

森見登美彦

恋文の技術

ポプラ文庫



The Art of Writing a Love Letter

By Morimi Tomihiko

Mochiguma Translations

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Translator's Note

Heretofore I have avoided taking up my readers' precious time with the self-indulgent exercise of a translator's note; however, being that this novel takes a rather unusual format in comparison to most of Morimi's previous works, I shall endeavour to provide a brief overview of the salient differences between Japanese and Western letter formats, and the choices I made in translating the format, in the hopes that this will provide some clarity as you follow Morita Ichirō through his single-minded epistolary odyssey.

In this book, the format of a letter is generally (but not always) as follows:

<Date>	
<Opening>	
<Optional seasonal greeting>	
<Letter body>	
<Wrap-up>	
	<Closing>
	<Sender>
<Recipient>	

The text is written vertically in columns going right-to-left; imagine the above example rotated 90° clockwise. Greetings and closings are canned words, the equivalent of "Dear" or "Sincerely". In Western letters, these will be followed by the recipient and sender's name respectively; however, as you can see that's not exactly the case in Japanese.

My first order of business lay in deciding how to translate the opening; initially I tried just using Dear XXX, which due to extended noun modification in Japanese often resulted in clumsy phrases like "Dear Ms. Ōtsuka, the gold standard of evil". There are other ways you can slice that of course, but in the end they all just sounded just as clunky, so I elected to use a To: field instead. Freed from the constraint of "Dear XXX", I decided to be a little more liberal with my translation of the openings and closings; occasionally I use the word "Greetings", sometimes I use "Dear XXX" where it seems appropriate, but much of the time I elected to dispense with a greeting/closing entirely unless it felt right to include one. In a few instances, I rework longer recipient names into the closing. Whether my laboured attempts at fitting a Morimi-shaped peg into a US-letter-sized hole are successful, I leave to the reader to decide.

Chapter 1 — To a Moat-Filling Friend

April 9

To: Komatsuzaki Yūya

Thank you for your letter. I am glad that everyone back at the lab is doing well.

It's good to hear that you are still living your unproductive college life to the fullest. I urge you to continue enjoying this unfruitful period of your life just as you are. Expectation breeds disappointment. If you are going to try to plant and harvest a fruitful crop on the barren wasteland of a college campus, you had best be prepared to risk your life. Sleep, sleep life away; you won't get any judgment from me.

I am well, though the cold at this research station is nothing to sneeze at.

I received quite a shock when I debarked at the train station. The research station occupies a prime location right in front of the train station with a sweeping view of the sea, but there is nothing else there, not even a convenience store. In fact, to find the next closest human settlement you have to go some distance down the national highway which snakes along the coast. The platform is bereft of another soul to offer warmth as I stand there waiting for the last train. I once saw a shooting star and tried to make a wish on it for companionship, but by the time I had reached the third syllable the star had already gone. This place seems bereft of hopes and dreams. If ever you think your life is difficult, just think of me, toiling away at jellyfish research far from Kyoto. In fact, you ought to come to Noto as well for a taste of this solitude.

My advisor, Taniguchi, is an odd man. He's all skin and bones with frizzy hair, and always has on a windbreaker like the bad guy in an old detective serial. Come Friday night he can always be found in a corner of the lab, plucking at a mandolin and singing a song of his own invention in a reedy falsetto. His drink of choice is a cola with a coelenterate of undetermined origin floating in it; he'll often take a sip, his eyes brimming with tears, and ask me what I think of his songs, which more often than not have to do with jilted women. That foul beverage is, by his telling, supposed to enhance virility. Why anyone would bother to enhance their virility on this forlorn stretch of seashore escapes me.

How can I ever express my gratitude to the professor who dispatched me here?

I am renting an apartment in a town called Nanao. It lies at the base of the Noto Peninsula, about 30 minutes by train from the research station. Near my apartment are a museum and a high school. Yesterday being a Saturday, I took a walk around the neighbourhood. I hear that there is a shopping street and a large park across the tracks, so I will have to visit some time. But this being my first time living in a new town, it's hard not to feel a little uneasy.

I spent all day today cooped up in my apartment writing letters. This past week I have hardly said a word at the research station. The only one who talks to me is Taniguchi, and half of our conversations involve him berating me. In between rounds of reprimands, he spends his time observing jellyfish and enhancing his virility with his mysterious concoctions.

How I miss living in Kyoto. "I fear that Kyoto may crumble without me," I confessed to my sister when I was packing my bags. "Worry about yourself first," she chided me. For a high schooler, she has a nasty habit of often being right. She will need to fix that if she ever hopes to be happy.

I appreciate you coming to Kyoto Station to see me off in the pouring rain. Somewhere along the western shore of Lake Biwa as the Thunderbird express headed north, the rain let up to a drizzle, and a beautiful rainbow appeared above the mountains that link all the way down to Mt. Eizan. On a dirt path between withered rice fields I spotted a boy being pulled along by who I assume was his mother. To my surprise, as I observed them the boy let a red balloon with something tied to it float away into the sky. In another moment the whole scene was gone as the train whipped by, but there is no doubt that this scene, the rainbow and the red balloon, was an auspicious portent of the glorious future that awaits me.

I intend to take advantage of this opportunity to polish my skills in writing letters. I shall set to paper the warm missives that are graven upon my soul, spread cheer to my correspondents, and become renowned as a master of letter-writing. And one day, I will master the art of making any woman swoon for me with a single letter, and conquer the world. Everyone will be happy, and I will be happy too. Hurrah for letters.

Please continue to write. If ever you are in need of advice you have only to ask.

Yours in haste,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

April 15

To: Young Komatsuzaki

Thank you for your account of the cherry blossom picnic. A barbecue on the banks of the Kamo River is a wonderful thing. I am delighted that Ibuki made an appearance as well. How is she?

I suppose that the famous cherry blossom spots in Kyoto must be thronged with sightseers, but over here all is quiet. There is a row of cherry trees at the station, so it's almost like having a blossom viewing party every day. Enclosed is a photo I took. The sour-faced one is Taniguchi. I don't remember why Taniguchi was with me, nor do I want to. The odd feeling that Taniguchi is lurking in the background any time I go to one of the famous spots in Noto sends a chill up my spine.

In my last letter I admittedly did tell you to ask for advice; in spite of that I was surprised that you wrote back immediately with a request, and even more surprised that the request concerned romance. My first thought was, "You idiot!" but I never expected you to be this much of an idiot. Do you sincerely expect that advice from a mouldering weevil whose motto is "live life vicariously" is going to help solve your problem? Any problem that has a chance to be resolved usually loses that chance once I get involved.

In my view, the first thing you need to do is build the resolve to take the first step. As to how to build up that resolve—go to Yoshida Shrine and offer up a prayer.

"But praying at Yoshida Shrine is bad luck," I can hear you saying. You're right: everyone knows that if you pray at the shrine to get into your dream college or pass your classes, you will fall into a pit of misguided confidence. But consider it carefully: what else do you fall into? Love. When it comes to miracles, Yoshida Shrine is assuredly superior to such places as Jishu Shrine in Kiyomizu or Nomiya Shrine in Arashiyama. Give up something that you enjoy as an offering, and pray that your romantic endeavour is successful.

Do you suspect that I am pulling your leg to distract you from your worries?

Of course I am.

I cannot forgive you for falling in love with a fourth-year student who newly joined your club on a riverbank with cherry blossoms swirling through the air. Don't delude yourself into thinking that you are the main character of some romantic comedy. What I mean to say is that if you think you can still regain a fragment of your lost youth even now that you have started a master's program, you are sadly mistaken. I considered looking for another

shooting star to wish you luck, but gave it up deciding it was far more trouble than it was worth.

On an unrelated note, I have a knack for dreaming about girls that I am interested in. Once, I had an amazing dream involving all of the girls that I had a crush on from high school through college (including the pop idols). They were all sitting in my living room eating *kinako mochi*. As far as dreams go this one was less enjoyable than it was terrifying, and not knowing how to handle the situation I fled out the back door.

Do you understand why I am telling you this story?

There is no point. Some stories don't have morals.

In haste,

Morita Ichirō, who failing to come up with a punchline is offering a prayer to Yoshida Shrine

* * *

April 30

To: Marshmallow Komatsuzaki

You are right that spring is a season of restlessness, when everyone runs around trying to find a new identity for themselves. To an unflappable late bloomer such as I these people look like fools, one and all. The one saving grace of this remote research station is that I can avoid all those zealous freshmen burning a hole in us upperclassmen with that hopeful, overenthusiastic look in their eyes.

I am currently gazing upon the Noto Railway which runs quietly between mountain and sea. Noto-Kashima Station is deserted. Nanao Bay sparkles under beams of spring sunshine, while the silhouette of Noto Island looms up beyond its serene swells. And Taniguchi, who gives off the impression of a man who has run into one of life's dead ends, thoughtlessly continues to augment his virility. It feels as though he and I are the only ones left in the world. This is nothing if not a nightmare.

Last weekend, I had Taniguchi drive me in his car over the Twin Bridge to Noto Island. I saw dolphins at the aquarium and stopped at Wakura Onsen on the way back where I visited the Sōyu public bathhouse. It's a splendid place to enjoy hot springs without having to check into one of the resorts, and the entry fee is comparable to a regular bathhouse. The baths are spacious, the ceiling is high, and there is even an outdoor hot spring. But I assure

you that sitting in a hot spring face to face in the buff was not something either Taniguchi or I wished for. Let's not get the wrong idea here.

I admit that I worry for you. Not only is your love not cooling down, it seems to be becoming further confused. You have fixated on the entirely wrong thing. What do you mean, you won't change your underpants until your love is fulfilled? Are you trying to become some sort of underpants hooligan? This act of yours will not cause anything to pass; in fact it will cause things which should have come to pass *not* to come to pass.

Among the information which sloshed out of Taniguchi's mouth at Wakura Onsen was the claim that it is a clean impression, rather than outward appearance, that makes the man. That is why he comes here every now and then to polish his manhood. Perhaps I should take after him and polish my manhood until it droops over. Believe me when I tell you it is important to polish your own. Pay special attention to polish your lower half, and when you are exhausted you will know that you are done.

Assuming that you are going to start changing your underpants as you should, what should you then give up?

You're on the fence about it, but I do not recommend giving up adult entertainment. Losing your reason is one thing, but to also lose a vent for your pent-up desires could very well turn you to crime. A heart once sullied can never be clean again; there is nothing to gain from giving up pornography, and everything to lose.

That reminds me: yesterday I went to the shopping street across the tracks. I wandered into a little book shop where I struck up a conversation with the old man who owned it. The shop was filled with old videos; apparently he used to rent them out, but once the big-box rental stores started popping up his clientele dried up. I could hardly believe my ears when he told me I could take whatever I liked for free, and of course I found some faded packages containing adult movies of great historical value. I must get my hands on a VCR.

But enough about my sex life.

Come to think of it, you were always munching on marshmallows. People said that you were starting to look like one. Ōtsuka once said, "I ran into this giant marshmallow in the hallway the other way, but when I kicked it away I realized that it was actually Komatsuzaki!"

Hence, from this moment forth you are not to touch another marshmallow.

"But my marshmallowy floofiness is my selling point!" I can hear you blubbering, tears welling up in your big round eyes. But I tell you, you will have turned into a marshmallow long before the world takes notice of your marshmallowy floofiness.

By the way, what are your plans for Golden Week? Don't just hint at them, I want you to describe them in detail, you marshmallow bugger. Let me remind you that abducting the object of your affections and absconding to Kurama is right out. One must first fill in the moat before assaulting the fortress.

Is your research proceeding smoothly?

You'll forgive me, I hope, for inserting a little jest at your expense.

My own research is going nowhere. I don't know what it was about jellyfish that could possibly have possessed me to take interest in such things. By all appearances my work is only regressing. Woe, woe is me.

Farewell, until next time.

Retreating from both romance and research,

Ichirō Morita

* * *

May 11

To: The Titty Professor

Do you remember calling me last week? I suspect not, judging by how wasted you were. Stop challenging Ōtsuka to drinking games. That lousy woman, I can't imagine where she got the idea that I was off chasing "dolphin tail".

The old VCR which I asked my sister to send me has arrived, so yesterday I paid a visit to Minowa Books in the shopping arcade in search of more historically significant adult films. *The Bridal Curtain* is a notable production from these parts; I have been prowling around odd corners of the shopping street for the past week, yet it continues to elude my libertine gaze. I barged into the book shop, hot air blasting from my nostrils intensely enough to part any bride's curtain. But taking me for a young intellectual, the old man struck up a conversation with me, forcing me to play the part of a goody two-shoes student. I came out of the shop with a book about castles which the old man recommended, as well as faded VHS copies of *Ghostbusters*, *Flashdance*, and *Cocoon*. I have never cursed my cultured

bearing as I have today. My retinas crave flesh. I'll have to pay a visit to the video stores on the edges of town.

After nosing around a candle store I stopped by the Mister Donut by the station. There I read your letter, which sent me into such a laughing fit that all the employees looked at me funny. It's so amusing to observe others suffering in the throes of love. I know you've mocked others before for the same thing. Don't you dare deny it.

It's a shame that you failed to invite Saegusa to the horse archery ceremony, but the silver lining is that she never read your poem. Surely the gods of Shimogamo Shrine must have taken pity on you.

Each dogged repetition of "lovely, lovely" saps the reader's energy; your comparison of her to a "fluffy pink marshmallow" in the middle only serves to show off your vile depravity to its fullest; and the ending of the poem starting with "even if I never take off these underpants" is entirely incomprehensible. Even the most kindly disposed of women would be driven into barefooted flight were she to be presented with the destructive force of this poem. You'd mentioned that you were part of the "Special Light Music Club"; is this the "Special" mentioned in the name? After five years of knowing you it all finally makes sense.

Lately all of my experiments have ended in failure which has put me in a sour mood. Nanao Bay is serene as ever, and the new spring foliage around Noto-Kashima Station almost seems to overflow into the station, yet clouds brood over my mind. I was in such a foul mood that I read your poem out loud to Taniguchi as he plucked at his mandolin. His reaction was one word: "KYS."

Of course, it is admirable that you have given up marshmallows. I will admit that much.

But after reading what you have to say about Saegusa, the extent to which you are losing your sense of reason has become clear. You have never been particularly good at discerning the truth; in fact, not only do you usually fail to see the point, you often fail to see that you have failed to see the point, a point for which you are well known. That's why Hisako the Great treats you like a marshmallow and kicks you around. But I fear that at last your brains really have turned into marshmallows. It may already be too late to give them up.

You may find her "mischievous accidents" in the lab adorable, but such things are the product of clumsiness and lack of preparation, and proof of indolence. I should know—my experiments fail all the time. You fawn over the way she frowns when she is "lost in thought in a corner of the lab", but I suspect that there is nothing going through her head at all. She

may be an avid reader, but the fact that she only reads books by Morimi Tomihiko is a sign of a potentially lopsided mind. You bring up all sorts of examples to prove how “modest” she is, but I would describe her not as modest but as timid. Things like “there’s always a smile on her face” and “it’s cute when her long black hair gets into her mouth” don’t strike me as attractive. What springs to mind is a woman who smiles weakly, speaks little, and is always chewing on her hair: not exactly a flattering image.

Furthermore, you were quite adamant in denying that you were attracted to her boobs, but I never mentioned her boobs in the first place, so I don’t know why you felt the need to so hastily justify yourself. You also wrote, “her boobs are big, but I didn’t notice how big they were until after I fell for her.” I also never asked about that. Now it is quite clear to me what it was about her that titillated you, you buffoon.

That’s alright. At this point there is probably no point in trying to douse your ardor. It is better that you run as far as you can go across the wild plain of youth. But don’t you think the tactics you have adopted thus far—praying at Yoshida Shrine, deifying this woman in verse—are a bit too roundabout? Golden Week is over, the air is clear, and it is time that you shake off the fog that has collected in the folds of your brain.

You must act sensibly and fill the moat in earnest. First you must ascertain whether she is taken. As she is a fourth-year the likelihood that she is already spoken for is exceedingly high. If it becomes clear that you are woefully overmatched you may need to manfully withdraw from the fray. Bear this in mind: you cannot do anything properly without first gathering information about the situation.

The other day Taniguchi chewed me out for not knowing what I was doing.

As I now know quite well, ignorance is not always bliss.

Faithfully,

Know-nothing Morita

P.S. I am currently in my apartment watching the copy of *Ghostbusters* I rented yesterday. It features a strange Marshmallow Man, which for a moment I thought was you. During a shopping trip to ASTY I also signed up for a membership at a video rental store. My sex life may just be saved.

* * *

June 16

To: A moat-filling friend

I was worried because you took so long to reply.

Am I lonely? No. Ever since I arrived in Noto looking for a fresh start, I have been inundated with letters from lost little lambs for whom I am a spiritual anchor; I have become a letter writer extraordinaire with no shortage of correspondents. I'm so busy writing replies that my experiments have fallen by the wayside. But as I have sown, so shall I reap. Through martial devotion to the practice of letter-writing I will elevate my epistolary skill to heretofore unseen heights, and one day I will start a company ghostwriting love letters and rake in the dough. I shall spend my days swaddled in luxurious down comforters, thinking nothing of slumbering the days away. My company will go public and become the darling of the stock market; my face will grace the covers of leading finance magazines. "We're not in the business of writing letters," I'll coolly tell reporters. "We're in the business of *capturing hearts*."

Taniguchi vents his ire at my incompetence like an incarnation of the wrathful deity Fudō Myōō; planting has begun in the procession of rice paddies along the seashore; and at the beach it's starting to feel like summer. In the midst of it all I have spent my days singlemindedly penning ever-grander missives, taking occasional excursions to Wakura Onsen, searching for UFOs at Hakui, washing down bites of Tengu Ham with beer. And just when I had finally put your despondent prospects for love out of my mind, the letter arrived.

Allow me to first vent my impotent anger.

You say that on Saturday you and the rest of the lab stole out for a friendly outing without telling the professor. It's good to get along with your labmates. There's nothing wrong with taking a pleasant trip to Kanazawa either.

But if you came all the way up to Kanazawa why didn't you visit me!? Nanao is practically in Kanazawa's backyard! I would have liked to meet up with all the seniors. But while you were all drunkenly cavorting in Kanazawa like a bunch of idiots, I was all alone in Wakura Onsen having been abandoned by Taniguchi, morosely soft-boiling an *onsen tamago* in one of the hot springs that bubbles up on the street here. It's some distance from here to Kanazawa, but if you'd reached out to me I would have headed down right away. Empress Ōtsuka may have fed you some cock-and-bull story that I was busy writing letters and put you under a gag order. Fie to her, I say, fie—at least, I say so in spirit.

The next time you're here you had better let me know. Morita Ichirō is here, I tell you, here I am!

It sounds as though the whole time you were in Kanazawa you were too lovestruck and intent on turning things around to notice anything besides Saegusa and her hair-chewing ways. But Kyoto itself is chock-full of events, such as the Aoi Matsuri and Takigi Noh, yet you failed to invite her to a single one. What made you think things would go differently in Kenrokuen?

Even more worrisome is how you are misinterpreting my advice. It is true that I emphasized the importance of gathering information. But what I meant was for you to ask around about her tastes and glean useful data from conversations in the lab, not to follow her around and observe her every move. Romance has rules of its own. Obtaining tidbits like how she tutors every Wednesday and Saturday night and comes home at 10, or that she occasionally drops off letters in the post, is completely against those rules. Those who enter the battlefield of love without regard for rules set themselves against all the world; whether they come out crowned in victory or clowned in defeat, they always lose. I speak from personal experience. Don't ask me about that personal experience.

At any rate, you need to stop doing those things. Full stop, cold turkey. And no matter how many fan letters she writes you must not become jealous of Morimi Tomihiko. Really, you're not a little kid anymore.

I will say that the fact that she's single and that she's not sure what to do after graduation are two very important pieces of information. You should casually ask about her worries and use this to get close to her. Don't overdo it and try to sound too insightful, lest you come off as lecturing her. Worse still is trying to probe too deeply. When you prod at someone's sensitive spot, they're more likely to lash out than say thank you. Men in love are fools, and if you try to be helpful more often than not you'll end up shooting yourself in the foot. Just keep nodding sympathetically, and listen closely to what she has to say.

Tomorrow I will go see the dolphins at the aquarium on Noto Island. I am full of misgivings about the path my life is on, but if I were to foolishly consult Taniguchi for advice I would only end up on the receiving end of another interminable lecture, along with a heaping dose of virility enhancement for which I have no use whatsoever. On the other hand, dolphins just float there on the other side of the glass and listen to whatever you have to say. She is the only emotional support I have around here. Dolphin communication has much to teach us. Remember: silence is golden.

I'll say it once more: stop stalking her. The best-case outcome of being a stalker: losing the girl. The life you could end up frittering away: priceless.

Morita Ichirō, who is on his game today

* * *

June 30

To: Komatsuzaki

I have been driven up the wall by a string of failed experiments. The stress has caused the peach fuzz which covers my body to fall out, and my feces have taken on an idiosyncratic rainbow hue. O, star-crossed Morita Ichirō, whither shalt thee be blown? O tempestuous Taniguchi, wherefore dost thee vent thy anger so?

I ask you, why is the sky over Noto so grey, and why must it hang so oppressively low overhead? Life at this seaside research station; Nanao Bay; Taniguchi; the view from the train on the Noto Railway; the streets in front of the Nanao Station; the life that awaits me—all of these things are dull and grey.

As I grill a piece of the Tengu Ham I bought at the butcher, I take a sip of beer and look up into the gloomy overcast sky. Tengu Ham is the only thing of value in my life right now. Your romantic troubles are meaningless in comparison to Tengu Ham.

But I am an upstanding human being, and so I offer this letter to you.

That's a very cold thing for her to say. It's only natural for you to be worried. I've never heard of this "All-Japan Maidens' Association" either, and I can't imagine what Saegusa would be doing in such a suspicious organization. But you're all grown up now, so don't just take everything Ōtsuka tells you at face value. "A maiden-driven plot to overthrow the state"—what exactly do maidens and the state have to do with one another?

In any case, there's not much you can do about Saegusa feeling down. Eventually you'll need to do some investigation. For the moment it's best that you avoid prying too deep.

It may turn out that you mistook her to be in a bad mood, and that she didn't really mean anything serious by it. Since time immemorial, lovestruck men have read too much into every little thing women say and do. Don't overthink it.

Here is one realistic plan of action: stockpile sweets. Whenever women are upset, offering them a piece of candy will turn their frown upside down. Back home in Kyoto, my little

sister used to get in a foul mood from time to time. She'd stomp home from school and throw herself down on the living room floor without even changing out of her uniform, glaring at the ceiling and muttering horrible things such as, "I wanna be a gentlewoman of leisure." Whenever this happened, I observed that going to buy a sweet for her would produce the most astonishing effect.

It is a tried-and-true method. I urge you to see for yourself.

As I have much else to deal with, I shall leave things here for today.

Yours,

A Scoundrel-of-Leisure-in-Training

* * *

July 10

To: Mr. Komatsuzaki

I am as busy as ever. Lately so many letters have been piling in that my humble quarters have come to resemble a post office. I fill up one page, then turn it over and fill up the other side; repeat ad nauseam, like a master swordsman practicing the same swing over and over.

Slugs have begun to ooze out of the woodwork recently, and I am at my wits' end. What do slugs live on? Why do they exist? Why must they be so slimy? If you know any good ways to drive them away I am all ears.

My research proceeds as slowly as ever, and my spirits wax and wane. The other day I took a tooth-shattering bite out of the *daruma* that lies by my pillow having mistaken it for an apple, only to have my spirits lifted on the train by the sight of a rainbow breaking through the skies that have been so cloudy of late, only to then have them promptly sunk by the arrival of a threatening letter from my sister demanding that I repay the three hundred yen she lent me in third grade. It's fortunate that Taniguchi has been in a good mood. The other day I spotted his beloved car stopped by the seaside, and Taniguchi himself looking out onto Nanao Bay strumming his mandolin. I ignored the sight and tried to board the train, only to hear him shout to me, "Are you enjoying your youth, Morita?" He really seemed to be feeling himself.

I must say that I was astounded by your letter. Though you ever so mildly attempted to lay blame on me, it was not I who gave her an upset stomach. You were the one who decided

to get carried away on the romantic night of Tanabata and make her eat some “bubble-bobble *chimaki*” made of who knows what. It makes no sense to blame me when you were the one who picked the food, and I’m willing to take the case all the way to the Supreme Court. What was in that bubble-bobble chimaki? I’m quite surprised that she ate it; it seems that the princess has a surprisingly daring side.

You are a grown man. You have the right to vote. You also have the right to fill in the moat in order to win her over. But with great rights come great responsibilities. That’s why this is all your responsibility. Stop trying to evade it by claiming that you’re just a marshmallow. Even marshmallows have some pride.

It is how one faces adversity that reveals one’s true worth. Only by rising up to the present challenge can you truly call yourself a man. Will you allow yourself to forever be labeled as the Marshmallow Man who forced her to eat a weird chimaki and gave her an upset stomach? Or will you succeed in revising it into a beautiful, fabricated memory that years from now you will both look back on fondly? It all depends on what you do next.

You must pay her a visit. I recommend you bring flowers. From my limited experience, women love receiving flowers. I had to pause and consider whether a gaudy display like that is the best course of action, but I believe it will make her happy after all.

My own Tanabata was a brutish affair. It may as well not have been Tanabata at all.

Yours,

A first-rate slug exterminator

* * *

July 15

The rain has not stopped for several days, and the oppressive clouds hang low. The sea is black. During a discussion about experiment results my negligence was exposed, incurring Taniguchi’s wrath once again. The way things are going I am in danger of being shoved into Nanao Bay wearing concrete boots. But when I ponder my employment prospects as I wait under the brooding clouds for the train to arrive at Noto-Kashima Station, I sometimes notice uncharacteristically weary thoughts going through my head; perhaps sinking beneath the waves wouldn’t be so bad after all. And that was when I received your letter, which has brought me to the end of my tether. “I can’t believe she’s allergic to carnations!” you wrote, but that is none of my concern. Who in their right mind would bring someone carnations on any day other than Mother’s Day? You did your homework, you should have

known that she was allergic to them, you revolting stalker. I withdraw my support for your romance; I wash my hands of the affair. What happens now is none of my concern. Morita out.

* * *

July 22

To: A friend in need

My last postcard was rather testy on account of my foul mood. I'll never make it in the love letter ghostwriting business like that. It has been four months since I washed ashore on the shores of the Noto Peninsula. It's high time that I take a good hard look at myself and grow up.

Taniguchi said that when he was in our lab doing his doctoral program, he once took "his girl" out to the Gion Festival during Yoiyama. It was so hot and muggy and crowded that the mood soon soured, and they came to blows under the Naginataboko float. When I told him how surprised I was that he'd once been young and in love too, he said, "You and me are nothing like each other, cherry boy." "What do you know about my life! And don't call me a cherry boy!" I wanted to say, but he was right on the money so I couldn't say anything. After not only giving Saegusa an upset stomach but also triggering her allergies, I thought there was no way that you could possibly invite "your girl" to a date during Yoiyama, Kyoto's biggest romantic event. "My man!" I was thinking to myself, when your postcard came.

I couldn't believe what I was reading.

After what you did to her, how did you manage to still meet her for Yoiyama?

What stupidity did you get up to?

And why did she bail on you in the middle of the crowd?

Your sentences were completely disjointed, and as you omitted any sort of explanation in favor of moaning about how "it's all over", I am at a loss as to how to respond. I request that you reply with the details immediately.

As your friend, allow me to say one thing.

Don't skip the country and fly to India.

Your concerned friend,

Morita

* * *

July 30

To: A friend racing down the course of love

The rainy season here has finally ended, and the woods behind Noto-Kashima Station reverberate with the cries of cicadas. The sun beating down upon me tells me that it is well and truly summer. When I see the pure white thunderheads rising up behind Noto Island, I think of how hot Kyoto must be right now. As a summery sort of man, I would like nothing better than to go stroll along the beach in pursuit of a summer fling, but as things stand my pitiful research output makes it difficult to ask for a vacation. I'm sure if I tried Taniguchi would just tell me to go to hell.

I received your pictures from the Gion Festival.

The instant I saw the picture of Saegusa my blood started boiling. Whatever happened to the "woman who smiles weakly, speaks little, and is always chewing on her hair"? The woman in the picture looks more like the goddess Kannon leading a boy along by the hand! She doesn't look anything like you described her. I was so annoyed that my gums started to bleed, and with the taste of copper in my mouth I couldn't stop myself from yelling out at Nanao Bay, "What the hell!"

The odds of your marshmallow ass succeeding with such a ridiculous romantic strategy involving praying at Yoshida Shrine, force-feeding her a funny chimaki, triggering an allergic reaction with carnations, following her and her student around during Yoiyama, calling out to her pretending to have randomly run into her, and then actually reading her that "lovely" poem out loud in the middle of all those crowds, has to be smaller than the odds of the earth itself being swallowed up by a black hole. The fact that you did succeed means that there are going to be a lot more idiots that get the wrong idea and end up getting their heart broken.

Why would she run away from you out of embarrassment, only to turn around and end up accepting the confession of a pervert like you? The way I see it, Saegusa loves marshmallows, and must be mistaking you for a gigantic marshmallow. You are dreaming a good dream out of happenstance, while I am having a nightmare. We both need to wake up soon and face up to the cold light of reality.

You claim that “she always had eyes for me.” I don’t believe that for a moment, but supposing I did, what was the point of all those letters I’ve been eking out time from my busy schedule to write since spring? What was the use of all those hours I lost writing night after night? What of the dreams I couldn’t dream? The youth I couldn’t experience? My plans for the future?

You said you couldn’t have done it without me. But that certainly isn’t true.

You said that she thanks me as well. Exactly what is she thanking me for?

You no longer need to send me pictures or updates. There is nothing interesting about a romance fulfilled. I have known you a long time, but from this moment on our correspondence is over. Goodbye.

On Friday night, as I was howling at the sea after reading your letter, Taniguchi stopped his car for me and took me to Wakura Onsen.

Inside Sōyu we were relaxing and making onsen tamago, when we struck up a conversation with a beautiful woman who was visiting from Kyoto. At her invitation we went to the top floor of the ultra-luxurious Kagaya resort, but all we found was a conga line of grubby old men jostling about. While we were drinking, the beautiful lady disappeared, and I got into a tussle with all those old boozehounds. Taniguchi composed a song on his mandolin with your poem as the lyrics, and performed it to thunderous applause. “Go to hell!” he shouted, and I found myself shouting defiantly along. That’s the last thing I remember. When I came to, dawn was breaking over Noto, and from the window I could see shimmering Nanao Bay, and then I realized that both Taniguchi and I were lying naked on the floor. The woman reappeared, took one look at us, and let out a snort of laughter. After that, Taniguchi and I stopped by the Shimamura fashion center, still nursing our hangovers, and then went home.

How do you intend to make amends for the hollowness I feel?

Congratulations, Komatsuzaki. And goodbye. Life is nothing but a series of goodbyes. Lap up the luscious nectar of love, and erase my pitiful existence from your cold heart.

Summer has arrived.

Yet my life remains the same.

I shall continue my training on the path of the writer with my spirit unbroken, and rewrite the history of failures I have recorded at this research station by the sea. Sitting at my desk

I shall glare at jellyfish and indulge in vicarious fantasies of red-hot romance on the beach of love, as Taniguchi futilely enhances his virility.

Sincerely,

Morita Ichirō, an ordinary man

Chapter 2 — To the Most Exasperating Woman I Have Ever Known

April 9

To: Ōtsuka Hisako,

It is I, Morita Ichirō. I hope that you have been well.

I would be honoured if you remembered the poor boy from your lab who was chosen by the professor in all his wisdom to be exiled to a research station in Noto. I have taken the liberty of writing in hopes of reminding you of me and my extraordinary circumstances.

A letter from Komatsuzaki arrived the other day (he is about the only one who still asks after me). I read his letter on the swaying train, and as the train pulled into a station I looked up from the page and saw a mail car being exhibited on the other side of the platform, its deep blue exterior bearing the proud 〒 insignia of the post office. I imagined how it must once have raced tirelessly over the tracks, bearing correspondences between loved ones separated by the tyranny of geography: family, friends, lovers. It must have been some kind of sign, and thus I determined that I should polish my letter-writing skills.

In our highly information-oriented society, a handwritten letter carries enormous power. I shall write enough letters to fill a train car, master the art of capturing a person's heart via the written word, and cruise through any crisis which life throws my way. I am no longer the Morita Ichirō who happily allowed you to string him along like a marionette. I am a lone wolf who has devoted himself to the positive martial art of letter-writing. O, Japanese samurai, let your pen fly over the page as swiftly as the stroke of a katana!

That is why I hope that you will write, if you have the time.

I assure you, I am not lonely.

But the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory is a lonely place.

It lies on the shore of Nanao Bay, but there is nothing else around it, and nothing to do but research: both an ideal environment and a hellish one. Every day I speak only to the jellyfish and to my advisor, Taniguchi. The jellyfish don't say anything back, and Taniguchi only yells at me. Taniguchi is a strange man who gulps down a peculiar energy drink he brews himself to pointlessly enhance his virility, and each night he can be found crooning

and strumming his mandolin. Do you still have that remarkable mandolin with the Heart Sutra plastered all over it? Taniguchi boasts that he taught you the mandolin when he was still in the lab. He commutes to the lab from Nanao by car; the other day he gave me a ride home, treating me to an unvarnished sermon on how to seduce women.

The days pass bleakly one after the next, as unending as the infinite cosmos. There aren't any of the boutique shops you love so dearly, you know, only vending machines. I'd give you half a day here before you made an attempt to escape. While I was waiting for the train at Noto-Kashima Station I wished on a shooting star to go back to Kyoto. I, Morita Ichirō, am truly pitiful. Pity me, please. No need to be shy.

How are the cherry blossoms in Kyoto? Here they are so-so.

Cherry blossom season also means that your hands must be full with all of the new members flooding into the lab. Komatsuzaki told me in his letter that you immediately lined all of them up in the hallway and made them swear total fealty to you. I must admit that I do have reservations about your reign of terror, reservations which I shall raise from this lonely place by the sea. I urge you to stop going to Kureshima and downing ice-cold beer like it's water. It will take a toll on your body. You should also stop dictating graduation theses to the newcomers. That is the professor's job.

Sincerely,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

April 19

To: Ms. Ōtsuka

Over here the cherry trees are in full blossom. At Noto-Kashima Station there is a cherry blossom tunnel, and though normally it is a little-used station I sometimes happen upon people who stop there to take pictures. I didn't attend any cherry blossom parties, but I did take pictures which I have enclosed here. Standing beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom trying to look nihilistic is Taniguchi, who has been tormenting me for days on end. He categorically denies that you were the one who taught him to play the mandolin. "Don't ever trust what Hisako says!" he told me. Of the two of you I am more inclined to take his side.

Thank you very much for your account of the cherry blossom picnic. I couldn't hold back the tears as I reminisced over those banquets on the bank of the Kamo River, and I'm afraid that your letter has gotten rather smudged. Woe is me, that I have been kicked out of Kyoto which I have lived in and loved for so many years; not only have I been swept off to the foreign shores of Noto, but I am not even allowed the chance to meet all of the fresh fourth-years. Pity me, please. No need to be shy.

I would have liked to be at the Kamo River so that I could eat meat and witness the moment Komatsuzaki fell head over heels in love. This senior, Saegusa, is she a looker? I have complete faith in your piercing gaze, but considerably less in Komatsuzaki, who having passed the ripe age of twenty wears his heart on his sleeve. I would hope that he would at least make the pretense of hiding his feelings. Perhaps it might be better if he hid himself so thoroughly that he winked out of existence entirely.

