him to continue to lie.

But the man was really bothered by their age difference. He said again and again, five year difference is like nothing, but the man just uneasily smiled. If he knew that he was actually ten years younger than him, and a student at the school he teaches on top of that...

He was not someone with strong and bright personality who would just laugh off the ten year difference and enjoy the secret love between a student and a teacher. He was so concerned about how others were thinking; there was no way in hell that he would tell him that he was a high school student.

He didn't think he could continue to keep his secret, but he wanted to avoid telling him until he at least graduated high school.

"There's a kid in my school who has the same name as you do." The man suddenly said, as if the thought came to him while being held by Kouichi. After sex it was hard to move away, so he had been hugging him and running his fingers through his hair fondly.

"I'm not in charge of him so I don't know how he looks, but the name and the way it's spelled and pronounced are all same."

He stiffened. The man cocked his head when Kouichi stopped moving.

"Are you that surprised?"

The man looked up at Kouichi; he couldn't say anything. As if trying to hide his shock, he kissed the

man.

"Don't go easy on him just because he has the same name."

The man laughed a little at Kouichi's words.

"No way. Um... If I ever see him, I'll tell you if you guys look anything alike."

His eyes had absolutely no suspicion of him. His heart hurt. He tightly held him. No matter how many times he held him, no matter how many times he said he loved him, he couldn't get rid of this anxiety in his heart.

If the man knew that he was a high school student... He thought again and again. The man would say, 'Let's break up.' If he only says he wants to break up, that wouldn't be so bad. He would have a chance to talk it over with him. If he suddenly disappeared on him, there would be nothing that he could do. He's someone who ran away from his first love because he had been so crushed with his own feelings, not even bothering to try to confess to him. There was no guarantee that he wouldn't run away again. He would be abandoned... The thought made him sad.

Kouichi knew the man was scared of him growing tired of him and abandoning him. But he was just as afraid, if not more, of the man running away when he discovered his lies.

He couldn't think of any solutions. No matter what he did, the ten year difference would not disappear, and he would be found out someday. So... he wanted to hurry up and become an adult. He wanted to become an adult so no one could say anything to him. No matter what anyone said, no matter what anyone did, he would be able to protect the man to the end. He wanted to hurry and become that kind of an adult.

"How many was that?"

Kakimoto asked, grinning, as Kouichi sat with pissed look on his face. He glanced at his interested friend.

"The third one."

"I take it that you rejected her again. Don't you feel like it's a waste?"

"Not really."

Kouichi settled deeply into his chair and pushed backwards. The pipe chair couldn't handle his weight and made squeaking noises. It has been about two months since he started dating the man, but recently Kouichi got confessed to often by girls. All in a row, on top of that. It had never happened before, so it was really weird.

"I think you've somehow changed."

To Kouichi who cocked his head, Kakimoto muttered with sigh in his voice, "Not that your face

changed or anything, but how should I put it. Like, you've become stable or something?"

He smiled ironically. Before he started to go out with the man, it had been his dearest wish to get a confession from a girl, but now it was just annoying. He lifted his head at a presence and was startled.

Endou was quietly listening to the two's conversation, one of her hands on Kouichi's desk.

"Um. I just need a second."

Uncertain fingers pulled at Kouichi's shirt sleeve.

Kouichi slowly stood up.

"Are you still dating him?"

"Something like that."

Endou dragged Kouichi to the center garden, which was a prohibited area. Even though it was prohibited area, there was a chair probably made out of marble under a shriveled up wisteria tree.

"Oh."

Endou sat on top of the chair, which was covered with dried leaves.

"You've become quite famous. They say that Satomi is so cool. Even though you're not... Or maybe other people's things just look good."

Her tone sounded challenging.

"But..." Endou looked up at Kouichi. "Just what part of him do you like?"

He didn't have to ask, what part of whom?

"Everything."

Endou approached Kouichi and slapped him. Even though she hit him, it wasn't a whole-hearted thing that would make a slapping noise.

"What an idiot."

Endou was the one who hit him, yet she was the one who looked like she would cry.

"I didn't tell anyone."

Endou's shoulders trembled, and huge eyes glared at Kouichi.

"Don't look down on me, idiot."

His heart ached as he looked at her running back. He finally realized why she had called him out. She was the same as the other girls, except Endou did not say the words "I like you" that troubled Kouichi.

"Why did Endou call you out?"

"Nothing."

He was cold to the audience who asked him right away. Kakimoto grinned meaningfully.

"Satomi, someone's calling you."

Tanaka waved and called him. Annoyed by being called out again and again during lunch hour, he stood up.

"Who is it?" he grumbled. Tanaka cocked his head.

"I don't know. I heard our homeroom teacher asked him."

At the unhelpful words, he stepped out to the corridor, sighing heavily.

Their eyes met. His legs didn't move. His lover's eyes took on a color that he had never seen before. If he had to describe it, it would be grey. A steel grey.

"I saw you at the garden. I was hoping that I had seen wrong, so I came here, but."

His voice was quiet.

"I see, finally. Why you never told me your phone number no matter how long we've spent together, and also why you wouldn't want to talk about your work."

"That's..."

"Here's hand-outs that Iwamoto-sensei gave to me. Please hand it out to everyone before the classes are over."

His tone was gentle, but his teeth had been clenched. He shoved the print-outs at Kouichi and turned away.

"Hold on!"

His hands slipped at his hurry. The papers scattered to the floor. While he had been trying to pick them up, the man had disappeared from his sight.

"What are you doing?"

While he was picking the papers up, one by one, he became numb. He was so anxious that his palms became all sweaty, yet his head was blank.

"HEY!"

At the angry shout, he came to his senses. Kakimoto lightly smacked Kouichi's head.

"Stop spacing out. Who's that?"

"That's..."

His lover. It was his lover who was timid and sweet like a bunny. It was the worst scenario possible. His vision darkened. The dizziness made him want to throw up.

"Don't say crap like you're going out with him."

It was a question. Kakimoto's words were beyond cold; it was freezing like ice.

"Yeah."

"What the hell are you thinking?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

"You shut up. You can't figure out anything unless I tell you."

"I know! I know he's a man, I know he's a teacher and I know he's ten years older than me. I know only too fucking well!"

He gathered himself into a ball and covered up his ears. He didn't want to hear anything. He didn't want to say anything.

"You're weird."

If I'm weird, you guys are weirder. He stood up and glared at Kakimoto.

He shoved his shoulder aside and entered the classroom. Kakimoto said something behind Kouichi's back. But he ignored him, as if he couldn't hear. He thought it was useless explaining to someone who could never understand him.

[\[Konohara Narise\] Sleeping Bunny \(Part 4\) \[END\]](#)

He had a spare key to the room, but he didn't feel like waiting inside. So he waited for the man in front of the door. Even after 8 PM, the man didn't return. When it was nearly 11 o'clock at night, Kouichi lifted his lowered head at the sound of footsteps that deceived him few times already. When the man saw Kouichi waiting in front of his door, he turned away. Kouichi chased after him. He soon caught him. He didn't know what the man had been doing up until now, but his eyes were red and he smelled alcohol in his breath. He vaguely remembered the man saying that he hated alcoholic drinks.

"Please go away."

"Stop running away from me."

"Please get lost. I don't want to see that school uniform on you."

The man glared at Kouichi with drunken red eyes.

"Was it fun playing around with an older teacher?"

Not even caring what anyone else might think, he kissed the mouth saturated with alcoholic scent. He dragged the man inside the room.

He pushed down the refusing man and pulled off his clothes. This was his first time doing it so violently.

The word 'rape' popped into his mind, and then disappeared. When he forced his way inside, the man was in pain and protested, but after few moments he started to make small sounds and moved his waist himself.

He didn't want to make any excuses. Instead, he countlessly patted his back with soothing motions. The man was pretending to sleep, clutching the sheets. He had cried so much that his eyes had swollen. He looked like a sleeping bunny.

"I have to go home now."

The man continued to fake sleeping.

"Let's talk. I'm going to come again tomorrow, okay?"

He didn't want to part from him, so when he patted his head, even his bangs were trembling. His heart somehow throbbed painfully.

The man didn't come to school. Even when he went to his apartment building, he had chained the door closed, so he couldn't go inside. After 3 days of that, on the 4th day, the man's room was completely empty. He spent half a day in front of the man's room that had the sign 'For Rent', sitting aimlessly. It was an empty room so there was no way that the man would return, but he had no

choice but to wait.

Time would slowly flow. He might never be able to meet him again. That thought kept on crossing his mind. Every time, he would deny that thought, and then agree with that thought. He became sad. When the sun nearly set, he finally remembered to move, so he stood up.

He walked the familiar streets that led to his home. From Kase Station, it was three stops until his stop. He was buried in sea of workers who were heading home from companies. He opened his gates with uncomfortable feeling that his body and soul had separated when he heard someone calling his name behind him. It was the voice of his friend, who was the last person he wanted to meet right now.

"What were you doing, cutting school?"

"Nothing." He answered without turning around.

"He came to school, you know."

He thought he was hearing things at the words. When he turned around, Kakimoto muttered, "Sly bastard."

"He was at the teacher's lounge. He'll be there tomorrow, too, wouldn't you think?"

Kouichi was about to leave home for the second time, but his friend grabbed his arm when he tried to run.

"Wait until tomorrow."

"I can't wait."

"Chill out already!"

