



森見登美彦

宵山万華鏡

集英社文庫

Yoiyama Kaleidoscope

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Yoiyama Sisters

The girl and her older sister attended Suzaki Ballet Studio, which was in a venerable four-story building on Sanjō Street in Koromonotana-chō to the west of the intersection with Muromachi Street. Each Saturday, their mother would send them off from their white, ivy-covered residence behind Kyoto Notre Dame University, and they would ride the gently swaying subway car to the studio in the middle of town.

The walk from Karasuma Oike station to the ballet studio was not long. Turn at the lofty brick bank building at the southwest corner of the intersection of Sanjō and Karasuma, proceed straight ahead on Sanjō Street, and the building would soon come into view on the left.

It was difficult to lose one's way on such a straightforward path, but the girl was cautious, and followed her sister closely as they walked. She had a habit of saying to herself things like "Turn right here", as if to fix the oft-traveled path in her mind. If her sister showed the slightest sign of straying from the path, the girl would at once become uneasy, for one never knew when familiar places would abruptly become unfamiliar.

"Let go! How am I supposed to walk with you grabbing on to me?"

"But I'm scared!"

The girl was in third grade, and her sister in fourth.

Her sister would gravitate to shop windows unpredictably, like an inquisitive cat. Their mother and the ballet instructor forbade them from taking detours, but her sister would suddenly exclaim that she wanted to buy a magazine at a bookshop, or take a peek inside a flower shop, putting the girl, who was more fastidious, on edge. Her sister kept herself busy running around satisfying her own curiosity, while the girl was kept busy minding her. The two girls moved around and around each other, as if tied together by a string.

The girl always felt tense getting off the train and walking through the streets, but once she saw the stately entrance of the building where the ballet studio was, she would fall into a reverie, and her worries and cares would slip away. The building reminded her of a medieval castle, and she had been enamored with it ever since the first time she went to class there. She loved everything about it: the beautiful old-fashioned emerald lanterns flanking the entrance; the low, elegant steps leading to the doorway; the tall, narrow windows spaced along the facade of the building. Whenever she stood in front of the door, she imagined a flock of large white birds swooping down towards a princess leaning out of the window on the topmost floor.

Their mother had worked in an office in this building, before she was married. The girl often imagined her mother and father meeting here when they were young. In her head she replaced the princess at the window with her mother, basing her mental image off of an old photograph she had seen. Her father, passing below on Sanjō Street by chance, glanced up and instantly fell head over heels in love. It was just like a movie! the girl happily thought, though that was precisely because she was imagining it as one. This way was much better than an arranged marriage, she decided.



The girl was engulfed by a blast of chilly air as she passed through the door into the empty red-carpeted lobby. A peculiar framed painting hung directly in front of the doorway. It depicted a little girl wearing a red yukata, alone in an alleyway lit by many paper lanterns. The girl didn't like this picture, because the dusky colors made her feel strangely forlorn.

Suzaki Ballet Studio was up the stairs in the corner of the lobby on the third floor.

Ms. Suzaki was closer to the girls' grandmother than to their mother in years, yet she was youthful and elegant. She stood statue-like on the wooden floor observing the students, coming down on sloppy movements with unflinching severity. When she was displeased, rays of fury emanated from her to every corner of the room like the bars of an iron cage. On such occasions, even the assistant instructors trembled in fear.

The girl changed into her outfit along with her sister and their friends.

The restless chatter that filled the room revolved around Yoiyama. Some of the girls talked about getting changed into yukata and going to the festival after practice was over. The girl listened to them rattle off their plans with envy.

As she had gotten off the train at Karasuma Oike station that day, she had overheard other passengers mention Yoiyama. There were more people around than usual, and stalls were lined up on both sides of Karasuma Street. Walking along Sanjō Street, she glanced south down Muromachi Street as she passed the intersection and saw that even in this already cramped lane, stalls had managed to squeeze themselves in front of the buildings and parking lots. Beyond them she could see the lantern-bedecked shape of Kuronushiyama¹. Even after changing into her outfit and starting practice, she occasionally thought about that sight, and eventually she realized that the picture in the lobby in fact depicted that very scene.

As they moved away from the barre to do centre work, the girl noticed Miss Misaki looking lost in thought. Miss Misaki was seldom one for words, but today she was even more taciturn than usual. The girl was quite sure it was because of Yoiyama. What was it about Yoiyama that was making everyone so uneasy? She pressed her ear to a frosted window pane, trying to make out the hubbub that was spreading over the town.

Ms. Suzaki began the floor lesson, and sensing that she was in a foul mood today, the normally excitable students meekly attended to the lesson. The wooden floorboards creaked softly as the girls shifted their feet over the faint reflections of the fluorescent lights. Though they were in the middle of the city, the inside of the studio was quiet and still, and each step and breath reverberated in the silence.

Lately, the girl had finally started to feel like her movements were ballet-ish, and for the first time she was having fun here. Of course, being scolded by the teacher was never enjoyable, and she frequently found tears springing to her eyes, but the feeling that her body was moving the way she wanted it to made her happy. Despite that, she often lost confidence in herself at pivotal times, something which she was told was only hurting her. Her sister was utterly fearless, and consequently always looked perfectly in control of herself.



¹ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/kuronushiyama.html>

When break time came around, the girl needed to use the bathroom.

The bathroom was in the middle of the long corridor outside the classroom. The ballet studio was not the only room on the third floor, but the space outside the frosted glass pane in the door was always dark, and a little creepy. She made her sister come with her. Her sister always came along cheerfully on these occasions, never teasing her even once.

When the girl came out of the bathroom, her sister was gazing at the stairwell at the end of the hall.

“What’re you looking at?”

“Shh.”

Her sister grinned and placed a finger to her lips.

“Take a look.”

The stairway leading up was lined with lanterns on both sides.

“What is with all these lanterns?” her sister muttered, one foot already on the steps.

The girl thought back to the time when her sister had taken her up to the rooftop. Ms. Suzaki had caught them coming down the stairs and given them a severe lecture.

“We shouldn’t,” the girl said.

“Just for a moment,” her sister insisted.

The girl could see a large tanuki ornament and a lucky cat statue on the landing. Her sister peered at the stairs leading further up.

“Ah-ha,” she said. “There’s a Hina doll display here.”

“Hina dolls?” the girl inquired.

“Right here. It’s rather impressive,” her sister replied.

“I guess I’ll take a look,” the girl said.

She climbed the first flight of stairs and stood beside her sister.

On the second flight of stairs, there were lanterns hanging from the walls as before, but the steps were lined with dolls, like a traditional doll exhibit. Her sister pirouetted up the steps, being careful not to tread on the dolls, and stopped at the landing on the fourth floor.

“Amazing,” she murmured. “There are so many strange things up here.”

“Really?” the girl asked.

“*Most* peculiar.”

Hearing that, the girl burned with curiosity and went up after her sister.

The fourth-floor corridor was cluttered with cardboard boxes filled with dolls and toys. Her sister picked up one of the bits of rainbow-colored tape that were scattered on the floor. It sparkled in the rays of light shining through one of the tall, thin windows. She let it flutter down through the air and strolled on, patting the heads of the black and white lucky cat statues on the floor as she passed.

“It’s just like a toy store,” remarked the girl.

Her sister nodded in agreement.

The pair came across a large box covered with a red cloth.

Her sister placed her ear to it and said, “I think I hear something.”

Throwing off the cloth, they came face to face with a murky tank of water, and a round, goggling eye staring at them from within.

They both stepped back and uttered little shrieks. The girl grabbed her sister's hand. Her sister gripped her hand just as tightly.

Inside the tank floated a bulbous scarlet fish, about as large and plump as a watermelon. Its mouth gulped open and closed as it stared vacantly at the two girls.

As they stood there petrified staring back at the fish, a shout rang through the corridor.

"Hey!" A woman wearing a straw hat stood there glaring at them. "If you're naughty, Lord Yoiyama will come and eat you up!"

The two girls sprang from their stupor and fled down the stairs.

"That was so scary!" her sister laughed.



It was nearing five in the afternoon by the time the lesson ended.

Each time the girl set out for the studio, she was filled with a gloomy reluctance, but as practice went on those feelings would be replaced with an enjoyable sort of stress. She would always slip into deep concentration during practice and by the time it ended, she felt as if she were a completely different person. It didn't feel good being sweaty and smelly, but that feeling of detachment was like a cool wind blowing through her soul, and she quite liked it.

As they wiped off the sweat and changed out of their outfits, the topic of Yoiyama came up again. One of the other girls mentioned a giant, moving model of a praying mantis. This caught the sister's attention, whose eyes lit up as she listened.

"Goodbye, Ms. Suzaki," said the girls as they passed her, bobbing their heads.

Ms. Suzaki looked at them. "No detours on your way home," she reminded them, eyeing the girl's sister particularly closely.

"We won't!" she replied brightly, and the two girls went down the stairs. Pushing open the heavy front door together, they went out onto the street.

Heavy, humid air smothered the city. Rays of sunlight painted the tops of the buildings and the clouds above a golden hue. Sanjō Street was unusually crowded with people, many of whom were streaming into Muromachi Street.

The girls took their usual route home until they reached Karasuma Street, when the girl's sister stopped in her tracks.

No cars rumbled down the boulevard; instead, the wide gulf between the office buildings on either side of the street was filled with people coming and going. There were businessmen in suits holding briefcases, old men fanning themselves with paper fans, tour groups full of middle-aged women, and young couples wearing yukata milling this way and that. The sun was setting over the wide avenue. Both sides of the road were crammed with more street stalls than the girl had ever seen in her life, many of which were already turning on their lights. The damp breeze carried a sweet-smelling aroma, difficult to discern exactly. The girl breathed in deeply through her nose. The stalls and the crowds filled the street with a feverish air.



The sister, burning with curiosity, flitted about hither and thither. The girl was gripped by a sense of unease as she was pulled along. She was afraid that Ms. Suzaki would find out that they had not gone straight home.

Furthermore, the girl was afraid of the perils that the city held. There were people here who would kidnap children for ransom, sell them off to far off countries, and even kill them. There was no telling when some dastardly grownup would swoop out of a dark alley and whisk the girl off to some foreign land, never to return home again. This was why the girl carried herself stiffly, palms slick with sweat, and never let her guard down for even a moment whenever she was walking around the city. Though she was fainthearted, she felt responsible for being vigilant and keeping a close watch since she had such a reckless sister. It really was quite endearing.

