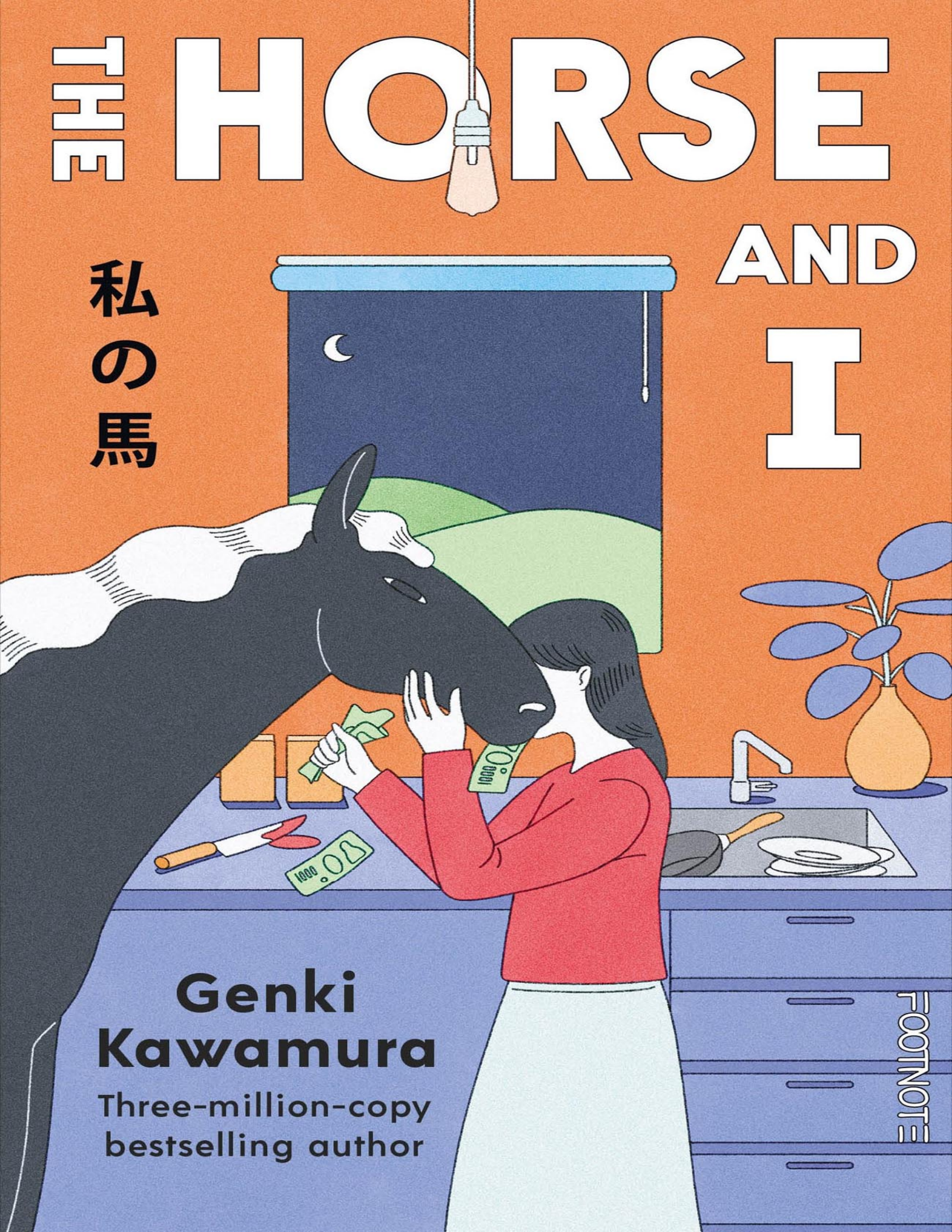
THE HORSE AND I

私の馬



Genki Kawamura

Three-million-copy bestselling author

FOOTNOTE

THE HORSE AND I

ALSO BY GENKI KAWAMURA

Exit 8
If Cats Disappeared from the World

THE HORSE AND I

Genki Kawamura

Translated by
Chikako Kobayashi

FOOTNOTE

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About the Author
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PART I

ONE

A horse stood on the highway.

I slammed on the rusty brakes, bringing my red moped to a stop. The tires skidded on the scalding, nearly melting asphalt, and the smell of burned rubber stung my nose.

In the middle of the road—between a used car dealership with a fading flag fluttering in the wind and a former pachinko parlor with its signs taken down—was a glistening black horse.

Small cars, large trucks, buses, and motorcycles were all honking their horns, but the sounds went unheeded by the animal. Towering about twice my height, it stood in the center of the commotion, calmly moving its head around.

The brim of my helmet had slipped down, and when I pushed it up, our eyes met. A sorrowful and somehow familiar black, the horse's eyes were fixed on me. For some reason, a sigh escaped my mouth. A bead of sweat fell from my forehead to my sunburned neck and dampened the collar of my worn-out shirt. The horse didn't look away from me. To make sure that I hadn't lost my mind, I raised the corners of my mouth.

Good, I can still smile.

The horse took two, three steps toward me. My pulse quickened and beat fiercely against my eardrums. The sound of the horse's hard hooves hitting the asphalt synced with the beating of my heart. I could smell the animal—like hay and milk mixed together.

That very moment, the horse looked toward the heavens and neighed loudly, as if to let me know that this was not all an illusion.

Four men wearing matching nylon jackets appeared out of nowhere and

surrounded the horse. Breathing heavily through its nostrils, it raised its forelegs high. To the right, to the left. Its four muscular, chiseled legs moved like they were executing an elegant dance. The horse thrashed about for a while, but immediately calmed down once its reins were secured.

The men in the nylon jackets bowed apologetically toward the surrounding vehicles as they began moving again, and led the horse to a trailer parked by the traffic lights a little way ahead. The horse walked up the ramp and into the stall through a set of double doors without any resistance, quite unlike the way it had behaved before, and the horse trailer set off at a sluggish pace. It turned left at the intersection with the automated consumer loan-application machine and the convenience store with the light blue sign. On the body of the trailer vanishing into the distance, I caught the words "Mugikura Riding Club." My eyes were glued to the faded writing when the horse poked its head out from a gap between the trailer's tarp and stall. Its black eyes, those eyes that held the power to pull me in, turned my way again.

Found you.

A split second before I had the thought, I felt the horse saying the same thing to me.

TWO

The shipyard was sprawling, like a town in itself, so you needed a company-owned bike to get around. I was riding down a rambling road on a bicycle with a rusty chain, the sun burning my scalp. It was only after I passed several big-lettered signs— “Safety First,” “Keep Area Organized,” and “Keep Area Clean”—that a factory came into view, the phrase “To the Ocean Together” written in large letters on the wall. The factory was the size of a baseball field. Sparks flew in one corner, and I heard long iron pipes being sawed off and falling to the ground with a clang.

A younger colleague of mine, Miu Unosawa, pedaled beside me, complaining with furrowed brows, “It’s so hot! My skin’s gonna burn!” She said this every day, but her face, her arms, and her thighs that peeked from her tight skirt were all unusually pale. Miu wore a short-sleeved button-down shirt with a checkered pink vest, and that, combined with her youthful face, made her look like a high school student. “Wearing this company uniform makes me look like I’m part of a cheesy pop group or something,” she said, happy to laugh at herself, and not at all considerate of the fact that I was over two decades older than her and wearing the same outfit.

A shadow suddenly covered my field of vision, and I looked up.

A red iron plate that would become the bottom of a container carrier was blocking the sun. It looked like a giant dead whale that I’d once seen on television. Like all ship components made at our factories, it was being transported by one of the cranes, each of them over a hundred meters long, so that it could be assembled with other parts on the shore.

An ore carrier that had been ordered by a Greek shipowner was just about halfway done.

Apparently, it was going to be more than three hundred meters long when completed. The head of the shipyard said that it would be about the same size as Tokyo Station.

Twenty-five years had passed since I'd graduated from junior college, accepted a job at a shipbuilding company, and gotten assigned to this shipyard. I was scared at first. Was it acceptable to build things that were so big? It felt like the ships' sizes were on a scale that far surpassed what was appropriate for humankind. It reminded me of a story in the Old Testament that my mother had told me about. That human beings had built a tall tower trying to get as close to heaven as possible and that God had become angry with them and jumbled up their languages. Humans could no longer speak to each other, and construction of the tower had come to a halt. After that, people spread to various parts of the world, and had no choice but to speak in different languages. I feared that something like that was going to happen at this shipyard, too.

But after I'd worked here for a few months and learned the basic elements of shipbuilding, I came to realize that though the parts were large, what the workers were doing with them was not much different from making small plastic models. And if that was the case, I concluded with relief, it was un-likely that we would invoke the wrath of God. There were times when I wished I could confide in someone at work about this, but I could think of no one here who would empathize with me.

Miu and I had been riding our bicycles for about eight minutes, avoiding messily stacked drums and sheets of iron with holes in the shapes of ship components, when the ore carrier docked at the pier finally came into view. The cross section of the ship, which was about the size of a twenty-story building, was exposed as if the ship had been sliced. We parked our bikes next to the iron plate factory right in front of it.

The two of us lugged a total of forty-two plastic bento boxes that we'd carried on our bikes into the factory, where iron sheets of various shapes were placed on the floor like pieces of a puzzle. As soon as we ducked through the sooty plastic curtains, a rotten smell assaulted my nose, and sweat poured out of my forehead. It was well over one hundred degrees inside. I immediately worried that in this heat, the lunches would go bad right away.

"Hey, Miu, what's for lunch today?"

The men who had caught sight of Miu stopped what they were doing and began to crowd around us. The heavy soles of their protective footwear made an irritating clanging noise on the hard floor.

“Um, there’s fried chicken nanban or mackerel stewed in miso.”

“Hmm, sounds good.”

“Right?”

Miu, who had joined the company two years ago, spoke casually with everyone at work, but for some reason, it never sounded rude.

“Which would you recommend, Miu?”

“Me? I dunno.”

I had never heard her make a decision.

“Well then, Yuko, which would you recommend?” a brown-haired man at the head of the line suddenly asked. I automatically raised the corners of my mouth. “Wait, did I say something funny?”

I wasn’t smiling because he’d said something funny or interesting. Half-hearted smiles were just a habit I’d developed because it was how I got by in most interactions with people.

“Hey, don’t bother Yuko,” Miu said, spreading her arms out protectively, stopping any further questions from being directed at me. “Now, do you want the chicken or the fish?”

“Maybe I’ll take Miu,” said the brown-haired man, his voice husky from too much drinking. He had supposedly had a baby just last month, but even before he’d shacked up with the mother, he’d been making the same inappropriate remarks.

“Me, too!” “Me, too!” followed the men behind him.

“Come on, stop teasing,” Miu responded, laughing as she retied her hair, which had been swept into a mess by the ocean air as we biked.

“No, I’m serious.” “Totally serious!” “Do you have a boy-friend?” The men’s mouths opened and shut as if they were koi fish swarming over feed.

“Come on, everyone! It’s lunchtime!” Miu called out, waving to the men in the back, and I noticed from the corner of my eye that her armpits were drenched in sweat. I continued to matter-of-factly pass out bento boxes.

“Miu, aren’t you sick of the constant sexual harassment?” I’d heard a female colleague ask her when we were eating lunch in the cafeteria yesterday. But she’d replied, “It’s not that bad. I think it’s better than being

disliked. I mean, if you think of it as a form of communication, it's no problem at all."

It wasn't often that I agreed with what Miu said, but I found her endearing. Regardless of whether one could empathize with her, she was born with the ability to be liked.

"Thank you very much, Ms. Setoguchi."

Hearing a low mumble, I raised my face to find Kenjiro Ushio. He'd initially joined the company as a shipwright, but was now head of iron-plate welding. He had a good reputation for the close attention he gave to his work. Because he always worked until the very last minute, he was the last in line to collect his lunch every day. He always got a bento from me.

"It's hot . . . isn't it?"

To Ushio, who was obviously seeking an affirmative response, I simply gave an evasive smile and passed him the last bento box. The stoutly built welder wiped the sweat dripping from his thinning hairline with a towel and happily accepted the miso-stewed mackerel from me.

"The accounting deadline is today, right," he muttered, and as I was struggling to react to what could've been a question, Miu, who was one step ahead of me and had already gotten on her bike, called out, "Let's go, Yuko!"

I quickly bowed and turned around, so Ushio's voice landed on my slouched shoulders: "I'll see you later at the union office."

When we returned to the General Affairs Department, Katsumi Fujii, the department head, came over with cold water bottles in hand, saying, "It was hot out, huh? Thanks for taking care of bento delivery." I bowed slightly and accepted a bottle. Underneath the pink vest that I was wearing, my shirt was glued to my back with sweat.

"Yuko, take a moment to catch your breath, but once you do, could you take care of something else?"

Fujii, who didn't step out of the main building except to go have lunch, never took off his suit jacket, even in the summer. Combined with his macho demeanor, it made him seem more like someone who worked for a trading firm than someone at a shipbuilding company.

"Was there another complaint?" interjected Miu, who had been staring at her cell phone with her face positioned near a desktop fan behind me. She was always texting people, even during work. Her pastel blue nails glided

over the surface of her phone.

“There was a complaint from a resident near the train station,” Fujii continued, paying Miu no mind. “They claimed our employees were drunk and creating a ruckus in front of their building—”

“But that’s an annual summer tradition!” retorted Miu in my stead, still looking at her phone. “They’re just going crazy cuz of the heat.”

It was a matter of routine for Miu to resist when Fujii passed off annoying tasks to us, but recently she’d become even more blunt toward him.

“I just think that if you address people’s concerns, they tend to calm down,” Fujii said.

“It’s only going to make them cocky,” Miu said.

“We can’t do nothing, so please respond to the complaint before the end of the day,” Fujii insisted.

“Nooooo, thank yoooouuuu,” Miu said.

“Thanks for handling this,” Fujii said.

At some point, the conversation had turned into one between Fujii and Miu. Instead of responding to Fujii, I wrote a note to myself: “Take care of complaint by EOD.”

With her eyes still on her phone, Miu mumbled, “There was a whiner like that before in my building. He went around putting up a sign on every door complaining about children’s footsteps being too loud, but there were no children living in any of the apartments. It was like something out of a horror movie.”

As if to shut out her words, Fujii combed back his salt-and-pepper hair with his fingers, then placed his hands on my shoulders and whispered, “This place would not function without you.”

My eyes went straight to his bony fingers.

Watching as Fujii returned to his seat at the back of the room, Miu rolled back on the wheels of her chair so that she was right next to me. “Fujii’s really touchy-feely, isn’t he?”

The wry smile I returned to indicate my agreement only spurred more insults against him. “Why does he butter up female employees when he has a wife? His sweet talk is really creepy. And what I truly can’t stand is that he thinks he’s got style or whatever. I bet you his non-work clothes are a joke.”

Miu said what she wanted, without the expectation of a reply. I simply nodded along, and the interaction continued at a satisfying pace. It was much better than a conversation in which each party was overly courteous toward the other. I had nothing in particular I wanted to say, but she did. In several hours, we would both forget what had been said, but we'd be left with the sense that we had engaged in communication. The conversation was similar to an exchange of text messages.



After I'd meticulously crafted an apology email to the neigh-boring resident, the bell marking the end of the workday rang.

"You have to go to the union office today, right, Yuko?" Miu asked.

I nodded, gathered my things, placed them in my small backpack, and got up from my seat. "Bye, Yuko!" Miu waved, and I discreetly waved back at her. I cut through the office between the Materials Department and the Design Department and exited the main building to see a crane stretching its neck from the pier toward the ocean. The setting sun was shining on it, creating a horselike silhouette. It took my breath away as I recalled the black horse I'd seen on the highway this morning.

I once again straddled my company-issued bicycle, passed by a smoking booth where men who'd finished work were packed like fish in a tin can, and wove my way between factories.

Eventually a car that looked like an armored vehicle, piled high with sheet metal, approached from the front. I avoided the oddly shaped thirty-six-wheeler and aimed for the pier. The early evening ocean breeze brought with it the smell of iron.

When I was a child, I would often wake up to a similar smell. I'd be sleeping at night when a warm liquid would flow from my nose into my throat. I would swallow it and taste iron. Feeling nauseated, I would hastily sit up in my futon and turn on the fluorescent light. When I looked at my pillow, there would be a bright red stain.

Because I was prone to frequent nosebleeds, my mother dragged me to three hospitals, but we never found out what caused them. As a precaution, my mother told me to avoid eating chocolate and peanuts, so until I was in junior high, I gave up chocolates despite loving them. A few years ago, when I found out that there wasn't actually a correlation between

nosebleeds and chocolate, I complained to my mother, but all she said was "Did I say that?" She didn't seem to remember at all.

It was ten minutes to the pier by bicycle. Once I'd biked from the bow to the stern of the container vessel that was docked alongside the harbor for repairs, the small, worn-out prefab shed at the end of the harbor became visible.

I parked my bike in front of the shed and went inside. Ushio was already there. The room was the size of about twelve tatami mats, and the walls were plywood, chipping in some places. Our eyes met and he smiled, to which I responded with a quick bow. On the wall behind him was a red flag that read "Sakamaki Shipbuilding Workers' Union." When it was just the two of us in such a small office, with a flag that was way too big for it, I felt incredibly awkward.

Ushio wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel hanging around his neck and looked over the articles in the union newsletter. The air conditioner in the office was broken and only expelled warm air. As I passed behind him, I looked toward his hands. There was an article about a union members' cycling tour that had recently taken place. In the center of an accompanying photograph, Miu was the only one making a peace sign with her fingers. As always, her skin was much paler than everyone else's.

Ushio and I had been tasked with doing the busywork of the union. Ushio became the union's secretary-general two years ago, and did everything from organizing meetings and social gatherings to editing the union newsletter. I worked on union accounting at the prefab shed every Wednesday and Friday evening from five to six thirty. I sat down at a steel office desk diagonally across from Ushio, unlocked the drawer, and pulled out a memo pad and a calculator.

About eight hundred union members paid monthly dues of 2,000 yen each, all of which went into the labor union account. Union activities were mellow, and not once had negotiations between management and workers broken down since I'd joined the company. The use of union dues was limited to things like union members' social gatherings, training trips, utilities for the union office, and the purchase of this and that. My job was simply to check the comings and goings of union money and write them down. It was unglamorous, but I liked it because it was pretty much self-contained.

“Here’s the receipt from last week ’s social gathering,” Ushio said, placing a piece of paper on my desk. “Could you please take care of it?” It was a receipt from a tavern for 54,220 yen, the number jotted down hastily in pen.

I opened up the accounting software on the faded desktop computer in front of me and clicked on the tab for financial records. Under 36,200 yen for “Meeting bento,” 13,000 yen for “Office door repair,” 5,000 yen for “Condolence money for Yamamoto,” and 324 yen for “Envelopes and staples,” I typed in 54,220 yen for “Social gatherings.” I then crouched in front of the safe that was behind me and turned the dial. Clockwise to 0, counterclockwise to 9, clockwise to 2, then counterclockwise to 3. The union safe, which apparently had been in use for at least fifty years, was massive and about the size of a washing machine. I could never tell anyone that the lock combination was as silly as the birth date of a famous female singer from the 1980s.

With a click, the safe opened. It was slightly cool inside the iron doors. From the tray closest to me, I took out some bills and change. In the back, among some bookstore gift cards and gift certificates from God knows when, were about twenty stacks of bills still in currency bands, each amounting to 1 million yen.

“I’m sorry I’m completely dependent on you when it comes to all things money-related,” Ushio said.

I shook my head to say that that wasn’t the case, and counted the bills and change. I had the sense that by taking on tasks that nobody else wanted to, I was securing a comfortable place for myself in the company.

“You’re the only person who knows how everything here works,” he continued.

When I handed him the bills and change in lieu of a response, Ushio accepted them and said that I should tell him if there was ever anything he could do to help. After staring at his dirty nails while he counted the bills, I moved my gaze toward the pier visible through the gaps in the warped blinds.

I was always watching the cranes from this position. The cranes moved slowly and systematically. In the last nine years, people had come and gone, but the cranes and I had stayed here, unchanged.

THREE

When I exited the prefab shed, the sun had sunk into the horizon and the sky had turned light purple. Perhaps the container vessel's repairs had been completed; it was now sailing out into the open sea. Up close, it had appeared so grand, but now it looked like a bamboo-leaf boat floating helplessly down a creek.

Ushio and I returned to the shipyard's main building together.

"Dinnertime, isn't it?" he said. I responded to his invitation with an ambiguous smile—he could have simply been talking to himself—and turned on the engine of my moped.

I drove down the highway for about twenty minutes and returned to my apartment, which was surrounded by peanut fields and rows and rows of solar panels. By then, it was completely dark outside. I took a peek inside my rusty mailbox, grabbed a bunch of flyers, and climbed up the stairs. A small tricycle lay on its side in the center of the second-floor hallway. I picked it up and quietly set it upright by the door of my next-door neighbors.

As soon as I tossed my nylon backpack into the corner of my apartment —comprising just a bedroom and an eat-in kitchen—I turned on the air conditioner. I took rice and a hamburg steak from the freezer and heated them up in the microwave. While I waited, I poured boiling water from an electric kettle onto the contents of a freeze-dried miso soup packet, and arranged some lettuce and cherry tomatoes from the fridge on a plate and drizzled sesame dressing over them.

When my television stopped working two years ago, I simply got rid of it, and hadn't had a TV since. I stared at my cell phone as I ate dinner at my

tiny kitchen table.

There was a video of a middle-aged man emitting a strange cry at a high school girl on the street, and another of two women screaming at each other on a train while pulling each other's hair. Then there was one in which someone scrutinized the various cosmetic surgeries they'd undergone, another that exposed the personal information of a boy who had licked the soy sauce dispenser at a sushi-go-round restaurant, as well as screenshots of texts sent back and forth between two people having an affair. People immediately commented on each of the posts. You couldn't see their names or faces or hear their voices, but they were definitely there. Time flew by as I gazed at the comments. With my phone in my left hand and my chopsticks in my right, I brought a hardened piece of meat to my mouth.

I heard the faint sound of a child laughing in the apartment next door, and my right hand stopped. The father and mother took turns speaking, and the child burst into a belly laugh.

I clicked off my phone screen and listened carefully. Sounds that I couldn't quite turn into words carried through the thin walls. When silence fell, I sipped the lukewarm miso soup left at the bottom of my bowl.

After taking a shower, I slapped some toner on my face and got under the covers of my futon before midnight.