When he shouted at him, he stopped. Kakimoto came nearer to Kouichi and smacked Kouichi's head. Hard. But it didn't hurt at all.

"Just chill out, okay? It's not like he's going to disappear on you in a day or two."

"What are you gonna do if he DOES disappear? Huh?" Once he started to talk, he couldn't stop. "If I can never meet him again, what are you gonna do? You're gonna be responsible or something? I want to meet him right now. I want to see him."

Tears came out. After he had matured, he had never cried in front of his friends. Shame, discomfort, anger, all mixed together and spilled out.

"He's going to come to school tomorrow. I'll guarantee it."

He didn't know where his confidence was coming from, but that's what Kakimoto said.

"Stop crying. You're grossing me out."

He lightly smacked Kouichi's lowered head.

"If he DOES disappear... I don't want to, but I'll look for him with you. I'll look for him together, so go home and sleep tonight," he gently said.

"I really don't get you," Kouichi suddenly muttered.

"Well, what can I do? Even if you're like that, you're my friend, so... I really can't agree with you being gay, but."

They both closed their mouths. Kouichi went home without saying anything further. He kept feeling Kakimoto's gaze behind his back, so he was unhappy.

He discovered him before he entered the teacher's lounge. When he ran towards him, the man recognized Kouichi and nervously ran inside. He sat at his desk and opened a book on purpose.

"I have something to say to you."

Grey suit ignored Kouichi who was standing right behind him. He grabbed the man's arm.

"I can't say it here, so let's go."

He coldly shrugged him off. Kouichi rested both of his hands on the man's shoulders and whispered against his ears.

"If you won't come, I'm going to yell out right here and now that we're dating."

The man turned around. He didn't look angry, nor did he look troubled. He just looked so scared that he looked like he would burst into tears.

"I don't want to see any longer. I neither wish to talk to you, nor to meet you ever again. So please let me go. I beg of you," the man said, his head lowered. "It's unnatural for us to continue this relationship."

The room had a nice name of high school memorial center, but it became a very nice, dusty storage room. Ever since they had entered the room, the man had refused to look at Kouichi in the eyes.

"You've been doing this unnatural thing all this time."

"Because I didn't know anything." He said, ironic tone seeping into his voice. "If I knew, I would have

never dated you. Especially someone who's a high school student."

"I knew."

The man lifted his head.

"I knew from the beginning that you were my school's teacher. I knew that you were lying to me."

The man's face crumpled painfully. He bit into his lips and muttered, "I almost want to throw up. It must have been REALLY funny, right? You must have found me so funny, clinging to you even while lying."

He let out a small scream of despair.

"If only I could, I'd like to KILL myself starting from the moment that I've met you. It's all over; I'm going to end it all. How am I going to be with you after thinking such embarrassing, idiotic things?"

"You love me, don't you?"

"I always thought so, but you sound so arrogant. Are you treating me as a fool?"

"If you love me, bear with it a little."

"What the heck are you talking about?!" The man shouted. "Just how many years do you think are there in our age difference? It's ten years. When I was an adult, you were still in elementary school. No matter how much older you get, this ten year old difference is not going to disappear."

"It's your fault for being born first."

He was shamelessly selfish.

"Oh, so it's all my fault now? I see. So it's all my fault. That's why I'm going to end this now."

In the end, the man only thought about running away. Because it was annoying, because he was worried about what the society thought, he didn't even give a thought about sharing their future together. He didn't try to understand Kouichi's feelings at all.

"Fine. Shall I break up with you?"

At the parting words, the man stared at Kouichi. His eyes looked like they would overflow with tears at any moment. Even though he said he wanted to break up, he would look at him with such eyes. His eyes clung to him; said he didn't want this. His eyes might be more honest than his words. The man clenched his hands into fists.

"Shall I break up with you? Right here, right now, I'll say lots of words that would tear you apart and

cruelly dump you. That's easy. And then you'll all shrivel up and think that you'd never want to fall in love again. Because you're a scaredy-cat. You'll never be able to love anyone, ever again. You'll always be alone. You'll always be lonely, and spend your life saying you're lonely. And then you'll think about me and regret for the rest of your life that you shouldn't have dumped me."

"How could you say something like that?"

His voice was trembling.

"I'm telling you to THINK about it. Think carefully with that stupid head of yours."

The man covered his ears with both of his hands.

"No one would ever love you like me, ever again. Of course not. No one would give a second glance to an inconspicuous, normal man like you."

"How cruel your words are."

"It's the truth."

"Then..." The man said, his voice small. "Then shall I be forced to be in your debt for the rest of my life? Shall I be forever worried about the fact that I've lied to you, that I'm older than you? Do I have to constantly worry about a young man like you changing his mind about me? I'm already obsessed with you, so what am I going to do if I fall in love with you even more? I can't stand this any longer!"

Towards the end he had been sobbing and screaming. He wouldn't listen, no matter what he said. Kouichi pushed the man away. He lost his balance and knocked over a stack of chairs.

"I don't care about you any more."

His words echoed in his head. He didn't cry, but his heart ached so much that he wanted to cry.

Girls are strong. By chance, Kouichi saw the girl he had recently dumped walking with a boy. Was it 2 weeks ago? When Kouichi refused to go out with her, her eyes had filled with tears, but now she was happily laughing next to another boy.

Did she confess with feelings that she could forget about in a week or two? The thought made him angry. That's not real. That's not a real love... Or was he pathetic for dragging on the love that had already ended? ...He wasn't sure.

He had never met the man at school. After that incident, he saw him only few times. When he realized that he was always searching for the man unconsciously, he felt empty. He was the one who pushed him away in the end. It was definitely Kouichi who concluded the good-bye that the man had brought up.

He kept having dream about the man. He wanted him so much that it was pathetic. In his dreams, he ignored his pride and chased after the man. He found himself crying every time he woke up. He felt

empty, and sad, and longing. No matter what words he used, he couldn't describe this feeling. If love made him have such heavy thoughts that he couldn't breathe, he never wanted to offer love to anyone again. He kept thinking, I wish I'd never met that man...

Kakimoto didn't ask Kouichi anything. Even though he was such a busybody, he didn't ask anything about what happened, nor what he was going to do from now on.

It was a short break time. He saw the man on his way back from a moving class. (*T/N: In Japan, teachers move from class to class, not students. However, for some classes (like music), students must move to the classroom.*) The man he hadn't seen for a while must have gotten hurt, because his left arm was in a cast, connected to his shoulder by bandages. He was talking with a male student under the stairs.

'Didn't you say you were not into younger men?'

He knew that there was no way that the man would be talking with those kind of intentions. But he couldn't help but be pissed when he saw him talking with an unknown man.

If the sight upset him, he just had to go away, but he couldn't pull his gaze away.

When the bell rang, the man tried to lift the textbooks by his side. His right hand looked uncomfortable. Feeling sorry for him, he started to walk towards him with the intention of lending him a hand, but the male student who had been talking to him got to it first and lifted the books up.

Laughing, the student started to climb the stairs. The man slowly started to ascend as well.

His heart felt like it had been stabbed. The man hadn't recognized him yet. But he felt as if he had already been excluded from the man's life. Putting a little distance between himself and the man, he started to climb the stairs, taking care that the man would not notice him. Kouichi had his head lowered, but he lifted it up when he heard noisy sounds of something dropping. The little tinkling sounds didn't stop until it passed Kouichi and reached the end of the stairway. It was a plastic chalk container.

"I'm sorry."

He heard the man's voice. The container's lid was broken and the contents were rolling here and there. Kouichi walked all the way down the stairs and retrieved it.

When Kouichi raised his face, his gaze and the man's gaze met. The man's eyes widened, and then he suddenly lowered his head.

"...Please hurry back to your room. Your class will start."

Kouichi walked while picking up the fallen chalks.

"You don't need to do that, so hurry and go back to your class."

He ignored him. Even picking up the powdered remainings, he walked to the man's side. The man had stopped in the middle of the stairway and did not move. When Kouichi picked everything up and handed him the case, he accepted with trembling hands.

"You got... hurt."

At Kouichi's words, the man's body became slightly stiff.

"I fell down the stairs."

"Idiot."

At Kouichi's words, the man bit into his lips. Neither the man nor Kouichi moved. The man didn't tell Kouichi to 'go'. Until recently, he had been allowed to touch his thin and white neck, fingers, and red lips, as much as he wanted. They belonged to him, and only him. But now... He was standing so close to him, yet he could not touch him.

"You'll be a senior soon," the man suddenly said, striking up a conversation. "Did you decide on your major? Your studies are going to get harder."

"What's it to you?"

The man lifted his face, as if someone had punched him. His face looked on a verge of crying. Even if he showed that kind of face, he was the one who had been cruel. He wanted to break up and he hated him, yet he still felt regret over him. The knowledge only made him madder.

"Did you grow to hate me?" He asked in a shaking voice. Even if he told him he loved him it wasn't like he was going to do anything about it, so he couldn't understand why the man would ask him that. What were his feelings?

"I really hate you."

He dropped his gaze at Kouichi's words.

"Then... Don't be nice to me any more."

"I'm not."

"You are. You just picked this up for me, too."

"I would've done so for anyone. Don't get cocky."

Kouichi snatched the small case he had handed over to the man and threw it down the stairs. Not even looking at the totally destroyed case, he climbed up the stairs.