Her sister insisted that she had to see the festival's praying mantis. The other girls had said that it moved as though it were really alive. *Really, what an idiotic thing to tell my sister*, she thought to herself uncharitably.

"Do you *have* to see it? Let's go home!" she urged.

"I just want to see it, okay? Come on, this way!"

As they spoke, her sister was already slipping into the crowds surrounding the stalls of Karasuma Street, so the girl followed, clinging onto the hem of her skirt.

The sister's black hair was tied up in a bun, which shone in the light, and her steps were fleet, like a dancer's.

The girl had to admit that walking in the middle of the street among all those people was thrilling, like nothing she had experienced before. The rows of stalls that jostled along the sides of the road seemed to continue on forever. Her sister, overcome with amazement, kept giggling for no particular reason. As the two girls continued along the road, the banks and office buildings with which they were so familiar began to seem entirely unrecognizable. The orange lights of the stalls spread dimly through the street, while the white fluorescent lights in the windows of the office buildings spilled out into the darkening sky above. The girl had never seen a sky as beautiful as this one in her life, and an awesome sensation of boundless possibility shivered down her spine.

"Incredible," she whispered unthinkingly.

"Oh, look!" her sister cried, pointing.

A jet black flock of birds plunged down through the air, swerving up at the last moment to the tops of the buildings before repeating the movement, perhaps drawn by the mouthwatering smell of yakisoba and charbroiled squid and fried chicken wafting from the stalls. The way the birds seemed almost to be targeting the people below frightened the girl. What if they mistook her for food and carried her off into the sky?

Continuing down Karasuma Street, the girls joined a stream of people flowing west onto Takoyakushi Street through a gap in the stalls. The old-fashioned cafés lining the street were packed with people taking a respite from the bustle of the festival. Under a canopy that had been erected next to an alleyway, children sat hawking sticky rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves, shouting to passersby in their high, shrill voices.

The sister pulled the girl towards a crowd that was gathering in front of a traditional two-story residence. The facade was adorned with white cloths and large red lanterns, and the

front of the second floor was wide open for all to see. Sitting on an altar was a doll, clad in armor and wearing a fearsome expression.

“What’s that?” the girl asked.

“That’s Benkei,” her sister replied, standing on tiptoes to get a better glimpse.

They squeezed their way out into the middle of the intersection with Muromachi Street. A sea of people stretched out in all four directions.

Stalls vied for space on the narrow street, squeezing the already cramped lane even further. The girl and her sister skimmed through the stalls. There was grilled corn and fried chicken and goldfish scooping and lotteries and hot dogs and tamago senbei and masks and stuffed animals and it seemed to the girl that the festival just kept going on forever, like it had swallowed up the town.

As the girls made their way down the street, they encountered the lantern-festooned Minami-kannyo².

This float resembled nothing so much as a fortress made of wood and lanterns. Its ramparts towered high in the darkening sky, halting the stream of people that sought to continue down the street. But the sight of this did not placate the sister, who continued to weave through the crowd, insisting that she was going to see the mantis. The girl had no idea whether her sister knew where she was going, or whether she was merely striking out at random.

The sister stopped in front of a booth selling candy apples. “You know, I’ve never had a candy apple before. Do you think they’re good?”

“Maybe,” the girl answered hesitantly. “Is it really a good idea to get one though?”

“I have money.”

“But if Ms. Suzuki sees us we’ll be in for a scolding.”

The sister walked past the booth, staring longingly at the shiny apples as if they were baubles on a Christmas tree, but the girl put a firm hand on her back and pushed her onward.

A police officer stood in the middle of the next intersection, directing the flow of the hordes of sightseers that jostled on all sides.

“This street is one way only! Everyone will move faster this way!”

The sister navigated the narrow streets like she was tracing the grid of a Go board, turning left, then right, and occasionally changing her mind and turning back around. As she was pulled around, the girl called out “Left!” or “Right!” each time they stepped onto a new street, like a train conductor announcing the next station.

“We made a left here, so when we come back we have to turn right,” she muttered to herself. “And that means right will become left.”

But as she whispered reminders under her breath, her sister would turn around without warning, and all her diligent memorization would go to waste. Countless times she would be in the midst of saying “right” or “left” when she would suddenly forget which direction was which.

“Oh, forget it!” she said despairingly.

Everywhere the girl looked she saw another narrow alleyway stretching out into the distance. Each street, buzzing with festival merriment, appeared indistinguishable from one next.

² <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/minamikannyo.html>

“Didn’t we just come this way?” the girl asked.

“Did we?” her sister said, sounding completely unconcerned.

The further they walked, the more distant the idea of escaping the festival became, and the girl began to feel the world closing in around her.



The girl had lost all sense of direction, and unfamiliar faces pressed in all around her, so she heaved a deep sigh of relief when she spotted Mr. Yanagi in the crowd.

Mr. Yanagi worked at an art gallery by Sanjō Takakura. The girl had gone there with her mother once, and she still remembered sipping the fragrant black tea that he had served her. Now, he was loitering by a vending machine, carrying a cloth-wrapped package. He looked a little weary.

“Hello, Mr. Yanagi!” the sister chirped, greeting him politely.

“Well, hello there,” he said, smiling.

“Do you know where the praying mantis is?”

“Praying mantis... perhaps you mean Tōrōyama³?”

“Yes, that must be it.”

Mr. Yanagi smiled again and gave them clear, simple instructions on how to get there.

“Don’t let go of each other,” he instructed them as they parted ways. “Hold hands tightly, so you don’t lose each other.”

Following the directions Mr. Yanagi had given them, the girls at last made their way to Tōrōyama.

Tōrōyama was located on Nishi-notōin Street, which, while much wider than the alleys they had been traversing, still twinkled with the lights of street stalls as the day faded into dusk. Gazing at Tōrōyama, the sister suggested that they go home before it got too late, seemingly satisfied at last. The girl, thinking that she would be released from this infernal festival after all, allowed herself to relax. It was this carelessness that caused her to lose her sister.

As the two walked up the gentle slope of Nishikikōji Street, passing old houses and shop buildings, the girl became enamored with a few girls weaving in and out of the crowd, shrieking with laughter. They were all wearing gorgeous crimson yukata, and the flashes of deep red as they darted in and out of sight reminded the girl of a school of goldfish frolicking in the murky canals.

“That looks lovely,” she murmured as she watched them, spellbound.

Snapping back to reality, she suddenly realized that she had lost sight of her sister in the surrounding throngs, and her heart thudded so rapidly it hurt. She started to panic, thinking that her sister had abandoned her. Stumbling on recklessly, she ran headlong into the side of a large man walking past her. The man, a bald-pated monk, glared down at her, and blinded by sheer terror the girl fled without even apologizing.

Turning at the next intersection in an attempt to evade the monk, the girl stopped under the overhang of a small shop to catch her breath.

³ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/toroyama.html>

To the right, above the crowds, she could see another float decorated with paper lanterns.

She was separated from her sister. She had no idea where she was, or even which way was which. Tears quickly welled up in her eyes, and the red and white glow of the lanterns began to blur together. But away from the crowds, under the eaves of the shuttered shop, she willed herself to hold back the tears.

“Don’t cry,” she told herself. “Don’t cry...don’t cry...”

The girl was a crybaby.

She was alone and separated from her sister as night fell. She had never felt so alone in her life. Willing herself not to cry, she began to feel sorry for herself, wondering what to do now. She couldn’t go home now, not without her sister.

“What do I do, what do I do...” she repeated, as if reciting a mantra, when her eyes fell on the police officers directing traffic in the middle of the intersection.

She wondered if they might be able to help her. *But what if they scold me? After all, I was wandering around*, she thought hesitantly. She had always had a great fear of approaching strangers.

Though only a few minutes had passed since she had lost her sister, it felt like it had been hours, and the sky was getting dark alarmingly quickly. But even as the girl stood under the storefront feeling small, her thoughts were for her sister’s safety.

She was very worried about the possibility that her sister had been tricked and whisked away by some bad person. With so many people here enjoying the festival, there were bound to be a few bad eggs mixed into the crowd. No one would notice if a child or two were to go missing. The more she thought about this, the more convinced she became that everyone that passed by looked like a kidnapper. She folded her thin arms and shivered.

She couldn’t trust any of these adults, even if they said they would buy her a candy apple, or take her to the station. But her sister was more trusting, and would blithely go along with anyone.

“They’d only need to tell her that they had a giant candy apple and she’d follow them anywhere, simple as that,” she sighed.

She imagined her sister locked in the hold of a ship sailing away from the harbor at Maizuru, surrounded by suspicious boxes of all shapes and sizes, a great iron ball chained to her leg as she sat in the corner, weeping and thinking of Kyoto. All because she couldn’t resist the promise of a giant candy apple. The girl’s chest tightened painfully as this sad scene went through her mind, and she could no longer just stand there anymore.

“Wait! Don’t go with them!” she whispered.



The girl mustered all her courage and began to walk. There was always a chance that she would come across a familiar part of town. The air rang with shouts from street vendors, which was enough to make the girl freeze up. She began to walk faster. A man watching the festivities from the upstairs balcony of a house waved, but she turned and trotted onward.

Her breath grew short as she pushed onward, so she crouched down below the overhang of a house. Warily observing the crowds from her hiding spot under the eaves, she noted people hiding their faces behind exquisite fans, or holding extraordinary balloons with goldfish inside them. Each time someone glanced at her, she feared that they intended to kidnap her, and she felt a burning flush sweep over her. Sweat prickled unpleasantly on her back. Blood oozed out as she nibbled at her nails, and her fingertips throbbed painfully.

“Ow, that stings!” she yelped, but continued to gnaw at her nails.

The sight of happy families ambling by piqued the girl’s ire. How delightful it must be trailing along behind a mother and father.

“That must be wonderful,” she mumbled. “I wish I were them! But here I am, alone and bleeding from my fingers.”

If only she were with her sister, she wouldn’t feel lonely, no matter how lost or anxious she might be. If only she had known this was going to happen, she never would have let go of her sister’s hand. If only she had paid attention when Mr. Yanagi warned them never to let go of each other. The girl had a feeling that she would never see her sister again.

