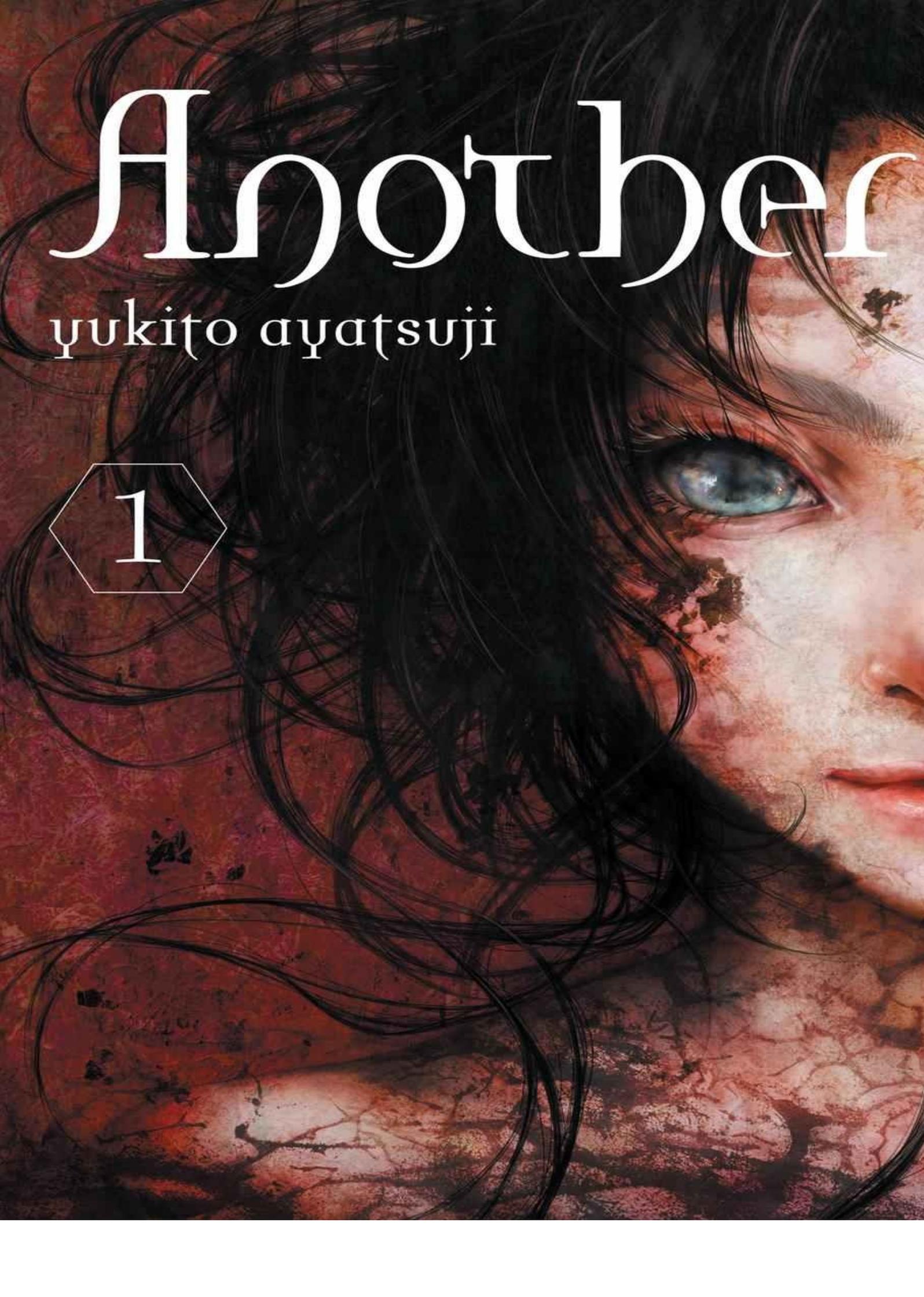


Another

yukito ayatsuji

1



Another

Volume 1

Yukito Ayatsuji



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~To Dear R.M.~

Part 1

What?.....Why?

Introduction

...Do you know who **Misaki** is? **The one in third-year Class 3?** Did you hear the story?

Misaki? Is that someone's name?

Yeah. No one knows what characters it's written with. It could be a last name, so it's not even necessarily a girl. Either way, *Misaki So-and-so* or *So-and-so Misaki*, there was a student named **Misaki twenty-six years ago.**

Twenty-six years? Wow, that's a long time. That's back with the last emperor.

1972. The forty-second year of Emperor Hirohito's reign. I think that was the year Okinawa was returned.

Okinawa came back? From where?

Are you stupid? America was occupying it up till then, ever since the war ended.

Oh, so that's why there're still all those graves.

Now that I think about it, the Winter Games were in Sapporo that year, too. Pretty sure the Mount Asama Lodge incident was, too...