He didn't feel like doing anything. Everything lost its color. It really was like that. He didn't feel like studying hard, either, so his grades dropped. His teacher called him and scolded him a little.

"You're pathetic. You want some help?"

That's what Kakimoto said, but he refused. He ignored the gaze that looked at him worriedly at his refusal. He didn't really feel like talking to other people. As his heart grew colder, so did the weather. And then it was one day, after class.

"Kakimoto tells you to come to the music room."

During 5th period's break, Kakimoto told him to remain after class because he had something to tell him.

"What? You can just tell me on our way home."

That's what he said, but he didn't ask him if they had to meet in class. After class he said, "You HAVE to wait," and left the room. After that, over 30 minutes had passed. He watched everyone leave one by one at the corner of his gaze. From time to time, he heard the base ball team's yells as they practiced outside. Kouichi became a little bored while sitting on a chair and waited for Kakimoto.

"Music room? What's up with him?"

When Kouichi frowned, Tanaka, who was only a messenger, shrugged.

"I don't know, but he told you to hurry and come. I gave you my message, so."

Tanaka left the room, as if his work was finished. Clucking his tongue, Kouichi slowly stood up from the chair.

The sun was setting. The hallway's shadows were long and thin. Unless you chose music or entered a band, you wouldn't really be familiar with the music room. All the special classes were void of living creatures. At the end of that hallway, Kakimoto was standing in front of the room all the way at the end. He was still like a figurine.

"You..."

When Kouichi started to speak, Kakimoto placed his pointer finger against his lips.

"Be quiet."

"You made me wait for so long, so why are you giving me that attitude?" He asked, slightly lowering his voice. Kakimoto jingled the keys that looked like the ones to the music room.

"Go inside. But until I say it's okay, don't say even one word."

Kakimoto took a hold of Kouichi's elbow and quietly opened the door. The curtained classroom was

pretty dark. Kakimoto walked past the small grand piano and went to the deeper part of the room. He stopped in front of a room that had the sign, 'Record Room'. As soon as he had opened the room, he shoved Kouichi inside. Kouichi lost his balance when Kakimoto grabbed his head, and knocked it against the corner of the desk right across from him.

"What the hell are you doing?"

When he turned around, the door closed in his face. He heard the sounds of the door being locked carefully.

"It's totally sound-proof in that room, so you can scream and cry all you want. Finish up with that person. I'm going to come back in an hour to open the door for you."

He turned around. It was dark, so he couldn't really see. He hadn't realized before. At the corner of the small room about 6-tatami big, the man was sitting, a surprised look on his face. The man was sitting on a round steel chair placed in front of the record closet. He was wearing his usual dull grey jacket and dark blue cotton pants. His face, which looked at Kouichi with amazement, slowly paled. When Kouichi moved a little, he practically jumped up. When he realized what he was doing, he slowly sat back down, looking uncomfortable. He only stared at his toes with lowered eyes, not trying to look at Kouichi.

He had nothing to say to the man who would reject him this way. Just to piss him off, Kouichi sat on the floor right across from him, in the farthest corner possible. He hugged his legs to himself. Because of his sight being lowered, he could only see the end of the man's feet beyond sea of desk legs. At the sides of the room, the shelves reached to the ceiling, chaotically filled with classic records, CD, and cassette tapes for autumn festivals. To pass the time, Kouichi was looking at them starting from the right side.

"Just what is the meaning of this?"

The man asked about 5 minutes after they had been locked in. His voice was vaguely shaking.

"Was that male student your friend? I didn't even know who he was, but he told me he had something he wanted to discuss with me so I came. So how come you're here?"

"Don't know."

"That's not possible," the man scolded him. He sounded like he was mad about this situation. Kouichi scratched the back of his head.

"Okay. I'll be honest with you."

He slowly stood up.

"That guy just now was my new lover. He gets jealous really easily, so I told him clearly that it's already all over between us two, but he's still worried about you. He seems to be mistaken that I still

have feelings for you. So I think he did this crap, trying to end things for real this time. I'm sorry for dragging you into this."

What a selfish jackass he was. But the words came out easily. If Kakimoto heard this, he would have been pissed like there is no tomorrow. Imagining that, he somehow found it funny, so he snickered to himself.

"Is that so," the man mumbled in a small voice. The man believed his lies. He kept changing the way he held his hands together, as if patting his thumb.

"When he comes to open the door, I'll tell him clearly myself."

"Okay."

Their conversation ended there. Kouichi looked at the head of the standing man who leaned against the wall, his head lowered. It hasn't been even a month since he said, 'let's break up' at the memorial center. Did he think that Kouichi, who told him 'I love you' so many times, would have forgotten him in such a short period of time and already found the next lover? Since he believed him, that was the conclusion. The man was the one who forgot him without any regrets already. His heart started to ache. The man could no longer belong to him. He felt like the fact had been rubbed in his face, so he became sad.

Suddenly the man sneezed, three times in a row. His narrow shoulders shook lightly. He didn't pay attention because he was getting used to the semi-darkness, but the surroundings had become darker. He closed the curtains and turned the lights on. The man numbly stared at Kouichi's movements.

He stood in front of the man and dropped his jacket coat on top of the man's head.

"I'll let you borrow it. I'm not that cold."

He returned to his original position, across the room. The man clutched at the jacket and looked hesitant, but wrapped it around his shoulders without saying anything. The only sound in the room was the tic-toc of the clock. To Kouichi, who had his head lowered, he heard faint footsteps mingled in with the ticking of the clock.

"I'll give it back to you, after all."

The man handed the jacket to Kouichi.

"I'm okay. You wear it."

"But then you're going to be cold."

"I'm really okay."

The man smiled only with corners of his mouth.

"...Don't be sweet to me."

"What are you afraid of."

At Kouichi's words, the man stared at him with wide eyes. The hand holding the jacket started to shake visibly.

"I am not afraid of anything."

"Oh, really..."

The man ended up giving the clothing back to Kouichi and went back to his chair by the corner of the room. He numbly sat, his head lowered. The man covered his face with both of his hands. He couldn't hide his shakingly breathing back and tears from Kouichi.

"You crying?"

The man didn't reply.

"Why are you crying..."

He didn't say a single word.

"Don't tell me that you want me now."

"Some dust got into my eyes. Would you... kindly shut your mouth already?"

His voice tried to sound neutral, but it was shaking. He stood up and walked to the man's side. He violently pulled apart the hands covering his face, but the man faced the floor.

"Keep your hands off of me. Do not touch me with the hands that you touched another man with."

"I can touch whomever I want."

"I told you to stop."

The man forcefully pushed Kouichi's arms away. He glared at Kouichi with reddened eyes.

"You told me so many times you loved me, and you already have another lover? Aren't young ones flexible. Or am I old fashioned?"

The man covered his mouth after speaking.

"Please go away. I think I'll say useless things..."

"Go ahead and say them."

"I don't want to say them."

He hugged the protesting body. The repulsing strength was suddenly gone and he melted into his arms. When he tightened his hold, the man clung to him. His hands grabbed at Kouichi's back.

"I don't want to give you up to a brat like that," the man muttered, as if to himself. "I'm the only one you should know about."

He used his jacket and coat as sheets to make love to the man. They couldn't slow down at all. He wanted the man so much that he couldn't be patient. Their awkward position and hurried insertion must have caused him pain, but the man wanted Kouichi quickly.

"I love you."

As if whispering in his dreams, the man wanted a kiss again and again. It was only after second orgasm after they mindlessly held each other again and again, that they had a presence of mind to think. In the afterglow, they kept kissing each other. The man's right arm, wrapped around his back, gently caressed Kouichi.

"Your arm all better?"

He suddenly remembered that his arm looked uncomfortable because of the cast. The man let out a small laughter.

"To tell you the truth, I got hurt when you tossed me away back at the memorial center. I got a tiny crack in my bones, so I could've just used bandages, but I had a cast on just in case."

"You told me you fell down the stairs."

At Kouichi's troubled voice, the man lowered his eyes.

"You're worried. I guess you do feel guilty about it?"

"Of course."

"Then please kiss me instead."

The man lifted his body.

"What kind of kiss do you want?" Kouichi asked, holding him tightly. In Kouichi's arms, the man

closed his eyes and muttered,

"A gentle kiss."

He kissed him on the cheeks, then the tip of his nose, and then he gently bit down on his lips. He did so again and again, very gently. The man suddenly stiffened his hold on Kouichi's body. He wrapped his arms around Kouichi's neck and tucked his body closer against his, and then closed his eyes. The key made a sound. The promised 1 hour had passed. The door opened. He didn't give a damn what Kakimoto thought when he saw two naked men hugging each other. But when Kouichi grinned, he gave him a freezing look and threw the key inside the room and left after slamming the door closed.

"I'm sorry."

The man was trembling. Even while trembling, he was apologizing. He wasn't sure to whom, but he was apologizing.

"Don't worry about it."

He gently patted his head, as if reassuring him. The man started to tremble more and more.

"To tell you the truth..."

"Yes?"

"To be honest, that guy just now was my..."

The next day, Kakimoto was really, really angry.

"I'm sorry."

Kouichi apologized again and again since morning, but he didn't even try to listen to him.

"I'm really thankful to you."

During lunch, with thankful heart he made a mountain out of breads he bought at the convenience store and made begging motions with his hands. He sniffed with end of his nose.