Ibuki is such a fastidious person, attending the picnic even though she's already graduated and employed in Osaka. Is she doing well? Komatsuzaki and I only went to grad school because we didn't know what to do with ourselves, but in comparison Ibuki is so put-together. She's always been like that, ever since I first met her at the ocean practicum in Maizuru. It's always the idiots who hesitate and dither. It's pathetic. Deplorable. To hell with them all (including myself).

At the cherry blossom picnic a year ago, you ordered Komatsuzaki and me to cross the Kamo River. It was still freezing at that time of year, and I still resent you for it. That was when I first experienced physically how cold and harsh the world of grad school would be. But the warmth of the towel that Ibuki lent us as we stood there shivering...that was when I learned how warm humans can be. Ibuki is always prepared for everything.

At Komatsuzaki's request I have been advising him on matters of romance. I've rolled up my sleeves and waded into the fray, but it really is a drag. To be frank I couldn't care less about it. I just told him to pray at Yoshida Shrine. If that kind of advice somehow helps him find love, I will have won a resounding victory over life.

It really is tiresome, spending each day head down in experiments and being wound up by Taniguchi. If it's all the same I'd rather be wound up by a ravishing beauty. I'd pirouette around and around for her like the world's best wind-up ballerina.

Yours,

Morita Ichirō, the Prima Ballerina of Noto

* * *

May 2

To: The Empress of Late-night Ramen

Late last night, Komatsuzaki called me out of nowhere. Apparently you and he were drinking together. I was shocked to read in one of his letters a declaration that he would not change his underpants until his love was fulfilled—a declaration that would make the most pioneering idiot proud—but now I see that you must have instigated this. Please stop putting worthless ideas into his head just because you think it's funny.

Thank you for the update on Ibuki. It's great that she's doing well in Osaka. But I'm not being that nosy, so I would appreciate it if you'd stop making me sound like some sort of creep. You always jump to conclusions. I'm only not writing to Ibuki because I'm sure she's got enough on her plate getting settled into her new job. It's not that deep.

In fact, I'd say that you're the one being nosy about my private life. I haven't met anyone. The research station is surrounded by a forest on one side and the ocean on the other. I haven't found any women washed up on the beach or stumbling down the mountainside. The only one I can spill my soul to is the dolphin at the Notojima Aquarium. It's not as if new acquaintances are swarming out of the woodwork.

I think Komatsuzaki is plotting something over Golden Week. Please make sure that he doesn't do anything for which he could be found criminally liable in the heat of his passion. And let's not egg him on. Our proteges are not toys to be played with.

Lately my research is looking more and more like a losing battle. I could manfully bow out of the fight, but then my master's thesis would go up in smoke. I conduct one experiment, fail completely, start another experiment, get an earful as well as a dose of mysterious virility enhancement from Taniguchi (when he's angry he looks just like Fudō Myōō), write an interim report for the professor, and train myself in written correspondence by responding to the myriad letters which flood into my mailbox. I can barely keep up with it all.

One of my few joys in life is crisping up slices of Tengu Ham from the butcher, drinking beer, and coming up with a list of things to do when I get back to Kyoto. At the top of the list is eating Neko Ramen. The other day when Taniguchi and I went to Wakura Onsen we stopped by a ramen joint, which made me long for Neko Ramen. Taniguchi waxed nostalgic for it too, and he even boasted, "I'm the one that introduced Neko Ramen to Ōtsuka, you know."

Sometimes when I'm working on my thesis late into the night, I think about the night you introduced me to Neko Ramen. That was the first and last time you ever did anything mentor-like for me.

Retreating from both romance and research,

Ichirō Morita

* * *

May 15

To: One of those people who just want to watch the world burn

Thank you for your letter. Spring is such a wonderfully refreshing season. The forest and the islands are all bathed in the verdant green of new foliage. Sunlight dances upon Nanao Bay.

"You sound like you're mocking me," you wrote. But I assure you that a lowly worm such as myself would never dream of mocking you, not in a million years. I, Morita Ichirō, am your humble servant.

There is, however, one thing I would like to clarify.

I am not here in Noto chasing after female dolphins. I merely went to the aquarium to talk to the dolphin as a form of amusement. I ask that you stop your grassroots campaign of getting people to send me dolphin plushies because I am "chasing dolphin tail". If people start to think that I lust after cetaceans my plan to make a triumphant return to the lab and become the spiritual leader of the youth will be ruined.

Speaking of ruined plans, Komatsuzaki tried and failed to present his poem to Saegusa over Golden Week. I hear that he used to be a rising star in some special band called "Marshmallow Magus and Li'l Benzaiten". That poem showed how "special" he is; I could hardly bring myself to read to the end. "Lovely, lovely" is still seared into my brain. He was right not to present it to her.

It was you that goaded him into writing a poem, wasn't it?

You lectured him from dusk till dawn with a glass of sweet potato shōchū in one hand; for this he wrote to me, "Ōtsuka is a good person; she gave me such a nurturing pep talk." What a sweet young man. I couldn't help but shed a tear for him. There's no way you would

ever nurture anyone except yourself. You're just enjoying yourself at his expense. Do you deny it?

Sincerely,

Baron Dolphin

P.S. Thank you for telling me about Ibuki. It was very much appreciated.

* * *

May 21

To: Empress Ōtsuka Hisako

Spring sunshine smiles upon the gentle swells of Nanao Bay. The new greenery is magnificent.

It has been splendid leaving behind the tumult of Kyoto and reexamining myself here in this quiet seaside town. My father has apparently begun to write an autobiography, and looking back over all that I have accomplished and learned I am considering doing the same. It may well help prepare me to begin my job search.

Now that you have secured a job, the professor is hardly worth your contempt, and your master's thesis is only a formality. The lab lies completely under your dominion; there is nothing left for you to fear. I envy your station. But then again, you never were afraid of anything, were you? That's what Taniguchi tells me. If you would be so kind, I would love to hear what they fed you when you were a kid to make you grow up so fearless.

Thank you so very much for telling me all about Ibuki and her blissful love life.

You didn't have to make a report to me just because you happened to run into her. Perhaps you meant to add insult to the injury of being washed away to this desolate beach. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I am not so easily daunted. Like a solitary monk I have endured through suffering and witnessed the cruelty of life, and if you thought that this would be enough to perturb me you are sadly mistaken. Your attempt to harass me merely tickles my cheek like the wind whispering over the sand. I hope you are not losing your touch.

But enough of that. What sort of scumbag is Ibuki's new boyfriend? Knowing more about him may come in handy. Ignorance is not always bliss.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Your servant,

Know-nothing Morita

P.S. The Tengu Ham you requested is on its way. Please enjoy.

* * *

June 5

To: Ms. Ōtsuka

The cool weather persisted much later into the year than I was expecting, but it seems that summer has come to Noto at last. The rice paddies are planted now, stretching down along the coast in their grids of green.

How are the preparations for the conference coming along?

I seem to have hit a rut in every facet of my life imaginable, and so in order to escape reality I went to a town called Hakui yesterday. It is about half an hour away on the Nanao Line. If you're wondering why I would waste a perfectly good weekend by going outside, don't be, for (according to Taniguchi) Hakui is reputed to be the closest town around these parts to outer space, complete with UFO flyovers. But the whole day went by fruitlessly with nary a UFO in sight. Today I am writing letters in the Mister Donut in front of Nanao Station, bathed in the stench of a stagnant youth that is rotting away. The illustration is of the dolphin at the Notojima Aquarium. It's quite cute.

When you have time, I would be most grateful if you would kindly tell me more about the matter I inquired about last time. I am also curious about your thoughts on Tengu Ham.

As I have much else to deal with, I shall leave things here for today.

Please give everyone my regards.

Yours,

Ichirō

* * *

June 10

To: A splendid mentor

Hello.

As a special treat, I am enclosing a self-portrait with this letter. Please enjoy this majestic rendition of yours truly. I drew it to kill some time while I was waiting for the train at Wakura Onsen Station. I went there this evening with Taniguchi, but once we came out of Sōyu he said out of the blue, "Alright, you can get back by yourself," and with a rev of his car engine he was gone. What a terrible thing to do. I was morosely soft-boiling an egg in a hot spring when I saw someone who looked suspiciously like you coming out of a souvenir store. You didn't happen to be in Wakura Onsen today...did you?

Komatsuzaki hasn't been writing at all lately. I'm convinced he must be planning some foul deed. Be on your guard; every time you think you've got him figured out, he pioneers some new sort of idiocy to catch you off guard. More to the point, don't encourage him.

You really are a bad guy.

That's what Komatsuzaki thinks. You ought to teach him how to watch his mouth, especially to such a splendid, respectable person like yourself. Me? Of course I don't think that at all. I think you are a wonderful human being, beautiful beyond compare, haughty and independent, overflowing with smarts, living how you please and contradicting yourself whenever you feel like it...truly, you are one of a kind.

And because I am so painfully aware of what a wonderful person you are, I humbly request that you give me an answer to the question I asked the other day.

Respectfully yours,

Morita Ichirō, King of Hot Springs

* * *

June 20

To: The indomitable Ōtsuka Hisako

My sincerest wishes that this rainy season finds you well.

Thick grey clouds hang over Noto, shrouding the mountains, the city, the sea. Taniguchi is in a fine temper at my incompetence, smouldering with wrath like Fudō Myōō. I feel that being constantly angry must be shortening his lifespan.

I was stunned after reading Komatsuzaki's last letter. He said that the entire lab came to Kanazawa. Why didn't anyone drop me a line if you were all coming to visit right next door?

I may be focused on my training as a letter-writer, but that doesn't mean I'm forbidden from human contact. Now I would never dream of complaining to you, but perhaps I might receive a modicum of consideration here...

Thank you for telling me in such detail how Ibuki is making raw eggs mixed in rice for this unknown man, and writing him letters, and gifting him socks, and doing all sorts of couple-like activities. How positively delightful it is to hear that she invited Saegusa for a succulent Chinese meal at the Tōka Saikan. Both she and Saegusa are fans of Morimi Tomihiko after all, which must have helped them hit it off. I fail to understand, however, what two ladies such as themselves find interesting in that man's writing.

I beg you to tell me who it is that Ibuki is involved with. If he is someone with whom I am acquainted, all the more reason for me to know. My feelings won't be hurt, really.

The Unflappable Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 29

Your Grace,

I was most honoured to receive your letter. I have been driven up the wall by a string of failed experiments. The stress has caused the peach fuzz which covers my body to fall out, and my feces have taken on an idiosyncratic rainbow hue. O, star-crossed Morita Ichirō, whither shalt thee be blown? O tempestuous Taniguchi, wherefore dost thee vent thy anger so? I am glad to hear that your conference presentation went off without a hitch. I read your detailed report on Ibuki with gratitude. I am delighted and I wish her every happiness. You seem to think this man is quite a catch. That is good. I am but the pale moon to his glorious sun, and that is as it should be. I must ask why you have not told me his name. There's no need to spare my feelings. His name is certainly not something I absolutely need to know, but it's also not something I absolutely don't need to know. Don't you agree? Don't you think so? I must end things here for now. Taniguchi may actually drown me in the bay today.

Yours,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

July 12

To: Ms. Ōtsuka, the gold standard of evil

Lately the letters have come pouring in so thick and fast into my mailbox that it feels like my training has begun in earnest. No sooner have I read and replied to one missive than another clamours for my attention. Being that I'm the one who started this I know that I have no one to blame but myself. At times I feel like I could coax Lady Luck herself to my side with a stroke of my pen, but then I think of my job hunt and lose all motivation to write, doubly so when I think about how poorly my master's thesis is going. Before you commit yourself to any kind of rigorous training, you must be prepared to fail. Not a single person would take any notice if I were to drop out of this self-imposed training, but that makes me bitter, and that is why I refuse to let myself falter.

The rain has been unrelenting for days, and I am at my wits' end. I despise slugs. Have you ever stepped on a slug with your bare feet? The physical feeling is impossible to put into words; your mind is torn equally between ecstasy and dismay. I encourage you to give it a try. Only the other day I spotted a slug as big as a sweet potato by the waterway next to the research station. It is intolerable to live in the same country as such a disgusting creature.

Occasionally the clouds will part, allowing a glimpse of the blue sky yonder, and a majestic rainbow will stretch across Nanao Bay. But you only have a moment to suck in your breath and admire the view, for in a few minutes all will be grey once more. Not a moment goes by each day where my mind is not beset by some trouble or other; it almost feels like being back under your tyranny at the lab.

How was Tanabata? Do you remember what happened last year? You forced me to go to the botanical garden to cut bamboo, where the caretaker found me and chewed me out. I'll never forget how you shot off like a rocket, leaving me to face interrogation alone...sometimes I still dream about it. It was a terrible thing to do. What a memory. I hate you.

I hear that Komatsuzaki fed his precious Saegusa some weird thing called a "Bubble-bobble Chimaki". I can't keep the tears from streaming down my face when I think about how his clever little idea somehow idiotically ended up giving his crush an upset stomach. Maybe so much of his brains have turned into marshmallows that he can't come up with a coherent plan. I think he'd be better off giving up on becoming a stand-up human being, and focusing instead on becoming a stand-up marshmallow.

Thank you for your words of consolation.

As long as Ibuki is happy, I'm happy too. Your lecturing is perfectly unnecessary: I'm not so petty as to resent her, thank you very much. Morita Ichirō may not be much to look at on the outside, but on the inside he overflows with enough compassion to fill Lake Biwa. Therefore your concern is unnecessary. Now, may I trouble you to tell me what kind of man he is? Is he one of those musclebound types? Is he a clever sort? Is he a looker? It takes much more than those things to make a man. What is the gold standard, then? That is for me to decide.

Sincerely,

Morita Ichirō, the gold standard of manhood

* * *

July 22

I have a request for you today. Recently I received a rambling letter from Komatsuzaki, wherein he said that he met Saegusa at Yoiyama and made a massive blunder. I can only hope it didn't involve him making some obscene display of himself, but from what I read he seems to be in a fairly unsound state of mind. He mentioned that he is absconding to India, so I beg you to find out what happened and stop him from going. By no means should you cram him onto a container ship bound for India. His stomach is as weak as his mind and I'm afraid that the water in India would do him in. A soft marshmallow requires a soft touch: that's all I ask of you. With respect to the man with whom Ibuki is so in love, I don't—I refuse—to believe that he's really a playboy who pretends to be a sweetheart and seduces women all over Japan. Ibuki's not the type of sucker that would fall for a womanizer like that!

Ichirō

* * *

August 2

To: The most exasperating woman I have ever known

My sincerest wishes that you are bearing up in the scorching heat.

Now that we are in August it is starting to feel like summer here in Noto. With my lab work making little headway, I turn to look out the window, through which I can see brilliant sunlight bouncing off the waves of Nanao Bay, and thunderheads rising up beyond Noto Island like vanilla ice cream swirled high atop a cone. Waiting for the train at the station,

melancholy wells up as I listen to the cicada cries which cascade down upon me like twilight rain.

O, Summer Break! Will I ever again feel your warm embrace?

Thank you for telling me about the climax of Komatsuzaki's romantic saga. So in the end it was your scheming that allowed him to stick the landing and salvage that Yoiyama mishap. That makes sense—not that Komatsuzaki pulled it off, but that he had help. There's no way that he could have done this on his own. He proudly sent me a picture of her. I sent him back a letter ending our relationship.

That's enough about him.

I am seething with fury. I am positively enraged.

After months of leading me on about Ibuki's boyfriend you can't just suddenly say it was all a prank.

I already knew about the part where she was a superfan of Morimi Tomihiko. But based on everything you've been writing any reasonable person would have come to the conclusion that she got a boyfriend. What a waste of my time and emotions. You knew I had the wrong impression the whole time, didn't you? Think you're going to get away with saying "it's just a prank bro" and "learn 2 read"? Think again, fucker.

Do you have any idea what the past two months have been like for me?

Every day I toil away here at my research in this grey research station on this lonely stretch of seashore. By playing this prank you have not only endangered the master's thesis of a model student, you have also impeded the progress of Science. You are not only hindering humanity's understanding of those queer creatures known as jellyfish, you are also hindering its understanding of how to deal with the destruction of natural environments around the world. These problems affect not just me, but all of humanity. This is not the time to be smugly remarking "lol I knew you had a crush on Natsuko!" For shame.

I don't need your advice telling me that I should write to Ibuki directly. This is my own problem to solve, and the last thing I need is for you to come butting in. Please just leave me alone. Morita Ichirō is a free man, a citizen of the entire globe.

The Komatsuzaki news, among other things, put me in such a bad mood that I went to Wakura Onsen with Taniguchi the other day and went drinking with a bunch of strange old guys. A beautiful lady saw me in the buff. Taniguchi says not to let you win. He also told me

to outdo his old bones. Not long after he said that he tried to throttle me. Maybe he means to make me into a dead body before I can step over his. But it goes without saying that I have no intention of losing to you either.

I'm begging you, hurry up and graduate already.

Give the laboratory (and everyone in it) some peace and quiet.

You seem to be enjoying life to the fullest. I lay my pen down now, praying fervently that life has some sort of bottomless pit waiting in store for you. My letter may be ending, but I promise that I will have my revenge. Just you wait and see.

From Noto with love,

Morita Ichirō

Chapter 3 — To a Promising Young Lad

April 9

To: Mamiya

How are you doing? I am doing very well.

Have the cherry trees in the garden blossomed yet? Around here the branches are still bare.

I'm a long way from Kyoto, in a place called the Noto Peninsula. It's a piece of land that juts out from the island of Honshu into the Sea of Japan. Have you learned about it in social studies yet? If you haven't you should look it up in an atlas. Remember, you can't slack off on your studies if you ever want to become an upstanding grownup.

Of course, not all grownups who know where the Noto Peninsula is are upstanding people. But that doesn't mean that it's ok to slack off and not look it up. In the grownup world that's called "sass", and whenever someone says "You givin' me sass?" it usually leads to a bloodbath. A "bloodbath" is when you get in a fight and get beaten to within a millimeter of your life. Study hard so you can avoid bloodbaths when you grow up.

The Noto Peninsula is shaped a little bit like a hitchhiker's thumb. I am working at a lab called the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, which sits near the crook of the thumb. Not too many people live around here. There aren't even any convenience stores. Next to Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory is Noto-Kashima Station, where a little train stops on its way down the Noto Railway. It looks a lot like the little Eizan Railway trains, but unlike the Eizan Railway the tracks here run along a lonely seashore. At night it's so dark you can't even make out the ocean and the mountains. But the stars in the sky are very beautiful. I wished on a shooting star that I would win the Nobel Prize.

If you're wondering why your old tutor is at the Noto Peninsula, I was sent to this faraway place by my teacher (who is a very important professor) to do research. I spend my days here studying jellyfish. But because I'm still a greenhorn, I am learning about all sorts of things from a teacher called Taniguchi (who is not quite as important as the professor). Taniguchi's hair is very shaggy, and he's very good at playing the mandolin. Have you ever seen a mandolin before?

I'm not your tutor any more, Mamiya, but I wrote you this letter because I wanted to know how you're doing. Are you being a good boy for your new tutor? You're a promising boy, but your mind tends to wander. You also like to slack off. Also you can be a little bit spiteful. I wrote a report on how far we'd gotten in your studies and gave it to your mother, so don't even think about trying to trick your new tutor. Yes, I am bullying you. What about it?

The school year has started, hasn't it? Have you made any new friends?

Chin up, you're in fourth grade now. Don't forget what I taught you: play hard every day, and study just as hard. Tell your father, mother, and granny that I said hello. Squeeze Tamotsu's little paw pads for me too. I always thought Tamotsu was a funny name for a cat with so much contempt in its eyes.

I hope you'll write back.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

April 16

To: Mamiya

Thanks for your letter.

I'm glad to hear you're well. "Salutations" is a very advanced word, I'm impressed.

Having to study with a home tutor every week must be a real drag. I don't think there are very many students in elementary school who have to do that.

When I was around your age, all I did was play in the backyard with Natsu. Natsu was my dog, and he loved to dig holes. We were almost inseparable. Why was Natsu always digging holes? He didn't seem to have any idea, but then again neither did I. Basically I used to be a dumb kid who wasn't any smarter than a dog. I worked very hard so that I wouldn't be a dumb kid anymore, but Natsu stayed a dumb dog for the rest of his life, and he dug a lot of holes for us to remember him by.

That's why I understand what you mean when you write things like, "I wish home tutors would all die in a fire!" and "I want to go to the steam locomotive museum!" If my parents had told me when I was your age that they were forcing me to study with a home tutor, I probably would have thought, "Gimme a break! Can't I just go and dig a humongous hole?"

I was so obsessed with digging holes that sometimes I'd get up early before I had to go to school to move some dirt. It used to make my mom cry. She was really worried about me. I guess all moms are big worrywarts.

That goes for your mom, too. She worries about you; she thinks that if you study a little harder than everyone else, you'll always be one step ahead. There's a saying that goes "early to bed and early to rise," and another one that goes "the early bird gets the worm." Remember them both, they're bound to show up on a test one of these days.

I think those sayings have an element of truth, but I'm skeptical that being early is always for the best. I told you that when we climbed Mt. Daimonji together, if you recall.

But do you know what's most important right now?

Whether your mom thinks it's for the best.

You don't think so. I don't think so. Your dad doesn't think so. Your granny doesn't think so. Tamotsu...is probably napping out on the veranda. But none of that matters. Scream and shout all you want, your mom isn't going to change her mind. And as long as she doesn't budge, you're going to have to put up with the home tutor. You can fight it all you like—lock them in the bathroom, spill tea all over their notes—in the end it won't matter, because even if one tutor leaves, another will just take their place.

I'm not telling you to study from dawn till dusk. When the tutor comes, be polite, and start getting to know them. The tutor isn't your enemy, they're your friend. But they won't be your friend for long if you lock them in the bathroom.

In your letter it sounds like your current tutor is very straight-laced, so it might take a little longer to get them on your side. Try asking them what they're studying in college; they're sure to tell you all sorts of things. People are always eager to share new things that they've learned. Once you've gotten to know them, you should study hard until your mom brings in the tea; after that you can just chat with them about all sorts of things, like we used to do.

In other words, what you need to do is find a compromise.

Once you do that, your mom will be satisfied that you're not acting up. Your tutor will be satisfied because they're getting money in their pocket. And you'll be satisfied because you won't have to keep thinking of ways to get out of tutoring. And you'll all live happily ever after.

I've enclosed a picture of a Noto Railways train that I took at Noto-Kashima Station. Isn't the cherry blossom tunnel pretty?

Take care of yourself. And try to get along with your tutor.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

April 23

To: Tits McGee

Thanks for your letter.

Every morning I get on the Noto Railway and commute to the research station by the seashore. The cherry blossoms have all fallen, but the Noto days are slowly warming, and the sea is placid.

Thanks for the picture of Tamotsu and your granny. I see that Tamotsu is giving off his usual aura of contempt; that's what you call "being in one's element". I see why he was named after one of your uncles: he does remind me of a middle-aged man, with his big paunch and how he's always lounging around on the veranda. By the way, can I ask why there's a daruma balanced on your granny's head?

I must say I was a bit disappointed to hear you couldn't stand your tutor anymore. Why is that? You were so well-behaved when I was tutoring you.

Your mom must be furious. You might feel like hot stuff having chased the tutor away, but if I know your mom she's definitely not going to let this go. The next tutor's probably already on their way, and this time they could very well be a scary Abarenbō-Shogun-from-hell type. Grownups call this "digging your own grave." Just like poor old Natsu: when he died, we buried him in one of the holes he dug.

The tutor tried to assert their authority over you, didn't they? Of course they scolded you for suddenly starting to talk about boobs. Tutors don't come to your house to teach you about dirty things like that.

While I was out taking a walk along the beach I started to think about whether I'd led you astray. I prayed that your thoughts of boobs would stay far from your head. I even made a wish on a shooting star. I prayed that those thoughts would be sent to my head instead.

And lo, my wish was granted. But I didn't start to smirk. My heart didn't even start to beat fast. That's because your former tutor is a sagacious grownup.

In addition to math and science, I taught you about those things because you were so worried that you were a pervert. You told me it kept you from sleeping at night (though I'll bet you slept just fine). There's a fine line between perverts and non-perverts, but I'll say this much for certain: if you're a pervert, then that would make me a pervert too. That's why I told you that it's normal for your heart to race when you think about those things. I definitely didn't say it to fill your head with dirty things.

As you wrote in your letter, there's a complicated connection between why girls make your heart race and how babies are made. Your mom made a face when you asked because that connection is supposed to be a secret. But it's not what you're imagining it is. If making babies was that easy, they'd be swarming all over the streets.

But if you just forget about studying and walk around daydreaming about that stuff all day, you're going to turn out to be a dummy.

All this boob talk reminded me: did you know that since dolphins are mammals, they have breasts? Yesterday, I crossed the ocean to Noto Island and saw a dolphin at the aquarium. They're slick, beautiful, mysterious creatures. It must be difficult to breastfeed underwater. I wonder if it tastes salty.

I've enclosed a picture of the dolphin. The person beside the dolphin glaring at me is my teacher (Taniguchi). Don't you think his scruffy hair and his sunglasses are right out of an old detective show? You turn your back on him and he might just whip out a pistol. He looks like a scary person, and in fact he is a very scary person, so I have to be on my guard at all times. What do you think it'd be like if he came to your house to tutor you? If it were me, I'd probably get on my knees and beg for mercy.

Try to find the dolphin's breasts in the picture. And just so we're clear, it's not like I'm always looking for dolphin breasts. You need to grow up and get over boobs, just like I did.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

May 13

To: Mamiya

The weather is fine today, and the seas are calm.

Please thank your mother for sending me the ajari-mochi. As a token of my gratitude I'm sending a package of Tengu Ham; please share it with your family. I often buy a few fresh slices from the butcher at the shopping arcade. It's quite exquisite toasted. I bet Tamotsu wouldn't mind a slice or two as a pick-me-up after giving birth.

I can't believe Tamotsu is a girl! I always thought she was a he. I know you said that she resembles your uncle, but naming her after him is just asking to confuse people. And you might find it funny, but you shouldn't balance a daruma on your granny's head...too often.

I'm glad to hear that you're listening to your new tutor and studying hard. Ms. Mari sounds like a wonderful person. You've changed quite a bit too in such a short time; I think it's great that you're trying hard to avoid bringing up dirty things. Ms. Mari must have given you a real earful.

But I'm a little hurt.

A degenerate is a person who doesn't know shame. It means that Ms. Mari thinks that your old tutor, Mr. Morita, is a waste of space for teaching you those bad things and would be better off dead. Oh, I can't tell you how discouraged that makes me feel.

I don't think that telling you that you're not a pervert was a bad thing. Please explain this to her and clear the air. And remember, from now on don't tell Ms. Mari about any of the things I taught you. Some secrets should stay just between men.

I don't know very much about Ms. Mari, but anyone who reads books by Morimi Tomihiko is a little strange. There's nothing weird about writing letters to the author of a book. I'm not sure what you're worried about, but those are called fan letters, which are not the same thing as love letters. Sometimes authors get worked up when they receive those letters anyways. Morimi Tomihiko is an idiot. I know him personally. I'm a clever person, but I have a lot of idiot friends.

If you're so worried, try this: write to Morimi Tomihiko and ask him to stop hitting on Ms. Mari. I'll give you his address.

All of that said, I'm glad that you've been having fun.

As I write this letter I am sitting in a Mister Donut across from the train station eating a donut.

There's a cram school outside the station, and in the window is a huge poster that says, "Studying is serious business". That sounds pretty hardcore. I bet the teachers there are all

the Abarenbō-Shogun-from-hell type. You're so lucky to have a kind tutor. I'm almost jealous of you.

Is Ms. Mari pretty?

Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 4

To: Mamiya

Thank you for your letter. I was just wondering how you were doing.

Every day I study, eat Tengu Ham, and go to the hot springs.

Today I took the train to a town called Hakui to spend the day. Apparently there are many UFO sightings in this town. I was hoping to spot one, but there weren't any hovering around today. Do you like UFOs? I'm very curious about what aliens look like. If they're pretty, I'd tell them, "Come on in!" but if they're like jellyfish or pointy bamboo shoots, it might be hard to get along with them.

Ms. Mari is pretty, isn't she? I can tell by how you wrote your letter.

It's very hard to express how pretty a person is in words. Sometimes you might struggle to find words other than just "pretty". When you get stuck like that you can compare them to other things. For example: "Ms. Mari is as pretty as a soft-boiled egg," or "Ms. Mari is as cute as a *kibidango*," and so on. But sometimes when you call someone pretty or cute, they might not take it that way. That's just how life works. Sad, isn't it?

However, when you're having trouble with writing something it's good to think about how to put it into words. By doing that you'll eventually be able to write all sorts of things.

I see that you really did write a letter to Morimi Tomihiko, because I received one from him too. I don't know what you wrote in your letter, but it made him very afraid. He said it was so scary that he might miss his writing deadline. What you did is called a "criminal threat", and could cause the police to come and arrest you. I suggest you tone it down.

One more thing: the strange man who was hanging around outside watching Ms. Mari? I suspect he was just a neighbour who happened to be passing by, not a real stalker. You shouldn't be suspicious of someone just because they're chubby. What makes you think chubby people are suspicious? I know a chubby man. People often mistake him for a

marshmallow and kick him around, but he's not a bad person. In fact, he can even be kind of cute.

How are Tamotsu and your granny? All you write about is Ms. Mari.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 17

To: Mamiya

Everyday I'm swamped with work from dawn to dusk.

The more I study jellyfish the more mysterious they become. They've begun to drift into my dreams, as has a frolicking dolphin with a slab of Tengu Ham on its back. I suspect that seawater must have begun to soak into my brain. When things get too hectic I go to Wakura Onsen for some R&R. You get there by taking the Noto Railway. Have you ever been to a hot spring, Mamiya? It's a lot of fun; you can do things like making onsen tamago. The hot springs bubble up to the street, so all you do is stick an egg in there, and you've got an onsen tamago. The water in hot springs is salty.

Your adventure was a white-knuckle thriller. It had me on the edge of my seat.

Who does that flabby man work for? Why was he following Ms. Mari around? And what goes on in that mysterious building? What does the woman who controls that flabby man want? Why did she throw him to the ground and sit on his belly to interrogate him?

The plot thickens.

When she was threatening you by swinging her funny weapon around and saying, "I'll eat you up, hee-hee-hee!" that probably means you saw something that you shouldn't have. I think you ran into some real perverts. It's a relief to hear that you got home safe and sound.

I understand that you're worried about Ms. Mari, but children shouldn't be following around strange grownups like that on their own. You should talk to Ms. Mari or your mom. Out in the world you're going to run into both good grownups and bad grownups. Some good grownups are still perverts, and some bad people are also perverts. Watch your back.

You did a great job portraying Ms. Mari snacking on those marshmallows. I can imagine just how cute she is.

I think you've fallen head over heels for Ms. Mari.

You're smitten, I can tell. That's why you were so jealous of those marshmallows.

I'm a jellyfish expert, but you know what else I'm an expert on? Crushes. I bet you won't find anyone as knowledgeable as I am on jellyfish and crushes in all of Kyoto. Sometimes I give advice to my friends when they fall in love.

Don't lose your head and do anything rash because of a crush. Leave the bad guys to the adults.

Morita

* * *

July 10

It's been raining every day here; I hear the weather's just as dire in Kyoto. The sky is constantly shrouded by thick grey clouds; from dawn to dusk a gloom hangs over the mountains, the city, the sea. Even on my days off I can hardly bring myself to leave my apartment.

On weekends I often visit the little bookseller in the shopping arcade by the station. The shop is run by a solitary old man who says he's 80, which makes him older than your granny. He reminds me of my own grandpa, who's already passed away. There are all sorts of interesting things in the shop, like a model battleship Yamato made out of magazine inserts and a whole mountain of videotapes. Are you interested in things like the battleship Yamato? He let me take a picture, which I've included with this letter. The model was made by one of the old man's customers, who donated it to him. Apparently the same customer started working on another model, but died before it was complete.

I usually chat with the old man for a little bit before browsing the videotapes. There are a lot of old movies, and he lets me borrow them all for free. I spent the last two Saturdays watching a lot of old flicks. There's nothing like spending the day watching old movies when it's raining outside.

I'm glad to hear that the flabby man has vanished. It's a shame, though, that we'll never find out what he was up to.

You seem very worried that Ms. Mari has an upset stomach. But when I was your tutor, every time I caught a cold you were over the moon. No, that's not a complaint; if I were in your shoes, I'd probably be worried about Ms. Mari too.

That's just how it goes. What can you do, huh?

It's well and good to visit her, but since her stomach isn't feeling well I wouldn't bring her marshmallows if I were you. Women love getting flowers.

Morita

* * *

July 16

To: Mamiya

I'm writing this letter inside the Mister Donut in front of the station. Evening is falling, and the lights of the town are flickering on one by one. Things are quiet over here, over in Kyoto the streets must be filled with sightseers for Yoiyama. I imagine that you're out right now with Ms. Mari browsing the festival stalls and eating all sorts of yummy food. Thinking about it makes me a little envious. What are your favourite festival foods? I'm a fan of yakitori. There's something special about festival yakitori that makes it extra delicious.

Between you and me, I've always dreamed of accompanying a woman to Yoiyama, but I've never had the chance (remember, this is just between us). Life is complicated. Say that to other grownups, and they'll usually nod and agree. Grownups who don't nod and agree usually end up being beaten to within a millimeter of their life.

By the way, your mention of the "bubble-bobble chimaki" in your letter helped me deduce the identity of our mysterious chubster. His name is Komatsuzaki, and he's one of my friends. He's round and pudgy like a marshmallow, right? He has his reasons for lurking around Ms. Mari. They're very important reasons, but as they're private matters I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to divulge them. But I bet he'd be green with envy to hear that you're attending Yoiyama with Ms. Mari. "I can't stand it!" I can already hear him sulking, puffing up like the marshmallow that he is.

Do you intend to confess your feelings to Ms. Mari already?

You're moving so fast it almost makes my head spin. First you visit her bearing flowers, then you secure a promise to go on a date together to Yoiyama in exchange, and to cap it all off you're planning to hand her a love letter! Those are some advanced techniques. How did you learn them? Did your granny teach you some slick moves? Grade schoolers really are something else these days.

What really astounded me was how quick you whipped up that love letter. How did you do it so fast? I struggle with writing love letters. I'd like to write one myself, but all I can do is fill the page up with nonsense. Maybe I'm just not cut out for it.

In any case, I have to admit that you have surpassed me. Victory is yours.

Yoiyama must be so pretty at night. And Ms. Mari must be pretty too.

I hope it doesn't rain tonight.

Hoping to hear from you soon.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

July 29

To: A promising young lad

The sea is shimmering; now that the rainy season has ended it finally feels like summer.

I went to the hot springs with Taniguchi for the first time in a while. We got to know some older fellows and had a fabulous time. I've been a little down recently, so cutting loose helped me feel much better. The next time you're feeling sad or lonely, remember that having fun is the best medicine. And don't forget a good sleep. That's important for both grownups and grade schoolers.

It's too bad you weren't able to hand Ms. Mari your love letter.

I know what you're thinking: Komatsuzaki stole her from you. And you're right. He did steal her. How did Ms. Mari fall for him? What is it about him that makes her so happy? That stupid, flabby marshmallow! I'm thinking the exact same thing.

But you're restraining yourself because Ms. Mari seems happy, aren't you? That's very mature of you.

Dr. Koibumi of Idaho State University once said, "Every rejected love letter is a chance to grow." At first glance this seems like a famous adage, and because I know a lot of famous adages I can pull them out like this to console you. But the way I see it, I'd throw away all the rejected love letters if I could just have the person I like tell me they like me back. So in the end, the quote I just wrote down is only superficial consolation. I understand what Dr. Koibumi was trying to say, but it doesn't appeal to me at all.