What lodge on Mount Asama?

Are you for real? Whatever, I guess. *Anyway.* What matters is, **twenty-six years ago, there was a student named Misaki in Class 3 of the third-years.** And then...are you sure you never heard the story before?

Hmm...hold on. You're saying the kid was named Misaki? Not Masaki? If it's *Ma-saki*, then yeah, I heard a little bit about it.

Masaki? Huh. Maybe it's like that in some versions. Who'd you hear it from?

An upperclassman in my club.

What'd he say?

I dunno if it was twenty-six years ago, but there was a third-year student named Masaki a long, long time ago...and, um...the way I heard it, it was a boy. And **something really weird happened in his class that year.** But my upperclassman said it's a secret, and you're not supposed to go around talking about it. So he said he couldn't tell me anything else.

That's it?

Yeah. He said, **"If you joke around about it, bad things will happen to you."** I bet you it's one of those things. "The Seven Mysteries."

You think so?

You know how piccolo music starts playing in the music room in the middle of the night when no one's around, or how sometimes a hand all covered in blood reaches out of the lotus pond in the schoolyard? So I figure, maybe this is the seventh one.

I heard that the mannequins in the home ec room have actual heartbeats.

They totally do!

There's a ton besides that. I know like nine or ten of the "Seven Mysteries" at this middle school. But this story about Misaki or Masaki or whatever it was...I don't think it's one of those. Most of the

stories feel pretty different from the rest of the “Seven Mysteries.”

Wow, really? So you know the details?

A little, I guess.

Tell me!

What, you don't care if something bad happens to me?

That's just a superstition, obviously.

Yeah, you're probably right.

So tell me!

Actually, I don't know if I should...

Come on! I'll never ask you for anything else!

And how many times now has it been the last thing you'll ever ask me for?

Heh-heh.

Oh, for crying out loud. If I tell you, you can't go blabbing to everyone you know.

I won't tell anyone. I swear.

Hmmph. Okay...

Awesome.

So maybe it's Misaki or maybe it's Masaki...I guess for now, I'll say it's Misaki. Ever since the first year, this kid was popular with everyone. Brilliant student, accomplished athlete, really good drawing, and even a talented musician. On top of all that, Misaki was gorgeous. And if he was a girl, he was chiseled. Whichever way, Misaki didn't have a single flaw.

That sounds kind of obnoxious, don't you think?

Nope, they say Misaki had a great personality, too. Not obnoxious or stuck-up at all. The kid was nice to everyone and just casual enough. That's why the teachers and students and everybody else adored Misaki. Well, you get it—Misaki was popular.

Huh. So people like that actually exist?

So third year started, and Misaki got put into Class 3 when they switched up the room assignments. And then all of a sudden, Misaki died.

Whoa.

It was still first semester, right before Misaki's fifteenth birthday.

What happened? Was it a car accident? Did Misaki get sick?

I heard it was a plane crash. Misaki's whole family was going to Hokkaido, and on the way back the plane nose-dived. But there are other theories, too.

...

So the other kids got this horrible news, and it was a huge shock.

I bet it was.

How could this happen? everyone was shouting. Other people were wailing, *It can't be true!* And a bunch of kids were absolutely wrecked with crying. The homeroom teacher had no idea what to say to them, and the whole classroom had this otherworldly atmosphere...and in the middle of all that, somebody said: **Misaki's not dead. I mean, look. Can't you see Misaki's here?**

...

This kid pointed at Misaki's desk and said, **“Look, Misaki's right there. Where else would Misaki be? Misaki's alive and right over there.”** After that, student after student chimed in, backing up that first kid. **“It's true. Misaki's not dead. Misaki's alive. Misaki's right over there...”**

...What did they mean?

Nobody wanted to believe that such a popular person had died so suddenly. They didn't want

accept it. That's what I figure. But it didn't end that day. **The class kept it going for a long time after that.**

What do you mean?

Everyone in class banded together after that and kept *pretending*, “**Hey, Misaki is still alive!**” heard even the teacher was in on it all the way. “**It's true. You're right, all of you. Misaki isn't dead. In this classroom, at least, Misaki lives on as a member of our class. From now on, we need to work together to graduate. All of us, together.**”... Or something like that, at least.

It makes a good story, I guess. But I dunno, it's kind of creepy.

That was how they ended up spending the rest of their middle school careers. They left Misaki's desk exactly how it had been, and sometimes they would rest a hand on it and start talking to Misaki—who was supposed to be sitting there—or they would goof around with Misaki or go home together. **But of course, it was all just an act.** At the graduation ceremony, the principal was even considerate enough to set up a seat for Misaki...

Hmm. I guess it is a good story...

Yeah. Basically, this is a beautiful story with some great source material. Actually, there's a scary twist at the end.