"I knew you guys were beastly, but... I was an idiot for thinking you'd have any common sense. I would've never thought that as a thanks for trying so hard for you, I'd be shown such a disgusting scene."

"But it's all thanks to you."

When he seriously said that, he clucked his tongue lightly.

"I was hoping that you guys would break up for once and for all."

Kakimoto stood up from his seat. Kouichi smiled bitterly. His childhood friend was roughly spoken, cold, and awkward... but he was a busybody, and kind. Kakimoto was about to leave the room, but he suddenly turned around.

"I've been curious since this morning, but what happened to your left cheek?"

When Kouichi jumped and pressed his left cheek, Kakimoto smirked.

"It's kind of big for a hickey, right?"

When he confessed to the man yesterday that having a new lover was all a lie, the man punched him with his newly healed arm with all his strength. After hitting him, the man cried in Kouichi's arms like a child.

"I'll never forgive you if you cheat on me."

That was his threatening words. It was yet to be seen if the words would chain up the man or Kouichi, but. He took out his wallet. The key inside fell to the floor. He hurriedly picked it up. New key. The spare key to the man's new room.

When he looked at the key, he suddenly wanted to see his face, so Kouichi stood up. He knew the man would make a troubled expression, but he wanted to meet him so much that he couldn't help himself.

"Excuse me."

He carefully opened the door to the teacher's lounge. The man, as if recognizing Kouichi's voice, turned around and looked at him. He seemed troubled after all, since he cocked his head a little.

おわり

[Konohara Narise] One Winter Day ~Sleeping Bunny Epilogue~

His mother discovered him while he was putting on his shoes at the front step. Even though he had not been doing anything wrong, somehow he felt guilty.

"Where are you going, Hirokazu?"

"I'll just go out for a short walk. I'll be back before dinner time..."

When he answered awkwardly while putting on his shoes, his mother muttered, 'Oh, really?' and then briskly walked to his room. She returned with a grey scarf.

"You must dress warmly, or you'll catch a cold. Your body is weak, so."

"Yes ma'am..."

When he obediently took the scarf, his mother brushed back her white-peppered hair carelessly and suddenly sighed.

"You have to hurry and get married, too..."

He gave a bitter smile and left the house before the situation became more difficult.

It was only past four in the afternoon, but the outside was already quite dark.

The sky was covered with grey cloud and unmelted snow was piled up at the sides of the road.

This was truly the first time that Takahashi Hirokazu returned to his hometown, Hamamichi, after his grandfather's death three years ago.

At that time, he had another business to take care of the next day, so he hurriedly returned on the same day.

He was also being considerate of his younger sister and her husband who brought their child with them, since their home wasn't very big.

There was another reason that he stopped visiting his home often.

It was because whenever he returned home, the adults would always talk about marriage.

Of course, it was natural considering his age, but he felt guilty whenever the topic was brought up.

Whenever his mother persistently asked if he had anyone he was dating, he would have to make excuses like 'I'm a poor salary man' or 'I haven't met anyone nice yet.' He was tired of that.

When he walked a little along the main road, he smelled the sea and heard the sounds of the wave.

He walked up the stairway next to the grey concrete wall facing him, and climbed up to top of the levee.

The sea was shaded into a heavy water color, tinged with grey, and the waves were rough as well.

He numbly thought that the reason why the waves felt closer to him than before was because he became an adult.

He stared at the sea for quite a while like that, but he seemed to be the only one weird enough to

come to see the ocean on a cold day like this. He didn't see anyone else.
The reason for his homeward journey was because a distant relative of his was having his funeral.
Incidentally, this was a day before Saturday, so he decided to spend a night at his home.
His little sister did not come.
It seemed that she was busy because her oldest child's junior high school entrance exam was coming up.

His mother said, "Hirokazu, you don't need to come, either, if you're busy..."

She might be imagining things because her son who didn't return home if he could help it suddenly came.

There definitely WAS a reason why he came home this time, but...

Takahashi leaned against the concrete wall and deeply sighed.

His liver was aching.

He thought once again about the difference between a place he couldn't return to even if he tried, and a place he couldn't return to even if he wanted to.

Soon, the chill overpowered the view, so he left the levee.

After he returned to the main road, he walked towards the seaport because he didn't want to return home right away.

The houses lined up the one-way road.

The street and surroundings that hadn't changed for nearly 20 years since he was little--This place was definitely something he had forgotten about.

He saw an elementary school facing him.

When he was a boy, he spent five hours a day there.

Nostalgia made his steps naturally quicker, so he ended up running.

When he arrived at the gates, he was gasping for breath, white mist escaping from his lips.

He was startled that his hand reached the top of the pillar next to the gates and he couldn't hide his shock at the building that was smaller than he had thought.

When he hesitantly walked in, he saw three children playing on the darkened school grounds.

The boys were kicking a ball into the goal, one by one.

He loosely sat at the corner of the school and watched them for a while.

The bar and goal had changed from the time Takahashi had attended here.

He had been steeped in memories for a while, but reality suddenly rushed into his heart.

He thought about how he didn't want to go back home, and when he lowered his head his liver started to hurt again.

He knew that he couldn't run away from the assignment in front of his eyes, like the time he had been a child, so he felt even more depressed.

He felt a light shock against his foot.

When he lifted up his head, he saw a soccer ball that slowly rolled away from him.

"Excuse us..."

It seemed that a missed kick made the ball fly towards him.

Takahashi shook his head, making an expression to show that it was okay, and lightly sighed when the relieved child turned away.

"Are you kids in the 6th grade?"

Suddenly, he heard a loud voice coming from the main gate area.

The boys froze in place.

"It's already five. You boys go home before it gets dark."

The boys looked at each other and hesitated, and then obediently picked up their ball and went home.

At his tone and his unwavering, authoritative command at the children, it could be inferred that the man standing by the school gates was a teacher.

He didn't leave even after the children left the school.

While he was wondering why, he slowly walked towards him.

It was a man that looked about three or four years older than him. He was dressed in sweats, and he had a beard.

"I'm thinking about closing the gates. Won't you leave?"

"I, I'm sorry."

Takahashi nervously stood up. When he was about to quickly walk out of the gates, then man suddenly called to Takahashi.

"Uh... Can you be Takahashi?"

He was a little surprised that the man knew his name.

"Ah, yes..."

When he answered like that, the man happily laughed.

And then, with a gesture so familiar that it made him nervous, he tapped Takahashi's shoulder while saying, "I knew by your voice."

He couldn't recall who this man was, who was talking to him in a such intimate way.

The man seemed to notice Takahashi's awkward expression, too.

"You can't tell who I am?"

At his gesture of lowering his head and looking into his face, a face suddenly came into his mind.

He thought it couldn't be.

"...Ichinose."

"Yes, it's me."

The man tapped Takahashi's shoulder again.

When he looked at him closely, he still had traces of his childhood face at the edge of his nose and around his mouth.

"If you've returned, you should at least give me a call, you cold-hearted little jerk."

"Sorry."

His voice naturally became smaller.

"It's been 20 years. I've missed you. What brings you here today?" Ichinose asked, looking into Takahashi's lowered face. Because he was an introvert and could not talk well, he had always lowered his head, so Ichinose had always lowered himself and looked into his face when he spoke to him.

"Because of my relative's funeral..."

"Oh, I see..." His tone of voice lowered a little. "That must be hard."

A strong wind blew.

A chilling wind mixed with sleet brushed past his cheek.

"Where do you live now?" Ichinose asked, trembling in cold.

"I'm living in the city."

"I see."

Their conversation suddenly stopped.

He couldn't bear the clumsy silence and thought he had to say something, but he couldn't think of anything to say.

"What were you doing here?"

He lifted his head at Ichinose's question.

"You kept sitting here on such a cold day. This guy in black coat kept staring at the kids, so at first I thought you were some dangerous dude."

His worrying made sense, if he thought about it.

Takahashi bitterly smiled.

"Even if I came back few times, I had no time to relax and stay here. Today, while I happened to be passing by this area, I saw our school and I somehow felt nostalgic, so..."

"Hmm..." Ichinose softly muttered. "Then why don't you come and take a look inside the school, too? I'm a teacher at this school now. I'm in charge of the 5th graders, but I'm also head of the grade. Even if I say the head of the grade, we only have like two classes, but..."

"...Can I go in even though the school's closed today?"

At Takahashi's concern, he laughed loudly and replied, "If they catch us, I can just say that I was going for a drink and I forgot my wallet at school."

His expression looked like a naughty little boy. At his unchanged expression from boyhood, Takahashi nodded without thinking.

"I would've never thought that you had fantasies about sitting on the desks..."

"I know I'm being immature."

Ichinose tsked and mumbled, "Come to think of it, so what kind of work are you doing?"

The question made his heart almost stop.

He had no intention of hiding it, but he somehow felt hesitant.

"I'm teaching modern Japanese at Entrance-based Private School."

Ichinose widely opened his eyes.

"For real? You're a teacher, too?"

"Yeah, well..."

At his stare, he felt uncomfortable, so he slightly avoided meeting his eyes.

Ichinose folded his arms across his chest and said in a low voice, "Mm..."

"I would've never expected that. I thought you'd choose a job where you can work alone, like a professor or a skilled worker."

Takahashi slowly shook his head, smiling ironically.

"I'm not a tenacious type like that."

"Oh yeah? You've always done all of your homeworks, didn't you?"

"I did everything I was given, but I didn't do more than that, right?"