Her sister had dragged her to parts unknown on several occasions before, and while the girl was always on tenterhooks, the experiences hadn’t been bad. Her happiest memory was venturing onto Shijō Street just before Christmas, looking at the glittering lights and the Christmas trees and the great belled wreaths that hung on the street corners, peeking into a flower shop bursting with bouquets of red and green. Even the time they had snuck into a ramen shop after practice seemed like a thrilling adventure now. Once, Ms. Suzuki had caught them on the roof of the ballet studio building and shouted at them until even her sister had been reduced to tears, but the girl still thought of that day fondly. No matter how scared she had been, or how annoyed she had gotten at her sister, she had enjoyed all of those adventures. But of course, that was only because her sister had been by her side.

“I wish she would turn up in front of me! I’m sure I wouldn’t let go of her again!” she lamented, still crouching down.

She shut her eyes tightly and imagined herself riding on the subway with her sister. They had made that gently swaying trip back to the white walls of their vine-wrapped house so many times, but now it seemed a distant, treasured memory.

“I want to go home. Straight home, and into the bath,” she said wistfully, fervently praying that today’s frightful ordeal would turn into a cherished memory just like the others.

Almost too exhausted to even stand, she was staring into a fire bucket when she noticed what looked like a red cloth floating in the water. Moving out of the way of the light to take another look, she realized that it was actually a goldfish.

“What’s a goldfish doing here?” she remarked, putting a hand on the edge of the bucket as she watched the goldfish bobbing in the water. “Did you escape from a goldfish scoop? You must be quite a jumper!”

The girl thought that such a strong goldfish must become quite an impressive koi. She was under the impression that goldfish turned into koi when they grew up.

As the girl gazed at the little fish, a shadow fell over her.

It belonged to a girl wearing a red yukata.



The other girl sidled up and looked into the bucket, then looked at the girl with a friendly smile. The girl couldn't help but smile back.

"Is that a goldfish?" the other girl asked.

"Yes, it is," the girl said.

While the girl's new companion looked into the bucket, other girls converged towards the overhang, as if drawn by her presence. It was the same group of girls that the girl had been watching when she lost her sister. They all wore the same scarlet yukata. The color was so dazzling that it was hard to tell how many of them there were, but the girl counted five. They surrounded her, nudging and tugging at each others' yukatas and giggling.

"They're like goldfish looking for a bite to eat," the girl thought to herself. As she watched them cooing over the goldfish, it struck her that they might be familiar with the surrounding neighborhood. And maybe, just maybe, they even knew where Suzaki Ballet Studio was.

"Um," she ventured.

One of the girls turned to her and sang "What is it?"

"Do you know where Suzaki Ballet Studio is?" asked the girl.

The girl thought for a moment and then gave a little nod. The girls offered to take her there, and so the girl at last let them take her hand and pull her out from underneath the overhang that she had been cowering in and back into the rushing crowds. Although it was midsummer, the other girl's hand was not sticky with sweat, but rather cool and pleasant to the touch.

"You're all very kind. Thank you!" the girl exclaimed, beginning once again to wend her way through the narrow alleys.

The lights of the stalls twinkled ever brighter as the sky faded into darkness. The girl walked along the street, with the girls in red yukata around her flitting nimbly through the congested alleys, and eventually the girl felt like her own steps were becoming lighter.

On Shinmachi Street, the glowing edifice of Minami-kannyama loomed up before them into the dark evening sky. Laughing and chattering, the girls walked under a bridge connecting the upper level of the float to one of the old wooden houses on the street.

Occasionally, they stopped to look through the stalls at their leisure, shrieking with laughter as they put on fox masks, waved candy apples around, and stuffed their cheeks with little sponge cakes. None of them paid, but the stall owners didn't seem to mind. *These girls must know everyone around here*, the girl thought to herself.

The girls plied her with all sorts of sweets.

"Here, have a bite!"

"This is really yummy!"

Each time she refused, the girls looked amazed. The girl felt bad eating food that hadn't been paid for, and she didn't want to be caught by Ms. Suzaki and given another scolding. Most of all, she just wanted to hurry back where she came from.

Only one stall caught the girl's attention. It stood alone on a dim, mostly deserted side street, lit by a single, bare old-fashioned light bulb. Lined up on the counter was an assortment

of kaleidoscopes of every color and size imaginable, and the girl joined the others as they peered at them, squealing in delight.

The girls seemed to be more interested in going round all the stalls than guiding the girl to her destination. Each time the girl asked if they were nearly there, the other girls all chattered and nodded in assurance, but afterwards they always returned to their endless sightseeing. The girl nearly suspected that she was being deceived, but the girls all looked and spoke so earnestly.

“Well, I suppose they are just little girls,” the girl mused. “And it is the festival, after all.”

The sights of Yoiyama flashed before the girl everywhere she looked—bustling stalls, floats bedecked with paper lanterns, windows gleaming in the buildings, yukata-clad festivalgoers, police officers directing traffic. They had run on quite a ways, and yet the hand which clasped the girl’s own still felt as cool and pleasant as before. The longer she held hands, the airier her body felt, and the airier her body felt, the more lightheaded she became. She did not even realize that she was encountering the same scenes over and over.

The girl passed the lonely kaleidoscope stall countless times, turning the same corner, walking down the same street, and coming back to the same place again and again. Going round and round the same clamorous corner of town like she was circling a whirlpool, the girl was drawn into the mysterious depths of Yoiyama.



“Hey,” the girls chirped as they clung onto the girl’s arm. “Let’s go up top. They’re having the festival there too!”

“Where?”

In response to the girl’s question, they pointed up, past the power cables that dangled over the constrained alley to the tops of the buildings. The sliver of sky that was visible between the rooftops had been overtaken by night.

“Kinglyohoko is there!”

“It’s the prettiest float of them all!”

“Come on, let’s go!”

The girls gathered around her, all clamoring at once.

“Don’t you want to see it?”

“I would love to,” the girl blurted out, then hastily added, “but I can’t.”

“Why can’t you? Tell us, tell us!”

“Well, I have to go home...”

“Come on, it’s going to be lots of fun! I promise!”

Surrounded by all those bright faces pleading with her, the girl felt a twinge of curiosity. Her own face wore a conflicted expression, but she let herself be pulled along.

She fell into thought.

The girl imagined Yoiyama rising like a flood from the depths of the alleys to swallow up the tops of the buildings, the stark white lights leaking from the windows gradually taking on the warm tint of the orange lights of the stalls, the red and white lanterns swaying as high as the rooftops. The scene was based on a memory from when she and her sister had climbed to the

roof of their ballet studio. Clutching the rusty railing, her eye had fallen upon a shrine on the roof of a building far off in the distance. *Where there's a shrine, there must be a festival*, she had thought to herself.

"Just for a moment," she mumbled, letting her mind wander again.

This time she imagined herself in a landscape of water towers and antennas and rooftops of various heights, enveloped in the same light of the festival that surrounded her now. The view was breathtaking. Timeworn wooden bridges connected all the buildings together, stretching as far as the eye could see. The floats rose up from the crowds hidden in the shadows of the buildings like giant street lamps.

Kingyohoko could be seen in the distance, unhurriedly crossing from one building to another. It was an awesome sight, larger than any of the other floats, like a shining fortress.



The girl found herself on Rokkaku Street, standing at the entrance to an alley.

The narrow passageway was squeezed between a multi-tenant building and a cafe, and was so inconspicuous that most passersby would never notice it was there at all. The entrance was guarded by an immense iron gate, flanked on either side by red lanterns. Between the iron bars she could see a paved stone walkway disappearing from the faint light of the street into the gloom. One of the girls opened the gate, and the rest slipped in after her like water disappearing down the drain.

"Where are we going?" asked the girl, stopping short.

"Come on!" smiled the little girl that was holding her hand, gently placing the girl's fingers, still oozing blood, into her mouth. The girl immediately became dazed and docile, and eventually let the little girl's cool hand lead her into the alley.

The dark, deserted path went on and on. Gray walls hemmed the girl in on either side as they trod the stone tiles underfoot. The lights of the town did not reach here, but ahead in the distance the girl could see a light burning, perhaps from a gate lamp. Beyond the light she made out what seemed to be a thickly overgrown forest grove. In the darkness it was hard to be certain of anything. Looking up, she saw a faraway old-fashioned looking building, its tall, thin windows flickering with orange light. The sky was a fragment of indescribably sorrowful indigo.

From ahead came the sound of muffled laughter and the clacking of stone steps as the other girls did a little dance in the midst of the alley, their crimson sleeves flashing like fins as they twirled around and around.

The girl looked back as the little girl pulled her onward, watching the lights of Yoiyama recede behind her.

"I feel a little lonely," she said out loud. "I'd really rather go home now!"

The girls gave no reply. After proceeding on a little further, they all gave the stone floor a little kick and jumped into the air.

They floated in the darkness of the alley, slowly rising up through the air.

"Come on," said the little girl holding her hand.

Imitating the motion, the girl stamped on the floor. At once the languor left her body, and still wrapped in that vague air of melancholy, she began to rise through the alley towards that slice of sky. *Well*, she thought dimly, *maybe I'll go see this place they've been telling me about.*

Laughter rang out like a bell.

Just then, the girl heard loud footsteps on the stone pavement, rapidly approaching from behind. As she began to float upwards, she felt someone grab onto her ankles. Their hands were slick with sweat. The girl was jerked sharply towards the ground; she yelped in pain and instinctively flailed her legs, but the person stubbornly clung on. Glancing down in exasperation, the girl came face to face with her sister, who looked as if she might burst into tears any moment.

"Sister!" the girl cried out, shocked out of her stupor. She reached down to grab her sister's hand.

Her sister tried to pull her down to earth, but the girl in the red yukata pulled her in the opposite direction towards the twinkling sky with all her might. The hand that had formerly felt so cool and pleasant was now bonechillingly cold. The girl shivered in horror and desperately tried to shake her hand free, while her sister doggedly held on to her legs.

The other girls came floating towards them like goldfish come to feed, and began to caress the girl's hair, which was tied up in a bun for ballet practice, taking out the pins that held it one by one. A warm, moist wind blew in from the depths of the alley, and as the girl's untied hair fluttered in the breeze, she felt gravity take hold of her again.

The girl came thumping down on top of her sister.

As the girl in the red yukata came floating down to clutch at the girl once more, her sister rose to her feet furiously and slapped her pale cheek. The dry sound rang through the dark alley with a satisfying echo.

The sister sank to her knees and embraced the girl.

