

城崎にて

森見登美彦
円居挽
あをにまる
草香去来

四篇



At Kinosaki: Four Stories

Morimi Tomihiko

Mochiguma Translations

Translator: koiabi

Editor: eerabbit

Foreword

“The crab is delicious in Kinosaki.”

Our little gathering of Nara writers is chatting idly at a yakitori bar not far from Yamato-yagi Station when Morimi Tomihiko makes this offhanded comment. On the spur of the moment we decide to visit Kinosaki Onsen. Our lodgings are the Kawaguchiya Kinosaki Riverside Hotel. We feast on a full course of crab, play smartball and shoot targets at the amusement center, ride the ropeway up to pray at Onsenji, and browse the Kinosaki Onsen Heritage Museum. Our memories of that delightful trip are recorded in this book.

—The editor

At Kinosaki (Ao Nimaru)

This is a tale of old Japan, from the days when the scourge known as COVID-19 was still classified as a Class II pathogen under the Act on the Prevention of Infectious Diseases.

A pair of foolish fellows were driving a car fitted with winter tires up a snowy mountain road, grouching as they bumped along.

“Grr. Thanks for nothing, idiot GPS, now we’re completely lost. If I’d known this would happen I would have bought a brand new unit instead of cheaping out on this used garbage.”

“Who’d have thought it would take us off the national route and onto this horrible remote track? I haven’t gotten a single bar on my phone for ages now.”

Shigata and his younger work colleague Butsuhara were presently lost somewhere in the mountainous Tajima region of Hyōgo prefecture, having traveled many leagues from their home prefecture of Nara in search of Kinosaki Onsen.

“Hell, this damn place is just like Nara: all mountains and trees and stuff. I can’t wait till we’re out of here and in view of the wintry Sea of Japan. Once we get to Kinosaki I’m going to lower myself into a piping hot spring and gorge myself on plump snow crab until I’m bursting at the seams!”

“I could go for some sashimi dipped in soy sauce, but crab hotpot and crab broth porridge are pretty tempting too!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be able to use GPS on your phone even if you don’t have any reception? I can’t believe our phones crapped out on us too!”

Keeping one hand on the wheel Shikada pecked with his other hand at his phone, which was plugged into a charger. But the screen remained frozen and unresponsive. Glancing over at the passenger seat he saw Butsuhara tapping tenaciously on his own device, with much the same results.

“Looks like we really underestimated the mountains of Hyōgo. By all rights we shoulda been relaxing in a hot spring right now after a full lunch...”

“Just three hours away by car, Kinosaki Onsen is a perfect day trip from Nara! That’s what I read online, anyways.”

December was coming to an end, and in the midst of the ongoing cold snap they were surrounded by a field of pure white. The mountain road was bereft of signs or billboards; on the other side of the guardrail they saw only an endless dense sea of pine trees.

As if overwhelmed by the mountainousness of it all, the GPS unit which had led them so astray let out a frantic beep, before giving up the ghost and going dark for good. At the same time their phone screens turned off, finally having run out of juice.

"...Well, there goes 94,800 yen down the drain," sighed Takada, poking the GPS touchpanel.

"116,000 yen for me. I just upgraded my phone, 22 months to go before it's paid off," replied Butsuhara, staring morosely at the bricked iPhone 13.

Up to this point Shikada had still been optimistic, but now his face looked a touch pale. He pulled over to the icy shoulder and looked at Butsuhara.

"Say, I just felt a chill go down my spine. It's gotta be my sixth sense going off. I think we'd better turn around now and forget all about hot springs and crab."

"You...you're right. Just bad luck all around today."

"Let's call it. On our way back, what do ya say we stop by Kani Doraku and get us some crab porridge?"

"Sounds great to me! Let's make a U-turn and get back on our way!"

But after they had retraced their route for some distance the comforting ribbon of the national route was still nowhere to be found, and there was not a single sign to tell them whether they were even heading towards Nara anymore.

"Damn. Think we'd better call for emergency services?"

"We can't, our phones are broken!"

"Yep, we're in a pickle all right."

At this point all the blood drained from their faces.

"What the hell!?" shouted Shikada suddenly, slamming hard on the brakes. Startled, Butsuhara looked through the windshield, and past the wipers scraping back and forth he saw, sitting in the middle of the road, a lone little monkey listlessly staring at them.

"It's a monkey. A wild monkey."

"I guess out in the sticks you can find these little guys everywhere, not just in Nara."

Shikada laid on the horn to try to scare the monkey away, but the monkey hardly reacted to the sound. In fact, it started to shuffle towards the car.

"Uh, I think it's coming this way."

"You're right. You'd think wild animals would have better instincts for self-preservation, but there's always an odd banana in the bunch."

Closer and closer the monkey came, until it hopped right up onto the hood. Now they had no choice but to get out and try to shoo it away, and yet the monkey refused to budge.

"The hell is wrong with it? Weirdest monkey I've ever seen."

"It looks like a baby. Maybe it got lost."

"Ah, poor thing. Well that makes three of us, little man—er, monkey."

The monkey put its hands together and did a little shiver, then turned to face Shikada.

"You don't suppose it's hungry, do you?"

"You mean it's asking for food? I didn't realize you spoke monkey, Shikada."

"I don't, it's just the feeling I get. Didn't you put those dried persimmons you got from your folks in Gojō in the trunk? Why don't we give this fella one of those?"

"I guess we could. But we're already in a bind, are we really in a place to be giving our precious rations to a monkey?"

"Still plenty of gas left in the tank, we'll be fine. This poor little guy needs it more than we do."

Shikada popped the trunk and took out a fat dried persimmon from a paper bag, then held it out in front of the monkey.

"Go on, take it. Gojō *tsurushigaki* are famous, you know. They're real sweet. Think they call them *hoshigaki* in other parts."

Hardly had Shikada finished talking than the monkey hurled itself on the proffered persimmon, chewing with evident relish. Neither of them could stop themselves from grinning at the precious sight. When it had finished eating, it let out a single satisfied, "Ook!" and then sauntered back into the trees.

"I'd say it enjoyed that persimmon, eh?"

"I think you were right, that monkey was too famished to move. That was incredible, you're a real monkey mind reader!"

"You calling me dumb as a monkey or something?"

"Now you know that's not what I meant."

Chattering to each other in disbelief they returned to the car and started off aimlessly again down the road. But not long afterward the snow began to flurry down in earnest. The sky, the road, the trees: everything was blanketed in pure white.

"What the hell do we do now? Can't see a thing now, and all these bends in the road are starting to make my stomach turn."

"I'm getting carsick, too."

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to be sitting in a hot spring right now, or slurping up some piping hot crab porridge."

But they could only look at each other with chagrin and struggle on through the blizzard.

Out of nowhere the lights of a building came into view amidst the blowing snow. Getting closer they saw that it had a dignified Japanese-style facade, with a large sign nearby that read:

YAMAKANI-YA

Crab Hotpot Onsen Ryokan

"Butsuhara! Look at that! It's a *ryokan*!"

"You're right! Who'd have thought we'd find a godsend like this hidden in the mountains?"

"And you see that sign? Crab hotpot! This place is like a dream come true! Let's get a room for the night and wait for the storm to blow over"

"You read my mind! Let's just pray they've got a room available for us."

When they had set out early that morning they had only planned on a day trip to Kinosaki Onsen, but now that things had gone south they had no choice. They parked in the lot and fought their way through the heavy snow to the entrance.

The thick automatic doors slid open, admitting them to a spacious, red-carpeted hall with gold-leafed *byōbu* standing along the walls.

"What a luxurious inn to find all the way out here."

"Suddenly I ain't so sure my wallet can cover this. You think they take cards?"

"It's weirdly quiet, don't you think? Given how out of the way this place is I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't have too many customers, but I don't see any staff around either."

"Now that you mention it...where's the front desk?"

As they talked they scanned the lobby and found a long scarlet-lacquered counter. But they approached it to find it empty: instead of a concierge waiting to greet them, there was an LCD monitor on a stand. A long block of text scrolled up from bottom to top like movie credits.

Welcome to our inn. We are pleased to let you know that rooms are currently available. Check-in begins at 3 p.m., and check-out is tomorrow at 11 a.m. Our onsen draws directly from a natural hot spring and is open for use at any time of day. For dinner, we offer a full course meal featuring unlimited snow crab. Furthermore, today marks the tenth anniversary of our opening. In celebration, all guests are invited to enjoy their stay and meals at no charge. We look forward to serving you.

The pair leapt for joy when they read this.

"No charge!? Hot damn! After all this bad luck it's about time something went our way! Hell, this is such an unbelievable stroke of luck that I almost expect the other shoe to drop at some point."

"Just look at how nice this place is, I can't wait for dinner! Unlimited prime snow crab, imagine that! I'm almost glad now that we didn't get to eat lunch!"

It so happened that the antique clock on the wall by the front desk had just struck three. The two read the text as it continued to scroll up the screen.

Please continue through the automatic doors on the left; there is no need to check in. We have many regulations which must be strictly adhered to. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

They looked left and spotted the glass sliding doors.

"A large number of regulations? What does that mean?" frowned Butsuhara.

"I reckon it means that in exchange for the free stay, you gotta fill out a bunch of surveys and stuff. From the looks of it they don't get too many customers around here, so management needs all the unvarnished feedback they can get."

"Hm, I guess that makes sense."

"Yep, that's gotta be it."

The two idiots shrugged and continued through the glass doors deeper into the ryokan. They found themselves in a corridor with *kyōkabe* walls of olive-green, which led to a red wooden sliding door which resembled a *torii* gate. In front of this door was yet another monitor mounted on a stand with more scrolling text.

Dear guests, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 the wearing of masks is required.

Both of them let out a resigned sigh at the same time.

"*Infection regulations*, so that's what they meant."

"Well, we're both already wearing masks, ain't we? I mean, how many people go travelling these days without wearing a mask?"

Each of them looked at the white nonwoven masks on the other's face. I would like to emphasize that, as you all well know, from the very beginning of this tale neither of our protagonists have removed their masks for even the slightest moment.

"If I remember correctly, three months ago Hyogo prefecture lifted its state of emergency for the fourth time."

"Over in Nara we ain't had but one emergency declaration this whole time."

"They never even declared that semi-state of emergency whasit in Nara, did they. But they've still got Omi¹ on the TV every day, talking about the new wave of infection and 'preparing to adopt a new mode of living.'"

"I wonder how long we're going to have to keep taking these infection measures."

"Maybe centuries, maybe forever."

"Damn, that's a horrible thought."

¹Omi Shigeru, head of the Subcommittee on Novel Coronavirus Disease Control

They pulled the door aside only to find that it led to yet another straight hallway, at the end of which was another red sliding door and another monitor on a stand, which had the ostentatious directive:

For the safety of your fellow guests and to prevent the spread of COVID-19, please check your temperature and disinfect your hands.

Beside the door was a tidy pair of contactless thermal scanners and pedal-activated disinfectant stations.

"Same old, same old."

"Emergency COVID-19 measures...this is our new mode of living."

"Ya know, there's something funny about this ryokan. Why are there so many doors in this one hallway?"

"It must be part of that Three C's strategy the Tokyo governor's always preaching about, you know, social distancing. These partitions must be to block airborne particles."

"Ah, I get it now. That's why they don't got anyone manning the front desk, because of social distancing. You can't talk to anyone face to face until you've got a mask and disinfected and they've taken your temperature. Very sensible system they've got set up here."

"Mmhm."

The two idiots shrugged once more and, after verifying their temperatures on the scanners and thoroughly disinfecting their hands, opened the third door and continued onward, into yet another long corridor with yet another door at the end, and yet another all-too-familiar LCD monitor on a stand.

Please present your vaccine card QR code to the scanner.

said the supercilious caption, and beside the monitor was what appeared to be a QR code scanner.

"I'm starting to think this is getting a little much," mumbled Butsuhara, but Shikada instantly shook his head.

"No, this has gotta be part of the government's Go To Travel phase 2 campaign. I ain't used it before either, but I hear that if you've got at least one booster shot you get a hefty

discount from hotels and lodges and such. They're just being thoughtful to make sure we don't forget to use the discount."

"Sure, but isn't our stay free? What do coupons have to do with anything?"

"You big dummy. If we stay free that just means we got to do our part and comply with the monitoring. Hurry up now, you've got your booster, so just get your vaccine app out to show it to the scanner."

"But our phones are dead, remember? They won't even charge anymore."

"...That's too bad, we'll just have to skip this one," said Shikada with a slight flush, and together with Butsuhara he passed through the red door. He was starting to feel that if he didn't see either a hot spring or a bowl of crab porridge soon he was going to go stir-crazy.

"This is a little out of nowhere, but can I ask what you did with your 100,000 yen SCP check last year?"

"Well, hell, what *did* I do with it? I think it just disappeared into my everyday spending. How about you?"

"Me? I bought a Nintendo Switch. Without it there's no way I would have made it through lockdown for a whole year."

"A Switch, huh? I'm surprised you got your hands on one, it was sold out everywhere."

"Yeah, actually, I ended up buying it from a scalper. That's why it took the whole 100k."

"Damn, so ya caved in, huh."

As they walked along the next monitor came into view, with yet another unusual ask.

Please apply the disinfectant solution thoroughly to your face and neck areas.

Next to the monitor were two more pedal-activated dispensers. By this time the slightly less foolish of our two protagonists was getting suspicious.

"I get disinfecting our hands, but rubbing it on our faces and necks? What's going on here?"

But again Shikada shook his head and said, "They're just being extra-careful. The virus don't just live on your hands, you know, your face and neck are exposed to the air. You gotta make sure to kill the virus there too. The way I see it, they gotta have some real important guests in there. A place all the way out here, maybe they host celebrity bashes, or conferences for government bigwigs."

"I see," said Butsuhara, and together they pumped their hands full of disinfectant and rubbed it all over every inch of their faces from forehead to chin and down to their necks. I fear I must retract my previous statement: Butsuhara was actually every bit as foolish as Shikada.

They slid the next door open, only to find behind it a sign reading

Did you make sure to disinfect behind your ears and around your nose?

accompanied by more dispensers.

"That's right, I forgot about my ears. I almost carried those little virus buggers into a room full of VIPs! This management don't miss a thing."

"I forgot to rub it on my nose. Hey, is it just me or does this disinfectant smell really boozy?"

"The hell are you talking about? Of course it smells boozy, it's made of alcohol!"

"Yeah, but I mean it smells more like *mirin* or cooking wine than sake, with a hint of *ponzu* mixed in."

Indeed the liquid had a very faint brown colour. But the two shrugged at each other again, convincing themselves that it must simply be a different kind of disinfectant, and rubbed it all over their noses and ears before traipsing down the hallway.

"The manager is damn neurotic about infection control."

"You don't think they're the kind who forces people to eat in complete silence, do you?"

"Well, I suspect everyone'll be too busy prying apart their crabs to talk much anyhow."

The next door soon presented itself to them, but unlike the others, this one had a short blue *noren* with the character 浴, for bath. Lo and behold, it led to a bathhouse changing room, with lockers along the wall and rattan flooring. Once they had taken off their shoes and stepped up onto the raised floor they found as they had expected another LCD monitor with the following instructions:

Before you retire to your rooms, we invite you to relax body and mind at our renowned hot spring facilities. Please leave your clothes here, then head through the glass door to our outdoor bath.

Two of the lockers had been left open, with neatly folded hand and bath towels placed within.

"A bath before heading to our rooms, eh? Real novel."

"Check-in just opened up, so maybe they're still getting our rooms ready?"

"Maybe so. Well, there's nothing for it. We're staying for free after all, so let's be patient with our gracious hosts."

They stripped off their shirts, then their socks, then their pants and underwear, and placed them in the lockers. After shutting their respective lockers with a click, they looked at each other's stark naked form, and then burst out laughing.