"That's impressive in itself..." After muttering that, Ichinose found a cigarette in his sweatshirt pocket and stuffed it into his mouth. "But I can't believe you're working at a private school. It's hard to deal with them since they're all going through puberty, right?"

"...Well, I didn't have any expectations on a teacher's job, so I can work quite objectively."

"Hnn." Ichinose muttered in a small voice. "Then isn't it boring?"

He didn't sound like he was blaming him, but he couldn't answer.

"It's not even fun, yet you became a teacher and go through hell. Your monthly pay is shit and the students always make trouble. Isn't it full of annoying stuff?"

"Even if you work at a company, wouldn't there be many things that would annoy you?"

Ichinose let out a huge puff of cigarette smoke.

"Company and school are different. I used to be a student, too, but not only are they shameless, they're surprisingly sensitive, and while they're liberal they can also be narrow-minded... I just can't get the hang of them. I can never deal with them."

Even though he didn't apply to a college specializing in education, he decided to be a teacher because he couldn't think of a future.

At that time he remembered that Ichinose said he wanted to be a teacher... So he thought maybe he could be in the same field as the person he liked.

"Maybe I became a teacher because I thought it'd be better for me to get along with other people, even if I have to force myself."

He didn't want to tell him the truth.

The fact that it totally didn't match him *was* one of the reasons, even though not a large one.

"I felt that if I didn't do at least that, I wouldn't have anyone left around me."

Ichinose quietly listened to him, but did not say anything.

This bearded man in his thirties was definitely the person that he had loved so, so much before, but now he didn't feel such strong emotions any longer.

It was when he entered junior high school that he realized that he had developed a crush on him, who was a boy just like him.

At puberty, his body developed, including in a sexual way. He started to consider him in a romantic light.

In his head he knew that it was weird to like a boy like him, but his body wouldn't listen to him. Even if he lightly tapped his shoulder, even if he saw him change, his entire body would heat up.

When they were swimming, he kept looking at him between his legs.

He would masturbate, imagining them embracing each other naked. Staring at his dirtied right hand, he would hate himself.

The good feelings and disgust at himself kept alternating, and his entire body, starting from tip of his head to the tips of his toes, filled with thoughts about him.

He had transferred when he learned during summer vacation of their 3rd year in junior high school. He learned that he made a girlfriend.

The day that he got the confession that he had a girl he was dating, he went home and cried all night. The heartbreak made his tears flow endlessly.

But the hurt didn't end there.

Whenever he talked about his girlfriend, it felt like his heart was being torn apart.

When he said that this year, he had decided to attend the summer festival that they had always attended together with his girlfriend instead, the shock made him unable to do anything, so he spent the entire day stuck in his room.

In the end, just hearing her name from his lips made him feel like cry.

He became tired of being hurt and tossed around by even one of his careless words.

He would never love him back.

The thought that this feeling may continue forever made him dizzy.

He was planning to enter the nearby public high school together with him next year.

But when he heard that the girlfriend applied to the same school, he changed his 1st choice to a high school in the city.

Neither his parents nor his teacher questioned the fact that he suddenly changed his choice to school one level higher.

The test dates were different, so just in case he failed to get in, he took the test for a different public high school as well.

They were in different classes during their 3rd year, so Ichinose had no idea until the day of their graduation that Takahashi had applied to a high school in the city.

When he scolded him for not telling him about this, holding his diploma, he looked hurt.

He couldn't bear to look at his hurt expression, so he lied with a lowered face that he wanted to study harder.

After spring vacation started, for a while he didn't contact him even once.

He could almost see his angry face.

Towards the end of March, he finally called him up.

He didn't look like he completely got over his anger, because awkward silence continued again and again, but he did say, 'let's meet again.'

He answered, 'okay,' but that was a lie.

On the day of their graduation, watching him getting mad and turning his back on him, he had decided that he would never meet him again.

He had decided to throw away his beloved and aching heart...and to protect himself instead.

Even if the people surrounding him and his environment changed, he had never disappeared from his heart.

There was always a place in his heart for him.

Even though he hadn't been able to see his face for years... No, to tell the truth, he had forgotten mostly how he looked like, but the pain in his heart never disappeared.

He was scared that if he had ever met him again, his heart would pound violently.

Unlike his such expectations, right now when he met him coincidentally, he maintained his cool.

Perhaps, from a long time ago, his love towards him had already become a thing of the past.

It was only that he had not realized it...

The love for him had taken over his life for years and years. The reason he had been able to end that love may have been because of his lover, who was ten years younger than him.

"You've never really gotten along with friends. While everyone else were having fun hanging out, I wouldn't see you and go to find you. And then I would find you reading a book at the corner of the classroom, so I thought you liked being alone."

"I was bad at talking with other people, that's all."

"But you've talked often with me. Well, it was mostly me just rambling by myself, but. Whenever I saw you reading a book, I always wondered what kind of world was inside your mind."

He had always had lewd fantasies, not something that was classy enough to be defined as a "world".

"I couldn't understand that I was always with you since we were little, yet I didn't know what you were thinking. You didn't talk much and you had your head always lowered, so I couldn't be sure if you were laughing or you were angry..."

Takahashi looked outside the window, as if running away.

The snow was falling even more thickly.

"Hey, you listening to me?"

He nervously turned his head and replied that he was, and then bitterly smiled.

"I *am* listening, but you've hit a tender spot..."

"I'm not complaining. Even though I couldn't figure out what you were thinking, and you didn't talk much, and you were brusque, I still liked you."

The words didn't have much meaning to it, but his heart gave a leap.

"Even though you were taciturn, I enjoyed the times we were together. I didn't have to be pretend to be someone else when I was with you. It felt like it didn't matter whether I won or lost, or something like that... You were the only one who was like that. So... I wanted to continue to be friends with you."

"...Thank you."

"What... is that supposed to mean?"

"Because you still want to be friends with someone like me."

"I swear, I don't understand what you're thinking..." Ichinose said, shrugging his shoulders. "All this time, I thought you hated me. I mean, you've just entered city high school without telling me anything back in our junior high days, too... Of course it's your life, but even though we were together practically 24/7, you still didn't say anything to me. That sounded like you didn't trust me, so I was stunned. But I thought you'd at least give me a call during the summer vacation, but you didn't even do that... I couldn't stand it so I went to your place, but your mom said you didn't come back. ...I was really lonely."

He did hear from his mother about Ichinose's visit.

But he became frightened of how affected his heart was, so even the thought of Ichinose taking the trouble to come all the way to his home didn't urge him to come back.

"So I really had to bring up a lot of courage to send you the letter telling you I was getting married. I thought if you hated me, the letter would only annoy you. But I really wanted to get in contact with you again. So... I wrote to your place. Did you get that letter?"

"I did get it."

Ichinose pressed his forehead with his right hand, looking pained.

"You know, commonly you'd at least give an answer. I gave you my address and my phone number there."

Before the letter had arrived, he had heard from his mother that Ichinose was getting married. Even though it had been more than ten years since he had met him, he had been unbelievably affected.

He had a chance to meet a lot of people up til that time, but he still hadn't met anyone else who grabbed his heart like him.

His beloved's wedding.

When he thought that he could never be with him now, his heart was torn apart, so he threw the letter away without even reading it.

The heater sometimes made whirling noises.

His cell phone suddenly started to ring.

It was a call from his mother.

She must have called him because she grew worried about her son who didn't come home, no matter how long she waited.

"I've met up with my friends on the way. So go ahead and start dinner without me..."

Ichinose was quietly looking at Takahashi who hung up and stuffed his phone into his pocket.

"Should we head back now? I'm hungry."

Ichinose got up from his chair and turned the heating system off.

The classroom was filled with silence all of a sudden.

When he came by his side again, Takahashi thanked him again.

"I'm happy to have met you today."

Ichinose let out a strange laughter and walked towards the classroom's exit.

He suddenly stopped walking.

"Ichinose?"

"May I ask you one thing?"

He turned around with a serious face.

"To tell the truth, you hate me, right?"

"No way."

He strongly denied it, but he didn't seem convinced.

"I know you've been avoiding me. Don't worry about my feelings and be honest with me."

When Takahashi looked startled, he became more persistent.

"I know it's immature, and there's no point in asking you about this now; I know I'd only make you upset. But it really got on my nerves all this time. I couldn't even imagine why you'd avoid me... No. That's a lie. I did have few guesses..."

Ichinose said in a trembling voice and then sighed.

"I was happy that you, whom others said 'incomprehensible' and 'emo', only got along with me so well. So because I didn't want anyone else getting close to you, when others asked me what kind of person you were, I said you were boring and not a big deal. ...You knew all about what a jerk I've been, right?"

The man who had entered into his thirties years ago said with an agonized face, squeezing his voice out painfully.

Truthfully, Takahashi didn't know how he had described him to other people.

"I was such a big, fat moron. Just thinking about it makes me ashamed."

Ichinose dropped his head weakly and mumbled out an apology in a tiny voice.

He thought that, even though their feelings were not the same kind, it could be said that they liked each other.

"My homeroom teacher back at elementary school told me to make lots of friends, but that was hard for me."

Ichinose slowly raised his head.

"You alone were more than enough for a friend. So don't worry about it."

He thought that he could no longer hide the truth from his friend who confessed his true feelings to him, even revealing about his past.

Takahashi clenched his hands into fists and bit into his lips.