"You know you shouldn't have gone with them," she chided. "And I thought you were a crybaby!"

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered.

Holding her sister tightly, the girl looked up at the girls who had tried to pull her into that inky blue sky as they tittered and floated onwards. The sound of their laughter bounced off the walls of the alley. That laughter had seemed so joyful, but now it sounded utterly transformed. It was the most eerie, forlorn sound the girl had ever heard.

At that moment, the girl had a sudden realization.

Each and every one of the girls that were floating away had the same face.



The girl ran pell-mell with her sister, and before she knew it they had come out onto the broad expanse of Karasuma Street. They sat down, blending in with the multitude of people who were seated eating all sorts of street foods from the stalls.

For a time they did not speak.

Her sister squeezed her hand tightly, and the girl squeezed back, neither caring how sweaty their palms were. As they slumped together, the girl caught a whiff of something sweet, the way her sister always smelled after ballet practice.

After a while, the girl turned to her sister and began to ramble.

They talked about the recital in May, the fun they had eating their packed lunch in the dressing room backstage, like they were on a field trip. Later on, they had stood behind the curtains in the wings, watching the older students perform. They both liked watching from the shadows by the stage much more than watching from the seats. It felt almost magical. The thought that one day, they too might be able to dance like that, and become part of that spectacle, sent a thrill through them.

“What do you think we’ll be performing at next year’s recital?”

They chattered on, sitting on the sidelines of Yoiyama.

Having calmed down, they stood up at the same time and walked to the middle of Karasuma Street, silently observing the festivities growing more raucous by the moment. The streets twinkled with the lights of the stalls, and far off in the distance between the buildings, Kyoto Tower glowed like a candle.

“Let’s go home,” her sister said.

Clasping hands tightly, the two girls set off at a run for the white, ivy-covered house where their mother was waiting for them, leaving behind the Yoiyama night.

Yoiyama Goldfish

Otogawa is the guy who raised the “super goldfish”.

What is the super goldfish?

We were born in Nara, but the town where we graduated high school has had a booming goldfish farming industry for ages. Even the temple where my dad worked as head priest had a large algae-filled goldfish pond. Beneath the fence behind the main temple building ran an old waterway where the goldfish that somehow always managed to escape drifted like red flower petals.

During the summer break of my first year in high school, as I was returning to the temple one day, I saw someone leaning over the waterway. It was Otogawa. Even though we rarely spoke to each other at school, he was gazing so intently at the water that I stopped my bike and called out to him. Shadows from the tree branches that spread over the fence from within the temple compound fell upon the waterway, and Otogawa’s face was dappled with sunlight filtering through the leaves. He looked like an elementary school kid on summer break. For some reason he seemed to be having a great time.

“Oh, Fujita-kun.”

He always said my name with the honorific.

“I’m rescuing goldfish, you know.”

“Why?”

“I want to train them.”

Normally at this point I would probably think, *Better stay away from this guy from now on.* A high schooler who not only saved goldfish but also wanted to “train” them was not a good sign. Abnormal. Bad news. There was no place for me in this guy’s private world. Even though my assessment of the situation was probably correct, I didn’t feel anything particularly off at the time. Maybe I had already been snared by Otogawa’s strange personality. Or maybe I was overwhelmed by the joy of finally being on summer break. Unlike my eldest brother who had to waste his time at an acquaintance’s temple, I, as the youngest son, was totally free.

I stood beside the waterway, wiping away my sweat and watching Otogawa capture goldfish. He put the day’s catch in a tank and nodded to himself, satisfied.

“This one’s tough. It’s got promise,” he said.

“How can you tell whether it’s tough or not?”

“That’s what’s called experience.”

“You have experience?”

“Of course. I have all sorts of experience, you know.”

During the years in high school pent up in that tiny box called a classroom, my relationships usually developed so gradually that I could never pinpoint when I became friends with someone. But I very clearly remembered that this was the day I became friends with Otogawa.

Ten years have passed since then.



There is an insect called the Ōshū Saikawa hellgrammite.

It has a flat, thin body made of numerous segments, and lots of skinny legs. Its head looks like a stag beetle's, with small pincers. It has fewer legs than a centipede, making it look kind of stout.

Whatever conditions were that caused them to reproduce, these weird insects have been sighted in towns west of the Kamo River since the middle of the Showa Period. They enjoy humidity and are usually found lurking in the dark crevices beneath buildings. Sometimes they make an appearance near bodies of water and scare unsuspecting people, but there's nothing particularly bad about them.

These hellgrammites have one strange behavior. When July rolls around on Yoiyama, they crawl out of their usual dwelling place and migrate above ground, crawling up utility poles and the walls of buildings. The path they take is always more or less the same, so if you camped out along it, you'd be able to see a long train of them. This is one of the things that mark the Gion Festival on Yoiyama. Although it's not particularly pleasant to look at, many insect enthusiasts flock to Kyoto just to see it.

A professor of insect ecology once proposed that light from the lanterns that fill the town cause the hellgrammites to travel in a line. Insects swarming around lights is a behavior called "positive phototaxis", but apparently hellgrammites move away from lights of certain wavelengths due to "negative phototaxis". The professor's research showed that the switch to electric lights in lanterns in the past few years also affected the path the hellgrammites take.



—Otogawa said seriously as I stared at him.

We were drinking somewhere in Kyoto. The bar, Seikitei, was located on Rokkaku Street in a traditional wooden house sandwiched between two multi-tenant buildings. With a bamboo curtain covering its entrance, it looked like an old, historical bar, when in actuality it had opened just two years ago.

The already humid air caused by the seemingly endless rainy season was compounded by the mass of drunk customers packed into the room. The AC might as well not have been on. Outside, the lukewarm night breeze made the wind chimes tinkle and brought in various smells from the street stalls. The breeze also quietly carried with it the cacophony of Yoiyama, but this only added to the ambience. Between the window shutters I could see an old man in a yukata, his face glowing red from lantern light.

"Come on, eat up." Otogawa pushed a plate toward me as he wiped his sweat with a moist towelette.

It was a plate of nasty grilled bugs, their long, thin, segmented bodies skewered mid-wriggle. Having been stewed in sugar and soy sauce, they shone a glossy amber in the dim light of the bar.

"Hellgrammites are an aphrodisiac, you know. It'll boost your mojo in no time. You'll be blessed with loads of children."

“How’s that supposed to happen when I’m single?”

“It’s a Yoiyama specialty, so get yo grub on! People will laugh at you if they find out you went to Yoiyama and didn’t have any. Look, it probably goes well with beer.” He poured me another glass.

“Are they really a Yoiyama specialty?” asked a woman who was passing by, looking at Otogawa.

He grinned.

She burst out laughing. “That’s enough, Otogawa,” she said. “Stop pulling his leg, I feel bad for him.”

Otogawa just continued to smirk without saying anything.

“So what are hellgrammites?” I asked.

“The larval form of dobsonflies. They only live in clean rivers.”

“Don’t make me eat some weird-ass bug.”

“It’s true that they’re aphrodisiacs though. Ōshū Saikawa hellgrammites is the name of an actual product.”

“Still, that’s messed up. He’s always been like this.” I said to the woman still smiling beside me. “Nothing but lies from him.”

“I know. Just the other day he pissed off Ms. Suzaki.”

“Has he come back since then?”

“Haven’t seen him.”

“If it really was my fault I’d feel kind of bad.”

“Ms. Suzaki isn’t an alcoholic like you.”

“How rude.”

“Sorry not sorry.”

“One more beer,” Otogawa said, lighting a cigarette. “Man, even though we haven’t met up in ages, all we talk about is stuff from the past.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re not talking.”

“You’re not saying much either, Fujita-kun.”

“I don’t have anything interesting to talk about, unlike you...”

After graduating from a university in Osaka, I’d been working for a consumer electronics manufacturer for the past three years. Although I normally live in Chiba, the company sent me out to the branch in Umeda for the weekend. Since Otogawa had told me to come to Yoiyama this summer, I took the train to Kyoto after getting off work.

Otogawa had stayed in Kyoto after graduating. When we were students, I was always a bit apprehensive, wondering, *What will this guy do in the future?* When I heard that he had gotten a job at a secondhand store, I thought it was kind of fitting. Otogawa had always liked collecting strange odds and ends, and had often happily carried off the junk from our family temple.

“How is your work going?”

“Well, it’s hard to say. It’s a world rife with demons, you know.”

“Then it’s perfect for you.”

“Yeah. I want to become a professional demon. But my boss Kinezuka says I’ve still got a ways to go,” Otogawa said, grinning.

“Still, you haven’t changed at all since high school.”

“I was fully formed when I was young. You know how they say great talents mature early.”

“There’s no such saying.”

“Fujita-kun, you’re the one who said I had an open skylight in my head.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a good phrase. Pithy and easy to understand. You should open a skylight in your head too.”



Back in high school, not many people knew the extent of Otogawa’s weirdness. Although he had no issues doing things others wouldn’t, he was actually pretty shy and tended to keep his mouth shut around people he wasn’t familiar with.

The high school we went to was located on the remnants of a castle said to be built by Tsutsui Junkei. For three years I rode my bike from the train station up the gentle slope that led to the castle.

Those days passed more or less pleasantly.

At the time, I was proud of how popular I was. I didn’t stand out in elementary school, but starting from junior high I gradually became more popular and eventually secured a place for myself in the class in-group. Someone like Otogawa never registered on my radar. It wasn’t until that summer break that I really became aware of his existence.

Incidentally, there were a number of strange occurrences at our school during those years.

A small wooden statue of Jizō would appear on the teacher’s podium every Monday. No matter how many times it was cleared away, a new one would appear the next week. Each one was carved with a cute expression, and it became a topic of conversation even among the faculty. Since it was the statue of a deity, no one wanted to just toss it in the trash, so to this day, they are still smiling beatifically in a corner of the principal’s office.

In the winter of my second year, a Christmas tree appeared in the classroom. Once, all the toilet paper in the mens restroom were replaced with pink, scented paper overnight. When the theater club didn’t have enough funds for the culture festival, it was sent an envelope of cash; and when we returned to school after New Year break, a tiny kagami mochi had been placed on everyone’s desk.

The one who solved the mystery quickly and masterfully, and won the title of high school detective, was Otogawa—not. In reality he was the mastermind behind all the strange incidents, but being so inconspicuous, no one thought to suspect him. To be honest, even I hadn’t considered the possibility until he told me.