"Ha ha! You dunderhead, you've forgotten to take off your mask!"

"So did you, ha ha!"

"Damn, you're right! I barely even feel it now, it's such a part of me. Ha ha ha!"

"Me too. Whenever I don't have it on I actually feel uncomfortable, heh."

Chortling to themselves, they put their masks in the lockers, then took their hand towels and walked eagerly through the door to the bath, eager to avail themselves of all the different kinds of bath that these "renowned facilities" must offer. But once they were outside, they saw only a single large open-air rock bath in the midst of the enclosed Japanese garden, without even showers or a washing area, let alone other kinds of baths.

"Well, huh. I guess they're like a pitcher with a mean fastball; they're betting their spring water is so good they don't need any other gimmicks. No showers means they probably don't have other water sources or heat sources, so this stuff has gotta come straight from the source."

"All right, it's too cold to stand around showing off how much you know about hot springs, let's just get right in!"

Fortunately the blizzard had begun to slacken just before they entered the ryokan, but a white wind was still moaning, and flecks of snow had begun to pile up on their heads and shoulders.

"Not so fast. Let's at least show a bit of manners and rinse ourselves off first," said Shikada, looking around for a bucket. But all he discovered was a sign beside the bath.

Please accept our humble apologies for the many regulations you have had to endure. This is the very last one. The pot on the ground before you contains salt; please sprinkle it all over your

bodies. This is essential to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Now please sprinkle the salt all over yourselves and rub it in thoroughly.

The salt pot was nestled at the base of the sign. This time, at long last, in the midst of the frozen milieu, both of our nude protagonists stopped and frowned.

"N-now, wait a second. This is just too much!"

"I hear that salt has antibacterial properties or some such, but even I'm starting to get a funny feeling about all this."

"Remember that disinfectant that smelled like ponzu? Now we've got salt. It's almost like we're seaso—"

But just as Butsuhara was on the cusp of an epiphany, Shikada interrupted him with a loud clap.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "Hold your horses, I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"It's a salt sauna!"

"Huh?"

"You heard me, a salt sauna. It's all the rage these days. Salt causes osmotic pressure, which improves blood flow in your peripheral blood vessels, so rubbing salt into your skin helps you work up a sweat, or something like that. It doesn't just help fight infection, it's got detox benefits too. Yep, that's gotta be it. Pretty sure. Awful thoughtful of the management, to offer free salt."

While Shikada was blabbering on and on the north wind had picked up. Butsuhara's lips were turning purple and his shoulders shivered like pudding.

"O-o-okay, I've had enough, can I just g-get in? It's December and we're standing naked outdoors in the c-cold."

"Abs-solutely not," insisted Shikada through chattering teeth. "Y-you've gotta do it f-f-for a real de-detox."

He leaned down and grabbed a fistful of salt, then proceeded to salt himself liberally like an overgrown french fry. Seeing this, Butsuhara relented and followed suit with reckless abandon. They were so thoroughly coated that it was hard to tell whether it was snow or

salt which covered their skin. And at last, unable to withstand the cold any longer, they jumped into the bath with enormous twin splashes.

"Oh, *ohhhh*, that's the stuff. I'm alive again!"

"Heck yeah, you can say that again. Ain't you glad we took the time with that salt, huh? Now we can sit back and enjoy the essence of a real natural hot spring. *Ahhhh*."

They stretched their legs as far out as they would go, feeling the warmth seeping into their bodies, and sighed again and again.

"Feel those toxins coming out in your sweat? It's like dashi leaching out of us."

"Dashi, huh? Ha ha ha! That's real funny. I guess that makes us the hotpot ingredients, heh heh...wait a second."

"Ingredients? Us?"

The two turned their disinfectant-coated faces to look at one another in dismay.

"Those regulations they were talking about, those were to prevent COVID-19 spreading, weren't they?"

"But somewhere along the way they started to get kind of weird. Remember how the disinfectant smelled like ponzu? And that business with the salt."

"Ya know, there's something else."

"What?"

"Hot springs usually smell of sulfur, don't they? But don't this one smell a little like *kombu*?"

Butsuhara cupped a handful of hot spring water and brought it up to his nose, and noticed that there was a distinctly umami scent.

"That's kombu, all right. Now that you mention it, this water is kind of yellowish but it's still see-through. At first I thought it was just the iron content, but it almost looks like hot pot broth..."

"You mean this bath...it's like a hot pot? Now that's just crazy talk...ain't it?"

"Remember what the sign out front said? 'Crab Hotpot Onsen Ryokan'..."

"...So you're saying that the crab hotpot doesn't mean hotpot made from crabs, but hotpot for crabs? Then, then this isn't no outdoor hot spring we're sitting in, it's a—"

"We're the food...aghh!"

Quiver quiver quiver...they were sitting in a steaming pool, and yet both of them began to tremble so violently they couldn't get the words out. And what's more, the temperature was rising at an alarming rate.

"W...we gotta...get out...!"

They desperately tried to clamber out, but it was as if they were chained down. They could only sit there helplessly as the water temperature rose towards boiling.

"Ow! Ouch! Hot!" *quiver quiver quiver*

"Oof! Oh! We'll be boiled alive!" *quiver quiver quiver*

As they shook and sobbed, four enormous crabs, each of them easily over 10 meters in length, emerged and surrounded the bath, speaking their crabby speech.

"It's too late now, foolish humans. It's far too late!"

"Your plan worked perfectly, boss. These days, you just have to write 'COVID-19', and these humans will do anything you say!"

"This COVID-19 business must be really nasty if they're so afraid of it!"

"Heh, they're about to learn they shoulda been afraid of us instead. For too long they've captured our brethren, and boiled them and ripped their legs off and slurped up their brains. They'll regret every crab they've eaten a thousand-fold now, yes they will!"

The two men were so terrified that their expressions were frozen into a likeness of the statue of Gyōki which stands in front of Kintetsu Nara Station. They held each other tightly, sobbing without words.

"Prepare to die, humans. First, we'll immerse you head-first, so that your insides get nice and hot!"

With this burbling threat, a massive pincer descended toward their heads. The two shut their eyes, convinced that this was the end, when they heard a cry reverberate in the distance: "Ook! Ook!"

Without warning a flood of monkeys came flying over the hedge, so many it was impossible to count them all. No sooner had the giant crabs seen them did they begin to froth and swivel their eyestalks in terror, crying out, "No! Not the monkeys! Not the monkeeeys!"

Without hesitation the daring monkeys leapt onto their far larger foes, plunging the scene into confusion. The crabs waved their claws around like construction cranes, trying to knock away their tormentors, but the nimble monkeys dodged aside and clung on for dear life to the enormous shells, nipping and clawing at the crabs' eyes as well as every soft spot they could reach.

"Ooh! Ow! Get off, get off!" the crabs cried. Soon enough the melee turned into a one-sided rout, and the crabs scuttled off in a ragged pod, wailing, "Retreat! Retreaat!"

Watching them go, the monkeys let out screeches of triumph, and after trotting a victory lap around the bath the troop abandoned the scene as quickly as they had arrived, heads held high as can be.

While this was all going on, Shikada and Butsuhara sat there in utter disbelief. But before long they realized that one monkey remained—and to their great surprise it was the very same baby monkey to which Shikada had given the persimmon!

It looked at Shikada with its big round eyes, and after letting out another satisfied "Ook!" as it had after eating the persimmon, it streaked off like a meteor after its comrades.

In another moment, the two men realized that the ryokan, rock bath and all, had vanished without a trace. They were sitting in a snowy patch of grass, completely butt naked, freezing their bottoms off. The ferocious blizzard had died away, and the sun shone through a patch in the clouds.

"Helloo!," they suddenly heard someone shout from far away. "Is someone there? Anyone there?"

Their surprise lasted only for a moment.

"Help! Help us! We're over heeere!" they screamed at the top of their lungs, their voices thick with tears and mucus.

After a little while they saw an old man in an orange vest from the local hunting lodge beating his way through the grass to them, and only then did they let themselves bawl out in joy and relief, hugging one another tight in their birthday suits.

"You two are a hell of a sight. What the hell are you without any clothes out here in the mountains?"

The two excitedly told the old man everything that had happened. But in response to their unbelievable tale, he just looked at them sympathetically.

"Well, we don't want you two catching cold, do we? Why don't you go on and get dressed."

Looking around, they saw that their shoes and pants and phones were caught up in the trees or lying scattered in the grass. A flush of consternation rose up into their pale faces, and they fairly flew to cover themselves up.

The kindly hunter guided them in his car, and at long last they found themselves back on the national highway. But owing to their long naked spell in the snow, upon their return to Nara they were immediately laid out with fevers of over 39°C.

They say fools never catch colds, and indeed after taking a PCR test at their local clinic just in case, they both tested positive for COVID-19.

Even after they had recovered, the lingering aftereffects left their sense of taste a little dulled, which no number of pills or hot soaks would cure, so for a long time afterward neither man was much tempted by a scrumptious meal of crab.

* This parody was inspired by Miyazawa Kenji's *The Restaurant of Many Orders*.

At Kinosaki (Madoi Ban)

“Whoever brings me a hard-boiled egg will be the next editor-in-chief!”

Even the fact that we were on the train to Kinosaki did nothing to tamp down Miyoshi’s natural tendency towards tyranny. The only saving grace was that our car was mostly empty.

The Kōnotori Express was running on time. Through the windows the terrain had turned into mountains, mountains, and more mountains, and even I, who didn’t know the first thing about the geography of Hyōgo, knew that it wouldn’t be much longer before we arrived.

“I know this is a club trip, but do you mind chilling out?” I asked.

Miyoshi scowled at me and clicked his tongue. His conspicuous combination of gold-frosted tips and sunglasses made him look like a petty thug; the fact that he was lined up to take over his family law firm was enough to convince me that the world was doomed.

We’d taken two seat rows, turning the front row around so that the four of us could sit facing each other. If only it was anyone besides Miyoshi sitting directly in front of me, but I was so stoked to be on a February trip to Kinosaki that I was willing to put up with it.

“Wake up, Erikawa, and you might notice the difference.”

Erikawa being me.

“He’s right...” said Amiko in the seat next to Miyoshi, looking thoughtful. “Normally he’d tell you to write a whole article in an hour, or reject a piece you worked really hard on all like it was nothing. Kinda like when someone sexually harasses everyone when we’re playing King’s Game. But today he’s not like that.”

Harsh but true. I had to admire her for having the guts to say that to his face.

Hamauzu Amiko was as cunning as she looked, always playing her cards close to the chest. It was almost scary how she could charm her way into anyone’s confidence; she’d just been chatting up a couple of old ladies who loaded her up with all sorts of goodies. Not that we could complain, since we all benefited from it.

"You got that right. I'm just skirting the line so that I can't get sued for harassment. I'm a lawyer-to-be, remember?"

I couldn't believe he said that with a straight face.

"I'll tell you all the details later, but right now all you need to know is that the tradition for selecting the next editor-in-chief of Third Eye involves hard-boiled eggs and stuff. No one knows exactly how long we've been doing it this way, though supposedly it's been going on for at least thirty years."

Third Eye was the name of our college student co-op's magazine. We mostly published articles written by students. The mag didn't make any money, but the co-op took care of all the publishing costs, so we could put out whatever we wanted without having to worry about being in the red. I guess you could say that the occasional letter from a reader was our reward.

We'd been hard at work writing articles since last April, labouring as lowly freshmen under the Chief Miyoshi regime. I was only vaguely interested in writing for the magazine when I went to their welcoming party, but it didn't take long before I was hooked. It didn't help that I don't have any hobbies to speak of, so I found myself dedicating every minute of free time I had to Third Eye.

The way Miyoshi threw his weight around you'd think he was older, but he was actually only a sophomore himself.

"I got this position by getting a boiled egg to the previous chief. Oh, and my rivals for the spot? They're all dead."

"Whatever line you said you were skirting, I think you just crossed it."

"It's a metaphor, relax. I'm just saying you have to be prepared to do whatever it takes."

"Then I'm just going to say it now, I'm definitely the most devoted."

My mind went back to the events of the last ten months. The very first article I wrote was rejected, so I furiously rewrote it...only for it to get rejected again. I gave up my weekends to work on an article because we suddenly decided to publish an extra issue...rejected. I put up with a lot of things, but I was determined to one day become the next editor-in-chief.

"You're such a harsh taskmaster, Chief Miyoshi. You do realize that if it were anyone else but me they'd have quit a long time ago, you know?"

"Not like I forced you. If you want I can move you to proofreading duty?"

"I wrote the most articles of any of the freshmen. It's like having the most wins in baseball!"

"You also had the most rejections."

"Doesn't that just prove how motivated I am?"

"If everything was down to motivation, we wouldn't need job interviews or elections now, would we?"

He just had to be quick with the comeback, didn't he.

"Yeah, well, I still don't buy this tradition. I mean, if it let someone like you be chief..."

"Well, lemme ask you this. Why do you want to be chief editor so bad?"

"...I'd rather not talk about it here."

I sneaked a glance at Narusawa Umi, who was drowsing in the seat beside me, and lowered my voice to a whisper so I wouldn't wake her.

"All I'll say is, I'm fine as long as it's not Narusawa."

Both Miyoshi and Amiko were struck dumb when they heard my confession. It was Narusawa herself who broke the silence.

"...What about me now?"

She sounded sleepy, but then again maybe was just politely pretending not to have heard. Not that I cared if she had.

"Nothing," I said.

"Kay," she said with a little yawn, plucking her black-framed glasses from her breast pocket and putting them on.

Narusawa was a petite girl who kind of reminded me of a frog; I bet if you splashed a bucket of water on her she would barely even flinch. She was pretty hickish, but she could be weirdly charming, and I heard that she had a sneaky cult following among the boys. But she kept herself so busy—not just here but in the literature club too—that she didn't seem to have much interest in relationships.

"Well, look: to head up this magazine you've got to be a despot. The magazine has to reflect your own aesthetic, and in order to do that you have to be prepared to reject everything that doesn't meet your standards."

"I *am* prepared!"

Miyoshi's eyebrow twitched. I'd meant to show him how determined I was with my eager beaver act, but apparently that had backfired.

"Let's look at your articles. You're not any better than anyone else, but your articles are always looking down on the reader. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? From this moment I dub thee: Princess Soapbox!"

I'd thought that I was used to Miyoshi's mockery, but sometimes he'd come at you from an unexpected angle and catch you off guard. True, I knew that I tended to bite off a bit more than I could chew with my writing, but how else was I going to get ahead?

"...Then what about Narusawa's writing?"

The whole editing room agreed that her writing was superb, but I thought it was a little out of place for a magazine like Third Eye.

"You shouldn't be jealous of birds just because they can fly and you can't, right? You're clearly just different types of creature, that's all."

"Maybe, but..."

"The fact that you don't have a comeback ready to go just means that you're a pipsqueak. You're self-conscious, you're afraid that you're the hunted, not the hunter."

All this time Narusawa just sat there quietly listening to Miyoshi talk her up. That's the kind of girl she was.

"Anyways, long story short, I'm going to be choosing one of you three to be the next editor-in-chief."

Finally! I'd been expecting there to be some talk about succession in February, but I didn't think it would happen like this.

"Oh, so that's why we're heading to camp a little early."

How could Amiko be so blasé at a time like this? Well, it's never a bad thing when the field's a little weak.

"But why would you choose any of us?"

Matter-of-factly asking the tough questions: a real Narusawa specialty. Even Miyoshi was taken aback by how direct it was.

"Good question...well, you, Hamasaki, are a great communicator, so you'd make the editing room run like clockwork and secure interviews without any trouble. And you, Narusawa, are such a great writer that you can make anything work; people just want to follow you. Something like that."

"Wait. What about me?"

"You're just here to make the number even."

No hesitation that time. I was about to fire back but all of a sudden he got up and grabbed down his bag from the luggage rack.