I stared at the wood grain of the faded ceiling for a while, and pulled the covers up to my shoulders. When was it that my eyes had met those of the horse on the highway? I thought about it for a bit and realized that it had been just this morning. It felt like such a long time ago, but those eyes were seared into my mind. I slowly closed my own eyes. In the darkness, the contours of the black eyes began to melt.

I heard an exhale.

I opened my eyes. What was that sound? It wasn't the neighbors. It came from the kitchen.

Again, I heard what sounded like a sigh.

Someone was here. I sat up in my futon. The sound of lungs expelling air reached my ears through the frosted glass of the sliding door. I cautiously stood up and quietly slid open the door of the bedroom.

A horse stood in the dim kitchen.

The animal stood in front of the kitchen table, its eyes glimmering as they reflected the fluorescent lights outside the window. Also present—the

scent of hay and milk mixed together, just like before.

The horse sighed.

All other sounds vanished, and the only thing I could hear was its breathing.

The horse slowly swung its head around. It gave me a piercing look with its jet-black eyes.

The animal let out a low-pitched whinny. I sensed that it was calling for me.

One, two steps. I moved closer to the horse without making a sound and stretched my hand out toward its glossy black body. Although I wasn't yet touching it, I could feel its heat. Five, six, seven steps. The moment my shaking fingers made contact with the horse's powerful neck, I woke up.

I slowly sat up in my futon and raised the corners of my mouth to confirm that this was reality. A bright white sun illuminated my sunburned skin.

Somehow, I had been sleeping naked.

FOUR

The almost empty home-improvement retailer and the super-market, two chain restaurants side by side. Then the used car dealership and the pachinko parlor that had gone under. Once again, I was riding my red moped on the parched highway. The familiar landscape passed by me in the same order it always did.

The intersection between the automated consumer loan-application machine and the convenience store with the light blue sign came into view. It smelled faintly like the ocean. If I continued for a while on the highway that stretched straight ahead, I would hit the pier, and if I then took a right and continued along the shoreline, the shipyard would appear.

The traffic light turned red and I stopped my moped.

I glanced over to the left to see a narrow road leading into a field of lush green rice paddies. I remembered the jet-black eyes. I felt heat in my fingertips.

Someone honked from behind and I looked up. The light had turned green. Impulsively, I made a left. Once I passed the intersection, I twisted my wrists backward, picking up speed.

As I drove on the single road surrounded by verdant rice stalks extending toward the sky, the wind carried the scent of animals to my nose. I stared intently in the direction of the smell from my dream last night and eventually spotted a white wooden building. In front of it was the horse trailer that I recalled seeing before.

Once I saw the words “Mugikura Riding Club” on the side of the horse trailer, I stopped my moped. Beyond the white building, there was a field surrounded by a fence, as well as a stable.

Several horses were grazing. Still on my moped, I stared into the riding arena. Standing near a pair of fine horses with chestnut and dappled gray coats was the jet-black one.

Its glimmering eyes caught sight of me looking in.

Found you, it felt like the horse said again, knocking the breath out of me.

I got off my moped and approached the fence, drawn in by the horse's beautiful form. "This your first time?" a gray-haired man who was standing next to me without my noticing asked in a raspy voice. His face was a sunburned dusky red, and there were deep wrinkles in his neck. He was short but broad-shouldered, and despite using a cane, he appeared to have the vigor of a beast of prey.

"You wanna ride a horse?"

Me? Ride a horse? I raised the corners of my mouth at the sudden proposal.

Ignoring my forced smile, he goaded me, asking, "So what's it gonna be?" Searching for an answer, my eyes followed the black horse, walking gracefully in the arena.

"I wouldn't recommend that one to a beginner."

The man with the cane introduced himself as Mugikura, the head of the riding club. He suggested that I pick another horse, saying that the black one had just arrived and wasn't used to the grounds, and had a wild nature to boot. But seeing that I wasn't letting my eyes leave the black horse, he said, "Well, why the hell not," and led me to the clubhouse—which the main white building was apparently called—dragging one of his legs behind him.

Inside the clubhouse, which had the look of a European-style resort, the paint was chipped here and there. The tin roof of the stable was lopsided, and the fence surrounding the riding arena, which was the size of an elementary school playground, had been patched up all over the place. The riding club did not exude the luxuriousness one would usually associate with the words "horseback riding," and the lack of pretension made me feel at ease. This place, where horses grazed freely surrounded by a pastoral landscape, made me feel like I'd come to the rustic countryside of a foreign land.

As soon as we entered the clubhouse, Mugikura sank into an old leather

sofa and sighed deeply. With his leg the way it was, it must have been painful just to walk several dozen meters. Taking over for him, a petite old woman approached me.

"Is this your first time riding a horse?"

I hesitated, and she seemed to accept the silence as my answer.

"Well then, you must be excited." She smiled at me like a young girl, which prompted the corners of my mouth to rise. "Visitors ride for 12,000 yen. Since it's your first time, we'll rent out a helmet, jodhpur boots, and leg chaps free of charge."

The woman handed me a registration form. She seemed a little bit older than my mother, but with her straight spine, she had the youthful energy of a fawn. As I filled out my name on the form sitting on a sofa across from Mugikura, I heard the faint sound of a horse whinnying. The black horse was racing a chestnut horse and a gray horse in the riding arena, which I could see through a small window. Hastened by the sound of their play, I quickly filled out my address, phone number, clothing size, and shoe size.

A dozen or so award plaques and trophies were placed haphazardly by the bay window behind Mugikura. They were all faded from the sun and covered in dust. There was a fairly big fireplace in the back of the clubhouse. On the wall next to it hung a photo of a man straddling a large chestnut horse as it jumped over an obstacle. I was admiring the photo when the old woman whispered to me from behind, "That's my husband. It's a photo from when he won the national championship."

Dumbfounded, I turned my gaze back to find that Mugikura had fallen asleep on the sofa with his hands resting on his cane.

"He's like this now, but he used to be a really good equestrian. Any restless horse would fall under his spell. He suffered a major injury during a competition because he'd been pushing himself too hard."

Now, she told me, she didn't just work at the office of the riding club, but was also the stable-keeper. When I passed her the registration form I had filled out, she smiled like a little girl again and said, "This riding club is a small operation, so even though I'm an old lady, I've got to work hard."



After putting on a helmet and changing into boots, I gingerly stepped into the arena. When my heels sank into the soft soil, I was enveloped in a much

more intense animal smell. Perhaps out of vigilance, the chestnut and gray horses watched me from a distance. Mugikura, who walked ahead of me, still dragged his leg but moved along rhythmically in triple time. I followed after him, getting closer step-by-step to the black horse. Once Mugikura was standing next to the horse, he took the reins into his hands. I was finally going to ride it. Itching with excitement, I scurried toward the horse from behind.

"Be careful."

The moment Mugikura opened his mouth, the horse let out a high-pitched whinny, and kicked its hind legs high up toward me. Its hard hooves just barely missed the tip of my nose. Scared stiff, I fell backward. I was up to my wrists in soft mud.

From the ground, my eyes followed the horse's four legs, which were leaping about erratically. As if to reject me, the horse grunted forcefully and swung its head from side to side.

"Don't scare the poor thing," Mugikura said in a low, disapproving tone. The cautionary remark seemed to be directed at both me and the horse. "You could've died. Remember that horses are ferocious animals."

Mugikura pulled on the reins as he clucked his tongue, and stroked the neck of the horse, whose eyes had rolled back into its head. The horse's pupils were dilated and its ears had fallen backward, as though its heart had sealed shut.

"Today's not going to work, either for this horse or for you." Mugikura held out his cane toward me. "You've gone pale. Go back to the clubhouse and rest."

I grabbed on to the old man's cane and got up from the mud. The sensation of the horse's hooves barely missing my nose remained. My knees shook.

"Remember this: Horses reflect who we are."

Mugikura turned back toward the horse and began stroking its neck while whispering something in a low tone. As if under a magic spell, the horse's breathing slowed. When its flattened ears perked up again, Mugikura clucked his tongue. With the reins in his hand, he led the horse, which was now completely calm, toward the stable. That was when the horse stopped in its tracks, as if it had suddenly remembered something. Turning its head, it looked at me apologetically.

Staring at those eyes, I was filled with a reluctance to part with the horse, and before I knew it, I had grabbed Mugikura's arm. "One more chance," I implored. To communicate to the old man that I wasn't about to give up, I looked straight at him.

"Not today." Mugikura tried to discourage me, but I kept my eyes locked on his.

His milky pupils turned from me to the horse. He stroked the creature's neck and whispered something again. The horse perked up its ears, appearing to listen. To signal that his negotiation with the horse had wrapped up, Mugikura glanced over at me and nodded, saying, "Give it a try."

I put on my muddy helmet once again and approached the horse diagonally from the front.

"Touch the horse with the entire palm of your hand."

I stretched my hand out toward the horse's neck, and gently placed my hand on it. Maybe because it had thrashed about earlier, its body was hot and damp.

"Feel his breath."

I could feel the air that was inhaled through the horse's nostrils traveling through its entire body. Observing its pulse, I ran my hand downward on its neck. Its ears moved and its eyes darted about as though it was trying to identify who in the world I was.

"There's no use for half-hearted smiles here," Mugikura said. I realized that I'd been smiling at the horse out of a desire to be accepted. "Smiles only work on humans."

But that was how I'd lived my life so far. "Stop trying to be coy."

What was I supposed to do? I looked to Mugikura for help.

"Match your breath with the horse's. You're both animals."

Synchronizing my breath with the horse's, I inhaled and exhaled deeply. The scent of his body hit me, mixing with the smell of grass.

The horse's pulse settled down, and its rhythm began to match my own. Gradually, all other sounds fell away, until I could only hear the beating of his heart and mine.

His eyes turned toward me.

I was inside a deep well of pure jet black.

I extended my hand toward the tip of the horse's moist muzzle. When I

stroked it, a pink tongue protruded from the horse's mouth and licked my fingertips.

The heat in my fingers passed through my arms and reached my heart. My chest tightened, and tears fell from my eyes.

In that moment, I felt that I had been forgiven.

In lieu of saying thank you, I stroked the horse between his eyes. Then, as if to prompt me to get on his back, he lowered his neck.

"Are you sure?" I asked, and firmly grasping the reins, I placed my left foot in a stirrup. As if to encourage me, the horse let out a low whinny.

Mugikura held out his hand to support my back from behind me, but as if to block his hand, I kicked the ground with my right foot and sat down on the horse's back. My field of vision rose significantly, and a lush horizon stretched out in front of me. I felt the horse's large lungs contract between my legs. Mugikura waited for me to get settled in the saddle before he opened his mouth.

"Try kicking his belly with your calves."

I tapped the horse's belly with the insides of my legs, and the horse began to walk slowly. My inner thighs felt the heat of his blood flow. Clucking his tongue, Mugikura followed us. To reassure the old man, I nodded from atop the horse.

"Kick again, and this time loosen the reins a little."

I did what I was told, and the horse's neck, now freer, thrust forward. We picked up speed.

Dah da, dah da.

His powerful muscles swelled; his back swayed. I recalled the sensation of his hooves barely missing the tip of my nose earlier. This animal could destroy me at any moment. I realized that I was entrusting him with my life, and the trembling of my knees started up again.

It brought back a childhood memory of the first time I went into the ocean, led by the hand of my grandfather, who lived by the sea. He was floating on the surface of the water and I was shaking as I clung to his shoulders. "It's all right," he said. He then gently pulled my hands and dove underwater. Once we were inside the ocean, my body mysteriously grew lighter, and the tension I was feeling began to undo itself. When I nervously opened my eyes, fish of various colors were swimming about—blue, yellow, emerald green. Their scales glittered, illuminated by the sun's rays.

It was frightening but also beautiful, and soothing, even. It was as if my body was not my own.

Now, on the back of this horse, I was savoring the joy of letting go like I had back then.

"Open the rein in the direction you want to turn!" Mugikura yelled from behind. I suddenly realized a fence was right in front of me.

Right or left?

I hesitated, and looked both ways.

Okay, let's go left.

The moment I made the decision, the horse turned left. Without my saying anything or pulling on the reins, the horse turned left.

No, that wasn't it.

Just a moment *before* I decided to turn left, he had turned left.

Unwittingly, the corners of my mouth turned upward. The black horse knew what was inside my heart. He turned left in an arc and then continued to move straight.

Without uttering a word, Mugikura stood in the center of the riding arena, watching us. I was swaying on the horse's back, not completely understanding what had just happened, when we began to approach another fence.

Let's go right this time.

Once again, shortly before I had the thought, the horse turned right. "My goodness," I murmured in awe. It wasn't a coincidence.

"You're doing good, don't drop your gaze! Try tapping a bit harder with your legs."

Emboldened by Mugikura's words, I pressed into the horse's belly with my thighs. In response, the horse grunted and began trotting.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

My breath and the horse's fell in sync. The vibration of the animal's four legs treading on soil was soothing. My heartbeat overlapped with his footsteps, creating a pleasant rhythm. An ocean breeze swept through his black mane. The green rice stalks in the distance also swayed in the wind. A large cumulonimbus cloud expanded above us like a living creature. I felt a rush, as though I were riding through the sky.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

The horse was feeling my heartbeat. I sang to myself on his back as I

exhaled.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da.

Was this how I sounded? I was startled by my own voice, and a laugh bubbled up from inside me.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da.

As I repeated this phrase, the horse whinnied in a high-pitched tone, as if to match my breath. He was singing along with me. A beautiful sound, like the bright timbre of a trumpet, echoed across the field.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

When I sang a melody mimicking the horse's voice, he whinnied again in response. Our voices fed back to each other, creating music. Birds chirped as they flew through the countryside, joining us in a chorus.

Everything was as it should be.

He existed inside me, and I, too, existed inside him.



"That's about enough," Mugikura said. His voice brought me back to the moment. "Sit up straight, and pull on the reins."

When I did what I was told, he approached us and called out to the horse, "Whoa, whoa, whoa." The horse had been bounding through the riding arena, but now he came to a complete stop. It was as though Mugikura had cast another spell on him.

"Thank you," I said to the horse, and patted his thick neck. Having been in constant motion, he was breathing heavily through his nostrils, and his body was covered in white sweat. He smelled sweet and pleasant, like milk. Reluctantly, I raised my buttocks off the saddle.

Checking with one foot to make sure there was soft soil below me, I took the other foot out of the stirrup. My legs were wobbly from the knees down and felt like they weren't mine.

He pushed the tip of his muzzle into my neck, as if to tell me that he had enjoyed himself.

I stretched my hands toward him, cradling and stroking his muzzle.

Isn't this great?

I thought I heard a voice. I couldn't tell if it was mine or his.

"Is that a newbie?" a female voice purred, suddenly invading our precious time together. I turned around to find a woman approaching us, a

checkered jacket slung over her shoulders, a smile on her face.

She looked a bit older than me. Along with a frilly shirt that she'd undoubtedly had tailored to fit her voluptuous physique, she wore tight beige pants and shiny leather boots. Earrings the shape of horseshoes swung from her earlobes.

"You're beautiful."

I had no choice but to give way to the woman, who had unceremoniously inserted herself between the horse and me.

"You had a good time, didn't you?" The woman petted the horse's neck and nuzzled up to him as if she already knew him. She had a thick layer of foundation caked on her face and a youthful shade of vermilion on her lips.

"Mrs. Mikoshiba, you won't be able to ride this one today," Mugikura said, to which the woman responded with a fake smile.

"I know," she said. "He's gotta rest up since he's worked hard."

I stared at her hands, which were still petting the horse, and noticed a large diamond ring on her wrinkled ring finger.

"Hey, you, what's your name? Where did you come from?"

There was no way he was going to answer, but Mikoshiba kept talking to the horse. Mugikura responded instead.

"His name is Grande Strada." He'd come from a famous farm in Hokkaido, Mugikura explained, and as a thoroughbred with the papers to prove it, there had been high expectations that he'd do well as a racehorse. He'd been fast but had suffered frequent injuries, and had eventually stopped winning in national races, and then in regional ones. Following stints at various riding clubs, he found his way here. He was smart but unruly, and just yesterday, as he was being transported here, he'd suddenly run away and caused a disturbance.

"Oh . . . So, you're a wild one, are you? How cute," Mikoshiba said as she tried to pet the horse's muzzle. But he shook his head to avoid her hand and threw me a glance. His teary eyes were looking at me, wanting me.

Yesterday he had escaped from his trailer and stood on the highway. It was fate.

Had he not escaped, we never would have met.

FIVE

“You’ve ridden before, haven’t you?” Mugikura said when I returned to the clubhouse, after his wife had taught me how to wash my boots in front of the stable. He was sitting on a sofa, playing a shogi puzzle. He moved a knight forward. “Was it when you were a kid?”

I nodded. There was a tap—a knight flipped over in enemy territory.

“Your body remembers,” Mugikura said.

When I was in elementary school, I’d gone horseback riding with my father several times. I think it was over a period of two or three years, but I’d definitely retained some muscle memory.

At the time, my father’s business was doing well, and we certainly lived that way. My father, my mother, and I would go horseback riding in the summers and skiing in the winters. My memories of my father outside that period are blurry. After what happened, it was just my mother and me.

The handwritten flyer—which claimed that my father and our neighbor, the mother of one of my classmates, were having an affair—was posted on our building’s bulletin board around the time I graduated from junior high. Livid, my father went to the police, but they didn’t take him seriously, advising him to simply wait and see. From there, things gradually escalated. A photo of a man and a woman entering an apartment was copied onto the flyer and posted on the front door of every unit in our building. Rumors began to circulate in our neighborhood that the woman and my father had been seen at a restaurant together, or had been witnessed coming out of a shady hotel.

My father insisted that we ignore the entire thing as it was just a prank, but my mother, who had always been one to worry about how she was

perceived, was unable to tolerate the fact that people saw her as a woman who'd been cheated on by her husband. The man on the flyer did look a lot like my father from the back. This incident happened to overlap with the tanking of the Japanese economy, and my father's business had begun to suffer. Upon my graduation from junior high, my parents separated.

I then started going to a local public high school.

My mother and I left the building where we had lived with my father and moved into a smaller apartment, just the two of us. Three months in, around the time when we had finally adapted to our new lives, Miyoko came to visit.

Miyoko, who had been a classmate of mine in junior high, was the daughter of the woman who had been rumored to be my father's mistress. My mother happened to be at work, so I let Miyoko in. I poured some cold barley tea from the refrigerator into a glass and sat across from her.

"I did it," Miyoko, who for a while had been sitting quietly, looking down, suddenly confessed. With trembling fingers, she tried to grasp the glass of tea, but the wet glass kept escaping from her hand.

"You were prettier than me, and your family had more money than mine, and your father and mother got along . . ."

Miyoko finally grabbed the glass. She brought it to her mouth as she continued, "But my family was just me and my mom. And she was always busy with work. One Sunday, I really wanted to see my mom, so I went to the supermarket where she was working part-time. I found the manager fondling my mom's hips the entire time she was stacking eggs on a shelf. He was this bald man who sometimes came to our house. Maybe she had no choice because he was the store manager, but Mom had a fake smile on her face the whole time. I couldn't bring myself to go up to her. I just watched. That's when I saw you shopping with your father and mother, looking so happy. You guys were picking up different cuts of meat, trying to decide if you were going to have sukiyaki, yakiniku, or shabu-shabu. Meanwhile, we were always eating expired ready-made dishes that Mom brought home from work." Miyoko finished her barley tea.

"I went home and photocopied a picture that looked like it could've been your father and my mom and wrote that flyer. I wanted your parents to be too embarrassed to leave your house," Miyoko said, and raised her gaze to look at me. No words followed.

Why would you do that? I must have misplaced my words, too, since I couldn't speak, either. *Even if we became unhappy, that didn't mean you' d become happy.*

"I thought that things were going well for your family because you guys were cheating the system somehow. And I thought that things weren't going well for my mom and me because we were upright citizens," Miyoko finally said. "In the end," she murmured in a voice barely above a whisper, "the lie hurt me. And it just kept getting more and more painful."

It was lunchtime, and I could hear the jingle of a variety show coming from the television in the apartment next door. Without saying a word, I listened to the upbeat melody carrying through the walls. Why did my mother and all the adults around us buy into such a blatant lie? Everyone had taken the cheap words on a flyer made by a child at face value. Nobody cared if it was true. After Miyoko went home, all that was left in our small apartment was a sense of emptiness.



When the sun went down, my mother came home, went straight to the kitchen, and began preparing dinner. As she chopped cabbage, she cheerfully talked about a friend she'd recently made at work. And when she no longer had anything to chop, she said, "I'm thinking of divorcing your father," as though it was an afterthought. From behind, she looked like she was waiting for my response.

When I didn't say anything, my mother began sautéing thin slices of pork marinated in ginger and soy sauce.

"It all happened at just the right time," she said, as if to let the words get lost in the sound of the meat sizzling in the frying pan. "He was never home, and we didn't have anything to talk about anymore. It didn't make sense to stay together, did it?"

The pork began to brown. The fragrant smell of cooked soy sauce came wafting toward me. Staring at the drops of oil bouncing from the pan, my mother continued to speak.

"He's probably with someone else now, anyway. So, it all works out," she concluded, and placed the cooked slices of meat onto beds of thinly chopped cabbage.

I didn't tell my mother that the contents of the flyer had been made up.

I'd known that my mother had wanted to divorce my father for a long time. I'd also known that she didn't know how to initiate the divorce herself. So I said nothing, in order for her wish to come true.

Six months later, my mother received several million yen in assets from my father in the divorce settlement.

"Men can't be trusted" became my mother's trademark phrase. "Yuko, you better be careful," she said. But once I was in my thirties, she relentlessly pressured me to get married and repeatedly asked for grandchildren. In my mother's mind, demanding grandchildren and declaring men untrustworthy didn't seem to be at odds with each other. After I turned forty, though, she suddenly stopped talking about marriage. Without my being able to fulfill her wishes, my mother became ill two years ago. She was now in a nursing facility, and I lived alone in an apartment. I was constantly on a shoestring budget, what with my mother's nursing-care expenses and my own day-to-day life.



"How did you like it?" Mugikura asked, bringing me back to the present. When I didn't respond, he opened his rust-colored lips to say, "You're even more tight-lipped than a horse."

I grinned out of embarrassment.

"I think that one likes you," Mugikura said.

He likes me? My grasp on the fake leather rental boots grew even tighter.

"I could tell just by watching," he added, smirking as he took his gaze back to the shogi board. The flipped-over knight was now cornering the king. "You were the only one he let touch his muzzle."

Mugikura looked at me, exposing a gold tooth. His laughter filled the clubhouse. "You can come see him anytime," he said.