Oh? Like what?

After graduation, they took a group photo in the classroom. The next day when they were looking at the developed picture, everyone noticed something. **In this class photo, tucked away in a corner, they could see Misaki, who couldn't possibly have been there.** Misaki's face was pale, like a corpse, and smiling like everybody else's...

Chapter 1

Spring came, I turned fifteen, and right after that, my left lung collapsed.

It was the third day after I left Tokyo to come to Yomiyama and leech off my grandparents on my mom's side. I was supposed to start at a middle school here the day after that, despite the fact that I was a little late in the term to be transferring somewhere—and just my luck, it happened the night before.

April 20, 1998.

Monday, which was supposed to be my first day at a new school—a day for me to make a fresh start—turned out to be the first day of my second-ever hospitalization. My first experience had been six months earlier. Just like last time, I'm back because my left lung collapsed.

"They told me you'll be hospitalized a week, maybe ten days."

My grandmother, Tamie, arrived at the hospital early that morning. When she gave me the news—and I was already feeling isolated in the bed of the hospital room to which I'd only just been admitted—I fought back a pain in my chest and a suffocating feeling that seemed unlikely to ever subside.

"The doctor said there's most likely no need for surgery, but they're going to start a drainage treatment. I believe it was this afternoon."

"Oh...okay."

A few hours earlier, when the ambulance brought me in, the suffocating pain in my chest had felt much fiercer. After resting for a bit, I felt as if it was starting to get better. But to be honest, it was still pretty bad. The X-ray image of one of my lungs—shriveled up in a weird twist—flashed through my mind, not that I wanted it to.

"I feel just terrible for you...so soon after you came here!"

"Oh, uh...I'm sorry, Grandma."

"Now really, there's nothing for you to feel bad about. You can't help being ill."

My grandmother looked into my face and smiled, and the wrinkles around her eyes deepened twice as much. She had turned sixty-three this year, but she still seemed sprightly and was very kind to her grandson. This, even though we had almost never spoken alone together or been so close to one another.

"Um...what about Reiko? She wasn't late to work, was she?"

"She's just fine. She stays focused, that girl. She went home and then left at the same time she always does."

"Could you tell Reiko that, um, I'm sorry for all the trouble...?"

Late the night before, out of nowhere, I was struck by familiar symptoms. There was a disturbing gurgling sensation coming from inside my chest, and that unique, splitting pain, and then the tightness. The moment I realized *It's happening again?* I'd run with the SOS, half-panicked, to Reiko who had still been awake in the living room.

There were eleven years between my mother, who had died, and this younger sister of hers—which makes her my aunt. As soon as I told her what was happening, she called an ambulance. And she even

went with me to the hospital.

Thank you, Reiko.

I owe you so much.

I wanted to proclaim my gratitude in my loudest voice, but in my condition, I was in too much pain to even think about doing that. Not to mention that I had trouble talking to her face-to-face...I dunno. I just get really nervous.

“I brought you a change of clothes. If there’s anything else you need, you let me know.”

“...Thank you.”

I thanked my grandmother in a rasping voice as she set a large paper bag down beside the bed. The pain seemed to increase when I shifted inattentively, so I lifted my chin slightly toward her and kept my head on the pillow.

“Grandma, um...what about my dad?”

“I haven’t told him yet. Do you suppose Yosuke is in India by now? I’m not sure how to reach him. I’ll ask Reiko tonight.”

“That’s okay; I’ll get in touch with him. If you just bring me the cell phone I left in my room...”

“Oh-ho, is that so?”

My dad’s name is Yosuke Sakakibara. He works for some famous university in Tokyo doing research for cultural anthropology or socioecology or something like that. He became a professor in his early forties, so he must be a pretty exceptional researcher. Still, I can’t help harboring some pretty strong doubts about how exceptional he is as a father.

Anyway, he doesn’t live at home anymore.

He casts off his only son and leaves the house empty while he flies around Japan and to other countries, doing I don’t even know what—fieldwork, I guess. Thanks to that, ever since elementary school, I’ve had this weird confidence that my ability to keep house, at least, is better than any of my fellow students’.

Like my grandmother said, my dad had gone to India the previous week for work. The job had come up with practically no notice during spring vacation. He would be staying there and devoting himself to surveys and research activities for almost a year. Those are the basic circumstances that led me to being taken into my grandparents’ home in Yomiyama with hardly any warning.

“Koichi, are you and your father getting along?” my grandmother asked.

“Sure, I guess,” I replied. Even if I thought it was tough having him for a father, it’s not as if I hate him.

“Still, Yosuke is such a dutiful man!” She sounded as if she was speaking mostly to herself. “After this time has passed since Ritsuko died, and yet he still hasn’t remarried. And he does so much to help us, too, at the least little word from us.”