"...But none of that matters, as long as you can complete the ritual of the egg."

I was going to ask him what that meant, but it was then that the Kōnotori Express started to slow down as it pulled into the end of the line: Kinosaki Station.

Funny, considering I was born and bred in Kansai, that this was the first time I'd ever visited Kinosaki. But now that I was here it made sense: you've got to cross hill and dale to get here. The Sea of Japan is so close, yet so far away. No wonder my folks always just booked a shuttle bus from Umeda to go to Arima Onsen.

"I thought onsens were always built straddling a river."

"And the buildings are way shorter here than the ones at Arima Onsen."

To the right outside the JR station we were greeted by a street filled with ryokan and souvenir shops. It was completely jammed with tourists.

"The ryokan are fairly small, but the river is just a little ways over that way. It's called the Ōtani River. Plenty of ryokan and onsen on both sides."

I guessed things would quiet down once we got through this crowd.

"Hope everything isn't completely filled up with all these sightseers. You figure they can keep building more additions, you know? It's a big business opportunity."

Personally, I'd feel pretty suffocated if they turned this street into a canyon of skyscrapers, but what do I know.

"The yen is super cheap right now, but who knows how long the tourism boom will last. Even some pretty well-known onsen run into trouble trying to downsize their operations. Maybe these smaller onsen are sized just right."

We navigated through the crowd with our luggage in tow. There were a lot of foreign tourists in the crowd. Good for Kinosaki, I supposed, but I would have preferred a more low-key vibe.

There was a sudden gust of wind, and on it was the faintest scent of the sea.

"I forgot that we were by the ocean...if we're out here too long it's going to dry out my hair."

"I love the smell of the sea. It makes me feel like I'm travelling in exotic lands, even though our feet remain planted upon our native soil."

There it was: a wild Nurusawa-ism. They always had the effect of making me feel downright mundane.

"We should pig out on some crab while we're here. You can't do that at Arima!"

...well, at least with Miyoshi I wasn't the most mundane one here.

"All-you-can-eat crab is all well and good, but don't go too crazy or you'll be cursed by the crabs."

"Actually it just so happens that there's a place in Kinosaki called Kanizuka. All you gotta do is go pray there after you eat, and then you won't be cursed."

Over the course of this dull conversation we arrived at our lodgings, Sasazuka-ya. Apparently Third Eye had always held its winter retreats at this ryokan. Sure, it looked really historic, sort of comfy in a homely way...allright, I'll just say it, it reminded me of a cheap B&B. None of the tourists wanted to stay here in a hole-in-the-wall like this, I guessed.

"All right, everyone be at the Kinosaki Moto-Yu at 3:30. And don't be late!" said Miyoshi after we checked in, making a beeline directly for the boys' quarters. That wasn't a lot of free time, but even so it felt amazing to finally be free.

We went into the girls' room. Based on how cheap the retreat fee was I'd been bracing myself for the worst, but it was surprisingly not as dingy as I had expected. There was even

a spacious veranda. The view alone, with the Ōtani River and the tourists strolling along, was more than worth the cost.

"Place isn't so bad," Amiko commented.

"Yeah, I'm glad I came," I said, looking at the clock. It was about 3 right now; the rest of the club was supposed to arrive at 5, which left 2 hours or so in between. What was Miyoshi planning to do between now and then?

"Do you guys mind if I take a nap? I'm exhausted," said Narusawa, in the midst of pulling out a futon from the closet.

"Of course you can't!" I hastily stopped her. "It takes 20 minutes to walk to the Moto-yu, we gotta get going soon unless you want us to be late!"

I couldn't believe someone could be that lazy, I mean, it only takes a second to look it up on your phone.

"Yeah, then I guess we'd better lock up our valuables. You guys have anything you want to store?" said Amiko, shutting an expensive-looking wallet in the safe.

"You're leaving your wallet?"

"Yeah, I mean you can probably get away with paying with your phone. We're at a tourist spot after all."

Narusawa and I held on to our wallets anyways. No clue what Narusawa's reasoning was, but I wasn't nearly as confident in tourist infrastructure.

"Do we need to bundle up?" asked Narusawa.

I thought about it. It'd been cold when we arrived at the station, but it was a sunny day, and considering the time of day I was pretty sure we could get by without.

"I'm not taking my coat," stated Amiko, "It'll get cold after sunset, but we'll probably be back by then."

"That makes sense. Then I won't wear mine either."

I watched them hang their coats up in the closet, but just in case I decided to wear my down jacket. I get cold easily.

The Moto-yu was supposed to be walking distance from Sasazuka-ya, following the Ōtani River into the mountains. Still plenty of people along the way, but not so many that we'd have to fight through crowds.

The three of us took our time getting there, savouring every moment of the reprieve which Miyoshi had tossed our way. As I took in the willows along the riverbank swaying in the wind, and listened to the *click-clack* footsteps of *geta*-clad onsen guests on the stone pavement, I started to really feel like I'd arrived in Kinosaki. Like damn, there really was a day-and-night difference when Miyoshi was out of sight and out of mind.

Now that I had some space to breathe, I realized this was a perfect opportunity to knock my rivals down a peg.

"Hey, have either of you read *At Kinosaki* before?"

"Nope, not me."

"I read it a long time ago."

Amiko was whatever, but I hadn't expected Narusawa to say that.

"So you didn't even look at it before you came here? I thought you wanted to become an author?"

"I don't see what visiting Shiga Naoya's favourite onsen and writing have to do with one another."

"Now that's not a very romantic thing to say."

"It sounds like you've read it, Erikawa. Why don't you summarize it for Amiko?"

The fact that she still called me by my last name wounded me. For crying out loud, we'd known each other for over ten months now.

"It's based on a real episode from Shiga Naoya's life, when he visited Kinosaki to recuperate after being hit by a train on the Yamanote line."

Not that anyone really wanted to know, but I didn't want to waste the chance to review it, so I explained the story as we walked. That being said I hadn't been expecting to talk about it, and I was a little fuzzy on some of the details.

"He narrowly escapes being killed, but there's still a chance he might develop spinal tuberculosis, so he begins to reflect on life and death...I guess the climax is the passage

with the newt. He sees a newt by a stream and throws a rock to scare it, but by accident he kills it.”

“No way. First, how the heck did he survive getting hit by a train? Wouldn’t you think he’d be torn to bitty pieces? You’re not exaggerating, are you?” Amiko cackled.

I wasn’t expecting that so I didn’t know what to say. *Life and death are not opposite poles, they exist side by side*, I’d been planning to continue. *Naoya realizes that he owes his life to the slimmest of margins, and so he departs from Kinosaki.*

“Trains didn’t move so quickly in those days, so it’s possible that’s how he miraculously survived. But because the shadow of death still loomed over him, everything became a reminder for him to reflect on life and death. That’s only my theory, but it kind of makes me jealous of Shiga Naoya.”

“Narusawa...why do you say that?”

“Because even as humanity is wracked by disease and natural disasters, even as the fires of war rage beyond the sea, I still think of them as someone else’s problem. If I were to look death in the eye, would I even recognize it?”

“I think I get it,” said Amiko. “Me, I’m still trying to figure out this love thing.”

“I don’t understand the first thing about love, either. Then again, it’s not a given that an event which shakes your worldview will necessarily fall into the realms of either Eros or Thanatos. Yes, maybe I read novels in search of what that means to me.”

“In plain Japanese, please?”

I wasn’t trying to be mean, I was genuinely curious what she meant.

“I think the nice thing about novels is, you can relive experiences which you never would have had in your own,” replied Narusawa matter-of-factly, not seeming particularly bothered. But that just made me want to press the attack.

“Then, you think your life is important enough to add to other people’s lives that you want to write about it?”

“Don’t be mean. We’re only 19, you know?” said Amiko.

“There’s nothing wrong with what Erikawa said. The only things that appear in my novels are people who spring out of my own head. No matter how careful I am, there’s a good

chance that the worlds I create are written in a way that is overly convenient for me. So I constantly have to think about how to avoid that.”

God, she made me want to burst out laughing. Miyoshi was right: we inhabited completely different planes.

“For example...let’s say that our fates were determined by someone rolling a die. Would we give up and let ourselves become stagnant, or would we persevere and carry on? I think it’d be interesting to write on that theme. And I think that if I did, I’d be able to bring forth and depict characters holding world views entirely different from my own. I’m glad you’re with me here in Kinosaki, Erikawa.”

Her politeness made my chest ache a little. She didn’t need me to get where she was going. She would have gone down this path regardless; I just happened to be standing on the road as she walked by.

“You know, Narusawa, I haven’t seen anything by you in the lit club magazine. Don’t they only publish 4 issues a year? There’re only two more issues left in the year.”

Narusawa shrugged.

“They didn’t exactly get axed or anything. My pieces just didn’t match everything else, so they left them out. ‘We’re busy,’ is all they said.”

“Come on...if you went to the trouble of writing something you gotta find other ways to put it out there!”

“Wait, did you seriously dig up the lit magazine just to pick on Narusawa? I can’t tell if you’re a fan or a hater.”

“That’s not what I...”

I was about to correct Amiko when Miyoshi came into view ahead, standing with his arms crossed. During our conversation we’d arrived at the Kinosaki Moto-yu.

“Ah, there you are.”

I thought the Moto-yu would be an outdoor hot spring, but it turned out to be just a rock surrounded by a fence. The only hot spring-ish things nearby were a footbath and an even punier pool of hot water...now what was that there for?

Miyoshi answered my unspoken question as if he’d read my mind.

"This is the *onsen-tamago* spot. You buy raw eggs from that shop there and boil them in here."

He bought three eggs and dropped them one by one into the pool, each in a separate slot.

"And, begin!"

"Begin what?"

"Read that," he said, pointing to the sign.

Extra soft: 11-13 minutes

Soft: 14-16 minutes

Hard: 17+ minutes

After we'd taken a look he pointed towards the mountains.

"See that ropeway station over there? It's called Sanroku Station. In about 17 minutes I'm going to take the gondola to the top of the mountain. Whichever of you can get in the gondola with me and hand me a hard-boiled egg at the summit, I'll make you the next editor-in-chief. But if the egg is still soft-boiled, you're out."

He explained all this in a single breath, but I'd already noticed something was wrong.

"Wait!"

"What? I want to get going."

"If it takes 17 minutes to hard boil an egg, how do we get to the station before the gondola leaves?"

It was 5 minutes' walk to Sanroku Station, maybe 3 minutes if you booked it. But if we were supposed to get the egg there along with Miyoshi, the egg would still barely be soft-boiled.

"Ay, there's the rub. Use your little noggins to figure it out."

"What does any of this have to do with picking the next chief editor?"

"It at least ensures that whoever it is isn't a total dimwit. Lates!"

With an evil smirk, Miyoshi sauntered off towards the ropeway.

"Miyoshi started a stopwatch when he dropped the eggs in. It's already been 1 minute!"

As soon as I realized that the clock was already running, I had an attack of vertigo at the thought that I might not be the next editor-in-chief. I'd never even considered the possibility that next year I might be a lowly editor working underneath Narusawa or Amiko. My brain went into overdrive trying to prevent this dire fate from becoming reality.

I needed to make a hard-boiled egg and make it to the gondola on time to give it to Miyoshi...well, how about this. First, I'd position a chain of assistants between here and the station. As soon as the egg was hard-boiled I'd take it out and have my assistants relay-toss it all the way down. It'd probably take about a minute to get it to the station, which meant that I'd only be able to boil it for 16 minutes, but that was probably within the margin of error...

Nah, finding enough assistants in time was going to be pretty hard, and tossing a fragile little hard-boiled egg around would be a recipe for disaster.

Argh, I was so worked up that I was having trouble coming up with an even remotely realistic solution.

"Not to interrupt your obviously tormented chain of thought, but what if I told you that I already had a solution?"

My entire body went stiff when Amiko unexpectedly piped up. Here I was, still clutching at straws, and Amiko already had the answer? But then again maybe she was bluffing.

"So you're really gunning for the spot too?"

"Nah, frankly it doesn't matter much to me either way. But I figure, if I were chief editor, I could put out some more interviews. I could go around asking about fun stuff, then I could have Narusawa write them up...yeah, that sounds pretty good to me."

"Have Narusawa write for you? Good luck with that!"

"Ooh, feeling spicy, are we? Hey, how about this. If you tell me why you wanna be editor, I might just hand over my solution."

It was a very, very tempting offer. If Narusawa hadn't been standing there I might just have given in.

"...I don't want to tell you."

"So you're gonna be stubborn, huh? You sure you're not going to regret it if that pride ends up costing you the spot? It's been 3 minutes now...I wouldn't waste too much more time racking my brains if I were you."

Decisions, decisions. The way things were looking, Amiko might start heading to the ropeway any second now. I had a strong urge to put her in a full nelson to keep her from leaving, but that would just fritter away more of my own precious time.

What was I going to do?

But then I was hit with a revelation.

"Hold it right there...you can drop the act now."

"It's not an act. I've got it all planned out..."

"Sure. I believe you when you say you've got it all figured out. But you left your wallet back at the ryokan. How are you going to buy a ticket at the ropeway?"

"Oopsie..."

It was complete guesswork, but an ancient ropeway like that, I was pretty confident they didn't have cashless payment set up.

"If you want to go up the ropeway, you'll need to borrow money from either me or—"

"I don't mind spotting you the fare," Narusawa chimed in.

"At least let me finish!"

Narusawa had destroyed my bargaining position, the thoughtless wench. But Amiko didn't seem to care much either way.

"Eh, I bet if I asked Miyoshi he'd lend it to me too...but whatever. If you really don't want to talk about it, Eri, that's okay. You can be chief editor."

Amiko seemed to be enjoying all this. I was relieved that she'd dropped out from the race, but I still didn't know what her solution was.

"Actually, I think I've got the answer as well," said Narusawa nonchalantly.

"You'd better not be bluffing too!"

"Uh-uh. At first I was confused too. But then when Amiko said that she had it, it was like a lightbulb went off...kind of like a mental chain reaction."

I felt myself break into a cold sweat. Narusawa wasn't devious enough to lie in a negotiation. Which meant that if she wanted it, the editor-in-chief spot was as good as hers.

"You're really worried about me becoming chief, aren't you?"

"Not worried, exactly...I guess I'd just prefer it not be you..."

"Do you mind telling me why? I just can't figure it out."

"If I had to guess...maybe she just doesn't like you?" guessed Amiko bluntly, but Narusawa shook her head.

"There has to be more to it than that."

I was so tempted to just unload it on them. But that just wasn't my style, and anyways there wasn't enough time. Even assuming I could convince them, by the time that happened the gondola would already have departed, and we'd all be out. Then with the ritual out of the way, Miyoshi would be able to choose whoever he wanted. I didn't know if it'd end up being Narusawa or Amiko, but it definitely wouldn't be me.

"It's been 11 minutes...it's now or never."

Amiko's reminder snapped me out of it. If we were all going to be disqualified anyways, I'd rather just board the gondola and bargain with Miyoshi. I still hadn't figured out how to hard-boil the egg, but I could still bring him a soft-boiled one and improvise my way through it.

"Sorry girls...it'll have to wait!"

I scooped up one of the eggs and stuffed it into my down jacket, then dashed like a jackrabbit towards Sanroku Station. I wished I hadn't worn the jacket, because with every step I could feel the air tugging at it and slowing me down. *They could easily chase me down and grab me*, I thought, scaring myself with my own as I puffed up the stone steps. I was running out of breath but I kept forcing my legs to pump up and down, and when I finally reached the entrance of the station I turned around and discovered that neither of them had followed me.

I should have been relieved, and yet I was kind of disappointed. It was like they were telling me that being editor-in-chief wasn't as important as I thought it was. But now it looked like I was like the only one in the running.