I felt my face relax.

I made a reservation for the following Saturday and left.

SIX

When I finished shopping at the nearby convenience store and returned to my apartment, my phone vibrated. Since the call was from a number I didn't recognize, I didn't pick up and continued putting tofu, natto, and yogurt in the fridge. When the plastic shopping bag was empty, I got a notification on my phone that I'd received a voicemail.

"Hello, this is Ushio. Are you all right? I heard that you weren't feeling well and took the day off. I thought about bringing you something but realized I didn't know where you lived. Haha. Maybe we can exchange addresses in case something like this happens ag—"

A beep cut Ushio off, and silence returned.

I was still shaky from the knees down, and my fingertips were hot.

I didn't feel like cooking, so I lay on the floor and scrolled on my phone.

"Everyone says that smartphones are bad for children, but I feel that kids' communication skills are improving because of them," a young male entrepreneur had posted on social media. "Human beings have never used words as much as they do now. There's no need to read books; simply scrolling on one's smartphone is enough IMHO."

"That's a dangerous way of thinking. Words don't belong to us anymore," rebutted a female psychiatrist. "The AI that is built into social media deliberately makes people pick fights with each other to attract viewers. We human beings must take back our words."

Each comment was followed by multiple responses: "Preach," "Here goes another conspiracy theory," "You're talking about yourselves lol," "Stop fighting."

The words that had been invented so that we could understand each other were teaching us that we could never truly do so. I felt pity for AI, which got a bad rap. It was just faithfully carrying out what it was ordered to do.

I put my phone down and closed my eyes.

Savoring the quiet, I inhaled and exhaled deeply.

As if matching my own breath, I heard the inhale and exhale of the horse.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

I sang to myself.

As I sang, I felt the pulse of his powerful back.



"Yuko? Are you all right?"

Someone behind me was shaking me by the shoulders. "Yuko?"

Fujii's voice brought me back to reality. *Dudududududu. Dudududududu*, a phone in the General Affairs Department rang. Because it was the job of female employees to answer the phone, it just kept ringing. Looking at my startled face, Fujii asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I said, nodding, and the phone stopped ringing. *Right, this isn't a dream.* When I raised the corners of my mouth to indicate that there was nothing wrong with me, Fujii laughed as if he were relieved, and glanced over to the side.

"Yesterday was a mess," he said.

Miu, sitting behind me, was single-mindedly fiddling with her cell phone. Her long nails, now painted pink, clicked against the glass surface of her phone. "Truly, this place cannot function without you, Yuko."

"We depend on you," Fujii said, and as he left, Miu rolled over to me on her chair.

"You won't believe how bad it got yesterday!" Checking to see that Fujii wasn't listening or watching, Miu continued, "Since you weren't here, Fujii came with me to hand out bento boxes. But he was totally useless. And then he tried to force me to deal with another complaint that we got."

In a show of sympathy, I gave Miu a wry grin. The phone in front of me rang again.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da.

As if in response, the sound of horse hooves echoed in my ears.



“Ms. Setoguchi? Um . . . Ms. Setoguchi?” Ushio, who was standing next to the red Sakamaki Shipbuilding Workers’ Union flag, called out as he fed old union member lists through a shredder. “Are you still not feeling well?”

I vigorously shook my head and resumed inputting data into our financial records: 900 yen for “Stamps,” 2,700 yen for “Social gathering transportation.” I didn’t remember how I’d gotten here, but I was at the union office.

“Why don’t you go home early today? If you want to work over the weekend on something due by the end of the month, let me know and I’ll come out to the office with you,” Ushio said, as if the phone call the previous night had never happened. He then stepped out to smoke. The glass sliding door seemed to have become warped again; after several pushes and pulls, Ushio finally managed to close it behind him.

Left alone in the office, I looked toward the gaps in the blinds. Atop the ore carrier that was in the process of being built, the neck of a crane moved slowly.

It had been a strange week, as if time had been stolen from me.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

The melody poured out of my mouth as I watched the crane. It turned into a silhouette as the sky darkened.

SEVEN

The sun, rising from beyond the highway, shone on my face as I sang to myself on my moped.

I'd barely been able to sleep last night. I felt like I'd been living in a dream, but all the while I was wide awake.

I passed by the nearly empty home-improvement retailer and the supermarket, then two chain restaurants side by side, one serving Japanese food and the other Western, then the used car dealership and the pachinko parlor that was no longer in business.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

My whisper gradually became a song. I saw the intersection now.

Without hesitation, I made a smooth left turn at the corner with the convenience store and its light blue sign. I drove down the narrow road through the rice paddies, and was welcomed by the smell of animals and Mugikura Riding Club.

Searching for the black horse, I stared intently into the riding arena past the fence.

Found him.

Inside the arena, the black horse was running. But someone was on his back.

Who could it be? Incredulous, I got off my moped and approached the white fence.

"She's amazing, isn't she?" sighed a woman in a gold-buttoned jacket, standing by the fence.

"She really is," agreed another woman in the same outfit, aiming her smartphone at the horse.

On the other end of their gaze, riding the black horse, was Mikoshiba.

"Just what you'd expect from Mrs. Mikoshiba," "She's such a wonderful match with that cutie," the women complimented her. When Mikoshiba raised her buttocks off the horse's back, he snorted and transitioned to a canter. I sent the horse a meaningful glance, but maybe he didn't notice, because he passed right by me.

"Apologies," said Mugikura as he walked up to me with his cane, a nylon jacket draped around his shoulders. "He can't take any more riders today."

The melody that had been playing in my head stopped. I was supposed to ride the black horse today. I looked straight at Mugikura with contempt in my eyes.

"Mrs. Mikoshiba's been riding him every day. Unless we let him rest, he's gonna get hurt again," Mugikura said in response.

The horse was breathing hard through his nostrils as he ran through the field. A whinny that sounded like a scream echoed throughout the arena.

He didn't want this. I had to help him. I was staring at him as if in prayer when Mugikura let out a bitter laugh. "That woman has a lot pent up inside her, so she overdoes it with the riding." Mikoshiba noticed that I was standing outside the fence, and waved with a smile.

I felt a tightness in my chest, and sour saliva began to fill my mouth. The taste stirred a nostalgia within me. I tried to pull the memory connected to it into my consciousness, but I couldn't, no matter how hard I worked at it.

Only after a full session of riding did Mikoshiba finally get off him. "Thank you, Grande."

After stroking his neck for what seemed like an eternity, she handed the reins back to Mugikura and left the riding arena. That was when my eyes met hers. I reflexively raised the corners of my mouth, but she looked the other way as if she hadn't noticed me and walked toward the clubhouse. Her hangers-on followed her as they showered her with praise: "You and that black horse are such a great match."

"Hey, you," Mugikura called out to me from the stable. "Over here."

He beckoned me inside, and I entered the stable, its roof slanted. The smell of horses' bodies and hay tickled my nose. Once my eyes adapted to the darkness, I saw the black horse in a stall in the back.

Mikoshiba must have ridden him for a long time. His belly contracted forcefully, and he looked like he was in pain just from breathing.

Mugikura took out an apple from one of the boxes stacked along the side of the stable. “Feed this to him.”

I took the apple from him with both hands. Seemingly entranced by the fruit’s red color, the horse moved toward me. “Do you want this?” When I held out the apple, he stretched his neck. “Go ahead, take a bite.”

He opened his mouth and crushed the apple between his teeth. A bright scent filled the stall, and the other horses in the stable grunted.

His teeth moved closer, seeking more.

Suddenly I felt pain, and then numbness in my fingertip. He’d left a tooth mark on my middle finger, which turned red and swelled up. In sync with the sound of his chewing, my pulse quickened. I had an urge to eat the same thing as him.

“That woman’s always wanting the next new thing,” Mugikura’s voice boomed throughout the stable. “That one, and that one over there, they’re both her horses.”

I turned to look right and left at the stalls in the back he was pointing at with his cane. A chestnut horse and a dappled gray horse, both well-groomed, stood unmoving in their respective stalls.

“She has both time and money on her hands. She drives a Porsche, and her competition wear is all from Hermès. She’s a sucker for everything horse-related,” he explained.

The sour taste filled my mouth again. In the dark stall, Mugikura turned his cloudy eyes toward me. “If she buys him, you won’t be able to ride him anymore,” he said.

My pulse sped up further. I had assumed that as long as I came here, I’d be able to ride him. The black horse pressed his muzzle against my body. He was still out of breath. His moistened eyes wanted me.

“He’s 4.5 million yen, and there’d be a 200,000-yen monthly boarding fee,” Mugikura said, as if he were talking to himself.

The horse was faintly trembling. My fingers, which were touching him, were also quivering.

“You know . . . we wouldn’t sell him to just anyone.”

I hugged my faded backpack as if to hide it. Was I deserving of him? I was a woman wearing a shirt with a stretched-out collar and dirty sneakers,

who came to the riding club on a moped that was ready to fall apart at any moment. Meanwhile, he was lustrous and majestic. I shoved the leftover piece of apple into the horse's mouth and quickly made my getaway from the stable.

"Ms. Setoguchi?" I heard Mugikura's wife call out to me from the clubhouse, but I ignored her and started up the engine of my moped.

I went full throttle on the narrow road through the rice paddies, and took a left at the corner of the automated consumer loan-application machine. I sped along the highway, where large trucks carrying earth and sand flung particles from their loads into the air as they came and went. I smelled seawater, and, beyond all the dust, saw the ocean.

When I got to the shipyard, I parked my moped under the rusty roof of the parking lot and rushed toward the main building. The lot was usually packed with bicycles and mopeds, but today, it was empty.

The shipyard was deserted and quiet, except for the sound of a steel plate being sawed far away. AI-controlled equipment, which had been adopted recently by the shipyard, continued to work even on the weekends. Sooner or later, people like me were going to become obsolete. I glanced up at the cranes lined up by the harbor. On days off, the old cranes didn't move, making them look like they were dead.

If she buys him, you won't be able to ride him anymore. I replayed Mugikura's words in my head. The sight of Mikoshiba riding the horse flashed before my eyes. With his reins in her hands, the horse pleaded with me for help with his black eyes.

Out of breath, I opened the lockbox on the wall of the General Affairs Department and took out my bike key. As I was about to leave the main building to head to the prefab union office, I heard the sound of an animal cry amid the noise of metal being sliced.

I stopped and looked around. I heard the cry again.

Searching for the source, I opened the door and went out to the hallway.

I walked down the long corridor, lined with a series of precise models of ships. There was a container carrier, an ore carrier, and a liquefied natural gas carrier on display, each of them nearly one meter in length. Because it was a Saturday, the main building's air-conditioning was turned off, and the air inside was hot and humid. Immediately my back became wet with sweat. The cries were coming intermittently from the reception office at the

end of the hallway. Silently placing one foot after the other onto the burgundy linoleum floor, I approached the office.

I gripped the doorknob and turned it slowly. Through the small gap that opened, I peered inside.

Something flesh-colored writhed.

I wiped the beads of sweat seeping out of my forehead and strained my eyes.

There was a half-naked man and a half-naked woman. When the man moved, letting out a doglike grunt, a cry escaped the woman's mouth. My breathing became erratic, blood rushing through my body.

Through a gap in the curtains, sunlight shone on Fujii and Miu, entangled together.

Miu was on all fours on a black leather couch with her mouth hanging open, moaning.

Behind her, Fujii rhythmically slapped his hips against her buttocks.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

Before I knew it, I was singing to myself in sync with their rhythm. My hand unsteady, I reached for my phone. I groped inside my pocket and somehow grabbed it, opened the camera app, and aimed the lens toward the flesh peeking through the gap in the door.

When I pressed the red button, a digital *ping* went off to indicate that my phone had started recording. I held my breath, thinking the two were going to notice me, but the sound had been drowned out by Miu's cries.

I stared into the wobbling screen at two animals intertwined with each other. Fujii was sweating from his back as he banged his hips against Miu's buttocks. Her pale thighs undulated.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da.

I closed my eyes. The feeling that I had when I touched the black horse came rushing back to me. The pulsing of his powerful muscles, the sweet animal scent. Overlapping with Miu's moans, high-pitched neighs echoed deep in my ears.

I forced the door open and stepped inside.

Seeing me barge into the room with a smartphone in one hand, Miu and Fujii were scared out of their wits. They crawled around on the floor trying to get away from me. "Stop it!" Miu's screech reverberated throughout the room. "It's not what you think," Fujii's voice trembled. I followed their

naked bodies around with my lens aimed at them. Laughter welled up inside me at the ludicrous sight. The sound of metal being sawed intensified. I continued to howl with laughter, and inside my head, the whinny of a horse chimed in.

Miu's scream brought me back to my senses.

Fujii slammed his hips into Miu's buttocks, and with that she arched her back and reached orgasm. The pair's heavy breathing dampened the air inside the reception office.

My right hand, still on the doorknob, was clammy.

With shaking fingers, I pressed the red button on my phone to stop recording, closed the door, careful not to make a sound, and left. I rushed through the hallway as if to escape the animals' cries. I exited the main building, hopped on my company-issued bike, and pedaled vigorously. I continued at full speed across the empty factory grounds. Feeling the wind blowing in from the ocean, I heard a horse's footsteps echoing in my ears.

Even after I arrived at the prefab shed, my heartbeat was still racing. "Utilities," "Phone bill," "Copying expenses," "Transportation fees"—I flipped through the receipts that I had gathered for my end-of-month accounting tasks, but I just kept looking at the numbers over and over again. I took a deep breath and turned on the computer to look at the ledger.

A number that I usually took no notice of jumped out at me.

685,002,174.

The opening balance in the union account was 685,002,174 yen.

He's 4.5 million yen, and there' d be a 200,000-yen monthly boarding fee.

I recalled Mugikura's milky eyes.

The horse's breath and footsteps echoed in my ears.

From the dark stable, he looked at me with pleading eyes.

It' ll be all right, I told him in my heart.

No one looked at these accounting records but me.

I could just borrow the money for now and return it right away. If I manipulated the books a little bit, nobody would notice. For nine straight years, I'd been doing a job that no one else wanted to do. I could get away with this. If I gave back all the money, what would be the harm?

I clicked on the keyboard to increase the number of social gatherings and tweaked the expense amounts. The man who had been secretary-general before Ushio had loved going to hostess bars, and the expense amounts for “Social gatherings” back then had been off the charts. Nobody would notice if social gathering expenses increased by several million yen. I checked to make sure that the opening balance looked about right, and got up from my chair. Crouching down in front of the safe that sat behind me, I turned the dial 0–9–2–3. A click and the heavy door of the safe was open.

In the back, there were wads of bills stacked on top of each other. When I tried to reach for them, my fingers trembled.

This was a crime.

Since I was young, my mother had instilled in me the importance of being “good.” I had never shoplifted, never even jaywalked.

I was not built to do this sort of thing.

Slumping down on the floor, unable to move, I heard the sound of an exhale right behind me. A puff of breath that smelled like hay and milk caressed my shoulder-length hair. Worrying that I would be pulled back into the dream, I didn’t dare turn around. I heard the sound of hooves clunking on the floor, his presence growing closer. I felt one more breath on my back — like a nudge.

In no time, the shaking of my fingers had stopped, and I reached into the back of the cool iron safe. I quickly pulled out six stacks of bills and shoved them into my nylon backpack. With my bag stretched out from the six hundred grams of extra weight, I made a hasty exit from the prefab shed.

Suddenly feeling like I was being watched, I looked around to find those gigantic cranes behind me, stretching high into the deep purple sky. I wasn’t used to seeing them so still; they looked like sleeping monsters. Trying not to wake them, I quietly began pedaling my bike.

PART II

EIGHT

Silk scarves in vibrant shades of orange, pink, and turquoise were displayed in the boutique, the interior of which was, by and large, a tranquil beige. Bags made of soft calfskin, each one easily topping 1 million yen, lined a wooden display case. The scent of lotus flowers wafted through the shop from a long, thin perfume bottle. A female sales associate with a silk scarf around her neck led me to the elevator in the back. My high heels, which I was not accustomed to wearing, sank into the thick carpet as we wove our way between an older woman holding a shiny crocodile bag and Asian tourists decked out in luxury-brand clothes.

We got off the elevator at a floor that overlooked a cluster of high-rise buildings through a glass-block wall. As I sat down on a large leather sofa, a glass of sparkling water was brought to me right away, the water fizzing on the tabletop. I brought the glass to my lips. Still wearing the camel coat that I'd bought at this boutique three months prior, I felt uneasy, worried that others would find out I was wearing a collared shirt and skinny pants from a mass retailer underneath my expensive coat.

When I first came here, the staff didn't take a second look at me. But as I went on to buy riding boots that cost more than 300,000 yen, followed by a crop, bridle, and horse blanket for at least 100,000 yen each, they came to remember me as a horse owner, and as of last month, I was assigned my own sales associate.

A tall male sales associate in a black suit arrived carrying an orange box about half his height. "This is the item you ordered. Would you like to take a look at it?"

When I nodded, the man placed the box on the table and smiled as he

opened it with his white-gloved hands.

"It's been finished beautifully," he announced.

I peered into the box, which was engraved with a horse and carriage. A gentle curve of glossy black leather lay snugly inside.

The smell of freshly tanned leather somehow resembled the scent of the black horse.

Three months had passed since the day I'd gone to see him with a heavy backpack.

At nine AM, Mugikura Riding Club was completely silent. There were no people inside the clubhouse, and no horses out in the riding arena. I entered the stable as if I had come to see a lover in secret. The horses were eating hay in their dark stalls. Surrounded by the sound of methodically chewing teeth and heavy breathing, I slowly approached his stall. Mugikura leaned on his cane with one hand, brushing the horse's body with the other. The black horse, his silhouette more beautiful than any other horse's, turned in my direction and gave a low whinny.

I've been waiting for you, he seemed to say. That was all the confirmation I needed. I wasn't making a mistake.

The edge of one of the stacks of bills that I'd thrown into my bag was poking me in the back. My fingers trembled, a sense of guilt and a bit of courage mingling together. I stretched out my hand, and he lowered his neck, placing his muzzle on my shaking fingers.

It was warm. I felt like I'd been forgiven for everything and sighed.

"I came for you," I told him, and he grunted. I could understand what he was feeling.

He'd been waiting for me this entire time.

Mugikura, who had been watching us closely, tossed the brush into a bucket and left the stable. I readjusted my back-pack and followed him. He walked fast in spite of his cane, and I struggled to catch up with him.

When the old man and I reached the clubhouse, we sat across from each other on the sofas. I handed him the money I'd brought with me: 4.5 million yen.

Mugikura removed the currency bands and licked his index finger, which bent outward from the first joint. With the photo from his professional equestrian days on the wall behind him, he counted out the 10,000-yen bills, flipping them with his fingers—one, two, three, four. I

listened to the faint nickers carrying through the window and watched the number 10,000 appear over and over again.

"What do you wanna do?" he asked. He'd finished counting the money.

"About what?" I said, raising the corners of my mouth.

"His name," he replied gruffly. Leaning on his cane as he stood up, he fetched a faded binder from a shelf next to the check-in counter and returned to his sofa. He passed me a pedigree certificate and name registration form from the binder. In addition to his pedigree, date of birth, and breed, the papers indicated that the horse's name was Grande Strada.

"Grande Strada." I repeated the name out loud, but it conjured up the image of a racehorse and felt ill-suited for his current life.

"The owner gets to name the horse," Mugikura said, as if he'd read my mind. I *get to name* my *horse*.

I didn't even know where to begin. Watching me stare a hole through the paperwork, Mugikura said, "At this rate, it's gonna take you forever." He picked up a ballpoint pen and crossed out "Grande" on the name registration form.

"Strada," Mugikura read out loud. "It means 'road ' in Italian."

Strada.

I mouthed the name.

"You two met on the highway, didn't you?"

I recalled the gallant manner in which the horse had stood in the middle of the road between the used car dealership and the former pachinko parlor.

Strada.

I felt I had been led here by fate once again, and replayed the name over and over in my head.

With a "Strada" nameplate in hand, I reentered the stable with Mugikura.

"Hey, you, have you been waiting for me?" Mikoshiba stood in front of the black horse's stall, stroking his neck with too much familiarity for my comfort. She looked our way, having heard our approaching footsteps. When she saw me, she gave me a half smile in lieu of saying hello, and moved her gaze over to Mugikura.

"Mr. Mugikura, I've come to a decision." A coquettish voice spilled out of her vermilion lips.

I drew a sharp breath, anticipating what she was going to say next.

Mugikura stood next to me with his eyes closed, waiting for her to make her request.

If Mikoshiba said that she wanted the horse, would we have to compete against each other for him? She would definitely put down more money than I already had. Would I be able to win if it came to that? The thought of sticking my head back into that chilly safe and grabbing more stacks of cash filled me with dread.

As if to mock me as I turned pale, Mikoshiba's vermilion lips opened again. "This cutie right here . . . I want to—"

Mugikura's raspy voice cut her off. "This one's been bought by Ms. Setoguchi."

"Oh, really." With a fake smile, Mikoshiba slowly turned toward me. Unable to meet her eyes, I focused my vision on the gold horseshoes that hung from her earlobes.

"So, Yuko, he got you, too?" Mikoshiba asked. I responded with a faint smile.

"Horses make us dream," she continued, still stroking the black horse's neck. But now the manner in which she was stroking him was already somewhat distant. He shook his neck, obviously wanting to get away from her. His jet-black eyes caught sight of me. A vision of the black horse standing in my kitchen flashed before my eyes.

"Isn't that right, Mr. Mugikura?" she murmured. With that, Mikoshiba turned on her heel and said, "Let's go, Alec." She pulled open the stall door and led her chestnut horse out of the stable.

"Congratulations," Mugikura said, showing his gold canine tooth as he smiled. "From today onward, this is your horse."

My horse.

When Mugikura attached the new nameplate to the entrance of the stall, Strada moved his head toward me. He grunted, seemingly to tell me that he had been waiting for me all along.

"Strada." I called him by his name for the first time.

The black horse nickered in response, as if to let me know he liked his new name.

That very moment, all the horses in the stable whinnied. The sound rang throughout the stable like a chorus of brass instruments. Strong rays from the morning sun shone into the darkness, as if the horses' neighs had called

the light inside. It was so bright that I couldn't help but squint. A bright white beam shone on Strada and me.

I took him out of his stall and climbed into his saddle. When I pushed his belly with my feet, he raised his head high and began to walk.

When I loosened the reins, we accelerated from a walk to a trot. I felt the hot blood circulating through his body against my inner thighs. Strada's back muscles swelled, and the light sound of his hooves reached my ears.