Ritsuko is my mom’s name. Fifteen years ago—the year I was born—she passed away at the young age of twenty-six. My father, Yosuke, was ten years older than her.

From what I’d heard, my dad first saw my mom while he was working as a lecturer at his school and she was one of his students. He won her over almost as soon as they met. “You work fast,” one of his old friends said when visiting our house one time, teasing my dad relentlessly. The guy seemed drunk.

It was hard to conceive that my dad had lived without any women in his life ever since my mom died. I admit I’m speaking as his son, but he’s a talented researcher, and even though he’s fifty-or-so years old, he’s a youthful man with a sweet personality who’s pretty handsome. He’s got a pretty good position in society and makes decent money, and since he’s single on top of all that, I can’t believe

he's not more popular.

~~Was he fulfilling an obligation to his deceased wife? Or being considerate of my feelings?~~ Whatever it was, it had been long enough. I wanted him to get married again sometime and stop pushing the work of managing his household off on his son. That probably accounted for half of my feelings on the subject.

2

A “collapsed lung” is, in fact, a condition called “spontaneous pneumothorax.” More correctly referred to as “primary spontaneous pneumothorax.” It's common among young men who have a tall, thin body type. The cause is pretty much unknown, but it's said that in more than a few cases, fatigue or stress can be a trigger in combination with a person's basic physique.

Just like it sounds, “collapsed” means that part of the lung ruptures and air leaks into the pleural cavity. The balance of pressure gets messed up, and the lung withers up like a balloon with a hole in it. It's associated with chest pain and difficulty breathing.

This illness, the mere thought of which is terrifying—it was six months ago, in October of last year when I first experienced it.

At first, a weird pain started in my chest, and it felt as though if I moved, I would immediately lose my breath. I thought if I just waited it out it would get better, but after a couple days, I still hadn't improved. In fact, it was getting worse and worse, so I told my dad about it and we went to the hospital. As soon as they took an X-ray, it became clear that my left lung had undergone a pneumothorax and was in an intermediate state of collapse. I was hospitalized the same day.

The lead physician decided to give me a treatment called “pleural drainage.”

I was given a local anesthetic; then they cut my chest open with a scalpel and inserted a thin tube called a trocar catheter into my pleural cavity.

The treatment continued for a full week while my collapsed lung reinflated to its original shape and the hole sealed up, and then I was released without further incident. At the time, the physician used the words “full recovery,” but in the same breath he told us, “The chance of recurrence is fifty percent.”

Back then, I tried not to think too deeply about how much of a risk that was. About all I did was acknowledge that, okay, I might get like that again someday. But I never thought I would face that miserable fate so quickly and with such bad timing...

To be honest, I was pretty depressed.

After my grandmother went home, first thing that afternoon I was called to a treatment room in the internal medicine department, where they began the pleural drainage, just like six months before.

Luckily the lead physician wasn't terrible. The pain had been incredible when they shoved the tube into me six months ago, but this time it wasn't bad at all. Just like last time, if the air escaped through the tube and my lung reinflated and the hole closed up, I'd be set for a welcome release. However, they told me that when the condition has recurred once already like this, the risk of another relapse is even higher. If it kept happening, they would have to consider surgery. Hearing that made me even

more depressed.

~~My grandmother came again that evening and brought me my cell phone. But I would tell my da~~
what was going on in the morning. That's what I decided.

It wasn't as if rushing to tell him would change anything. My condition wasn't life-threatening, and there was no need to worry him by letting him hear how feeble my voice was.

The respirator beside my bed emitted a soft huffing, the sound of the air it sucked out of my chest being expelled through water inside the machine.

I remembered the generic warning label that said "may interfere with medical devices" and turned my cell phone off. Then, feeling annoyed by the familiar pain and tightness, I looked out the window of my room.

I was in the municipal hospital's inpatient ward, an old five-story building. My room was on the fourth floor.

I could see hazy points of white illumination below the darkening sky. They were city lights from the tiny mountain town where Ritsuko, the mother I knew only from photographs, had been born and raised. Yomiyama.

How many times have I visited this town now?

The thought cut across my consciousness idly.

There were only a very few instances that I remembered. I don't recall much from when I was little. Maybe three or four times in elementary school. Was this the first time since starting middle school...Or maybe not.

I was pondering that *maybe not* when my mind ground to an abrupt halt. A deep noise was building out of nowhere: *vmmmm*. It hung over me, felt as though it was crushing me...

Unconsciously, I let out a small sigh.

The anesthetic must have worn off. The incision below my armpit, where the tube had been inserted, was throbbing, mingling with the ever-present chest pain.

3

My grandmother came to see me every day after that.