The gondola hadn't arrived yet when I went inside. Miyoshi was standing at the back of the line.

"Great, it's *you*..." he said once he laid eyes on me, with a deeply disappointed sigh. "Fine, let me buy your ticket."

He detached himself from the line and took his wallet out, heading to the ticket window. It was more expensive than I'd expected, 1200 yen for a round trip to the top.

"You don't have to..."

"Of course I do."

"All right..."

The boarding announcement came just as I got my ticket and brochure and was headed to the line. Without a word to each other we hurried to the platform.

We just managed to squeeze in, but we were with two groups of foreigners, and the air was filled with foreign tongues. English and Chinese, I think, both of which I'd studied in class before, but I couldn't make out a single word.

"I guess I'd prefer a little background noise for this..." Miyoshi said quietly, just before the gondola started to move.

I didn't get it, so without thinking I just blurted out, "What does that mean?"

"I'll keep it simple. I'm not making you editor-in-chief."

As the gondola shuddered off, my mind went blank. I'd come all this way for the sole purpose of convincing Miyoshi, yet it was over before it'd even begun.

"But...I've spent more time in the editing room than any of the freshmen. And I've written so many articles..."

My mind turned over everything that had happened in the months since I'd started college, the good things as well as the bad. What had I put in all that hard work for?

"That's the thing with you. It's only natural to expect your own effort to be rewarded, but why should that matter to anyone else?"

Miyoshi sighed deeply, looking pained. He looked like he was trying to vomit out an invisible hairball. I'd never seen him so tortured, not even half an hour before going to print.

The multilingual chatter around us had died down. Maybe they thought we were breaking up or something.

Miyoshi breathed in slightly, as if to take a beat, and then let it all out.

"You've convinced yourself that you're leadership material. But the way I see it, you're the worst of the first-years. Your writing is never satisfactory, and you're too dense to read the room. And pretty much everyone else in the club knows that."

"You're not serious..."

"And you know what else? As the editor-in-chief it's my job to bring you back down to earth."

"Onsenji Station, Onsenji Station."

My rebuttal was interrupted by the announcement for the midpoint station. I was left to face my own emotions.

I didn't need to be hit by a train to come face to face with death. Miyoshi's words were death sentence enough.

I thought that I'd internalized Shiga Naoya's attitude towards life and death after reading *At Kinosaki*. But all I'd done was pass my eyes over the pages and skim literary analyses without actually understanding what it really meant. And now I was reaping the rewards of my half-assed work.

And if Miyoshi was telling the truth, I'd never been in the running from the start. I'd never even had a chance, a dead girl walking this whole time. It was so funny how pathetic I was that I started to cry.

The doors shut and the gondola started towards the peak once again. Miyoshi apparently decided that was the signal for him to begin again, his face blank.

"I'm not heartless so I'll give you one chance. I still don't know why you want to be editor-in-chief. Once we get to the top, we'll visit Kanizuka, and you can tell me your reasoning. If it's better than the articles you've written, I'll give you the job."

"But..."

“Not another word. I want to enjoy the view. If you have anything to tell me, save it for after we get off the gondola.”

I bit my lip. That wasn't a concession from him at all, because he knew I couldn't do what he was asking.

My stomach was churning, but my mind was still. Nothing was getting in. Or more like, I didn't want to let anything in. I was hunched over staring at the floor. He may have been right, but that was no reason to say things like that.

My mind just kept going around and around in circles. Before I knew it the speaker was announcing that we had arrived at the summit.

“Come on, we're there. Let's go.”

When I heard his unsympathetic tone the resentment started bubbling up again inside me. Forget it. I didn't care if this was my last day in the club. There was no way he was getting away with this.

I trailed after Miyoshi out of the gondola and through the station. He didn't say a single word the whole time. We hadn't walked for that long before the stone plaque came into view. Miyoshi stopped in front of it.

“This is Kanizuka. Most people don't go out of their way to see it, so if we're going to talk...”

As soon as he turned around I took the egg out of my pocket and hurled it as hard as I could right at his forehead. Through my fingertips it was almost like I could feel the shell shatter as if I'd crushed it in my hand. It felt so good.

Down went Miyoshi, like he'd tripped on his own feet. He wasn't out cold or anything. He just sat there bewildered, staring at me. He didn't seem to understand what had just happened to him, or to have expected me to go postal on him. Meanwhile, the egg in question hadn't exploded completely; it was actually mostly intact, rolling around on his stomach.

Now I could say it. I'd spit it out here, and then it'd be all over.

“I only wanted to be editor-in-chief for Narusawa!”

Miyoshi tried to pick himself up off the ground, looking like he couldn't believe his ears.

"...I thought you hated Narusawa!"

"When did I ever say that?"

Miyoshi rubbed his forehead. I wasn't sure if he was trying to jog his memory, or just trying to alleviate the pain.

"...I guess you didn't."

"Dang right I didn't."

"But you were always so rude...or maybe, *short* with her."

I understood why he'd think that, if he'd mistaken it for the dunce being jealous of the top of the class. But I wasn't jealous: I admired how talented Narusawa was.

"Narusawa's not the collaborative type, she just always does her own thing. Which is fine...not just fine, it's great. Not that I ever said that out loud."

"What is it that you admire so much about her?" asked Miyoshi, giving up and sitting there with one knee drawn up to his chest.

"Everything she says is delightful. I wish I could record every word."

There were plenty of people who said interesting things, but how many people could rivet your attention to themselves as naturally as breathing?

"Maybe I'm not much of a writer. Maybe I'm not editor-in-chief material. But I love Narusawa's writing. I want to read more of it. That's why I want Third Eye to serialize her writing. If I was chief, I'd carry her stories for everyone to read."

Narusawa's stories were so valuable that everyone in the club should have been begging to publish it in the magazine, even if every single other page was filler. But since they didn't, it was up to me to advocate for her.

"I guess that would never happen if Narusawa were editor-in-chief. She doesn't strike me as the my-way-or-the-highway type, so it'd never happen under her...and that's why you want to be chief." He got to his feet, wincing as he rubbed his forehead. "Guess I misjudged you."

"It'd be nice to get the benefit of the doubt once in a while..."

"When I was a freshman I was a nobody. I was only invited to join Third Eye by accident, but once I realized how fun publishing magazines is I was hooked. It took over my life...to the

point that I schemed and plotted past all my rivals to take the chief editor spot. And that's why I swore that I wouldn't let my successor be a monster."

"Takes one to know one, huh?"

Miyoshi scowled.

"That's not what I said...but now that I know you're trying to become the chief editor for someone else's sake, I have to admit you have the moral high ground. You win. You're the next editor-in-chief."

"...You're kidding, right?"

"Did I sound like I was kidding? Besides, you passed the hard-boiled egg test."

He peeled the rest of the shell away, revealing a perfectly hard-boiled egg.

But that was impossible. That egg could barely have been soft-boiled when I fished it up; when I chucked it at him I'd been expecting it to explode all over his face.

As calmly as I could fake it I asked him, "What about the inside?"

"Well, let's take a look..."

He took a big bite out of the egg, and showed me the perfectly firm golden yolk inside.

"Seems pretty hard to me. Congrats, you passed the test."

"I'm gonna try my hand at *kawarake-nage*² before I head back down, so let's break here. Don't even think about following me," he said, stuffing the other half of the egg in his mouth before heading off, leaving me standing there in front of Kanizuka. I had nothing to do but head straight back down in the gondola.

How did that egg hard-boil itself? I know it was soft-boiled... That was all I could think about as the gondola creaked its way down the mountain. I was so distracted I barely even noticed the passing scenery.

²A diversion involving tossing pottery discs off a cliff at a target. Hit the target, have your wish come true.

Amiko and Narusawa had supposedly figured out how to pass the test, yet the only one to actually pass it was clueless old me. They were the talented ones, the popular ones. Was there something I had that they didn't have?

"Onsenji Station, Onsenji Station."

Here I was again. I'd been too distracted on the way up to notice, but now I saw the old wooden temple right outside the platform. I suddenly remembered the brochure that had come with the ticket. It said that Onsenji had been built all the way back in the Nara period, and still held events year-round. Even just looking at the pictures, you could feel the history lingering in the place.

Lingering...lingering...lingering heat!

Out of nowhere it dawned on me. I'd only left the egg there for 12 minutes, but as long as you kept it insulated the egg would keep cooking...that's how it turned into a hard-boiled egg!

"In about 17 minutes I'm going to take the gondola to the top of the mountain. Whichever of you can get in the gondola with me and hand me a hard-boiled egg at the summit, I'll make you the next editor-in-chief. But if the egg is still soft-boiled, you're out."

Hand me a hard-boiled egg at the summit: I knew there was something funny about that statement. He never said anything about giving it to him at Sanroku Station.

Amiko must have picked up on that, and Narusawa had realized it later on. I was the only one in the dark.

It was total coincidence that I'd jumped the gun and sprinted to Sanroku Station, total coincidence that I'd stuffed the egg in the pocket of my down jacket. But it was those coincidences that had led me here.

By the time I stepped out of the gondola I couldn't help but be in awe at how the stars had aligned. To put it bluntly, I was just a bumbling bootlicker with my head so far up my ass I couldn't see just how unqualified I was to be editor-in-chief. But because I was too thick to see that, I'd refused to give up, and I'd attacked Miyoshi...and now I was the editor-in-chief-to-be.

In *At Kinoshiki*, Naoya throws a rock and by chance takes the life of a water lizard. In my case, I had thrown what I thought was a soft-boiled egg and by chance hit him with a hard-boiled one...if you thought about it, didn't it all come down to luck? Whether I

succeeded or failed had nothing to do with whether I was trying or not. Not to steal from Narusawa's story idea, but it was like everything was decided by a roll of the dice. When I thought about it that way, suddenly the editor-in-chief position I'd dreamed of didn't seem important to me at all.

What was I supposed to do now? If all my trying just ended up with me spinning in circles, then didn't that mean I should just not try at all?

As I walked away from the gondola pondering these ideas, I spotted Narusawa sitting on a bench inside the station, eating a popsicle.

"Welcome back."

"Where's Amiko?"

"She went back to Sasazuka-ya. Apparently she wants a dip in the onsen before everyone gets here."

Very Amiko-like. But in my mind I would have expected it to be Narusawa to do that instead.

"How come you didn't go back with her?"

"I wanted to ask you something. So I waited."

Something about Narusawa waiting for me made my heart feel full.

"If it's about why I wanted to become chief, forget it."

"Well, that too...but it looks like you got what you wanted. Congratulations."

She couldn't have known that I had become editor-in-chief...which meant that whatever she had been waiting to ask me had nothing to do with the result of the test. I felt a warm glow spreading through my body from head to toe.

"...So what did you want to ask?"

"I was just curious how you're feeling."

"Um...like I just had a near-death experience?"

I felt my toes curling in embarrassment. Not only was my pitiful vocabulary being exposed, but I was exposing it myself to my favourite writer. This had to be some kind of torture.

"That's all?"

"That's all I could come up with on short notice, okay?"

Narusawa cocked her head and peered into my eyes.

"Hmm, let's see...you tasted the bitter dregs of defeat and lost all hope of ever attaining your long-yearned-for seat of editor-in-chief, only for your fortunes to be reversed in a sudden stroke of serendipity?"

"How the hell did you know..." I blurted out to hide my embarrassment, though I was glad that she had picked up on it.

"Of course I knew. We've been friends for months."

"You've never said anything about us being friends before..."

I knew she hadn't, because there's no way I would have forgotten it if she had.

"You really get worried if things aren't all spelled out for you, don't you?" she said, polishing off the rest of her melted popsicle.

Looking at her, I began to contemplate. The only thing I was sure of was that I'd have plenty of screw-ups in the future. Tests, reports, job hunting, maybe even falling in love and getting married...there was no way I'd sail through it all without a hitch. Every time I met with an agonizing failure or an unexpected windfall, I'd probably be thinking of the dice.

And yet...regardless of the outcome of the test, Narusawa had been waiting here, for me. That was something I wanted to treasure forever. Even if someday in the future we argued and went our separate ways, I would still hold this moment dear. This was my *At Kinosaki*.

While I waited for her to finish off the popsicle, I decided to break the silence.

"Narusawa...I mean, Narusawa-sensei. What do you think about writing a story for me?"

You never know what the dice will give you, but why should that mean you can't roll them yourself?

At Kinostaki (Kusaka Kyorai)

You may not know this, but once upon a time, Kinostaki Onsen was home to a panda which lived in a zoo.

*

Got a friend in Kinostaki, one of my dad's brothers says to me, If yer lookin' for a job, Daisuke, why don't you go ask around there? He lived in the Kitakatsuragi district in Nara, in Ōji town, so all of us Tatsumis used to call him Old Ōji. His real name was Tsuguhiko, but there's no real need to call him by his given name, so Old Ōji it is.

Now Old Ōji used to get himself in all sorts of trouble in his younger days. Just as soon as he could leave home he went to Osaka and got tangled up in some dodgy line of work. Later on he set up his own business, but when it fell apart around his ears he went on the run from loan sharks. Borrowed a lot of money from the family, which of course no one ever saw a yen of again.

For over a decade after that he kept his nose clean, but on even days he'd be drunk by noon, and odd days he wouldn't get out of bed until the sun was going down. Never seen a deadbeat like that before or since.

Even when he was sober hardly a thing came out of his mouth that wasn't a lie, fable, or tall tale, if it wasn't a cloud of tobacco smoke. Small wonder not a person in the family gave him the time of day.

We Tatsumis are a hard working bunch, and plenty of us end up working for the city or as teachers, so you might call Old Ōji the black sheep of the clan. And who was it that looked like he might just follow in Old Ōji's footsteps but little old me: unemployed at twenty-eight, sitting around drinking with him all day. Real shame, but that's how it was.

Now I never exactly planned on turning into him, and if I didn't want that to happen the first thing I had to do was look for a job. But that'd mean I'd have to be interviewed by my father's students, or my old classmates, or even my little sister's friends, and that just seemed like a real bummer. So I can imagine how hard it was to drag myself to city hall or Hello Work. Maybe some of you can sympathize, and if you can I think we'll get along just fine.

So you see the bind I was in, and unreliable as Old Ōji was, I was in no position to be picky. I'd been sitting around with nothing to do for over six months as it was. I could practically feel my mother—a professional homemaker of thirty years—and my sister—who'd landed a job with the prefectural government the year before last—breathing down my neck. Every time we sat down to dinner their gazes all but saying, *You even turned rōnin all so you could go to your fancy private university, and this is all you have to show for it?* I could never tell what dad was thinking because he never said anything about it, which just made things all the more awkward.

"Mm, I guess I could give it a go...but how do you know anyone in Kinosaki, anyhow?"

Old Ōji stroked his stubbly chin.

"I lent a little help a while back, and now he's made something of hisself. Says he needs a helper for his triumphant homecoming. Patient fella like you, you're exactly what he needs."

"Not sure I follow."

Hell, neither do I. Just make a fair shake of it, and if it don't work out you can always come back home and find a job at the sock store in Kōryō. Hear the envelope factory in Shinjō's looking too."

He'd been swigging casually from a sake bottle like it was barley tea, but now he set it down with a thunk on the damp tatami and went poking around in the shelves behind him, coming up with an envelope. Handed it to me and said it was for the travel expense. Inside there were two ten-thousand yen bills, as well as a business card on coated paper stock, which said

Yoshiya Kōichi

Representative Director

Daikichi Enterprises

So this was the fly-by-night operation I'd be working at.

"Yoshiyan's got all sorts of ideas in his noggin," said Uncle Ōji, pointing at his head and finishing off his bottle with an outrageous belch. "Plenty you can learn from him, *ghurrrp*."

Aren't you the one who owes my parents a whole lot of money? I thought to myself.

"Thanks. I'll give it a try," was all I said.