I once asked him why he’d done all that.

“Dunno. I just really wanted to,” he replied. “I wonder why. It was my *raison d’etre*, I guess.”

“But no one knows it was you. Isn’t that disappointing?”

“There’s some fun in keeping it a secret too. So don’t go telling anyone.”

Otogawa's shenanigans all cost money, so I wondered where he'd gotten the funds.

When I asked, he said that he enjoyed hiking, so he'd often go collect herbs and sell them to an acquaintance's traditional medicine shop on Nara's Sanjō Street in order to make his budget. He also had a knack for trading in secondhand goods. Unwanted wall scrolls and jars from our temple were small fry for him; from abandoned engines from farming equipment to faded signs from storage sheds, there was probably nothing Otogawa couldn't turn into money.

Everything he did and didn't do was strange. But strange as he was, I never thought he was a genius, or that he had no future. He just lived freely in his eccentricity.

At the time, he was interested in carving Buddhas, but had nowhere to put all his completed statues. So he'd leave them under trees or on top of rocks during his hikes, and when the fancy struck him, at school. That was where all the Jizō statues had come from. Those weren't his only creations; he'd once made an entire papier-mâché float like the ones you see during the Nebuta Festival. Nowhere was his versatility more apparent than in raising the "super goldfish".

After spending his highschool years doing whatever he wanted, he left his hometown in Nara and entered university in Kyoto. A year after that, I started school in Osaka.



I listened to the raucous noises coming from Yoiyama as I sipped my beer.

During university, I had visited Otogawa twice during the festival, but this was my first time getting the actual Yoiyama nighttime experience. The reason for this is that although he always promised to show me around Yoiyama, he usually ended up taking me somewhere else entirely.

"So now you're also a man who has experienced Yoiyama, Fujita-kun," Otogawa said, chewing on some smelt fish. "When are you going back to Chiba?"

"Tomorrow, after I've seen the floats. Can I crash at your place? The hotels are all sold out."

"I'm not taking you in. You can still make the Shinkansen. Anyway, you've already seen Yoiyama, so when you get back to Chiba you can pretend you know all about Kyoto."

"I haven't seen anything yet. Give me a tour, since you're the one that invited me in the first place."

"I've got way too much other stuff lined up."

"I'm not letting you off this time. I've already been tricked into coming here twice before." Otogawa merely chuckled.

My first time visiting Yoiyama was during the summer break of my first year in university. At the time, Otogawa lived in an apartment near Shinnyodō.

He'd sent me a map showing how to get to Shinnyodō by going over Mount Yoshida, but after I'd sweated all the way through the dense forest, he told me that if I'd gotten off at the Ginkakuji Michi bus stop, I wouldn't have needed to wheeze my way over the mountain. Anyway, I rested for a while at his place, then we set off to see Yoiyama, which was unexpectedly disappointing. He pointed at some lanterns inside a shrine and said, "There's a float". I found out later that he'd actually taken me to Kamigamo Shrine.

The second time I visited was during my final summer break in university. I thought for sure he would take me to Yoiyama this time, and boarded a small train with him. It swayed its way out of the city and deeper into the mountains before finally stopping at Kurama. There was nothing else to do but wander around Kurama before going back. Otagawa regaled me with tales about his friend who went to train on Mount Kurama and got chased by wild pigs, water that would fly around the valleys and was therefore called “tengu water”, and other dubious stories, thanks to which, I gained a bunch of useless knowledge and, in the end, never even got to see Yoiyama.

This time, I finally managed to set foot in Yoiyama.

“What were you playing at, those two times?”

“Are you bitter about it?”

“Not really.”

“Why climb a mountain? Because it’s there. Why mess with Fujita-kun? Because Fujita-kun is there. That’s what you call instinct.”

“I was wondering whether you’d actually take me to Yoiyama today. But I’m an adult, so I figured if you didn’t take me I could go on my own.”

“Best not do that,” Otagawa said, frowning his brows. “It’s dangerous for someone not familiar with it.”

“Why?”

“There are various rules in the Gion Festival. If you don’t know what they are...”

“You’re bullshitting again.”

“Oh, you beat me to the punch.”

“I’m not a kid anymore.”

The clock on the wall showed 7 o’clock. Pulling up the blinds and looking out, I saw that even the long summer day was coming to an end. I didn’t notice that we had spent that much time in the bar. Since the nights are short, I had intended to just eat a light meal before going on a walk around Yoiyama.

“Let’s go see this long-awaited Yoiyama,” Otagawa said.

I wanted to go to the bathroom before setting off. Seikitei’s facade wasn’t that wide, but the building extended farther back than I could fathom. A corridor surrounded an inner garden decorated with dense shrubs and stone lanterns.

“It’d be interesting to live in a house like this.”

“Yeah, but there’d be a lot of inconveniences too. It’d be freezing in the winter,” Otagawa said. “Go out from over there by the bathroom slippers. I’ll wait here.”

I pushed open the heavy door and entered a dim storage area. The bathroom was in one corner.

After I did my business and came back, Otagawa was nowhere to be seen. *What!* I thought, *did he give me the slip again?* But I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me panic, so I pretended to take my time admiring the garden. *Can’t take my eyes off him for a second.* Just as I was thinking, *if he really did trick me for a third time, that would be going too far,* I saw something strange.

There was another corridor at the far end of the dimly lit garden.

Something bright and shining slipped out of the sliding door of a room coming off the corridor. It was like those papier-mâché lanterns used in the Nebuta Festival, in the shape of Kintarō⁴. The giant, potbellied Kintarō turned swiftly around and continued silently down the corridor. A young man dressed in work clothes pushed him carefully from behind.

Kintarō turned a corner and disappeared, leaving only an afterimage of the red light in his stomach.

As I stared in astonishment, Otagawa appeared in the place where Kintarō had vanished, grinning as he came down the corridor toward me.

“You thought I’d played you again, didn’t you? I wouldn’t do something that heartless.”

The noise on Yoiyama grew louder when we pulled aside the screen and exited the bar. Tangled silhouettes of utility lines and buildings criss-crossed across the indigo sky as streetlights seemed to float lazily through the town.

The aroma of grilled food from the street stalls wafted on the night breeze.

There were businessmen, old men fanning themselves with round paper fans, women in flamboyant makeup, boys and girls wearing yukata that appeared to be students. As a yukata-clad girl passed me, my eyes were drawn to the nape of her neck.

“So this is what Yoiyama is like.”

The narrow alley was packed with street stalls.

Otagawa started down the street, occasionally meandering toward some particularly delicious smell. He’d always liked buying snacks.

“What will happen if I break the rules that you were talking about earlier?”

“The guys from the preservation society will come get you.”

“You mean the locals?”

“Each neighborhood in charge of building a float has a preservation society. They get together and organize the Gion Festival. The Gion Festival High Council that oversees all the preservation societies is located somewhere near here. If someone disrespects any custom or tradition, they get dragged there and suffer Lord Yoiyama’s punishment.”

“Who’s Lord Yoiyama?”

“Probably the head of the Gion Festival High Council. He has to sort out the logistics of a huge event like the Gion Festival, so I’m sure he’s a terrifying guy. Actually, he might not even be human anymore. All the tourists that get caught and taken there are reduced to tears, I heard. Well, it *is* an event with a long history, so there are bound to be tons of demons. Can’t have anyone treating it like any old holiday.”

“Isn’t it a holiday though?”

Otagawa loved making up stories, and I was his favorite target. Later, after thinking it over, I’d probably kick myself for believing any of this, but he had such a calm demeanor when spinning his lies that I, more innocent than most, always fell for them hook, line, and sinker. Otagawa often said, “Is it my fault for fooling you? Or is it your fault for being fooled?”

But I’m no longer who I used to be.

⁴ A boy of superhuman strength in Japanese folklore, supposedly based on Sakata Kintoki, a skilled warrior who served as Minamoto no Yorimitsu’s retainer during the Heian Period.



I was simply following Otogawa wherever he went so I had no idea where we were.

No matter where I turned, I saw streets full of the same multi-tenant buildings and family homes built with no visible order, and tons of people walking around. Smoke from the street stalls permeated the air. Otogawa continued onward, rounding a corner with no hesitation. As he did so, I saw, beyond a black mass of people, a float decorated with lanterns rising into the indigo sky. It looked like something out of a dream. In front of a convenience stores were coolers full of bottled water and ice-cold beer. I bought a beer and sipped it as we continued on our way.

I was having fun, but the humidity and my slight drunkenness had left me a bit dazed.

Seeing the festival continue no matter where we went was a bit surreal.

The festivals I was used to were no more than fairs at the local shrine, where the shrine itself was obviously the focus of the event. But I couldn't tell what the focus of Yoiyama was. I knew it was called the Gion Festival because it was based out of Yasaka Shrine, but the festival was so vast and sprawling that I couldn't tell where the shrine was at all. It spread out like a shimmering liquid, swallowing the entire city.

These thoughts drifted blearily through my mind.

Cutting through the oppressive, humid air came the sound of a wind chime. The second its crisp, clear tone reached me, all the noises of Yoiyama that had been wrapped around me seemed to fall away. Looking around to see where the sound had come from, I saw, among the crowd, a group of red figures slipping quickly away.

It was a group of girls dressed in gorgeous red yukata.

Although the streets were packed, the girls were able to move lightly through the crowd without bumping into anyone. As I followed their movements, it seemed like time stopped around them. The one in the lead turned her slender neck from side to side and raised a delicate hand, triumphantly showing off the ringing the wind chime those behind her. The girls following her began calling out in a flirtatious voice. Their red yukata stood out boldly against their creamy white skin. Against the deep evening sky, the girls flitted gracefully through the streets like a group of goldfish swimming in a shady canal.

I suddenly thought of the goldfish that swam in the waterway behind our temple. I also remembered Otogawa standing in the water, rescuing goldfish.

Although Otogawa was easy to get along with, he, ironically, never really got used to approaching people. The first time he showed me his fish tank was at the end of autumn during our first year in high school. He had a number of tanks, each with a different water temperature and level of cleanliness. He'd subject his goldfish to more and more severe conditions until he found one that could survive the worst of them. Most of them couldn't adjust and had to be returned to the more habitable tanks, but he said that there was one that was doing perfectly well. The creature that swam lazily in the murky, weed-clogged tank looked nothing like a goldfish. I jumped back in shock when I saw it.