The hospital was pretty far from home, I thought, but she would laugh lightly and tell me it wasn't much trouble since she drove herself. Here was a grandmother you could count on. Although—stuff at home was probably getting neglected at least a little bit, and she must have been worried about my grandfather, Ryohei, who'd been getting a little senile lately...I felt terrible regardless. Thank you, Grandma—I couldn't help expressing my deep gratitude in my heart.

The effects of the pleural drainage were going according to schedule, and on my third day in the hospital, the pain had pretty much subsided, too. The problem that arose then was sheer boredom. I still couldn't even walk around on my own.

For one thing, my body remained linked to a machine via a tube. Additionally, I had an IV drip twice a day. It was pretty tough even getting to the bathroom, and of course, I hadn't been able

shower for a couple of days.

My room was a small one-person deal that included a little coin-operated TV, but even if I turned on, they only air boring shows in the middle of the day. Should I give up and watch anyway, or read one of the books that my grandmother brought for me, or listen to music...? This was how I passed the time that no one would have called relaxing: in idleness.

On my sixth day in the hospital—April 25—a Saturday afternoon, Reiko came to my room.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t been able to come see you, Koichi.”

She told me apologetically that she got home from work late during the week no matter how hard she tried, but of course, I understood that perfectly well. If I complained about it, I’d have been the one who needed to apologize.

With as much cheerfulness as I could manage, I told her about my condition and how I was recovering. About the lead physician’s prediction, which I’d received that morning, that if everything went well I’d be discharged early next week, and at the latest definitely sometime that month...

“Then you should be able to go to school after Golden Week, huh?”

Reiko turned her eyes to the window. I was sitting up in my bed, so my gaze naturally followed hers.

“This hospital is built on a hill near a mountain called Yumigaoka. At the eastern edge of town. Well, look. What you see over there is a bunch of mountains to the west. There’s also a place called Asamidai over there.”

“What weird names.”

“Yumigaoka, because you can get a gorgeous view of the setting sun, and Asami, because you get a gorgeous view of the sunrise. I guess that’s where the names come from.”

“But the name of the town is Yomiyama, right?”

“There’s a mountain that’s actually called Yomiyama north of here. The town is in a basin, but the entire thing consists of gentle hills running south to north.”

I didn’t have a complete grasp of the fundamental geography of the town yet. Maybe Reiko had noticed, which had prompted her simplistic tour. Maybe she thought, seeing the view out the window that this presented the perfect opportunity.

“Do you see that over there?” Reiko raised her right hand and pointed. “That green bit running all the way north to south. That’s the Yomiyama River that runs through the middle of town. On the other side of it, do you see? That’s the field at school. Can you make it out?”

“Oh...uh...”

I lifted the top half of my body off the bed and squinted in the direction Reiko was pointing.

“Oh, that wide, white spot?”

“That’s it.” Reiko turned back around toward me and smiled faintly. “That’s Yomiyama North Middle. The school you’ll be attending.”

“Interesting.”

“You went to a private school in Tokyo, right? One of those escalator schools with integrated middle and high schools?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You might feel a little out of place at public school...But you’ll do fine, won’t you?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“You’re going to be behind on the work for April, what with this sudden hospitalization.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that. At my last school, we were already halfway done with the stuff for third-year middle school.”

“Well, well, impressive. Studying’s going to be such a breeze for you.”

“I don’t know if it’ll be that easy.”

“I suppose I’m obligated to tell you not to get cocky.”

“Did you go to that school, Reiko?”

“Yup. I graduated fourteen years ago, I think it was. Now you’re going to figure out how old I am.”

“So then my mom went there, too?”

“Yup. Ritsuko came out of North Middle, too. There’s also a school called Yomiyama South Middle in town, which is South Middle. Some people also call North Middle ‘North Yomi.’”

“North Yomi? Oh, I get it.”

Reiko, dressed in a black pantsuit and beige blouse, had a slender build and a fair-skinned, slender face. Her stick-straight hair grew past her shoulders.

With that haircut, her features seemed somehow to resemble my mother’s, whose face I knew only from photographs. When that realization struck me, every atom of my heart began to ache helplessly as if infused with a flush of fever. I said that I’m bad at talking to Reiko face-to-face like this because I get nervous; that’s eight-tenths of the problem, and this was probably the root.

“I guess if you’re not worried about the schoolwork, then the problem really will be the difference in how they do things at public school. You’ll probably be confused about some things at first, but I’m sure you’ll get used to it soon enough.”

And then Reiko told me that once I came home from the hospital and could start attending school, she would tell me “the North Yomi fundamentals.” Then her eyes fell to the paperbacks on my bedside table.

“Huh. I didn’t know you liked these kinds of books, Koichi.”

“Oh, uh...I guess.”

There were four books in all. They were both long books broken into two volumes: *Salem’s Lot* and *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King. I’d finished the first volume of *Pet Sematary* right before Reiko came by.

“In that case, I’ll tell you about the ‘Seven Mysteries’ of North Yomi, too.”