The horse's robust inhales and exhales synchronized with my breath, and a melody spilled out of my body. Seemingly in response to my song, Strada let out a high-pitched whinny.

I could feel the looks of envy from Mikoshiba on her chestnut horse, and from her hangers-on riding their worn-out horses. Pride and joy intensified our song.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

His joy came spilling into my heart. *Let's stay together forever.* Just moments before I put it into words, the feeling came from him and circled through our hearts. As though it had been preordained from the start, we became one.

I'd finally found something I could believe in. Something that would never betray me. I lifted my buttocks and put my arms forward.

Let's go.

Our voices overlapped with each other in our hearts. Strada grunted powerfully and transitioned from a trot to a canter.

We put our voices together and sang.

NINE

I snapped back to reality at the sound of trains passing by.

On the overpass visible through the glass-block walls, a blue train and a green one passed each other in opposite directions.

“We were originally founded in the nineteenth century as an equestrian workshop, and only offer this item to our most special customers.”

The white-gloved sales associate took out the just-finished saddle from the orange box and placed it on the table with great aplomb, like a magician. There was a line of white stitching on the smooth leather, which formed a sultry curve.

I stroked the saddle along its stitches. This glossy black would really suit him, I thought.

This would make him happy.

Mikoshiba used saddles from this brand on both her chest-nut horse, Alec, and her dappled gray horse, Rose. I had been bothered by the fact that Strada’s horse tack looked much shabbier than those that Mikoshiba used on her horses when we were running through the arena side by side. Resenting that, I’d started buying high-quality horse tack piece by piece. Now I finally had the saddle. I wanted to rush to Strada and saddle him right this very moment.

“How about a bag for you, too?”

Taken off guard by the sudden question, I raised the corners of my mouth.

A female sales associate who had been on standby next to me continued, “ You see, we have a bag made from the same leather as this saddle.” She extended her arms, in which she held a black leather bag with

a gold lock and key. It resembled one of the bags in the display case, but was a size larger.

"It's one of our trademark designs, and it was originally made for carrying saddles in. Please, try holding it," she said as she handed me the bag. In the mirror before me was a reflection holding a bag made of the same leather as the saddle.

"Beautiful. It suits you well."

I was exhilarated, but at the same time felt an indescribable sense of shame. What kind of woman goes around triumphantly carrying a bag matching her horse's saddle? Wouldn't she be seen as some kind of joke? I was also hesitant about spending money on myself.

"This bag has become a rarity these days. But since you've purchased a full set of horse tack from us, we're delighted to make you this offer." The female sales associate looked at me and smiled as if she were giving me the encouraging nudge I needed. I smiled back, and placed my hand on the collar of my coat to hide the cheap shirt I was wearing underneath.

As I stared at the smooth black leather bag, my pulse quickened and a sigh slipped out of my mouth.



". . . guchi. Ms. Setoguchi."

Hearing Ushio's voice, I turned around. "Something's not right."

I hadn't noticed, but Ushio had opened the door of the safe behind me and was peering inside. I drew in my breath and stared hard at the balding spot at the back of his head.

"I don't know why," Ushio's low voice echoed inside the safe, "but there's a lot less cash in here than there used to be."

Ushio turned around and our eyes met. I responded with a smile expressing both agreement and befuddlement.

"There's no need to hurry, but could you withdraw some money from the union account and restock the safe? We have a lot of reimbursements to settle."

Ushio stared at me as I exhaled and nodded. I couldn't stand to continue looking him in the eyes and shifted my gaze toward the red Sakamaki Shipbuilding Workers' Union flag. A corner of the flag had become detached from the wall and was drooping.

“See you on Monday, then,” he said.

Ushio gathered his things, picked up his threadbare leather bag, slid open the thin glass door of the office, and stepped out. After he pushed and pulled it several times, the poorly installed door finally closed. When silence fell on the office, I looked toward the cranes through the gaps between the blinds. Five iron necks in a row slowly moved up and down as though they were horses grazing.

I stood up, crouched by the safe, and unlocked it, reciting the lock combination to myself as if it were a mantra. Inside, there were only three stacks of bills left of the twenty or so that had been there before.

In addition to the amount I’d needed to make Strada mine, what with vaccines, light exercises, massages, veterinarian fees, shoeing, and luxury horse tack, I’d spent a lot of money. When I thought about what I could do for him, I didn’t hold back. In addition, I had to continue paying a monthly boarding fee. Before I realized what I was doing, I had spent most of the money that had been in the safe.

This was going to be the last of it.

As I told myself this, I grabbed two stacks of bills. That was when I heard, “Ms. Setoguchi?”

I held my breath and turned my head.

From the half-open door, Ushio was looking in.

“Um . . . Would you like to have dinner?” Behind him in the light purple sky, I could see a crane stretching its neck. “Or do you have plans?”

With my hands still holding the stacks of bills inside the safe, I nodded twice.

“We should change the combination to the lock soon, shouldn’t we?” he said.

Ushio glanced into the darkness, the depths of the wide-open safe pulling his gaze in like a black hole.

“Good night,” he said, and left without closing the door. The sea breeze blew in and rustled the yellowed blinds.

When the smell of iron, like blood, reached my nose, I slumped to the floor. I had to give back the money soon, return everything to the way it was before. I placed the stacks of money I had grabbed back where they had been inside the safe, and closed it.

The iron door felt heavier than usual.

A chain sushi-go-round restaurant, a ramen shop, a private tutoring school, and a funeral home. The landscape along the highway passed me by in a dusky blur.

The traffic light turned red at an intersection between a convenience store with a green sign and a light vehicle dealership, and I stopped my moped. The blue sign above me indicated that I'd entered the city next to the one where I lived. I'd been driving for about forty minutes since I left my apartment, but the landscape along the highway was unchanging, as if I'd been going in a loop.

I recalled an animated film I saw when I was a child.

In the movie, a group of high school students were spending the night at school to prepare for their school festival, which was set to take place the following day. The rambunctious students continued their preparations for hours and hours, but no matter how long they waited, the school festival never began. They eventually came to realize that they were living in a loop, apparently inside a dream they were being shown by a specter. One can start over in dreams, the specter explained. It went on to admonish the students who tried to escape the loop, telling them that as long as they kept living inside the dream and never woke up, it would be the same as living in reality. So why not just enjoy it?

Horses make us dream. I suddenly recalled Mikoshiba's entranced voice, and the sight of the black horse standing in the middle of the highway flashed across my mind.

The life I was living right now—was it reality or just a dream that Strada was showing me?

TEN

After continuing on my moped for a while, I began to pass flatlands tightly packed with solar panels. In the middle of the green landscape, there was a white square building, the likes of which one might see on a flyer for a newly built apartment building.

I parked my moped in one corner of the parking lot. Past two sets of automatic doors, there was a lounge with a linoleum floor the color of grass. It smelled like animals, like the stable. In the center of the room, surrounded by a modest assortment of Christmas decorations, about twenty seniors in wheelchairs were gathered together like sheep, their backs hunched over, staring at a single television screen. I took a good look, and when I found a particularly small back, I called out, “Mom.” But she didn’t turn around.

“I’ll bring her over,” whispered a female staff member who recognized me. She waded into the flock of sheep, and pushed my mother’s wheelchair to a bench in the corner of the lounge.

“Is my food ready yet?” my mother said as soon as she saw my face.

“Ms. Setoguchi, you just ate,” the staff member replied with a smile, crouching next to my mother.

Seeming unconvinced, my mother furrowed her brow. “I’m hungry.”

“I’ll bring some snacks, then,” the staff member said, and headed toward the office. I dipped my head, then faced my mother.

“You’ve got yourself some awfully nice gloves,” my mother said, staring at the gloves I’d bought at the luxury-brand store. Since she’d started living at this facility, my mother rarely looked me in the eyes. “Mrs. Hashizume stole my wallet,” she said. “What should I do?”

“Calm down,” I told her, but she ignored me, attempting to force her wheelchair out of its position next to the bench.

“She stole my wallet from me.”

I held on to her wheelchair, but she was fired up. “Mom, you have money in the bank, don’t you?” I tried to soothe her like a child, but my mother only raised her voice.

“Why would anyone steal?”

Alarmed that our conversation had seemingly turned into an interrogation, I felt the corners of my mouth unwittingly curl up. Seeing me smile, my mother stopped moving.

“Yuko?” Her eyes—the borders of the pupils and the whites unclear—peered at me as if they were trying to confirm who I was.

“Yes, it’s me, Yuko.”

“Oh, you’re already home from school? A bit early today, no?”

“Mom, I need to borrow some money from you,” I whispered. “Just a little bit.” I knew she must have some money left in the bank from the divorce settlement.

“Yuko, when are you getting married?”

“Don’t—” I began to say, and bit my tongue. If I rebutted, this conversation would never end.

“I really want grandchildren.”

“I’m sorry.” The apology that I’d repeated over and over again naturally came out. “You have money in the bank, right? I need money.”

I pleaded with my mother, but she looked away and murmured, “I wonder where my wallet went.”

“I’m telling you, no one stole it!” I exclaimed, unable to tolerate it any longer.

My mother looked at me in surprise. After falling deadly silent, she said in a voice barely above a whisper, “That flyer was a lie.”

She brought her face close to mine as I sat there, flabbergasted. In my mother’s glass-like eyes, I thought I saw the black horse.

“I knew. The flyers accusing your father of cheating on me? Miyoko made all that up. I always knew.” My mother’s trembling voice stirred my memory of Miyoko drinking barley tea out of a glass at our apartment. I wondered when my mother had found out. “But it all happened at just the right time. We didn’t have anything to talk about anymore.” My mother

uttered the same words that she'd said to me that day in the kitchen. "Yuko, I'm sorry I never told you." Once she'd confessed her secret, tears overflowed from her gray eyes, slowly falling through the countless wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. "You completely stopped talking to me . . . and I was so lonely."

If I had told my mother the truth in the kitchen that day, what would have happened? At the very least, my mother and I might have been able to continue sharing our feelings with each other. I should've just opened up to her. But it was too late now. My mother's gaze began to wander again.

"All I want is for you to be properly happy."

What did being "properly happy" mean? I didn't know. I glanced outside at the field of solar panels. Wherever I looked, the landscape looked familiar. I felt as if I were looking straight into my future.



As I traced the landscape I had passed earlier in reverse, the sun was beginning to set.

Between the brightly lit automated consumer loan-application machine and the convenience store with its Christmas lights, I was stopped by a red light. I could no longer hear the melody that had been playing in my head.

Feeling melancholy, I turned my handlebars to the left and drove down the narrow road through the rice paddies. The chorus of birds failed to reach my ears, and I couldn't smell the sweet scent of animals. I parked my moped in front of the somber-looking Mugikura Riding Club, only to find that someone was riding Strada in the arena.

Was he getting the light exercise he needed for maintenance? I took a good look at the rider.

For a horseback rider, he had unusually pale skin. He had a narrow, high-bridged nose.

The daintiness of his facial features was at odds with his thick neck, which was proof that he was an athlete. He looked like he could be in his early thirties. He wore a white nylon jacket, riding pants that tapered at the hem, and leather boots. Strada seemed to be bounding unhindered through the arena with him on his back. Even from afar, it was obvious the rider was highly skilled.

I moved closer to the arena, as if pulled in by an unseen force.

Mugikura came round behind me. “Shintani!” he called out toward the young man.

Deftly manipulating the reins, the man approached us on Strada’s back.

“You have a beautiful horse here. He’s smart, and he seems to have good intuition.” Shintani stroked Strada’s neck like a seasoned pro. I felt happy, like I was the one being complimented.

Strada saw me and let out a low whinny, stretching his muzzle toward me.

“You two get each other, don’t you?” the young man murmured to Strada. I broke into a smile.

Mugikura introduced the young man to me. His name was Atsushi Shintani. He was a jockey turned show jumper, and in the past had trained horses that had competed in the Olympics. Mugikura had decided to put him in charge of light exercises and training at his riding club.

“I figured a handsome horse like Strada and a handsome guy like Shintani would probably work well together,” Mugikura said, exposing his gold tooth when he laughed.

“Yuko, would it be all right if I rode him for a little bit longer?” Shintani asked.

As soon as I nodded, Shintani shouted “Ya!” and Strada leapt into a run. His muscles contracted, and in no time, he was at top speed. They headed straight toward the obstacle in the center of the arena. White dust floated in the air like smoke.

Wait, can he actually jump over that? I held my breath and observed Strada’s grand figure. Right in front of the obstacle, Shintani raised his buttocks and leaned forward.

“Whoa,” I whispered.

Strada’s muscles swelled, his chiseled legs folded, and he sailed over the hurdle.

My five senses, which had been frozen over, melted, and tears fell from my eyes. Colors returned to everything I beheld, and the scent of dry soil tickled my nose.

Circling the arena, Strada once again headed in the direction of the hurdle. As though gravity had vanished from the riding arena, his powerful black body soared into the air and over the jump. As if in slow motion, his long tail curved like a bow, and his thin legs landed softly on the soil.

“Impressive stuff,” I heard an awestruck Mugikura say behind me.

Strada ran and jumped as if he had no idea how much he amazed us. I felt jealous of Shintani—Strada was showing him a side of himself that he’d never shown me—but from inside that jealousy bubbled up a mysterious desire.

After executing two, three more elegant jumps with Strada, Shintani returned to me.

“I’ll ride him.” He smiled, the sunset at his back, his breath undisturbed by physical exertion. Confused by this declaration, I raised the corners of my mouth.

Mugikura stepped in to explain. “Shintani means that he’ll compete with Strada and help him win competitions.”

I was still flummoxed when Shintani said from Strada’s back, “He has what it takes.”

Strada, winning? My heart sang at the possibility of something I had never even dreamed about. Strada looked straight at me, breathing heavily.

I want to win, his black eyes pleaded.

Strada, who had suffered setbacks as a racehorse, could step into the limelight in show jumping. Together, he and I could start our lives over again.

“What do you think, Yuko?” Shintani directed his almond-shaped eyes at me.

Before I could say anything, Mugikura started laughing. “There’s only one answer, isn’t there?”

ELEVEN

The narrow supply room was overflowing with threadbare work clothes, scuffed-up protective boots, dust-covered skull-caps and respirators. The smell of oxidized male sweat and iron was stifling.

I picked up a helmet with a "Safety First" cross symbol off the floor.

"Gross." Pinching a welding jacket between her thumb and index finger, Miu frowned. "Why do we have to clean up after nasty grown men?"

I smiled in agreement, and picked up a helmet with a chipped brim. It was the purview of the General Affairs Department to check what supplies needed replacing (and to then actually replace them), but that meant that we effectively tidied up after the men who worked at the shipyard's factories.

"Fujii doesn't ever do this kind of stuff. The state of this place, he has no idea!" Miu said. "I'm going to sue the company for gender discrimination!" She pouted as she threw tattered work clothes into a trash bag.

Next to her, I lined up helmets on a shelf and confirmed how many of them there were.

As usual, Miu and I had decided our roles without any discussion.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you. They're about to push that *thing* on me," Miu said. Miu often omitted specifics when she spoke. She expanded further, sensing that I had no idea what she was talking about. "They're trying to make me do union accounting."

"What?" I reacted without meaning to. I dropped a helmet on the floor, and a pathetic, empty sound echoed throughout the room.

"But you've had that job forever, right?" As I hastily picked the helmet up off the floor, Miu pouted again, saying, "They probably think I have too

much time on my hands. How rude."

I faced the wall and gently placed the helmet on the shelf.

"Is the work hard?" Miu asked coyly, her voice reaching my left ear. Without looking away from the helmets on the shelf, I put on a vague smile. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her dragging a trash bag packed to the brim with dirty supplies. When she reached the door, she dropped the bag and sighed. "I really don't want the job. I just know I won't be any good at it."

For nine years, I had never been told to give up my position as the union accountant.

There was no one to take over, anyway. It was a job that had very obviously been forced on me. No one would've denied that that was the case. Could it be that Ushio was spreading rumors?

"But it would be fun if you and I could use union money to go on trips. Do you think that would count as part of our benefits?" Miu asked.

I had withdrawn money from the union account on several occasions, taking half of it home and putting half of it in the safe. The amount of money in the safe was now back to what it had been before. I was the only one who handled the cash-books and passbooks; no one else ever saw them. But if Miu came to work on accounting at the union, things would change. If she looked closely at the passbooks or the ledger, she would realize that something was off.

I stepped on something soft, and looked under one of my pumps to find a leather glove mottled black with oil stains. I picked it up—it smelled like rusted iron. I began to feel nauseated, the way I used to when I got nosebleeds, and quickly covered my nose and mouth with my hand.

I had to get out of this room.

Throwing the glove that smelled like blood in the trash bag, I grabbed a harness that was lying on the floor. A large carabiner secured to one end of the rope swung like a pendulum and struck the concrete wall, producing an irritating clang. I tried to place the harness on a hook on the wall, but noticed that the rope was tangled. Unable to hide my frustration, I pulled on the harness with brute force, only for the knot to get even tighter.

"Maybe I'll secretly buy myself a puppy. I've wanted another toy poodle. I should be allowed some compensation since I'm going to be stressed out from this new role, right?" Miu spoke as if she were defending

someone else, but seeing my stiff expression, she laughed bitterly, saying, “I guess that’s a ‘no.’” She then stood next to me and gently took my hand. “The thing is, I trust dogs. They don’t betray me like men do, and they understand me before I’ve even said a word.”

Miu took the tangled rope from me as I stood there, speechless.

“It’s funny. My dog comes to me when I’m feeling lonely. Somehow, he always knows.” Miu’s nails, painted pink, proceeded to undo the knot that I had tightened. I stared at the skillful way her fingers moved. “I love that we live in a world where it doesn’t take that much money to get yourself a pet,” Miu murmured, and smiled at me, seeking agreement.

TWELVE

The parking lot had a splendid view of snow-covered Mount Fuji, and it was crammed to the gills with high-end cars. About one-third of those cars had some kind of horse logo on them. Walking among them made me feel like I was in a stable.

I made my way through the parking lot, climbed up a short flight of stairs, and suddenly there was a vast show jumping arena stretching out before me. A dry northerly wind blew and raised a plume of yellow dust over neatly groomed soil.

Several dozen horses paced the warm-up arena, closed in by a white fence, each of them tracing tracks in the soil and repeatedly jumping over obstacles. There were horses in colors that I usually didn't see—seal brown, white, dark chestnut. But every one of them was glossy and obviously well taken care of. Despite the presence of so many horses, I could barely detect the animal smell that usually enveloped our riding club.

As if by agreement, all the riders wore black riding helmets, tight jackets, white shirts, riding culottes, and leather boots. I was intimidated by these dignified riders and their downright regal horses.

In the stands surrounding the arena, the heads of other riding clubs watched how the horses were doing with grim expressions on their faces. They were all men with sunburned skin and sharp features who gave off a Mugikura-like energy. The audience, who seemed to be mostly family members of the riders, were smartly dressed, and even at first glance, it was obvious that they were well-to-do.

It brought me back to elementary school field days. While everybody else was giddy with excitement over the chance to show off in front of their

families, field days were extremely uncomfortable days for me. Footraces clearly distinguished winners from losers, and as a short, slow runner, I felt utterly pitiful.

I brought up the corners of my mouth in an attempt to buoy my spirits.

Today was going to be great. I wouldn't be making a fool of Strada. I'd made sure that my clothes and Strada's horse tack were all from that luxury brand. We fit right in with this distinguished group.

"Yuko!"

A man with long limbs sheathed in a black riding jacket approached me. Shintani looked like he could be an actor. The eyes of all the women who had come here to root for their own horses suddenly turned to him. I had bought him a full set of luxury riding clothes.

"I've been waiting for you. So has Strada," he said, leading me counterclockwise around the show jumping arena. I could feel all the women's eyes on me, the mysterious stranger accompanied by the handsome equestrian.

Shintani led me by the hand as we walked up a slope behind the arena, where we passed by a black horse descending the slope. Its body was much larger than Strada's, and its mane was braided in the most intricate way, as though it were some kind of celebrity.

"That horse won last time," Shintani whispered in my ear.

The horse and its young rider, similarly dressed all in black, both looked at me as if to appraise me.

Do I really look that out of place?

"He's probably not going to do too well. Seems too restless."

I was startled by Shintani's remark.

"Everyone's going to freak out when they see the shape Strada is in today." He smiled, showing off his perfectly aligned teeth.

There were five stables, and several horses that had already finished competing were getting their hooves washed and picked out front.

"Alec, what happened out there?" Mikoshiba, completely covered in mud, was wiping the corner of her eye with a dirty gloved hand as she brushed her chestnut horse. Shintani leaned toward me again.

"Mrs. Mikoshiba fell off her horse while she was jumping. Alec suddenly went a little wild."

The chestnut horse grunted and shook his head fiercely, violently

slamming his hooves onto the concrete floor.

"I'm sorry, Alec. It's because I wasn't any good, right? I'm so sorry." Mikoshiba tried to nuzzle up against the horse's neck, but seemingly rejecting the gesture, Alec's ears fell back and closed shut.

"Don't worry about it," "It's not your fault," Mikoshiba's hangers-on took turns reassuring her.

"It kind of looks like she's going through a breakup . . . doesn't it?" An irreverent voice spoke softly into my right ear. The corners of Shintani's thin lips had turned upward. It was infectious, for the corners of my mouth were doing the same when my eyes met Mikoshiba's.

"What are you looking at?" As if her tears had all been an act, she was suddenly expressionless as she looked at me. "Is this funny to you?"

"No . . ." Shintani answered for me.

"Good for you, Shintani. You finally found yourself a sponsor." With mud still on her cheek, Mikoshiba gave us a fake smile.

"What are you talking about?"

"Everyone knows. Come on, how much are you getting paid?"

Mikoshiba's hangers-on looked at me coolly. Mikoshiba's gaze was directed at Shintani, but her words were directed at me.

Mikoshiba's cold words brought the past three months back to me. An arena in the back of Mugikura Riding Club that hadn't been in use was converted into a show jumping ring. The broken fence was replaced with a new one, and a variety of obstacles were installed. Compared to the main riding arena, which was patched up and weather-stained, everything in the new arena was unnaturally white. I paid whatever amount I was told was needed for the renovations. Shintani trained Strada three days a week in the arena built with my donations, and I rode him on the weekends.

One day, as I walked past the clubhouse, I happened to overhear one of Mikoshiba's hangers-on through a partially open window.

"It's like he's a host from a host club, and she's a patron."

"I was thinking the exact same thing," said the other one. "I mean, he is cute." "I guess she's the type to pick both horses and men by their looks."

The two women laughed.