"Ichinose."

He tried to make it sound neutral, but his voice unconsciously shook.

"...I'm gay."

At his confession, Ichinose cocked his head.

"I've loved you."

After asking him if it was okay to smoke, Ichinose put a cigarette into his mouth and sat in front of the classroom door.

It felt weird to be standing and staring at his shoes, so Takahashi sat a little apart from him, on the floor.

He looked back at him, just once.

By looking at his profile, who was numbly staring at the smoke floating up to the ceiling, he couldn't read how he felt about his confession.

He couldn't guess what kind of reaction Ichinose would show.

He prepared himself so that he could stand the shock, no matter if he felt sorry for him or he was disgusted with him.

The warm air has been cut from the classroom, and chilly air started to seep into it.

Takahashi gathered his coat closer to himself unconsciously.

"I thought those kind of stuff only happened in TV."

Ichinose left his seat, and then returned with an ash tray.

"I'm surprised, but it's not that much of a shock. It might be because I'm still not fully getting it, though."

"Really?"

Ichinose lightly laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, yeah, life is really like that, huh?"

When he laughed with him, hot liquid suddenly ran down his cheeks.

He hurriedly covered his eyes, but his tears wouldn't stop. It might be because tension suddenly left him.

"Don't cry. It's not even a big deal..."

Ichinose muttered, as if comforting him, and then he lightly smacked his head.

"I..."

When he kept sniffing because his tears wouldn't stop, Ichinose offered him tissues.

"It's the first time that I confessed to someone else that I'm gay."

He lowered his head and gathered himself into a ball.

"...I was scared..."

If he kept quiet, no one would know.

No one would hate him.

That was much easier.

It was easier, but... He didn't want to lie.

He wanted to seriously answer to his honesty.

All of a sudden, he felt someone touching his hair.

"Thanks for telling me. You're a brave guy."

At his whole-hearted kindness, more tears came out.

"I'm so glad that you were the first one I told," he confessed in a shaking voice. "I was so lucky to have loved you."

He was in so much pain when he learned about his love.

He despaired at the love that could never be returned.

For years and years, he couldn't throw his feelings away, so he cursed the fact that he was gay. He was resentful of the destiny that wouldn't let him stay friends with him.

What Takahashi received from him was the best ending to the first love that he could have ever hoped for.

He cried and cried until he felt satisfied.

A little later, when he finally got his senses back, he was really embarrassed, but it wasn't like he could pick up the feelings he had already revealed.

Ichinose had stayed by his side wordlessly.

It felt like his silent kindness was diffusing into his heart.

When he turned around at the clinking sound, Ichinose was turning his lighter on and off, like a child.

Next to the ash tray, an empty cigarette case lay.

"I've been thinking for a while, but do you still have a crush on me?" He seriously asked when their eyes met.

"What...?"

"Do you still want to become lovers with me or something?"

Laughing at the thought that he had been worried that he would hit on him, he shook his head.

"It's not like that, so don't worry. I already have someone I'm dating, so..."

"What?"

Ichinose looked shocked.

"You have someone you're going out with?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm... Can I ask you what kind of person he is?"

He laughed a little at his hesitant tone.

"He's a sweet person... Even though he's younger than me..."

His lover's face popped into his mind.

They were living in different houses, but he settled himself at Takahashi's place and rarely returned to his own apartment.

Recently, he slept at his apartment after a long absence, and complained that he felt like a stranger at his own house and that he felt uncomfortable.

"How long have you guys been going out?"

After he counted on his fingers, he replied that it had been eight years.

"...You guys dated for quite a while."

It might seem like a long time to others, but to Takahashi, the last 8 years passed in a blink of an eye. The boy who had been a student when they first met graduated college and became a working man. His growth was brilliant, so he could only watch the blindingly radiant man with a bit of anxiety as he became an adult.

"I've heard from my female friends before that a human's love cycle is about 5 years on average. They said after 5 years, whether they're lovers, spouses or lovers-outside-of-marriage, their love cools down. I partly agreed with that, but what about you? Don't you get sick of him, since it's already been 8 years?"

Takahashi confidently shook his head.

"No."

"You must match up with him really well."

Ichinose gave a sarcastic smile.

"My heart grew cold right away when I heard about humans' love cycle. I felt stupid when something I've believed as 'destiny' turned out to be something that was influenced simply by human's psychology pattern."

He felt uncomfortable that him dating someone for 8 years was simply called 'matches well' and Ichinose had such a negative views on love. But it also felt wrong to stubbornly argue against his opinions.

"Even I think I'm a boring, tiring person. I have lots of faults, too. But..." Takahashi clutched his hands on top of his thighs tightly. "I'm going to do my best until I can convince myself that I can't be with him any longer; that this is not going to work out."

"Doing your best is good and all, but what are you going to do if that's just causing trouble for your lover?"

He brought up a sensitive issue.

"That's..."

"It's also important to know when to back off."

It was definitely true that it was unseemly to fight over relationship problems. He knew that, but Takahashi didn't think that he could easily give up his current lover.

"It was painful for me to watch you fall in love with someone else, so I've transferred to a school far away from you. That was the only way I could run away. But that didn't solve the problem at its roots. For years and years, I've dragged on my feelings for you. For me at the time, it was impossible, but if I had the courage to face you directly at the time, if I've tried my best up til the end, perhaps something might have changed."

"Hnn..."

Ichinose agreed, holding the wrinkled cigarette case and fingering it.

"Then how do you think you would've changed if you've confessed to me back then?"

Takahashi answered after a short period of thinking, "...Perhaps I wouldn't have became a private school teacher."

Ichinose asked why.

"You might laugh at my simplicity, but the reason why I became a teacher was because long time ago, you told me you wanted to be a teacher. Of course, it was also because there was nothing else I really wanted to become, but if you've dumped me directly, I might not have chased after your dream."

Takahashi lowered his face and closed his eyes.

"Even after I've graduated college and got a job, I couldn't forget about you. Even after years and years of not seeing you, you were my sweetheart in my heart. My memories faded and I couldn't remember your face clearly, but strangely enough, my feelings towards you remained vivid. The pain... The sadness... Every once in a while, those feelings would suddenly, clearly revive. If I was able to end my love for you clearly, I might not have been hurt in that sense."

"This might be a little different from that, but I couldn't forget about you, either. I was in pain all this time. In my young heart, I was shocked that you would hate me enough to cut off all connection with me all of a sudden. I couldn't even understand why I was so persistant about you. But if I knew the reason, I wouldn't have been in such pain needlessly."

After muttering that, Ichinose suddenly tilted his head, saying, "Huh?"

"Say, that means if you had confessed to me back in junior high and I said no, it would have ended like that?"

"It might have."

After laughing until his shoulders shook, Ichinose put his interlocked hands behind his head and muttered, "You know, I... got divorced 3 years ago, to tell you the truth."

He was so surprised that he was rendered speechless.

"It was a woman I've really loved. I married her, thinking that she was the only woman in my life. But after 2,3 years our relationship weirdly started to go wrong, so in the end I didn't even want to see her face. We had a kid, too, so we had a huge fight over the custody. In the end, she got it, though. I never thought seriously about why it had to be like that, since divorce is quite common nowadays. That was when I heard about the love cycle lasting only 5 years and I convinced myself that was why, since coincidentally that happened in my 5th year with her. But thinking back on it now, I think I just ran away because I didn't want to think about it deeply."

Ichinose deeply sighed.

"When I married her, I relaxed, thinking this woman's love was all mine now. But that was only misunderstanding and selfishness on my part. Since we were together, I thought of course we would have affection towards one another, so I started to treat her with less and less care, and in the end she fell out of love with me. I think it really was like that, since neither of us cheated on each other."

His gaze was directed towards Takahashi.

"What would have happened if I thought deeply about her, like how I was persistent about you? If I seriously thought about what started to go wrong, why it happened like that, the result might have been different."

He couldn't offer him his sympathies, nor tell him to be strong.

Like that, a long silence settled.

As if shaking off the serious atmosphere, Ichinose loudly said he was hungry and stood up from his seat.

"After I got divorced and came back home, they all treated me like a burden. It's more comfortable for me to live alone, too, but I have to pay alimony so I'm not very well off."

Ichinose widely stretched and smiled, poking at Takahashi's shoulder.

"There's no need for you to get so serious. I'm poor and lonely, but not unhappy."

After they cleaned up the ash tray and garbage, they turned the room's lights off.

When they stepped out to the hallway, it felt much colder than the room that had its heater off.

The sound of their slippers echoed surprisingly loud.

Ichinose, who was walking ahead, suddenly stopped moving and muttered in a small voice.

"I guess what's important is how seriously you think about it. Your love for me and my obsession with you were both shapeless, vague things, right? But my relationship with you had been longer than with her, who had been my wife. So relationship between human beings are not decided by some papers, and I don't think something like that is effective at all. I think what's important is how

much you think about each other."

Ichinose suddenly cocked his head, saying, "Huh?"

"Come to think of it, that's what I always said to my kid. What was I thinking all this time while babbling that?"

When Takahashi smiled, Ichinose laughed, too.

When they were about to put their shoes on at the entrance, despite his previous warning, he tripped on the 5cm door ledge and fell forward.

"I told you to watch your feet, since it's dark."

Ichinose offered his hand, giving him a helpless look.

When he grabbed it, the warmth of his body transferred to him.

"Thank..."