All else aside, you show promise.

Sure, you're easily distracted, and you tend to slack off. You can also be a little spiteful. You don't listen to your mom. You gripe and groan. And your mind often wanders to dirty things.

But that's exactly why I think you have promise.

Forget about getting revenge on that marshmallow, I just hope that you get back to your usual self soon.

You've got all of summer vacation ahead of you.

Morita Ichirō

P.S. I'm afraid I don't know anything about making yogurt bombs. I strongly advise you to pick something less violent for your summer research project.

Chapter 4 — To Morimi Tomihiko: Addlebrained Author

May 18

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Dear Mr. Morimi,

My name is Morita Ichirō; we used to be in the same club in our college days. It has been some time since we last spoke.

Do you remember me? Yes, I am the very same Morita Ichirō who pilfered the girlie magazine you brought for spiritual lubrication during spring training camp and circulated it to everyone at the outdoor activities center; the same Morita Ichirō who pored over the notes you used to leave lying around in the clubroom and disfigured my own writing in fallow imitation. Great memories, don't you think? I hope you feel the same sense of nostalgia that I do.

I currently reside in a place far from Kyoto.

Since April, my research duties have confined me to a research lab by the sea in Noto. As for why I find myself in this predicament, I can only thank the paternal concern of my thesis advisor, who decided that the best way to nurture my emerging talent was to drop me off a cliff, albeit one so steep that there is very little hope of me ever clawing me way back up again. Oh, how deep, how profound the love of a professor for his students.

It's too heavy for me, I say, too heavy by half.

This gloomy chasm is host to: a lonely Noto Railways station; Taniguchi, who quaffs down mysterious virility-enhancing substances and rambles on about how to seduce women; calm seas; immutable mountains; Wakura Onsen; Noto Island. Looking up from this dark place I can see only a sliver of blue sky above me, a sliver which in my mind is a bridge to beautiful Kyoto, and a bright, promising future. And so I write letters, attach them to shiny red balloons, and release them into the sky. Someone, anyone (preferably female), grant me salvation from this abyss. I'm so very lonely; my future seems so very barren.

But that's enough about that.

Ever since you graduated I've been following your activities from afar, watching you roam both banks of the Kamo River under the auspices of your seemingly deskbound career. The sentences you weave are no different than the eccentric scribbles that filled up the notebooks strewn in the corners of the clubroom. Who would have thought that the lunatic ravings that once led me astray would one day be contaminating bookstores across the country? Whenever I read your writings, I am reminded of those college days, that prime of human putrescence and youthful passions.

I would be delighted if you could find time in that busy schedule of yours to jot down a quick reply.

Sincerely yours,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

May 29

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Thank you for your prompt reply.

Have your travels ever taken you to Wakura Onsen? I am currently living in a town called Nanao, and Wakura Onsen is just a hop, skip, and a jump away. Polishing my manhood in the Sōyu bathhouse is one of my few and greatest pleasures, rivalled only by the delight of Tengu Ham.

I happen to know the author of the disturbing letter which you received. He's just a boy, still in elementary school, and he seems to be extremely jealous that his personal tutor is a great fan of yours. So I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about from this threatening letter of yours.

I'm sure you receive a great deal of fan mail.

Since I came to Noto I've started a self-imposed training regimen writing letters, in order to improve my skill in written communication. Regrettably, most of my effort is wasted dealing with a breast-obsessed friend of mine who is madly in love, so I have precious little to show for my efforts. Recently his letters have been flooding my mailbox. That's how I came upon the idea of asking you to instruct me in the ways of writing letters. I would be most indebted if you would teach me that world-famous technique of yours to woo a woman with a single letter.

Oh, how I long to go back to Kyoto.

They've just opened an exhibit on Fujita Tsuguharu at the MOMAK, haven't they? You know, I once took a girl to the MOMAK. We went around the exhibits, gazed at the Fujita Tsuguharu paintings, and went to a café for coffee afterwards. How about you stop fantasizing about lewd things at your desk all day and go outside to experience some real culture once in a while?

Hoping to hear from you again,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 11

To: A despicable Don Juan (Mr. Morimi Tomihiko)

Your admission that you don't respond to fan mail because you don't know what to write shocked me. Withholding your literary talents and disappointing your readers is a grave sin. It's a poor correspondent who wastes half the day reading the same letter over and over and yet never sends a reply, while you've got a deadline breathing down your neck no less. Why don't you send the letters to me; I'll reply to them for you.

My congratulations on the publication of your first *bunkobon*.

I know a woman, Ibuki Natsuko, who wanted to attend one of your autograph sessions in Kawaramachi (though she was prevented from doing so by a sudden cold). Ms. Mari, the tutor of the boy who sent you that threat in the mail, is also an avid fan of yours. Even my little sister reads your books, becoming more depraved by the day. How is it that you have legions of female readers? How does such a thing come about? Explain yourself.

I'm also astonished at how busy you seem to be. You used to be the kind of person that no one even noticed was there, like the multitude of abandoned bikes that littered campus; now female editors throw themselves at you for a chance to get their hands on your drafts. It's the most grotesque thing imaginable. I'm half-convinced that you're making it all up.

For someone who makes his living by writing, your advice on love letters is very disappointing. There is no technique? Just put my heart and soul into it? Are you sure you're not just too jealous to give up your secrets? I suspect you're actually writing back to your torrent of fan mail, using this undisclosed technique to batter down the gates of your

fangirls' hearts all over Japan. In fact I'm certain of it, you lecher, you dirty playboy. I never took you for that kind of person. No wonder you always miss your deadlines.

I visited Hakui the other day, to break up my daily monotony. I was looking for UFOs, but there didn't seem to be any hovering around that day. It was a big disappointment. Have you ever written sci-fi?

Your most devoted disciple,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 12

To: His Excellency the Alabaster Count of Monte Crackpot

It felt as if no sooner had I dropped my letter to you in the mail than a reply came fluttering back. *Damn, he writes fast!* I thought to myself, only to realize that it was a lengthy postscript to your previous letter.

Thinking that it was a treatise on how to write a love letter, I opened the envelope with bated breath, only to be met with an interminable account of the rise and fall of one Morimi Tomihiko, featuring crates full to bursting with glistening DVDs; shelves upon shelves of books casting their siren call; hot springs excursions accompanied by raven-haired maidens (or dreams thereof); apartments filled from corner to corner with piles of fan letters; and hordes of bad guys. As I raced through the manuscript, white-knuckled in apprehension over whether Morimi would make his deadline in the end, a single thought occupied my mind: stop writing this crap and get back to work!

Ibuki used to hang a snowman advent calendar on the wall in the lab. Each day in the calendar had a little chocolate hidden behind it, so that every day the proud sweet-tooths of the lab could break off a little morsel of chocolate to enjoy as we counted down to Christmas. I used to be tyrannized by Ōtsuka Hisako, one of the older students in the lab, and whenever it was too much for me and I broke down in tears next to the rotary evaporator, Ibuki would console me with some chocolate from the calendar. Surely she must be the most gentle person in Japan since the Meiji Restoration. Don't you want to hurry up and finish writing your next book and make this wonderful person happy? As far as I'm concerned, what you think doesn't matter: her happiness is all that matters.

Don't let yourself get too upset about always being locked in a basement trying to keep ahead of the deadline. If you want to grab hold of something, you have to let go of something else: for instance, our youthful passions, a glorious picnic-perfect day, chances to relax with girls in a hot spring. That's just how humans get by.

I'd say I'm the one that deserves pity here, wasting my days here on this lonely seashore staring at a bunch of slippery jellyfish. There's nothing for me to let go, but there's also nothing for me to grab hold of. Don't waste time on self-pity, send that pity my way instead.

A friend once said to me that wasted time is priceless. A pretty saying: I take it to mean that it's so worthless you shouldn't even bother attaching a price tag. Wouldn't you agree?

Bargain Bin Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 13

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

I need to get something off my chest right off the bat.

Morimi, you write too many letters.

You write so fast that if you fed all your letters to a goat you'd give it indigestion.

Have you ever considered what it feels like to receive three letters all from the same person in the span of just two days? If I were to receive a dozen letters in a single day from a girl declaring her undying love for me I'd jump for joy, but your constant bellyaching just makes me want to jump off a bridge.

Why is it that you can't bring yourself to reply to fan mail, yet you can crank out a million words a minute when you feel like grumbling to me? This is exactly why you have trouble keeping up with deadlines. Even a first-grader could see that, why can't you?

Whenever I read your letters I can picture you perusing a stack of fan mail, blissfully unaware of the subtle chasm that separates fan letters from love letters. Imagine the embarrassment to your reputation if word were to get out that the famous lone wolf Morimi Tomihiko was cuckoo for fan letters, to say nothing if they also knew that you thought that fan letters and love letters are the same thing!

I also don't know how to answer your questions about life and how you should end your novel. My friend Komatsuzaki is head over heels for a younger woman, and has lost his

head so completely that he's on the verge of becoming a filthy stalker. The situation is desperate. I find that the task of ensuring that he doesn't commit some sort of crime in the course of his quest falls upon my shoulders. While I've been busy keeping a watchful eye on him, my academic life has also fallen into desperate straits. The results of my last month of research are currently balanced on a knife's edge, and I need to make sure that my future doesn't go up in smoke.

So as you can see, I'm not in any position to be your personal guru. It doesn't matter to me whether your deadlines are approaching, or whether you can't make up your mind, or whether you think one of your left molars might have a cavity. You'll just have to grin and bear it. Squeeze out some sentences like you squeeze the last bit of toothpaste out of the rolled-up tube. And if it turns out that you really do have a cavity then you'd better get to a dentist pronto.

It's kind of funny; here I thought I was your disciple, and yet I find myself talking down to you.

Trying to balance too many spinning plates at once,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

June 21

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Thank you for your letter.

The sky over Noto is dark and overcast; on the train each morning I stare out the window at a desolate view. There's something different, heavier, about the rainy season here. It feels as though my life, both past and future, is filled with grey; only my visits to the dolphin at the aquarium for life advice keep me from succumbing to this spiritual crisis. The only things that still seem to be full of life are the hydrangeas and the slugs.

You're right, my last letter was a little strongly worded. My apologies; I can only blame my lack of mental maturity. But the way things are going it seems that I am doomed to burst before I ever reach that maturity. Yes, I am the avant-garde Morita Ichirō, bursting alone here in Noto by the sea.

It does seem odd that of everyone I am corresponding with, it is you—the best-selling author supposedly knee-deep in women and work—who writes the most.

With my research going so poorly, reading and responding to the long-winded letters that you send me have become a burden. Trading these enormous missives, eating up one another's time and destroying ourselves in the process— isn't this exactly what we used to do in college? Betraying each other's most embarrassing secrets in the communal clubroom journal, throwing away that which we should have valued most for the faintest hint of praise. You taught me to toy with words and amuse myself by blowing smoke in everyone's faces, but one day I realized that it was my own face I was blowing smoke into, and that I had lost sight of what really mattered in life. So when it comes down to it everything is your fault, wouldn't you say?

As I sit here in the lab penning this reply, I can hear Taniguchi plucking away at his mandolin, warbling in an earsplitting falsetto. I suspect he's downed so many of his weird beverages that he needs to burn off all that virility. The flickering fluorescent lamp in the corner of the room strains my eyes. Outside the window the sun is already setting over Nanao Bay. The Twin Bridge that stretches over the water to Noto Island is a slender ribbon of light. Oh, how far I am from home.

Why am I here?

Why am I writing this letter?

The plunking of the mandolin reminds me of that chilly, dust-plastered corridor in the old boarding house at college. There was an older student named Tamba who used to play a mandolin in my closet, singing, "Let's bring some colour into this grey old world!" He was a real weirdo who'd show up all over the boarding house with an unassuming kotatsu which he dubbed the Speedy Kotatsu in tow. It's because I was surrounded by people like that that I wasted and continue to waste my life.

I think replying to fan mail is a good thing, but fretting about which letters to answer is a waste of time. Just pick the best written one and answer it; I'm sure it'll make you feel a lot better.

It doesn't seem that you're getting much work done. You're not a hermit; you don't get to avert your gaze from reality and pout, "I want to waste time." Just sit down and work on whatever's in front of you. Only by getting things done without complaining will you ever earn the title of being a "great catch".

I'll ask one more time, just in case: are you sure there's no such thing as a secret literary technique to woo women? Please, don't withhold anything: teach me your ways.

Morita Ichirō

P.S. Have you ever been to a restaurant called Tōka Saikan? It's on the west end of the Shijō Bridge. I hear Ibuki went there, so I was just curious. Is it one of those trendy date spots?

* * *

July 5

To: An author who is surprisingly bad at writing letters

Thank you for your letter. A spate of recent failed experiments has driven me to the edge. I dreamed that a UFO landed on a mysterious stress-induced crop circle on the rear right quadrant of my head, disgorging a stream of chubby marshmallow aliens carrying koi fish on their backs who exclaimed, "We'll camp here tonight!" For some reason when I woke up there was an apple by my pillow. In my drowsy stupor I took a big bite of it to moisten my parched throat, only to realize that it was actually a wooden daruma which my sister had sent me as a good luck charm (to help me graduate, of course). Woe, woe is me. Why do apples and daruma look so ridiculously similar?

A long string of drool trickled from my mouth as I read your boastful description of your first taste of the sukiyaki at Mishima-tei. The meat of Mishima-tei may be out of my reach, but no matter: I still have Tengu Ham. The time you spent tormenting your poor protege writing minutely detailed descriptions of that scrumptious beef would most certainly have been better spent planning for your next novel.

Seeing how excited you get when you reply to a fan letter and immediately get a response makes me fear for your future.

I was wrong to think that you knew anything about using letters to conquer hearts and minds.

It's clear to me now that there's no way that you ever could have sparked romances throughout Japan writing back to fans. I'll just have to give up my original plan of wheedling the trick out of you, and develop the technique myself.

Once I've developed the art of writing a love letter I'll pass it on to you, so that you too can make any maiden fall in love with you on the spot.

I'm being worked to the bone. The list of failed experiments continues to grow. My little sister has sent a threatening letter demanding that I pay up on an ancient debt. Taniguchi recently asked me, "Are you enjoying your youth?" I'm fed up with this world.

Morita Ichirō, epistolary researcher

P.S. Thanks for teaching me how to deal with slugs. I immediately put your method to the test, but now I have a revolting pile of dead slugs which I can't bring myself to dispose of. What am I supposed to do now?

* * *

July 13

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko, gentleman of leisure

It is the time of day where I, having botched yet another experiment, sternly growl to myself, "I am the gold standard of manliness," which only serves to make me feel even more pathetic.

A friend of mine called Komatsuzaki recently fed some bizarre thing called a "bubble-bobble chimaki" to a girl, tragically giving her an upset stomach. In anguish he asked me what he should do, so I repeated the advice which you once gave me: bring her flowers (thank you for that one). Are you trying to be one of those suave middle-aged men who casually whips out a bouquet of flowers? But what's the point of being suave if you've got to get to middle age? I can't afford to wait that long.

How goes the game of love for you? All those editors keeping your hands full?

My hands are full too, going over data with Taniguchi.

I know that falsifying data is verboten, yet day and night I hear its siren call. It's so tempting to tweak a few numbers here and there. It's not just test data I want to make up. Who does it hurt, really, if I fudge my bank account balance or tell an embellished account of my first love in high school? Isn't it win-win all around? Happy memories with Ibuki, my TOEIC scores, the sports I played and the hours I volunteered in school, my resume, why can't I just make them all up?

Between you and me, even I couldn't put off thinking about the job hunt forever. I still firmly insist that I don't want to get a job. Furthermore, it's entirely plausible that even if I wanted to get a job I couldn't. Yet I don't see much of a future staying here at the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory. I don't even know why I'm studying jellyfish; it's not like I like them much anyways. Sometimes I find myself silently cursing the amorphous little bastards. What to do, what to do. I don't know whether it's the professor or Taniguchi who will end up drowning me in Nanao Bay first.

"If I can't be a poet or a slacker, then I don't want to become anything at all": a cry of the soul that came not from me but from you, in some café on Imadegawa Street. You were cradling your head in your hands, as I recall. That used to be all you talked about.

I think I finally understand what you were going through.

Morita Ichirō, simple pleasure seeker

* * *

July 23

To: Morimi "Great Catch" Tomihiko

Thank you for your letter.

You really mustn't be peevish just because someone called you a man of pleasure; it shows how petty you are. You ought to be more even-tempered, take my childish sniping in stride. That's the Morimi Tomihiko I know and love.

By the way, my idiot friend Komatsuzaki has somehow dug himself into the most ridiculous situation.

When I passed your sage advice about flowers on to him the other day, what did he do? Give her carnations, as though it was Mother's Day, blissfully ignorant of the fact that she was allergic. Even after that, he still somehow managed to meet her for Yoiyama, only to commit yet another blunder. Now he's saying that he's giving up on Japanese society and fleeing to India. As his mentor I'm out of my mind with worry. How is a buffoon like him going to survive in India?

The girl with the carnation allergy is apparently a big fan of yours. And remember that threatening letter you got? She's Ms. Mari, the tutor of the boy who wrote the letter. What a small world. Right now Ms. Mari is the epicenter of a heated rivalry between Komatsuzaki and this grade schooler. I'm telling you, this kid is something special.

I'm green with envy about your jaunt into town the day before the day before the day before the Gion Festival. Sitting in a chic Italian restaurant on Muromachi Street with a girl with sleek black hair? That sounds like a dream. In fact I bet you did dream it all up.

I don't think you should be wasting your summer vacation responding to fan mail. Keep this up and you'll find yourself doing all-nighters as soon as the summer is over. Simply witnessing your inability to manage your own life makes me break out into a cold sweat.

Now if you're looking to hire someone to manage your life for you I wouldn't say no...you really need to stop looking away from your growing pile of work and playing pen pal make-believe. I don't care how pretty you imagine the girl you're writing to is, don't let yourself your fantasies carry you away or you might end up accidentally signing away all of your author's rights.

As for me, I don't get a summer vacation.

Lately I've been thinking about what a noble thing it is to offer up your irreplaceable youth at the altar of research and study. That is what all students should aspire to do. If I had a summer vacation, I might well have enjoyed it by cutting my ties with this wretched society we live in and skipping off to India with the lovelorn Komatsuzaki (my only regret being that it couldn't be with a companion of the fairer sex). Perhaps there I might run my hand over the impressive rump of an Indian elephant, cut my hand on its tough skin, come down with a bacterial infection, come face to face with the fact that reality is just as unforgiving no matter where in the world you are, and despondently return to Japan.

In any event I'm not brave enough to travel abroad. I can read English well enough with the aid of a dictionary, but speaking it is entirely out of the question. Ibuki speaks English like a native; she rescued me once when I was completely tongue-tied trying to converse with an exchange student from Indonesia, in a dazzling display of fluid intercultural communication. She patiently walked me through countless nights of English 101. Surely she must be the most gentle person in Japan since the legendary Emperor Jimmu's Eastern Expedition. I freely admit that, as you pointed out, I may be mildly smitten with her. Got a problem with that? Oh, I've finally admitted it in writing. But that's alright; after all, it's only you. It behooves me to mention that Ōtsuka says Ibuki's going steady with a great guy she met in Osaka. But that doesn't matter to me either. I'm happy as long as she's happy. I never exactly threw my hat into the ring, but I voluntarily withdraw it all the same. If coming out here to Noto wasn't enough to compel me to write to Ibuki, maybe I do need to go farther afield after all. I'll send a postcard once I reach the banks of the Ganges.

I can hardly wait to embark on my journey of self-discovery. I used to sneer at the idea of such things, in no small part thanks to your influence, but I'm no longer concerned with appearances. And besides, you're the one who used to wander around back alleys trying to find yourself. Yes, I know all about that.

This me isn't the real me.

Sometimes I curse the fact that I am me.

This is what they call identity dissonance. Isn't it?

Ichirō Morita

* * *

August 1

To: Morimi Tomihiko

I hope you're in a listening mood today. Fight whining with whining, as they say.

Against all odds Marshmallow Komatsuzaki, despite having become a disgusting stalker, seems to have gotten the girl. His rival—the kid I told you about—has just experienced heartbreak for the first time in his life, and is threatening to carry out an attack on Komatsuzaki using yogurt bombs. As the kid's former tutor, I'm having trouble finding the right words to comfort him. Komatsuzaki, on the other hand, sounded happy as a lark in his letter, which contained a picture from Yoiyama. He gushed about all the embarrassing couple things he wanted to do—including shocking obscenities such as taking her to Wakura Onsen—laying it on as thick as if it was an oil painting rather than a letter. The stench of pure joy was so unbearable that I rashly wrote back ending our relationship. As soon as someone finds love, that's it for them.

Enough about that. It's not my business anyhow.

I'm more irritated by the little games that Ōtsuka Hisako plays. After sending letter after letter tormenting me with hints that Ibuki was dating someone, she finally admitted that it was all a prank. It weighed on my mind so heavily that it ended up screwing up my experiments, but she apparently doesn't see what the big deal is. Unforgivable. I have half a mind to go back to Kyoto, storm into the lab, and delete all of her research data.

Now I know that you're a saint and that there's zero chance that would ever happen, but on the off chance that you were ever to run into Ibuki, and on the off chance that you two were to hit it off, please don't contact her ever again. Keep your hands off Ibuki! If you don't, you can kiss all your copyrights goodbye.

Nothing personal. It's a dog-eat-dog world, is all.

I needed a break from it all, so I went to Wakura Onsen with Taniguchi, where we ran into a bunch of strange old men who called themselves the "Friday Fellows". We drank, sang songs, and made merry all through the night; at one point Taniguchi started ranting about me surpassing his corpse and tried to wring my neck, and when I came to, I found myself at

the top of the luxurious Kagaya resort without any clothes on, watching the sun come up. I never would have imagined that my chastity would be at risk in a place like this. What has the world come to?

I'm fed up with it all, and from now on all I'm going to do is look on as you self-destruct from your obsession with answering fan mail from parties unknown. My sister has joined a women's fan club dedicated to you. What is she thinking? She should be studying for entrance exams, and if she fails it's all your fault.

I just want you to answer me one question.

How come I don't have any fans?

Morita the Fed-up

* * *

August 8

To: Morimi Tomihiko

Summer has truly arrived in Noto. The mountains are alive with the buzzing of cicadas, and the fresh breeze carries with it the smell of the sea. The foliage is so fresh I can almost feel my skin turning green. When I'm sitting inside the dim laboratory glaring at my data, I have to suppress the urge to toss everything aside, throw open the window, and hurl myself into the gleaming waves of Nanao Bay. A decade from now I want Taniguchi to tell people the story of the grad student who leaped out of the window into the bay and was never seen again. But I'm not much of a swimmer, so the chances of pulling off this imaginary escape would be slim at best.

If only I was a better swimmer! Maybe I wouldn't have embarrassed myself shaking like a leaf in front of Ibuki at the ocean practicum. I could have been spending the summers lounging on the beach, knocking the ladies dead with my chiseled physique. It's too late now. How the sun mocks me with its blinding rays!

I know what you're going to ask me. "How come you're at a seaside laboratory if you can't even swim?" I wish I knew the answer. Life is complicated.

researchstudyresearchstudystudyresearchresearchstudy

I also need to think about finding a job.

Nothing comes to him who waits. I know you're very fond of that saying. Whenever I'm so anxious that I can't sleep at night, I put on one of the old videotapes that I borrow from the old man in the bookstore at the shopping arcade. But once the movie ends, the silence only becomes more unbearable. And when I get back into bed, intrusive thoughts start flying thick and fast through my mind. The future seems unknowable.

Back in Kyoto, on the other hand, Komatsuzaki is completely absorbed with his girlfriend, counting down the days until he takes her to the pottery fair in Gojōzaka. "What about your research? What about your future?" I want to shout at him. Don't fall in love, unless you want to ruin your life.

Sometimes I wonder: if I can't see what lies ahead, can anyone else? Maybe they only think that they can. Do they all just talk themselves into thinking that it's all smooth sailing ahead? Are they satisfied as long as they have a job? Then again, maybe a job is all you need. I'm not one to talk, considering that I'm still tied up at the pier, waiting to venture onto the open sea. I just don't know.

I want to start a company writing love letters.

That's why I need to master the art of writing a love letter, ASAP.

That would be enough, don't you think?

Morita Ichirō, temporarily embarrassed CEO

* * *

August 19

To: Morimi Tomihiko, contrivalist

I've been turning a question over in my mind: what exactly is our correspondence? I don't see what the point of it is. If we were lovers, it would be to assure one another of our love; if we were friends, it would be for the pleasure of conversation, catching up about the various goings-on in our lives and deepening our bond. I'm begging you, tell me something worthwhile. Teach me the art of manipulating words to make it through life.

If first love was a drink, what would it taste like?

I'm not posing this question to you idly; I know that's all you drink, because why else would you have turned into a namby-pamby who just sits in front of his desk all day in flights of

fancy? You need to sip from the fount of reality and forget about this puppy love business. Shall I send you some of the virility enhancing drinks that Taniguchi chugs all day long?

I can't express how jealous I am that you took a gaggle of raven-haired maidens to see the Gozan no Okuribi. Your tale made me long for Kyoto. Then again, with you it's hard to tell fact from fiction. I'm even starting to doubt whether or not you're actually being hounded by deadlines.

Speaking of Daimonji, my friend Komatsuzaki tells me he saw the Daimonji bonfire with his girlfriend. Apparently you can see it from the rooftop of her apartment. But I don't think it was the bonfire that he was staring at. No, I suspect that he was gazing at a different set of mountains all night.

Most of his worries have to do with boobs. You could waste the rest of your life debating with him about a passing pair of breasts. It's the most pathetic thing you can imagine. But it's an important issue. At the same time, I just want him to have some shame.

Have you had any breakthroughs on the new novel?

Well, you asked me for my honest opinion, so honesty it is.

Your novels are far too contrived. They're too unmoored from reality. You can't just let your delusions gush out onto the page and expect that to slide. Sometimes you take storytelling for granted. I suggest you take some time to really think about that.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

August 22

To: Morimi Tomihiko, addlebrained author

I received the manuscript for your new novel.

I read it immediately, and immediately flew into a rage. All you did was rip off bits and pieces from my letters, without even doing me the courtesy of telling me you were ripping me off. The elephant rump, the daruma and the apple, the underwear headman who refuses to change his underpants, the person carrying the koi fish on her back—all of it was in my letters. You even ripped off the word "contrivalist" for one of your chapter titles: bravo.

Is this how you repay me for patiently listening to your constant complaining? By robbing me of my youth, the only thing that I treasure in this world? Exploiting a wretch like me—and you still call yourself human? What colour is your blood? You're worse than a banker who purloins life savings from retirees.

You're not alone. Everyone around me is guilty of the same crime. I'm sick of it all: my research, the endless letters, Taniguchi asking me, "Are you enjoying your youth?" I can't bear the idea that I'm going to be trapped here all summer without a break.

I've decided: tomorrow I escape this place.

In the evening I'll board the Thunderbird Express from Nanao, headed for Kyoto. I won't even begin to list the things I want to do in Kyoto, but the very first thing I'll do is head to where you live.

I feel like doing something pointless.

While I'm there I'm going to take my royalties for the manuscript, so make sure to have that waiting. I'll be expecting you to treat me to a drink, something that tastes like falling in love for the first time, and then I think the storied Mishima-tei would be a good place to spend the evening. Oh, and you'll need to sign over your copyrights to me for safekeeping. If you held onto them, it'd only be a matter of time before you accidentally slipped them into the envelope of a reply to some random fan letter. Don't you worry, I'll take real good care of them.

I'm coming for you.

Morita Ichirō, official body double of Morimi Tomihiko

Chapter 5 — To an Infinitely Titillatable Friend

August 6

To: The Titty Professor

I bet it's sweltering over in Kyoto. Here it's hot as midsummer in the daytime, but at night the breeze is cool.

Please accept my belated thanks for showing my little sister around the university near the end of last month. With entrance exams looming, she's been curious about what college is like. I hear she had a great time with Saegusa mooning over Morimi Tomihiko. And I also hear that she wouldn't call you anything but "marshmallow man".

So.

Komatsuzaki! My bestie!

First of all, I want to make sure that you actually read my last letter. My exact words were, "I have known you a long time, but from this moment on our correspondence is over. Goodbye." Anyone would take that to mean that our friendship had ended.

So why are you still sending me letters?

You'd better not be crumpling up my letters without reading them and shoving them in your mouth like a goat or something.

I'm writing to you not because I'm hoping to siphon off some of that nectar of love that you've been slurping up so greedily these days. No, I've been exchanging letters with an author named Morimi Tomihiko, and one of the lines from his books goes, "If we assume that happiness is a finite resource, your misfortune necessarily creates a surplus elsewhere in the system." Put differently, "If we assume that happiness is a finite resource, you must necessarily have stolen your happiness from someone else." And by someone else I mean me.

Since the spring of this year I have been beset by countless calamities.

You have been quietly stealing away my happiness. Night after night, my precious happiness has been stealthily loaded onto freight trains bound for Kyoto, destination: you. You've been fattening your pockets at my expense all along.

A friend in need indeed, you thief of joy!

You sit on the throne of happiness which you usurped from me, comfy as can be, and yet you continue to moan about relationship problems. I wasn't even going to dignify your self-indulgent braying with a reply, but as I read your letter it became blindingly obvious that you refuse to face reality. I was so infuriated that I couldn't let it go without a response.

No one knows your many flaws as a human being like I do.

You're a clumsy conversationalist; you're the perennial last pick in sports; you look like a marshmallow (and roll like one too); and above all you're an idiot pioneer, blazing new trails of idiocy that no sane person would ever have been able to dream up. You don't have a reputation for nothing, you know. I've never thought that you and Saegusa make a smart couple, not for a second. I bet you two have plenty of awkward moments. Of course you do. But you refuse to face up to the biggest problem you've got. That can't go on. If you want to know someone else, you must first know yourself. That's a good line, I'm going to reuse that.

Be honest and take a good hard look at yourself. My keen powers of observation tells me that the only thing you ever think about is her tits. Tell me I'm wrong. If you don't first change that, then you'll never be able to learn advanced techniques like how to take the lead in your relationship. That's a guarantee.

If you want to dispute any of this, I'll be waiting for your letter.

Yours sincerely,

Morita Ichirō

Head Counselor, Morita Relationship Counseling Center

* * *

August 11

To: Komatsuzaki "Boobs" Yūya

I was astounded to read your astonishingly naked confession. I never realized you were so infinitely titillatable. I counted how many times the word "boobs" appeared in your letter: 108. That has to be some kind of world record. I believe your idiocy has reached genuinely historical proportions.

Sometimes I think I have you figured out, only for you to find another way to surprise me. Frankly, it's one thing to be attracted to her rack, and another to pine over it 24/7. You're much too old for this kind of thing, and if you don't fix your boob obsession you're never going to grow up into a respectable adult. There are plenty of other places your eyes could be wandering: the nape of her neck, for example, or her dimples.

Don't you think you're doing the poor girl a disservice? If all I had to go on was your letters, I wouldn't even be able to picture her in my head. It would just be boobs, boobs, as far as the eye can see.

Your lust is tormenting you, that much is plain to see. But that's also really pathetic.

Women's breasts just protrude out farther than men's do, that's all. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, letting a couple of soft, squishy blobs take over your mind? Have some self-respect, man. Any rational man worth his salt ought to be able to take the appearance of a boob or two in his stride. Just look at me. A real man wouldn't even glance over if a pair of boobs suddenly appeared from behind a telephone pole. He would simply continue on his way.

So the next time you find yourself in a curvaceous situation, just laugh and say, "Away from me, you squishy brutes!" and move on. Boobs, schmoobs!

Only the pitiful allow boobs to control their minds. Think about how other people perceive you. Right now, you might as well be shouting out to the world, "I love boobies!" You're a mess, man. If only you had squared up with how pathetic you are right now, you could have avoided the shame of sending me a letter containing 108 occurrences of the word "boobs".

At all times my mind is as tranquil as the surface of Lake Biwa: stuff like boobs doesn't faze me in the least. For example, I have zero interest in Ōtsuka Hisako's boobs. In fact, I hate them; I can hardly imagine anything more horrible than those awful things.

Anyways, that's enough about that. There's something else we need to talk about.

Don't you think that writing to me about Saegusa's boobs is disrespectful to her? Obviously to you her boobs are objects of great personal interest and arousal. But get a grip: they belong to her, not to you. While I was reading your letter I thought about how disrespectful you were being, but I also couldn't help but imagine them for myself. I simply couldn't help it. And now I have this feeling of guilt hanging over me. It's all your fault.

To be fair I should never have told you to ask me for advice, but have some tact when it comes to her. I'll wrap this letter up by giving you fair warning: after you've gotten over your boob problem, tact is next on the list.

Tactfully,

Morita "Tactician" Ichirō

* * *

August 15

To: The Titty Professor

HoW dArE yOu PiCtUrE hEr BoObs

Okay, mon ami. What do you want from me? I didn't want to do it. I'm well aware that daydreaming about the boobs of a woman you have never met is highly inappropriate. I only imagined them because you wouldn't shut up about them in your letters. It was a totally, utterly involuntary act.

Besides, I can read your letter however I like. Freedom of thought is enshrined in our constitution. Whatever goes on in my head is my own business. You have no right to stop me from picturing her boobs. Are you so infatuated with her boobs that you would infringe on the right of a sovereign citizen of Japan to fantasize about a pair of titties?

Okay, enough about that. It's clear that your current conundrum is no laughing matter.

You say I'm the infatuated one? I have trained my mind for situations such as this; I am the man who can't be moved. Of course if someone were to tell me to move I would move. But when it really counts, I wouldn't budge an inch. This is what it means to master oneself.

I once lived among monks, waking up each morning at four and ascending to the peak of a nearby mountain to undergo their regimented training. Most of this training consisted of gazing at the surrounding mountains that swelled forth from the earth and trying not to think about boobs. But I can assure you now that the most perfectly formed set of knockers wouldn't move me in the slightest. I think that you would benefit from climbing Mt. Daimonji and engaging in the same training as I once did.

I have to feel sorry for any girl who is unfortunate enough to date someone who is so fixated on boobs that he can't hold a decent conversation. I will give this problem some serious thought: partly because you are a close friend, but more so for Saegusa's sake.

The way I see it, you're just too simple.

You place far too much trust in boobs. You'd gamble all of your hopes and dreams on a pair of titties. Just stop and think about it for a moment. Are boobs really so superior?

The French philosopher René Descartes once sought out absolute truth by doubting everything. You've heard the phrase "I think, therefore I am"? If you see a pair of breasts before you, you would do well to approach them with an attitude of fundamental skepticism. What is the nature of those breasts? And what is the nature of you, who greedily stares at those breasts? If you continue to ask yourself these questions, those breasts will eventually become an abstraction, merely a pure being in the world in opposition to your own, and cease to so wantonly entice you. Probably. This is called methodological boob skepticism, and I've heard of people using this method to free their souls from boobs. Totally not making this up.

You could also think about it from an evolutionary perspective. According to my personal hypothesis of evolution, humans once walked on all fours. In those days, that four-legged posture hid breasts from view, which made them a non-entity from the male perspective. Long did the Ass Age reign, but once humans evolved to walk on two legs the allure of the buttocks gradually diminished, supplanted by the eye-popping potency of ginormous bazongas. No doubt their resemblance to the derriere spurred their popularity, as did their perfect position just below eye level.

So when you think about it, boobs are really just a product of happenstance. We were not always doomed to be entranced by boobs. If we had evolved to walk on our hands instead of our feet, there might be a lot more guys out there getting their rocks off to a leathery pair of knees. That's all it is. Evolution led to us standing on two legs, and boobs just happened to be there for it.