I hated to admit it, but Old Ōji was throwing me a lifeline. As a baby I was so adorable that the gateball club at the old folk's home went gaga for me; in kindergarten I'd memorized my times tables so fast that everyone called me the Boy Genius of Chūwa. But it'd been all downhill ever since I failed the Nishiyamato Middle School entrance exam.

The economy had tanked when the bubble burst, and it wasn't getting any better, so it didn't matter much whether I went to Kinosaki or Inubōsaki or Makurazaki: I just had to go.

I didn't tell my family that it had been Old Ōji who had given me this lead. I packed a few sets of clothes, some half-read paperbacks from my shelf, and both volumes of Saitō Mokichi's *Selected Poems from the Manyōshū*, and with duffel in hand I boarded the Kintetsu.

*

Officially, the office—though really it was a warehouse—that housed the headquarters of Daikichi Enterprises was located in Kinosaki, but it was a little ways from the onsen district near the mouth of the Maruyama River.

"No, that ain't right, ain't right at all...panda tails ain't black."

That was my first impression of (President) Yoshiyan. He was standing in the dark recesses of the warehouse with his arms folded, mumbling to himself. To save some cash I'd taken the slowest train I could find and boy was my butt sore. I should have cushioned the seat with some of my clothes.

"Hello?"

"No use crying over spilled milk...just have to start over, buy me another white bear..."

"Excuse me. I'm Tatsumi," I said, rubbing my bottom. After a few more tries he finally noticed me.

"Ah, there you are! Daisuke, the new kid. Old Ōji tells me you're the cleverest of all his nephews. Pleasure to have you on board!"

"Um, thanks. I'm looking forward to it."

He reminds me a whole lot of Uncle Ōji, I thought to myself as I shook his hand.

"Could I ask what you were doing?"

The president proudly led me over to the wall as if he'd been just waiting for me to ask.

"...Is that a onesie?"

It certainly looked an awful lot like a giant white onesie, mottled with splotches of black paint.

“Get this: this is gonna be a panda. I’m bringing a zoo to my hometown, and this panda’s gonna be the star of the show. And you’re going to be inside!”

“Uh-huh...”

Wasn’t that a scam?

But my new middle-aged boss just insisted with a gleam in his eye, “Kids in Kinosaki have never had a chance to see a panda before. I say we show ‘em one!”

He wanted me to prep the habitat—an empty room in an onsen ryokan—said it’d pay a little better than the average part-time gig.

“I’ve already bought some rabbits, marmots, ducks, goats: you’ll need to take care of them too.”

I figured that he’d be better off just opening up a bog-standard petting zoo, but he wouldn’t budge on the panda.

So that was how my life in Kinosaki began.

*

That night I headed to a nearby bar, where I picked up some scuttlebutt about President Yoshiyan. Apparently he was Kinosaki born and bred, but after he started hanging with a bad crowd he dropped out of high school and moved to Osaka, where he spent his days getting up to no good. After a series of misadventures, including feuding with Old Ōji over the top hostess in Kitashinchi, he finally settled down at Ōji’s company (which as I’ve already mentioned would go on to implode in spectacular fashion) before striking out to found his own venture, which he sold upon his father’s death to come home to Kinosaki.

With the funds from the sale he bought out a resort which had gone bankrupt when the bubble collapsed...well, he bought the parking lot anyways, and that was where he intended to build his zoo. He was just living out of the warehouse temporarily, and once the zoo opened he’d move over there.

He and Old Ōji were two peas in a pod, and it was just as hard to tell with him where the truth ended and the lies began. But most of it seemed pretty farfetched to me. There were

only two things that I was sure about: one, President Yoshiyan was trying to open a zoo, and two: I was going to be wearing the panda suit.

While I waited for the white onesie to be delivered from Russia, I sat in my room and obsessively watched the panda videos that President Yoshiyan kept sending me. Now that I think about it, we could probably just have ordered a panda onesie direct from China.

The unrelenting rains that signalled the beginning of autumn left a thick fog hanging over Kinosaki, and the stinkbugs came out in droves. After three days I got sick of going around trying out all of the open air baths in Kinosaki, so I just watched panda videos in my room and imagined myself inside the suit, rolling around on the tatami and pretending to eat bamboo leaves.

I finished the books I'd brought in no time at all, and since there weren't any bookstores in the area there was nothing else to do but re-read *Selected Poems* or practice being a panda. I sprayed insecticide on the screen door, yet somehow every time I went outside I'd find a cluster of stinkbugs stubbornly clinging on.

I'd later learn that convincingly "eating" bamboo leaves and stalks and shoots while wearing the suit was much harder than it seemed. But even so, all of my imagined rehearsals still ended up paying off.

It was another two weeks before I could put on the finished suit.

"Well I'll be darned! This really your first time? That was way better than I was expecting. Man, I can't tell where the man ends and the panda begins!"

President Yoshiyan's gushing compliments took me back to April of second grade, when I got the nickname "Prep King" after I read all my textbooks cover to cover on the day of the opening ceremony. That had been a glorious time, and now I felt a little of it coming back to me.

The trees were bare and snow was drifting down from the sky on the day that Daikichi Enterprises opened the doors of its first, last, and grandest project: the Kinosaki Zoo.

The fliers which President Yoshiyan created brazenly featured photos of the pandas in Adventure World at Nanki-Shirahama.

"Don't see the harm, the fliers don't say anything about there being *real* pandas."

The tourism board refused to allow us to distribute fliers, so whether it was a problem or not was really a moot point. But I didn't know that at the time, so as I put the suit on all I could think of was all the people that would come to see me.

On opening day, there were exactly three customers: the mama from President Yoshiyan's favourite bar, and two of the regulars.

"Don't you worry, we're just getting started. We made it to opening day, didn't we? Now drink up!"

Glug-glug-glug went the bottle of Nikaidō shochu as President Yoshiyan filled up my glass. In his other hand he clutched a microphone, while all the grey-haired regulars in the aforementioned bar shouted and cheered along. A yakitori place had opened up recently in the neighbourhood, pilfering all of the younger customers for whom karaoke was less of an institution. Times change. That's just how it goes.

As I sipped sparingly at my almost neat shochu and listened to President Yoshiyan butcher an Ozaki Kihoyiko number, the mama came and sat beside me. Her hair was dyed way too dark for a woman her age.

"You know, that wasn't a half-bad panda impression."

I was semi-gratified to receive the compliment.

"Ahm, thank you."

Apparently she used to be classmates with President Yoshiyan.

"I can't believe how respectable Yoshiya's gotten...you wouldn't believe what a rascal he was in the old days!"

Seeing a tear well up in her eyes, I couldn't help but think what a messed up place the world was. But when I thought about the fact that I myself was part of this messed up world, I felt a headache coming on, and it wasn't just the booze talking.

*

Winter is the busiest time of year at Kinosaki Onsen.

The tourism industry may have been in the dumps in the aftermath of the bubble bursting and the long recession, but domestic travel was still chugging along. Kinosaki was just

barely in range of a day trip from the Kansai area, and it boasted a respectable stable of attractions, what with crab and onsen and Shiga Naoya. So that winter, just as any other, tourists descended in their droves upon the town.

On the other hand, the Kinosaki Zoo may as well have been in the throes of the Great Depression. We counted ourselves lucky if we saw three groups in a day; on plenty of days not a single visitor walked through the door.

The entrance fee was 500 yen for adults, 200 for kids. 100 yen in the tin can would get you a paper cup full of thinly cut carrot sticks to feed to the goats and rabbits. The same 100 yen would get you a bag of bread crusts for the duck, which President Yoshiyan got gratis from a bakery, so those were particularly cost-effective: that is, if anyone came in to buy them. Even at a generous estimate of three groups every day, we were deep underwater.

By the way, we advertised a yearly pass for 5000 yen, which President Yoshiyan called, "A hell of a bargain!" but naturally we hadn't sold a single one.

Being the only staff member apart from the president, I was in charge of taking care of the marmots and the rabbits and Quacksuke the duck as well as the two goats Donkichi and Hanako, on top of plastering heat pads all over myself and doing my panda impression. Some days I didn't talk to a single solitary person besides President Yoshiyan from opening at 10 in the morning until closing at 5 in the evening. I spent more time talking to the animals than I did to people.

Life was so monotonous that whenever I was in the suit I started to believe that I'd always been a panda all along.

The panda I portrayed was named Janjan, which comes from the sound of falling pachinko balls, or as President Yoshiyan put it, "like money pouring in."

They say that pandas steal the spotlight, so I'm pretty sure President Yoshiyan must have been banking on that, but I'm sorry to say that after three months it was clear that his expectations had been misplaced. The most customers we ever had in a day was at the end of the year: 7 groups, 12 people in all, for a grand total of 3200 yen. We were sunk. Some pachinko machines give you a jackpot once you've put in enough balls, but we never got so much as a pity payout.

By the time the buds on the plum trees began to sprout, the Kinosaki Zoo, which is to say Daikichi Enterprises, was apparently running deep in the red.

That was all too predictable. But I wasn't the one running the show here anyhow, and at that point I'd spent so much time inside the suit that I was getting a little *too* comfortable in; life felt pretty bleak whenever I was Tatsumi Daisuke instead of Janjan the panda. So not once did I ever get as far as thinking about how the business was doing. That alone should tell you that I was cracking.

President Yoshiyan would hand me my pay at the end of every month, and now that I think about it each time the envelope would be a few thousand-yen bills thicker than the previous month. I suppose he could have been selling off his household belongings, but there was also the possibility that it had something to do with his trips to the pachinko parlor. Maybe he was selling everything he had worth anything and turning it into his pachinko war chest. Yeah, that would probably explain it.

Anyways, the business was in a nosedive, and I was totally immersed in Janjan: it was all up to President Yoshiyan. But of course it was, he was the president.

"We've gotta cut costs somewhere, may as well start here," he ruminated. He'd borrowed a light truck and a lawnmower, and talked a friend into letting him mow a vacant lot for animal feed. The result: Saneatsu, one of the bunnies, got the runs, and the vet bill probably ended up costing him more than he'd saved.

"Damn rabbit's got no survival instinct," said President Yoshiyan with a scowl. "Don't even know what it can and can't eat."

I didn't know what he'd expected, considering he'd bought them from a pet shop. And I had to step in to keep him from feeding the goats old newspapers. Ink can't be good for their stomachs.

His next bright idea was to lower the price of the yearly passes. A whopping 50% discount, just like that..

"Once we've got the cash in hand we can always hike the price back to normal for the second year. Foolproof, eh!"

Spoken like a true businessman. But the question remained: was a yearly pass to see marmots, rabbits, ducks, goats, and Janjan the panda (me) worth even 2500 yen?

If you had 2500 yen in your wallet, it'd probably be better spent on a CD. That's what I would do. A classic album is something you can listen to for the rest of your life.

You can pick up Western music for even cheaper. The Beatles and the Stones are a given, but I also give two big thumbs up for the Byrds, the Kinks, Buffalo Springfield, and Neil Young.

Books are another good choice. With 2500 yen you can pick up a whole armful of classics from the discount rack. You could probably net yourself five whole sets of *Selected Poems from the Manyōshū*.

So I wasn't expecting what happened next.

"We're in the money, Daisuke!" shouted President Yoshiyan, doing a little skip into the room as I took off the suit and prepared to close up for the night.

"You're serious, a yearly pass? Wow, how many?"

"Just the one, heh."

One measly pass? I thought to myself, but a sale was a sale.

"Next, let's find us another low-maintenance animal. How about a turtle?"

Why a turtle?

"I don't think that'll bring in the customers."

"You think so? Well, alright."

I had to wonder: what kind of curious soul would buy something like this?

It wouldn't be long before I found out.

*

She was on the shorter side, and the ends of her bob cut were constantly fluttering as if there was a draft in the room.

"How come you're dressed up like a panda, mister?" she asked quizzically, staring at Janjan/me as Janjan/I gnawed proficiently at a stalk of bamboo.

The gnawing stopped for a moment. But I couldn't respond to her question...for I was Janjan the panda.

Janjan resumed his gnawing.

"You're taking this awful serious," she said, sounding suitably pleased. I acted like I was tired of bamboo and did a little somersault.

"Just like the real thing! You make a great panda. But that suit's pretty lousy. You oughta pull it a tad tighter so the outline's not so saggy."

No arguments about the suit. I acted out Janjan as best I could, using every technique I'd picked up from my research. Up until then I'd barely had an audience to speak of, but even so I was pretty confident in my performance.

The girl clapped her hands, watching me act my heart out.

"Thanks, mister. Next time, do you mind if I do a little more talking? You don't have to talk back or anything."

On the spur of the moment I made a little circle with my paws to convey my assent. The Kinosaki Panda had some tricks up his sleeve.

"Thanks, I'll be back."

So she was the one who'd bought the yearly pass. Young lady, you shouldn't throw your allowance away like that. Your dad and mom worked very hard for that money.

"That musta been Kanami, Sakai the milkman's kid." said the mama, trying in vain to put out a skinny cigarette which ended up breaking in two.

"Milkman's daughter, huh?"

"She's a good girl, Kanami. Smart enough to get in a good high school 'n everything, but..."

A thin wisp of smoke curled up from the black ashtray.

"Can't say I know what happened, but she's stopped going. A couple of times I've seen her standing around at the bus stop during the day."

A regular truant then, this Sakai Kanami. Word got around fast in this little town, just like it did back home. Everybody knew everybody else's business. I wished she wouldn't gossip to me, it made me feel a little nosy. But I guess I was just as guilty as the mama was for listening to it.

That being said, I bet I could imagine how Kanami felt. She was supposed to ride the bus to school, but she just couldn't bring herself to get on. She must know how it looked to everyone else. Heck, I'd felt that way too, at least until a little while ago.

Maybe I should take back what I said about her wasting her allowance.

"Hadn't seen her there in a while, so I thought she'd started going back to school again. So she's at the zoo, huh...damn thing just won't go out."

The mama picked out an ice cube from her glass and mashed it into the ash tray. There was a wet little hiss.

"Hah, there it goes."

I was torn. I could listen to someone talk all day, but as Janjan I couldn't use human language to reply. If I'd been a tiger maybe it would have worked out. I mean, if Li Zheng of Longxi³ could do it, so could I.

But what was Janjan supposed to do? As I climbed into bed that night, that was all I could think about.

*

Starting the next day the girl would show up at the zoo every three days or so.

"Hi, I'm back. Still pretty empty in here, I see."

Janjan/I didn't answer. Just listened to Sakai Kanami talk.

But she didn't talk about her life, or her personal troubles.

"I wanna be a writer. My dad said he wanted to be one, a long time ago."

She said that long ago, Sakai Fuminori—now Sakai the milkman—had been a wunderkind who had studied literature at Waseda University. But his long dreamed-of literary debut was not to be, and so he had little choice but to head home and take over the family business.

"I wonder if it'd make him happy, to see me become a writer. Mom wants me to go to school, but I think that's just her usual kind of worrying."

³ See [The Moon over the Mountain](#) in Through Kyoto Streets.

Yeah, I felt like I could relate. Janjan gestured sympathetically, though I don't know if she understood.

"That's why I think up all sorts of different stories. I want to tell you some of them today. I tend to write myself into a corner when I'm by myself, but I feel like if I told them to someone I could find a way out."

For the briefest of moments Janjan made a circle with his paws.

"Thanks," said Kanami, and she started to list off plots one after the next. "Um, so I've got this idea..."

Once upon a time, probably around the end of the Meiji period, there was a young man named Takeshi. Takeshi was born the heir to an old ryokan in Kinosaki Onsen, and he was so tremendously clever that when he was still in primary school he could debate circles around his schoolmasters. But as it turns out, Takeshi was allergic to shellfish; the mere scent of crab would send him into a dead faint, frothing at the mouth...