"Stop it, you two. That's disrespectful toward Yuko." I heard Mikoshiba's voice traveling through the window, too. "She must be doing something right. Myself, I always seem to go for the uggos. Maybe I should

take a page out of her book and find myself a *professional*."

The women came undone with laughter, and I bristled. They had no idea what they were talking about. They were just trying to distract themselves from their own unhappiness by making fun of those who went after what they wanted. They were no different from Miyoko, who had distributed those fake flyers, or the people who spread negativity online with their cell phones. Looking down on others wasn't going to make them any happier.

"Yuko, let's go."

Shintani grabbed my arm and pulled me into one of the stables.

"Did I upset you?" Mikoshiba called out. "I'm sorry, the whole sponsor thing is just a joke, please don't take it seriously!" Trying to shake off her voice, I kept walking, moving farther into the dim stable.

The horses still waiting for their turn grunted fiercely at the sight of me. Exposed to the cold air, my breath turned white. Searching for Strada, I continued farther and farther down the long corridor of the stable.

I heard a low whinny from the darkness in the back, a response to my familiar footsteps. Strada could always tell that it was me from my gait, and called out to me before I could see him.

I'm here.

I followed Shintani, forcing myself to stay calm. Those black eyes caught sight of me in the darkness.

Whenever he gazed at me, my pulse quickened and a sigh escaped my mouth. My breath turned white, hovered in the darkness for a moment, and then disappeared.

Mugikura, wearing a nylon jacket slung over his shoulders and leaning on his cane with one hand, stood next to Strada, whispering something as he placed the bridle over the horse's head with his other hand. Compared to other horses, who were stomping their front hooves or shaking their heads with anticipation, Strada was calm, almost oddly so.

"You got him good and ready, Shintani," said Mugikura, who had finished tacking Strada up.

In the face of these rare words of praise from Mugikura, Shintani was humble. "You should be praising Strada, not me. He was trained to run fast, but now he has total control over his speed, and he's such a graceful jumper. He really is talented."

"Maybe he'll even get a blue ribbon." Mugikura laughed in his raspy

voice, and patted Strada's belly.

"It's all thanks to Yuko, who believed in us," Shintani said, his eyes smiling.

The nasty feelings I'd had just a few moments ago were gone. Strada chimed in with a grunt, as if to express his happiness. We put our faces close to each other and smiled.

Good luck.

I took out the apple slices that I'd brought with me in a Tupperware container from my backpack.

Strada licked both the apple slices and the fingertips that held them, positioned the fruit between his teeth, and chewed.

The smell of his body, the smell of the apple filled my nose and my heart.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

The song returned to my ears. Our melody shook my eardrums.



Strada, who had entered the warm-up arena, contracted his body and bounded effortlessly. It was obvious that the other horses that were warming up were intimidated by him.

I sang while I watched Strada's gallant figure from outside the fence. When a voice came on the loudspeaker announcing that it was just moments till Strada's turn, he let out a long whinny. He was announcing his desire to win.

With Shintani on his back, Strada entered the show jumping arena. I sat at the very front row of the stands, staring at his four legs moving rhythmically. The MC announced the start of Strada's turn. Shintani pressed down on the stirrups and brought the reins forward, and Strada sprang into action. In a canter, Strada ran around the oval arena and approached the first obstacle. I followed him with my eyes as if in prayer. The black leather gloves that I'd bought at that boutique were drenched in sweat.

Shintani lifted his buttocks off the saddle. Strada's muscles swelled; he kicked, scattering soil, and his front legs lifted off the ground, followed by his hind legs. His body created a beautiful arc, like a whip cracking through the air, as he sailed over the green hurdle.

"Beautiful," I uttered to myself without realizing it. The audience began

to cheer for Strada from the stands as he completed his graceful leap.

Hearing the applause, the riders circling the warm-up arena all turned to look at Strada. Behind me on the grass, the heads of riding clubs glared at the situation unfolding in front of them. They'd all turned a rusty red under their caps, sitting on small camping chairs and murmuring dourly to each other. Everyone's eyes were glued to Strada.

Following the green hurdle, Strada went on to jump over a red-and-white-striped hurdle, a yellow one, and one painted in rainbow colors, one after another. There were no doubts in his movements. It was as if he'd run this course a million times.

Even when we were physically apart, his happiness came gushing into my heart.

Every time he soared over a hurdle, the song reached a higher pitch.

I was frustrated that I couldn't jump over those obstacles with him. But that was okay.

Because we were feeling the same happiness.

In the blink of an eye, Strada had finished jumping over all the hurdles. The words "Clear round!" echoed throughout the competition venue. There was applause, and then his turn was over.

Strada whinnied as he came back to me. I knew they were announcing his victory over the loudspeakers, but I could hear only him. I welcomed him with open arms.

Excited, Shintani said, "He's an amazing horse."

I nodded, my arms still entangled around Strada's neck. I was picturing national titles in my head. We could aim higher. No one would deny that.

"This kind of competition, it's the perfect level for him."

I couldn't understand what Shintani was saying, and lifted the corners of my mouth.

"It'll be difficult for Strada to win in national competitions. I can't even ride him half the week, and Mugikura Riding Club doesn't have all the necessary facilities. Strada's been injured before, so instead of pushing him too hard, let's continue to enter him in small competitions like this one."

Wait a minute. Strada can do better than this.

Seemingly in agreement with me, Strada grunted loudly. In the cold air, his breath came in two, three puffs of white steam.

It' ll be all right. I' ll help you win. I stared deep into his eyes.

Behind us, Mugikura let out a soft laugh, shaking his head.
“This horse is going to suck you dry . . .”

THIRTEEN

The shredder in front of me sliced the sheets of paper I fed it into thin strips.

213,600 yen for “Training trips,” 89,670 yen for “Social gatherings,” 62,000 yen for “Office repairs.” One by one, the numbers got sucked into the gaps between the rotating blades of the shredder.

When I began working on union accounting, we digitized all handwritten cashbooks and receipts. And just in case, we printed out all the paperwork and kept it in a clear plastic sleeve. I plugged away at it for whoever was going to take the job after me, but ten years passed with no one looking at the results of my painstaking efforts but me.

When I tweaked the numbers in the electronic cashbooks little by little, it was possible to balance the budget. After work, I went to the union office and put old receipts that were inconsistent with the paper cashbooks through the shredder along with old passbooks.

Nine years’ worth of paperwork came out to a lot of pages, and after three days of shredding, it still wasn’t done. But it would be soon. When the paperwork was gone, only consistent numbers would remain in the electronic data.

It was already past eleven pm. The shredder at the union office was a cheap one, and the speed at which it ate up paper was slow as a creeping caterpillar. The prefab shed’s thin walls were incapable of stopping the cold air from seeping in, and the tips of my toes were freezing.

“Ms. Setoguchi . . .”

Just as I was thinking of heading home, I heard a low mumble.

I quickly turned around and found Ushio watching me from outside the sliding glass door. Today was not a day we normally worked at the union

office; even if it were, it was the middle of the night. Flustered, I forced myself to smile and bowed my head slightly.

Ushio smiled back and nodded, putting his hand on the door. It didn't open right away, and when he tried to force it, the prefab shed creaked and shook.

"We need to get this door fixed." Ushio grinned wryly as he forced his large body through the gap he'd made. "You're working late," he said as he slowly approached me, the red Sakamaki Shipbuilders' Union flag behind him.

From the neck down, I couldn't move, as if I'd been frozen in place. I felt my molars rattling as my jaw trembled, so I stood still and tried to hold my breath, assessing the situation using only my pupils. The plastic sleeve with the cashbooks inside was open on the desk, and the shredder was taking its time sucking in receipts. The sound of paper being shredded was dreadfully loud. When I let out the breath that had built up inside my chest, my right hand finally moved. In a hurry, I turned off the shredder. The right corner of a receipt for 26,250 yen for "Business trip expenses" flopped over the side like a tongue.

"Can I help you with anything?" Ushio stood next to me and peered at the number—250—that was poking out of the shredder.

How was I supposed to explain this situation to him? No great ideas came to mind, so I shook my head.

"Sorry to have bothered you. Go ahead with whatever you've been doing," Ushio said softly, and turned the paper shredder back on with a grease-stained finger.

The machine began moving again, shredding the receipt. Ushio stared at the number as the shredder swallowed it. "Ms. Setoguchi, do you have any time after this?"

The sound of the motor spinning idly after it had finished shredding the receipt was not unlike the sound of a horse's hooves stomping on the ground.

"I'll wait for you outside." He smiled again, showing his tobacco-stained teeth, and turned around without waiting for my response. His protective boots made the thin floor groan, and after he stepped out, he used them to force the warped glass door shut.

With a sense of resignation, the melody came pouring out of my mouth.

Singing in a trembling voice, I took the remaining cash-books out of the plastic sleeve on the table and fed them to the paper shredder one by one.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da.



I could see the silhouettes of the giant cranes towering above me in the dark purple sky. Normally they were still at this hour, but tonight, they, too, were working late. A cold ocean breeze blew into the harbor, and I zipped up my down jacket, worn out at the cuffs.

"Apparently, this ship's going to be completed and handed over to the owner by next week," mumbled Ushio as he walked toward the ore carrier. I caught up to him, still staring at the cranes above us. One that looked like the neck of a horse picked up a black lump and carried it over to the ship, which was about as tall as a high-rise building. Something large was casting its shadow onto the lump, and I couldn't make out what it was.

"It's probably a piece of equipment that goes on top of the cockpit. It looks pretty heavy," Ushio said as he began climbing the stairs that led into the ship. The sound of his boots stomping on iron panels echoed in the darkness. I followed Ushio single-mindedly, neither knowing nor caring how many steps there were going to be.

"I heard that her launching ceremony is taking place in ten days. You know how ships are always given the names of women, like *Queen Elizabeth* and *Santa Maria*? Do you know why that is?" Ushio asked, and entered the ship through its side, painted red.

When I didn't reply, he continued. "Various theories exist, like, maybe it's because ships need to be repainted frequently, like women needing to touch up their makeup, or maybe dressing up a ship is like dressing up a fine lady. Some people even say it's to keep ships from being sunk by mermaids." Ushio led me up the narrow stairs. "But I think those reasons were all made up after ships were already thought of as women. Ships are just unquestionably female. I know because I was originally a ship-wright. I think that Europeans who were making ships way back when felt the same way. Ships are like mothers, or lovers. At any rate, they're definitely women."

We must have climbed over one hundred steps already. I could see a small door at the end of the stairs. White light was seeping out through a

thin gap underneath it. Ushio opened it and entered, and I followed. Inside, there was a space the size of a gymnasium, painted white, and below us was a dull-colored engine, roaring as it moved. The engine was like a gigantic heart, connected to six cylinders and pipes.

We walked across the catwalk installed above the engine room, and opened the door at the far end to find small crew rooms lining both sides of a narrow corridor. The smell of fresh paint pricked my nose. Clear plastic sheets covered the new desks and beds. Ushio continued to the back without any hesitation, but I drew a sharp breath when we entered a room at the end of the hallway. In a dim cafeteria, five brown-skinned men were sitting on chairs covered in plastic, drinking alcohol. All of them were drunk and spoke in raised voices, but I couldn't understand what they were saying.

"Filipino crew members," Ushio explained. "They're preparing for the launch ceremony."

They stopped talking when they noticed us, and eyed us warily. But when they saw Ushio in his work clothes, they realized he was an employee at the shipyard and waved. Ushio waved back, and proceeded to walk through the cafeteria, open the door in the back, and begin climbing up another set of stairs. I scurried after him to escape the gazes of the men, and closed the door behind me.

I focused on climbing the stairs, which were so narrow one person could barely get through. Our four feet—mine and Ushio's—created footsteps that sounded like those of a horse.

Where in the world was he taking me? My body, which had practically been frozen inside the prefab shed, was now generating so much heat inside my down jacket that my back was dripping with sweat. My breathing was unsteady and my heart beat furiously. My vision grew blurry, and as I was about to fall to my knees, Ushio stopped.

"We're here."

We'd reached the top of the stairs. Ushio smiled at me and opened the door in front of us.

With a whoosh, the sea breeze swept in and tousled my hair. I yanked down the jacket zipper that I had pulled all the way up my neck, and cold air flowed into my lungs. My vision cleared.

A bright red deck stretched out in front of us. Newly painted, the color was vibrant. It glittered, reflecting the aircraft warning light that was

attached to a crane overhead.

"We're at seventy meters above sea level. Be careful."

Slowly following Ushio, who had begun to walk toward the bow of the ship, I stayed close to the wall and tried not to slip.

"I feel sad whenever we near completion on a ship. With this one especially, I think I got a little attached." As he walked, he glanced over at the shipyard below. "But it wasn't like I didn't know she was going to leave us at some point."

In the harbor, lit up by orange lights, the construction of a new container vessel had begun, and its cross-section was exposed to the ocean breeze.

"Getting attached to ships is strange, I know. But I thought that maybe you would get it," Ushio said, without turning around. I nodded.

He murmured, "I'm glad," seeming to have sensed my response. Avoiding a coil of rope, he moved slowly toward the center of the deck, stopped, and looked at something below. I caught up to him and followed his gaze.

All I could see was a darkness with its mouth wide open.

"I heard the company might launch an investigation," he said.

In the center of the red deck, there was a gaping black hole—a hold for storing iron ore. Staring at the jet-black opening, I started to feel like a monster was going to climb out of it.

My legs felt weak. Just then, I was hit by a gust of wind rushing out of the hole and lost my balance. All of a sudden, I was freezing again, and felt my knees begin to shake beneath me.

"It'll be all right. Just return the money before they notice," Ushio continued, as if he were talking to himself. He kept looking into the hole, which was about thirty by thirty meters. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

I looked at Ushio's face from diagonally behind him. His eyes, still staring into the darkness, were glimmering from the red light coming off the aircraft warning light. A flag atop the cockpit flapped in the cold wind.

If he fell into the hole, he would die instantly.

"I want to help you."

Then no one would know of my crime.

I held my breath and moved closer to him. Ushio turned around and looked at me.

I looked back at him and gasped.

The black horse was inside Ushio's eye.

It was standing on the highway at night, looking straight at me.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

I ran into Ushio's arms. Caught off guard, he took two, three steps back. I could hear his heart beating powerfully. He staggered, and his heel reached the edge of the hold. I put my arms around his neck and pushed him down onto the red deck. My body moved as if it were being controlled by the horse's eyes.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

I straddled Ushio and brought my lips to his.

FOURTEEN

I woke up to the sound of my apartment door closing shut.

Then the sound of protective boots clanging down the stairs outside filtered through the thin walls. Once the foot-steps were gone, as if to replace them, the sound of water could be heard dripping from the faucet into the kitchen sink.

It sounded like the footfalls of a horse.

Singing along to the sound, I thought of Strada. But then the melody escaped me, like the flame of a candle flickering out.

I stretched my hand out from my futon and searched for my cell phone. Once I found it, I unlocked the screen.

A video of several men making a citizen's arrest of a groper and screaming at him, another of a YouTuber being forced to make a stilted apology for some crime that wasn't quite evident, and one of an AI announcer trying to scam viewers in a voice nearly indistinguishable from that of a human being. I was swimming in a sea of words, scrolling the bright screen of my phone, when I received a message.

"Thanks for tonight." It sounded like something a lover would say. "I'll see you again soon." The words had an overly familiar tone. They signaled to me that tonight's events had not been a dream.

As I read the words on my phone in the darkness, memories of the night came back to me. The tobacco on his breath, the rough skin of his fingertips, the pain after he pounded against me for what seemed like eternity, the pathetic expression on his face when he orgasmed.

"I want to help you, Yuko." My phone pinged with his unsolicited words.

As if to shake them off, I went to a search engine and typed in "embezzlement." The results were surprising, in that there were so many different ways to go about it: There was a man working at a municipal office who'd misappropriated public assistance funds, a city councilperson who'd stolen neighborhood community association dues, a life insurance saleswoman who'd falsified contracts, and a teacher who'd taken the money he'd collected from students for their school trip. At the same time, though, the ways in which these people had used their stolen money were all so similar—gambling, alcohol, women. I couldn't find a single person who had spent the money they embezzled on an animal. If I were to be caught and the media reported that I'd stolen money from my place of employment for a horse, I would probably be a laughingstock for the rest of my life.

I kept tapping on my phone screen until I found someone who'd embezzled about as much money as I had. They'd been sentenced to five years in prison. Would Strada wait for me for that long?

Still naked, I got out of my futon and opened the sliding door of my closet. I took out the orange box that I'd hidden in the back. Gently lifting its lid, I took out the black bag that was made from the same leather as Strada's saddle, placing it on the tatami floor in front of me.

Whenever I felt anxious, I took it out to touch it, which helped calm me down. The smell and texture of the leather always made me feel like I was with Strada.

But today, the more I touched the bag, the lonelier I felt.

I'm sorry.

Taking a quick look at my messy futon, I felt an over-whelming sense of remorse.

I want to see you.

I grabbed my underwear from the floor, threw it into the washing machine, and took out a change of clothes.



By the time I reached Mugikura Riding Club, it had started drizzling. It was the middle of the night, and the club's outdoor lights had been turned off, preventing me from seeing even five meters ahead. I kept the headlight of my moped on as I walked. Illuminated by the single ray of light, the misty rain looked like a cloud of flying bugs.

I gave the clubhouse, dark with rain, a sideways glance, and headed toward the stable, its lopsided roof beckoning me inside.

Next to the stable, I could see a new structure being built. The foundation and walls were almost complete, and all that was missing was a roof. Once his grand new stable was completed, Strada's living conditions would be much improved. In order for him to win, it was imperative to make sure he lived a comfortable life when he wasn't competing.

I stepped into the old stable. Without any other humans inside, it smelled even more strongly of animals than usual. As horses hardly sleep, I was surrounded by the sound of them eating hay, breathing, and stomping their hooves. I felt my way through the darkness toward the back, until I arrived at the stall where Strada should have been waiting for me. But it was empty.

Where are you?

I felt the blood drain from my face and started running. In the darkness, I tripped over something and fell. The smell of urine and dung stung my nose.

Where are you?

I crawled out of the hay-strewn stable and looked toward the riding arena, staring deep into the darkness in search of Strada. Thick clouds covered the moon, and the headlight of my moped didn't reach me. I could hear only the sound of my own footsteps, and couldn't even see a few meters ahead of me. My shoes sank into the ground, muddy from the rain. I was too frightened to turn back, and kept moving my freezing feet forward. I couldn't look behind me now. Did the world even still exist back there?

I heard a low neigh from the darkness far away.

My ears perked up at the noble sound, a sound I knew by heart.

Strada?

I heard a whinny, as though he was responding to me.

I strained my eyes toward the voice. Gradually, they discerned a red-black horse's silhouette from the complete darkness. I had become lost, and he had come to get me.

The red-black silhouette moved closer to me. I felt nostalgic. At some time in the past, I had witnessed this scene, like a slow-moving shadow puppet show.

Oh, Strada.

I held him as his form became clearer, as the darkness seemed to melt away around us.

I'm so happy you came to see me, he whinnied. The blood rushing through his neck warmed my cold body. Enveloped by a sweet milk-like scent, I felt increasingly at peace.

He grunted suddenly, and began walking. I took his reins in my hands and let him lead me into the darkness. Did we have a destination? Several meters of rope connected me to him. If I let go of it, we would no longer be able to stay together.

Strada grunted once again and pointed beyond the darkness with his muzzle. I looked toward the other side of his gaze.

Across the jet-black landscape, I eventually began to pick out various shades of gray, like in an ink brush painting—the red-black silhouettes of horses grazing far away, the shadows of green-black trees swaying quietly behind them.

With Strada by my side, the darkness that had been so terrifying transformed into a serene and beautiful world.

"This is the world that horses see," said a raspy voice from the darkness as the red-black silhouette of a person approached me. "Even in darkness, there are colors." The silhouette now stood in front of me, leaning on a cane. "Horses and people look red because of the blood traveling through their bodies. Forests have a different darkness, a green one."

I dipped my head to apologize for visiting so unexpectedly. We couldn't see each other's faces, even standing this close.

"Darkness is not nothingness. When you're in the darkness, you can experience all the sounds and smells that you never noticed while it was light." The figure with the cane moved toward Strada. "I think he knew you were coming."

As if to say, *That's right*, Strada nickered. I couldn't see with my eyes, but I could hear Mugikura stroking the horse's body.

"He was acting up in the middle of the night, which was unlike him, so I let him out to walk around," he said.

So Strada does understand my feelings. I felt like I had been forgiven again, and leaned on his warm body. The drizzle had stopped. With our bodies close together, we watched the sky turn from a dark navy to purple.

"You're like Oshirasama." Mugikura cackled. When I looked at him

questioningly, he went on to recite what sounded like a fable from memory. “A long time ago, there was a poor farmer. His wife had died, but he had a beautiful daughter. He also had a horse, which his daughter loved more than anything. At night, she went to the stable to sleep with the horse. Eventually they became husband and wife.”

Mugikura paused to assess my reaction, then continued telling the story, sensing that I wanted to hear the rest.

“When the farmer found out that his daughter had married the horse, he killed the animal by hanging it from a mulberry tree. Learning what had happened, his daughter was shocked and grief-stricken. She went to the base of the mulberry tree and clung to the dead horse’s neck.”

Even though I knew that it was just an old story, it broke my heart. To confirm that he was still there, I pulled Strada toward me, and he placed his muzzle on my head.

Let’s stay together forever. The words flowed from him right into my heart.

I confirmed my own emotions through this horse. He always told me how I was feeling.

When I was with people, I was never so sure. If Strada were to die, what was I supposed to believe in?

Mugikura continued to speak as he stared at the sky, which was gradually turning red.

“The farmer, upon seeing his daughter clinging to the dead horse, went into a frenzy and chopped off the horse’s head. The head then floated upward, and still, the daughter refused to let go. The horse’s head continued to drift upward, and the daughter drifted with it into the heavens, where the two of them turned into a deity called Oshirasama.

“I don’t know if you’d call that ending happy or sad.” Having finished telling the story, Mugikura stroked Strada’s forehead. Strada’s eyes were clear, reflecting the sky as it began to brighten. Sometimes, without warning, Strada’s expression would become so pure, as if everything unnecessary had been washed away.

“It’s just humans who think in terms of happiness and sadness. To animals, human emotions are overly dramatic. Especially from the perspective of horses. Dogs and cats get upset if you take away their food while they’re eating, right? Well, horses don’t,” Mugikura said.

A fissure formed in the belt-like clouds on the horizon, and the sun shone through. Strada broke into a trot, quickening his pace as he ran toward the sun, which was radiating a powerful light. When he got to the center of the golden-brown field, he raised his front legs and whinnied loudly.