Doesn't that make you mad? Doesn't that shake the foundation upon which boob supremacy rests?

Ultimately, it all comes down to this: you must conquer boobs with reason. You must not allow yourself to be subjugated under the yoke of boob supremacy. You went to the Shimogamo Shrine used book fair with Saegusa; you should seek out books that will build your ability to reason, which I can safely say is not your strong suit.

I'll be praying for you.

Morita Ichirō

Spokesman, Anti-Boob Supremacy League

* * *

August 18

To: A silly boob

Thanks for your account of the Gozan no Okuribi.

Were you actually watching the bonfires, though? You conspicuously avoided the subject: could it be that your gaze was directed towards a sprightly bosom instead? Don't even try to pretend otherwise.

Colour me amazed: watching the bonfires from the roof of your girlfriend's apartment building sounds too picturesque to be true. I was so lonely by myself here that I lit up some sparklers to try to cheer myself up, though that just made me even sadder. I briefly considered setting fire to the mountains around here and creating a Daimonji of my own.

Morimi Tomihiko told me that he went out to see the bonfires with a raven-haired maiden on each arm. I can believe that he was there, since he does live in Kyoto. The raven-haired maidens, however, I suspect are pure fantasy.

Onwards to your problem.

You told me that you have trouble loosening up when you talk to Saegusa. I've pointed out your real problem time and time again, yet all you do is sidestep it. This is exactly why you're stuck in the mud. I've already told you: if you want to know someone else, you must first know yourself. Isn't it obvious that your eyes are fixed on her because you don't want to look at yourself? All you're doing is running away. Stop staring at her (boobs) and square up with yourself.

Ask yourself this: is it her that you're in love with, or her tits? If it's her that you adore, then you need to face your breast obsession head-on and figure out how to master it. If you only fool yourself into thinking that you've overcome your lust, those boobs you love so much will one day turn and smother you.

Why do boobs have such power over men? How can mere mounds of flesh make us go mad? I just don't understand it. It's absurd. It's unfair. Is it a curse placed on our sex. Merely by plopping themselves down in front of us a pair of knockers can cloud our vision, castrate our minds. Boobs obscure the truth of the world. This struggle is a struggle for liberation.

Only by sweeping away the domination of the boob can the conversation of our souls truly commence. Give me liberty, or give me death!

Excuse me, I got carried away. Apparently, summer in Noto only lasts until Obon, which means that while I've been wasting my time penning silly diatribes, another precious summer has ended. I demand compensation!

Booby this, booby that: aren't you ashamed of yourself? You can't seriously expect me to have a decent conversation with someone who talks about titties all day. I'm out.

Sincerely,

Ichirō Morita

* * *

August 21

To: Komatsuzaki Yūya

Ever since you asked me for advice with your little problem, I've had boobs on the mind to such an extent that I can't focus on any of my experiments. I consulted Morimi Tomihiko, and all he had to say on the subject was: "Let there be boobs."

Lately, whenever I can't stand being cooped in the lab for another minute, I take a walk out along the shore to get a can of coffee from the vending machine at the station. As I look at the rustling rice plants in the fields by Nanao Bay, feeling the sweat prickling at my skin, my mind tends to wander towards the future, which puts me in a melancholy mood. To distract myself I think about meaningless things, which of course brings me to you, and once that happens thoughts about boobs aren't far behind. Try as you might, there's just no escaping boobs in this pitiless world.

I hustle back to the lab, where the AC is on full blast, and glance out the window. Across the bay I can see Noto Island. It kind of looks like a boob. I hastily shift my gaze upwards into the sky, towards puffy, boob-shaped cumulonimbus clouds. Feeling like I'm losing my marbles, I take refuge in the break room; I open my mouth to take a bite of some mochi ice cream that Taniguchi tried to hide in the fridge, when I realize to my dismay that the frozen mounds look just like little boobs.

I'll never get any work done like this, so I leave the lab and head north towards a nearby shrine. The shrine grove is on a piece of land that juts out into the sea, and as I approach through the fields I notice that the round stand of trees resembles a you-know-what. Each

morning on the train, I pass another very similar shrine grove north of Nishigishi Station just before my stop at Noto-Kashima. So it's like I'm doing research sandwiched between a giant pair of boobs! But I have only moments to ponder my new discovery before Taniguchi barges in shouting, "I know you ate my mochi ice cream!"

What am I doing here?

I think I'm slowly turning into a marshmallow myself. You and I must break this foul curse and see the world anew through unclouded eyes. But how can that be done?

I just had the most brilliant idea.

In order to pull it off, I'm going back to Kyoto.

To be upfront, that's not the main reason I'm going. I just need to get away from Noto for a breather. But this Friday on the 25th, Morita Ichirō is coming back to Kyoto. Need I remind you that this is top secret. It mustn't get out to anyone, especially not Empress Hisako. If you leak this information I'll scatter copies of your boob letter all over the Hyakumanben crossing.

I have two objectives for this trip. Number one: break the stranglehold of boob supremacy. Number two: shatter Empress Hisako's iron grip over the lab. I've already formulated plans for both of these goals. Don't worry: if this ship sinks, at least we'll sink together.

More to follow.

Morita Ichirō

* * *

August 25

To: Mr. Komatsuzaki

VISITED LAB THOUGHT BEST TO MAKE INTERIM REPORT TO PROFESSOR STOP REGRET WE
COULD NOT MEET AND LEFT MESSAGE FOR YOU STOP WILL TELEPHONE LATER
REGARDING 8008 SUPREMACY STOP MORITA ICHIRŌ 330P

* * *

August 27

To: An infinitely titillatable friend

I am currently composing this letter in the Jane coffee shop, deep within the bowels of the Kintetsu Mall.

There's a decidedly 20th-century air lingering about the Kintetsu Mall. The sleek, ultra-modern angles of Kyoto Station which baffle tourists by the trainload are about the last place anyone would expect to find such a charming little alley: yet here it is. As I prepare to depart from Kyoto in the shadow of my defeat by boob, I find the faint melancholy of bygone times that lingers here is perfectly attuned to my own sorrow. Thank you everyone, you're far too kind.

I suppose that you're angry. No, if it were only anger that you felt I would be relieved. I think you've fallen into despair once again. I'm worried that you'll start making noises about fleeing to India again, as you did in the aftermath of the Gion Festival. But I didn't mean to do it. I've never harmed anything in my life on purpose, honest. I'm practically a saint, I am.

I didn't go after you when you fled the lab that night. But not because I couldn't be bothered too. It was because I wasn't sure I wouldn't end up running off to India alongside you.

Let me recap my thought process one more time.

In a previous letter I introduced to you the approach of methodological boob skepticism. Theoretically, by systematically questioning the boob that lies in front of you, you can reduce it to a mere abstraction and thereby break the spell. But as you wrote in your reply, this approach contains a fatal flaw. It is clear now that the more you stare at a boob, the more appealing it becomes. Its very existence becomes unshakeable.

So I started thinking.

For average schmoes like us, rejecting boobs through willpower alone is a bridge too far. We need crutches to lean on until we learn to stand on our own two feet. There must be something out there, some method that would make boobs easier to doubt. A boob is a boob, but is there a trick to make it completely unrecognizable as one? Even better, is there a method to make us sick of boobs?

And lo, my solitary ponderings in Noto led me to the answer: magnification.

If you zoom in on a boob far enough, you will no longer be able to tell what it is, and its power of boobiness will be nullified. A video projector would do the trick, and as luck would have it I had only just used a video projector to present my interim report. If you blew up a picture of a boob on the wall and concentrated on it long enough, it would slowly stop

looking like a boob, and eventually you would lose your appetite for boobs entirely. At last, you and I would be free from the tyranny of boobs!

So on Friday night I slipped out of the lab under cover of darkness, avoiding old drill sergeant Taniguchi's watchful eye, and hopped on the Thunderbird Express at Nanao Station bound for Kyoto. I stopped at the lab to chat with the professor about my career path, linked up with you to go pick up young Mamiya, and then met up with Morimi Tomihiko at Mishima-tei on Teramachi Street.

I hope you at least appreciate that you got to taste the sukiyaki at Mishima-tei. But things began to unravel when Morimi muttered that nonsense about "there are many kinds of boobs, just as there are many kinds of lives" and disappeared with young Mamiya in tow. I later interrogated Morimi and learned that they went to meet the ladies of the All-Japan Maidens' Association, who were also at Mishima-tei. And while we two were heatedly discussing how to get out of there before the bill arrived, they skipped out into the night and had a ball around town.

Which brings us to the screening.

We stowed the lab projector in a locker in the professor's office. If it ever got out that I used it to project a gigantic boob on the wall, I'd be condemned to the Noto Peninsula once more, this time for a life sentence. So we thought of everything. We came in on a Friday after the professor would be gone. We scoured the lab to ensure there was no one lurking in the corners. And Empress Hisako had already left, humming, "On the road again..." It was airtight. While I set up the projector, you retrieved the screening materials from the locker.

You remember what happened after that.

In hindsight, we made a few blunders along the way. Our optimism was misplaced. We completely underestimated the power of our foe. No matter how big you blow it up, a boob is still a boob. There was no doubting it. "This can't be right," I thought as I gaped at the giant image. Long after it was evident that things weren't going to plan, I kept telling myself that it was just an object, just a soft, shapely, sublimely magnificent object, and I'd be damned if I let such a thing wrap itself around my mind? A war broke out within me, both mentally and physically.

In the end, the boob won out. "Three cheers for boobs," I softly groaned in defeat. But in the heat of battle, I hadn't noticed that the door to the lab had opened, revealing the last people I would ever have expected to see there. Morimi Tomihiko stood right outside, and beside him was a petrified Mamiya. Saegusa quickly shielded Mamiya's eyes with her

hands, and close behind her were my sister and Ibuki Natsuko: the All-Japan Maidens' Association.

Here I need to pause the narrative and vent for a moment: why didn't you lock the door!? What were you doing while I was setting up the projector? Were you just drooling all over yourself waiting for the boob to be blown up? Sure, it was Friday night, but did it not cross your mind for even a second that someone might still pop into the lab? You're supposed to be Saegusa's boyfriend; how did you not know that she would be at the Mishima-tei for a gathering of the All-Japan Maidens' Association? And why didn't you tell me that the association was just a Morimi fanclub made up of Saegusa, Ibuki, and my sister?

Whatever. Blaming you won't erase what happened.

You got off light, just standing there looking at a giant boob with your stupid face. But me? Ibuki and my sister just witnessed me whispering "Three cheers for boobs," with their own eyes. Why did I have to say that? Am I some sort of tit-crazed lunatic? In the quarter century that I've been on this earth, that's got to be one of the top 3 most embarrassing things that has come out of my mouth. You'd be hard pressed to get me to admit that even in front of my closest bosom buddies, and here I just said it in front of Ibuki and a member of my own family. I shared a lot of beautiful memories with Ibuki in the lab; why, six months after graduating and going out into the world, did she have to come back to the lab on a random Friday night!? Why, after eighteen years of looking up to her big brother, did my sister have to pick this exact night for a campus visit to see my lab? There are no words to express how horrible this tragedy was.

What I did, I did for your sake. And now all my hopes have been blown to smithereens.

I still remember the dead silence after our uninvited guests awkwardly closed the door. We stood there like statues, gazing up at that giant boob. When you finally mustered the courage to pull open the door, the girls were already gone. Only Morimi Tomihiko was still standing there muttering, "Three cheers for boobs."

"Things will get better," he said, handing over the money for Mishima-tei. He gazed at me for a moment, eyes full of sympathy, before walking off.

After you fled wailing into the night, I returned to the lab alone, put away the projector, and cleaned up the room. That lab had never felt that quiet at night. I set up a trap for Empress Hisako, and then left.

When I got home my sister was waiting for me. The only thing she said was, "You're dead to me."

“What’s this?” my dad said excitedly. “What’s going on? Do we need to have a family intervention?”

All I wish, all I long for now, is to sink beneath the waves off the Noto peninsula.

This has turned into a very long letter.

I leave Kyoto now with nothing to show for myself, except perhaps another deep wound etched into my heart. I don’t know when I will be back again. At the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, drill sergeant Taniguchi is rubbing his hands in anticipation, awaiting my return. I can already see all of my experiments crashing and burning.

I keep replaying that moment in my mind: all those people just staring at me dumbfoundedly through the crack in the doorway. I feel so pathetic that I just muttered “Three cheers for boobs” out loud. That’s a tear stain below, not drool.

What a summer it’s been.

I never meant for any of this to happen. All I wanted was to be free from boobs.

My faith remains unshaken. Freedom from boobs—that is where it all begins.

An infinitely titillatable man

Chapter 6 — To the Most Exasperating Woman I Have Ever Known (cont.)

August 27

To: Her Ladyship Ōtsuka Hisako

Greetings, milady.

I hope that the last few days of summer find you well, as the last unfettered vestiges of summer vacation are swept away. Schoolchildren shrieking with laughter at the pool, middle schoolers feeling the stirrings of first love, high schoolers bashfully performing folk dances at the beach, college students whose brains are evaporating in the pursuit of shameless revelry—all tremble in despair at the imminent end of summer vacation.

All things, no matter how enjoyable, must come to an end; all homework, no matter how far you put it from your mind, must come due. If the concept of summer vacation did not exist, when would our youth have cause to stop in the midst of their slovenly existences to ponder the callous passage of time?

One can only truly appreciate summer vacation at its demise.

And so too it was for your reign of terror.

Ever since I joined the lab as a senior, and even after I was dispatched to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, you have put me through many trials and tribulations. You are a living legend: where once your power was second only to that of the professor, it now perhaps eclipses his. But with your ascent your arrogance became outrageous, and your abuses of power grew flagrant.

Obey your superiors, conform to your betters, keep your nose clean: those were my mottos, and so for many a year I bore the unbearable and gave you my obedience. When you told me to cross the Kamo River, I crossed the Kamo River; when you asked me to make a liquor run, I ran out to the store, and if it happened that I bought the wrong brand I would make the trip again. When you needed bamboo for Tanabata, I snuck into the botanical garden and got yelled at by the watchman. Ah, the bittersweet memories spin through my head like a revolving paper lantern!

But even the meekest mouse will bare its teeth when cornered.

I am writing this letter at the Jane coffee shop in the bowels of the Kintetsu Mall at Kyoto Station. While you were out going wherever you were going last Friday night, I snuck into the lab.

Have you looked at your desk yet?

Notice anything missing?

Perchance, the computer containing your master's thesis?

I think you get the point.

I hereby claim responsibility for this act. If you ever want to see your computer again, you must swear to obey these conditions three:

1. Thou shalt not use MORITA ICHIRŌ's name in vain
2. Thou shalt pray twice a day in the direction of MORITA ICHIRŌ, once in the morning and once at night
3. Thou shalt treat MORITA ICHIRŌ to Neko Ramen whensoever He pleasest (in perpetuity)

Even the most amorous couple must one day part; even the oldest friends must go their separate ways; even the quietest, most one-sided crush must come to an end. As the Tale of the Heike states: the arrogant do not long endure, they are like a dream one night in spring; the bold and brave perish in the end: they are as dust before the wind.

Empress Hisako's reign of terror will be no different.

This is what you get for leading me on about Ibuki. Consider yourself served.

Have a blessed day,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

August 28

To: Ms. Ōtsuka Hisako

READ ASAP

When I got back to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory I discovered that my computer and research notes had gone missing! But how, and why? I asked that slavedriver

Taniguchi about the lost notes, and he said, "You mean the notes you were supposed to hold dearer than your own life?" He looked as if he was about to drag me to the shore and hold my head beneath the waves until I stopped moving. I managed to hold him off for the day, and upon my return to my apartment in Nanao I discovered in my mailbox your note claiming responsibility.

When did you come here? And what could possibly bring you out all this way?

That reminds me. As I was on the Thunderbird Express on my way back from Kyoto, I felt a chill go down my spine just as the train was entering Fukui. Maybe that was you passing by on the opposite track. What a crossing of paths! And what an incredible coincidence that we both planned the exact same thing!

The situation is urgent. For you this is just a short delay to your thesis completion, but without those notes for my ongoing experiments all I can do is roll around like an armless, legless daruma. It throws all the experiments I'm scheduled to start into jeopardy. How could you do such a horrible thing? You're inhuman; your heart is made of stone. You need to start thinking about how your actions impact other people.

I called you a little while ago but you didn't pick up. Do you really hate me that much? How could you do this to such a kind, pure, innocent boy like me?

I demand you return my computer and research notes at once. I'm not kidding. Until then, you can kiss your computer goodbye.

Hurry it up.

Sincerely,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 4

To: The Empress of Darkness

Salutations. I know now why you haven't been answering my calls.

But frankly you're completely misguided. Yes, I am in epistolary bootcamp. Yes, I declared that I would polish my writing skills and start a company ghostwriting love letters. Of course I would like nothing more than to follow through. I would certainly like to be able to make any woman on Earth swoon with a stroke of my pen. But why should I be forced to deal

with everything through letters just because I said I would? Who was it that came up with the ludicrous notion that a man must keep his word? Was it the prime minister? The president of the United States of America? I am a man, not to toot my own horn. Even so, I have never followed through on anything in my life. "Following through" is not in my vocabulary. Now is not the time to be talking about such things. I need to get my experiments back up and running!

My computer and notes contain incredibly valuable data, data that could transform this dying planet into a thriving, beautiful home and secure a bright future for all of humanity. Even as I pen this letter, intelligence agencies and secret scientific syndicates are hot on my trail: that's how important this data is. I've even heard it said that my research could very well revolutionize the face of science itself. Come, paradigm shift! Well, paradigm shift or no, it'll at least lead to my graduation, and that makes it important enough for me.

I ask you: do you intend to plunge the earth into a new dark age? And what of my future—do you intend to throw that into darkness as well? Only a fiend would do that, thou demon, thou scourge.

I was able to salvage some of my data and notes, and with a little supplementary data provided by Taniguchi (who it turns out does have a heart after all) my research has been limping along, but this can't go on much longer.

Lately I swear I can detect a trace of sympathy in Taniguchi's attitude. He doesn't get mad at me anymore when I screw up; all he says is "Don't worry about it, cherry boy," which for him practically sounds like he's trying to cheer me up. Sometimes he even gives me a piece of mochi ice cream. I'm starting to miss his constant drill sergeant barking. Knowing that he's only being nice because he's given up on me is painful. It's like he's saying that it's not worth spending any effort on me because I'm just going to mess things up, no matter how hard I try. I've never been so humiliated. At long last, my pride has been wounded.

That's why I need to produce some results, no matter how insignificant. I need to prove to Taniguchi that even if I'm a worthless scrub, I'm a worthless scrub who at least does what he's supposed to. And that's why I need my computer and notes back.

Starting to make sense? I'm finally hunkering down and getting serious. I'm not going to get a second chance. Without my stuff I'm in real trouble.

Don't you want your computer back so that you don't have to rewrite your entire thesis from scratch? Let's stop this ridiculous game of chicken. This is pointless. We both have better things to do with the limited time that we have.

Summer vacation has to end sooner or later, and so do our student days. More accurately, we have to end those days ourselves, no matter how much we wished they could go on forever.

Yours,

Morita Ichirō, the shining hope of humanity

* * *

September 10

To: Ms. Ōtsuka Hisako

The heat of summer's end this year is unforgiving, almost as unforgiving as the conundrum I have been thrust into.

I read your letter, and to your demands I say only this:

NUTS!

However, I am willing to withdraw my own demands. I believe our interests align. You need to recover your computer: do you really think you're in any position to lay more absurd demands on me? If this drags on much longer, I'll never be able to go back to Kyoto, and you'll never be able to graduate. No one wins!

The content of my research notes hardly concerns us right now. I was simply practicing writing love letters for my startup in between experiments. They were written as part of my business plan, not with a specific recipient in mind. It's because of my god-given talent that they read so much more realistically than your average practice letter. They're certainly not real drafts of letters to Ibuki, I assure you.

Did you take my notes with you? Or did you hide them somewhere here in the laboratory? Surely you didn't throw them into the ocean. Please, just tell me where they are.

No, I'm afraid I can't tell you where your computer is first. Without first securing a guarantee that you'd return my own computer and notes in exchange, I'd just be left holding the bag.

You tell me where my stuff is first, then I'll tell you where yours is.

There's no guarantee that I'll hold up my end of the bargain, you protest. But I can promise you that that won't happen though, because I am a fine upstanding citizen. I've never told a lie in my life. Cross my heart, hope to die.

Let's put an end to this pointless, childish squabble.

Truthfully,

Morita "Saint" Ichirō

* * *

September 15

To: Ms. Ōtsuka Hisako

I received your letter.

I'm glad that you've seen reason. Indeed, a wise choice. I knew you had it in you.

At last, my beloved computer and notes with which I have shared the ups and downs of the last six months are back in my possession. I never would have guessed that they were hidden inside Noto-Kashima Station. What would I have done if some stranger had taken them? You need to think your actions through.

Now I can brush aside Taniguchi's pity, rededicate myself to brightening the future of humanity through my research, and really make something of myself. My triumphant return to Kyoto is not far away.

But if you think that your evil deeds have been wiped from the slate, you've got another thing coming. I spent the last two weeks in great distress because of you. Time is money, and I lost out on a fortune. That loss doesn't go away just because you've told me where to find my computer and notes. Therefore, I won't be telling you where your computer is just yet. Serves you right!

It's a dog-eat-dog world—might makes right—no one to blame but yourself—etc etc. I'm actually disappointed: the jaded person you are, I thought you'd know better.

If you ever want to see your computer again, you must swear to obey these conditions three:

1. Thou shalt not use MORITA ICHIRŌ's name in vain

2. Thou shalt pray twice a day in the direction of MORITA ICHIRŌ once in the morning and once at night
3. Thou shalt treat MORITA ICHIRŌ to Neko Ramen whensoever He pleasest (in perpetuity)

Say what you like about me. Sticks and stones and all that.

At long last, I've finally beaten you. This calls for a toast: To sweet, sweet victory.

From the strategist by the sea

* * *

September 18

To: Her Ladyship Ōtsuka Hisako

When I swaggered into the lab ready to begin the week, I found that my computer and notes were missing again. Of course I turned the lab inside out, and I even scoured the shore of Nanao Bay, to no avail. I wasn't even sure my letter would have reached you yet, but even if it had you couldn't possibly have had time to accomplish this even if you'd freaked out and jumped on the next Thunderbird Express as soon as you read it. Yet you're the only possible culprit. What sorcery is this?

I've taken the day off from the lab with a fake cold; as I rock back and forth in the fetal position, I can almost hear your cackling faintly echoing through my Nanao apartment. Komatsuzaki is coming to the lab next week. I was planning to lord my senior lab member status over him, but without any results to show for myself I'm afraid it won't be a very convincing act. I'm actually crying right now.

I admit it: you were a step or two ahead of me. I understand fully now what a superlative human being you are. It's painfully clear that I am not even in the same league. I am humbled, and as I write this letter I prostrate myself in the direction of Kyoto. See for yourself how my tears of penitence stain the page.

I will never, ever betray you again. So please tell me where my computer and notes are. I wouldn't lie to you, not after the ignominy of this experience. I swear on the God of Boobs.

Your humble and obedient servant,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 19

Lady Ōtsuka, how the dog days of summer do tarry, delaying the long-awaited relief of autumn. I hope this abominable heat is not overly straining your delicate constitution. Please take care of yourself. And also please return my computer and notes. Morita.

* * *

September 20

Lady Ōtsuka, one or two days is not enough for the lingering heat of summer to fade, but my compounding worries compelled me to write this letter. Your anger is entirely justified, but I fear that the longer you hold on to it the more likely it is for some ill effect or other to manifest upon your health. I humbly urge you to let bygones be bygones, and return my computer and research notes. My fate is in your hands. Morita.

* * *

September 22

To: Ms. Ōtsuka Hisako

I am aghast at what Morita Tomihiko has done. I rue the day I foolishly put my trust in his hands. He'd seemed so busy with writing letters and novels that I never conceived he had the time to get up to such mischief, and after I'd explicitly instructed him not to take them to the laboratory until I said so, too. Pangs of conscience, my foot. Damn that man; I never thought that my greatest enemy would be hidden in plain sight.

I consent to the following three conditions:

1. I will master the art of writing a love letter
2. I will organize a pep-up party for Ibuki
3. I will send a love letter to Ibuki

Satisfied? You trample over people's marshmallowy-soft feelings like you're shamelessly tracking mud into someone else's house. "Don't you turn into the type of pathetic jackass who gives a girl a love letter in public," my granddad said to me on his deathbed. "One, the whole street would laugh at you. And two, you wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning her heart." He was right. I don't have a snowball's chance in hell. Are you rubbing your hands in anticipation of watching me charge towards my own destruction? Perchance will you be looking on with libation in hand?

It doesn't matter to me anymore. I'll do what I must to earn your forgiveness: if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. I'll just have to grin and bear it. My chances with Ibuki are nil anyhow, after what happened the other day.

The world is full of criss-crossing letters. Do you know which ones have the most degenerate power? It's love letters and extortion letters. You have a talent for threatening people. What do you say we pool our talents, start up a letter-writing conglomerate that specializes in both love letters and threats? We could rule the world, you and I, carve it up with a silver pen.

I have to send a report to the lab advisor tomorrow. Without my computer and notes, I'm sunk. I'll be banished for good. He'll squash me flat with his iron hammer of rage. All that data that might have helped advance humanity into a new age will never see the light of day.

It's all up to you now.

A love letter noob,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 24

To: Ōtsuka Hisako

How very long it has been since I last wrote you.

The mornings and evenings have suddenly become quite chilly; with little fuss or fanfare, summer has gone away. And thus does a most tumultuous summer come to a close. I would say it ranks as the fifth least productive summer of my life. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool optimist, as you surely are aware, who doesn't dwell on the past. If I seem impatient to add more experiments to my workload, it is only because I am eager to produce more results. Yet at the same time, if I produce results I'll have to go back to Kyoto, where I know you are lying in wait. That thought alone rather dampens my enthusiasm to see that city once more.

Yesterday the sky over Noto was crisp, clear, autumny. Since I was off, I roamed the streets of Noto, visiting the Noto Shokusai Market, brooding alone in Komaruyama Park over whether you're really going to return my stuff. My dark thoughts were interrupted by a phone call from Taniguchi, who told me to meet him at Titty Shrine—Titty Shrine being the

seaside shrine at which Takemikazuchi-no-o-no-kami is enshrined, right next to the laboratory. He'd never called me on a weekend before, and I trembled as I boarded the train, imagining how that old drill sergeant was going to rip me a new one.

From Noto-Kashima Station I walked along the shore, through the green rice paddies into the shrine forest, where Taniguchi was plucking at his mandolin.

"C'mon, cherry boy," he called with a wry smile, and from the shadows of the dingy shrine he pulled out a briefcase containing what else but my computer and research notes. "Sorry," he said. "Hisako's got me by the balls."

I was floored when he told me that you two had been dating since he was working in the lab in Kyoto. No way, I thought. Taniguchi—the jellyfish scientist who waxes poetic about seducing women, downs mysterious virility drinks by the liter, and strums his mandolin alone at the lab into the wee hours of the night—and you—the fashionista Empress of Evil—a couple? The only thing you have in common is how weird you both are—and then I noticed Taniguchi's mandolin, and the Heart Sutra plastered onto it.

Now it all makes sense. Now I know where you went the night everyone in the lab came to Kanazawa—why Taniguchi abandoned me at Wakura Onsen that night—who that Ōtsuka Hisako doppelganger at Wakuran Onsen really was. And I also know why you just happened to target the lab here in Noto the exact night I went to Kyoto, and how my stuff went missing while my redeclaration of war was still whizzing through the mail, and why, for nearly the entire last month, Taniguchi's been so sympathetic and helpful with my experiments.

I was blind, but now I see.

I know I would be a fool to expect a single word of contrition from you, but I'm gratified that Taniguchi apologized to me at Titty Shrine.

But why would he do this?

Why are there so many idiots in the world?

When you give people orders you make sure that they obey, and with respect to the conditions you forced upon me in the last letter I expect no different. The thought of it makes my heart heavy. For the past six months I've filled up countless pages with my scribbling, yet I'm no better at writing letters than when I first began, to say nothing of love letters. If anything, my letters tend to cause chaos. In fact the more I write, the further I get from bringing joy to the world (and to myself). My dreams of writing love letters have gone

up in smoke. Don't you think it's messed up to force me—someone with a patchy history with love letters dating back to boyhood—to write a love letter to Ibuki? Is this really supposed to lead me to a happy ending?

All I want is to be happy with everyone. And if I can't have that, then at least let me be happy on my own.

Morita Ichirō, Professional Instigator

* * *

October 10

Greetings from Noto. It's really starting to feel like fall around here at last.

The other day Komatsuzaki and I rode the train here in Noto all the way to the end of the line, just to see what we would find. Red spider lilies were blooming all along the paths between the rice fields; it was a surreal sight, as though we'd crossed over to the other side, and if my softly swaying ride on that train had indeed been my journey into the next life it would have been a very pleasant way to go. I kid, I kid, I have far too much untapped talent to die just yet.

For the past few days Taniguchi has been mercilessly mocking Komatsuzaki and his marshmallow-ness. If he thought that leaving you back in Kyoto meant he'd be free from marshmallow ridicule, he had another thing coming. At first I felt sorry for the poor bastard, but then I remembered that I call him a marshmallow too. Anyways, now that Komatsuzaki's bearing the brunt of Taniguchi's ire, I've been able to get some peace and quiet. I look out the window, at the swells of Nanao Bay, and reflect upon my vigorous feud with you.

Let me tell you a story.

Once there was a middle schooler who wrote love letters. He wrote so many that they all piled up in his room. But one day he was rejected by the person to whom he had intended to send them. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't throw them away in the wastebasket, for his mother might have found them. He couldn't throw them away outside, for there was no telling who might find them. So the boy burned the letters in his backyard. The flames rose higher and higher, as if they were fed by his unrequited yearning, and smoke billowed into the air. But as the boy fed the unsent letters into the fire one by one, he heard the wail of sirens approaching his house. Flashing red lights swirled round and round. The boy's little sister had seen the smoke and, mistaking them for a house fire, phoned the fire

department. All the neighbours came out to see what the commotion was about. When asked what he had been burning, the boy didn't know what to say. He was so mortified that he wanted to sink into a hole in the ground.

What lessons can we take from this vignette, and from our own feud?

The moral of the story is: some stories don't have morals. Life is full of stupid, pointless episodes.

I spoke with the lab advisor and Taniguchi today, and I'm pleased to announce I will be returning to Kyoto at the beginning of next month. Do be on the lookout for me.

Write back soon.

Yours,

Morita Ichirō

Chapter 7 — To Morimi Tomihiko: Love Letter Anti-expert

August 27

To: Morimi Tomihiko, addlebrained author

I—Morita Ichirō, who once so yearned for the city of Kyoto—am now leaving Kyoto. I am composing this letter in a dim café deep within the bowels of the Kintetsu Mall in Kyoto Station, hunched over a table, counting down the minutes until my train leaves.

Thank you ever so much for that wonderful night. After visiting a certain underground abode and hearing the full story of the Titty Incident, my rage against you only grew. How immature of you, trying to throw Mamiya under the bus. Even if he did want to see the lab, you should have pointed out that it was already 9 at night and steered him towards bed like a responsible adult, not sauntered onto campus with all the ladies in tow. This is all your fault, all of it.

I'd like to set things straight: as I already explained to you, that buxom screening was just a means to set Komatsuzaki free from his delusions.

It's been a trying three days; my little sister even told me, "You're dead to me." But the silver lining is that I got my hands on a computer belonging to a particularly odious colleague of mine from the lab. If I hadn't, I might well be waiting at the station right now with a discount Seishun 18 ticket in hand, off to seek my fortune at the edge of the world. I hear it's a magical place with no experiments, no graduation theses, no job hunting, no heartbreak, no Taniguchi, no boobs. Actually, let's keep the boobs.

Don't bring the computer I entrusted to you outside, and under no circumstances should you bring it to the lab. My revenge against my hated foe depends on you holding on to it. By wreaking my vengeance, I shall emerge a new man and take the next step in my evolution. Once my foe admits defeat, I will send instructions on the computer's return.

My train will be pulling in soon.

Whenever you feel like complaining about how hard writing is, consider how fortunate you are that anyone wants to read your insignificant twaddle at all. Look at me: in that lab at Noto, hardly anyone even remembers that I exist.

I struggle alone in that forsaken place against an array of mundane yet formidable obstacles. How will I graduate? How will I make my living? How do I get the person I like to like me back? Since the dawn of time, how many students, uncounted and uncountable, must have wrestled with these selfsame problems, rolling around and bawling in their 4½ tatami quarters! I disdain the ordinary, and yet it's the ordinary problems which I just can't seem to overcome.

But I have a plan to surmount this crisis: I will master the art of writing a love letter!

Let me finish before you start to judge. I master the art. I put on the moves. I get the girl. I find my reason for living. My motivation skyrockets. I nail the interview. I get the job. I bust my ass to get to graduation. I graduate. I marry the girl. We have a kid. And we all live happily ever after.

A flawless plan, no?

What do you mean it won't work?

And what exactly, pray tell, is wrong with it?

Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 10

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Good day. It is I, Morita Ichirō.

My sincerest apologies for the late reply. You're right: summer is ending, not that there was any point in checking with me. It's still sweltering, but the cool breeze that whispers through the window in the mornings and evenings now is no longer that of summer. Our summer is going away. Once again we late bloomers have wasted yet another summer. Save your tears; tears that won't even buy you any sympathy are worthless.

I couldn't help but notice as I read your letter that you were subtly implying that I was to blame for your lack of progress on your novel. Stop wasting time with such transparent chicanery. And if you've got a toothache you ought to go to a dentist. If you want to have a pajama party, have it by yourself. And I'm pretty sure guys don't normally throw pajama parties. Loincloth parties are the name of the game for us.

Now onto the serious business.

To be frank, I really don't have the time to be writing this drivel. When I arrived back in Noto, it was to find that in my absence the cowardly Ōtsuka Hisako had stolen a march on me, as well as my computer and research notes. Truly the work of a dishonorable mind. Taking the initiative to steal her computer was the right call. I can only throw myself upon the mercy of drill sergeant Taniguchi. I am negotiating with Ōtsuka in good faith, but it looks like it's going to be a bumpy ride.

The computer you currently hold in your possession is my ace in the hole. You need to be very careful with it. Don't let it leave your apartment. You never know who could be on the prowl. Your opponent is clever, inflexible, egotistical, ruthless, and beautiful to boot. Without question, she's one tough customer. Keep your guard up.

Request favor of your reply ASAP.

Morita Ichirō, Negotiator

* * *

September 15

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Looking out from the platform at Noto-Kashima Station at the sea, it seems that the course of summer has a little left to run yet. Yet here I stand, watching the last grains run out on a summer of regret. I am in agony. I want to walk into the sea. No, not to swim in it. I just want to get away from it all, baby.

I'll take your advice in the spirit that it was given. You're completely correct: I should put aside my silly pride and return her computer. And I should stop wasting time on this pointless squabble and focus on practicing writing love letters.

But I no longer have any reason to give the time of day to trifling things like common sense. Things are different now, for you see, after standing tough at the negotiating table, I am at last back in possession of my computer and notes. What have I to fear now? My enemy requests that I return her things, having returned mine. How gullible. Too gullible, forsooth. There is much I still desire. And so, she will just have to suffer a little while longer.

No doubt you're already preparing a pious, self-righteous lecture for me.