Set in the near future, in the waning days of the Heisei period. With tourism on the decline, Kinosaki Onsen faces an uncertain future. One man dares to stand up and revive the town's fortunes: the young heir to the local newspaper. He invents a mascot, Kinosshi, and donning a self-crafted crab suit, fights to save his hometown. His catchphrase: "It's crab-licious!"

What is the oldest story in Japan? Most people will tell you that it's the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. But that is not so. The throne was claimed this year by a manuscript unearthed beneath Onsen-ji, entitled The Tale of the Crab Catcher. And this is how that tale begins: Once upon a time there lived an old crab catcher. Every day he would make his way into the sea to catch crabs, which he would cook into all manner of things. This old man was called Kinosaki no Miyakko...

Long after the onsen novel craze has faded into history, three onsen novelists and one onsen novel editor visit Kinosaki. After gorging themselves on a delectable meal of crab, they amuse themselves with a game of kokkuri-san. But who should appear but the ghost of Shiga Naoya...

In 1981, a Vietnam veteran wanders into Kinosaki Onsen to visit an old war buddy who is recuperating there. But the tyrannical sheriff labels him a rabble-rouser and tries to run him out of town...

In the first year of the Genna era, two men arrive in Kinosaki Onsen. By all appearances they appear to be noblemen: one, a brash warrior, is dressed head-to-toe in red; the other is a young man nearly two meters tall. Together they invent the onsen tamago. Their true identities? Sanada Yukimura and Toyotomi Hideyori...

The prefecture of Nara is a meager one, ignorant of the bounty of the seas. As an unknown plague sweeps the land, two men set off in a car from their landlocked hometown in search of the distant Kinosaki Onsen. But at the end of their journey they find themselves at the Crab Ryokan of Many Orders...

These are all the stories I remember, but that day at Janjan's Corner the girl outlined at least twice that many. By no means did I know anything about literature, so I couldn't say whether any of them were ready to publish, but if they ever did appear in print I would have wanted to read them.

"Janjan, I just came up with another one!" she would say with a smile. With every visit there was a little more life in her, especially compared to our first meeting, but as time went on her visits became less frequent. Apparently she'd started going back to school.

"Look, Janjan, I wrote them all down!" she said, brandishing a college notebook at me. "There's almost enough for a whole book in here!"

Pandas can't read, so Janjan just snuffled at it. Now that summer had arrived he needed to take frequent water breaks.

"I'm hoping to write enough for two books by summer vacation. If I can manage it I'll make a copy for you," she told me, before practically skipping away.

I never saw her again.

*

When I arrived at the zoo the next morning, there was a Mercedes parked outside. An angry-looking middle-aged guy was peering into the building.

"Hey, buddy. You work here?"

Immediately I worked out what was going on. I'm not Old Ōji's nephew for nothing. We have abnormal senses of danger, like Newtypes in Gundam.

"Nope, I'm here to collect some money."

"You too, huh?" The scary man dropped his cigarette and ground it out with his foot. "He's already skipped town. Place is empty."

"Damn, really? What am I going to do now?" I groaned, before making a U-turn outta there. Strictly speaking, I counted as a creditor—President Yoshiyan still owed me a paycheck—but I didn't expect to get another yen.

I quickly went back to my room and gathered my things, then killed some time at Café Yushima before heading to the bar once lunchtime rolled around.

"I was just gonna call you!" said the mama, her makeup only half finished. She handed me a letter. "Found this in the mail slot."

It was from President Yoshiyan, saying that Yoshiya Enterprises had run into financial issues, and that he'd need to lay low for the time being, and that he'd asked an acquaintance at city hall to find a home for the animals, and how he was sorry to the mama and that he'd pay his tab one day, and lastly, to me, that I should go home to Nara. *The panda suit I leave to Daisuke*, said the postscript, *Keep the spirit alive*. What the hell was I going to do with the suit? And whatever spirit that was is retired now, thank you very much.

As the mama continued to unhurriedly apply her makeup, I asked, "How much was the president's tab?" There hadn't been much to do around here, so I'd barely touched my salary.

"Oh, don't you fret about that, dear. But shouldn't you be hurrying to leave town?"

Now that she'd reminded me she was absolutely right. But there was one last thing still on my mind.

"Do you have some pen and paper lying around?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Why bother? I don't think he'll be coming around here no more."

"It's not for him," I said, quickly explaining that it was for Kanami, and that I at least wanted to say goodbye.

"Hmm, well alright. Where's some paper..."

The mama looked around the shop for a bit before taking a long thin calendar which hung on the tar-stained walls, one of the ones with stirring quotations written in calligraphy, and ripping off a page.

"Only 3 days left in the month anyways. Here, take it."

"Thank you so much!"

"Ain't much time left if you want to catch the next Kōnotori, better hurry it up!"

My pen scrambled across the page. The pen she'd lent me was practically dry, and I had to almost scratch some of the words into the paper. But once I was done, I snatched the first volume of *Selected Poems* out of my bag, folded the calendar page until it was small enough to fit, and stuck it inside the pages.

"Can you make sure she gets it?"

The mama had finished her makeup while I was jotting down my letter, and with a draw on her cigarette she took the book and slowly nodded.

"You take care of yourself now. If I was you I'd stay away from Kinosaki for a while."

"I will. Thanks for everything."

With a bow I sprinted off towards Kinosaki Onsen Station. I didn't have time to buy any souvenirs, or take one last look around the onsen district. If I'd known this was going to happen I would've done a little more sightseeing. But it was too late for that now.

I made it just in time to catch the Kōnotori before it left. I wiped off the sweat, and then took out the second volume of *Selected Poems* from my bag. Whenever my heart was racing and I couldn't get it to stop, reading a little Saitō Mokichi had a strangely calming effect on me. Even the time I'd gone stir-crazy during my rōnin days and considered jumping in front of a train on the Midōsuji Line, it had been *Selected Poems* that had rescued me.

But now, for some reason, my heart just wouldn't stop pounding.

*

"Didn't work out, eh? Yoshiyan's *idea* sounded good enough..." said Old Ōji, puckering his lips and blowing out a puff of smoke. Not that it mattered, but the way he said "idea" in English weirded me out.

"Would ya lookit that, Daisuke, I made a smoke ring!"

When I waved my hand to dissipate the smoke he sat up straight, looking chagrined like a frigging kid.

"Well, don't get too down on yourself."

I wasn't down on myself. More like I didn't know how to feel. I wasn't angry at Old Ōji or President Yoshiyan either.

I'd implored my sister to make some calls, and it sounded like all of the animals had found new homes. Thanks, unknown city hall employee. I couldn't openly express my gratitude though, because they'd probably ask what I had to do with the whole thing, so all I could do was face the general direction of Kinosaki and press my hands together in thanks.

It'd been over two weeks since I fled Kinosaki.

"Hmm, you want me to find you your next gig?" asked Old Ōji.

I thought for a second, then said, "Nah, I'll find it myself."

"Sounds fine, but you ever need anything you just come on and ask. Ya never know what might become the manure of life."

He blew out another smoke ring and chortled to himself.

"What the hell is the manure of life?"

Whatever it was, I was pretty sure he didn't have much of it.

"Means that what you go through in your younger days'll come of use someday."

"Uhh...well, sure. So you think I'm still young?" I asked.

When he heard that Old Ōji opened his eyes wide and bellowed, "Idiot! Of course you're young! At your age no matter how many times you fuck it up you can still start again. And I'll have you know I ain't given up either!"

So he was still hoping to strike the motherlode...for the sake of the family, I hoped that he'd stay put right where he was, for all eternity.

With that sincere prayer in my heart, I left the *kakinoha* sushi I'd brought him and left his tenement.

For some reason the walk to Ōji Station felt very long. As I walked, I wondered what might have happened if I'd taken that panda suit back with me. Maybe I could have found some empty property around here, opened up a zoo. I'd call it the Ōji Zoo.

But that was exactly what I *shouldn't* do.

Tomorrow, or maybe the day after...definitely by next week, I'd hit up Hello Work. Bye-bye Janjan: from now on, I was back to being Tatsumi Daisuke.

*

It's been a little over fifteen years.

Thankfully Old Ōji never did get back to his enterprising ways; last autumn he was on his way back from a booze run to Mandai when he fell down and never got up again. The coroner said he probably hadn't felt a thing. Personally I felt like he deserved to suffer a little, but by all appearances it was a peaceful way to go.

A few unsavoury characters showed up at his funeral, but President Yoshiyan wasn't one of them. I don't know if he's still laying low, or if he's already dead too. I helped out at the funeral wondering if he might show up, but I guess things never happen the way you expect.

On that same theme, after I got out of Kinosaki I drifted across the country from job to job, though probably not quite as restlessly as Shiga Naoya.

Maybe it was all that rolling around that softened my edges, like greenschist worn smooth by the Yoshino River, or maybe it was just that with every year it got a little easier to breathe, but eventually I was holding down a job and putting food on the table.

I came back to Nara three years ago, and now I work at a company in Tennōji run by an acquaintance of mine. It's not much, but it gives me a sense of accomplishment. I make enough to give my sister's two kids a *hongbao* every year. Not like Old Ōji.

Just before Old Ōji keeled over, I was drinking with some work buddies when someone floated the idea of visiting Kinosaki. My uncle didn't have a wife to take care of the funeral

arrangements, so we had to put it off for a while. After all the fuss died down, I visited Kinosaki in early December, for the first time since I'd left.

It was great being able to be there as a tourist. We prayed at Onsen-ji, feasted on crab, and had a little competition at a shooting gallery.

I'll never forget our walk back to the inn, just the four of us strolling along the river eating ice cream.

Once everyone else had fallen asleep that night, I left the inn by myself and headed towards the bar.

This was mostly why I'd agreed to come here. I hadn't lied to them, of course. But everyone has a few secrets to keep.

I got lost a few times—it had been fifteen years, after all—but eventually I made it to the bar. The building was still standing, and the weathered sign was just as I remembered it, but judging from the rust on the shutters it'd been abandoned for at least a few years.

I wandered around the vicinity until I found the yakitori place that had been brand-spanking new fifteen years earlier. Without hesitation I went under the *noren*, ordered a highball, and struck up a conversation. Apparently the mama had gone into a care facility about five years earlier.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to be a Kinosaki native, are you?" asked the grill chef, who looked a little bit like Abareru-kun, the comedian. I mumbled back that I'd done a little work in Kinosaki.

Of course, I didn't mention the zoo.

"Huh, you don't say. Well here, have some chicken heart, on the house!"

"Hey, thanks."

There was one more thing I wanted to know. Looking at the steam rising from the piping-hot chicken hearts, I asked, "Do you happen to know Sakai Kanami, the milkman's daughter?"

*

What I scribbled down on the back of the calendar that day is not for my readers to know.

But I owe it to you at least to write down what happened to the promise we made.

Back in Nara I visited a Tsutaya Books, and just as the Abareru-kun lookalike chef had told me, found three volumes written by a certain female author. She'd been born in Kinosaki and made her literary debut while still in her teens studying literature at Osaka University. Her third book became a bestseller, and even after hitting a slump after that she was still a fairly popular author with a steady output, whose quirky style never failed to capture her readers.

Of the three books I found on the shelves, one was a collection of short stories. I picked it up and flipped past the table of contents. The very first story started like this:

You may not know this, but once upon a time, Kinosaki Onsen was home to a panda which lived in a zoo.

At Kinasaki: Morimi Tomihiko

Onsen novelist Arima Otohiko threw himself down on the tatami, stretching like a cat.

It was an evening early in November. The four middle-aged men lolled around in their room at the Kawaguchiya Kinasaki Riverside Hotel, each of them wearing a heavy *tanzen* over his yukata. There was a ruddy glow on their faces from their tour of their outdoor baths, which had only been enhanced by the delicious feast of crab which they had subsequently enjoyed.

The hotel was removed from the heart of the onsen district, and outside the window all was dark, shrouding the Ōtani River depicted in Shiga Naoya's *At Kinasaki* from view. But so content were they that they scarcely noticed.

"I haven't had so much crab in such a long time."

There was boiled snow crab, crab sashimi, crab hotpot, crab *tōbanyaki*, crab tempura, crab porridge: all in all, a dazzling array of crab. Aonimaru Satoshi, the youngest of the group by far, was making a cheerful commotion, while Kamibayashi Hankotsu, who was constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, was shoveling sashimi into his mouth in willful disregard of his delicate constitution. Even Fuwaku Yonjūrō was licking the last few drops of porridge from the pot.

"I never knew that you were such a crab-lover, Fuwaku!"

"Actually, I've probably overdone it," replied Fuwaku, leaning back in his *zaisu* and rubbing his belly, singlemindedly digesting the crab contained within. His was the countenance of a courtier from olden times, from his plump cheeks to his narrow, inscrutable eyes. Onsen mysteries were his particular specialty, and he and Arima were heated rivals in the battle to secure hegemony over the exceedingly narrow world of onsen novels.

"Sometimes I wonder how crab can possibly be so delicious."

"Too true, too true."

"Being succulent must be a disadvantage in the struggle for existence," mused Arima thoughtfully. "Otherwise they wouldn't be so hunted by humans."

"If they weren't so difficult to get at they would have gone extinct long ago." This from Kamibayashi, a publisher, sitting on the other side of the table. He was lean, and with

old-fashioned black-framed glasses and long bangs which draped his forehead, could easily have passed as one of the post-war Buraiha literary clique. He had been the architect of the onsen novel revival, and was so close with Arima Otohiko and Fuwaku Yonjūrō that they were practically brothers. His love for onsens was true, and several years ago he had given up employment at a major publisher to go solo, setting up the Yukemurisha publishing house to distribute onsen-related works.

An onsen novel craze had swept the nation twelve years prior. In those heady times a book merely needed the word “Onsen” on its cover to sell like hotcakes; everyone and their mother was snapping them up. Both Arima and Fuwaku had made their names riding the crest of that wave. But *sic transit gloria mundi*: the tide had ebbed as quickly as it had come in, and nowadays you could hardly find anyone who still raised the banner of the onsen novel. Kamibayashi Hankotsu was keenly aware that the genre was in danger of fading away, and thus he had issued the call: onsen novelists of Japan, assemble!

Three had answered:

Arima Otohiko

Fuwaku Yonjūrō

Aonimaru Satoshi

Lo, the three onsen novelists.

The foursome had stepped off the train at the JR Kinosaki Onsen Station just past noon earlier that day. But what could this paltry group of three accomplish? After paying their respects at the Kinosaki Onsen Heritage Museum, that hallowed ground of the onsen novel, and availing themselves of several of the outdoor baths, they checked in at the onsen hotel; that night the air was filled with the sound of smacking lips as they feasted upon crab. As far as Arima was concerned, his duty was fulfilled. Tomorrow they would ride the ropeway up to visit Onsen-ji, and gaze down upon the onsen district from the observation platform. And after a meal of Tajima beef curry, they would purchase some straw craft souvenirs before enjoying a leisurely ride home on the Kinosaki limited express.

“What now?” said Aonimaru, rousing himself from the floor. “Shall we visit another outdoor bath?”

At thirty years of age he was the rising star of the onsen novel scene; his debut novel, an onsen comedy, had been published the previous year. He did not write full time; his day job was in municipal government.

"Let's bask in the glow of all that crab a little while longer," said Fuwaku.

"You're still young, Aonimaru," remarked Arima. "But the rest of us are too tired and stuffed to move."



Arima Otohiko forgot how the topic of kokkuri-san came up. Out of nowhere Kamibayashi Hankotsu started showing off his vast knowledge of minutiae, going on about how in the Meiji period kokkuri-san was played using a rice chest lid mounted upon a tripod of three bamboo rods tied together, or Mishima Yukio and his clique had used kokkuri-san during literary magazine meetings, and so forth. Arima had tried it himself as a young grade schooler—certainly not with a rice chest lid, but on a paper containing characters and numbers using a ten-yen coin.