“But that one looks mighty happy right now.” Mugikura laughed, and Strada swung round and round in a circle as if he were dancing. Wet from rain, the grass and Strada’s glossy body both glistened in the golden light.

I was breathless.

How was I to express the emotions that were threatening to spill out from me?

“You don’t have to say anything,” said Mugikura, as if he’d read my mind, while the two of us stood there watching Strada. “Some things just can’t be verbalized.”

I kept watching as Strada galloped through the field, his black coat illuminated by the sun, whose golden beams were gradually turning white.

PART III

FIFTEEN

White steam rose from the backs of the dozen or so horses scattered across the warm-up arena.

They were all large and glossy, and done up in high-quality tack. Most of them were from famous riding clubs, and the riders astride them were a great deal more skilled than the ones at regional competitions.

It was as dark as dusk, the midday sun hidden behind ink-colored clouds.

Shintani, who had been getting Strada ready in the warm-up arena, looked up at the sky as he approached Mugikura and me outside the fence. From deep inside the winter clouds, we could see faint flashes of light.

"That's lightning, isn't it?" Shintani said.

"We should throw in the towel for today . . . He's been shaking his head this whole time," muttered Mugikura, who had been closely watching Strada as he exhaled through his nostrils at irregular intervals. Another horse that had been scheduled to compete had become unruly in the warm-up arena just a few moments prior and dropped out of the competition.

"Strada is fine. He's feeling a bit heavy today, but he'll be all right. He's running okay." Shintani raised his voice, refusing to be drowned out by the thunder that followed a few moments after another sharp flicker of light. "It'll all have been for nothing if we back down now." He was trying to appeal to me, as Strada's owner. Sensing the tension among us, men from other riding clubs standing around the warm-up arena looked coolly in our direction.

I'd spent quite a bit of money so Strada could win this national competition. I'd had a show jumping arena built and the stable renovated at

Mugikura Riding Club. I'd started paying Shintani twice what I used to pay him, and increased Strada's training to five days a week. Strada had stabilized both physically and mentally, and his jumps had improved day by day. Sure, he hadn't succeeded in horse racing, but now he was finally going to get to shine in show jumping. It was no time to be talking about dropping out. Strada himself looked truly ready for this.

"He's really agitated." Apparently detecting what I was thinking, Mugikura tried to dissuade me from going through with it. Strada shook his head, seemingly in protest, as though he understood what the old man was saying. "There's a fine line between determination and fear. It's no good to be taking chances at times like this."

"Let's let him show his stuff." Shintani, who was on Strada's back, read my thoughts just as well and offered backup. "I'll do him justice, I promise."

After glaring at Shintani, Mugikura turned his murky pupils toward me. "Well, he's your horse. You make the final decision."

That's right. Strada is my horse. I was the only person who understood him. I placed my hand against the hard bridge of his muzzle to gauge his true feelings. I could feel the hot flow of his blood beating against my hand.

I want to win. I could feel Strada's strong will through my fingertips. *Believe in me*, his eyes told me. He'd spent so many grueling hours training for this. I had to let him run.

I gently held his neck in my arms. His pulse synced with mine and fell into a comfortable rhythm.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

I believe in you, we can do this together.

Thank you, he exhaled, as if he were whispering.

Large drops of rain began to spatter against the tin roof of the stable. Above the noise, the MC announced Strada's turn.

"Let's go," Shintani said, and pulling on Strada's reins, he headed toward the competition arena. Listening to the sound of Strada's hooves against the concrete, I walked next to him, in step with his rhythm. A gray-haired rider on a horse much larger than Strada looked at us intimidatingly as he passed.

The clouds that had blanketed Mount Fuji suddenly flashed, and a few moments later, thunder echoed throughout the venue. Several horses

circling the warm-up arena were spooked and started running. Some of them even raised their forelegs and thrashed about wildly. Fear spread quickly among the horses, their screams overlapping as if they were talking over each other.

I recalled Miu's high-pitched voice from yesterday. Out of nowhere, she had showed up at the union office.

"Wow! This is incredible!" she'd screeched, as she ran around the office like a puppy from wall to plywood wall. Ushio and I looked at each other. *Incredible?*

"I didn't know there was such an old-fashioned place in this shipyard," she said. After staring long and hard at the red Sakamaki Shipbuilding Workers' Union flag, she ran over to the bookshelf and started pulling out old files. "'Spring Wage Negotiation Study Session Materials'? 'The National Council of Workers' Welfare'? Ugh, all these words are making me dizzy."

Miu proceeded to thumb through all the files that I had organized over the past decade.

Overtime Applications. Delegate Training Session Materials. Occupational Health and Safety Committee Requests.

"Did you do all of this, Yuko?"

I nodded as I raised the corners of my mouth. *It's all right*, I told myself. *I've already disposed of anything that could possibly be considered evidence.*

"There's so much paperwork here! There's no way I can do what Yuko's been doing all these years," Miu said in a cloying voice to Ushio, who was standing behind me.

"Ms. Setoguchi is going to be with us for a while longer, so we can take the transition slow." I couldn't see him as he said this, but I could imagine him smiling as usual, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"And this safe is humongous! Is it okay if I open it? Wait, how do you do this?" Miu, now enamored with the safe, was turning the dial willy-nilly.

"We really should change the combination." Ushio, who was now standing next to me, grinned wryly as he leaned in toward me. The smell of oil and sweat assaulted my nose. Non-chalantly, he placed his right hand on my waist.

The distant boom of thunder, like an iron plate dragged across a hard floor, yanked me back to reality.

At the same moment, Strada, with Shintani hovering over his saddle, jumped into action. The downpour made the competition arena look like someone had poured ink into the soil. Strada kept getting his hooves caught in the mud, but he proceeded to round all four corners in a canter, and jumped over the first obstacle. Soaking wet, he landed heavily and splashed muddy water into the air. Shintani's white riding pants, which I had paid 160,000 yen for at the luxury boutique, were immediately dyed brown. Streaks of light shot through the cloudy sky like capillaries.

Strada, frightened by a deafening roll of thunder that sounded like firecrackers being set off, failed to turn the next corner and stopped in his tracks. Without a moment's delay, Shintani whipped his side. A heartbreaking neigh synchronized with the sound of thunder, reverberating throughout the venue.

I prayed, watching Strada shake his head as he started to run again. The murmurs of the audience members sounded muffled underneath the hood of my plastic raincoat, and overlapped with Ushio's voice from the previous night.

"I was against it, but the higher-ups said they wanted to switch you out with Unosawa." Once Miu had left the union office, Ushio put on an exaggerated expression to indicate his quandary, and came walking toward me. We were the only ones in the tiny prefab shed, but he still leaned in to speak softly into my ear. "But it'll be okay. I worked it out with them so that you can stay and work on union accounting for a while as well. I'm sure Unosawa will give up in no time and be removed from the position."

I dipped my head and was trying to leave when Ushio placed his grease-darkened hand on my shoulder.

"Listen, Yuko. The company told me to launch an investigation, but I assured them there was nothing to investigate, so don't worry about a thing."

I realized then that Ushio had been calling me by my first name. At a loss for words, I raised the corners of my mouth, and Ushio did the same. He looked like a predator eyeing its prey.

“Maybe I’ll come over tonight, and we can talk about it.”

Just at that moment, there was a blindingly bright flash across the sky. Before I had time to think about how close the lightning was, it was followed by a deafening crash of thunder.

Please stop.

Just before I had the thought, a whinny that sounded like a scream echoed through the arena. Strada raised his forelegs and shook Shintani off his back, sending him flying headfirst toward the ground. The horse’s thrashing body sprayed water from his coat. Shintani lay in the mud, face up, unmoving. Now, without the weight of a human on his back, Strada plunged into a hurdle, his legs jerking wildly. As a result of a five-hundred-kilogram horse crashing into it, three hard tubes from the hurdle tumbled down. Strada’s legs got caught in them, and he fell over into the bog-like arena with a splash.

A sharp fork of lightning illuminated Strada, whose legs convulsed in the mud.

“Strada!” I screamed, but my voice disappeared into the sound of thunder.

I shook myself free of Mugikura, who was trying to restrain me, and put my foot up on the fence. Just as I was about to jump over it, my foot slipped, and I pitched forward and fell jaw-first into the arena. Spitting out the mud that had gotten into my mouth, I stood up and tried to run to Strada. The riding boots that I had just bought got caught ankle deep in the mud, and I couldn’t move forward. I took off my shoes, and my socks with them, and ran to him barefoot.

Strada, who was writhing in the mud, whinnied weakly. When he noticed me, he tried to twist his body to get up, but was unable to.

“Strada.”

Cautiously, I touched his quivering neck. I couldn’t hear his voice, his song that I usually heard like it was coming from my own body. The life was quickly draining from his deep black eyes. Wet from the rain, his body became colder and colder, and I could tell that his legs were growing weaker.

“Strada. Strada. Strada!”

My screams, Strada’s weak neighs, the footsteps of men running in our direction—all of it sounded indistinct, like I was underwater. I felt as if

Strada were being swallowed by a bottomless swamp, and all I could do was continue to hang on to his body and call out his name.

SIXTEEN

A cylindrical robot with a plate of omurice on it glided in our direction.

There was a catlike face on the monitor on the front of the robot, whose round eyes moved about as if to observe what was happening around it.

“Kitty!” A toddler sitting in a high chair extended a hand grasping a ketchup-covered French fry toward the robot. The robot stopped in front of her hand, smiled toward the girl, moved to avoid coming into contact with the messy fry, and continued on its way. It played a light electronic tune from its speaker as it passed by me.

“I wonder who’s smarter . . .” Mikoshiba, sitting across from me, had just begun eating her Japanese-style hamburg steak meal. She looked at the robot, and then at the young man who was sitting next to her.

“Hey, Junko, that’s not fair! You know that I’m a college student.” The young man, who had just taken a huge bite of his spaghetti, exaggeratedly pretended to choke. He looked at the robot with his small, acorn-like eyes, peeking through gently curled bangs. The bridge of his nose was high and his lips were nicely shaped, but the positions of all the individual parts of his face were slightly off, and somehow made his face look messy.

The robot stopped at the table next to us and slowly turned around to show its profile. The cylinder was divided into four levels, and the omurice sat atop an LED-lit tray. A middle-aged man who was here on his own stretched out his arm to reach for the dish as if this was the moment he’d long been waiting for. When the plate was removed from the robot, it winked, turned its back toward the customer, and returned to the kitchen.

“Inui, do you think you could work as hard as that robot?”

“Hmm, probably not.”

“Do you not have a shred of self-respect?”

“I mean, I use an AI app for all the papers I’m assigned at school . . .” Inui’s mouth, which was small like his eyes, moved busily, filled with spaghetti.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” Mikoshiba used a paper napkin to wipe away some meat sauce that Inui had gotten on his face near his lips.

“Sorry.” Inui, who appeared to be completely at Mikoshiba’s mercy, had on the same horseshoe earring that she always wore.

“Yuko, I’m sorry to have brought you here, of all places. I’ve taken Inui to try all kinds of restaurants, but he says he likes chain family restaurants the most.”

I shook my head to indicate that I didn’t mind, and ate a bite of the chicken breast and mushroom salad that I’d barely touched.

“Oh, come on, Inui, you’ve spilled on your shirt again! And that one was so expensive.”

“Will you buy me a new one? Please?”

Not knowing where to direct my gaze in front of these two as they flirted, I turned my eyes outside, looking through the windows framed by the striped walls of the restaurant.

A car, a truck, a bus, a car. The vehicles went by, one after another, on the highway that I was so accustomed to seeing. The way every vehicle was moving at the same speed, maintaining the same distance between one another, made them look like they were being carried on a conveyor belt.

Since that day, I’d been riding my moped on the highway every day, and somehow arriving at work on autopilot. I thought to myself that maybe I was being carried on a conveyor belt, too.



As the thunderstorm continued, Strada lay in the mud and eventually stopped moving. Luckily enough, he hadn’t broken any bones and we were spared the worst-case scenario, but he had hurt his ligaments pretty badly. Following a discussion with the competition’s veterinarian, we decided that Strada would recuperate at a stable nearby.

The following weekend, I went to the clubhouse at Mugikura Riding Club to send Strada’s tack out for maintenance. All the tack that I had bought for him was covered in mud, and there was a deep gash in the saddle

that was made of the same leather as my bag. When I touched the gash, his cries came back to me, and I slumped down on a sofa. I stayed there for a while, unable to move, until Mikoshiba came in after finishing a riding session.

"Yuko . . . how about some lunch?" It was a rather unexpected invitation.

The next thing I knew, I was following Mikoshiba's red SUV on my moped. After driving for a while on the highway, the SUV put its turn signal on and entered the parking lot of a chain family restaurant that one could find anywhere. After we'd settled into our seats by the window and sat there for a while, a young man wearing a hoodie with a large designer-brand logo over a white collared shirt entered the restaurant. He looked around, and when he saw Mikoshiba, he waved enthusiastically without any concern for how he might appear and sat down next to her.

"You're riding friends with Junko, right?"

For some reason, he stuck his hand out, so I cautiously put mine out as well, and we shook.

"This is my friend Inui," Mikoshiba introduced him.



"Yuko, why don't you talk?" Inui, who had just accepted a strawberry parfait with Hokkaido soft serve on top from a robot, looked at me with his small eyes.

Not knowing how to respond, I smiled, but Inui continued.

"Did something bad happen? And then did that make you decide not to talk ever again?"

"It's because you've been talking nonstop the entire time you've been here," Mikoshiba answered for me, then pinched a strawberry off of Inui's parfait and ate it. The robot, which had emptied out its trays, winked as it turned back around.

"I'm afraid of silences. The guys who've been working at the host club longer than me are always yelling at me to fill any silences."

"You're not creating baroque music, for God's sake."

"What's baroque?"

"And they say horses are dumb."

Inui did a facial impression of a horse, trying to make Mikoshiba laugh.

No matter how much he was mocked, he continued on like he was enjoying himself.

"I guess we do have customers who don't speak. There's one person who sits there silently for four hours, just listening to what I say."

"Could you please shut up for a little bit?"

"K."

"What does 'K' mean?"

"It means 'okay.'"

"Why would you abbreviate that?" Mikoshiba smiled bitterly, and Inui leaned against her.

"Junko, I'm going to go get something from the drink buffet. Do you want anything?"

"Could you get me some rooibos tea? How about you, Yuko?"

When I shook my head, Inui got up, avoided the robot that was moving in the other direction, and headed toward the drink buffet.

All of a sudden, when Inui and his words had disappeared from the table, I began to hear the sounds surrounding us. The customer next to us had changed from the one middle-aged man to two people: a non-Japanese man with dreads and a woman with flashy makeup. The man spoke in English, and the woman responded in Japanese. Were they really understanding each other? In any case, their conversation continued without pause.

Why had I been invited here? Did Mikoshiba just want to show off her young boyfriend to me? But as a subject for showing off, Inui was pretty underwhelming. Not knowing what to do with my time alone with Mikoshiba, I looked around the restaurant.

Three employees wearing black aprons were standing in front of the kitchen, chatting.

Since most customers ordered and paid using an electronic tablet, all that was left for them to do was clean up after the customers and place dishes on the robots.

"They look so bored," Mikoshiba, who turned out to have been looking in the same direction as I was, muttered. "Was it really necessary to replace people with robots? It feels like they're transporting the food on robotic vacuum cleaners, and it ruins my appetite. I can't imagine that it cuts labor costs that much, either."

On the backs of the two robots that were busily going back and forth among the tables were “Now Hiring Part-Timers” stickers.

“It’s kind of ridiculous that we live in a time when robots recruit people to work,” Mikoshiba said. Again, I felt like she’d read my mind. Does one develop a sixth sense when cultivating a horseback riding practice? Or was it due to some sort of empathy that grows between riding colleagues? “But I guess robots don’t require scheduling shifts, and they don’t complain, either, so maybe that’s a plus. The only staff in this restaurant who are friendly are those two robots, to be honest.”

Mikoshiba shifted her gaze to the table across from us. A boy and a girl in their teens were eating with their father— curry with rice, cheese rice gratin, and stewed udon, respectively. After each bite of udon, the father’s eyes went straight to his smartphone.

“Why are human men so boring? My husband has so much pride, and yet he’s incapable of saying anything remotely interesting, and he certainly doesn’t listen to a thing I say. I’m shocked he’s able to hold down a job as an attorney.”

Across from the father who continued to stare at his phone, the son and daughter didn’t look at each other as they ate their curry and rice gratin, quietly bringing their spoons to their mouths like cows sticking their faces into feed troughs.

“Horses are the best. They require a lot of money, but you can truly understand them, and they you.”

Mikoshiba sought agreement from me, and I nodded. *Strada is the only one who truly understands me.*

“Inui’s ugly and boring, isn’t he?”

I was taken aback by the sudden question, and peered toward the drink buffet. Inui had a Coke in one hand and a rooibos tea in the other, and was headed our way with a grin on his face.

Mikoshiba continued, as she fiddled with her horseshoe-shaped earrings. “Inui is a host at a host club, but he doesn’t have that many customers, so I’m supporting him. When he first sat down next to me at the club, I was stunned. He talked constantly and it was all so dull. But after a while, I was sort of moved. Because no matter how poorly you treated him, even if you ignored him completely, he simply continued to talk, unfazed.” Bringing her voice down to a murmur, Mikoshiba laughed.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a man in all black force-fully open the door to the restaurant. I carefully followed the man with my eyes. With a large square backpack slung over one shoulder, he walked past the register and went straight into the kitchen to receive a meal in a plastic bag. He appeared to be a delivery person called up via an app. It took maybe thirty seconds for him to enter and leave the restaurant. There were no words exchanged between the man and the restaurant staff.

"Horses are great because they're gentle and intelligent. I love both Alec and Rose. But . . . sometimes, I crave words. Inui is stupider than a horse—he won't even put out to get more patrons—but he talks a lot. No matter how empty those words are, he gives a lot of them to me."

"Junko, here's your drink," Inui said as he returned to the table and placed a cup of rooibos tea in front of Mikoshiba.

"Thanks, Inui."

"You're welcome."

"Hm. This tea's weak."

"Sorry, I'll go get a fresh cup!"

"You're always coming up short. Is it because you're stupid?"

"Junko, you're so mean."

"Well, you can't do anything right. If you tallied up all your mistakes, you'd reach a hundred points."

"Woohoo!"

"That's not something to 'woohoo' about."

"Really?"

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

As if to overlap with the twosome's rambling dialogue, I began to hear the melody in my ears again. I felt a black presence behind Inui and glanced over his shoulder to find a horse there. Strada was standing in front of the drink buffet, where the two robots were coming and going. He was looking at me with moist eyes.

What do you want to drink?

Let's see . . . a café latte.

As if to say *okay*, he let out a low whinny.

If Strada were to come to my apartment, we'd sleep together in my tiny room. When I woke up at night, he would be standing near the window, gazing at the moon. I would fall asleep staring at his smooth silhouette.

When I woke in the morning, we would have breakfast together at the small table in the kitchen. I would peel apples for him, and I would eat the same thing.

Then we would leave my apartment, and I would get on his back.

Where to?

Anywhere.

To the ocean, then.

Just a moment before I had the thought, Strada would start walking. We could go anywhere.

SEVENTEEN

The horse trailer, the words “Mugikura Riding Club” splashed across the sides in red, stopped in front of the clubhouse.

When the double doors opened, the black body of a horse appeared. The horse turned his head and looked around as if it were returning to a familiar landscape. I watched closely as Strada’s delicate legs came down the ramp.

Welcome back . . .

When the sun shone on Strada’s body, I drew in a quick breath. His powerful neck had wasted away, and the glossiness of his coat was gone. He had also lost a lot of muscle from his chest, rendering his ribs visible on either side.

“Damn it,” I heard, and when I glanced next to me, Mugikura was looking at Strada with a scowl on his face. His voice was a low growl, like a dog, his gold tooth showing.

“Congratulations, Yuko.” Without missing a beat, Shintani wedged himself between Mugikura and me. “Strada’s lost some weight, but he seems well.”

He smiled with his eyes as if to comfort me, and walked toward the horse trailer to fetch Strada. Mugikura joined him there, and fell deep into conversation with the veterinarian who had accompanied Strada. I tried to pick up pieces of their conversation, but all I could hear were sounds that had failed to take the shape of words.

Strada.

I called for him in my heart, but he didn’t look my way once. He dragged one of his forelegs as he began walking, and disappeared into the newly renovated, unnaturally white stable.

“There’s no way he’ll be able to compete again,” Mugikura said as he stroked the belly of the gaunt horse. As soon as Strada had entered his stall, he had lowered his neck and stopped moving entirely.

“The ligaments in his right foreleg are in really bad shape. Jumping is out of the question. Surgery might help . . . but we’re talking several million yen, probably more.”

Inside the stall, Strada had put his tail between his legs, and was staring into space with vacant eyes. Shocked by how much he’d changed, the other horses in the stable glanced over at him from their own stalls.

“He was a sensitive horse to begin with. And with the accident, he’s suffered mental trauma. Even if his leg were to recover, who knows how much he’d be able to run,” Mugikura said.

I entered Strada’s stall, crouched down next to him, and stretched out my hand toward the tip of his muzzle.

Strada.

He shook his head as if to avoid me.

Strada, it’s me.

His black eyes didn’t turn to me.

I took a Tupperware container out of my backpack, and brought an apple I’d peeled for him at home to the tip of his muzzle. He put it between his teeth and chewed, but pieces of it crumbled out of the corners of his mouth.

Have you forgotten about me? I persistently stuck out my trembling fingers toward the tip of his muzzle, but the black horse didn’t let me touch him.

“There are plenty of special horses out there,” said Shintani, who, standing behind me, seemed to have lost his patience. “Why don’t we aim for a championship with the next one?”

As if in reaction to Shintani’s words, Strada whinnied weakly.

Without warning, I slapped Shintani’s cheek. A dry sound echoed throughout the silent stable.

Why would you say something like that in front of Strada?

For some reason, the more rage I felt, the higher the corners of my mouth rose. Shintani, who had been caught off guard, went wide-eyed. He then breathed deeply and smiled as if to match my expression.

“It’s all right. Horses can’t understand words.”

No, you're the one who doesn't understand.

"Yuko, have you heard of Clever Hans?"

In response to the sudden question, the corners of my mouth curled even further upward.

Looking down at my strained smile, Shintani continued as if he were lecturing me.