But after the Titty Incident I have nothing left to lose. Boobs have changed me. But Morita Ichirō is not so gutless as to blame everything on boobs. It is not boobs that are at fault. Boobs are virtuous things. The fault is mine for having been vanquished.

My eyes have opened to the cause of justice. Wherever there is injustice, I will be there to oppose it. Empress Hisako once ill-used and mistreated me: now I shall smash her fortress of treachery, liberate the once-proud laboratory from her tyrannical reign, and sow the seeds of a better tomorrow. If I am vilified, despised for my actions, so be it: I shall gladly pay that price for the sake of my fellow researchers, and those who will come after me. For what is the world but a den of perfidy? History is written by the victor, and anyone who is taken in by silver-tongued falsehoods has only himself to blame. Call me a coward if you like. Forget me, and go back to writing letters to your raven-haired maidens. But remember not to sign away your copyrights. And don't ever kid yourself that those maidens aren't gunning for them. There's no other possible reason anyone would be sending hot and heavy love letters to someone like you.

That will be all for today. I want constant vigilance with that computer.

Morita Ichirō, evil incarnate

* * *

September 20

Master Morimi: apologies for this humble postcard. Thanks for most convincing letter. But things have taken sudden turn. Mortal enemy Ōtsuka Hisako more devious than I could have imagined. Computer and notes once again in clutches of the foe, negotiations reopened. Situation slightly dire. Enemy could be anywhere. Double check all locks. Knowing her, possible she's sniffed out your address and is en route as we speak. Extreme caution: repeat, extreme caution. Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 22

To: Morimi Tomihiko, whipping boy

I used to respect you, Morimi. Maybe I did take advantage of your easygoing (some would say lackadaisical) nature and go a little too far. Maybe I did treat you with less respect than you deserve. But never in my wildest dreams did I consider that you might be the cause of my downfall.

Yet here we are.

How many times did I warn you not to let it leave your apartment or take it to the lab? How many times did I tell you not to return it without my express permission? But what did you do? Unbelievable. Do you really have to be such a goody two-shoes?

Ōtsuka Hisako's high-pitched cackling rings in my ears. With my ace in the hole down the drain, I had no choice but to write an apology to her yesterday and yield to her every demand. I'm sure you would like to know what they are.

1. I will master the art of writing a love letter
2. I will organize a pep-up for Ibuki
3. I will send a love letter to Ibuki

How did it come to this?

There's no way I can write a love letter.

For months I've begged and I've pleaded, yet still you refuse to divulge the art of writing love letters. That is why my proficiency in romantic correspondences has remained stagnant. And it's not like I was ever any good at writing ordinary letters to begin with. Every time I write a letter under the pretext of epistolary boot camp, things take a turn for the worse. And after all that, I ended up whispering, "Three cheers for boobs," right in front of Ibuki, sweeping away the last petals of hope that might have remained. And now I'm supposed to hand her a love letter in public? My granddad once said to me, "Don't you turn into the type of pathetic jackass who gives a girl a love letter in public. One, the whole street would laugh at you. And two, you wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning her heart." And dammit, he was right.

I've already lost everything I have; do I really have to lose my dignity too?

It's all your fault that things have turned out this way.

It's your fault! It sounds so nice I'll say it twice. It's your fault!

Sincerely,

A man on the edge

* * *

September 29

To: Morimi Tomihiko, Representative Director of Love Letters 'R' Us

Thank you for your letter. If you agree to teach me the art of writing a love letter, then all will be forgiven. Things are a little less lonely around here at the lab now that Komatsuzaki has also been dispatched here from Kyoto. I suppose I ought to be grateful to you for keeping me in your thoughts as I slowly descended into madness.

Ōtsuka Hisako has returned my computer and research notes. You may be surprised to learn that the abusive drill sergeant who was supposed to be mentoring me was in cahoots with Ōtsuka all along. In spite of the fact that they own matching mandolins with the Heart Sutra emblazoned on each, it never crossed my mind that they might be an item. It blew my mind. Romance remains a mystery to me.

I spend my days now going through the motions, setting up experiments and cataloguing data.

One day I will leave this place. I will return to Kyoto, and with a little more diligence I will leave the sheltered harbour of the university campus and paddle forth boldly into the great unknown. I don't want to paddle out. No ship can long withstand the tempestuous waves that await out in the real world. Yet neither can I stay here, happy and content in this lab by the sea. I will never find true happiness here.

Currently my motto is, "Do something, anything," so I've thrown myself into the job hunt. I stay up late into the night, analyzing my strengths/weaknesses and filling out applications. As you know, I have never been one to shy away from casting my discerning gaze upon reality, and it did not take long for me to discover an undeniable fact: there's nothing appealing about setting sail into the real world.

Certainly I have plenty of energy to write vast numbers of pointless letters. When it comes to pointless ventures my cunning knows no bounds (Then how was I beaten by Ōtsuka? The answer, of course, is that she is a demon in human clothing). I have spent many years in deep contemplation on the subject of boobs. In fact I was once quite revered as a guru on the topic by a number of male college students. But life is sufficiently long that man cannot live upon reverence alone, and I am far from certain about spending my life as a philosopher of breasts. What if one day I were to ask my beloved's father for her hand in marriage, only for him to angrily rebuff me, thundering, "No titty philosopher is going to have my daughter!" No, thank you.

Yet that's the only talent I have.

What a preposterous, unjust dilemma.

If I can't get any companies to hire me, I'm thinking I'll just start a company myself. You're the only one I can turn to. What do you say we join forces to start up a venture writing love letters? Don't worry, all you need to do is provide the capital. Together we'll be unstoppable. We'll be listed in all of the up-and-coming young entrepreneur showcases.

Great idea, don't you think? Fine, I'll say it so you don't have to: it's a terrible idea.

The Titty Philosopher (first publication forthcoming)

* * *

October 5

To: Morimi Tomihiko

No joke, it's fall now.

The other day I was by the shore filling the sea with tears for fears about my future, when I noticed red spider lilies blooming along the embankment. It was such an otherworldly sight that I ran away in sheer terror. I have yet to experience the finer things in life, so you'd best believe I'm not ready to embark towards the great hereafter just yet. First I'd need to know whether the afterlife has boobs...and the fact that this is all I talk about is exactly why I'm so hopeless. I'm such a moron! I'm such a stupid moron!

In any case, congratulations on finishing "The Night is Short, Walk On Girl". I guess all the advice I dispensed when I visited you in Kyoto really paid off. We should get together and celebrate when the book comes out. Cash is a perfectly acceptable form of repayment.

You're right: this whole "love letter startup" thing is just me running away from the fight. And you're also right that I need to stop taking refuge in fantasies and face reality. But why does hearing you say that annoy me so much? Don't you feel any shame, superciliously lecturing me from atop that self-righteous throne? Are you going to abandon your principles for the sake of being right? What happened to the Morimi Tomihiko who groaned in that cafe, "If I can't be a poet or a gentleman of leisure, then I don't want to become anything at all"? Were those just crocodile tears that trickled down your face?

I just wanted to try saying that.

Sorry.

I know that you've got deadlines breathing down your neck, which makes me all the more grateful that you still spent the time to share your thoughts on love letters. I've been poring over them in between experiments and job applications.

I understand what you're trying to say. But isn't advice like, "Use intensity to seize her heart," a bit, well, simplistic? There's nothing very secret about that. And it's not like I needed you to tell me that, I'm already putting my heart and soul into these letters. Each word is seared onto the page with the ardour of my entire being. My soul is engraved in each line. You said that, "you're stuck in the mud because you rely on half-baked gimmicks," but nothing could be further from the truth. Only a blackguard like you would harbour such suspicions. My soul is as squeaky clean as a freshly scrubbed toilet bowl.

Yet what do I have to show for it?

I've written several drafts, but my nerves always give out before I can drop them in the mail. Re-reading them makes my face burn with embarrassment; I keep wondering, *What was I trying to write?* Sure, the emotion almost makes the ink run on the page. It's pretty good writing by my standards, straightforward and passionate, and sometimes I catch myself wiping a tear from my eye, it's so beautiful. But there's a critical flaw. Partway through my letters always go a little odd; I don't know what it is, but it just doesn't feel like I'm writing with a pure mind.

Why does this happen? What am I doing wrong?

As a kid I loved writing letters, even if I wasn't very good at it. I loved it so much that I even used to tie letters to red balloons and watch them sail into the sky, hoping that they'd come down to earth in some far off town where I'd find a penpal. Yes, grade schoolers like that do exist. I was so innocent in those days, so very innocent. But someone must have taken divine pity on those innocent hopes, because imagine my surprise when someone did write back. Everything was beautiful about that letter: the writing, the pen strokes, the envelope. The summer that exchange ended was one of the saddest summers of my life. Just thinking about it makes the old flame flare up. I can even hear the sirens.

I just can't not screw things up.

A vagrant soul

* * *

October 11

To: Tomio

Yet another day chock full of taking down research notes and filling out job applications—oh, hello there.

While autumn descends upon Noto, I've been riding the Noto Railway to the end of the line with Komatsuzaki and scanning for UFOs hovering over the waves. I'm glad to hear that you enjoyed the MOMAK. Isn't it nice to get out and experience culture? I'm reminded of the time I was at the museum with Ibuki looking at those paintings by Fujita Tsuguharu. You know, what's great about art museums is, while she was engrossed in the paintings I got to stare at her face from the side. I completely forgot that everyone else from the lab was there.

Yesterday I was informed that I will be heading back to Kyoto at the beginning of November.

Drill instructor Taniguchi's constant barking as well as a full course of those virility enhancement drinks seem to have paid off: I've accomplished what I was sent to this forsaken shore to do. It's been a hard, lonely six months, and yet somehow it's hard to feel as excited as I should. Ōtsuka's edict to write a love letter to Ibuki still hangs over my head, and though I would like nothing better than to spurn that command and save my dignity, I know that the Empress of Evil would spend her last few months before graduation making my life a living hell. I'm not sure that I'd outlast her.

In one of my darkest moments, I asked my little sister (who aspires to become an astronaut), "If you got the love letter of your dreams, what would you do?" Her reply: "Rip it up and throw it away." It's hard to tell what goes on in the mind of someone with such single-mindedly astronomical aspirations. I fear that she will never find happiness. But then again, maybe she has found happiness and simply is keeping it on the down-low from her big brother. I'll let her have it. I'd like nothing better than to dissolve into a puddle of tears at her wedding.

Many thanks for your letter. "If you don't feel like you're writing with a pure mind, you're probably not writing with a pure mind." What a hurtful thing to say. I have feelings, you know. It's not like I'm completely depraved. And how exactly would banishing all impure thoughts from my mind help me write? There's nothing duller than a completely sanitized mind. Strong feelings, strong love, can only grow in a mind fertilized by a million impure thoughts. It's unfair to criticize me just because my mind tends to gravitate towards boobs. I just don't get why my thoughts get jumbled up when I try to tell her how I feel.

I tried your suggestion to take a cold shower, change into a clean set of clothes, and kneel at my desk to write, but once I started to write my passion got the best of me, and the end product was horrific. It seems like the more passion I pour into my writing, the more remote my chances of a date become.

Love letters are just like job applications that you need to hand in to your crush, and I have as much aptitude for writing love letters as I do for filling out job questionnaires: none. If I keep waiting around like this, my life's never going to get off the ground. I'll just keep dancing the Sophist Samba, floating through the void, to infinity and beyond—

Does anyone actually ever get the person of their dreams? It just doesn't seem plausible to me. I don't see how things could ever line up so conveniently. I bet people just make it up.

Later.

Morita Ichirō, a mortal man

* * *

October 17

To: Morimi Tomihiko

Thanks for your letter. You must be tired having to travel all the way to Tokyo. It sounds like you have to travel back and forth between Kyoto and Tokyo a lot, like you're some kind of bestselling author; you sure it's Tokyo you're going to? You know that Tokyo's the capital of Japan, right? Shijō Kawaramachi may have a lot of buildings, but they're not the same thing, okay?

You write novel manuscripts, I fill out job applications (love letters included). Filling out job applications (love letters included) feels just like piercing your heart with a sword.

I've been thinking about love letters so much that I had a dream that the mail train that's exhibited at Noto-Nakajima Station was chugging towards Kyoto under the silver moonlight, laden full of my love letters. A more humiliating locomotive I can hardly imagine.

You encouraged me to focus on writing compliments, so I listed out what I liked best about her and what had made me fall for her, as if I was dissecting her existence. The result certainly ranks as one of the top 3 most horrible love letters I have ever written. I wrote compliments like my life depended on it, in my desperation even commenting on how nice her earlobes were, but once I realized I was approaching the point of no return my pen

abruptly came to a halt. If I'd kept on writing I would have turned into a concentrated mess of a human being.

Don't get me wrong: I still want to write a love letter, but I don't want to pour it on too thick. Love letters are a way to convey your feelings. That much is true. But I don't think that it's enough just to convey your feelings. Conveying your feelings is just the first step. What love letters are really supposed to do is bring those feelings to fruition.

Quite an astute observation of me, wouldn't you say?

Complimenting someone isn't easy. In fact, I think it's actually really hard. The more you butter someone up the more insincere you seem, so pouring out how you truly feel can actually make you sound even more artificial. It's true that when you're in love, it feels like everything about them is wonderful. I could go on for days about what I like about her. But once you start listing everything, it begins to feel as though you're missing the point by pulling her apart. I like her face, her short black hair, her dimples, her earlobes, her occasionally blank expression. But I didn't fall in love with all of those things put together. I didn't fall in love with her because her earlobes are cute, I think her earlobes are cute because they belong to the girl I fell in love with.

In any case, you'd probably be creeped out if you got a love letter saying how cute your earlobes are. I'd wonder what kind of freak I was dealing with.

I think your method needs some tweaking.

Yours,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

October 21

To: Morimi Tomihiko, love letter noob

Once again it is I, Morita.

My hands grow ever more busy as the day of my departure from the lab draws near. I am no closer to developing the art of writing a love letter, in no small part thanks to your litany of worthless advice. How am I supposed to write a love letter that will capture her heart? As I struggle to accomplish this daunting task, the Titty Incident—that most deplorable of

happenings—continues to loom over my head. How could any love letter that I could write ever wash away that awful stain?

As I've said many times before, the issue isn't that my heart is impure, or that I'm a pervert, or any of those things. As such I have no interest in undergoing the training that you proposed. I don't have the time on my hands to be skipping all the way down to Cape Muroto like Kūkai did way back when to gain enlightenment.

You clearly don't understand the situation I'm in. The problem I confront is of a much more rudimentary nature.

Over the course of many attempts and failures at writing a love letter, I've come to realize that I don't know what a sentence is anymore. Writing sounds simple, but there are so many hidden pitfalls. People say you should write what you feel. But are these sequences of characters really what I'm feeling? How can anyone be sure? How can I be sure? What if I'm being deceived by my own writing? I think and I write and I think and I write, but somewhere along the way it all starts to seem so strange. Am I really committing my thoughts to words, or are the words that I write fabricating my thoughts?

I'm starting to wonder whether I'm not just engrossed in fabricating my feelings for her through words. Could this be why every letter I've written is so repulsive? What if it's not my heart that's polluted as you claim, but the very act of writing a love letter that is wrong? What if putting your thoughts to paper and throwing them at other people is what's really creepy?

And if that's the case, what really is a love letter? Does it have a purpose or is it useless? Should I write one or not? Nothing makes sense to me anymore. I've bogged down completely: it's just too much for me to deal with.

That'll do it for today. I've been suspecting for a while now that you don't know the first thing about love letters. Have you ever actually written one?

Sinking into the swamp of love,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

October 27

To: Dr. Koibumi

I'm glad that you seem to be doing well. So you're doing a book signing at a bookstore on Kawaramachi Street in November? That seems a little grandiose for a person of your stature. I prefer you sitting all alone, hugging your knees to your chest.

Autumn is well and truly underway in Noto, and the mountains are turning a deep shade of crimson. Whenever I start feeling worn out, I leave the lab and walk along the shore towards Titty Shrine, admiring the foliage and the sea. This is the last week I'll be able to enjoy the view at Nanao Bay.

While I'm getting ready to leave Noto, I also have to plan for Ibuki's pep-up party. I'll send you an invitation once things are ready. The plan's simple: since she's a founding member of the All-Japan Maidens' Society she'll be over the moon to see you there.

As for my love letter to her I've more or less given up. The idea that I could just scribble down a few words and make her fall head over heels for me when I can't even figure out how to live my own life is laughable, at best. This is all too obvious at this point, but there's no such thing as the art of writing a love letter. Yet just spilling my guts onto a piece of paper would hardly serve the purpose of writing a love letter. It's a lose-lose situation. So I've come to the conclusion that trying to tell her how I feel would be a mistake. No matter how strong my feelings are, they'd come out all garbled, so it'd be better not to tell her at all.

And above all, the Titty Incident hangs over everything. What could I possibly do to overcome her having seen me staring at a giant boob projected on the wall, whispering, "Three cheers for boobs"? Nothing, that's what. I'll just have to grin and bear it whenever Ōtsuka starts ribbing me.

I didn't want to admit it, but you were right. Love letters were just my way of escaping from reality. Every time I talked about "love letter this, love letter that" I was really just trying to distract myself, from the emptiness I felt having to study jellyfish (which I've never even cared about), and from my fears about the future.

I've come to realize that you've got to do more than grasp at straws. You can't just obsess over a crush to distract yourself from your own anxieties, and you can't expect them to come and save the day. Maybe my love letters are doomed to fail because I've been drowning all along.

The deeper into autumn it gets, the more profound my melancholy becomes.

Today is Friday. I'm writing this letter in the break room at the lab. The sun is setting over Nanao Bay. I'm only going to see this view a few more times, and that thought makes me

regret how little I have to show for the past six months. The old drill sergeant invited me to spend one more night in Wakura Onsen, at the Kaigetsu Inn. "Let's get your manhood polished real good before you head back to Kyoto, cherry boy," he said.

I don't know where there's any point at polishing myself anymore, but I'm going to go anyway.

Till next time.

Sincerely,

A loser

* * *

October 27

To: Morimi Tomihiko, love letter anti-expert

I can't wait for a reply to my last so I'm just going to write again. After I finished up my previous letter, Taniguchi picked me up in his beloved old beater and drove me across the pitch black bay to Wakura Onsen. The Kaigetsu Inn is diagonally across from my usual haunt, Sōyu. The name means "sea moon", or jellyfish: fitting considering it's Taniguchi's favourite inn.

We had a soak in the inn's hot spring, had a sumptuous feast, went for another soak inside Sōyu, then returned to our room and broke out the libations. From our window we could see Kagaya looming up in the night. I'd been on the top floor there back at the end of July, carousing with a bunch of drunken old men and listening to Taniguchi sing a paean to boobs, but it'd been too raucous for us to talk much then. So tonight was the first time we'd sat down and had a proper conversation, face to face.

We talked about a lot of things—about the Four Mandolin Gods; about how he met Ōtsuka Hisako; about how the taste of the broth the first time they'd gone to Neko Ramen together; about Ōtsuka's secret family recipe for virility enhancement drinks; about the struggles he'd faced when he was sent off by his lonesome to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, just like I was. I heard a lot of interesting things. I'd never heard him talk that much before.

He chugged beer like it was water, chasing it down with whisky. I learned later that something was going on between him and Ōtsuka, so maybe he'd been brooding about it. I did my best to keep up with him, and before long we were both plastered.

"Once you're outta here I don't ever wanna see you here again. Got it, you phony?" he berated me. I vaguely remember mumbling something back. Whatever I said made him even angrier, and he shouted, "You can't stay here!"

To make a long conversation short, we talked about life and women and a lot of other things. Sometimes we disagreed, and the alcohol that warmed us led us into pointless squabbling. In the end he shouted his usual, "Over my dead body!" and tried to turn me into one. We made so much noise that the staff came and yelled at us.

After that we went to bed, but then I heard Taniguchi whisper from his futon, "Three cheers for boobs!" How could he possibly know about the Titty Incident!?

"Don't be naïve. You really think anything that happens in the lab gets past Hisako?" he snickered. "She hears everything, and I mean everything."

"Goddammit!"

"No need to throw in the towel just yet. Ibuki's not that square."

"And how would you know?"

"Cause Hisako said so. And if she says it, I believe it."

"I don't know about that..."

"Just keep the faith. Tomorrow I'll take you to Koji Beach."

"Where's that?"

"It's near the eastern tip of the Noto Peninsula. The Beach of Love: lovely name, ain't it? There's a bell that grants good fortune in romance, so I'd recommend you give it a whack or two."

"I'm not embarrassing myself like that!"

"I think you're way past that, you titty addict."

"I'm not a titty addict!"

"Ring the bell, young Morita. Only then can you surpass my dead body."

"You're not dead yet."

"I might as well be. Hisako and I are splitting up."

"Huh?"

"Haven't you heard? She got a job a long way away, and long distance is hard to pull off."

"I thought you two were going to get married."

"Life is complicated, baby..."

I tried to find out more, but at that point Taniguchi nodded off. Drunk he may have been, but as I watched this thirty-year-old man mumbling, "Three cheers...three cheers..." in his sleep, I realized that he was an idiot too.

It was then that I had a revelation: boobs and romantic feelings flower only when they are hidden.

Yes: only now did I realize that by laying out my feelings straight out on the page, I had only exposed them to be strangled by my impassioned words; it was the stink of their rotting corpses that I had smelled from all of my previous love letters. In other words, the truly effective love letter, the one I seek to write, is the love letter that does not appear to be a love letter at all.

I was so elated by my discovery that I patted Taniguchi on the cheek, but he was so conked out that the retaliation I was expecting didn't materialize. Alone I took another round at the hot springs inside the Kaigetsu Inn, then came back to our room and sat at the desk where I am now penning this letter. Taniguchi's snoring uproariously. He's a good guy.

I'd said that I've given up, but I hereby declare that I am going to attempt to write a love letter once more. You might say I'm being stubborn, but I think stubbornness is a good thing.

You know what they say: it's not about how many times you fall, but how many times you get back up.

Morita Ichirō

Kaigetsu Inn, Wakura Onsen

Chapter 8 — To My Sweet Baby Sister

April 29

To: My troubled baby sister

Salutations,

It is I, your big brother.

How are dad and mom? Please let them know I spend each and every day by the sea at Noto tirelessly researching difficult issues and advancing the causes of humanity and world peace.

When I left our Shimogamo home, you questioned whether I wasn't actually being exiled to the Noto Peninsula, but I assure you that nothing could be further from the truth. "You're my top student!" the professor implored me. "Only you can break new grounds in the field of jellyfish research there at the Noto Peninsula." It's a form of tough love, like the proverbial lion pushing its cubs off a cliff. "Make me proud," the professor said. So as you can see, your big brother carries a lot of weight on his shoulders.

The Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory is manned by Taniguchi, a distinguished jellyfish expert. He wears a leather bomber jacket and his hardened demeanour reminds me of the villain in a detective serial, but he's a consummate professional. To the timid he's as intimidating as a bawling drill sergeant, but he holds me in high regard. Just the other night we huddled in deep discussion till the first rays of dawn, coming up with revolutionary new ideas one after another. If he ends up winning the Nobel Prize someday, don't be surprised if I get an invite to the award ceremony: that's how tight-knit we are. Yes indeed.

There's a cherry tree tunnel at Noto-Kashima Station, so every morning during the first few weeks of April I was treated to a magnificent view of the cherry blossoms. Nanao Bay is stunningly serene. Mom was fussing as if I was being sent to the edge of the world, but it really isn't that lonely a place. I have a nice apartment in Nanao, and there's even an ASTY shopping center and a Yamada Electronics nearby, so shopping is a breeze.

Now that cherry blossom season is over, the trees across from the station and on Nanao Island are a lush sea of green. Seeing that fills me with energy. I'm not going to fall behind.

I'm going to keep growing too, growing and growing until my head's skimming the stratosphere.

I hope my cosmic example encourages you to apply yourself to your studies and spend your time wisely. You've only got a year before college entrance exams. Don't watch too many *Ultraman Taro* reruns. Saving the planet is a noble calling, but so is saving your grades.

You're probably wondering why I'm going to the trouble of writing a letter.

But think about how considerate I'm actually being. Some things are hard to say face to face, even between siblings. Sometimes you want to consult your dependable big brother, but just can't seem to get the words out. It's complicated being a blossoming high schooler, huh? Of course it is. So don't be shy, ask away. Some people call me a legendary trouble buster who's responsible for solving half the problems in Sakyō ward. And I haven't retired yet. Every time my labmate comes to me with a new heartache, I hit him with pinpoint advice.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Your brother

P.S. I was out walking in the shopping arcade across from the station today and got to know the sage owner of Minowa Books. He's got a lot of classic films on tape that he's willing to lend me for free. Could you send me the old VCR that should be sitting in the shed? Please and thank you.

* * *

May 21

To: Morita Kaoru

It's me, your big brother.

Thanks for writing back. Mom sent me the VCR a few weeks back, along with an assortment of food in cans and pouches. I was positively heartbroken that it didn't come with a reply from you, until I checked the post today. You're right, you have a lot on your plate, and I can't expect you to write back instantly. My bad. But me, the troubled one? How dare you. What could I possibly be troubled about?

Rice planting has just finished up here, and you wouldn't believe how lush the spring greenery is up here. It makes me feel brand new. Today I strolled through Nanao and dropped by Minowa Books to discuss jellyfish and old castle ruins, before stopping for lunch at the Freshness Burger in front of the station, where I'm now writing this letter. A perfect weekend, if I do say so myself.

Last weekend I went to Wakura Onsen. Hot springs are wonderful, aren't they? I positively live for them, them and Tengu ham. I'm sending you a sample, so when you get it share it with mom and dad. I can't believe dad's started writing an autobiography. How's it coming along? Maybe we'll finally learn how mom and dad fell in love.

Lately I've been waking up bright and early every day to get to the Noto Railways station and catch the train to the laboratory. I'm so swamped that I can hardly spare a second to think of home, though I get plenty of mail from Kyoto. As I mentioned in my last letter, I'm helping my friend Komatsuzaki navigate his love life. And Ōtsuka, who's also from my lab, is also flooding me with letters, out of loneliness I suspect. What's a guy to do?

I sound like a different person in my letters? That can't be right. I may look like I'm fiddlefarting around at home, but that's just the carefully crafted kindly-big-brother mask I wear at home so as not to frighten you all. You still have a long way to go if you never figured that out, young grasshopper. I'm a hardened realist, through and through, and I don't have a single moment to waste sitting around daydreaming. How I wish you could see me in the lab engaged in white-hot debate. But I decided long ago that what happens at work stays at work, and even one day when I am married in the not-too-distant-future that will not change. I intend to cherish my wife. Dad seems to be cut from the same cloth. Ask him yourself.

So you can consider this letter-me to be the real me, and treat him with all the respect he commands. Do this and you will be rewarded.

Unfortunately, I've never read *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, so I can't answer your questions about it. I'm curious why you'd choose your final year of high school to pick up Nietzsche? I'd hope that you'd choose more cheerful books to read, and ask more demure questions. For example: there's this guy that I kind of like, what does he think about all day? And so forth. I'm confident I could give you much more useful advice about those kinds of questions.

So let's stick to more cheerful topics, shall we?

Oh, and in case you were wondering what guys usually think about, it's never anything good. 40% of the guys who pass by on the street are idiots, another 40% are worthless, and the final 20% are perverts. Never show them your back. Never show signs of weakness. Slip up once, and the next thing you'll feel is a knife sliding between your ribs. Constant vigilance.

The Hot Spring Sage

* * *

June 23

To: My charmless baby sister

Thanks for writing.

The rainy season has arrived here too. It feels like the sky here hangs a bit lower overhead than it does in Kyoto. On the train yesterday I looked out the window and saw a great big rainbow slipping in and out of the rain clouds. There's something mysterious about the Noto weather.

When I look out the lab window at the rain falling over Nanao Bay, it reminds me of how we used to play games together on rainy days when we were little. Be grateful that you had such a good big brother.

I'm not telling you not to read Nietzsche; please stop jumping down my throat with all your logic. Do what you believe you should do, but don't forget that there is such a thing becoming too enlightened. Whether you're a guy or a gal, showing a little vulnerability is a good thing. That's what makes people charming. Just look at me. I show vulnerabilities where I ought to, and so no matter how hard I try to conceal it the charm just comes oozing out. That's why all throughout college, and at the lab, people have always gravitated to me. Get it? And if any guy tries to take advantage of what he thinks is weakness you just knock him out cold. Show no mercy.

It sounds like dad's autobiography is chugging along. What if he revealed that he used to be a spy for some foreign country in his younger days? He'd probably top the bestsellers lists. Why do you think he calls so many family meetings? Doesn't he slog through enough meetings at work? My lab head hates meetings so much he once jumped out of a window to get out of one.

Oh, and tell mom she doesn't need to come over. No need for her to worry herself. I'm taking care of myself just fine, emptying the kitchen garbage every day and all that stuff.

I'm a little shocked that you've started reading Morimi Tomihiko. We used to be in the same club back in undergrad, and I still write to him. Just between you and me, I give him advice from time to time about the book he's working on. I find his works dull, since he only ever writes about Kyoto. Ask him to write about anything more than a kilometer or so away from himself and he's completely clueless. One of these days that monomania is going to lead to his demise.

I'd stay away from him if I were you. He's a scoundrel. He pretends to be harmless, but he's always playing with fire, wheedling his way into the hearts of female readers all over Japan. That's why he's always missing his writing deadlines. That's why I urge you to pick a different novelist to read.

This wouldn't be a very charming letter if all I did was lecture you, so here's a picture of a dolphin I took at the Notojima Aquarium. I often take trips over to the aquarium to talk to the dolphin for a change of pace. It's a beautiful dolphin. Dolphins possess a cosmic charm all their own.

Today's letter was brought to you by the letter "C". Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, but neither can do without Charm.

Till next time,

Your Charming big brother

P.S. I got the daruma you bought at Shinkyogoku. I'll fill in the eye when I graduate. Did you buy one for yourself too?

* * *

July 3

To: Kaoru

When you write letters to your big brother, could you maybe not write "Balance Overdue" on the envelope? It really had me worried for a minute. I don't remember this incident you describe at all. We were just passing the time on a rainy day; I'd never try to pilfer my baby sister's pocket money. Probably. Most likely. Either way I'm afraid I don't recall.

For such a clever girl you have a lot of slovenly ways. You can't go around saying you want to "become a gentlewoman of leisure." First off, it's not easy to become a gentlewoman of leisure. Now if dad's autobiography turns into a bestseller that would change everything, but I wouldn't hold my breath. I highly doubt that dad has a dark and mysterious past as a secret agent or anything like that to make his book fly off the shelves.

Back in college, Morimi and I once were sitting in a café having a silly debate about the future. This is what he said: "If I can't become a poet or a gentleman of leisure, I don't want to become anything at all." That's the sort of man he is. If he's anything to go by, Japan is doomed.

I'm extremely optimistic and realistic at the same time, and I'm convinced that you'll never get anywhere just with a mopey attitude like that. I need to go out into the real world and get to work. The whole world is waiting for my arrival. Well I'm ready to get this show on the road. So no more pouting about wanting to become a gentlewoman of leisure. Get out there and get some real work done.

You never know what life has in store. In college some people seem like they're going to accomplish great things, only for them to fold once they hit the real world. On the other hand, some people seem to be treading water, and the next thing you know you hear about them making a name for themselves. You just never know what's going to happen.

I'm helping Komatsuzaki (you remember him from my other letters) with his love life. At the same time I also get letters from Ōtsuka. I help Morimi figure out how to respond to fan mail, and Mamiya, the kid who I used to tutor, writes to me as well. All these people are depending on me.

But lately I've been so busy with research that it's started to wear me down. I'm in the middle of a very important project, so I've barely caught a wink of sleep. My lab head is depending on me. Forget about graduation; that's nothing compared to the twin burdens of human progress and world peace that I now carry upon my shoulders. But sometimes the burden gets so heavy that when I see the Thunderbird Express stopped at the station I have to resist the urge to hop on and go back to Kyoto.

Enough complaints from me.

Good luck with your entrance exams.

Your devoted brother

* * *

July 28

To: A promising entrance exam taker

It's me again. It's so hot now, isn't it?

I figured now that it's summer vacation you'd be busy hitting the books for entrance exams. So imagine my surprise when I heard that you'd visited my school! I can't believe how much you've grown. You don't know how proud it makes me feel to have a baby sister with such cosmic aspirations.

Not many high schoolers have the gumption to just go marching into a lab, so little wonder that my lab head was so enthused to see you. By the way, I don't know what tall tales Komatsuzaki or Ōtsuka Hisako were spinning about me, but they're such jokesters, so I'd take anything they said with a handful of salt. And it's great that you and Saegusa bonded over Morimi Tomihiko.

I'm surprised how perceptive you've gotten. Yes, Saegusa's going out with Marshmallow Man (Komatsuzaki). They're a brand spanking new couple, too, since they only started dating just recently. Komatsuzaki said it was all thanks to my pinpoint advice. And please, he's my friend, so stop calling him Marshmallow Man.

Did Ōtsuka keep ribbing him? If someone's a bad person, it's only right that you all gang up on him. But if he's just clumsy and misunderstood, you shouldn't rip him apart. You can't always judge a book by its cover.

A warning: just because you perceive what lies beneath the surface doesn't mean you should just start poking at it willy-nilly. The most dangerous thing you can do is poke at someone's soft spots. And that's exactly what you tend to do. You'll never find your happily-ever-after that way. You can't always be fixated over what's on the inside, but if you lose sight of it you'll also lose your meaning in life. Hey, that was pretty clever of me!

By the way, what are you reading a book about copyright for? I'm finding it hard to grasp your intellectual interests, what with you reading Nietzsche back in May. Whatever you're looking for, maybe I can slip it into your stocking for Christmas? I'm gunning for the rights to Morimi Tomihiko's books, so if you've got anything specific in mind let me know. Together we can rob him blind.

You don't need to worry so much about how I'm doing. Though the beach is only steps away, I don't let the temptation to catch some summer rays distract me from focusing on my research. I don't get much shuteye, but then again I slept far more than anyone has any

right to during my undergrad days, so I reckon I can work without rest for another two years before it catches up with me.

What exactly are you so worried about? Why on earth would I have to falsify my experimental data? I've produced plenty of useful data already, thank you very much. I have no plans of running off to India, much less any desire to touch an Indian elephant's derriere. Whatever put those wild thoughts into your head? There's nothing I despise more than someone who refuses to face reality. I've got work to do. Winston Churchill once said, "One ought never to turn one's back on a threatened danger and try to run away from it. If you do that, you will double the danger." You've heard of him, I presume?

I'm afraid your intuition is off the mark. Stop fussing over me, and start worrying about entrance exams. This is going to be the most important summer of your life. I advise you to take your prep classes seriously instead of blowing them off. Be extra cautious if you happen to be seated next to a cute boy you don't know. 40% of the guys...well, you already know the rest.

Take care,

Your brother (and promising young researcher)

* * *

August 12

To: Kaoru

Hey hey hey, it's me again.

I was slightly shocked that you wrote back so quickly. Are you really still mad about the pool thing? How many years has it been? And I didn't do it for no reason, you know. You know the saying about lions testing their cubs by pushing them off a cliff? That's what I was doing, except, you know, I pushed you into the municipal pool. Pulling blubbery little sisters from the pool, and treating them to a mint chocolate chip ice cream cone while they give you the silent treatment is a time-honoured tradition. I definitely gave you that ice cream cone. Don't even try to tell me you don't remember.

Midsummer at the beach is definitely not the same as midsummer in Kyoto. Whenever I get tired of the endless research at the lab, I go outside and take a stroll along the beach, sipping a refreshing Calpis. The seagulls screech, the waves crash, and the cicadas chirrup

in the lush shrine wood that lies beside the sea. During the day the sun is searing, but at night the breeze is cool.