It was as round as a ball, with tiny fins that looked like jowls. It glared at me, waving its fins as if mocking me. Then it began to attack the unknown powdery substance Otogawa sprinkled into the tank with a voracious appetite.

“That’s not a goldfish,” I blurted out.

“True, it’s not a goldfish anymore. It’s gone through all the levels of training, so I call it a ‘super goldfish’. It’s the world’s strongest goldfish.”

“That’s not a goldfish at all. It’s some creature from the Amazon.”

But Otogawa insisted on calling it a “super” goldfish.

“I’ve been training it for three years, you know. It was cute when I first got it. I’m so glad to see it grow into such an intimidating specimen.”

“Whatever floats your boat...but what’s the point of doing this?”

“Excellent question. There is no point whatsoever.”

Seeing Otogawa laughing delightedly at his, I thought, *What a weirdo. But he’s also pretty interesting.*

I smiled inwardly as I remembered all this.

I opened my mouth to call out to him, and realized that he’d disappeared.

Huh?

I stopped in the middle of the writhing crowd and looked around. Otogawa was nowhere to be seen. No matter which way I turned, all I could see were people. I took a few steps, peered this way and that, and sighed. I tried calling his cell phone, but he seemed to have turned it off.

Did he play me?

I stood blankly in the sea of people.

Not again!



During high school, Otogawa would often just up and disappear.

If, when we walked home together, another classmate joined in and struck up a conversation, we would suddenly realize a few minutes later that Otogawa had vanished. At that point, it was too late; no one would know where he’d gone off to. But no one got angry at him for it. “Well, he’s a weird dude,” they’d say, and leave it at that.

When it was just the two of us, he’d be halfway down the street before he finished saying, “I’m going this way, see ya.” He always waited until right before we parted, leaving me with no time to respond. He didn’t seem to care whether I responded or not, but it didn’t feel like he was intentionally being rude. It was just as he said, “I’m going this way.” At those moments, I would stand and watch him leave, as if out of respect. I had no idea why he’d always leave when we reached that street, since his house was in the other direction. I thought maybe he had business to attend to in that area, but there might also have been no reason at all.

I now know the reason, but I still have to admit that I’m jealous of Otogawa.

He wasn’t excluded from the rest of the class, but he wasn’t popular either; he’d disappear down side streets and spend his time wholeheartedly pursuing his little projects. He didn’t feel the need to announce his existence to everyone. As long as he could do what he wanted, all was good. It felt like he was intent on fulfilling his own desires. Talking to him was like a breath of fresh air. It was the wind blowing through the skylight in his head. Any bad mood I carried with me would float away like a balloon being borne high into the sky.

Since I was innocent and sensitive, no matter how good life was, there was always something that irritated or depressed me. When I was angry, though I wasn't savage enough to blow up at anyone, I would ruminate endlessly and make myself even more upset. At those times, I'd often go to McDonald's with Otogawa. I would sit stewing silently in my teenage angst, binge eating french fries while Otogawa talked.

"Fujita-kun, do you know how to divide a watermelon evenly?"

After a few minutes, I would begin to feel that life wasn't so bad after all. I guess I just didn't have it in me to be angsty.



I made it to a parking lot after about an hour.

After going all around Yoiyama, I was completely fed up with the insane crowds, so entering the empty parking lot was a huge relief. From the map, it looked like I was near the intersection of Sanjō Street and Muromachi Street. There wasn't a single car in the parking lot. Under the street light in the corner floated a red carp streamer the size of steel barrel. I had no idea where it could have come from. *As expected from Yoiyama*, I thought, *it's got its own character*.

I sat down on the blue bench that was in a corner of the parking lot.

As I rested my sore feet, I tried calling Otogawa again. As the the outgoing ringtone was ringing, the smell of mosquito incense wafted toward me. As I looked around for the source, there, hidden in the shadow of the giant carp streamer, stood a kid who looked like Kintarō wearing a red workman's apron and a sullen expression. His face was shaped like a rounded square and was as white as a rice cake. A round, plate-like vessel hung from his waist, inside which was the mosquito incense.

Just as I was thinking that this kid had really gone all out on his outfit, Otogawa called.

"Fujita-kun?"

"Oy, Otogawa. You left me hanging again."

"It's not my fault. I was looking for you too. There are so many people here, once you lose sight of someone they're impossible to find, you know."

"I called you a bunch of times," I said, still staring at the Kintarō-looking kid.

He continued to glare at me while covering the opening of the vessel around his waist to keep in the smoke from the incense. Even I, as an adult, wavered under the intensity of his stare.

"Sorry, I didn't hear my phone ringing. Where are you now?"

"How would I know? In some parking lot."

"Parking lot?"

"Where you turn onto Muromachi Street from Sanjō Street. There's a big-ass red carp streamer...and a kid who looks like Kintarō glaring at me. What does he want from me?"

"Oh crap!" Otogawa shouted. "Fujita-kun, you're in trouble. You've entered a prohibited area."

"Kintarō's here too."

“He’s the lookout. The red carp means the area’s prohibited. If you don’t get out of there quick they’ll drag you off to the Gion Festival High Council and then you’ll be in real deep shit. You’re gonna get your ass reamed by Lord Yoiyama!”

“Huh? Even if you tell me now...”

“That’s why I told you not to wander off on your own.”

I stood up.

In that instant, I heard the sound of glass cracking underfoot. Lifting my foot, I saw the shattered pieces of a Kintarō candy. The Kintarō under the streetlight started coming toward me. When he saw the broken candy, his face contorted like he was about to cry.

“Arrest him! Arrest him!” he shrieked.

Lantern light bloomed all around me. Large ones, small ones, an infinite number of lanterns filled the parking lot, completely surrounding me. Panicked, I tried to run away, but a lantern the size of a steel drum pushed me back imperiously and I began to be more angry than afraid. All the lanterns had “Constable” painted on in thick letters. The leader, a young man in a gaudy happi appeared in front of me.

“We are the Gion Festival High Council Special Police Force.”

“Who now?”

“You are in violation of Section 26 of the Gion Yoiyama Ordinance. Surrender quietly!”

“Wait a minute, calm down. I’m just an ordinary tourist.”

“Seize him!” the young man shouted.

A group of muscular men leaped at me.

In the blink of an eye my hands were tied behind me and what appeared to be a wad of bamboo grass had been stuffed in my mouth. As if that wasn’t humiliating enough, my butt was shoved into a bamboo cage so that I couldn’t move at all. They were treating me like a criminal. As I tried vainly to spit out the grass, I was placed on a mikoshi, which was then carefully lifted.

The young man who seemed to be the leader was talking into a cell phone.

“We’ve secured the intruder and are about to take him in.”

○

My butt still stuck in the bamboo cage, I was carried unceremoniously up a ladder that was leaning against the concrete wall at the far end of the parking lot. Between the wall and the dark wooden fence opposite it ran a long, thin alley.

At the end of the alley I could see orange light spilling out of a sliding door.

The men who ran ahead opened the door, and the men who carried me rushed inside. We went down the hall and almost kicked in the sliding door as we screeched to a stop inside room at the far end. I saw a glittering, gold-leafed folding screen. Around the room were arranged numerous fish bowls, inside which goldfish flashed a brilliant red. A man dressed in traditional clothing and holding a folding fan sat at a Japanese-style writing desk, turning a kaleidoscope over and over. His cheeks glowed with good-health, and he sported a small mustache in a style not often seen in this era. The nameplate on his desk read “Antique Store”.

I, along with my caged butt, was deposited in front of him.

He glared sullenly at me. The young man who brought me here presented him with a piece of paper.

He barely glanced at it before shouting, "Look what you've done! Reprobate!"

"I didn't know I wasn't allowed there," I shouted, spitting grass. "Listen to me!"

"Your testimony is rejected!"

"Wait! Wait!"

"Don't try to deny it! Imbecile! Repent to Lord Yoiyama!"

He slammed a giant seal on the paper and said, "That's why I always say you casual tourists are nothing but trouble."

He clapped his hands and the golden screen folded away, revealing a glass door that opened automatically. I was picked up again, my protests going completely unheard.

The glass door led to a small garden. The mikoshi bumped into a stone lantern with a dull thud. We passed through the garden and out a wooden door. The street outside was hung with paper lanterns, under which were figures of beckoning cats and Shigaraki tanuki. We passed by cat, tanuki, cat, tanuki, cat, tanuki, cat, tanuki, cat, tanuki. Just as I was getting dizzy from looking at them, the street ended and we were outside another wooden door.

On the other side was a traditional dry garden. The mikoshi made its way through the perfectly spread sand and along a veranda to a stately house. The room on the first floor was full of people slurping sōmen. Across the length of the room ran an interminably long bamboo flume, through which noodles flowed endlessly. Everyone's attention was on the noodles and nobody even glanced at the mikoshi.

We went up the stairs to the second floor. The wind was howling so loudly that I wondered if there was a storm, but upon entering the room I saw that there was a giant wind blower like the ones used in photoshoots. At the far end of the room was a row of pinwheels spinning at dizzying speeds, and from the lintel hundreds of wind chimes were ringing in wild cacophony. In front of the pinwheels stood a maiko. She held a fluttering carp streamer in her left hand and a large hagoita⁵ painted with a picture of a red carp in her right.

I was questioned again with my butt still stuck in the cage.

"I am told you entered a prohibited shrine, unbidden?" she asked in a soft voice, waving the hagoita back and forth. "And furthermore, tread upon a Kintarō candy and crushed it underfoot? You rascal, you knave!"

She came toward me, "What dark schemes lurk in your mind?"

"I'm not scheming anything!"

"Only a wolf would claim such innocence in the guise of a lamb. Your guilt, sirrah, is quite manifest! No simple visitor are you. What intrigues have you devised? I bid you, speak!"

"I said I'm not."

"Verily? Then you deny that you were plotting to assassinate Lord Yoiyama?"

"I've never seen nor heard of Lord Yoiyama! I have nothing to do with him!"

"You dare think to assassinate Lord Yoiyama...only death may assuage the guilt of this crime."

⁵ A rectangular wooden paddle used to play a game similar to badminton during New Year celebrations. They are often painted with intricate designs and used as decoration.

“Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me! Listen to what I’m saying!”

She picked up a brush and swiftly signed a piece of paper.

“Show our guest out!” she said, and whacked me on the crown of the head with the hagoita.