Before he finished, Ichinose lightly hugged Takahashi.

His heart was thumping, but it was more like residue of emotion in his heart. It wasn't anything passionate.

"Shall we at least share a kiss?"

Even at the voice only few centimeters from him, Takahashi remained cool.

"I think it'll be better if we don't."

Suddenly Ichinose blushed brightly and hurriedly turned his body away.

"Sorry. Forget about what I said just now."

Blushing so hard that even his ears turned red, he said he'd go on ahead and hurried outside.

Outside was still freezing cold, and violent snowstorm made it impossible to see anything.

High and low sounds of wind came like whirlwind.

Ichinose numbly stood at the entrance, gazing at the snow.

"I kept thinking. How it would've been like if you didn't have a lover and you still loved me. There's no point in thinking about this now, but..."

There was no need to ask him anything else.

"Hey, you. Be strong."

His voice sounded like it'll get swallowed up by the wind.

When he turned around, he was laughing with his cheeks wrinkled, as if he couldn't keep his expression straight because of the cold weather.

"I'm sure you'll be strong even if someone like me doesn't tell you to be strong, but anyway."

They looked at each other wordlessly.

Sudden kiss.

It was a baby kiss that barely brushed his lips, but he tensed up like the first time he kissed.

After they finished their kiss, Ichinose turned away and said, "Don't you dare thank me," and then lowered his face.

He parted with Ichinose at the school gates.

When he looked at his turned back that was slowly disappearing into the snow, he thought he would never meet him again.

He was sure he wouldn't contact him.

They've exchanged their cell phone numbers and addresses, but he couldn't bear that premonition.

Hunching up his shoulders, he walked through the snow and arrived at the front of his house. His cell phone started to ring right at that moment.

It was a call from his love.

Takahashi hurriedly took the cell phone out from his coat.

He couldn't really hear his lover's voice because of the wind.

Clutching his phone with shaking fingers, Takahashi moved to the front of shuttered-up store.

'I can't really hear you. Where are you right now?'

Takahashi covered his mouth with his hand so that he could block out as much outside noise as he could.

"Outside. It's snowing and the wind's really bad, too, so."

'You were on your way to a convenience store?'

"No, on a walk..."

After a short silence, he was able to hear his lover's laughter.

'You're going for a walk in this snow? I'm not gonna go save you even if you get buried up.'

"It wasn't this bad when I started from home."

His lover asked in disbelief just how long he had been walking.

He was able to hear mumbling sounds through the phone.

He said he had to work on Saturday, too. It seemed that he hadn't returned home yet.

'I'm at the station. Can you come get me?'

"Station?"

'Kurego Station. Actually I wanted to go to Akatsuka, which was the closest, but since it was the last train running, this was their last stop. ...Sorry for asking you this at such a late hour.'

His lover came to this area--.

His fingers shook, he wasn't sure if it was because he was affected or because it was cold.

"You told me you had work today."

'Yeah, I came after I finished. That's why I'm so late.'

"I told you I'll return tomorrow, yet you came all the way here..."

'Am I bothering you?'

"No, it's not like that..."

He felt frustrated that he couldn't express his feelings well.

"Hold on, I'll go to the station right now."

'Okay.'

After hanging up, Takahashi hurried to the main street and caught a taxi with all his might.

At the empty waiting room of the train station, where even stores closed up, his lover Satomi Kouichi was sitting aimlessly.

In his hand he held the leather suitcase he always took to his office.

His profile which was numbly staring at the wall suddenly shone brightly when he noticed Takahashi's presence.

His lover got up from his seat right away and came running towards Takahashi.

"I'm sorry for suddenly coming to you."

The first thing he did when he opened his mouth was to apologize.

Grey suit and navy jacket--it was the same thing he was wearing when he went off to work this morning.

"But it's not like I came here compulsively. I was going to tell you in advance, but I thought you'd tell me not to come, so..."

"I want to know the reason."

His lover looked around and then laughed strangely.

"There's no one here, but it's kind of weird to talk here, so why don't we go somewhere else? There's a business hotel nearby so let's sleep there tonight."

When they left the waiting room, his lover thanked the station worker at the entrance.

"He was really nice when he told me where the station and hotel are."

The friendly man often talked easily with someone he had just met.

He was complete opposite of him, who was awkward at talking with others.

The business hotel that faced the main road was near enough that one could see it from the station.

The road wasn't that wide, yet his lover walked by Takahashi's side.

As he thought, a bicycle came from the opposite direction, so when he was about to move out of the way, he embraced his shoulders.

It felt like he was walking with his shoulders held, so he eased away from him.

Even now... he felt uncomfortable holding hands or having physical contact in front of others.

Once he backed away, his lover's hand no longer sought after Takahashi.

The hotel room was tiny and austere.

The first thing his lover did was to turn the heater on and take off his coat.

"What a snow, right?"

When he took a look outside the window, he only saw faint reflection of the street lights. He couldn't see anything else.

While he was looking at his lover's slightly sharp profile, he recalled the conversation they had last night.

When he called him and told him that he had to go back to his hometown for about two days because of his relative's funeral, even though he had just told him about the funeral, his lover asked him, 'How come?'

He was a bit shocked because it felt like he had discovered that he didn't HAVE to force himself to go, since he was quite a distant relative, but when he repeated that it was for the funeral, he didn't continue to ask.

At the hands that gently caressed his cheeks, Takahashi slightly jumped.

"Is my hand... cold?"

When he shook his head, his lover gave a tiny laugh.

As if tasting him with his palm, he touched his cheek and chin line, and then his lover embraced Takahashi with his hands on the nape of his neck.

The kiss... His lover's lips that felt like it was gently wrapping around him was amazingly warm.

"Just how long have you been walking?" He asked, sighing. "Your body's totally cold. You already

have the tendency to get cold easily, so you have to be careful."

After saying that in a scolding tone, he took off his suit jacket and entered the bathroom. He could hear the sound of water running.

"Anyway, warm your body up. Let's talk afterwards."

Saying that as he pulled up his shirt sleeves, he forcefully shoved Takahashi inside the bath. Because he knew that he was worrying about him, he obediently followed his words.

When he stripped and entered the tub, the tips of his fingers tingled.

He realized just how cold his body has become, since more than feeling the warmth, he felt numbness.

It was after he had stayed in the hot water for 10 minutes that he heard someone knocking.

"Can I come in?"

"I'm going to come out in a moment."

Even though he gently refused, the door opened with the words, 'Just for a little bit...'

When he felt his forceful lover pulling the shower curtains aside, Takahashi hurriedly gathered himself into a ball inside the tub.

"You warmed up now?"

His lover had already loosened his tie and was holding a can of beer in his right hand.

"Oh, the color returned to your face."

Sitting at the edge of the tub, his lover caressed Takahashi's wet cheeks.

"I was worried because your face was so pale. First I thought it was because the waiting room's lights were so dark, but that wasn't why. And then when I touched you, you were cold like a sheet of ice."

His lover swaggered down the beer he was holding, as if it was delicious.

When their eyes met, he offered the can, saying, 'You want?'

"You said the first sip was good, even for beers."

After hesitating a little, he accepted the beer.

He suddenly wanted to drink it.

Normally, he almost never consumed alcohol.

He didn't like the carbon dioxide, so even when he drank, the only thing he would drink is Japanese wine.

He would sip beer few times so that he wouldn't ruin the mood, but he did think that the first sip he

drank when he was tired was delicious. When the cold carbon dioxide drink passed his neck, it suddenly burned up in his stomach.

At the overreaction to the alcohol, Takahashi remembered that he hadn't eaten anything all day. Touching his cheeks again, his lover leered at him while he kept smirking.

"Why are you laughing?"

When he asked that, his lover's fingers lightly pinched him.

"You're bright red, like an octopus."

When he realized that he was laughing at his face that turned red because of the alcohol, he became so embarrassed that he wanted to cry.

Takahashi pushed his lover's hands away and turned his face away from him.

But that was as far as he could run away, since he was still sitting in the narrow tub.

"Don't get mad. It's because you're so cute, all red like that."

No matter what he said, it was true that he had been laughing at him.

So firmly closing his mouth, he faced the wall and didn't turn around.

Then, his lover grabbed his arms and forced him to turn around.

He didn't want the kiss that tried to suck up to him, so he turned his head away, but his lover's lips pursued his own lips.

Because Takahashi resisted his lover's shirt became completely soaked, but his lover didn't seem to care as he chased after him. So in the end, he accepted a long kiss from him, tightly held in his lover's arms.

"Ah..." Hot moaning sound echoed in the narrow bathroom.

He had been angry only few minute ago, but he couldn't care less about that now.

It wasn't like he had never been taken in the bathroom... Just imagining what would happen heated up his lower body.

The lips pulled away from him.

Touching his wet lips with his thumb, he gathered Takahashi into his arms.

"I want to jump into the tub like this, but then we won't be able to talk, so..."

Muttering that to himself wistfully, his lover brushed back Takahashi's wet locks of hair.

"Come out when your body warms up. Ah, and wash your hair, too."

After making Takahashi totally in the mood, his lover left the bathroom.

It wasn't like he wanted to have a passionate sex in such a narrow place, but his half-ignited pleasure heavily remained in his lower body.

While he was carefully washing his hair, his excitement slowly cooled down.