That reminds me; last month I went to Wakura Onsen with Taniguchi and we stayed up talking all night. It was a productive discussion that touched upon not just our research, but life and the future of the globe. It's a wonderful thing to look up to someone. You ought to find someone to look up to, too. In fact you never know when you might be talking to just such a person, but as your brother is a humble man I will say no more.

Mom and dad worry about me way more than they need to. And dad holds way more family councils than he needs to. Stop having heated debates about my future at family councils without me! Tell mom and dad they've got nothing to worry about. Mention what a distinguished scholar I am, how I've started looking for jobs, how early I get up every morning, so on and so forth. Tell dad to put his head down and work on his autobiography, and remind mom that she has tai chi classes to attend.

You've got to wake up early during summer. Lately I've been getting up at 6 every morning to go for a walk in the mountains. It's important to build good habits early. I have an idiot of a friend who just couldn't drag himself out of bed and ended up wasting four years of research trying to develop a foolproof method of getting up, but as far as I'm concerned all you need for an early start is good habits and lots of willpower. I find that my mind is clear and refreshed in the morning; I recommend you get into the habit of taking early morning walks too. It's such a waste to snooze your mornings away.

The moral of today's episode is, the early bird gets the worm.

I won't be back for Obon, but I might be coming back for a weekend sometime this month. Stop wasting time with the Morimi Tomihiko fanclub and all those other things, and start hitting the books.

Ichirō

* * *

August 27

To: Morita Kaoru

I'm back safe and sound in Noto. But it was a bittersweet return to Kyoto, seeing as the only thing you said to me was, "You're dead to me." Yet there was no way I could have avoided that.

I would never have imagined that the All-Japan Maidens' Society was actually a coven of female Morimi Tomihiko fans. I would never have imagined that it consisted of Ibuki, Saegusa, and you. And I would never, ever have imagined that you all would show up at the lab that night.

I know you're disappointed in me, but what you saw was just one part of your multifaceted big brother. I admit that I participated in that idiocy of my own accord, but let the record show that I only did it for Komatsuzaki's sake. I would tell you exactly how it was supposed to benefit Komatsuzaki, but since I can already hear you splitting hairs and calling me an idiot I will refrain.

I don't regret anything. Even I have the right to act like a fool sometimes.

I shall nobly suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. I ask only in return that you give me my due respect.

And stop holding those family councils. Dad has a big enough head as it is.

Your brother

* * *

September 25

To: To a future astronaut

It's me. I suppose summer too must come to an end.

I'm sorry it took me so long to write back. I ran into a complication with my experiments, which has kept me very busy. But it's over and done with now, so there's no cause for alarm. Now that my research has entered its final stages, it shouldn't be much longer until I'm back in Kyoto.

Despite your concern, the Titty Incident didn't happen because I was coming to the end of my tether or anything like that. Even I have hopes and dreams, you know. In fact I even have a girlfriend. I just didn't want to tell you and mom and dad because I knew that you'd start bombarding me with questions. I don't know where you get the impression that I was going stir-crazy being all alone up here, but I can assure you that I'm perfectly happy. This lab here at the Noto Peninsula is the most liberating environment I could ask for. My research is going to change the world. The future couldn't be brighter.

Please stop bringing up things that happened in middle school. I'd completely forgotten about my first crush until now. And I wasn't crying; the smoke from the fire was making me tear up, that's all. I don't know why you had to call the fire department, but in the end I still look back on that incident fondly. It taught me that you shouldn't just burn unsent letters in the heat of the moment.

It makes me wonder, though: if you're so concerned about me, why didn't you call me when you came up to Hakui last weekend? A bunch of people from my lab came to Kanazawa back in June, but did they visit the lab? No. Et tu, baby sister? Here I am! I'm right here!

I'm glad that you enjoyed the space museum. I went to Hakui myself to look for UFOs, but there were none to be found. I thought you were joking when you brought it up, but it sounds like you really do want to become an astronaut. Now that I think about it you always did like climbing up to high places when you were little. I'm so proud to have a little sister who's venturing into outer space. We ought to pool our efforts and become cosmic siblings.

On a completely different and punier note, as of today Komatsuzaki is a fully-fledged member of the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory. He'll only be here for three weeks to help collect samples. Unlike my Nobel-worthy thesis, the Marshmallow Man's thesis is destined for the dustbin of the lab archives, if he finishes it at all. But he's an old battle buddy of mine, and since he saw me off at the station when I left Kyoto I least owe it to him to see him off at the station in Nanao.

Till next time,

Your brother

* * *

October 15

To: Kaoru

O sister of mine, I feel the departure of summer deep within my bones.

So you did well on the national mock entrance exams. But don't rest easy just yet.

Last weekend Komatsuzaki and I rode the Noto Railway all the way to the end of the line, Anamizu. There's an emergency telephone inside Noto-Kashima Station that connects directly to Anamizu Station, and every morning when I got off the train I used to look at the phone inside the deserted station building and wonder what Anamizu Station was like. It

turns out Anamizu Station is a stately building that even has station attendants. But it's a lonely place in autumn. Komatsuzaki and I went into a general store, and as we idly browsed the shelves I enjoyed that feeling of melancholy. Feeling melancholy in autumn is the mark of a gentleman.

The entire time Komatsuzaki was here he wouldn't stop pining over Saegusa. I've never seen someone so whipped.

By the way, while we were waiting at Noto-Kashima Station for the train, I saw a round, mysterious object whizzing over Nanao Bay about 20 meters above the water. It was too dark for me to get a good look, but the way it was flying definitely seemed unnatural. I've never seen anything glide through the air like that. Personally I think it was a UFO, what about you?

Now that I've spotted a UFO, and I've amassed a trove of experimental data, I can say goodbye to this place without regrets. After talking it over with Taniguchi and my lab head it's been decided that I'll be going back to Kyoto at the beginning of next month, so tell dad and mom. Dad will probably have wrapped up his autobiography by then, so we can celebrate together. I was dumbfounded when I heard that he based it on his love letters to mom. Knowing dad I'm not surprised that he wrote 500 of them, just like I'm not surprised that mom held on to every single one. Talk about mushy. What he said—"My entire past is in those letters"—touched me deeply. I'm still disappointed that he wasn't a spy after all, though. Say goodbye to the bestseller list.

I can't end this letter without asking about the poem(?) with which you ended yours.

Nauseating

Awkward

Timorous

Sniveling

Uncultured

Klutzy

Ogre

Even after writing it out again I still don't get it. Is this supposed to be me? I guess this is how you saw me when you were little. It may be a little hard to stomach, but now that I'm

all grown up I'm humble enough to admit my past shortcomings. You hinted that it's a riddle that has to do with someone very important to me, so I've read it over and over but still can't make heads or tails of it.

I need to wrap up my research before I return to Kyoto, so I've got to get back to work, but I'll write again once I decipher it.

Good day to you, sister.

Your brother

* * *

October 20

I just figured it out. The first letter in each word spells out Natsuko. Why would you send me this? What's your game? Your brother

* * *

November 3

To: My sweet baby sister

The leaves of the forest behind Noto-Kashima are changing their hue. When I first came here there was a tunnel of cherry blossoms, but now it feels as though the cheer has gone.

My return to Kyoto draws nigh. Last weekend Taniguchi took me tearing across the peninsula to Koiji Beach in his beloved old beater. Tomorrow I'm thinking of going to the Notojima Aquarium to say goodbye to those cosmically charming dolphins.

Preparations are going swimmingly. After doing some packing today, I visited Minowa Books. It was drizzling, and when I reached the cheerless shopping arcade the candle and futon stores were deserted. But at the bookstore the 80-year-old owner was sitting behind the register as he always did.

"I'm going back to Kyoto the day after tomorrow," I told him. "I'm sorry to see you go," he said with a genteel smile. He looked just like grandpa. He's the reason I always had a movie to put on at home on rainy days. I got "Apollo 13" as a souvenir for you; keep it around in case you ever need it.

I stopped by the Mister Donut across from the station for what I figure is the last time. I sat down with a cup of coffee, my face turning a shade of crimson as I re-read your letter. And now I'm sitting there penning this reply to you.

Ibuki Natsuko was a colleague of mine at the lab. Instead of pursuing graduate studies she got a job in Osaka. I haven't spoken to her in a while.

I'm frankly appalled that Morimi is reporting every move I make to you. I can't believe he's such a snitch. You say it's just proof of how much he loves me, but friendly concern or not, how could he write about Ibuki and me in a letter back to a fan? It's a violation of my privacy.

But forget it. I'm done with the duplicity. I don't know how much you really know, but I can't go on with this charade. As a cosmic sibling I can't have this doing any more damage to my big-brotherly dignity. So I'm just going to come right out with the truth.

As you've guessed, and as mom and dad feared, I have absolutely no idea what to do with my life. My research isn't that impressive at all. In fact, at the lab I'm top of the class when it comes to disappointing expectations. I need to face reality. As Taniguchi said to me, this isn't the place for me, and I should look for my path elsewhere. But it's not too late for me. I can't run away now. If I do that, I will double the danger. Remember Churchill?

Drill instructor Taniguchi never thought much of me, in fact he called me a "downright ignoramus". But that was probably a blessing in disguise. It's better that someone told me straight up that I didn't belong. I owe him a lot. He took me to Wakura Onsen, the Shimamura fashion center, and even Koiji Beach way out at the tip of the peninsula. Yes, he's probably overly obsessed with enhancing his virility, and yes, he might have a foul mouth, and yes, his face looks downright villainous, but deep down he's got a heart of gold.

It's been tough here at the lab these past six months, but it's been just as tough undergoing my letter-writing boot camp.

I've written almost one hundred letters. That's a fifth of the number of letters dad wrote mom over their thirty-year marriage, in just six months. If I keep it up I'll surpass dad in no time.

You might be wondering why I started writing to you. Well you see, sometimes I just get the urge to project a reliable-big-brother image, like the kind of big brother you can be proud of. I never got the impression that you had much respect for me, so I tried to convey that image in my writing, but I've learned a painful lesson: the harder you try to force someone

to respect you, the faster that respect evaporates. See? I'm the type of big brother that learns from his mistakes. That deserves some respect.

You may think now that all those letters I wrote to you were a joke, but make no mistake: among the lies were scattered grains of truth. Which were lies and which were truth? I'll leave that exercise to you.

I get the feeling that I didn't need to write all this in a letter. But at the same time I get the feeling that writing what you don't really need to write is also part of writing a letter. It doesn't matter whether you write something or not; in the end, that's what human relationships are all about. I feel like I just came up with a really deep quote there, but you're my sister, so be honest: was that deep?

I'm so grateful to everyone who's humoured me in this letter writing exercise. As you say, the fact that I've been able to keep up with all these correspondences is nothing to sneeze at. That's very astute of you to notice, very good. I knew we were related. There's no way my sister wouldn't turn out to be a genius.

I've been thinking about Ibuki. As much as it pains me to admit it, it's really just a crush. You don't think love letters would do any good, but here's what I've devised. It's both a conservative strategy, and a bold time at the same time.

I'm thinking about the time you called the fire department on me when I burned a bunch of unsent love letters back in middle school. I decided then that there was nothing to do but go down with the ship. When dad asked me what I was burning at the family meeting, I couldn't just say that I'd been burning love letters, and you'd seen the tears streaming down my face (remember, the smoke just got in my eyes).

I look back fondly on that memory now.

Well, Kyoto here I come.

Your brother

Chapter 9 — To Ibuki Natsuko (Rejected Rough Drafts)

Draft #1

April 14

Greetings,

I hope the zenith of cherry blossom season finds you well. I'm sure that adjusting to your new job is no easy feat, but there's no need to fret. Knowing you, I have every faith that you will be acclimated to your new workplace and blazing new trails forward in no time at all.

I am currently in a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula, a long way from Kyoto. My supervisor is strict but caring, and each day under his tutelage I am striving diligently to mature and leave my daydreaming ways behind.

The lab is in front of Noto-Kashima Station on the Noto Railway. In the springtime one can enjoy a tunnel of cherry blossoms at the station. As I stared at the blossoming flowers while I waited for the train the other day, I was reminded of the welcome party when I joined the lab in Kyoto almost exactly one year ago. Komatsuzaki thrashed me at the Kamo River race, and as I stood there wet and shivering, you came and handed me a egg-yolk-yellow towel. I'll never forget how soft that towel felt. Do you remember that? I was grateful for the towel, but even more so for the kindness you showed me. That day on the embankment beneath the cherry blossoms, your soft smile—softer than that egg-yolk-yellow towel—captured my heart.

In the year since that day we have gone our separate ways, but I have at last made up my mind to tell you how I feel. I never could have done this before, because I was a sniveling boy who had nothing to offer you.

But I'm no longer that same boy.

I'm whipping myself into shape and rehabilitating myself into society. To prove it, I wake up every morning at 5 and climb a mountain alongside monks. The ascent is treacherous; I must scramble over rocky crags, swing from tree branch to tree branch, and carve new paths where man has rarely trod. This arduous exercise strengthens the body as well as the mind. Not only this, I arrive at the lab before anyone else and spend the entire day immersed in research. As a result of these accumulated practices, my biceps are bulging, I have shot up several centimeters, and my research is going swimmingly. As I dash through

the mountains I recite English vocabulary, so I'm able to chat with foreigners like a native. Pure soul, muscular body, communication fluency. With these three sacred treasures at my disposal, I would undoubtedly make you a happy woman.

What do you say? Take a chance on me?

A whopping 95% of my acquaintances agree that I am destined to hit the big time. According to the landmark work "How to Hit the Big Time" by Dr. Koibumi, professor of medicine and philosophy at Idaho State University, it is extremely likely that men just like me will be the ones to assume positions of power and lead Japan forward into the 21st century. Now is the time for you to experience first-hand the effects of the rebirth of Morita Ichirō. You need only leave everything to me. By my thirties, my yearly salary will have crested the 30 million yen mark; I will be living in a mansion with an enormous swimming pool; every vacation will be spent in a 5-star resort eating kinako mochi. A life of luxury and impeccably smooth skin await

—Evaluation—

The first half was well done if I do say so myself, but the second half beggared belief. I was so focused on selling myself that I ended up sounding like I was pitching something on a late night infomercial. It was such a case of misleading advertising that even Ibuki would reconsider our acquaintance, and possibly even delete my number.

I have no idea what dark corner of my mind "Dr. Koibumi, professor of medicine and philosophy at Idaho State University" sprang from. I don't know what that character was supposed to convey. I don't know what was going on inside my head.

The crafty hawk hides its claws. Be humble, don't flaunt your colours. The astute Ibuki will surely be impressed by your modesty. A fine catch never boasts or brags about himself.

* * *

Draft #2

April 30

I hope this letter finds you well, as the cherry blossoms give way to fresh dewy leaves. I'm sure your first month at your job has been taxing, but knowing you, I have every faith that you will be acclimated to your new workplace and blazing a path forward in no time at all. I, on the other hand, am just a dumb, clueless grad student with no idea where he's going to

land. I've got a long way to go before I catch up to you. But I'm working hard every day, so that I don't fall too far behind.

I am currently in a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula, a long way from Kyoto. My supervisor is strict but caring, and each day under his tutelage I am striving diligently to mature out of my immature student ways. Not long ago Komatsuzaki wrote and told me that you had attended a blossom viewing party in Kyoto. I regret that the Noto Peninsula is much too far away for me to have attended as well.

Komatsuzaki fell head over heels in love with one of the younger lab members at the party that day, and just between you and me, his brain has turned into mush. He's completely incapable of hiding how smitten he is, so Ōtsuka's wound him up into yet another one of her schemes. She's as feckless as I remember.

Now that I'm so far from Kyoto, I've begun to miss those days at the lab. I still remember fondly all those times we had to share reagents, as well when you comforted me when I was huddled by the rotary evaporator after a failed experiment. You were always so good with experiments, to such an extent that it made me despair of my own failure to grasp the basics. I was so incapable in those days, so lackadaisical, so powerless.

You are incredible. Your aptitude and diligence put me to shame. I am a worthless human being, a weak-willed worm who snugly burrowed himself into grad school—not because I had any particular interest in academia, merely because I was too afraid to set sail into the open sea of society. I am nothing but a burden to the university. That I, an insignificant worm, would send such a talented, beautiful person such as you a letter is nothing less than a travesty. My worthless words are a waste of the valuable wood pulp from which this paper was printed; it accelerates global warming, it is a drag upon the stock market, it casts a pall upon the future of Japan. Oh, why was I ever born? Begone, paltry knave. In terms of my usefulness to humanity and the world I am lower than the humblest blade of grass, nay, weed, that cowers at the side of the road. How could such an execrable lifeform be allowed to fall in love with a being of light such as you? This gap was far too vast to ever overcome; I repent in dust and ashes. It is only right that I have tumbled to this remote corner of the Noto Peninsula; it would only be fit for me to strike my head on a block of frozen tofu and perish. If ever you should be walking and come across me tumbling down the road, my only wish is that you should tread upon me without a second thought and continue on your way. Please, give me a good stomp. No need to be shy, dig your heel right into my

—Evaluation—

A wholesome start, but I don't know how the second half went so wrong.

I focused on being humble. I also worked on showing the depth of my feelings for Ibuki. The result was not a human but a sniveling toad. Death by frozen tofu is a little much even for me. Morita Ichirō is not that worthless of a human being. He's not!

Time to get serious. You can't brag, but you can't be servile either. You must carry yourself with pride. Maybe restrained, cultured writing would be the best way to convey dignity?

* * *

Draft #3

May 30

Dear Madam,

Let me confess my most sincere Penitence that such an intolerable Interval has elapsed since my last Correspondence, which common Courtesy would frown upon.

It is with great Pleasure that I have received glad Tidings of your pious Labour. It has been but two Months since your Graduation, and I fear that you may find many confounding Troubles in this World. But take Heart! Your Future rests on a Bed of Rock, for as I am acquainted with your many superior Talents your Toil will certainly be rewarded, as surely as Nature's Flow'rs bloom.

By your gracious Leave I shall relate an Account of my own humble Circumstances. I am in a new land called the Noto Peninsula, and applying myself as best I can to Study and Learning. My days are quite fulfilled. Tho' I made only the shallowest Pretense of Learning in my Days in Kyoto, you treated me very favorably. I walked not upon the Path of Righteous Diligence, but was poisoned by a Spirit of Indolence. For those shameful Acts, which deserve only the most severe Opprobrium, I have not the Words to properly express to you my right Contrition.

I was sent to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory this spring by the lab head, where I am guided in my Education by a wise and prudent Mentor: under his Tutelage I have awakened to my previous Errors of Thinking, and thus have I resolved to profoundly change my Ways. My Progress since that Time, had one the Eyes to perceive it, were like the River rushing thro' a ruined Dam, quite unlike the languid course of the Hozu River. The morning Sun finds me summiting noble Peaks, that my spiritual Heart might be purified, and my earthly Muscles might be sick. It is this Practice which has allowed me to so well perform my Experiments in a skillful Fashion which few have achieved. Furthermore, my Zeal in the Study of English hath granted me a most uncommon Facility of international

Communication. With my untiring Vigor, I aim to achieve my own Independence, and with my newfound Strength I shall no longer fear any Foreigner of superior Stature.

It is a Truth universally acknowledged, that it is the coldest Winters which produce the hardiest Pines, and the hardest Times which make the greatest of Men. For who can plant the Seeds of Hope in these troubled Times—who can carve a Path for Japan through the modern Age—who, if not Morita Ichirō? Verily, entrust All to me, and you shall certainly be gorgeous in your Living and want for Nothing.

Here I pause to recall a most unforgettable Event, the Occurrence of which was one Year ago in Spring. It was at the Feast beneath the Cherry Blossoms, in honor of the new Matriculants, in which I participated in the Kamo River Race, but very unwillingly. And who was it who extended her alabaster Hand—offered me a warm Towel—but you.

It was from that Moment which I loved you, and do thee love to this Day. I love you, I love you, I love you; thou art my North Star, my guiding Light. I repeat, I will surely make you the happiest Woman who has lived. And you, by reciprocating my Feelings, would make me the happiest Man.

I pray that, when next we meet, I should be fortunate enough to receive the gracious Favour of your Reply.

Your humble and obedient Servant,

—Evaluation—

I spent an entire day cooped up in the library across from the station with my nose buried in old dusty tomes, but this was all I managed to come up with. While I was writing I was perfectly convinced that I was perfectly portraying a restrained, cultured gentleman, but reading it back it came off like it was written by a sad, LARPing weirdo. In the second half that pathetic veneer couldn't stop my lovelorn desire from peeking through, and the contrast with my stiff, made-up period-speak was atrocious. Vile stuff.

This experiment in using unfamiliar verbiage was a failure. Ibuki and I aren't strangers, so I need to write more casually, intimately. Maybe that might make me sound warmer, make it easier for her to feel fond of me. And once that happens it's only a matter of time before that kinship turns into something more. Yes, that's exactly how it will go down. I'm certain of it.

But first, I need some shuteye. Coming up with ersatz period-speak makes my head hurt.

* * *

Draft #4

July 31

hi hi its me, morita ichiro

its so hot rite? but no duh its summer lol

how has it been four months since you graduated like omg that's crazy

i bet ur working super hard at ur new job, and just fyi im rooting for u. its probably like so hard just getting used to everything, but im 100% confident that ull be totally fine, because ur so smart and good at everything. i believe in u!

its been a crazy few months, but im still the same chill morita ichiro u no & love. u can probz tell from da postmark, but i had to escape from kyoto and right now im like miles and miles away at the noto-kashima marine biological laboratory blazing new trails and omg i feel like such a pioneer

being a pioneer is hard work tho like im so swamped that i don't have time for any hobbies. my smartypants lil sis is always moaning about becoming a "gentlewoman of leisure", and tbh i wanna do the same lol. whenever im pioneering late into the night i think about all those late nights u and me used to pull together at the lab in kyoto. omg it got so hard the closer you got to finishing ur thesis, amirite? the only good memories i have from those days was when otsuka took us out to neko ramen. omg that place is soooo delish yum yum

u wont believe this but there are no ramen carts here. omg rite? whose brite idea was it to put a lab in such an empty place? its like torture being here every day lol

so ur prolly wondering why im suddenly writing you a letter and its like this, like omg can you believe that komatsuzaki got a girlfriend? i can't let him leaf me in the dust so here goes

uoy htiw evol ni mi

geddit? i bet u do, but if u dont read it backwards.

LOLLLL

i hope u like it, i felt so brave writing that. i hope that u also feel the same way? and maybe the next time were alone together well be so happy and warm and fuzzy inside and stuff? id 100% make u feel so special u no?

rite back soon! ttyl hugz and kissez XOXO

—Evaluation—

The biggest problem with this letter is that it makes you want to strangle whoever wrote it.

It's so annoying. It's historically annoying. I want to punch myself in the face for finishing it.

I pondered over why this love letter turned out the way it did and came up with 3 reasons.

One, between May and July I slacked off on practicing writing letters to Ibuki. That was because Empress Hisako succeeded in her dastardly plan of pranking me into thinking that Ibuki had a boyfriend, and I got pretty down in the dumps. You have to keep practicing if you want to stay sharp.

Two, once I found out that Ibuki having a boyfriend was a load of crock I was so deliriously happy that wheels came off a bit, and you can see that in my writing here.

Three, I was so obsessed with sounding approachable that I just started to write like a dumbass. The only thing this letter succeeds in conveying is that whoever wrote it has rainbows and unicorns on the brain.

The most important thing I need to do now is regain my mislaid sense of reason. Ibuki's too smart to entrust herself to someone this featherbrained. I have to express my feelings in a measured fashion.

We live in an information society. If you're going to write a love letter, you should write it intellectually.

* * *

Draft #5

August 16

I hope that the dog days of summer find you well. It's already been almost five months since you graduated. Have you gotten used to your workplace? Knowing you, I have every confidence you're on your way to do great things.

I am currently a long way from Kyoto, at a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula. My supervisor is firm but fair, and under his guidance I spend each day engaged in strenuous but rewarding work.

From time to time I correspond with Komatsuzaki and Ōtsuka, who are back in the Kyoto lab. I also write to Morimi Tomihiko, the author, who also lives in Kyoto. You're a big fan of his work, aren't you? I still remember how excited you were for his Christmas Eve book signing.

Since that time, my feelings for you have grown exponentially. But I always hesitated to profess them, for fear that introducing such emotional contaminants into my everyday life would only hinder my intellectual pursuits.

Instead, I attempted to describe the space of the lab using pseudo-Riemannian manifolds, and after pursuing various lines of inquiry in higher mathematics (and with a little help from the theory of general relativity) I succeeded in proving Fermat's Last Theorem from the rear-right diagonal. Furthermore, I also established that in the special domain of the lab there is formed a simple BM structure, exactly as predicted by the Russian mathematician Melekhov. That is to say, in that hyperlocalized spacetime continuum, the parallel postulate of Euclidean geometry does not apply, Hofma spirals are reversed, and Terepachov ellipses become heart-shaped; parallel lines inevitably diverge, pockmarks become dimples, and men and women must inevitably become intertwined. In other words, I am madly in love with you!

—Evaluation—

I tried to express my love for her in an intellectual fashion.

I'm a little insecure when it comes to math, so I thought that sprinkling in a little mathematical jargon would make it sound intellectual. But that simpleminded stratagem just ruined the whole thing. The more intellectually you try to write, the further you get from the purpose of a love letter. My desperate attempt to get back on track—namely, "In other words, I am madly in love with you!"—utterly destroyed any remaining faith I had in myself. How did things turn out this way?

I've got to change something...I just don't know what.

* * *

August 30

I hope that the dog days of summer find you well. I can hardly believe that it's already been five months since you graduated. Have you gotten used to your job? Knowing you, I'm sure you're on your way to do great things.

Allow me to express my deepest regret for what transpired during our recent reunion in Kyoto. I write to you today because I cannot let that misapprehension stand.

What you witnessed that night was by no means a regular occurrence with me. I normally am hard at work each day performing research at a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula, with nary a boob in sight. I had not been back to Kyoto in some time, and returned that day to help Komatsuzaki resolve a personal problem; it was purely out of friendship that that boob screening was held. You may have misinterpreted the phrase I whispered as, "Three cheers for boobs," but what I said was, "We sneer at boobs". In fact, it would not be inapt to say that I despise boobs.

It's true that there is a man called Taniguchi here at the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, who plays the mandolin and sings paeans to boobs. I am acquainted with someone who, even at an outing to view the Daimonji bonfires, only has eyes for his girlfriend's boobs. I even know a swaggering fool of an author who spouts nonsense like, "Let there be boobs."

Yet despite all of that, in me burns a flame of liberty that will not be enfeathered by meager protrusions of flesh. I will return to dust one day, but the spirit of freedom will never die. I have always believed that boobs are nothing but impediments to true heart-to-heart communication, and I shall continue my struggle against the squishy enemy.

Therefore I hope to make this clear.

Though there be boobs before me, I shall not be moved; though temptation present itself, my will remains unbowed: I am a man whose soul is white as snow. Each morning I climb the austere peaks, endure the harshest training, stare at lusciously green, round hills while nary a thought of a boob crosses my mind. Even were a boob to suddenly roll onto my desk at the lab, I would simply snort and continue extracting DNA.

So please don't get the wrong impression of me.

I am not interested in boobs in the slightest. I hate boobs. Screw those

—Evaluation—

Somehow, the more I deny it the more obvious it is that I am a boob fiend.

I think the problem with this love letter is that it's too fixated on a single thing. It's too focused on boobs.

Sure, boobs may be a serious problem for me, and sure, Ibuki witnessing my practice of methodological boob skepticism left a lasting scar on me. But if I really were to send her this boobtastic letter she'd report me on the spot.

It's Komatsuzaki's fault that I wrote this. He should never, ever have dragged me into his personal boob problem.

At the same time, letting this misunderstanding stick around feels so aggravating. I need to defend myself. Maybe a more indirect approach will do the trick. And you should never use an earthy word like "boobs" in a letter to a lady; I should have realized that before I wrote this letter. I guess I really am an idiot.

Additionally, rather than wearing my feelings on my sleeve, I should let them rise sublimely in a more artistic fashion. It's a love letter, it should read a little poetically, to take her breath away with my unexpected romantic side. Unpredictability is key.

* * *

Draft #7

September 30

I hope that this fine autumn weather finds you well. I can hardly believe that it's already been five months since you graduated. Have you gotten used to your job? Knowing you, I'm sure you're on your way to do great things.

I am currently a long way from Kyoto, at a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula. My supervisor is firm but fair, and under his guidance I spend each day engaged in strenuous but rewarding work.

I regret that we weren't able to have a proper conversation when we saw each other in Kyoto. What you saw was not what really happened. What I mean to say is, I only did what I did reluctantly for Komatsuzaki's sake. You may be wondering to yourself, "Is Morita Ichirō that way?" but I can assure you that I certainly am not. I would venture that if anyone is that way, it's Komatsuzaki. It is often assumed all men are a certain way, and to an outside

observer Komatsuzaki and I might both seem to be that way, but he and I are not alike in any way. I hope that this clears things up. I am not this way, or that way, or any other way at all.

My defense rests.

I've written a poem to express how I truly feel.

Oh, my beloved, you are

Lovely, lovely, oh so lovely

Like two lush, round hills

You crest the horizon

Beaming all helter skelter

Striding my way oh so lov-e-ly

Set my heart on fire like rock'n'roll

Don't know what to do, I scream cock-a-doodle-doo

Oh, my beloved, you are

Lovely, lovely, oh so lovely

—Evaluation—

Having just finished this letter I'm fighting the urge to light it on fire and watch it burn.

I tried to write about the Titty Incident without using any indecent language, but it's impossible to talk about it without using the word "boob". It probably would have been better not to try to defend myself at all.

That's all fine and well.

But, the poem. I knew perfectly well that the one thing a man in love should never try his hand at is poetry, and yet I sullied my hands all the same. I'd already borne witness to Komatsuzaki's great failure (or magnum opus?). I'll be damned before I write a poem again. If this poem ever saw the light of day they'd lock me away for good.

All this effort and I still don't have a single decent letter to show for it. How can this be? I don't understand. I've given it all I have. I'm just going to have to wait for Morimi Tomihiko to instruct me in the art of writing a love letter.

* * *

Draft #8

October 17

I hope that this chilly mid-autumn season finds you well. I can hardly believe that it's already been seven months since you graduated. Have you gotten used to your workplace? Knowing you, I'm sure you're on your way to do great things.

I am currently a long way from Kyoto, at a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula. My supervisor is firm but fair, and under his guidance I spend each day engaged in strenuous but rewarding work. However, I will be returning to Kyoto at the end of the month. The time I've spent here at the lab has been trying in more ways than one, but all the same I'm grateful to have been given this opportunity.

How fondly I remember Kyoto, now that I have been away on my scholastic sojourn these many months. When I was there the days had seemed so unremarkable, other than Ōtsuka's provocations, but now I see that those too were precious days.

I recently advised the author Morimi Tomihiko in a letter that he ought to participate in more cultural pursuits, such as visiting the Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto. It reminded me of the time everyone at the lab went to visit the museum in Okazaki last year. Do you remember that as well? We went all around the hushed museum, gazing at paintings by Fujita Tsuguharu and Hasegawa Kiyoshi. You know how uncultured Komatsuzaki is, and Ōtsuka was never the type to quietly appreciate art, so the only person who really was sincerely looking at the paintings was you.

And me? I was looking at you.

You were standing before a large painting, grasping your left arm with your right hand, almost not breathing. To me, the sight of you was the most wonderful artwork in the museum.

You may not admit it yourself, but you are beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

I'd never seen a more beautiful person in my life. Every day in the lab I'd look at you and think about how beautiful you were, but that day in the museum you took my breath away. I could have looked all day and not found a single flaw or blemish.

Your forehead is neither too broad nor too narrow; it's the perfect shape, indicating a moderately-sized, well-developed brain. Your eyes, as they gazed at the Fujita painting, were solemn, yet retained a sense of warmth. Your eyebrows were well-arranged, but not in a cloying artificial way, and the sorrowful wrinkle between your eyebrows as you beheld the painting was almost terrifyingly delicate, exquisite. They say that some people have eyebrows that can speak a thousand words: they must have been talking about you. Your cheeks were smooth and pale, but not in a cold way; they reminded me of a warm china teapot at a restaurant. Your shoulders are wide for a woman, but when you turn your body there's a charming vulnerability to them. Your posture is always perfect, and the straight line drawn from the top of your head down to the nape of your neck and through your back is so sublimely straight that God must have spent a lot of time getting it just right. Your little exhalations as you looked up in rapture at the painting enraptured me in turn. Your hips and thighs swayed, swaying your weight ever so slightly from side to side as your eyes remained fixed upon the canvas. Every one of your movements was so perfect. If I may go a little further, even your earlobes were perfect. I almost fancied I could see the fuzz on them in the afternoon sunlight, each follicle arranged in perfect harmony, softly and silently enveloping the hard reality of that snug, perfect earlobe. Oh, such a luscious dreamfruit, what I wouldn't give to sink my

—Evaluation—

Morimi Tomihiko told me to bathe her in compliments, so that's what I did.

Somewhere along the way this turned from a love letter into a lust letter; it's easily in the top 3 creepiest letters I've ever written. There's not a woman in the world who wouldn't run away screaming from me if they read this. I'm such a moron! And so is Morimi Tomihiko! To hell with him!

I'm undeniably attracted to Ibuki, but trying to analyze that attraction just makes me more confused about it. The only thing that sticks out is how creepy I am. Taking a sober look back at this letter, I don't even know why I wrote about her earlobes; that definitely isn't what made me fall for her.

When I try to write a love letter, either I turn into a pervert, or I turn into a dumbass.

Are those really my only two choices in life?

* * *

Draft #9

October 26

I hope the bountiful season of autumn finds you well. It's been a while since we last talked. How quickly time passes; it's already been eight months since you graduated.

I've spent the last six months at a marine biological laboratory on the Noto Peninsula, but in a few days I will be returning to Kyoto. Since my arrival here in April I've attempted numerous times to write a letter to you, but I could never bring myself to drop them in the post. I don't think this letter will be making its way to you, either.

The letters I've been trying to write to you are love letters. I've been practicing writing draft after draft, and I even asked Morimi Tomihiko to teach me his ways (to no avail). Not one of the drafts I've written has been worthy of your eyes. And while I wasted my time dithering with those letters, I made an utter ass of myself right in front of your eyes at the lab.

Yet I continue to write. And I continue to be frustrated.

My feelings for you are true, but when I sit down at my desk to express them to you, they come out all wrong. Now it would be one thing if it just sounded a little awkward, but sometimes what I write disgusts even myself. Morimi told me that that happens because I don't write with a pure heart, but I don't think I'm so nakedly impure as to produce that kind of filth. Of course there is plenty of impurity within me, but I'm certain there are also parts of me that are pure. But when it comes to writing love letters, those pure parts are nowhere to be found. And if that's the case, why try to write a love letter at all?

Maybe I've come down with an illness that prevents me from writing love letters.

I used to think it was simple, that love letters were just a tool to convey feelings between a man and a woman, and that all you had to do was polish your ability to write one. Maybe there are people for whom that is possible, but it certainly doesn't seem possible for me. I can sit at my desk and flex my creative muscle all I want, but my efforts inevitably go awry.

I don't know why that happens.

But I think that this time I've really exhausted all of my options.

So I'm giving up on writing a love letter.

Just like the others, this letter isn't worthy of reaching you.

—Evaluation—

It's 2 A.M. on October 27th. I'm staying at the Kaigetsu Inn with Taniguchi here in Wakura Onsen. Taniguchi passed out after getting completely plastered. I re-read yesterday's letter, listening to him snore the whole time. This might be the most decent letter I've managed to write. Maybe my theory was right after all.