"Clever Hans was a horse who lived in Germany around the year 1900. He could calculate numbers, read, and understand melodies. After appearing in some local newspaper articles, he quickly became a sensation. But there were a lot of people who were dubious about Clever Hans, so an investigation was conducted by a panel of academics. What do you think the results showed?"

As if refusing to hear Shintani's voice, Strada wrung both his ears and shook his head.

Every time Shintani opened his mouth in the dim stable, his white breath bloomed into the air and then disappeared.

"Contrary to most people's expectations, no tricks were involved. The world rejoiced in the existence of this 'miracle horse.' But one psychologist who pushed on even when others were satisfied figured out the reason why Hans appeared to understand language. Hans could answer correctly when the asker knew the answer to the question, but not when the asker didn't know the answer. In other words . . . the horse didn't understand language, per se, but was skilled at detecting human body language."

I got what Shintani was trying to say. To what lengths would he go to make a fool of Strada and me? I began to shake with anger, but the corners of my mouth were still turned upward, as if they were being pulled.

"The reason Strada runs to you is because he's trained to."

No. He's always waiting for me.

"The reason he turns before you tell him to is because he knows the riding arena inside and out, and wants to make a turn before he gets whipped."

There's no way Shintani could understand our connection.

Doo dah da . . .

The melody poured out of my trembling mouth.

Shintani stared at me with contempt as I suddenly started singing.

"You're just looking at the parts of the horse that fit your fantasy.

Horses aren't pets. They're economic animals."

In an attempt to drown out Shintani's voice, I continued singing, my gaze turned downward.

"Come on, Yuko, it's not like I don't care. Who do you think cleaned up this horse's shit and mopped the floor when it was covered in piss?" I heard Shintani's exasperated voice from above. "I have no idea where you get all your money from, but you can't buy a horse's attention. Enough already with this delusion that you two have some kind of special connection."

I screamed and jumped on Shintani, digging my nails into his pallid face. He let out a wail and took a few steps back, then fell back onto a pile of hay. Drops of blood beaded on his cheek.

"Cut it out!"

Mugikura rushed to restrain me. At that moment, Strada neighed in a high-pitched tone, and stood in front of me as if to protect me. In response, the horses in the stable began to cry out one after another, banging their bodies against their stalls.

See, they're all on my side.

I straddled Shintani, looking down at his bleeding face. Still, he smiled.

He lifted the corners of his thin lips and said in disgust, "When you weren't around . . . he was running after mares."

Shut up, shut up, shut up!

I punched an unresisting Shintani twice, three times. I cut his lip, which also began to bleed. The smell of blood pricked my nose, mixed with the smell of animals. There was the familiar taste of iron in my mouth. Strada neighed wildly and stomped his hooves fiercely into the floor.



Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

Before I knew it, I was walking through the shipyard in the middle of the night, singing.

The full moon shone on the cranes as they stretched their necks toward the ocean. The gigantic stationary horses were watching over me.

Gripping tightly onto the bag made of the same leather as Strada's saddle, I continued walking at a brisk speed. When I spotted the half-constructed container carrier, I picked up the pace. I could just see the prefab shed past the pier. I was sure that if Strada underwent surgery, he

would be able to run again, jump again. I didn't care how much it cost. I wasn't going to give up. I wasn't going to let those men crush our hopes.

I forcefully opened the ill-fitting sliding door and entered the prefab office. The thin floor creaked underneath me as I lurched across it. I clung to the safe and turned the dial: 0 to the right, 9 to the left, 2 to the right, and 3 to the left. I opened the heavy door and stretched my hand toward the bundles of bills that were stacked in the back. I grabbed everything I touched, haphazardly throwing the wads of money into my bag.

In no time, all the money was gone.

That's it?

Looking at the empty safe, I chuckled.

How anticlimactic.

The darkness deep inside the safe was the same jet black as Strada's eyes. Staring into that blackness, I felt I had been forgiven for everything.

I picked up the bag, which was now quite heavy, and exited the prefab office. I held the bag with both hands as I walked alone among the empty factories. The shadow cast by the cranes stretched all the way to my feet. They followed me, as if to protect me.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

I walked past the main building, singing Strada's melody to myself. The bag was swollen from all the money in it, and the clasp drooped over like a tongue and clicked as I walked, creating a rhythm.

"Hey, is that you, Yuko?" Suddenly a cloying voice stopped me in my tracks. I quickly turned around to find Miu. My breathing and the melody I'd been singing both stopped. Out of nowhere, I felt a cold breeze against my neck and my body trembled.

"What are you doing here so late?" Miu's face was flushed, and she was slurring her speech. She seemed to have had quite a bit to drink. Her clothes were disheveled. Had she been with Fujii again?

"That's a nice bag you've got there. What's in it?" She staggered toward me and, with a grin on her face, put her hand on my bag.

I shrieked and shoved her hand off of it. The smile on Miu's face disappeared, and she looked at me with cool eyes. "It really was you, wasn't it? You thief!"

I let out the air that had been pent up inside me, and unwittingly pulled up the corners of my mouth.

Me? A thief ?

"Yuko, you're as white as a ghost!" Miu said, laughing, and pulled on my bag. One, two stacks of bills fell out. "Thief! She's a thief!" A grating scream, completely different from her usual sweet voice, made my eardrums vibrate.

I'm not a thief. I'm the one being taken from, all the time, by everyone else. This money was meant for me to use.

"Thief! Thief! Thief!" Miu screamed as she forcibly grabbed the bag with both hands. I bent my body over, trying to hold on to the bag.

As we struggled, a cell phone slid across the asphalt.

I cradled the bag, crouched down, and picked up the smartphone. With shaking hands, I pressed play on a video, and showed the screen to Miu.

Inside the moving screen, something flesh-colored writhed. Screams like that of an animal reverberated across the quiet shipyard.

Miu opened her eyes wide as she stared at the screen.

"What is this?" Her legs gave out and she slumped to the ground.

I tore Miu's hand off the handle of my bag and took off.

EIGHTEEN

With the bulging leather bag on my lap, I drove my red moped down the highway.

Large snowflakes began to fall, blocking my headlight. I turned the corner where the automated consumer loanapplication machine was located and sped along the narrow dark path leading to the riding club. Snow began to stick to the ground on the rice paddies in no time, blue-white landscape stretching around me as far as I could see.

I parked my moped in front of the quiet Mugikura Riding Club, and holding my bag, I ran into the stable.

I heard a familiar low whinny from the back.

I came to see you.

Out of breath, I ran toward Strada and extended my hand toward the tip of his muzzle.

His black eyes caught me. Strada moved his mouth toward my hand and licked my freezing fingers. His muzzle trembled.

My fingertips felt numb from the heat of his tongue.

Do you remember me now?

Warm tears streamed down my icy cheeks.

Strada pressed his neck against me as I shivered.

I will believe in you forever. His thoughts came rushing into my heart.

I sobbed and slumped down onto the haystack at the side of the stall. I was unable to move, clinging to the saddle that had been left on the floor and had hardened, like it had frozen.

Strada rubbed the tip of his muzzle against my neck and whinnied in a sorrowful tone. His enchanting eyes were moist. He knew that we would

soon have to say goodbye.

As if to wrap himself around me, he lay down on the floor. From the small window in the stable, I could see the snow coming down hard. I slowly closed my eyes. His body temperature converged with mine, which was slightly cooler. Enveloped in his warmth, I gradually lost consciousness, and darkness came.

"That's a place for horses to sleep." I woke up to a familiar voice. I raised my head, and saw the shadow of a man with a cane at the entrance to Strada's stall.



When Mugikura added a thick piece of firewood to the stove, there was a pop and a shower of flying sparks.

Curled up in a blanket on a sofa inside the clubhouse, I stared at the red and orange gradations fluttering inside the stove. The flames were still small, but I could feel my body slowly warming up.

"You could have died, sleeping in a place like that." Chuckling, Mugikura sat across from me, and resumed playing a shogi puzzle. He moved a knight diagonally forward and closed in on the king. "But I guess if you're around horses, you come close to death all the time."

Whenever I was riding Strada, I was entrusting my life to him. Coming close to death, to me, felt like loving someone.

"Muhammad the Prophet, Alexander the Great, and Genghis Khan all had their favorite horses," he went on. "The history of humankind is the history of horses. Everybody saw the world alongside horses, and were killed alongside them, too."

I caught sight of the photograph behind him. The young Mugikura, jumping over an obstacle astride a large chestnut horse, looked not unlike Napoleon in a painting I'd seen.

"I fell off a horse, and look at me now." Mugikura gave a droll grin, tapping his cane against his shin. It made a sound I wasn't expecting, and I raised my eyebrows questioningly. "The horse was mild-mannered and rarely ever got riled up. But that one time, I heard his voice, asking me not to ride him. I actually heard his voice. But I forced myself on him. I must've been too eager to win. And now I have a fake leg. Oshirasama's probably teaching me a lesson."

Mugikura went on to tell me that he would be leaving the riding club to go north, to the site of the Oshirasama legend, a paradise for horses. Apparently, it was where horses who have retired due to injuries lived out their final days, grazing freely.

"Most horses die without being able to win. Most horses are killed once they're unable to compete. But the place where I'm going is like heaven, where all the luckiest horses get to end up. I figured, I'm going to be with horses until I die, so I might as well retire there, too." Mugikura gazed at the weakening flames with his murky eyes. I could see Strada running around in vast snow fields in my mind's eye. I thought to myself that when the time came, I would go live there with him.

"That Clever Hans story that Shintani told you about," murmured Mugikura, dropping his gaze back to his shogi board and thinking about his next move. "It's not that horses are stupid. It just means that animals have a way of communicating even without words. Humans were supposed to have been able to do the same, but that's no longer the case. We've lost the capacity for insight and empathy."

Mugikura picked up the knight piece with his bent fingers and continued, "What is it that you want? What do you want to regain by making him win?" He tapped a shogi piece onto the board. "Words, expensive saddles, and first prizes mean nothing to horses." The knight flipped over, exposing the character for "gold." "You felt like you had a true connection with him, right? Whether you simply thought that on your own, or the horse made you think that way, who knows. It doesn't matter."

I stared at the red "gold" character carved into the shogi piece.

"Horses make people dream. You and I are humans that have been possessed by those dreams." Mugikura took a quick glance at my bulging bag, and pushed his "gold" piece forward. "But people always wake up from dreams at some point." Mugikura had checkmated on the shogi board. He placed both of his hands on his cane and stood up. "If you're worried about him . . . you can stay here for as long as you want today."

With that, he exited the clubhouse.

Left by myself, I put more wood on the fire.

The sound of wood crackling on the fire echoed pleasantly throughout the otherwise silent clubhouse. The flames, which had regained their intensity, illuminated the faded trophies that sat by the bay window.

I continued to throw firewood into the stove, staring absent-mindedly into the flickering flames. Before I knew it, I had a wad of cash in my hand, and tossed that in as well.

Fluttering in the hot air, the bills warped as they caught fire.

The money.

I realized what I was doing, but I couldn't stop. I threw another stack and another into the fire. The flames quickly grew as they swallowed the bills right before my eyes. The number 10,000 was enveloped in flames, over and over again, turning black in the blink of an eye.

I heard a crack and opened my eyes wide.

Outside the window, the sky was turning a pale blue. White smoke was rising from the charred pieces of wood inside the stove.

I rushed to pull my leather bag toward me.

When I gingerly opened the clasp, the bag was packed with untouched wads of cash. I must have been dreaming.

I felt both relief and despair.

Ultimately, I hadn't been able to break free from anything.

There was a high-pitched neigh outside and I stood up. In a stupor, I left the clubhouse and walked toward the source of the voice, stopping when Mugikura appeared on the back of the black horse.

Strada, with his reins in Mugikura's hands, was slowly walking the riding arena, which was covered in thick white fog.

It was my first time seeing Mugikura on horseback—a man who couldn't walk, riding a horse. But he rode as if it was what he was meant to do, from the moment he was born.

NINETEEN

Container carrier, ore carrier, liquefied natural gas carrier. I gave each model ship a lingering glance as I walked down the hallway where they were displayed, wondering if it would be the last time I'd see them.

Fujii walked slowly in front of me. A pink dry cleaner's tag stuck out of the collar of his dark suit. Instinctively, I almost reached out to remove it, but feeling someone staring at me from behind, I pulled my hand back. Walking right behind me was the head of the Accounting Section. We were getting closer to the door of the reception office.

Inside the office at the end of the hallway, the head of the Human Resources Department and Ushio, in his work clothes, were sitting on a sofa. When I entered, they both got up. I looked at Ushio, but he looked down and didn't try to meet my eyes.

I was told to sit on another sofa. Fujii sat next to me, and the accounting head sat across from me.

"These are the documents we'd like you to take a look at, Ms. Setoguchi," said the accounting head, and laid out printed-out copies of cashbooks and records of bank account withdrawals and deposits on the glass coffee table in front of me. I glanced vacantly at the pieces of paper, thinking vaguely that I was sitting on the leather sofa where Fujii and Miu had had sex that day. My eyes failed to focus, and all I saw was a blur—whether they were characters or numbers, I couldn't tell.

"Yuko, I'm going to record this just in case, okay?"

Even before I nodded, Fujii had turned on an audio recorder, which he placed on the glass table, and went on to ask me questions about each item and number in the documents. At times, the head of accounting interjected

with more indepth questions. Perhaps they had agreed on a tactic prior to the meeting, but neither of them spoke to me in an accusatory way. The interrogation continued in a mild tone, like a horse trainer trying to tame a horse. Most of it consisted of simple questions that only required that I nod or shake my head.

Behind me, the head of HR whispered something. I heard Ushio respond, “I didn’t notice.” I became aware of a foul smell, like sweat and old oil.

“Yuko, this is disappointing,” Fujii murmured once the questions were over, as if this had nothing to do with him. When we went over the numbers, the amount that I had temporarily borrowed from the safe turned out to have exceeded 100 million yen. The number felt unreal to me, and as I sat there, dumbfounded, Fujii continued. “Why would you do such a thing when we’d placed our trust in you?”

What about me had these men seen, and what had they trusted? Their cold, hollow words only created more distance between me and them.

“Silence won’t solve anything!” I heard the HR Department head yell from behind. He seemed to have lost his patience. “Do you have any goddamn idea what you’ve done? Did you even think about how much you were stealing?!”

Still, I remained silent, and Fujii, who sat next to me, let out an exaggerated sigh. His bony hands were placed on the cracked leather sofa. I wondered if Miu had told Fujii about the video I had of them. Or had they ridiculed me behind my back, calling me a thief ?

“I promise to return the money.” I had to force my voice out of my mouth.

I could tell that the men, hearing me speak for the first time, were holding their breath. They pierced me with their gazes, as if they were predators stalking their prey from the shade of a tree; they were all waiting for what I was going to say next. But I couldn’t continue. When I fell silent for a while, the men, who realized that I would talk under the right circumstances, shot questions at me in rapid succession.

Why did you take the money? When did you start taking the money? What did you use the money for? Was it for a man? Was it for gambling?

“. . . It was for a horse.”

“Huh?” Fujii muttered. He had an expression that seemed to question

whether he had misheard me. “Do you mean . . . that you were betting on horse races?” he asked, and I once again forced my voice out of my dry throat.

“No . . . my horse.”

“Your horse?” The men’s scornful laughter filled the reception office. I wondered what expression Ushio had on his face as he looked at me.

“Your horse, you say,” said the accounting head, but he failed to continue. He thumbed through the documents on the glass table, as if looking for the answer.

“Yuko, we can’t help you unless you tell us the truth,” Fujii said, perhaps hoping to serve as the “good cop.” “What did you use the money for?”

What was it that I gained with that money? Even if I were able to put it into words, would I be able to convince the men here? *Some things just can’t be verbalized.* Mugikura’s words echoed through my brain, and awakened the sight of the black horse running through the field.

“. . . He turns slightly before I think of which way to go,” I said in a hoarse whisper. “When I got sick, he stopped eating, too. When I was feeling down, he stayed by my side. He even came to see me in my dreams. When he gazes at me, I feel a sense of familiarity, a longing for something I’ve known for a long time.”

Reflected in those eyes was me, living in a world long, long ago, when I was happy. The person who existed before I became the person I am today.

“I’ve always hated singing. But when I’m with him, I’m chatty, I laugh a lot, and I sing, too.”

The happiness I felt when I was with him was like a kind of sadness. That sadness was what gave me the feeling that I was truly alive.

I forced myself to weave words together for men with whom I knew I could never reach a mutual understanding. But the more I put into words, the more I felt that whatever I had built with Strada was disintegrating. I tried desperately to bear it, but tears welled up in the corners of my eyes.

“What are you talking about? Oh, hell, we’re the ones who want to cry.” The HR head was utterly disgusted by this crack-pot of a woman who had begun talking about something so out of left field. The accounting head continued to look for an answer in the documents.

“Yuko, that’s not an explanation. No one’s going to believe that you

spent all that money on a horse." Fujii, who until a short while ago had been speaking in a gentle tone, now sounded quite bitter. This was the kind of attitude I came into contact with every day on social media: irritation toward things one can't understand. The tone taken on by people who had no doubt that they were the only ones who were "normal" and "right."

"This clearly isn't going anywhere . . . If that's really all you can say for yourself, we'll unfortunately have no choice but to get the police involved."

The moment the word "police" reached my ears, my whole body went limp. My knees shook, and I ran out of breath. The sight of Strada lying weakly on his side flashed before my eyes. I strained my voice.

"He's injured. He may no longer be able to run or jump. I can only imagine how anxious and lonely he is right now. I'm the only person who can help him."

If I went away, how was he going to keep on living? How long would he remember me for?

"He's . . . waiting for me."

The moment I got the words out, my stomach convulsed, and sour saliva filled my mouth.

I quickly covered my mouth with my hand, and the men reacted by yelping and retreating to create a ring of space around me. I hurried to the door of the reception office, opened it, and ran into the bathroom right across the hall.

I grabbed the discolored toilet seat as I kneeled on the dirty tiles of the bathroom floor and vomited. Because I hadn't been able to eat since yesterday and my stomach was empty, all that slithered down the inside of the toilet bowl was milky-colored saliva.

Tears fell from my eyes as I wiped the stringy spit dangling from my mouth with the back of my hand. From a small gap in the window of the bathroom, the ocean air blew in.

The wind sounded like that song.

Doo dah da, doo dah da . . .

I sang to myself. The smell of hay and milk reached my nose. The sound of hooves came wafting in on the sea breeze.

I stood up and left the bathroom.

With a wobbly gait, I started walking the long hallway, past the models of the container carrier, the ore carrier, and the liquefied natural gas carrier.

“Yuko!”

I heard the door of the reception office open behind me, heard Fujii’s voice as he tried to stop me. The footsteps of the men coming after me echoed throughout the hallway. Then there was the sound of protective boots clanging chaotically, and a sudden crash. I looked back to find Ushio rolling on the floor. The model ships had fallen, shattering into fragments that blocked the men’s way. I wasn’t sure if Ushio was purposely trying to help me get away or had just tripped by accident. Either way, the sight of him rolling around among the ship fragments was so comical that I couldn’t stifle a laugh.

“Let’s talk this through!” Fujii closed in on me as he trampled the scattered model ship fragments underfoot, back to playing the good cop. “We can work this out! Let’s just talk!”

Talk? With you men? About what? It was so funny that I had to laugh.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

With the corners of my mouth raised, I turned my back on Fujii and began running down the hallway. I left the building through the emergency exit straight ahead.

A gigantic crane at the port was elegantly moving its neck under the blue sky. A pleasant breeze was blowing.

I ran down the road that stretched straight through the shipyard.

A steam whistle blew like a horn, nudging me onward toward my moped, my escape. The sound of an iron plate being sawed formed a jaunty violin part, and the stomping of protective boots created a rhythm, a steady drumbeat. The breeze that swept through the shipyard produced the melody.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

When I ran into the parking lot with the rusty roof, the sound of heavy breathing filled my ears. Strada was standing behind the bicycles and mopeds, locking eyes with me over the iron racks.

Did you come to get me?

I ran to him, and he lowered his head and looked at my face.

Let’s run away together, the black eyes said to me.

As soon as I grabbed the soft leather saddle and jumped on Strada’s back, he broke into a run. I was almost flung off, but I quickly gripped the reins and fell into his rhythm.

He ran. Strada ran.

In no time at all, we'd gone from a trot to a canter.

In the blink of an eye, Strada exited the parking lot, swerved between the various factories, passed by the workers packed like sardines in the smoking booth out front, ignored the security guards' warnings to stop, and left the grounds of the shipyard.

As we sped down the curved seaside road, I heard police sirens behind me. As if to put distance between himself and the sound, Strada accelerated, and continued straight down the highway.

Doo dah da, doo dah da.

I felt powerful as I sang. My heartbeat overlapped with Strada's, creating a rhythm that pounded to the beat of the song we were making together.

Let's go.

I lifted my buttocks off the saddle and brought the reins forward, Strada's muscles swelled, and we went from a canter to a gallop. We flew past the nearly empty home-improvement retailer and the supermarket, then the two chain restaurants side by side, one serving Japanese food and the other Western. The familiar landscape along the highway swept by me for the last time. From atop a galloping Strada, I said goodbye to everything.

"Hey, you!" a raspy voice called out, and I looked to my left to find that the horse trailer from Mugikura Riding Club was driving alongside us. Mugikura was in the driver's seat, flashing us a gold-toothed smile. "Good luck!"

I waved back to Mugikura from astride Strada, and made a right at the intersection sandwiched between the automated consumer loan-application machine and the convenience store with the light blue sign, turning down that narrow road surrounded by rice paddies, still in a gallop.

The paddies, brimming with calm water, reflected the blue sky as if they were mirrors. It was as if Oshirasama were running through the sky.

As I breathed in sync with Strada, my love for him over-flowed from me. Was there a higher form of happiness in this world?

I wanted to turn this feeling into a song and communicate it to someone. Using the words I had once loathed, I would one day sing a story of truth like the legend of Oshirasama. About the day I met you, Strada; about the mysterious dream I had; about me existing inside you, and you existing inside me.

Doo dah da, la da doo dah da, doo dee doo dee doo dah da.

I sang on his back.

He whinnied as if in response—as if to scream that together, we could go anywhere.

TWENTY

I rushed into the stable at Mugikura Riding Club.

In his stall at the back stood Strada. When I looked over my shoulder, my red moped was lying on its side in the middle of the entryway.

In the dim stall, Strada was mindlessly eating hay. I sidled up to him and stuck my hands into the hay bales stacked up against the walls, looking for the leather bag that I'd hidden there. He could live in that horses' paradise as long as we had that money, but I realized with alarm that I couldn't find it. As I was desperately searching through the hay, pulling out clumps of straw with my fists as if weeding a garden, my hand closed around a torn 10,000-yen bill. At the same time, I heard a heavy snort and the sound of something ripping. I turned my gaze toward Strada's mouth to find a stack of bills hanging out of it.