"Want to give it a go?" asked Kamibayashi.

Arima sat up in surprise.

"Here? Now?"

"I'm not too fond of the occult," said Fuwaku. "And kokkuri-san is mostly a phenomenon of reflexive muscle movement, anyways."

But Aonimaru was raring to go. He looked up "kokkuri-san" on his phone and ripped out a page from a sketchbook, onto which began to write the characters of the Japanese syllabary. Kamibayashi dug out a ten-yen coin from his wallet.

"Why don't we try calling on the spirit of Shiga Naoya?"

"You think the ghost of a dead writer is just going to pop in for a chat?"

"Well, Kinosaki Onsen *was* one of his favourite haunts, after all."

Shiga Naoya's *At Kinosaki* is lauded as a classic of modern literature. Kamibayashi was always going on about how Shiga was the original modern onsen novelist; in so doing he meant to appropriate the lineage of the God of Fiction for the benefit of Arima and his fellow onsen novelists, and consequently elevate the prestige of the onsen novel genre. That was his publishing strategy.

Aonimaru slid his completed kokkuri-san paper into the middle of the low table. Arima rested his elbows on the table and looked at the paper beneath the glow of the fluorescent light. At the top of the paper was a torii (which Aonimaru had conscientiously drawn in red

ink), flanked by a *Yes* and a *No*. Beneath it was the hiragana syllabary, and the numbers 0 through 9. Perhaps it was only because his mind had been primed that it looked so sinister. He had always scoffed at the existence of ghosts, but now another part of him was whispering, *we shouldn't do this*. Even Fuwaku was meekly sitting in silence.

Kamibayashi placed the coin on top of the torii.

"Place your index fingers on the coin."

Each of the men gathered around the table did as he said.

"*Kokkuri-san, kokkuri-san,*" intoned Kamibayashi, "Grace us with your presence."

They did not have to wait long. Arima let out a yelp when the coin began to slide beneath their fingertips. It was the unconscious movement of their fingers that was causing it, he knew that—and yet it felt as though someone was pulling the coin along. His suspicions turned immediately to Fukuwa, who was sitting beside him.

"Fuwaku, stop messing around."

"It's not me, I'm not even pressing on it!"

What about you two?"

Kamibayashi and Aonimaru shook their heads vigorously.

Arima inhaled deeply, and tried to relax his fingertip. Yet the coin continued its slow skate over the paper. As if it had a will of its own.

"Are you Shiga Naoya?" asked Kamibayashi.

The coin came to a stop over *Yes*.

"Look like it's him."

"No way!"

"That was too easy."

"Let's test it some more," said Kamibayashi, and continued with his questioning.

"In life, did you ever visit Kinosaki Onsen?"

Yes.

"Are you an American?"

No.

"Is your only long-form novel *A Dark Night's Passing*?"

Yes.

The four men exchanged glances. Thus far the answers were correct.

"Do you believe *At Kinosaki* is a masterpiece?" asked Arima. This time the coin vacillated between *Yes* and *No* as if it were trying to decide.

"Maybe that's how the author would feel," remarked Aonimaru. "That's a question for other people to decide. I doubt that he ever expected *At Kinosaki* to become so well-known..."

"That makes sense. Pretty believable reaction."

"Let's keep asking," said Kamibayashi, leaning forward intently. "Shiga-san, you are the father of the onsen novel. Please, would you share some words of encouragement with us?"

The coin wandered into the syllabary.

To. Ha. U. Tsu.

"What does that mean?" Fuwaku muttered.

The four of them considered amongst themselves, but a reasonable interpretation failed to present itself. The questioning continued: What is it like on the other side? What do you think of your status as a literary giant? Is there an edge to outer space? And so on and so forth.

Some of those questions "Shiga Naoya" answered, some he did not. Yes or no questions excluded, he would not answer in words. The coin just meandered across the syllabary without settling on a character, producing what appeared to be a string of meaningless gobbledygook.

"Maybe Shiga Naoya isn't interested in answering."

Arima was starting to feel a little silly. Is this what he'd come all the way to Kinosaki Onsen for? To sit in a circle with three other middle-aged men and stare at a coin?

As if to mock them, the coin decided to speed up. But just as it did, Fuwaku asked with some concern, "Are you all right, Kamibayashi?"

Kamibayashi's face had turned pale.

"He's not possessed by a *kitsune*, is he?" said Arima.

"Stomach's giving me some trouble," answered Kamibayashi, looking strained.

"I told you, you shouldn't have gotten carried away!"

"But it was just so good..."

"Let's wrap this up, I've had enough," said Fuwaku, taking his finger off the coin. Aonimaru gasped.

"You're not supposed to take your finger off yet, Fuwaku. If you do it before you send kokkuri-san home, they say the spirit might possess you."

"Why didn't you say that before?" said Fuwaku, quickly putting his finger back on the coin.

"Ha! So you do believe in it!" chortled Arima.

"No I don't!" scowled Fuwaku. "Better safe than sorry, that's all."

The proper way to end the game was to beseech the spirit to return and move the coin to the torii. The groaning Kamibayashi had broken out in a cold sweat, so Aonimaru took over in his stead.

"Kokkuri-san, kokkuri-san," he prayed, "We beseech you, return whence you came. Return the coin to the torii."

Arima put some pressure into his fingertip, trying to move the coin upward towards the torii. But after some dithering, the coin instead went back to *No*. It was as though one of the four was desperately trying to keep the game from ending.

"Kokkuri-san, kokkuri-san. Please, go in peace," repeated Aonimaru anxiously.



Arima Otohiko took the elevator down to the first floor of the hotel.

It was around 8 in the evening, and the lobby was quiet. The guests were probably all resting in their rooms, or out for a round of the outdoor baths. The spacious room was

occupied by a row of black leather sofas on a carpet of plum blossom pink. The peacock feather pattern on the coffered ceiling, the relaxed bar sequestered at the back of the lobby: all so emblematic of the classic onsen hotel of days of yore.

Arima crossed the lobby into the smoking room. It reminded him of a waiting room in a train station. He sat on a bench and looked at the poster hanging on the wall across from him: *Discover Kinosaki*. It depicted two young women in yukata standing at the ropeway summit station, smiling at the camera. Whatever travel fair this poster had been advertising had long since ended. Arima smiled whenever he saw old posters left up.

As he lit up a smoke, Aonimaru Satoshi poked his head in.

"Well hello there."

"Hey. How's Kamibayashi doing?"

"He's resting in his futon. Face white as the sheets."

Aonimaru came in and sat down next to Arima.

"That gave me a scare. I thought he'd been possessed by kokkuri-san."

"Not a chance," chuckled Arima. "He's just overworked. Setting up Yukemurisha was a superhuman effort. It must've all just hit him at once."

"You've known him for a while, right?"

Back when he was still working for one of the major publishers, Kamibayashi Hankotsu had sent more than a few fledgling onsen novelists out into the world, among them Arima Otohiko and Fuwaku Yonjūrō, in that unprecedented onsen novel craze. Waves are fickle things: hit one just right, and it will carry you to heights far above your station. But one false move, and it can all come crashing down in an instant. Tossed around in this turbulent sea, Arima could only keep writing as frantically as he could; he supposed his rival Fuwaku had done the same.

At the height of the craze, Aonimaru had only been in middle school.

"You inspired me to become an onsen novelist," said Aonimaru. "Being here at Kinosaki Onsen with you is such an honour. I'm so grateful to Kamibayashi for extending this invitation."

"I'd watch my step around him if I were you."

“Why’s that?”

“He’s the Mephistopheles of onsen novels,” answered Arima. “Be careful you don’t end up selling him your soul.”

He had had many lively discussions concerning the future of onsen novels with Kamibayashi. In those days Kamibayashi had a strange charisma, and a great enthusiasm for exhorting to greater fledgling onsen novelists toward greater heights. This enthusiasm stemmed from a deep-held, magnificent dream: *The Complete Onsen Literature Anthology*.

It was intended to be an all-encompassing collection of onsen literature, spanning works from the Manyōshū to the modern age, and in fact had originated with his father, Kamibayashi Tetsuzō, a singular individual, and a critic not only of literature but of the onsen as well. “The soul of the Japanese lies in the onsen,” he had been fond of saying, and in his later years he had turned to a peculiar right-wing mysticism. He passed away of a heart attack during a stay at Gero Onsen, but at the last he had supposedly still been revising on his plan for the anthology. Thus Kamibayashi had taken it upon himself to fulfill his father’s dream.

This dream was the font of Kamibayashi zeal, and like a virus it had spread across the onsen novel world, producing the impetus for the onsen novel boom. With each new revision the project became ever more grandiose; at the height of the boom it had swollen to over 50 volumes. Obviously such a project was unworkable, and eventually the onsen novel bubble deflated.

By now most people had forgotten that the onsen novel genre had ever existed. The tide which had lifted Arima to such heights had gone out, leaving him high and dry. One by one the colleagues who had been cajoled by Kamibayashi into the onsen novel world drifted away. Fuwaku Yonjūrō was just about the only other one left, and even he was being drawn further into working on comics and games, with precious little time to work on onsen novels.

Arima alone remained. He had more copies in print now than he had during the boom. But that was just to make up for the shortfall in demand: maintaining momentum through sheer mass. Onsen novels no longer excited him, but after twenty years that was only to be expected. As long as he kept up a regular routine, writer’s block would not trouble him. And yet he had little desire to make the leap out into other genres.

Do you think the onsen novel is finished?

Maybe he should have asked that question to Shiga Naoya. Then again, maybe it didn't matter much to Shiga. He was the God of Fiction, after all, not the God of Onsen Fiction. The idea that he was the father of the modern onsen novel was really just a publicity gimmick that Kamibayashi had come up with.

Arima snuffed out his cigarette despairingly.

"I was thinking about the game earlier," murmured Aonimaru. "You weren't messing with it, were you?"

"Of course I wasn't. It must've been Fuwaku playing a prank."

"But he said he wasn't. And Kamibayashi was too preoccupied with his stomach to have done anything. It obviously wasn't me, and it wasn't you. So who was keeping the game from ending?"

"Beats me. Probably the ghost of Shiga Naoya."

No sooner had the joke left his lips than a figure appeared on the other side of the door. It was Fuwaku Yonjūrō, his chest exposed beneath his yukata, looking rather put out. He pressed his forehead to the glass window and knocked on the door.

"What's going on?" asked Arima.

"I need your help," answered Fuwaku Yonjūrō. "Something's wrong with Kamibayashi."



The three onsen novelists left the hotel and followed the Ōtani River towards the heart of the onsen district.

"Where did he go?"

"He didn't jump into the river, did he?"

Grabbing the stone handrail, Arima scanned the river. The reflections of the lanterns which lined the handrail glimmered on the black surface, and green willow boughs stretched down toward the water. This was the same river into which the skewered rat had desperately leapt in order to escape the mob in Shiga Naoya's *At Kinoshiki*, but it was quite peaceful now: not a drowning rat in sight.

Fuwaku claimed that Kamibayashi had gone strange. While Arima and Aonimaru were talking in the smoking room, Fuwaku was browsing the souvenir corner in the lobby. As he

examined a box of *ebi-senbei*, he heard the elevator doors open behind him, revealing the tanzen-clad Kamibayashi.

"Kamibayashi! Is your stomach feeling better already?"

Kamibayashi made straight for the hotel doors without replying. Fuwaku hurried over and caught hold of his tanzen.

"Where are you going?" he asked. But with a piercing stare Kamibayashi shook his hand off irritably.

"Layabouts, one and all!" he gritted out between clenched teeth. Then he swept through the doors into the darkness.

"That wasn't very nice," Fuwaku said in an injured tone. "What's he blowing his top at me for? I'm a busy man, I wouldn't have made time to be here for just anyone."

"Must be the stomachache," frowned Aonimaru.

"It must be a real doozy," agreed Arima.

The streets got brighter as they approached the center of the onsen district. On their right they passed the wisteria-purple *noren* of the majestic Ichinoyu and entered a row of gift shops and amusement centers, where yukata-clad families carrying onsen baskets and young couples strolled to and fro.

"Hey, isn't that him?" Aonimaru pointed to the center of the Tama Bridge at a stationary Kamibayashi Hankotsu-like silhouette.

"Kamibayashi!" called Arima, approaching the silhouette. But when it turned to him beneath the streetlights he recoiled in shock. For the pale face was one he did not recognize. He looked again: yes, that was Kamibayashi's face, and yet there was something not quite right. Had he ever had such a look on his face before?

"What's going on?" Arima asked.

Kamibayashi scowled at the writers. His eyes were curiously limpid. It was like he was staring deep into their souls. At length he snorted impatiently and shouldered his way through them. As they watched him go in amazement, he stopped and turned around.

"Stop dawdling!" he barked. "We've no time to waste!"

Fuwaku shrugged in resignation. "He's lost the plot."

"It's like he's a completely different person."

"Let's just play along for now, see where it goes."

Kamibayashi led them to an arcade. As they slid open the door and stepped inside, they were surrounded by a cacophony of electronic blooping and blipping. Every available inch of the deep room was occupied by arcade machines. Along the right wall were three machines that resembled pachinko or perhaps pinball machines.

"These are smartball machines," stated Kamibayashi, inserting hundred-yen coins into the devices. A hole at the top of each machine spat out a number of large marbles, which rattled down to rest at the bottom of the cabinets. The object of the game was to launch the balls and have them fall into the holes in the board.

Kamibayashi folded his arms and surveyed the group.

"Now, take your seats," he said, in a tone which brooked no discussion.

Still unsure of what was transpiring, Arima sat on the round stool. As the writers hunched over their cabinets, Kamibayashi paced back and forth behind them, sternly surveying each board. Fuwaku was the first to run out of balls, followed by Arima. Aonimaru put up more of a fight, having spent no little time practicing at arcades in Tennōji, but before much longer he too was defeated.

"Pathetic," sneered Kamibayashi, "No wonder you can't write worth a damn!"

Those cutting words took Arima aback. Fed up, Fuwaku stood up and rounded on Kamibayashi. But with nary a glance at him Kamibayashi instead took his seat and rolled up his sleeves. "Watch and learn!"

And he did not disappoint.

His hand deftly feathered the handle, and with a breezy rhythm the balls went shooting up the pipe, clacking off each other in intricate trajectories before disappearing into the holes as if by magic. The hole at the top of the cabinet disgorged a steady stream, and in no time at all the board was completely full of balls. Even Fuwaku was entranced by that sheer mastery.

"Not one of you understands," he lectured them. "It is rhythm that is key."

Arima was suddenly reminded of a passage by Shiga Naoya:

If this rhythm is lacking, then no matter how skillfully something is written, or how noble its subject, it is false and therefore of little worth. One feels it unmistakably when one has finished reading a piece of fiction. It is this—the strength of this rhythm as the writer writes—which makes the difference.

“Are you Shiga Naoya?” Arima asked.

“Indeed,” said Kamibayashi, rising from the stool. “It is time for a bath. Come along.”



Goshonoyu is one of the seven public bathhouses of Kinosaki Onsen.

After scrubbing himself clean, Arima exited the washing area and walked towards the outdoor hot spring. Dense clouds of steam rose towards the ample expanse of stars overhead. Trees tented a canopy of crimson on the other side of the bath, which was enclosed all around by boulders, and the air was filled with the rushing of a waterfall. Goshonoyu is a grand building, and wandering into it was like stumbling upon a hot spring hidden within a venerable temple.

Squinting his eyes, Arima could just make out Kamibayashi beyond the billowing steam.

“A Dark Night’s Passing...A Dark Night’s Passing...A Dark Night’s Passing...” he was muttering to himself, steeped in the role of Shiga Naoya.