If I really do try to write one last love letter, how should I approach it? I re-read all of my failed drafts, and here's what I've learned:

- Don't boast
- Don't grovel
- Don't write too stiffly
- Don't be a dumbass
- Don't try to sound intelligent
- Don't focus on boobs
- Don't wax poetic
- Don't be obsequious
- Don't try to write a love letter

Chapter 10 — To a Promising Young Lad (cont.)

August 9

To: Beach Boy

Thanks for writing. What a treat, to get a letter all the way from Wakayama.

It's great that you got to ride the Shinkansen. Sometimes I wish that they'd bring the Shinkansen to the town where I live so I'd be able to go to Kyoto quicker.

Thank you for your pictures of Shirahama. I didn't go to the beach much when I was your age, so I have to admit that the picture of you playing the watermelon smashing game made me a little bit jealous. Your granny's younger brother has some pretty impressive muscles for an older man. I thought that I was looking at Arnold Schwarzenegger! (I just watched "The Terminator", which I borrowed from the old man who runs the bookstore by the station.) By the way, those girls in the swimsuits in your picture are pretty, don't you think? Don't stare at their chests though, it's rude.

When I was in middle school, I went to Shirahama with four of my friends. We stayed for three days and two nights, but halfway through the trip we had a big fight. Fighting with your friends isn't good. But our friend Fujii was really uptight, and whenever the rest of us left our clothes lying around the room he would start nagging us as if he were our mom. And when someone starts nagging you to clean up, you only want to sneer defiantly, "Make me!" That of course made Fujii even madder. Not too many middle schoolers are as uptight as he was. But what can you do?

The beaches of Wakayama look just like the beaches on a tropical island. The sky is such a deep shade of blue. There are beaches at Noto too, but they're not like the beaches in Wakayama. I never go swimming; even though I study jellyfish, the thought of swimming in the sea gives me the willies. Serves me right for pushing my little sister into the pool when we were kids. Please don't tell that to anyone else. If I were good at swimming, I'd go to the beach all the time; the girls would go gaga over me.

Instead, I spend my days buried in research and being lectured by Taniguchi. Research is very hard work. Even I sometimes get sick of it; I start to daydream about going into business instead, and starting a venture of my own.

The days are hot here, but at night the breeze is cool, and the sea turns a mysterious hue. I love riding the Noto Railway train in the evening. The cicadas thrum in the forest across from the station, slowly getting louder and louder, and the last rays of sunlight stain the clouds a strawberry syrup pink. It almost makes my mouth water. And there's not another soul around.

In any case, I'm glad that you seem to be enjoying your summer vacation. I was worried that for your research project you'd draw up a scheme to assassinate the Marshmallow Man. You always have been a little too precocious for your own good.

Kids usually have growth spurts during summer. Keep swimming, and you'll be shooting up like a sapling in no time.

Since you're still going to be there another week, enjoy every minute of it.

Apparently there's a museum in Shirahama dedicated to a man named Minakata Kumagusu. Minakata was an accomplished scientist who lived a long time ago, and he studied many fascinating things like slime molds. You can see a lot of his handwritten notes there; you should ask your dad to take you there.

Until next time,

Beach Morita

* * *

August 17

To: Mamiya the Jealous

Yesterday was the Okuribi. Did you go see the Daimonji bonfire? I watched it on TV.

At this time of year, Kyoto is all hot and sticky, isn't it? I bet the weather was different in Wakayama. And the weather is different here where I'm living, too. It's strange; we all live in Japan, and yet the weather is so different from town to town. I'm sure you noticed that as well after your vacation in Wakayama. This is yet another important lesson for you to learn. Excellent observation on my part.

I'm very impressed that the greatness of Minakata Kumagusu inspired you to start plugging away at your summer vacation homework. You're very lucky that Ms. Mari is helping you. I wish I could find a pretty girl to help me with my research. But there aren't any around here. There are pretty dolphins though.

Thank you for the picture. How did you like your first used book fair? You may not be very fond of old, worn books now, but maybe you'll come to appreciate them as you grow older. The more you read, the more you'll come to appreciate their charm. But some people never get it.

Ms. Mari seems very excited to be in that picture with Mr. Morimi. Komatsuzaki doesn't look so happy though. I'm just thinking out loud here, but I suspect that seeing how starry-eyed Ms. Mari gets over Mr. Morimi makes him green with envy. Or is it white with envy, since he's a marshmallow? He seems to have become even more marshmallow-like, which is a surprise considering people usually get thinner over the summer.

What did you think of Mr. Morimi? I'm sure it was something along the lines of, "Hmph, I don't see what the fuss was all about." That's reality for you.

I see that you're no fonder of Komatsuzaki than you were before. As his friend, this puts me in a difficult spot. In the grown-up world, this is called "being stuck between a rock and a hard place." He bought you *ramune*, didn't he? You observe very astutely that he was probably only being nice to you because Ms. Mari was there. Knowing him that's not out of the question, but I hope you'll give him the benefit of the doubt. Either way, there's nothing like a cold bottle of ramune on a summer day.

You also mentioned that Komatsuzaki wouldn't stop staring at Ms. Mari's boobs. But according to the transitive property, couldn't you say that you "staring at Komatsuzaki staring at Ms. Mari's boobs" is equivalent to you staring at her boobs? You can't fool me. "Adults can't look at boobs, but kids can!" you may protest. But I counter that with the words of Dr. Koibumi: "God made men and God made boys, but breasts make them equal." That's just the way it goes. It is what it is.

Lately whenever I find myself stuck in a rut with my research, I go out for a walk by the sea. The sky is bright and clear, and the air carries the briny smell of the sea. About five minutes north of the research lab is a rice paddy that looks out over the sea, and beyond this paddy is a round little wood that at a glance seems to have plopped itself down in the sea, and inside this wood is a shrine. The wood is so round that I've named it Titty Shrine. But don't get it wrong, this shrine is dedicated to a god called Takemikazuchi, not to boobs.

I always stop by the shrine and listen to the cicadas for a while before turning back. I don't have a summer vacation like you do, so I consider these scattered little breaks my summer vacation.

I wish I could spend my summer like you did—go to the used book fair and take a long vacation somewhere far away.

Longing for a getaway,

Morita

* * *

August 20

I have some news for you today, Mamiya. I managed to secure a short summer vacation, so on August 25th I'll be coming back to Kyoto on the Thunderbird Express. Mr. Morimi is treating me to sukiyaki to thank me for giving him the ideas to write a new book. You've heard of Mishima-tei and its famous meat, right? Doesn't your family buy meat there for New Year's sukiyaki at home? I haven't had good meat in a long time. Do you like sukiyaki? If you do, you're welcome to come along. I'll come by your house to say hello to your parents. Best, Morita

* * *

August 27

My summer vacation is over as quickly as it began. I'm currently on the Thunderbird Express headed out of Kyoto.

First of all, I need to dispel any misunderstandings you might be carrying. I didn't say, "Three cheers for boobs," and that wasn't a video of boobs playing on the wall. Komatsuzaki and I were having a research discussion about jellyfish. The video on the wall was displaying a rare breast-shaped jellyfish, *Thricharia poupe*, which I'm currently studying at the lab. Ms. Mari covered your eyes so quickly that you only caught a glimpse, but since you tend to get excited by anything that even slightly resembles a boob I feel obliged to explain what occurred.

I am definitely not an idiot. Komatsuzaki and I are nothing alike.

I was actually thinking of going to see you one more time while I was in Kyoto, but unfortunately there were many other pressing matters that demanded my attention. I tried talking to my sister, but for some strange reason all she would say is, "You're dead to me." How very odd.

I must confess that I was hurt that you left me in the lurch at Mishima-tei. I was very worried when you and Mr. Morimi never came back from the bathroom. Komatsuzaki and I just sat there waiting and waiting. It was a huge relief when Ms. Mari called Komatsuzaki to tell him what was going on, though that relief was tempered by the massive bill we were saddled with. Mr. Morimi really put us in a difficult spot, skipping out like that. What if we'd been stuck in the restaurant forever? I sincerely hope you don't grow to be the type of grown-up who pulls pranks like that.

I can tell that you're still very bitter, but that puts me in a tight spot. I understand you were trying to teach Komatsuzaki a lesson, but please make sure you don't catch me in the crossfire too.

Until next time,

Morita

* * *

September 4

To: Mamiya

Hello, Mamiya. It's me again.

Now that summer vacation is over, how are you adjusting to the new school term? When I was a kid, I was filled with sorrow every time summer vacation ended. I used to wish, "If only summer vacation would last forever!"

You were so astute in your last letter; I suppose that telling lies is a bad thing after all. You're right, there is no jellyfish called *Thricharia poupe*. Seeing as you went to the trouble of going to the library and looking it up, I can only admit defeat. It's important to admit that you're wrong sometimes, though it does sting a little.

You're also right that both Komatsuzaki and I are not averse to boobs, which is a more restrained way of saying that we are fond of them. When you grow up to be adults like us, you can't say things like that so openly. And because I was your tutor, I didn't want to show you that side of me. Whether I am averse to boobs or not is entirely up to me, but whether I speak to you about it is another matter altogether. Do you get what I mean? When it comes to boobs, there are times when you can be candid and times when you can't. That is what I believe.

The night we had sukiyaki, I shouldn't have talked to Komatsuzaki about "our super secret research, wink wink." It was wrong of both Komatsuzaki and me to pique your and Mr. Morimi's curiosity. We should have been more discreet about it.

But what Mr. Morimi did was awful. He must have known very well what Komatsuzaki and I were up to, and yet he still brought all the ladies over to the lab. He probably just wanted to score some brownie points with them. Don't grow up to be like him.

Do you think Ms. Mari will be upset at Komatsuzaki because of what happened that night? What would you do if she was? Knowing how shrewd you are, I bet you're already plotting something. But remember, wicked plans make wicked men.

There's this woman I know called Ōtsuka who is always tormenting me. We're currently at war with each other, and a fierce one too.

Whenever I'm weary from the fighting, I take a walk to Titty Shrine. The other day I got there and was startled to see Taniguchi standing there, smoking a cigarette looking like he was up to something.

"Hey, cherry boy," he said to me. "Enjoying your youth?" He's always lurking around wherever I go. It's terrifying. I can never let my guard down.

Nothing would make me happier than seeing you grow up to be a good man.

Til next time,

Morita Ichirō

* * *

September 17

To: Mamiya

It's not usually this hot halfway through September.

But even that can't get me down right now. Remember Ōtsuka, the evil lady I wrote about in my last letter? Well, I just beat her at her own game. She's always thinking of ways to torment me, the crueller the better. For over a year I've suffered at her hands, but I finally found a way to get even. You should never bully anyone, but if someone keeps bullying you, you've got to fight back.

I'm glad that you see things my way about boobs. It's, well, a complicated subject in many ways.

The relationship between Komatsuzaki and Ms. Mari is also complicated. You're probably wondering why Ms. Mari didn't flip out on Komatsuzaki even though she called you a pervert just for saying something dirty. But there are deep bonds between Ms. Mari and Komatsuzaki. You can't see them. I can't see them either. That's because they exist only between those two.

Komatsuzaki is far from an admirable human being. He's not handsome either. He's round and pudgy like a marshmallow, and he's not much of an athlete. He probably runs slower than you. But he can be kind, and he tries his best, in his own way. You might not be able to see those things. But I think Ms. Mari sees them very clearly.

You complained that the only thing that Komatsuzaki has going for him is that he's older than you, but you're underestimating how important that is. No matter how hard you work, it takes time to become a grown-up; Komatsuzaki didn't turn into a marshmallow overnight. No, he gradually worked on himself, bit by bit, until he was a full-fledged marshmallow—I mean, grownup. Next week he'll be coming over to my lab to do research.

Best of luck with the upcoming school sports day. Are you a fast runner?

Morita

* * *

September 28

What a typhoon that was. It was unnerving to see the sea churn and foam like that. But now it's as if the typhoon has driven out summer; there's a clear sky now, an autumn sky. Has it gotten cooler in Kyoto?

Thanks for the picture of your sports meet. I never knew you were such an athlete. I wasn't much for sports when I was a kid, so I always dreaded school sports meets. Even now, my stomach drops whenever I see bunting with flags of all the countries like they put up at those meets.

I talk often with Komatsuzaki these days. He's here at the lab in Noto for three weeks, helping collect samples for our research. Taniguchi didn't waste any time; he's been running Komatsuzaki ragged along the seashore, shouting, "Marshmallow boy! What are

you doing!" and "Marshmallow boy! You dimwitted lard!" Dimwitted is a word that means "ignorant"; try your best so that you don't grow up to be a dimwitted lard.

So Ms. Mari's been feeling lonely? She'd probably be happy to hear from him, even if only to hear that he's sweating his butt off rolling along the beach. I've encouraged him to write a letter to her, and because I'm so proficient at writing letters I'm even thinking of teaching him.

Tell Ms. Mari that Mr. Morimi's new book will be out soon. I'm sure she'll be thrilled.

You haven't written about anything risqué in a while, so I almost gasped out loud when I read your letter. Yes, that's how babies are born. I understand how you feel. I was still a dimwit when I learned that for the first time, so my first reaction was, "That's bogus! That can't be true!" By all accounts, it is the truth. I've never seen a baby being born myself though, so I can't say it with 100% certainty.

It's a shock now, but you'll get used to the idea over time. Try not to think about it. No matter how bogus something may seem, you'll get used to it eventually.

I'd avoid doing more research into how babies are born, unless you want Ms. Mari to give you an earful.

Morita

* * *

October 8

To: Mamiya

It really feels like autumn now, doesn't it?

On my way to Anamizu with Komatsuzaki today, I was looking out the train window and saw red spider lilies blooming on the ridges between the rice paddies. I'd wanted to ride to the end of the Noto Railway at least once while I was here. In the past, the Noto Railway used to go all the way to a place called Koiji Beach, but now it only goes as far as Anamizu.

The neighbourhood by the station at Anamizu was empty, and even though Komatsuzaki was with me I couldn't help but feel a little lonesome. We walked around town for a little while, but then it started to get a little cloudy and chilly, so we went back to the waiting room at the station and got some coffee from the vending machine. You might not believe this, but on the way back we saw a UFO at Noto-Kashima Station. It was getting dark so it

was hard to make out, but we glimpsed a black, round object whooshing over the ocean. The world is chock full of mystery.

It doesn't sound like you believe that Ms. Mari was happy to get Komatsuzaki's letter. Then again, it is pretty hard to believe. But you're so obsessed with it that I can't help but feel worried.

Are you really going to try to win Ms. Mari's heart again? She's a responsible grown-up, and I'm sure she'll listen seriously to what you have to say, but I would recommend against it. She's head over heels for Komatsuzaki's marshmallow flab, and you're her student. "None of that matters!" you may proclaim, but I don't see this ending well for you.

You're torn about it too, aren't you? You can't bring yourself to admit your feelings to Ms. Mari because you're afraid that she'll stop coming over to tutor you. If you keep studying like a good boy, then maybe Ms. Mari will keep tutoring you forever. But if she knew how you felt about her, maybe she'd quit being your tutor. No matter how you plead that you'll be a good student, you couldn't know how she'd react.

So do you still want to try and storm the keep?

I can't say that either choice is correct. I don't have the right to lecture you on the topic.

Just think long and hard before you make your decision.

Morita

* * *

November 3

To: A promising young lad

I hadn't heard from you in a while, so I was delighted to receive your letter.

I'm coming to Kyoto soon, so I spent the entire day getting ready to move. It's not like I have a lot of belongings to pack, though. Tomorrow I'll visit the aquarium and say goodbye to the dolphins who have been so kind to me during my time here. The past six months have flown by, but what a whirlwind six months they were. Taniguchi says he'll see me off at the station. He's a scary guy, but sometimes he can be kind.

My heart broke for you when I read that Ms. Mari quit being your home tutor. I'm sure your heart was broken too. But she stuck to her principles as a tutor. Try not to forget that.

I don't think that she hates you. But as your tutor she was in a difficult position.

The pain must be agonizing, and there must be all sorts of things going through your head right now, but all you can do is grin and bear it. That's the only advice I can give you. I wasn't as driven as you when I was in elementary school, and the only thing I was interested in was digging holes with my dumb dog Natsu, so I didn't feel this heartbreak until I was much older.

The pain must be agonizing, but all you can do is grin and bear it. That's the only advice I can give you.

Let me tell you an anecdote from one of Dr. Koibumi's books.

Dr. Koibumi once wrote a great many love letters, but before he could send them he was spurned by the object of his affections. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't throw them in the wastebasket, because his mother would have found them. He couldn't throw them away in some public trash can, because he didn't want anyone else to pick them up. So he took them into his backyard and burned them. The flames rose higher and higher, and smoke billowed into the air. But as the boy fed the now-useless letters into the fire one by one, he heard the wail of sirens in the distance, and flashing red lights swirled round and round in front of his house. The boy's little sister mistaken the smoke for a house fire and phoned the fire department. The neighbourhood was in an uproar, but when everyone asked him what he had been burning, he felt so embarrassed he wanted to sink into a hole in the ground.

What can we take away from this story?

Nothing. There's nothing to take away.

But doesn't it make you feel better, knowing that there are lots of people with experiences like this out there in the world? I know lots of these stories, and I consider each of them to be a treasure.

There are so many things that I wished I could teach you but couldn't. And there are so many secrets that I had to keep from you. There are times that I shouldn't have tried to show off in front of you. But all of that is because I am your teacher, not your friend. That's what it means to be a teacher.

But sometimes I wondered—if you were a little more grown up, maybe we would have been good friends. That's because you're a promising young lad.

I'll be back in Kyoto soon.

And I'll bring back lots of Tengu Ham with me.

Morita Ichirō

Chapter 11 — Invitations to Mt. Daimonji

November 6

To: Morita Kaoru

Greetings,

I hope the deepening days of autumn find you well.

I spend most of my days pondering at my desk.

I recently published a book entitled “Fox Tales”. If you happen to see copies of it on the shelf at a bookstore, I would be most obliged if you would silently urge it to sell. I’ll also be holding a book signing to commemorate its release. Public appearances make me nervous, so I may end up using a body double instead. Your brother Ichirō was making noises about becoming my body double, so what say you I ask him?

It's too early in the season to go leaf peeping, but from the Kamo Bridge I could see the mountains slowly turning crimson.

Do you enjoy autumn?

Some people say that autumn is a sad season, but I think that it would be a good thing for everyone who says that to get a taste of melancholy. Melancholy in autumn is the sign of a well-bred gentleman or lady. An air of melancholy wafts equally around the people trudging through the streets equally, and a lonely wind blows through the streets. What more lovely season could there be than this?

It is unfortunate then that the autumn wind also brings with it tooth decay. I can only blame it on my overconsumption earlier this year of the drink of summer love. It’s unfair that this is what happens after I drank it all summer long at the nearby XXX Shrine. How is it fair that neglecting a trifling activity like brushing your teeth could lead to cavities? Why don't my teeth just heal on their own? Thanks to this my writing has come to a screeching halt. It’s all my cavities’ fault.

I’m leaving the pleasure of visiting the dentist to the last, instead distracting myself from the pain by reading your letters. It’s much more fun lying in a hammock and reading letters from my fans than trying to squeeze words out of my head. I’d be in heaven if I could quit

writing and just do this all day. And this is why I'm at risk of missing my deadlines again. It's a headache and a half.

I kid, I kid. Thou shalt not push your responsibilities unto others!

Receiving letters from my fans is pure joy. Though sometimes the love gets so heavy that I groan, "This is too heavy!" How strange it is, that someone who used to agonize in a 4½ tatami room is now getting letters from strangers all over Japan. It's the kind of thing that a young man with delusions of literary grandeur could only dream about. Your brother claims that I'm obsessed with using these letters to seduce young women, but I'm not as idiotic as that. I'd like to think I'm not so addled that I can't perceive the fine line that separates letters and fan letters.

I've come to understand Ichirō very well, thanks to your letters. It's amusing that you and I see him in almost the same way; he's so straightforward, or very or put in a less positive light, so simpleminded.

I don't have the right to lecture him about running away from reality, because it wasn't so long ago that I was a student on the edge, moaning, "If I can't become a poet or a man of leisure, I don't want to become anything at all." Knowing how much you care for him, I'm not surprised how worried you are. But the way I see it, he's not too far gone, not by a long shot. Sure, every time he opens his mouth something stupid like, "love letter startup" or "Three cheers for boobs!" comes out, but those are just his way of cheering himself up. Deep down he's smarter than that. He has to be.

I'm watching him from afar, just irresponsibly waiting for him to summon the courage to make a gigantic leap out there. If only all my other work was as easy as this.

You know, he'd never admit it because he says as a big brother it would be beneath him, but he's very grateful to you. No, really. Don't let him know I told you that. The next time you see him, be nice and try not to poke at his self-esteem. Even he has some respectable parts. Everyone has some saving graces, even him.

I've been rambling on and on, but I'm writing to you today to extend an invitation.

Lately my work has been tiring me out, and when I grumbled about it to Ichirō and said I wanted to do something useless he replied, "Want to go release some red balloons from Mt. Daimonji together?" I couldn't help but be deeply impressed by the sheer uselessness of the idea.

I once tried writing a letter to nobody instead of working on what I was supposed to turn in for my upcoming deadline, and what happened was that the words that I'd been unable to produce just came pouring out into what turned out to be a voluminous letter detailing the rise and fall of one Morimi Tomihiko and his quest to make his deadline. It's chock full of crates overflowing with sparkling DVDs, bookshelves full of volumes seductively calling out to passersby, fantasies of hot spring getaways with raven-haired maidens, rooms piled high with towering mountains of unread fan mail, and bad guys galore. I intend to attach this masterpiece to a red balloon and release it into the soaring autumn skies from the fire pits on Mt. Daimonji, with the intention that it will fall to earth into the hands of some unsuspecting stranger utterly unknown to me, who will be regaled with my woeful story. I think it's a wonderful plan, though the unknown recipient may regard it as a calamity.

Would the ladies of the All-Japan Maidens' Society like to come along? Would you be interested in writing a letter not knowing who would read it?

If so, I would be more than willing to sign away my copyrights.

I am planning to hold the balloon release at the Mt. Daimonji fire pits at 2:00 P.M. on Saturday, November 11th. Afterwards, you would all be invited to a sukiyaki banquet and pajama party. I understand that you may wish to consider this abrupt invitation carefully, but I should be overjoyed to be honoured with the favour of your presence.

Yours sincerely,

Morimi Tomihiko

* * *

November 6

To: Mr. Morimi Tomihiko

Dear Mr. Morimi,

Today I went to the station to meet my brother, who's just come back from the biological laboratory. My dad called a family meeting today to decide who would pick him up, but my mom and dad outvoted me so I didn't really have a choice. I stewed about how unfair democracy is all the way out the door. I stopped by the Sanseido bookstore at Kyoto Station, and I saw your latest book on the shelves so of course I bought it. I can't wait to read it.

Thank you for looking after my brother for the past six months. I know how busy you are with writing, so I can't tell you how much I appreciate you playing along with his "epistolary boot camp". He's always amusing himself writing stupid things, so I hope it wasn't too much of a chore. But I think that writing letters was a good outlet for him while he was there at the lab. He'd never admit it to me and our parents, but I think his first time living alone had him feeling lonely.

He's too embarrassed to tell you, but he really appreciates you, too. When he came back to visit a little while ago he kept gushing about how, "Morimi is a great man!" and "Other than his books, Morimi is a living saint!" He really respects you. I don't think you know this, but he actually practices copying your writing into a notebook. So I hope that you can continue to laugh off all the stupid stuff he says.

How have you been? Are you still eating well?

As always, I'm attempting to become a gentlewoman of leisure.

Just kidding. I'm actually trying to become an astronaut.

Whenever I bring up the term "gentlewoman of leisure" my brother starts laying into me, the hypocrite. I appreciate that he's looking out for me, but if you want to lecture me how about you figure out your own life first! Frankly, I've got it more together than he does. Mom and dad are always freaking out and holding family councils about him.

Sometimes he brings things up and I can't tell whether he's joking or serious. Like his "love letter startup". He's asked me for my opinion about love letters before, but frankly I couldn't care less about them. If I got a love letter from someone who I couldn't imagine being in a relationship with then it'd just be gross, and if I got one from someone who I could imagine being with, I'd rather they just say it to me directly instead of writing some roundabout letter. Of course, if it's from your current boyfriend or something then I think it'd be cute. Put the opposite way, if a guy is so obtuse that he can't even write a passable love letter then I would rather not go out with him. Obviously, if you're looking for some kind of art of writing a love letter that makes any girl fall for you, like my brother keeps talking about, there's no such thing. I told him so in one of my letters, but I still don't know if he really gets it...

When I think of my brother, I think of a nauseating, awkward, timorous, sniveling, uncultured, klutzy ogre. But he's also got a kind side; he used to play games with me on rainy days and buy me mint chocolate ice cream. The ice cream was an apology for pushing

me into a pool though. He said that it was “tough love, like the proverbial lion pushing its cubs off a cliff”, whatever that’s supposed to mean.

Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep rambling about my brother. I’m really writing to extend you an invitation.

The ladies of the All-Japan Maidens’ Society are planning an autumn hike up Mt. Daimonji. A normal old hike would be boring, though, so my suggestion was that we tie letters to red balloons and release them into the air.

A long time ago, my brother did the same thing and actually found a pen pal. Eventually his pen pal stopped writing though, but my brother still had a great time writing letters. I can still picture the huge smile on his face every time a reply came in the mail. I’m pretty sure that his obsession with love letters and epistolary boot camp started with his fond memories of that exchange.

So that’s where my idea comes from: the Mt. Daimonji red balloon project. We’re going to write letters with unspecified recipients, tie them to balloons, and release them into the air from Mt. Daimonji.

So I wanted to ask you a favour: would you do us the honour of joining us? I know you’d need to take time out of your busy schedule, but I’m sure it would be a pleasant diversion.

We will be gathering at the Mt. Daimonji firepits at 2:00 P.M. on November 11th. After the balloon release, you are cordially invited to join us for a sukiyaki banquet followed by a pajama party. I understand that you may want to think this abrupt invitation over carefully, but we would be thrilled to be honoured with your presence.

Sincerely,

Morita Kaoru

* * *

November 6

To: Ms. Ōtsuka Hisako

How’s your master’s thesis coming along?

I think this is the first time I’ve ever written a letter. Just to be clear, this ain’t got nothing to do with Morita’s “epistolary boot camp” or whatnot. So don’t get it twisted. Nobody, and I mean nobody, tells me what to do. I just thought it’d be fun to try it out, that’s all.

I went to Wakura Onsen with Morita the other day, you know. After that we went up to Koiji Beach and I rang this bell of love. Autumn is a godawful time to go up there, I was shocked by how forlorn the place was.

Me and Morita talked about a lot of things. He's a promising kid. From the outside looking in he's a real weirdo, but he's a straight shooter on the inside. He even told me that he appreciates you, and considering all the crap you put him through that just goes to show what a big heart he's got in there. Would it kill you to be a little nicer to him? Just say that you'll try. That shit you pulled in September was real messed up.

I can tell just by looking at him that he's not cut out for this work. He can't get through an experiment without fucking something or other up, and he can't concentrate long enough to read through an entire paper. He just doesn't have the heart for it, and I told him so straight to his face because I just couldn't bear to watch him keep stumbling towards a dead end. I must be going soft. Back in grad school I was too wrapped up in myself to worry about anyone else.

Recently after work every day I've been drinking your patented Ōtsuka energy drinks and plucking my mandolin and thinking about the future. The past, too. I've been rushing headlong this whole time, but maybe just running as fast as you can isn't enough to get you anywhere. I'm already thirty, and it feels like I've run into a brick wall. Will climbing over this wall get me anywhere? Or do I even need to get past it at all? That's the part that I worry about the most. When I was a kid I used to think that if I worked hard enough I could win a Nobel Prize. Come to think of it, kid me was pretty ambitious. This old man who runs a ramen joint in Wakura Onsen told me, "Sometimes you think things'll work themselves out, but they don't." Sounds obvious enough, but when I look back at my life, maybe it wasn't so obvious after all. Maybe I was just joking about the Nobel Prize, but that doesn't mean I don't have an ego. If I keep twiddling my thumbs that ego is just going to rot, and I can't stand the thought of that.

I can hear you cackling from here, Hisako. Go ahead, laugh all you want. That's what I like about you. Sometimes I feel like it's better not to beat around the bush with these things, so I'll just say it: I love you. There, I said it.

Morita went back to Kyoto today, so on my way to run an errand I dropped by the train station to see him off. He looked surprised that I showed up.

"All this time here and practically nothing to show for it. Still think you can graduate, baby?" I shouted at him.

"Well, I've gotten better at writing letters," he shouted back, sounding kind of proud. "If nothing else I'll make an excellent ghostwriter." He thinks writing a bunch of letters makes him a ghostwriter? "How about I fake a letter from Ōtsuka to you?" Little shit.

"Go ahead and try it!" I said. "But if I were you I'd spend that time studying."

"You got it! Come visit me in Kyoto sometime! We should grab a bite at Neko Ramen." And then he was on his way.

I wouldn't mind a bowl of Neko Ramen. What are you doing on the night of the 11th?

Now that Morita's out of my hair, and I've gotten some other work out of the way, I'm thinking of visiting Kyoto. Things have been so hectic that I haven't seen you since September, and there was all that other business that was straining things, if you recall. We should have a nice long chat over a bowl of Neko Ramen.

That reminds me, when you passed along that message to him he suddenly got really gung-ho. Apparently he's planning to invite his lady friend to climb Mt. Daimonji on the 11th? He also said something about tying letters to red balloons and releasing them into the air or some crap like that. You'd think if he can come up with crazy ideas like that, he'd be able to think up a halfway decent proposal for an experiment.

The Mt. Daimonji firepits at 2 P.M. on Saturday, November 11th. Don't go there to mess with him. Definitely don't do anything evil like go there with a BB gun to pop the balloons. No matter how funny it'd be.

That'll do it for me. Here's hoping I see you on the 11th.

With utmost deference,

Taniguchi Seiji

P.S. ABSOLUTELY, DEFINITELY DO NOT DO ANYTHING TO MESS WITH MORITA'S ROMANTIC PLANS NO MATTER HOW FUNNY IT WOULD BE.

2 P.M. on Saturday November the 11th. Don't be there.

* * *

November 6

To: Taniguchi Seiji

Hey, how've you been?

Other than the raging stomach ache I gave myself after binging on beer and sukiyaki the past couple of days, I'm doing just swell. I've never been more sober. And that's why I'm writing to you.

What, I'm not allowed to write you a letter? I'm starting to like this writing letters thing. I've written so many this year that I'm getting the hang of it. That little brat Morita keeps pestering me to write to him. He's such a wuss in person, but in his letters he's always so bossy. Who does he think he is, huh?

I roll my eyes every time he starts puffing himself up in his letters, but at the same time it's pretty funny. He started getting too big for his britches though so I had to teach him what's what back in September.

Can you believe he wrote to me, "What did you eat growing up to become so bold?" The nerve of him. He has the nerve of a chickpea. I wrote back and asked, "What did you eat growing up to become such a pussy?" Pretty clever, if I do say so myself. I have to hand it to him though, it's amazing how he can keep up writing to all these different people. I have a newfound respect for him. It's a shame he can't put all that energy to something that's actually useful.

He keeps saying what a great person you are, and he clearly respects you a lot, even if he gets deflated when you scold him sometimes. He may be a dumbass, but he's starting to grow up. At least he knows his place.

Now that I've more or less wrapped up my thesis, there's not much left for me to do around here, though I still gotta prep so that all those adorable little seniors who will be coming into the lab next year can take over my research projects. Other than that, it's just planning for my graduation trip and getting ready for my new job.

So don't worry about me, mkay?

You know me, I love getting things done quick. I always get all moody whenever I've got a pile of stuff that needs to be done. Fun stuff like traveling and messing with Morita don't count, of course. I can't wait for Morita to get back here so I can get him good. He seems to have learned his lesson from September, but leave him alone too long and he'll be right back on his high horse again. Every second I waste on my thesis is a second I can't use to screw with Morita's head, and there's nothing more important than that.

I start my new job next April. I've had my fun in college, my campus bucket list is completely checked off. I've been to a few of the new hire meetings, and some of them seem like the perky, gullible type, so I'm looking forward to having some fun. But I'm an

honest-to-goodness grownup now, and even I realize that I can't be pulling pranks on people forever. Yes indeed. I'll try not to pick too many fights. And I don't bully just any old person I run into. It has to be someone who'll put up a good fight, otherwise I just get bored of it. Morita was a worthy opponent. He never surrenders, and every time I talk to him I get all sorts of brilliant ideas for how to mess with him next. I'd say that makes him pretty respectable himself, wouldn't you? But I'd never tell him that, just to make sure he doesn't get any big ideas.

(I'm writing this in the lab. Morita just got back and he's been running his mouth nonstop right next to me. I brought up the Titty Incident to rib him and he just loftily said, "That was purely out of academic curiosity, nothing more." Talk about a cosmic idiot.)

What, I'm spending too much time writing about Morita? Maybe I should make you jealous more often.

I didn't think I would write this much. My hand is tired. I'm sure you have a lot of things on your plate so I'll end this letter soon, but before I do I have a favour to ask.

Now that Morita's back in town I thought it would be nice to have a pleasant little picnic so I asked Maeda to plan something for us. We're all going to climb Mt. Daimonji and stage a reading of Morita's love letters (Can you believe that he says he's mastered the art of writing love letters? Apparently it allows him to make any girl fall for him on the spot LOLLOL). Once he falls over out of embarrassment and starts rolling down the slope, we'll attach the letters to red balloons and release them into the sky.

What a storybook ending. Sometimes you just need to do cute things like this, don't you think?

Morita just screamed right next to me, "Leave my love letters alone!" Sorry honey, it ain't gonna happen.

The fun starts at the Mt. Daimonji firepits at 2 p.m. on Saturday, November 11th. Think you can play a little hooky and come to Kyoto then? Morita and all the junior lab members will be there. We're having sukiyaki for dinner.

I know you can't say no to more meat! I love me some meat.

Yeah, yeah, I know you're busy, but last time I went to see you so now it's your turn to come over here. It'd make me the happiest girl in the world.

If you can't make it let me know ahead of time so I can break up with you.

Till next time.

All my love,

Hisako Ōtsuka

* * *

November 6

Dear Mamiya,

How are you doing? Has your mother found a new tutor? Are you making sure to wash behind your ears when you bathe? Are you studying hard? Don't think too much about dirty things unless you want to become like Mr. Morita.

I'm very sorry that I had to resign from being your tutor so suddenly. I truly hope you don't think that I am angry at you or anything of the sort. I assure you that is not the case.

I sincerely regret that I couldn't continue to be your tutor, but after thinking long and hard about the situation, I felt that it was best that I resign. I would only be a distraction if I were to continue tutoring you.

I was very flattered to hear that you feel that way about me, but I already have feelings for someone else. You already know that, don't you? He's a marshmallow-like man, and he's very funny and very kind. You may find it difficult to understand the way I feel.

I think that you're a very promising young man. I had a great time with you at the Gion Festival and the used book fair. So even though I can no longer be your tutor, I hope that we'll still see each other from time to time.

In fact, very soon we are holding a book release celebration for Mr. Morimi Tomihiko on Mt. Daimonji. It was Mr. Morita who invited me. Mr. Morimi and Mr. Morita and Ms. Otsuka (the person who threatened to eat you up) will all be there.

We will be releasing red balloons from the mountain, with letters attached to them.

I'm expecting it to be a wonderful time. Would you like to come along?

If so, I will be waiting in front of Ginkaku-ji, at 1:00 P.M. on November 11th.