“‘The Seven Mysteries’?”

“Every school has them, but North Yomi’s are a little bit different. It’s gone up to more than eight since I went there. You’re not interested?”

Honestly, I didn’t really care about real-life ghost stories like that, but...

“No, you’ve definitely got to tell me,” I replied, crafting a smile for her.

Before lunch on the next day—the 26th. A Sunday.

Like always, my grandmother had come to present me with miscellaneous odds and ends. Then, with a formulaic “All right, I’ll see you again tomorrow,” she left me and returned home. She must have passed right by them. I never would have expected or even thought to dream up these visitors.

who had come to see me.

~~There was a knock, and the door to my room opened. It was a young nurse named Mizuno whom I had been relying on completely ever since I'd been admitted. "Go ahead," she said, ushering them in. It was a boy and a girl I had never seen before in my life. I was, of course, surprised, but since they were both roughly my age and wearing school uniforms, I soon guessed where this visit had originated.~~

"Hello. You're Koichi Sakakibara, right?"

The ambassador (or so it felt to me) on the right spoke—the boy. Medium build, medium height. Black school uniform with a standing collar. Silver-rimmed glasses accented his smooth, soft-featured face and narrow eyes.

"We're students from Yomiyama North Middle, third-year Class 3."

"Ah...hi."

"My name is Kazami. Tomohiko Kazami. And this is Sakuragi."

"Yukari Sakuragi. Nice to meet you."

The girl wore a navy blazer. They were both completely run-of-the-mill middle school uniforms, but the style was totally different from the private school I'd attended in Tokyo.

"Sakuragi and I are the class representatives for Class 3, so we've come on everyone else's behalf."

From my perch in the bed, I grunted, then cocked my head and asked the most obvious question. "Why are you here?"

"You're transferring to our school, right?" Yukari Sakuragi asked. She, too, wore silver-rimmed glasses, just like Kazami. She had a slightly chubby build and a simple haircut that came to her shoulders. "You were actually supposed to start last Monday, but then you got sick all of a sudden. That's what we heard. So we decided to visit you as class representatives. Um, this is from all of us."

She held out a bouquet of colorful tulips. Tulips mean "considerateness" or "philanthropy." I learned that later, when I looked it up.

"The teacher was asking how you were doing, too," Tomohiko Kazami continued. "We heard it was a lung condition called pneumothorax. Are you all right?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

As I answered, I stifled the smile that was rising on my face. I'd been caught off guard by the sudden visit, but I was also genuinely pleased by it. Plus, the way the two of them had come here was so picturesque—they almost seemed like "class representative" characters you'd see in an anime or something. So that also struck me as oddly amusing.

"Fortunately...I guess that's what I'm supposed to say, even in a situation like this. I'm recuperating on schedule, so I think they'll be able to take the tube out soon."

"That's a relief."

"What a horrible thing to have happen so suddenly."

As they spoke, the two emissaries of third-year Class 3 looked at each other.

"We heard that you moved here from Tokyo, Sakakibara," Sakuragi said as she set the tulips on the windowsill. For some reason, it sounded as if she was gently feeling me out.

I nodded, "Yeah."

"You were at K*** Middle School, weren't you? That's amazing. It's such a famous private school. Why did you...?"

"We came here for family reasons."

"Is this your first time living in Yomiyama?"

"It is...But why would you ask that?"

"I just thought maybe you'd lived here, even if it was a long time ago."

“I’ve visited before, but I never lived here.”

“Did you ever stay for very long?” Kazami came with the follow-up.

What weird questions— The thought nagged at me slightly, and I gave a vague response. “Eh. My mom is from here. I guess when I was still little I might have, but I don’t really remember...”

Their rapid-fire interrogation ended there, and Kazami walked toward the bed. “Here.” He pulled a large envelope from his bag and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Notes for classes since the start of first semester. I made a copy, so if you want them, you can have them.”

“Wow. You didn’t have to do that! Thank you.”

When I peeked at the contents of the envelope in my hands, I saw it was, indeed, all stuff I had already learned at my old school. Still, his consideration touched me, and I thanked them again. If that was how it was going to be, I might actually be able to forget all the terrible stuff that had been happening since the previous year.

“I think I’ll be able to start school after we get back from Golden Week. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Us, too.”

I thought I saw Kazami shoot Sakuragi a wink, and then, with a vaguely hesitant expression, he held out his right hand to me.

“Err, Sakakibara? Would you shake hands?”

That left me speechless for a second.

Shake hands? The boy who was class representative was suddenly asking to shake hands, the very first time we’d ever met each other...in a place like this? What did that even...?

I considered that maybe I should just let it go and say, well, public school students are different. Or maybe it was a difference between Tokyo and the countryside? A difference in attitudes?