Stars burst in front of my eyes.

“May you be properly punished by Lord Yoiyama.”

I was carried out into a long hallway, still dazed from the blow.

The hallway was lined with wooden lamps and hundreds of glass orbs hung from the ceiling. Each had a live goldfish inside. As the floor creaked with each step of the men carrying the mikoshi, the fish bowls overhead also clinked loudly against each other.

After passing through a large window at the end of the hall, we went down another wooden walkway going across the top of a roof. I could hear the Gionbayashi⁶ in the distance. As we continued step by step across the walkway, I saw that it went through the laundry deck on the roof of another house. Standing on the laundry deck was a bearded monk, his face and torso completely coated in white powder, hugging a golden lucky cat. Two torches blazed on either side of him.

I nearly passed out from the sheer absurdity of it all.

As the wind roared past the speeding mikoshi, I accepted that I was being taken to the Gion Festival High Council, but still could not figure out the reason for it. I was sure there was some kind of mistake. I hadn’t committed any heinous crime that warranted being abused by one person after another. But I couldn’t help wondering if this kind of disproportionate punishment was the true purpose behind ancient customs. To make you think that it’s better to confess and apologize for any and all crimes. I didn’t know what awaited me at the Gion Festival High Council. Maybe it was better to repent before the monster that was the boss of Yoiyama appeared.

Kyoto must be feared, the Gion Festival must be feared, Yoiyama must be feared.

An ordinary person like me should never have gone off alone.

Finally, the mikoshi stopped in front of the monk. His terrible gaze fell upon me.

“Kanjizai bosatsu!” he roared, and crushed the golden lucky cat in his hand to dust.

My soul nearly left my body. I tried my hardest to burrow deeper into the bamboo cage.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“Shō ken go un kai kū do issai ku yaku sharishi...”

The torches crackled as the monk continued chanting vigorously. I grew up in a temple so I knew right away it was the Heart Sutra. But I didn’t know why he was chanting it. While he chanted, he grabbed the prayer beads hanging from his waist and started munching them. By the firelight, I could see that they were actually hellgrammites stewed in soy sauce and sugar.

“Of all the ridiculous...” I muttered.

The monk’s eyes snapped open. “Toku anokutara sanmyakusanbodai kochi hanyaharamita” he chanted, taking out a long hand towel.

⁶ A band of traditional instruments accompanying each float during the Gion Festival.

He twisted the towel in to a thin rope and leaned toward me. *Is he going to strangle me? Is that why he's reciting the sutra? Is he Lord Yoiyama?* These and a number of other thoughts flashed through my mind. By this point I was too terrified to speak.

"Hara sō gyatei boji sowaka sō gyatei"

The powder-covered monk tied the towel around my eyes.

"...boji sowaka."



Since I could no longer see, I didn't know what route the mikoshi was taking.

It seemed like we had arrived somewhere crowded. I could smell street food. Then I heard the men carry me into a building and down a long hallway. Next they trotted up some stairs, chanting, "One, two, one, two." I heard a lock being turned and felt the night breeze on my cheeks. My nearly departed soul gradually returned to my body.

There was the sound of a door sliding open, and the breeze vanished. It seemed like we were indoors again.

At long last, my butt was freed from the cage, the ropes around my hands were untied, and the blindfold removed. Around me, the monk, the men carrying the mikoshi, the maiko with the hagoita, and the man who looked like the Laughing Buddha with the kaleidoscope were all lying prostrate on the floor. No one made a sound.

The room I was in had sliding paper doors on all sides. It looked like the back of a stage, or the storage room of an antiques store, with items crowded all around.

There were Japanese umbrellas, jars, chests of drawers, a spectacularly ornate doll, next to which was a large oak desk with a celadon porcelain plate on top, inside which were piled a number of kaleidoscopes the size of coffee cans. There were yet more paper lanterns. Old lamps and orchid-shaped glass objects, bottles of Akadama port wine, lucky cats and Shigaraki tanuki, streamers, wooden lamps, stone lanterns, large fans, Boys' Day dolls...

Across from me sat a man who looked like someone you'd see at the Jidai Festival, dressed like an aristocrat from the Heian Period. Next to them was a lantern with the words "Goldfish" painted on it; facing them on the right side was the Nebuta-style papier-mâché Kintarō, and on the left side was a papier-mâché Momotarō, both glowing dazzlingly. The man leaned on his armrest, kneading, with apparent effort, some white fluffy material that looked like cotton. When he finally managed to roll it all into a large ball, he smiled in satisfaction. He raised a fan painted with a grotesque goldfish to his mouth and glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"I act as Lord Yoiyama's proxy," he said in falsetto. His face was entirely painted with white powder, apart from two red spots on his cheeks.

I prostrated myself, just in case.

"Fujita, thou hast violated the commandments of Yoiyama and wound us deep by thine defilement of its ancient traditions. Doubt not the wrathful fury of Lord Yoiyama, his tiger-footed rage."

I had no idea what he was saying.

But since I had already been released from my bonds, I had no reason to stay and wait for some ridiculous punishment to be rained down upon me. I began to plot my escape as the man continued on in his unintelligible language.

“Lord Yoiyama shall mete his punishment by fire,” he said, picking up the ball he had rolled earlier.

“You were serious about the punishment? I thought it was just a figure of speech.”

“My, how rude,” the maiko said, reaching out to hit me with the hagoita.

I leaped up and tried to make a run for it, but the monk caught me easily with one hand and pinned me to the tatami. *How hot is this fire going to be? I just came to Yoiyama to sightsee, why did I have to get captured by this group of lunatics and burned alive?* As these thoughts ran through my mind, everything suddenly went dark.

“Lord Yoiyama has arrived!”

The monk let go of me. The group that had brought me here retreated as one. I was alone in the middle of the room.

Yoiyama’s skylight opened.

The ceiling rolled up from the ends of the room and disappeared, leaving only the night sky above. The four sliding doors around me fell with a boom and let in the night breeze. It looked like I was on the roof of an old building in the center of the city. I stared dumbfounded at the glittering lights that stretched out endlessly into the distance. Every street was inundated with festival lights.

Across from the papier-mâché Kintarō and Momotarō, a float-like contraption hung full of lanterns painted with the words “Goldfish” came toward me on silent wheels. Between each lantern swayed an orb with a goldfish inside. The goldfish swimming back and forth looked even more vibrant in the lantern light. A laundry pole tied with straw ropes and decorated with twinkling Christmas lights stuck out from the top of the entire thing. On top of a pedestal surrounded by the lanterns was a large box covered by a screen.

As I stood up to get a better look, Kingyohoko came to a stop in front of me.

The laundry pole let off a volley of fireworks that exploded in the night sky.

And the terrifying Lord Yoiyama that brought groups of tourists to tears finally arrived—

The screen around the box drew up silently.

Behind it was a giant fish tank that looked big enough to house a mola mola.

In the light of the hanging lanterns floated a corpulent, mutinous monster that could no longer be called a goldfish, or perhaps had never been a goldfish. Fluttering its disproportionately tiny fins, it settled at the center of the tank and glared out at the sight of Yoiyama below. Even though its noble name deemed it the lord of Yoiyama, I knew the creature’s humble origins better than anyone else.

“Super goldfish!” I murmured.

The Heian Period aristocrat standing beside me said in a singsong voice, “Is it my fault for fooling you? Or is it your fault for being fooled—”



Otogawa and I gazed lazily at Kingyohoko as the breeze blew past us. He hit a switch hidden in his fan and the Christmas lights started flashing in a different pattern.

Behind us, the monk, maiko, Laughing Buddha, and the men who carried the mikoshi were busy cleaning up. It reminded me of being in a school festival.

Otogawa offered me some grilled hellgrammites.

"Is that actually edible?"

"It's good for virility. The super goldfish is proof."

"Did you really create the goldfish by feeding it that stuff?"

"Well, well." Otogawa grinned. "Anyway, this is Yoiyama, Fujita-kun."

"You're such a liar."

"To be honest, preparing all this was a huge pain in the ass. It was so much work I considered giving up. Even though I might seem cheap saying this, but this really took a whole lot of time and money."

"I can tell."

"Were you surprised? Did you really think you were about to be burned alive by Lord Yoiyama?"

"I just have one question. What was the point of doing all this?"

"Excellent question. There was no point, none at all." Otogawa laughed delightedly. "But it opened the skylight in your head, didn't it?"

Yoiyama Theater

Konagai lived on Muromachi Street, near the intersection with Rokkaku Street in the northwest part of the Shijo Karasuma district. His residence was a studio flat in a building erected eighteen years previously. Few students could afford to live in such an area, but the owner of this building happened to be his uncle, who rented the flat to him quite cheaply.

Most people would consider themselves lucky, but whenever marveling friends from school came to visit, Konagai had only complaints to regale them with: how the bike ride to campus took a whole twenty minutes; how crowded the neighborhood outside the building was; how ominous sounds were always emanating from the walls; how the next-door neighbor was always bringing home girls (pretty ones, too); how the third floor landing was haunted...

And above all, how much he *hated* the Gion Festival.

The festivities reached their climax during the night of Yoiyama and the float parade on the following day. Sightseers poured into the neighborhood from every direction imaginable. They came on bullet trains, on the JR line, on the Hankyu line, on the Keihan line, on the Kintetsu line—all told there were hundreds of thousands of them. Come the evening of Yoiyama, the surrounding streets would be packed to the gills with street vendors and tourists and locals. Koiyama⁷ would be erected near his apartment building, illuminating the street below with its paper lanterns.

Konagai shut himself up in the apartment when the midpoint of the Gion Festival approached, for fear that once he was sucked into the wave of people streaming by, he wouldn't be able to get back again. *Did all these people really have to pick this one place to gather at the same time?* he would grumble to himself, alone in his room.

"If all you're going to do is complain about the Gion Festival," someone once admonished him, "why don't you pack your bags and go relax at the Ohara no Sato hot springs or something until the festival's over? Nobody's stopping you."

To tell the truth, Konagai was of the same opinion. And yet, the first thing out of his mouth was, "Moving's a pain in the ass."

The second thing was, "Man, I hate the Gion Festival..."

In spite of that, Konagai could occasionally be seen sitting on his balcony gazing down at the throngs below, sipping a beer contentedly as he squinted in the light of the float. Some people thought that he secretly enjoyed the Gion Festival. Whenever someone suggested that to him, he would flatly deny the rumor.