It was quite a while later when he put on a gown and came out of the bath. He had been watching TV on top of the bed, his shirt buttons loosened. When he saw Takahashi, he gestured to him to come to him.

"I'll dry your hair."

While he was drying his hair with a dryer, Takahashi lowered his head and kept his eyes closed. When he washed his hair, he would always dry it for him. Before, he fell asleep while his hair was still wet, and he became quite sick for 3 days because of a cold.

It had been a flu season and it was only a bad timing, but his lover scolded him, saying it was because he didn't dry his hair.

After that, it became his job to dry his hair.

He could do something like drying his hair himself, but the reason he let him be was because he knew catching cold was simply an excuse. The truth was that he just wanted to do so.

Not to mention, he felt good when he touched his hair with his big hands.

After drying his hair, he put his nose against Takahashi's hair and sniffed like a puppy.

"Were you with a smoker today?"

At his observation, his heart nearly stopped.

"Because you smelled like cigarettes before you washed you hair..."

Takahashi lowered his head and bit into his lips.

He knew that he was a terrible liar.

He knew that his lover, who always looked easy-going, was actually surprisingly sharp.

Then he thought he would be better for him to come out with the truth.

"I met my friend back in my junior high days."

He replied, 'Hnn.'

"That guy that you said you used to have a crush on?"

He was honestly afraid at his lover's confident voice.

"...How did you know?"

He said, shrugging, "How or whatever, the only junior high friend that you ever talked about was him, so."

At his simple answer, he cursed his own foolishness.

After sighing lightly, he lover held Takahashi from his back.

"I should start with asking you first, right? Why did you go see him now, all of a sudden?"

Because their bodies were close to each other, it felt like his fear and anxiety would transfer to him right away.

"I met him... by accident."

"What did you guys talk about?"

"This and that."

"You told him you used to love him?"

"Yes..."

When he answered like that, even though he was the one who asked, his lover became really surprised.

"Why did you tell him?"

"Ichinose... That friend from junior high told me the truth honestly, without hiding or embellishing on anything. So I didn't want to lie to him, either."

When he thought about that time, his heart started to ache.
Takahashi tightly grabbed his lover, who was holding him.

"I thought it couldn't be helped even if he was disgusted with me. But Ichinose..."

Tears came out at hand that patted his head just at the right time.

"Ichinose was understanding with me..."

His lover lightly kissed him while wiping his tears away with his fingers.

"The reason why he understood was because you were serious. I'm sure your feelings reached him."

He was so happy that he felt like crying again, so Takahashi hurriedly rubbed his eyes.

"And even if I got hurt, I thought you'd comfort me."

At that, his lover held Takahashi even tighter against him.
This breath-taking confinement was happiness that he wouldn't trade with anything else in the world.
When they first started dating, truthfully he couldn't stand it because he was so worried about his future.

It was first time he was in an intimate relationship that involved sex, and his lover was ten years younger than him on top of that.

It would be a lie to say that they had never fought, but the happiness of being with him was so much bigger.

Settling Takahashi on his lap and gently touching his cheeks, his lover whispered in a small voice, "It might seem stupid to say something I always, always say, but I love you so much. People around me say that it's amazing that I don't grow tired of you after being with you for 8 years, but instead of growing tired of you, I want to be with you more and more. I'm lonely if I can't see you for even one day. And I know very well that you love me a whole lot. I know, but... You don't have to force yourself for my sake."

His gaze made his heart ache, so he dropped his gaze.

"I thought you were behaving strangely since a while back. You have a habit of biting your thumb nail when you're stressed out, so. You didn't tell me that someone was causing you trouble at school, so I thought I might be the cause and thought it over. I thought of something."

Big hand messed up his hair.

"It's because I asked you for an adoption, right?"

He startled.

"I came to that conclusion after thinking on my own, and I'm ready to convince my parents. But that's just my feelings, so if you don't want it, then that's it. Even if you say no, it's not like I'd ever hate you. And..."

He continued in a gentle voice.

"You won't be able to hide the truth from your parents if I adopt you. I can totally imagine that me fighting with my parents would be nothing compared to how stressed out you'd be when you fight with your parents. No one would want to fight with their parents, and if they can... They'd want to hide that they're gay for the rest of their life..."

He was afraid of himself that he was describing, because it felt like his heart became a transparent glass that he could see everything.

"You could've just said no if you wanted that, but you were seriously worried about it, right? So much that you would bite your thumb nails. I thought I'd better talk to you again, but you suddenly said you're going home so I thought this was really bad. That's why I hurried after you as soon as my work was done."

He wrapped his cheek with both of his hands.

"You don't have to force yourself to tell your parents. You don't have to tell them for the rest of your

life. Unless you really want to, too, you don't have to worry about me. And even if you don't, no one's gonna say that you're despicable or cowardly."

"Sorry..."

"I told you, you don't have to apologize. It's my fault, too, that I blurted out my conclusion without even taking your personality into consideration."

But when he apologized again, he was punished with a kiss.

The kiss became more and more passionate, so before he realized it long fingers were pulling off his gown.

"I'd hate to see you forcing yourself for my sake, and then regretting it later."

A gentle whisper.

He wanted to say that no matter how painful it would get, he'd never regret it, but he couldn't resist his lips that wanted a kiss from him so he swallowed his words.

"I know you haven't been to your hometown in quite a while, so I was going to return as soon as I finished talking to you, but... At this point, I think that'll be impossible. Sorry... I'll bring you home later on."

After saying that, he kissed Takahashi on his neck, passionately enough to leave a mark.

In the end, he gave up returning home that day.

Before he realized it, it had already passed 12, and Takahashi didn't feel like going back home, either. He wasn't sure when the snowstorm stopped, but before he knew it, the window stopped shaking. Even after making love once, he didn't want to pull apart from him, so they spent their time playing around on top of the bed.

"I'm not being hung up on the formality of stuff like adoption or whatever," his lover whispered while caressing his hair. He had started to doze off in the afterglow, his face buried in his warm chest.

"I just wanted to be in a situation where I can be responsible for you. For example, if you got into a huge accident and were sent off to the hospital, I'll flip out if they tell me that only family members could come see you. Even if I want to stay by your side continuously, people would ask me, 'why'. It might be okay to just say I'm your lover, but it's the end if you just say that lovers are unrelated people. Then I thought it'd be better for me to become your family by adopting you."

Takahashi half-raised his body and gazed at his lover.

"Even if your eyes can no longer see, your ears can no longer hear, your body can no longer move, your lips no longer able to speak, I shall stay by your side. I want to be with you."

'It'll be great if I could've married you, since I love you so much...' his lover whispered, and then gave him a tiny laugh.

"It might sound like a joke, but I'm pretty serious."

Warmth pushed into his heart so that it felt like it would spill through his lips.
Takahashi softly pressed his lips against his lover's.
He couldn't believe that such a loveable human being could exist in this world.

"When morning comes..., let's go to my house."

His lover cocked his head.

"I want to introduce you to my family as someone precious to me."

"I told you, you don't have to push yourself..."

"I'm not pushing myself. I want to show the person I love to everyone."

After gazing at each other for a while, his lover lightly nodded his head.
And then he tightly held Takahashi and whispered in his ear, 'When morning comes...'

Early July.

When he returned from school, he found a postcard.

The handwriting looked familiar, but he couldn't recall whose it was. When he looked at the Sender, cocking his head, he found out that it was a postcard from Ichinose.

After a normal greetings, he had written that he got a new lover.

The PS after ✕ mark added that she was quite pretty, so he laughed a little.

When his lover who returned home early saw the postcard and asked, 'Is it from that friend?' he had replied that it was. His lover muttered, 'Man, his handwriting sucks.'

He spread out a meal that was a bit fancier than what they usually ate on the livingroom table.

The actual event was tomorrow, but his lover was stragely excited, saying it was the eve of the event.

"When I told my boss that I'm adopting someone, he asked me how old the boy was."

Staring at each other's face, they burst into laughter.

They were laughing now, but the process of getting to this point hadn't been easy.

His lover's family did not say anything.

By the time he introduced Takahashi to them, he had already talked it over with his family many times, so they seemed to have understood everything by the time he went to meet them in person.

The problem was Takahashi's family.

His parents were diligent people, so they did not raise their voices, but it was obvious that they were disapproving of his lover's presence.

He had talked to them many times, but when he told them that he loved him, they flatly refused to talk about it, saying that they didn't want to talk about such things any more.

But in the end his parents seemed to have grown tired of the argument, because they gave up, saying, 'You're an adult now, so do whatever you want.'

He felt that it would be impossible to get the understanding of his elderly parents, so he still couldn't tell if it was the right thing to do to tell them the truth, but still, he had no regrets.

"I guess we can say that this is our last day of being a single?" His lover asked him.

"I guess you can say that."

3 months ago, his lover left his previous apartment and was officially living at Takahashi's home. They would change their records tomorrow, but the only thing that would change is that their names would belong in the same family registrar. It wasn't like anything would change in their lives.

"It's embarrassing to say this now, but I think it'd be better to say something like this clearly."

Takahashi stopped eating and looked at his lover.

"Thank you for everything up til now. Please take care of me from now on."

Takahashi smiled at his lover who bowed his head and bowed in return.

"I'm the one who should be asking you to take good care of me."

After smiling shyly, his lover whispered that they would always be together. He could hear the cries of cicada outside the window.

It has been 9 years since he has met him. The first summer that they would greet as a family was about to start.

[END]