The Shiga Naoya imitator claimed that he had started writing the novel *A Dark Night’s Passing* seventeen years earlier, but had put it on a long hiatus after becoming stuck partway through the second half. Now he was determined to finish it, but after such a long time placing himself in the mindset of the protagonist Tokitō Kensaku was proving to be a difficult task, compounded by the fact that it was a full-length novel. It was in order to regain his mettle and revitalize his creative drive that he had come to Kinosaki Onsen.

Fuwaku waded towards Arima.

“What do you think he’s playing at?”

“He’s playing Shiga Naoya, apparently.”

“Well, I get that...”

“Kamibayashi must have been more stressed than we imagined,” sighed Arima. “Put yourself in his shoes. He puts in all that work to fulfill his dream and publish *The Complete Onsen Literature Anthology* with nothing to show for it, and now the onsen genre is dying

out. He sends out a rallying cry, hoping to bring back the glory of yesteryear, and look who shows up: just three measly writers. His standing is as low as it's ever been. Convincing himself that he's Shiga Naoya is his escape from that cruel reality. Kinoshita Onsen being so closely tied to Shiga, and the way he's always going on about Shiga being 'the father of onsen fiction', and all that."

"I feel for him, but being dragged around for some escapism isn't exactly a lot of fun."

"What was the deal with those smartball machines?" asked Aonimaru. "He said something about rhythm being key."

"Shiga Naoya wrote an essay called 'Rhythm.'"

Arima explained the passage that he had been reminded of at the arcade, in which Shiga explained the essence of writing fiction. Perhaps smartball had been the false-Shiga-cum-Kamibayashi's oblique way of conveying that essence to these pathetic onsen novelists.

"That's stupid! Who does he think he is, Mr. Miyagi?"

"It *was* kind of a stretch."

"I agree with both of you," chimed in Aonimaru.

"Well, in theory there's no harm in listening to what Shiga Naoya says," said Fuwaku. "The problem is, *he's not Shiga Naoya.*"

"Are we sure about that?" Aonimaru said in a whisper. "What if he's really possessed by Shiga's ghost?"

Arima thought back to the game of kokkuri-san they'd played in their hotel room. When they asked whether it was Shiga Naoya the spirit had responded *yes*. Then Kamibayashi had been stricken by that stomachache, and when they tried to end the game the coin had begun to move erratically. That was hardly proof of a spiritual phenomenon, but it was quite plausible that it might have been the catalyst for an already stressed Kamibayashi to come unglued. They should have never played that silly game...

"What are you mumbling about over there?" came Kamibayashi's voice. "Worthless cretins, I can hardly stand to look at you!"

His nude frame rose out of the water, his piercing eyes fixed upon them. How debauched, diminished, insignificant they felt beneath that boyishly pure gaze! The writers shrank and looked away.

“Arima Otohiko!”

Arima was so overwhelmed by the gravitas of that summons that he couldn’t help but sit up straight and answer, “Present!”

“You benefited greatly from the onsen revival, and lapped greedily at its sweet nectar,” said Kamibayashi. “Yet look at your present predicament. You can hardly be persuaded to go to an onsen; your prolific output is but a mishmash of commercial travel guides and Internet hearsay and rehashes of your older works; and once in a while you will half-heartedly dabble in erotica. And you call yourself an onsen novelist? For shame!”

Arima was speechless.

Now Kamibayashi turned his ire upon Fuwaku.

“Fuwaku Yonjūrō! What with your drawing comics and designing games your hands are never idle. Yet so enamoured of glittering gold have you become that you have forgotten who you truly are. Why have you not etched your name into history with a masterpiece of onsen fiction? Have you not the courage to take up the mantle of the tradition of onsen fiction? But I suppose I should not be surprised, what with your infatuation with silly gimmicks!”

Fuwaku looked away sulkily.

“And you, Aonimaru Satoshi,” said Kamibayashi, “You regard onsen fiction as a stepping stone in order to make your name known, nothing more. That, and no other, is the reason you come fawning and flattering to Arima and Fuwaku. And once your aim is achieved you will cast it aside. But I am afraid that the world is not so simple. Once you have immersed yourself in this accursed water, never will you cannot climb out again. The heavens may allow it, but I will not!”

The onsen novelists were cowed. It was an exhaustive castigation which was as thunderous as any from the literary greats. Yet it was not Shiga Naoya that delivered it: for there was only one person who was so intimately familiar with their pathetic state of affairs, and that was their publisher: Kamibayashi Hankotsu.

Fuwaku was the first to regain his composure.

"I've had enough of this!" he snapped, rising to his feet and approaching Kamibayashi. "I suspected something was up when you proposed to play kokkuri-san out of nowhere. Ghost of Shiga Naoya, my foot! You've been acting this entire time!"

He put his hands on Kamibayashi's shoulders and shook him.

"Enough, Kamibayashi! I get it: you don't like the state of onsen fiction, and you don't like the way we've been working. I'm sure you've got plenty more to say. But why not say it straight up to our faces? Why do you have to pull out Shiga Naoya?"

Kamibayashi's face contorted in rage.

"Is that how you speak to the father of onsen fiction?"

Before anyone could react, Kamibayashi had Fuwaku in a headlock. Fuwaku squawked and scrabbled, but those arms were like a vise, and soon his face was the same shade of red as a watermelon.

"This isn't good!"

In astonishment Arima and Aonimaru rushed forward to separate the two. What happened next was a blur. Arima poked his fingers in Kamibayashi's mouth and nostrils and tugged, while Aonimaru attempted to pry his arms from around Fuwaku's neck. When at last he was freed Fuwaku gasped mightily for air. The group was making such a commotion that the other bathers were staring from a healthy distance. Spluttering and coughing, Fuwaku pulled himself out of the bath and staggered towards the changing room.

Arima looked dumbfounded at the figure in the steam. Was this really Kamibayashi Hankotsu? He stood with his hands on his hips, not even labouring for breath. The Kamibayashi whom Arima knew was thin, pasty; by contrast this man radiated energy from his slick, bronzed skin. As if the baths of Kinosaki were giving him life.

"Onsen fiction is dying," said Kamibayashi, his voice cutting through the thundering of the waterfall. "Will you stand by and do nothing?"

○

Fuwaku Yonjūrō was absolutely incensed.

By the time that Arima made it outside, Fuwaku was already stalking down the street. Arima ran up to stop him, but the only thing he would say was, "I'm out of here!" He was heading straight back to the hotel to pack his things and depart Kinosaki. His ill humour

was apparent in the light of the red lanterns which dangled from the eaves of the souvenir shops.

"I was this close from having my neck wrung!" he snapped. "I'll never talk to Kamibayashi again. What the hell is his problem? Onsen fiction is dying because times have changed. But he makes it sound like it's all our fault...doesn't that make you mad, Arima?"

"Well, actually I think he's got a point," said Arima morosely. "We've dropped the ball."

Kamibayashi's rebuke had worked its way into Arima's mind like a splinter. For twenty years he had secluded himself in the insular world of onsen fiction; whatever ambition he might once have held to write a magnum opus had long since faded. He had become quite adept at bamboozling his readers with a wall of words as impenetrable as a rising column of steam, but didn't that just make him a swindler? Was that what he really wanted? For many years he had piled up a wall of excuses between himself and these intractable difficulties, but now that Kamibayashi had obliterated it he could ignore them no longer.

"I don't think you've dropped anything."

"You don't?"

"We have our own lives to lead," said Fuwaku. "If he wants to follow his own dream he can do it himself."

Aonimaru joined them.

"Kamibayashi's come out. What do we do?"

Turning around, Arima caught sight of Kamibayashi standing in front of Goshonoyu. He glared at them, his arms tucked inside his robe like a rōnin, but after a little while he turned on his heel and strode off in the opposite direction of their inn. Where was he headed? His path led him past a number of old ryokan towards the ropeway to Onsenji.

"Are we just going to let him go?" pondered Aonimaru. "I think we should go after him."

The three onsen novelists gazed after Kamibayashi's lone figure.

"What's he to you anyways?" asked Fuwaku. "I always assumed you were just using onsen fiction to get to bigger and better things."

"You're not wrong," Aonimaru admitted, "I'm trying to catch the big wave, just like both of you did. That's exactly why I'm hoping for an onsen fiction revival, and Kamibayashi's the only one who can make it happen. If not him, then who?"

Kamibayashi Hankotsu was a man possessed by onsen fiction.

"We can't just abandon him," said Arima to Fuwaku. "Whether he's really possessed or just acting, he's clearly not himself. If he needs help, we should help him. Right, Fuwaku? Whatever else we think about it, we wouldn't be where we are today without him. *The Complete Onsen Literature Anthology* wasn't just his dream: at one point, it was ours too."

For a moment Fuwaku was silent. Then at last, with an annoyed sigh he grouched, "Ah hell, all right. I must be getting soft!"



They followed Kamibayashi through the onsen district, passing the many onsen inns. The path bent to the right and brought them to the Kinosaki Moto-yu. Opaque clouds of steam wound up through the air, through the glare of the streetlights. At the back of a dark deserted parking lot could be seen the sign for the ropeway station.

The bustle of the onsen district was far behind them; here there was only the stillness of the mountains which pressed in close on the left, and the impenetrable forest exhaled a cold breath which bristled on the back of the neck.

But then they noticed that Kamibayashi had disappeared.

"Hey! Where'd he go?" fretted Arima, jogging up to where he had last been seen. There he found a magnificent wooden gate, beside which was a small sign that said *Harimaya*. Arima had never heard of it before, but the name had a noble ring to it. Beyond the gate was a paved stone path which led into the depths. Kamibayashi must have disappeared within.

"What do we do?" Aonimaru asked.

"He can't have made an appointment. They'll chase him out pretty soon," declared Fuwaku, rubbing his hands on his pasty arms as if to stave off the cold.

But the longer they waited the more apparent it became that Kamibayashi wouldn't be coming out anytime soon. The lingering warmth of the baths of Goshonoyu was stolen away by the chill of the mountains. And yet, thought Arima to himself, the shiver running down his back wasn't just from the post-bath chill. He'd felt an ominous foreboding ever since Kamibayashi had disappeared down those steps.

As he stared down the path he sucked in his breath.

"Someone's coming!"

It was a waitress in a iris-coloured kimono. Soundlessly she trod along the flagstones, stopping at the gate and bowing to them. Her complexion was pale; there was something about her that reminded them of a kitsune.

"Master Shiga Naoya awaits. Please, this way." She beckoned them inside the gate.

Something's not right, thought Arima. This was too involved for Kamibayashi to have planned out. But he swallowed his suspicion and walked inside, letting himself be swallowed into the tunnel. Fuwaku and Aonimaru went with him.

Already they had fallen underneath the spell.

At the urging of the mysterious waitress they walked into the inn and along a long wooden-floored corridor. Harimaya was an old, traditional wooden building, and the corridor twisted and turned interminably as it went along; it seemed as if it went on forever. The dampened sound and the chill which pervaded the air made it feel as though they were walking deeper and deeper into the forest.

They were brought into a huge room, perhaps dozens of tatami in size. The shōji doors leading to the veranda were slid open; outside was a garden with artificial hillocks and stone lanterns, and beyond it was the darkness of the forest. Yet the room itself was almost sultry, for inside there was a large cauldron, so large you could hardly wrap your arms around it, emitting a gentle burbling as it simmered over a fire. And sitting cross-legged staring at it, with his back to the *tokonoma*, was Kamibayashi.

In the tokonoma hung a scroll with the inscription: *The virtuous will not long remain lonely.*

"There you are! Sit down!" commanded Kamibayashi, casting a sidelong glance at them.

The three writers did as they were told, walking onto the tatami and sitting down uneasily around the cauldron across from him. It must have been the heat from the vessel which made his face glow such a crimson red. He was not wearing his trademark spectacles, and there was a crafty gleam in his eye. Yet most unnerving of all was that the massive cauldron contained only boiling water.

Kamibayashi leaned towards them, and when he spoke, it was as though the king of the beasts addressed them.

To write, or not to write—that is the question!

I vow to finish A Dark Night's Passing!

I am fighting, fighting with all my strength to produce a masterpiece.

Behold me! Behold my lonely struggle!

From me all was born.

I am the progenitor!

And what of you?

The heat of the cauldron engulfed them as though it were the very breath of hell. And as they withered beneath his seething onslaught, Kamibayashi began to transform before their eyes. Fur sprouted from his bare chest beneath his kimono, and muscle rippled through his frame until his arms were thick as tree trunks. His slick, ruddy skin shone like polished bronze, and his eyes blazed beneath loose, unkempt hair. He was a constable of the underworld come to life.

In his terror Arima forgot to breathe.

“YOU WILL SHIRK YOUR DUTY NO LONGER!” roared Kamibayashi, reaching out a giant hand.

The writers could not even try to run, for they had been transformed into crabs. Kamibayashi easily snatched them up and tossed them into the roiling water.

Needless to say, it was far hotter than an onsen.

“Wah! We’ll be boiled alive!” Arima desperately tried to scuttle out, but immediately he was shoved back in.

Through the rising steam he could see a wide grin on Kamibayashi’s face—a face as red and glistening as a boiled crab, here and there a spike protruding from it.

“Did you really think I was the God of Fiction?” called Kamibayashi mockingly.

And then—

At last Arima realized who he really was.

He was not Kamibayashi Hankotsu. Nor was he the great Shiga Naoya.

Boiled snow crab, crab sashimi, crab sukiyaki, crab tōbanyaki, crab tempura, crab porridge: the dishes from their earlier feast whirled through his mind. *We thought it was just a game,*

without realizing that we'd summoned the vengeful ghost of a crab! The spirit never left. The game of kokkuri-san never ended. We're still sitting in our hotel room!

"Kokkuri-san! Kokkuri-san! We beseech you, return whence you came!" he called, writhing at the bottom of the pot. Beside him Fuwaku and Aonimaru did the same.

"Kokkuri-san! Kokkuri-san! We beseech you, return whence you came!"

The false Shiga Naoya gave a shriek of laughter, that mouth of close white teeth splitting his face until it stretched from ear to ear.

A harvest! A fine harvest!

His roaring laughter split the heavens, and the cauldron lurched and shook.

When Arima came too, he found himself in the room at the Kawaguchiya Kinosaki Riverside Hotel. The sheet with the syllabary and the numbers was lying on the table, and the hands on the clock had barely moved. The laughter of the false Shiga Naoya still rang in his ears, but when he exchanged glances with the other two writers it became clear that it had not all been in his mind.

The ten-yen coin had returned to the torii.



In the morning a light rain was falling over Kinosaki Onsen.

After checking out from the hotel, the three writers walked through the onsen district and took the ropeway up the mountain. Stopping to pray at Onsen-ji, they took the car the rest of the way to the summit. From the observation platform they looked down at the rain-misted town.

After a little while, Arima took the stairs down and walked over to the park on the right. There he came across something rather peculiar: a mound of dark boulders, topped with a grey stone plaque which bore an etching of two crabs, and the word *Kanizuka*. The mound was flanked by two little stone lanternposts. It appeared to be some kind of tomb dedicated to crabs.

"Look at this!" Arima called to the rest.

Unprompted, the four knelt and prostrated themselves to the ground.

After they had left the writers never again played kokkuri-san. But the incident had changed something. Arima, Fuwaku, and Aonimaru formed an onsen writers' group called the Hotpot Club, dedicated to fulfilling Kamibayashi Hankotsu's grand dream. The name, of course, came from their shared experience in that cauldron.

During that game of kokkuri-san, Aonimaru had written down each of the characters that the coin had indicated on the sheet. They spelled out the following:

Kushiki

Naka

Tohautsu

Kana

Yokiko

At a glance, it appears to be a string of gibberish, but they can be arranged in this way:

Nakayokikotohautsukushikikana

What a beautiful thing is friendship

Oh, do not be so crass as to point out that those are in fact the words of Mushanokōji Saneatsu.