Sincerely,

Maeda Mariko

* * *

November 6

To: Maeda Mariko

I'm taking a page out of Morita's book and trying my hand at writing a letter!

Today was the first time you talked to him, wasn't it? Last time being what it was (again I am so, so sorry). Yes, that was the infamous Morita Ichirō: the Notojima Aquarium dolphin lover, the methodological boob skeptic. I know you were nervous to meet him, Mari, with all of your preconceived notions about him. But now that you've met the real him, he's courteous enough, don't you think?

He's the one who told me to pray at Yoshida Shrine, to buy you that bubble-bobble chimaki, and to bring you carnations when you were ill, though I think you already knew that. Every one of those things turned out to be a disaster, but it all worked out in the end, so I still oughta thank him. Two wrongs make a right, or something like that.

That screening which you were so offended at? That was all Morita. I know I've said this before, but in his own way he really was serious about that (again, totally in his own way). He was trying to fix me so I wouldn't be so shaky whenever I was around you. So I owe it to that poor sap to try to defend him a little.

But as you know, it was all for nothing. I get it now. He always said, "Freedom from boobs: that is where it all begins." But I really don't think there's anything wrong with beginning by acknowledging my true feelings and bending the knee to boobs, either. If he heard me say that though he'd start calling me a buffoon again, hah.

We've been buddies since our first year in college, so we know who we are and just how idiotic we are. He's always saying that I "blaze new trails of idiocy" but when it comes down to it so does he. Idiots are more complicated than they may seem from the outside, you can't just hit it off with any old idiot. You don't come across an idiot who operates on the same wavelength that you do every day. That's why I'm proud to call him my friend, and you can depend on that.

(So that the previous paragraph doesn't cause you too much worry, we're not idiots 24/7. We only unleash our hidden Idiot Power when the time is right. We both know exactly when that time is, which I think is what I mean by our wavelengths being aligned.)

By the by, would you happen to be free on the afternoon of November 11th? I'm asking on behalf of Morita; apparently we'll be meeting Ibuki at the Dai firepits on Mt. Daimonji; they're tying letters to red balloons and releasing them into the sky. He really does think of the strangest things. Anyhoo, he's asked whether we wouldn't like to join them for sort of a double date. The old Morita would have said, "Double dates are for the impure of heart!" but it seems like spending six months away from Kyoto has changed his worldview.

Since he's asking, I figured it wouldn't hurt to join him. I'll be waiting in front of Ginkaku-ji at 1 pm on the 11th.

The view from Mt. Daimonji is spectacular. It's almost comparable to your many charms: the little oopsies you make in your experiments, the look on your face when you're sitting in the corner of the lab concentrating, the way you never take a treat at teatime until everyone else has, the way you smile when you talk to people, your long black hair, and many others besides. Boobies.

Forgive this big idiot?

Boobies aside, though, I'm doing my best to leave behind my idiot ways. No matter how Morita fans the flames by calling me an "idiot pioneer", I'm doing my best to walk the straight and narrow, if you're willing to walk beside me. I hope you are. I'm so very glad I met you.

Komatsuzaki Yūya

P.S. Please don't bring up Morita and Ibuki at the lab. If Ōtsuka gets wind of it she's bound to show up. You know how scary she is.

* * *

November 6

To: My friend, Komatsuzaki "Marshmallow" Yūya

Thanks very much for picking me up at Kyoto Station. It has been a tumultuous six months; I even almost broke off our friendship once. But that notwithstanding, I am grateful that you have kept up this correspondence through thick and thin. And I am most happy that our friendship has withstood the test.

And that being the case, I would like to test that friendship once more with a few requests:

1. Obtain 10 red balloons (helium)

2. Bring those balloons with you to the entrance of Ginkaku-ji at 1:00 P.M. on November 11
3. Meet Maeda and young Mamiya at the same (invitations have already been issued)
4. Assemble at the Daimonji firepits

If all goes according to plan, the following nine people will show up at the Daimonji firepits: Morimi Tomihiko, my little sister, Taniguchi, Empress Hisako, Maeda Mariko, Ibuki, you, young Mamiya, and myself.

Behold, the fruits of my six-month epistolary boot camp.

And I will apologize to you and you alone; because I know the cat will be out of the bag in no time, I have already taken the liberty of ghostwriting the invitation to the guest of honour.

I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Morita Ichirō, Master of the Epistolary Art

Chapter 12 — A Letter to Ibuki Natsuko

November 5

To: Ibuki Natsuko

Hello,

I hope the bountiful season of autumn finds you well. Already it's been eight months since that rainy graduation ceremony where Komatsuzaki and I cheered you on with three cries of "Hip hip huzzah!" as you gallantly set sail into the rough seas of society. As you put up an umbrella at the rain-misted Hyakumanben intersection you turned and smiled at us, not deterred one bit by the inclement weather, every inch the worthy captain. That has been you since the Maizuru ocean practicum (where in contrast, both Komatsuzaki and I were seasick to our stomachs).

How fare you in the currents of life?

"Morita, you just worry about your own voyage first," you may reply. I get that answer a lot, even from my own sister. Perhaps behind their toothy grins the dolphins at the Notojima Aquarium are thinking the same thing.

At your graduation, I promised I would buy you a drink someday, and yet that promise remains unfulfilled. In the first place I have been away from Kyoto, only catching a fleeting glimpse of you in August at the lab...but that matter can wait. Wait! Please, don't shout, "Die, you disgusting pig!" and rip up this letter just yet! Unworthy as I am, my spirit remains noble, and if I am to die, grant me the opportunity to clear my pervert's reputation before I lay me down upon the tatami mat.

For the past six months I have been dispatched to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory. It is a tiny facility on the Noto Peninsula, facing out into Nanao Bay. Following my thesis presentation, my advisor summoned me to have the following conversation:

"I've been thinking for a long time, Morita. You can be pretty damn spoiled sometimes. I'm not sure you'd get much accomplished sticking around for grad school."

"I concur."

"I think we need to toughen you up some, knock some backbone into you while we still can."

"I concur. Shall I go train with monks in the mountains?"

"We haven't got time for that, especially since you're barely graduating as it is. And I'm afraid if you did that you might really become a monk."

"I concur."

"I'm sending you to Taniguchi, he'll set you straight. You know, all the junior lab members call him 'the Drill Sergeant.'"

Apparently he'd been contemplating sending me to the lab in Noto for a year already. That's what you call tough love. Imagine how much he must have loved me to kick me into a ravine so deep there was practically zero chance of me ever clawing my way back out. Sometimes love can be heavy. A little too heavy...

Thus I found myself being put on the Thunderbird Express out of town before I'd so much as gotten a glimpse of the new faces in the lab. Looking out the window I saw a rainbow, and a small boy attaching a letter to a red balloon and releasing it into the sky.

From April on I lived alone for the first time in my life, in an apartment by Nanao Station.

Each day I rode a tiny single-car train on the Noto Railway to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory. The director of the lab had apparently been a senior member of the Kyoto lab when my advisor had just joined, so ever since it opened the two labs have been collaborating, and apparently Drill Sergeant Taniguchi, who would be my mentor for the following six months, is an alumnus of the Kyoto lab.

Taniguchi is a strange man. He downs mysterious coelenterate-infused virility enhancement drinks by the liter and enjoys taking moonlit strolls along the beach strumming his mandolin and singing songs of his own invention in a reedy falsetto. However his vocabulary of abusive language is so extensive that I call it the "Kōjien Dictionary of Profanity"; though I admit that this constant torrent of swearing has toughened me up somewhat, I cannot count the number of times I've secretly wished for him to drop dead. But underneath it all, he's a decent guy.

There is very little in the vicinity of the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory. There are a few hamlets by the sea to the north and south, but not a convenience store as far as the eye can see. As I wait for the train at the silent, deserted Noto-Kashima Station, I'm often overcome by a profound sense of solitude. In that sense, you might consider it the perfect environment to concentrate on research.

Get chewed out by Taniguchi. Do research. Get chewed out. Study. Get chewed out. That's my life. It's such a productive life that it almost doesn't feel worth living. To people who are used to living unproductively, a productive life is a stressful life.

And that's why I needed an outlet.

Hence, "epistolary boot camp".

I would pen letters to my faraway friends in Kyoto, polish my skills in written correspondence, go on to become one of the most storied epistolary writers this world has ever seen, send missives overflowing with warmth throughout the world, help achieve world peace, and by gosh, I'd win the Nobel Peace Prize! At least, that was how I envisioned it.

If I wrote letters to all those people, how come I never wrote to you?

Allow me to explain.

I started off by writing to Komatsuzaki and Ōtsuka. By comparing their accounts I was able to piece together a mental picture of the welcome barbeque for the new lab members that was held on the banks of the Kamo River. I know that you were there, and that Komatsuzaki was blissfully and transparently in love there under the falling cherry blossoms, and I couldn't help but be a little envious here in exile in this faraway lab by the sea. What fun it must have been, ridiculing that poor sap Komatsuzaki.

Do you remember the welcome banquet they held for us the spring that we joined the lab?

Komatsuzaki and I were in a dead heat in the Kamo River Race, when I fell into Ōtsuka's carefully laid trap and rolled down the riverbank, and then you kindly offered me that egg-yolk-yellow towel. I still use that towel. It's hanging out to dry on the veranda right now, fluttering in the gentle autumn wind which whispers throughout Nanao, that happy egg-yolk-yellow towel.

What lovely weather it is today.

Not that that has anything to do with anything.

The problem was Komatsuzaki.

That frontrunner in the field of pioneering idiocy penned lengthy missives to me about his misfortunes in love, a love which he had been spectacularly unsuccessful at concealing

from all of our acquaintances. I was once known as both the worst troublemaker and best troubleshooter in all of Sakyo Ward, so I put on my relationship counselor hat and got to work.

The first piece of advice I gave him was: "You need to settle down. Go to Yoshida Shrine and start praying." While I was working to make his crush a reality, I also started writing to young Mamiya, whom I used to tutor. Furthermore, I began to worry that my baby sister, being a blossoming high school student, was experiencing the first throes of puppy love, and so I assured her that, "Trust in your cosmic big brother, and you'll never go wrong!" in an attempt to garner some much-deserved respect.

With the practice runs complete, I decided that the time was right to write to you.

But it was precisely then that Taniguchi's rage boiled over at all of my accumulated experiment failures: the first wrathful coming of Fudō Myōō (six more of which were still to come). I sat there alone late at the lab that night, not a tear left to cry after the sarge had put me through the wringer, and reminisced over my undergrad days in the lab in Kyoto.

Both Komatsuzaki and I used to be terrible at presentations. I remember after the advisor gave me a tongue-lashing I'd be crouched by the rotary evaporator, my face covered in tears, and you'd come by and give me an apple vinegar yogurt. I'd offer you a strawberry daifuku in return, and you'd take the little mochi in your hand and exclaim, "Strawberry daifuku are a fount of knowledge!" And indeed, after this little exchange of sweets I always felt just a little bit more clear-headed.

Do you still eat strawberry daifuku?

Don't eat too many of them if you do.

The cherry blossoms fell to be replaced by leaves of shimmering green, but at the lab things were as hectic as ever. Komatsuzaki screwed things up so precisely it was almost as if he was trying to fail. "I'm not changing my underpants until I've captured her heart!" he declared. What!? Was he serious!? While I was attempting to impress on him how silly it was for a man of his age to be spouting nonsense like this, April drew to a close, and I had yet to write you a letter.

May too passed by in a flurry of confusion. Ōtsuka started spreading an utterly baseless rumour among the junior lab members that I was "getting a little too friendly with a female dolphin at Notojima Aquarium," sullyng my reputation. It's hard to deal with someone who bases their actions entirely on whether they think something would be amusing or not.

Komatsuzaki remained as unmanageable as ever, and in order to impress the object of his affections he decided to compose a bloodcurdling poem. Taniguchi was in a near-constant state of fury. My little sister was reading Nietzsche and writing all sorts of inscrutable things. I believe you are familiar with her from the All-Japan Maidens' Association? She is a lovely girl with aspirations to become an astronaut and an unfortunate tendency to point out things that ought to remain unsaid. I had to steer Komatsuzaki back on track, assuage Taniguchi's anger, and guide my sister to happiness, all at the same time.

Of course, this is a lot for one person to manage, so I'd go relax at the hot springs in Wakura Onsen, chat with the old man at Minowa Books on Ipponsugi Street, and eat Tengu Ham to replenish my vitality. Are you familiar with Tengu Ham?

And so, with all this hullabaloo surrounding me, May whizzed right by.

I attempted several times to write to you. I wanted to encourage you, seeing as you'd just stepped into the working world. But when I stopped and considered, you'd always been the kind of person who would give it there all anyways, whether I said anything or not. In fact during our undergrad days I sometimes wished you would work a little less hard (so I wouldn't feel so ashamed of myself). On the other hand, I couldn't just say, "Stop trying," because trying hard is exactly what we needed to do.

So what could I write to strike a chord and make myself stand out to you? The more I agonized, the harder it was to put anything to paper. And this led to yet another nuisance of a pen pal for me to contend with, someone you are quite familiar with: that amateur of a novelist, Morimi Tomihiko. I was sure that if anyone knew how to pen a superlative letter, it would be someone who made his living from writing.

Have you read his newest book yet? I remember how much you were looking forward to his book signing in our junior year. You used to take out chocolates from your snowman advent calendar and distribute it to us unworthy souls. "Has a kinder soul walked the earth since the Meiji Restoration?" I thought to myself. No, really I did.

Writing to Morimi was a mistake. He bombarded me with letters nearly every day, yet never so much as touched upon how to write letters well, which had been the whole point of me writing to him. Instead all he did was moan on and on about the travails of the creative process. In the end it was I who had to console him. Imagine me, telling someone (much less a professional writer), "Get to work!" It was all rather bemusing.

In June, everyone from the Kyoto lab came to visit Kanazawa, but to my great chagrin not a single person saw fit to let me know. Apparently Ōtsuka had placed a gag order on everyone so that I could “focus on epistolary boot camp.” How wretched that woman can be.

And yet I could not afford to let my pen rest. I pulled Komatsuzaki back from the brink of becoming a stalker; weathered comings 2 to 4 of Taniguchi’s Fudō Myōō; and patiently imparted the importance of being charming on my younger sister. While all this was going on the rainy season began. I’d sit on the train, looking out the window at a rainbow spanning Nanao Bay, and so June came to a close.

July had me running ragged as well.

My old pupil, Mamiya, became smitten with Saegusa, the object of Komatsuzaki’s affections; it’s not easy to give advice to a kid as sharp as him. I received a collection letter from my sister for some ancient debt, and I had to work hard to restore her trust. The stress of the lab caused all the fuzz on my body to fall out, and I was tormented with nightmares of plump marshmallow extraterrestrials landing on the back of my head. In my sleep-fuddled state I took a big bite out of a daruma and hurt a tooth. What a miserable life I led, and yet in his letters Morimi just blithely bragged, “I had sukiyaki at Mishima-tei!” Our very own Komatsuzaki got swept up by Tanabata spirit and fed his crush some “bubble-bobble chimaki”, giving her a magnificent stomachache. Go on, laugh. I don’t mind.

Speaking of Tanabata, that reminds me of the time we all drank sake out of a freshly cut bamboo cup. “Tanabata means bamboo,” Ōtsuka had declared; it was because I was following her orders that I was nearly branded as a criminal. As soon as she saw the manager at the botanical garden approaching in the darkness, she zipped out of there as fast as greased lightning. If she thinks something might be amusing, she eggs us on, but the moment it seems like things might go south she disappears in a flash, leaving us to deal with the consequences. What a genius.

You really bailed me out of a sticky situation back then. So let me say it again: thank you. I don’t make apologies for myself, so if you hadn’t shown up to rescue me, in all likelihood I’d still be back there at the manager’s office, modestly insisting upon my right to remain silent. We attracted no shortage of questioning glances from other students as we carried the rustling bamboo back; what fun it was rushing Ōtsuka and giving her a taste of her own medicine. It couldn’t have been more satisfying. That Tanabata get-together was one to remember.

Komatsuzaki may have upset Saegusa's stomach with that bubble-bobble chimaki, but he was only getting started. He triggered her allergies with a bouquet of carnations and accosted her while she was with Mamiya during Yoiyama, reading that blood-curdling poem out loud only for her to flee into the night; afterwards he decamped to India, only to be miraculously reunited with her on the banks of the Ganges, when suddenly a fleet of alien ships touched down and a host of chubby marshmallow aliens emerged, performing a celebratory dance in commemoration of the happy couple...okay, that second half might contain some untruths, but it was a blindingly swift series of missteps and turnarounds. Perhaps you already heard of all this from Saegusa at the All-Japan Maidens' Association.

I wrote a lot of letters to Komatsuzaki out of concern, and as a result I wasn't able to write any to you. But he ended up capturing Saegusa's heart without my help anyways. On the other end of it, though, poor Mamiya had his heart broken, and I had to carefully craft my letters to assuage his anguish.

The busier I got, the more brusque my letters became. I have to fault Morimi, too, for never teaching me how to write a good letter. So as you can see, I was not in any shape to be writing you a letter. I seem to recall being a little cantankerous in all of my letters at the time, in spite of the fact that I'd started this whole letter writing business in the first place to take my mind off of things...

The rainy season ended at last, and summer arrived in Noto. Cicadas trilled in the mountains, and thunderheads rose high into the sky beyond Noto Island.

But this year's summer was shockingly bleak. The only respite I had from it all was taking walks to the shrine near the lab and drinking Calpis. On these walks, I'd think back to the summers I spent in Kyoto. Every time summer break rolled around all those pesky swarms of bicycles would vanish from the suddenly deserted campus. In between experiments we'd spend our downtime gazing outside at the sun-drenched inner courtyard, drinking the Calpis that you used to bring. They say that Calpis tastes like your first love, and while we all shared our own tales of sweet puppy love gone sour, I remember how astonished you were when I steadfastly refused to divulge mine.

So here's my delayed confession: I never met the first person I fell in love with.

A red balloon rising into the sky. Sheets of paper covered in my writing. The post box that I would pass on my way to school. The whirl of the postman's bicycle. The feeling of the envelopes containing her replies in my hands. Her neat handwriting. The odd illustrations she'd sometimes include. Those are the memories that Calpis brings back for me.

It was a correspondence, one that ended in heartbreak. In other words, I fell in love with a pen pal.

In hindsight, I kind of overdid the epistolary boot camp thing.

All through August, whenever I came back to my apartment there'd be a letter waiting for me in the mailbox. I'd read a letter and write back, read a letter and write back. I didn't have time to think. I just wrote. Komatsuzaki confided all sorts of idiotic worries to me, things like "I can't stop myself from thinking about b--bs. I just love -oo-- so much" (in order to protect the author's privacy and the reader's sensibilities, certain words have been censored). Back home, my folks were having family councils in my absence to fret about my future. My little sister complained about the time I pushed her into a pool when we were kids. Morimi kept up a steady stream of moaning, so I sent him some story ideas. Mamiya sent me a letter from his relatives' house in Wakayama, so I wrote back. And while all this was going on, I was also having heated discussions with Taniguchi and trying to keep up with my studies and research...

Morita, you done good.

Whenever I was sulkily setting up an experiment again after bungling it the first time, I would reminisce on all those all-nighters you and I pulled together. While Komatsuzaki and I snivelled, "What did we do to deserve this?" you'd calmly pull up a row of chairs and lie down for some shuteye, not the slightest perturbation in your breathing. When you discovered that some cock---ches (for purposes of hygiene, certain words have been censored) had crawled into our empty shoes by the door, you let out a shriek and jumped up onto those chairs like an elephant that had seen a mouse. And of course there were all those visits to Neko Ramen. And that time that you blew up the professor's profile picture and wore it as a mask to a practice thesis presentation; I was shocked at how spot-on your imitation of him was. Komatsuzaki was so convinced that you were the professor that he actually grovelled at your feet.

Those were some good times.

While I was distracted with all this reminiscing, the Gozan no Okuribi rolled around.

Morimi wrote to brag that he'd watched it with a gaggle of raven-haired maidens. I only learned later that this was you and the rest of the All-Japan Maidens' Association. I never

would have guessed that Komatsuzaki was also there. As for me, I just watched the NHK broadcast.

As I read all the letters that poured in, I started to resent not having a summer vacation. Every time I saw the Thunderbird Express stopped at Nanao Station, I had to resist the urge to jump onboard.

In the end I snuck back to Kyoto, resulting in the Incident.

I've spent all this time elaborating on my daily routine in hopes that some suave way of handwaving the incident away through facts and logic would reveal itself to me. Alas, none was forthcoming.

I apologize.

I'm sorry.

I'm a pervert.

I'm a degenerate.

I'll never do it again.

That incident was why I couldn't write to you in the months after August. I spent all that time trying to find a rational explanation that would allow me to save face and perhaps even earn your respect...which just made it impossible for me to write anything. If I'd known that was going to happen I would have just written plainer, sooner .

After the incident, my little sister told me, "You're dead to me."

Sorry sis.

I returned to the Noto-Kashima Marine Biological Laboratory, but before I'd even have time to recover from the shock of the incident I became embroiled in a war with Empress Ōtsuka Hisako. To be fair, I only reaped what I sowed. By whisking her computer away, I was hoping to knock the high and mighty Ōtsuka down a peg or two.

I can hear your voice in my head reproachfully saying, "Play with fire and you're going to get burned."

And that's exactly what happened. I got roasted. I nearly burned the entire house to the ground. It was so awful that I can't bring myself to repeat what happened here.

Needless to say, I didn't teach Ōtsuka a thing. I suspect that she's going to live the rest of her life freewheeling as she always has. But I've come to think that's how it should be. I don't have a chance of beating her.

And that's how the long, hot summer came to an end.

Autumn is a season of melancholy.

I wrote my letters, I persisted in my research, and I also had to start looking for a job. I'd witnessed you filling out job applications and showing up at the lab in a suit; now it was my turn. Long had I known that I would walk this path, yet never did I think that time would be today. Morimi once admitted to me, "If I can't become a poet or a gentleman of leisure, I don't want to become anything at all." I suspect that he was ripping off Herman Hesse, but if I'm being honest I feel the same way.

Filling out job applications is hard. For some reason it just feels like I'm being dishonest. Morimi pointed out to me, "If you don't feel like you're writing with a pure mind, you're probably not writing with a pure mind." But nothing could be further from the truth. My mind is practically spotless. He's always spouting useless nonsense like, "Use passion to capture their heart." Whenever I roll up my sleeves and try to promote myself, my shadiness level jumps exponentially, like I'm pitching something on a late night infomercial. If I'm being honest, I don't have much going for me. It feels like I'm trying to write a love letter. Every time I felt down, I'd mutter to myself, "If I can't become a poet or a gentleman of leisure, I don't want to become anything at all!"

"Argh, why can't things just work out!" I'd think indignantly, lashing out in my letters to Morimi. Komatsuzaki came to help with sample collection, and together we went to Wakura Onsen and even spotted a UFO. And while all this was going on, the day of my departure from the lab grew steadily nearer.

Taniguchi invited me for one last trip to Wakura Onsen. We stayed at the Kaigetsu Inn—"kaigetsu" as in jellyfish, our very own research subject. We soaked in the hot springs, drank at the inn, and talked about a lot of things.

At first we were having a real heart-to-heart, but after a few drinks, Taniguchi started to get belligerent. We debated all sorts of things related to Life, and I've forgotten a lot of what we said, but in essence Taniguchi was trying to tell me that I wasn't cut out for this line of work.

"Once you're outta here I don't ever wanna see you here again. Got it, you phony?" he berated me. After that we got into a big tussle, and the inn staff came in and yelled at us.

"I'm never coming here again!"

"You'd better not! Never step foot on Noto soil again!"

"You bet your ass I won't! But that's the way the cookie crumbles!"

And so on and so forth. We were really drunk.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles!"—those were your words. After your rainy graduation ceremony, I believe I said to you, "So you intend to embark upon the stormy seas of life, do you?"

"Don't you?"

"I haven't decided whether I ought to or oughtn't."

"There you go again!" you said to me with a laugh.

"Even you wish sometimes that you didn't have to embark on the high seas, don't you?"

What a phony thing to say, and yet without the slightest hint of ridicule you replied to me, "You bet I do! But that's the way the cookie crumbles!"

I was so touched hearing you say that to me so breezily. It was truly incredible. I resolved to do my best so that one day, I too could say, "What can you do!" with a smile on my face, the way you did. I'd show off what I got, catch up to you, surpass you—hey, that's the way the cookie crumbles!

When I looked back at all the braggadocious letters I'd been writing for the past six months I had to question what the point of it all was. Wasn't I supposed to be getting better at writing letters to warm people's hearts and contribute to world peace? Yet all these letters had led to was frustration and anger and dishonesty, and overall things had just gotten worse...

My sister wrote the following to me in one of her letters:

"You're selfish, crotchety, sulky, and always trying to boss people around. So why do so many people write back to you? I think having so many people that are willing to be your pen pal is pretty amazing, don't you? I don't even think you appreciate how lucky you are."

She always gets right to the point.

She'll never find happiness that way—or so I thought at the time—but maybe being upfront with people isn't always a bad thing, so I'll let it slide...this time.

The day of my return to Kyoto dawned. At Nanao Station I boarded the Thunderbird Express. To my surprise Taniguchi showed up at the station to see me off. As always, with his frizzly hair, his leather jacket, and his scruffy face, he reminded me of a fugitive from the law. The station attendant seemed to be a little wary of him.

"You didn't get much done here. Still think you can graduate?" he asked, a real drill sergeant to the end.

But I'll be fine.

"I'll write to you," I told him. He scrunched up his face, like he'd just come across a dead roach.

"Can't you just call like a normal person? What's the point of writing a letter?"

"There is no point. But I'm going to write one anyways."

"Hmph. See if I care," Taniguchi grunted.

He just doesn't know how to be honest with himself.

I didn't know what kind of letter I should write to you anymore. This next part might make you say, "Whaaat?", or even make you feel uncomfortable. But I always felt inferior to you. There you were, setting sail in the pouring rain after your graduation ceremony, and there I was, watching you go, just staying for grad school because I had no idea what to do with myself.

That's why I felt pressed to produce a paramount piece of writing. "Maybe writing this will impress her!" "Maybe this will make me sound like a real man!" I just kept coming up with half-assed measures, and eventually I thought so hard that I lost sight of the art of writing a letter. I lost my beginner's mindset. And I lost the ability to say what I wanted to say to you.

As a boy, I was obsessed with writing letters. It all started when I attached one to a red balloon, sent it floating into the sky, and actually received a response. The Red Balloon Girl was three years older than me, kind, clever, and a wonderful pen pal. I think I was in love with it all: putting pen to paper, the walk to the postbox, the long wait for a reply. To me, all of that was part of writing a letter. In my head I'd fantasize about what she'd write back. Maybe it was only natural that I ended up falling in love. I'd never seen her face, but I knew that she must be beautiful. I don't know why I was so strangely certain. Every time I saw a pretty girl on the street, I'd wonder to myself, "Could that be her?"

So things went until my first year of middle school. That summer, I finally realized that I was in love. "So this is what love feels like!" I marvelled.

At the time I wasn't as cultured as I am now and had no concept of restraint, so the moment I realized that I was in love I dropped a letter in the postbox. It was so red-hot with my emotions I wouldn't have been surprised if the postbox had erupted into flames. The ultra-concentrated eau de puppy love must have had an overwhelming effect, because the Red Balloon Girl never wrote to me again. My feelings had so overflowed I'd written many more love letters to work out my ungovernable feelings, and ended up burning them all in the yard, but my little sister called the fire department. I cried, but only because, the smoke, got in, my eyes.

So I never laid eyes on the face of my first love.

If I could write one more letter to the Red Balloon Girl, I'd write so much artfully than I did back then. After all, I've spent years researching the art of writing a love letter; at this point I could casually capture her heart before sitting down to breakfast. Just kidding. I'm kidding about the love letters; what I'd really want to tell her is, "thank you." Thank you, for showing me how fun writing letters can be: how fun it is to have a conversation with someone on paper; how fun it is to wait for their reply; how fun it is to finally open the envelope; how fun it is to read their letter over and over. It almost doesn't matter what the letter actually says. At the time I wasn't smart enough to worry about anything, so I didn't write about my troubles. I only wrote about things like the cup of yogurt that exploded in my friend's backpack, or the neighbour's dog that was always chasing its tail round and round, or the dream I had about eating a million *momiman* (that is, Momiji *manjū*). And that was all I needed to do.

I used to know the right way to write a letter. Part of me still remembers the fun of writing to a pen pal, and the sorrow when it ended. That's why I'm devoting myself to writing letters again.

One morning, after Taniguchi and I had stayed the night at Wakura Onsen, we were having breakfast with a bunch of lively old men in a large hall in the ryokan. "Koiji Beach," Taniguchi suddenly interjected between slurps of his miso soup. "What do you say we head on over?"

Koiji Beach is at the eastern tip of the Noto Peninsula. Once upon a time, a man and a woman were in love. But the woman was pursued by another jealous suitor, who pushed the man off a cliff into the sea. The woman, heartbroken, threw herself after him, and ever after, anyone who comes to this beach is blessed with luck in their romantic endeavours, or so the story goes. It's definitely not a place for two guys to come together, not unless you're looking for a good time.

But it sounded interesting, so off we went.

We drove along in the car, the previous night's quarrel all but forgotten, singing a song whose lyrics I can't bring myself to repeat for you. Taniguchi was driving, so I was responsible for strumming the mandolin. I don't play the mandolin. You've got to go the length of the Noto Peninsula to get to Koiji Beach, so as skilled as Taniguchi was behind the wheel of his beloved old beater it took I believe three hours to reach our destination.

After a long drive along the coast, the statue of the star-crossed lovers came into view. We passed the New Koiji Hotel, as well as delightfully named cafés and hotels such as the Coffee Lovers and the Lovers' Road Inn. After traversing that decidedly 20th-century section of town, we arrived at the famous Lover's Bell, a lovely little instrument which is said to bring good fortune in romance to anyone that rings it. But that day the bell was alone beneath the grey clouds, nary a soul around to ring it. "You're telling me this is it?" Taniguchi muttered dumbfoundedly.

It was October, and October is certainly not beach season. Moreover, weather on the Noto Peninsula can be a fickle thing; when we arrived at Koiji Beach the clouds were thick and low overhead, and the moaning wind hurled wispy raindrops at the glass.

"Get out there and embarrass yourself with that bell already!" Taniguchi said, standing by the car in the rain.

I said a silent prayer that my affections would be requited, then struck the bell. A sharp clang shivered the air over the deserted beach. I couldn't imagine this bearing any sort of romantic fruit.

"What about you?" I asked Taniguchi.

"No thanks!" he replied, but I hate being embarrassed by myself, so over his protests I dragged him over to the bell, which he grudgingly rang.

As we were about to return to the car, I noticed a grubby red object resting on the grey sands of the beach. "What's that?" I wondered, and when I made my way over to it I realized that it was the remains of a red balloon.

After leaving Koiji Beach Taniguchi and I went to Suzu; as I walked around the city I thought about the scene I'd caught from the window of the Thunderbird Express as I was heading to Noto for the first time. As the train passed along the western shore of Lake Biwa I heard someone say, "It's a rainbow." I looked out the window to see that the rain had lifted; towards Mt. Hiei a rainbow crossed the sky. But as I stared out the window I saw what seemed to be a mother and her young son walking along the raised paths between the rice paddies. And just as the Thunderbird Express passed them by, the boy released a red balloon into the sky.

The train had whipped by, but in that brief moment I remembered my boyhood passion. And I thought it would be fun to write letters back to Kyoto, just like how I'd once poured my heart and soul onto paper as a kid.

That was how my epistolary bootcamp came to be.

Hours upon hours, letters upon letters. When I saw that red balloon at Koiji Beach just before my return to Kyoto, I let myself imagine that it might have been the balloon from the boy I saw from the Thunderbird Express, or even the balloon I myself had released many years ago.

What makes a good letter? I'd written a lot of letters and done a lot of thinking about it. My conclusion: the type of letter that you tie to a balloon and let soar into the sky is the best kind of letter. Those letters don't contain anything important or urgent. They simply contain an earnest desire to connect with someone else, floating serenely through the air. And to me that seems like the most beautiful kind of letter there can be.

That's why I think people should write more unimportant, trivial letters. Maybe that's the way to bring peace to the world.

So ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, don't think, just write!

...Not a bad sentiment, don't you think?

I'd intended to explain why I hadn't written to you these past six months, but being that I haven't been able to find a reason that would convince both you and me I've just been dragging this letter on and on. I think it's time I wrap this up. I've had fun writing this because it feels just like I'm having a regular conversation with you, though I can't promise that it'll be as fun for you to read.

Thank you for reading all this way.

One more thing before I go. I've invited everyone with whom I've been exchanging letters for the past six months to a little get-together on Mt. Daimonji, where we'll release red balloons with letters attached to them into the sky.

Would you like to come?

After the balloon release, everyone is cordially invited to a sukiyaki banquet. My treat, of course. That is to say, Morimi Tomihiko's treat. Don't worry about it, it doubles as a celebration of his latest book coming out. It's a drop in the bucket for this magnanimous man, so don't skimp on the meat.

I understand that you may wish to consider this abrupt invitation carefully, but I should be overjoyed to be honoured with the favour of your presence.

Yours sincerely,

Morita Ichirō

P.S. I apologize that this trivial letter has gone on for so long. But I would be thrilled to receive an equally unimportant reply, for the sake of world peace of course. As a Master of Written Correspondence, I am always open to receiving trivial letters. I look forward to reading them.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to pass on the art of writing a love letter from the Morita Ichirō school of correspondence. The trick is to not try to write a love letter. In my case, I don't think I could hide how I feel even if I tried.

Never, ever lose faith in your dreams.

Afterword — To the Reader

To: The esteemed reader

This is Morimi Tomihiko. I hope you are doing well.

I'm writing this letter to commemorate the publication of the paperback version of *The Art of Writing a Love Letter*. Winter is over, and spring has come at last. My nose is always running because of the pollen. In between sentences I have to stop to blow my nose; my sinuses have become a place of cosmic horror. What a depressing season.

This is my eighth book, and my very first epistolary novel.

In this age of cell phones and email, writing a letter might seem like a ponderous, hopelessly outdated way to communicate. But then again I've always been a ponderous kind of man who is perfectly content with being hopelessly outdated. That's why I wrote this novel.

The other day someone told me, "At one point in their career every author wants to try writing an epistolary novel." Maybe that's true. But it wasn't what I was thinking when I wrote this novel; I simply enjoyed Natsume Sōseki's collected letters a lot and wanted to try emulating them. I highly recommend you read them.

It's been some years since this book was serialized, and to see it published in novel form makes me reminisce about those days I spent with the lovably eccentric Morita Ichirō. I visited the Noto Peninsula to research the book and made some fond memories of the place.

In this book, this Morimi Tomihiko character seems incredibly unreliable. But hold on a moment. He only seems that way because you're viewing him through the lens of Morita Ichirō. I sincerely hope my discerning, doting readers will keep in mind that the real Morimi Tomihiko is not nearly such a paltry being.

In fact, I've already discovered the real art of writing a love letter. But I'm afraid I can't spare the time to disseminate it to you all. And furthermore, an afterword is far too confined a space to elucidate such an advanced technique.

It'll take far more than reading a book or two to grasp such a life-altering technique. I hope you all find an opportunity to start a correspondence and discover your own art of writing a

love letter, just as Morita Ichirō did. And for those of you who insist on forcibly extracting from this charmingly compact volume some pithy aphorism of immediate efficacy, please chew over the following maxim by Morita.

Some stories don't have morals.

Good day to you all.

Very sincerely,

Morimi Tomihiko

March 6, 2010