I immediately got on all fours and began to collect the 10,000-yen notes that had gotten mixed in with the hay. But all the bills were tattered from being chewed on.

"What have you done, Strada?"

Without answering my question, my horse used his mouth to grab the black leather bag that he had been stepping on with his hoof and exited the stall through the open door.

"That money was for you."

With every step Strada took, saliva-covered stacks of bills fell, one after another. The center of the bag had a big hole chewed into it.

As I left the stable, picking up the wads of bills Strada left in his wake, the sky turned orange above us, the same color as the boxes from that luxury store. Underneath the orange sky, Strada continued to walk.

“Strada!” I called his name, but he didn’t stop.

As I shuffled after him, out of breath, my arms full of wet and shredded bills, the corners of my mouth began to rise. How stupid was this?

I felt a kind of strength come over me as I smiled. He understood everything.

We didn’t need the money.

All we needed was to be together.

The chestnut and gray horses that were watching us from the riding arena whinnied loudly as if to encourage me. Emboldened, I extended my hands toward Strada’s reins from behind.

“Strada, let’s escape together.”

A gust of wind rippled through his mane.

At that very moment, I felt an impact like that of being hit by a car, and my body was thrown backward.

From the corner of my eye, I saw an armful of 10,000-yen bills flying into the air. Strada, with his eyes rolled back in his head, had kicked me with his hind legs. The world turned upside down, and I landed on my back, my body flat against the muddy ground.

Doo dah da, doo dah da . . .

I chanted the song to give myself the strength to open my eyes wide.

A cloudless orange sky stretched beyond my blurry field of vision. In the distance, I could hear the fuzzy sound of a police siren.

I had to get away. I put my hands on the ground and sat up, finding myself covered in mud and horse dung. My whole body felt numb, as if it weren’t mine. I didn’t smell hay or milk. My nose was hot, as if it were on fire. A high-pitched noise, like iron being sawed, was ringing in my ears. From deep in my nasal passage, a warm liquid flowed into my throat, filling my mouth with the taste of iron.

Cautiously, I touched my nose. It was slimy with blood and certainly broken, twisted toward the left.

Strada looked my way nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened. Without thinking to staunch the flow of blood pouring out of my nose, I looked back at him.

He didn’t look away from me. His eyes were jet black, like marbles. I looked hard to see if I appeared in them, but I didn’t.

The sirens grew closer, and the red lights lit up his eyes and mine in

turn.

What stood there was just a horse, nothing more.

[Read on for a sneak peek of Genki Kawamura's *Exit 8*]



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The Subway

It sounded like the wail of a newborn.

I took off my earphones and shifted my gaze toward the sound. A woman was sitting in the priority seats holding a crying baby in her arms. The subway car was packed. Commuters clung to straps and handrails, their eyes glued to their screens as if they couldn't hear the baby's cries.

"Sorry, honey, just a little longer," the woman whispered to her child. He must have had a fever. Red in the face, the baby continued to cry despite his mother's attempts to soothe him. She seemed acutely aware of the people around her, as she reacted to every shuffle and sigh as though they were unspoken complaints. Someone gasped for breath, taken over by a coughing fit. Then, like floodgates bursting open, a voice exploded through the air.

"Shut that thing up already!"

My shoulders jerked up. Timidly, I turned my head to see who had shouted. A man in a suit stood across from the mother and baby. He was probably on his way to work. He ran a hand through his unkempt hair and trembled in his rumpled suit, his voice growing more heated. "Everyone's sick of it! You're the mother—make it stop!"

"I'm sorry . . ." The woman hunched over her child and bowed her head repeatedly. Startled by the shouting, the baby let out an even louder scream.

"What kind of person drags a baby onto a packed train? Have some damn sense. You're torturing the kid too!"

At that moment, the train jolted as the brakes kicked in. The man

stumbled, crashing into another passenger before slamming his head against the door between cars.

"Goddammit!"

His voice crackled with rage.

Clutching a strap for support, he leaned forward until his face was close to the baby's.

The mother glared up at him. His greasy hair stuck to his forehead, which was furrowed deep with anger.

"You've got some nerve, looking at me like that. You think I'm the bad guy here, huh? I'm just saying what everyone else is thinking!"

He gestured wildly, trying to draw agreement from the people around him, but no one responded. The other passengers tapped their screens, staying silent and motionless. His murky eyes drifted in my direction, and I quickly turned away.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the train window—white earphones dangling from my hand, pale skin, cracked lips, and dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes. I felt repulsed by the man and helpless at my own inaction. But instead of confronting either, I slipped the earphones back in, as if sealing myself off from it all. I tapped one lightly. *Pop.* The noise canceling kicked in, and all the sound around me vanished.

Turning my gaze from the real and uncomfortable, I looked down at my phone and opened my X app. A screengrab from a first-person shooter appeared on the screen—someone firing a machine gun inside a ruined building. Ear-splitting explosions. Spurts of blood. The screen wavered and blurred, and the words "GAME OVER" floated into view. An ad for a new war game.

I scrolled down my feed, and my screen filled with a young boy, screaming, surrounded by smoking rubble. It was probably somewhere in the Middle East, after a bombing. Dark blood ran down his face as he wandered through the remains of a city. I scrolled again. Footage of a city being bombed under a night sky. I could no longer tell whether these images were real or just part of the game.

As I scrolled, the fiery explosion unfolding across the night sky gave way to high school girls in uniform dancing to a pop hit. I scrolled down farther to see a cat hopping around on two legs. A model posing with a luxury handbag. Two men brawling inside a convenience store. A lab rat

with a human ear growing from its back. A group of teenagers attacking a homeless man in an underpass. A president somewhere delivering a provocative speech. An influencer offering a detailed rundown of cosmetic surgery procedures. With every flick of my thumb, all kinds of images spilled out in a never-ending stream, appearing and disappearing in an instant. It all seemed random, but apparently this was content selected by AI, based on my viewing and search history. If that was true, then maybe this endless feed of images was just a mirror of my soul.

Turning away from the crying baby and the shouting man, scrolling past the tragedies on my feed—somehow they felt like the same thing.

I swiped my thumb across the screen. A butterfly flitted through a luxury resort in one clip, followed by a job ad for temporary staff. Then, the low rumble of a siren, like the sound of the earth groaning, poured through my earphones. I stopped moving my thumb and stared at the screen. A coastal town was being swallowed by a tsunami. Houses, boats, everything reduced to rubble in an instant. A boy was screaming, fleeing from the surging wave. I tensed, my body rigid, as I watched the muddy waters engulf the town. Then a soft chime sounded through my earphones, and a message popped up:

Where are you?

I opened my messaging app. The sender's icon was a black cat—it was from my ex. We had broken up just last month, after being together for years. There hadn't been a clear reason or cause. But a certain incident had cast a lingering shadow on our relationship—a shadow that only grew darker with time until we could no longer see how we felt about each other. We broke up, as if to escape it. There was sadness, of course, but also a strange sense of relief. I think she must've felt it too. So then, why was she texting me now? Puzzled, I moved my thumb and typed out a response.

I'm on the subway. About to arrive at today's temp job.
What's up?

I'm at the doctor's

What's wrong?

I'm pregnant

My finger froze above the screen. I stared at the message, unable to reply. Another one followed.

I can't believe this happened right after we decided to break up

A baby's cry echoed in my ears. I couldn't tell if it was coming from inside the train, or from somewhere in my mind.

What do we do? Her messages kept arriving, each one punctuated by that soft chime. I felt my chest tighten. I looked up from my screen and saw my own distressed face reflected in the train window. Light streaking past. A baby crying. A man shouting. Straps swaying overhead. I felt like I had seen this scene before, somewhere.

What do we do? I asked myself again, just as the train pulled into my stop. I pushed through the crowd toward the doors, catching a glimpse of the infant. Still wailing. The mother, bowing again and again in apology. The man, still yelling. Around them, commuters stood motionless, blank-faced, staring down at their phones. The whole scene looked surreal, like a pantomime on a stage.

Swept along by the tide of people, I stepped onto the platform and began climbing the stairs with unsteady feet. From beyond my earphones, I could just hear the melody that signaled the next train's arrival. I recognized it—Maurice Ravel's *Boléro.* My mother loved that piece when I was a child. A single melody repeated over and over, gradually rising as if it were spiraling upward. Even the rumble of the subway sounded like its rhythm now. Moving in step with that rhythm, I merged into the neatly ordered column of people ascending the stairs. I glanced down at my phone again, still unsure what to say. Then, it rang.

"Hello?" I answered, my earphones still in.

Silence. Faintly, I could hear a baby fussing on the other end of the line. She was probably in the waiting room at the OB-GYN.

"Hello?" I asked again.

A hoarse voice finally responded. "You saw my messages?"

"I did."

“What do we do about the baby?”

I stopped halfway up the stairs, completely at a loss. The soft whimpering in the background turned into full-on crying.

“Move it!” barked a large man behind me, jolting me back to reality.

“Sorry . . .” I mumbled, bowing my head. He shot me a glare as he brushed past. I averted my gaze and started climbing again.

“I guess you still can’t decide,” she said, her voice tinged with resignation.

“Huh?”

“You always said you couldn’t picture yourself as a parent . . .”

I couldn’t find the words. I just kept walking. I reached the top of the stairs and headed toward the ticket gates.

“I felt the same way, too, about starting a family. I just couldn’t do—”

Her voice cut off suddenly. A man in a rush slammed into my shoulder, and my phone slipped from my hand, clattering to the floor. I yanked off my earphones and picked it up. Ticket gate chimes, a cascade of footsteps, the low rumble of the subway flooded into my ears all at once. Pain throbbed in my shoulder where he’d hit me. I looked down at my phone.

The upper-left corner of the screen was shattered, a deep crack running through its center. I’d only bought it three months ago. Sighing, I put my earphones back in. Her voice returned.

“. . . and when the doctor said that, I started thinking about it more seriously. She was right—it’s not something I can deal with on my own. That’s why I called you.” I strained to piece together what I’d missed. Then she asked, “Are you even listening?”

“Hm? Uh-huh.” I tapped my phone at the ticket gate and stepped through. I turned right and began climbing a narrow, dim stairwell. Back when we were together, she asked me that all the time—*Are you listening?* To her, it seemed like I was always distracted, always missing the things that mattered.

“What do we do?” I could hear more babies crying on her end of the phone. A tight knot of panic and guilt clenched in my chest. I started coughing.

“Which hospital are you at? I’ll ask if I can get the day off.” Still coughing, I slipped off my gray nylon backpack, unzipped it, and started digging around inside. After sifting through a bottle of water, a power bank,

a small towel, and extra masks, I finally found my asthma inhaler. I put it to my lips and inhaled deeply.

"You don't have to go out of your way . . ." she said in a pitying voice.

"No, it's fine. Really."

It was a big decision, and neither of us could deal with it alone. I took a deep breath to steady myself and started up the dark stairwell toward the exit.

"I think I've already made up my mind," she said.

"You've . . . made up your mind?"

When I didn't know what to say, I just echoed her words— something she used to call me out on all the time when we were together.

"I've decided what I'm going to do."

"Wait," I said, flustered, coughing as I broke into a run. "I'm coming. I'll be there soon."

"I . . . keeping . . ." Her voice was breaking up.

"Hello? The signal might be bad."

". . . not keeping it."

"Hello?"

"Not-not-not . . . keeping-keeping-it-it-it-it-it-it."

Her voice fell into a bizarre, mechanical loop, rising to a shrill pitch before cutting out altogether.

"Hello? Hello?!"

I reached the top of the stairs and glanced at my phone. No signal. The antenna icon was gone.

What the hell . . .

Then I noticed the time on the cracked screen: 88:88. Had the fall broken it? Why now, of all times? I jabbed at the screen in frustration, but the call wouldn't go through.

"Damn it," I muttered, taking off my earphones. I glanced sideways at a middle-aged man as I rushed past.

Ahead, a long passageway stretched out before me. The walls were lined with white square tiles that reflected the cold glow of the fluorescent lights. A yellow panel hung from the ceiling, emblazoned with the words "↑Exit 8" in bold black letters.

On the left wall, there were six posters: an ad for a dental clinic, a promo for an M. C. Escher exhibition at a museum, a notice from a judicial

scrivener's office. These were placed next to an advertisement for a beauty clinic, a recruitment ad for high-paying part-time work, and a poster instructing commuters to mind their subway manners. To the right, a sign with a large pair of eyes indicated that security cameras were in operation. There were three metal doors lined up on the wall on the right, with a fire hydrant next to them. Each door was labeled: Electrical Room, Employees Only, and Terminal Test Valve Room. Two exhaust vents loomed above.

Still keeping an eye on the reception icon on my phone, I turned left at the end of the corridor. A row of coin lockers lined the wall—seventeen of them in all. At the far end stood a photo booth.

I caught a glimpse of my distressed face in the narrow mirror fixed to the front of the photo booth. Between the coin lockers and the booth, I noticed a blue tarp and pieces of card-board laid out across the floor. On top of them, dirty blankets and grimy bags were heaped into a small mound. Scattered in front were paper cups from familiar coffee and fast-food chains, a few of them holding coins. It looked like a homeless person's sleeping spot, but no one was there.

I turned right again and a tall yellow sign with an arrow came into view. It pointed toward Exit 0.

"Zero?" I murmured in puzzlement. The number felt off. Beneath it were names of places I didn't recognize: Nanbu Park, Yonago Temple, Happongi Crossing. Where was I now?

My phone still read "no service." I had to get outside. I had to get to the hospital. I picked up my pace, turned left, then right—then left and right again—only to find myself pausing once more in confusion. In front of me stretched the same white passageway. On the ceiling, a yellow sign reading "↑Exit 8." Six posters on the wall. The security camera sign. Three metal doors. A fire hydrant. Two exhaust vents above.

I was sure I'd just seen this.

I felt bewildered, but kept walking. Under the ↑Exit 8 sign, I passed a middle-aged man. He looked like a typical salaryman: thinning hair, scruffy beard, white shirt, black slacks, leather shoes. He had a briefcase in his right hand, smartphone in his left.

Proceeding warily, I turned left at the end of the corridor. There were the coin lockers. The photo booth. The homeless person's bedding between them. Another turn—and again, the yellow Exit 0 sign. The exact same

scenery. I pushed forward, took another left, then right, then left and right again, and stopped dead in my tracks. My eyes widened.

What the . . . ?

Stretching out before me, once again, was a long white underground passage. And glowing above, in bold letters: ↑Exit 8. Six posters on the wall. The security camera sign. Three metal doors. A fire hydrant. Two exhaust vents above.

How is this possible . . . ?

A middle-aged man approached from ahead. He looked exactly like the one I'd passed earlier. Briefcase in his right hand, smartphone in his left. He walked with the precise rhythm of a metronome, his leather shoes clicking on the floor. His eyes stayed fixed straight ahead—he didn't so much as glance at me as he passed.

I hurried down the passage and turned left at the corner. There they were again: the coin lockers, the photo booth, the bedding tucked into the gap between them. The narrow mirror on the side of the booth reflected my face back at me. My mouth was slightly open, my eyes wild. The sight sent a jolt of unease through me.

I strode quickly to shake the feeling off, and rounded the corner. The sign for Exit 0 appeared again. It was filled with the same names I didn't recognize: Nanbu Park, Yonago Temple, Happongi Crossing. Something was very wrong. I quickened my pace, turned left, then right, then left and right again—then stopped cold. The white passageway stretched out before me. On the ceiling was a sign that read "↑Exit 8."

It's the same passage . . .

I was walking through the same loop over and over again. The click of leather shoes echoed from up ahead. I looked up and stiffened. The thinning hair. The stubbled chin. White dress shirt, black slacks. Briefcase in one hand, smartphone in the other.

"It's the same guy . . ." I blurted out, trembling. He walked forward in a steady rhythm, his gaze fixed straight ahead. I watched him go out of the corner of my eye. Then, the sound of his footsteps stopped.

Why did he stop?

Heart pounding, I slowly turned around. The man was smiling. But it wasn't a normal smile. It looked like a rubber mask had been stretched over his face.

A sharp gasp slipped from my throat as I backed away. The man stood frozen in place, the same grin fixed on his face. He didn't blink. Didn't twitch. It was like time had stopped around him. I couldn't tell if the expression meant joy or rage—it was impossible to read.

Keeping one eye on him, I edged down the passageway, rounded the next corner—and ran. The lockers, the bedding, the photo booth flashed past in my peripheral vision. And again, the sign appeared: Exit 0. Zero. Again.

My breath caught in my throat, panic rising. A ragged cough burst from my chest. Gasping for air, I turned back. He wasn't there. Relieved, I fumbled in my backpack, got out my inhaler, and took a long pull from it. After a few deep breaths to calm myself, I moved forward and turned the corner.

The white passageway stretched out before me once more. The sign pointing to Exit 8 hung from the ceiling. The man, whose face was plastered with a grin earlier, was walking toward me with his usual blank expression.

"This isn't the way out," I murmured.

I spun on my heel and hurried back the way I'd come. I didn't want to be anywhere near that man again. I ran around the corner—but what I saw made me gasp.

I was retracing my steps. The Exit 0 sign should have been on my right. But there it was—on my left. Had the space warped? Or was my mind playing tricks on me? I turned another corner, and froze in place again.

How is this possible?!

Before me, the same long white passage. The same ↑Exit 8 sign. Even when I turned around, the same white passageway stretched out behind me. The same man came walking toward me again. Steady pace. Unwavering stare. Not even a glance in my direction.

My pulse was pounding now, beating so hard it throbbed in my ears. The man kept walking until he rounded the corner and disappeared.

If I stayed here any longer, I was going to lose my mind. I had to get help. I spotted the security camera on the ceiling and began waving my arms frantically.

"Hey!"

The black lens inside the dome faced me, but I didn't feel like I was

being seen. I turned to the fire hydrant and slammed the emergency button. It gave a dry, useless click.

I tried the heavy metal doors, one after the other—Electrical Room, Employees Only, Terminal Test Valve Room. All of them were locked.

There was no way out. Hopelessness hit me like a wave. I slumped back against the cold concrete wall and stared blankly at the poster across the corridor. It was the one for the M. C. Escher exhibition.

Back in school, I'd never been particularly interested in art. But for a while, I'd been obsessed with Escher's drawings of impossible architectures and endless staircases. I wasn't athletic and I didn't care much for classical literature, but math had always come easily to me, and I was fascinated by architecture. Maybe that's why Escher's work, with its mathematical quality, had spoken to me the way it did.

The poster before me featured one of his illusions: nine ants crawling endlessly along a Möbius strip. I stepped closer and stared at it. The Möbius strip curled like a figure eight. The ants were locked in eternal motion, forever circling the same track, a path with no beginning, no end. I was in the same situation. Desperate for any clue that might lead to an exit, I reached out and traced the line of ants with my finger.

I smelled something sharp and metallic, like rust. I looked up. A line of dark, red-black blood was trickling down the wall, creeping over the poster. I staggered back and tilted my head toward the ceiling.

A pool of blood had gathered there.

From above came distant, muffled noises—something like an explosion, followed by the layered groans and shrieks of people in pain. The pool spread rapidly across the ceiling, pulsing in sync with the rising cries. Then it spilled down, dripping over the ↑Exit 8 sign.

I felt a warm sensation on my cheek and touched it with my fingertips. Thick, sticky blood.

"Shit!"

As I scrubbed my fingers together, the pungent, coppery stench stung my nose. I wiped my hand on my sleeve and hastened back the way I came, retracing my steps. I rounded a corner, and there he was again—the salaryman. He was staring intently at his screen, not moving a muscle. I passed him as he stood motionless with his smartphone in his hand, like a wax figure. I approached the sign ahead, and then I saw it.

Exit 1.

I let out an involuntary “Huh?”

The number had changed. It had been zero before, but now it was one. Why? Did it have something to do with the blood? Searching for answers, I stepped closer. Next to it was a sign I hadn’t paid attention to before.

Information . . . ?

I must have missed it because it was so inconspicuous. I passed several nearly identical signs every time I took the subway, after all. But as I took a closer look at this one, I realized it wasn’t your usual “information” board.

I leaned in and read aloud: “Do not overlook any anomalies . . . If you find an anomaly, turn back immediately . . . If you do not find any anomalies, do not turn back . . . Go out through Exit 8.”

Who had put this up, and why? It couldn’t have been the subway staff. Was it some kind of prank? If so, it was disturbingly elaborate. Staring at the sign, a thought crept in: What if this deranged place was some kind of program? The blood— was that an “anomaly”? And when I turned back after encountering it, had I caused the number to advance from zero to one? Then, what about the salaryman earlier? Was his *smile* an anomaly? Realizing that there were “rules” behind all these absurd phenomena gave me a faint glimmer of hope.

Find the anomalies.

If I find one—turn back.

If I don’t find one—move forward.

If I kept repeating these steps, then maybe, just maybe, the numbers would continue to climb, from one to two, two to three . . . and eventually, I’d reach Exit 8. And get out.

I didn’t know how much faith I could place in that strange sign. But right now, it was all I had. I had to believe. I had to get out of here and get to *her*.

“Do not overlook any anomalies . . . If you find an anomaly, turn back immediately . . . If you do not find any anomalies, do not turn back . . . Go out through Exit 8.” I repeated the words under my breath like a mantra. Then, I quickly turned the corner. The passage ahead was the same as ever —long, white, sterile. Lit by the glow of the ↑Exit 8 sign. It hung from the ceiling with the silent authority of a god.

AVAILABLE NOW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Genki Kawamura was born in Yokohama, Japan, in 1979. In 2012, he published his first novel, *If Cats Disappeared from the World*, which has been translated into thirty-five languages and has sold more than 3.5 million copies worldwide. His other books include *Exit 8*, *One Hundred Flowers*, and *Whispering Rooms*, which he coauthored with Marie Kondo. In 2022, Kawamura became the first Japanese filmmaker to receive the Silver Shell for Best Director at the San Sebastián International Film Festival for *A Hundred Flowers*, the film adaptation of his novel. In 2025, his second feature film, *Exit 8*, inspired by the cult video game, was chosen as an Official Selection at the 78th Cannes Film Festival.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Chikako Kobayashi is a Japanese-to-English translator who once almost got a job as a Japanese-English interpreter for Steven Seagal. Born to peripatetic parents and brought up in Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States, she has also spent time in mainland China teaching English. She is currently based in Tokyo.