The thoughts went around and around in my head, but I could hardly reject him and say “Uh, no.” So I played it innocent and extended my right hand, too.

There wasn’t much force behind Kazami’s handshake, even though he was the one who’d offered it. And maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I felt *dampness*, as if he was in a cold sweat.

5

My eighth day in the hospital, Monday, was the day of a modest liberation.

When they confirmed that the “leak” of air from my lung had stopped completely, they took out the drainage tube. This meant I was finally freed from my link to the machine. When the procedure was wrapped up in the morning, I left my room to escort my visiting grandmother out of the building so that I could breathe the open air for the first time in a long while.

According to the doctor, they would watch my condition for another two days, and if there was no change, I could be released. But I would have to rest as much as possible for a little while. I understood that part painfully well without having to be told, given my experience six months earlier.

So I couldn't go to school until May 6, which was after the break, after all.

I watched my grandmother's rugged, inky-black Nissan Cedric drive off, and then I sat down on the bench I'd found in the front lawn of the inpatient ward.

It was beautiful weather, befitting the day of my liberation.

Warm spring sunbeams. Brisk, cool breeze. I could hear the chirping of wild birds here and there, probably because the mountains were so close by. I even heard the cry of a warbler, a sound unheard of in Tokyo, occasionally cutting into the other songs.

I closed my eyes and took slow, deep breaths. The place where the tube had been ached a bit, but the chest pain and difficulty breathing had disappeared completely. Yeah, this was good. How wondrous a thing to be healthy!

After sinking into a momentary swell of emotion that I wouldn't exactly call youthful, I took out my cell phone, which I'd brought with me from my room. This seemed like a good enough time to call my dad. I was outside the building, so I didn't have to be worried about the warnings against "interfering with medical devices" and whatever.

I was pretty sure the time difference between Japan and India was three hours, or maybe four. It was after eleven o'clock where I was, so seven or eight o'clock there?

After some hesitation, I ended up turning off the cell phone I'd just activated. I knew very well how my dad slept in the morning. He was probably pretty tired what with his survey/research activities in a foreign country, too. It would have been cruel to roust him from bed for this after all this time.

I sat on the bench zoning out for a while after that. When I got to my feet, it was because lunchtime was approaching. I want to be clear: The hospital food did not taste good. But for a fifteen-year-old recovering from illness, hunger is a life-or-death issue.

I went back to the inpatient ward, cut through the lobby, and headed for the elevator bay. The doors to one elevator were just starting to close, so I quickly squeezed through them.

There was already someone on the elevator.

"Oh, excuse me."

I apologized offhandedly for my intrusion. But the moment I laid eyes on this other person, I couldn't help gasping.

It was a girl in a school uniform.

The same navy blazer as Yukari Sakuragi had worn when she'd visited the day before. Did that mean this girl also went to Yomiyama North Middle? Shouldn't she have been at school at this time of day?

She was petite and slightly built and had an androgynous face, the bone structure of which was terrifically fine. Pure black hair in a shaggy bob cut. Her skin color was quite washed out, in contrast. I'm not sure what to call it, but it looked like white paraffin, to use a somewhat old-fashioned term. Plus...

The thing that caught my attention more than anything was the white eye patch bandaging her left eye. Did she have some kind of eye disease? Or had she been hurt?

With my mind caught up in all these thoughts, I was embarrassingly slow to realize the direction of the elevator I'd chosen was traveling. It was going down, not up. I wasn't headed for the upper floor, and the car had started moving toward the basement.

I looked at the buttons arrayed on the control panel and saw that "B2" was lit up. Letting my own button selection slide, I seized on an impulse and spoke to the girl with the eye patch.

"I'm sorry, are you a student at North Yomi?"

The girl barely nodded her head, silent, showing no hint of any other movement.

"You're going to the second basement level? Is there something you need to do down there?"

“Yes.”

“But it’s not—”

“I’m dropping something off.”

Her tone of voice was cool and detached, as if all her emotions had been shut off.

“Half my body is waiting there, the poor thing.”

While I stood bewildered by those enigmatic words, the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

The girl in the eye patch slipped silently past me and went out into the hallway, her footsteps making no sound. Something sickly pale protruded through a gap in her hands, pressed tightly against her chest. My eyes fixed on it. I could see something pale, a tiny doll hand...

“Hey.”

I held the elevator doors open and stuck my head and shoulders out to call after the girl.

“What’s your name?”

The girl, the only person walking down the dimly lit hallway, reacted to my voice and came to a momentary standstill. But she didn’t turn around.

“Mei,” she answered curtly. “Mei...Misaki.”

Then the girl walked away, as if gliding over the linoleum floor. I watched her go, not breathing while experiencing a touch of despondency and, at the same time, a foreboding that I could hardly find words to describe.

The second basement level of the inpatient ward.

I didn’t think there were even exam rooms or nursing rooms on this floor, let alone patients’ rooms. It was knowledge I’d absorbed naturally while hospitalized. All that was down there were the food storage rooms, the mechanical rooms, and—I was pretty sure—the memorial chapel.

...In any event.

This was the first up-close encounter I shared with the strange girl—Mei. By the time I learned that “Misaki” was written with the characters for “viewing the cliffs” and Mei was “sound,” April had ended and May had just barely begun.

Chapter 2

“Morning, Ray.”

I admit it was adorable, but the more I heard it, the more oddly unsettling the shrill voice became. I don't know what it was thinking about, but it's such a pain having someone come at you that cheerfully so early in the morning.

“Ray. Morning, Ray.”

Ray is supposed to be *your* name. But of course, my grumbling had no impact. Because the object of my frustration wasn't a person, it was a bird.

It was a mynah bird my grandparents kept as a pet.

My grandmother said it was so small, it was probably a female. And they named it “Ray.” It was—and this gets another “probably” attached—two years old. They'd bought it on impulse at a pet shop two years ago in the fall.

The square cage in which she (...probably) lived was set on one end of the porch facing the garden. Apparently it was a special cage for mynah birds made of thick bamboo strips.

“Morning, Ray. Morning.”

May 6, Wednesday morning.

I had woken up at a ridiculously early hour—just after five AM.

During my ten days of hospitalization, a well-regulated lifestyle of early-to-bed and early-to-rise had been inculcated in me, but five AM was too early for anyone. It had been well past midnight the night before when I went to bed, so for a fifteen-year-old boy who was trying to get healthy, the lack of sleep was egregious, too.

Just one more hour, I thought, closing my eyes. But I didn't think I was going to fall back asleep again. I gave up after five minutes, got out of bed, and headed to the bathroom in my pajamas.

“Well, well, Koichi! You're up early!”

When I had washed my face and brushed my teeth, my grandmother came out of her bedroom. She looked me over, then tilted her head, appearing slightly concerned.

“You feel all right, don't you?”

“I feel fine. I just woke up, is all.”

“That's all right then. You shouldn't push yourself.”

“Like I said, I'm fine.”

I gave her an easy smile and thumped myself on the chest. Then—

It happened just as I returned to my study room/bedroom, while I was thinking about how to kill time before breakfast. My cell phone, which I had connected to its charger, started ringing on my desk.

Who was that? At this hour...

I only wondered for a moment. There was only one person who would make this cell phone ring at such an ungodly hour.

“Hey, there, good morning. How are you doing?”

The sunny voice I heard when I picked up the phone belonged, just as I'd predicted, to my dad.

“It's two in the morning here. India sure is hot.”

“What's up?”

“Nothing's up. You're starting school today, right? I'm calling to cheer you on! You should thank me.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How are you doing, physically? Have you been resting since you got out of the hospital? After all...”

His voice suddenly started to crackle and almost cut out as he began to ask me a question. I checked the LCD screen, and the bars showing the signal strength were barely holding at one. Even that one flickered in and out unreliably.

“...Are you listening to me, Koichi?”

“Hold on. I'm not getting a good signal here.”

I left my room as I answered, wandering around searching for a spot where the signal seemed good...and the spot I found was the porch on the first floor where Ray's mynah cage sat.

“Physically, I'm good. There's nothing for you to worry about.”

I answered the question I'd put on hold as I opened the glass door to the porch. I had called and told him about my current attack and treatment the day I left the hospital.

“Still, why are you calling so early? It's only 5:30 here.”

“You must be nervous heading into a new school. Plus you're getting over your illness, on top of everything. That's why you woke up so early, right?”

Oh man, he knows me so well.

“That's just how you are. You try to be so tough, but in reality, you have a pretty thin skin. You talk after your dad that way.”

“Don't you mean I take after my mom?”

“Well, that may be, but...” Changing his tone somewhat, my dad continued, “As far as the pneumothorax issue goes, you shouldn't brood over it more than necessary. When I was young, I did that.”

“Wha...? You did? I've never heard that story before.”

“I missed my chance to tell you six months ago. I didn't want to be told it was hereditary something.”

“...This is hereditary?”

“My second one happened a year later, but after that, I never had another recurrence. If there's some hereditary link, then you should be out of the woods now, too.”

“That would be nice, anyway.”

“It's a lung disease. Now you have to quit smoking.”

“I don't smoke!”

“At any rate, just tell yourself you're not going to have a third one, and keep your chin up. Although, you know, no need to stress yourself trying.”

“I know, I know. I'll take it easy.”

“Good. Say hello to Grandma and Grandpa for me. India is so hot!”

And so the call ended. Letting out a long breath, I went through the door I'd opened and sat down on the porch. As soon as I did, the mynah bird, Ray, started up with her bizarre voice again, as if she had been lying in wait.

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