"I know how selfish I am, but I'm man enough to take whatever pain that brings me," he once said. "Whatever happens, I'll take care of it—as long as I get to complain a little more than the next guy."



Our story begins at the crack of dawn on the day of Yoiyama.

⁷ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/koiyama.html>

Day was breaking as Konagai finished up the last of the night's work. The only thing on his mind was the prospect of sleep, no matter how little. The cawing of crows scavenging through the trash echoed around him as he groggily trudged through the alleys, heading for home, and his slightly grubby futon. Above the corners of the buildings, the cloudless blue July sky was streaked through with the steadily growing rays of dawn. In the stillness of the morning, it was almost unfathomable that these deserted streets would soon be filled with the bedlam of Yoiyama.

"Of course no one's around before the start of the festival," Konagai grumbled to himself. "Bunch of bandwagoners."

He glanced up. Alone in the deserted expanse of Muromachi Street stood the roped-up silhouette of Koiyama.

"Jackass," growled Konagai.

Rubbing his eyes as he walked up the stairs to his apartment, he took the briefest of showers to wash off the sweat before collapsing into his futon completely naked. Just as he began to nod off, a call came in from his friend Maruo.

"Hey, great work last night, hope you're not too put out, huh? See you later today?"

"I've got work in three hours. Just let me sleep."

"I'm counting on you, you know—"

"Piss off."

Konagai abruptly hung up before Maruo could finish.

Before he dozed off completely, his thoughts began to drift back.

The runup to this year's Yoiyama had been incredibly exhausting, primarily due to Maruo, who had invited Konagai to meet him at the university's central cafeteria back when the first buds of spring had only just begun to bloom. The two were not especially close, but they had been in the same lab group. Konagai knew Maruo as a laidback, potbellied, flabby-armed fellow who was rather capable at getting others to do his bidding: in other words, someone who knew how to get things done.

The dingy fluorescent lights of the cafeteria buzzed overhead as Maruo polished off a mouthful of miso-stewed mackerel and smacked his lips with gusto, before announcing, "I'm starting a club."

This proclamation failed to impress Konagai. For one, he had worked as part of the theater club stage crew, until the grueling work of last year's cultural festival led him to quit. He had no interest in burning out again. Besides, there was something fishy about the whole affair. Few students would just up and start a club out of nowhere halfway into their college careers without some ulterior motive in mind. Konagai suspected that this was just a way for Maruo to rope a bunch of young coeds into his own personal harem, and that suspicion was cause enough for him to turn the offer down.

Maruo pulled up a sleeve and rubbed his underarm fat, sounding injured.

"What a thing to say, what a thing. All the ladies love me, you know."

"...I'm not even going to try to argue with you."

"It'll only be until the summer. Look, I know someone from the Nara Prefecture student association, guy by the name of Otogawa, it's his ask. He works at a thrift store, and I lent him a

hand for a job a while back—I mucked up the whole thing, total wash—and that’s why he asked me to work on this job.”

“Hold on a second. If you mucked everything up, why would he ask you to do another job?”

“Perfection isn’t everything.” Maruo tittered unpleasantly. “The plan is to create an ersatz Gion Festival.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Details can wait. We’ll be calling the club the Gion Festival High Council.”

“You sure that will fly? I don’t think the real Gion Festival people will be very happy with you.”

“There’ll even be compensation the day of the festival: thirty thousand yen for the night’s work.”

“Thirty thousand!”

“Well, that’s how much work we’ll be expecting from you, but really, Otogawa will be handling most of the heavy lifting.”

Konagai crossed his arms and thought as Maruo leered at him. Thirty thousand yen was a lot of money. And while he had gotten pretty burnt out, Konagai was a veritable legend of the stage crew, and he knew it. The days since he quit the theater club last fall had felt empty and meaningless, but now he felt his inner stagehand begin to stir.

“I’ve heard the stories about you,” Maruo casually remarked. “You are the guy that built the castle at the cultural festival, yes?”

Konagai modestly shook his head, trying to keep the satisfaction from showing on his face. “Someone else thought that up; I was just the logistics guy.”

“I’m telling you, you’re just the guy this enterprise needs to succeed,” entreated Maruo, thrusting out a fleshy hand.

After considering for a moment, Konagai reached out and shook Maruo’s hand. He knew how selfish he was, but he was also quite conscious of the fact that he was a sucker for a compliment.



Konagai rose groggily from his futon, a surly expression on his face. He had only slept for three hours.

He took a near-freezing shower, yelping as the cold water pounded his body.

Leaving his abode, Konagai walked down the stairs to find the narrow confines of Muromachi Street already swarming with people. Many of them were stopping to take pictures in front of Koiyama. In an instant Konagai’s face turned sour. Though the lanterns on the floats would not be lit until sundown, already tourists were pouring into Kyoto for Yoiyama.

“Nobody wants you here,” Konagai sulkily muttered to himself, as if he spoke for the entire neighborhood.

After several minutes of pushing through the crowds, he arrived at a convenience store on Sanjō Street. The manager was standing in front of the store next to a cooler filled to the

brim with ice. He was round and rather shaped like a kamo eggplant, animatedly hawking juice and beer to the festival crowds.

“Good morning.”

“Morning, morning...say, Konagai, you’re sure you can’t come in tonight?”

“No, sorry, I can’t make it tonight.”

“I see...well...shame, that...”

Leaving the manager to mumble to himself, Konagai went to the back of the store to change. He worked weekends here with the eggplant-shaped manager, choosing the job simply because it was only a few minutes’ walk from his studio. He had asked to take this weekend off ages ago, but none of the other employees would switch with him, and in the end he had to settle for getting off at five in the afternoon—hence, his current sleep deprivation.

It irritated Konagai how brisk business was during the Gion Festival. What was the point of coming all this way for the festival just to buy things at a convenience store?

He went out front to take over for the manager.

“Take this, you’ll need it,” said the manager, offering him a navy blue handkerchief emblazoned with a white praying mantis. “Nice, ennit? I bought it when I snuck off for a gander at Tōrōyama yesterday.”

Forcing a smile onto his face, Konagai called out to the tourists loitering along the narrow street: “Juice! Ice cold beer! Fried chicken!” His voice was ragged with fatigue and lack of sleep. Wrinkles would gather on his forehead whenever he zoned out for even a moment. With the sun rising higher in the sky, and the throngs pressing in on the street, the heat soon became unbearably stifling. Konagai draped the handkerchief over his shoulder so he could wipe away the sweat from his brow, and whenever he began to feel faint he took out a piece of ice from the cooler and pressed it to his head.

As the day weathered on, Maruo suddenly emerged from out of the crowd. The crew had worked furiously all through the previous night, but Maruo had somehow managed to slip away halfway through. Tellingly, his unblemished complexion had none of the pallid hue that normally accompanies an all-nighter: if anything, his skin was even more radiant than usual.

“Fried chicken please. Oh, and a beer,” he announced.

A furrow crept onto Konagai’s forehead.

“Where did you sneak off to last night?”

“Come on, you can’t blame me for being tired, right? That’s why I called this morning, you know, I really felt bad about being the only one to get a full, peaceful night of sleep.”

Maruo took a big bite of chicken, washed it down with a swig of beer and continued, “There’s really nothing, you know, nothing like tossing back a cold one in front of someone toiling away under the hot sun. This must be what a guilty pleasure tastes li—”

“Yeah, okay, good for you. How’s everything coming along?”

“Splendidly, just as I envisioned it. Kingyohoko should be done on time, thanks to Yamadagawa’s fine efforts, and we’re due to conduct a test run of the nagashi sōmen and fans momentarily. I haven’t been able to contact Otagawa, which I admit is worrisome...but then again, he does have a flair for mystery.”

“I don’t feel like going anymore. I don’t really have to be there, do I?”

“Don’t be silly, today’s our chance to show what we’re made of! This could be your one shining moment. Besides,” Maruo added bluntly, “when is anyone going to need you this much again?”

He reached in his bag and produced a chimaki⁸. “Right. You’re going to be stuffing this in the mark’s mouth. Try to get some practice.”

Konagai sighed as Maruo strolled off into the crowd, then reached into the cooler and put another piece of ice to his forehead.



The Gion Festival High Council was officially inaugurated in mid-May at a pub called Seikitei. Otogawa was nowhere to be seen, so Maruo officiated the meeting in his place.

The corpulent commandant put himself in charge of the entire organization, which would be split into four teams, each with its own leader. Idle students would be rounded up and put to work where extra manpower was needed. Maruo and the four leaders would come up with the battle plan. Otogawa would supervise.

Maruo was waiting in the second floor lounge when Konagai arrived, along with two of the other leaders: Takayabu, a bearded bear of a man, and an elegant-looking woman. Konagai started when he saw the woman—she stopped by the convenience store every Saturday during his shift, just past noon. She peered at his face curiously after he sat down on the tatami across from her, seeming to recognize him as well.

“Have we met somewhere before?” she inquired.

“Yeah, I work at the convenience store every Saturday.”

Her face lit up. “Of course! I didn’t recognize you without the uniform, but I knew I’d seen you somewhere.”

“You live around here?”

“I’m a teacher at a ballet studio on Sanjō Street. Oh, I’m Misaki.”

Konagai could practically see her poised in the middle of a stage, radiating the grace and beauty of a swan.

Misaki was scarcely a year older than Konagai, though her calm demeanor made her seem more mature than her years. She had first become acquainted with Otogawa after she aided with one of his jobs during a pause in a ballet lesson; this incident had somehow also led to her becoming drinking buddies with Maruo.

I knew that guy was a sleazebag, Konagai thought to himself. All in all, though, he was rather pleased to have made this unexpected acquaintance. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad.

The last person was yet to arrive when Maruo stood and called the meeting to order.

“We are here, my friends, to create a fake Gion Festival. Otogawa’s friend Fujita will be coming to Kyoto on Yoiyama. Our objective is to lure him into our ersatz production and give him a little lesson in trickery.”

“Why on earth are we doing that?” asked Misaki.

“Yeah, what’s the point? We settling some kind of score?” said Konagai.

⁸ Steamed sticky rice with filling wrapped in bamboo leaves.

“No, there’s no score, no grand objective,” Maruo explained. “We’re just doing this because Otagawa wants to see it happen. It doesn’t mean anything, and that lack of meaning gives the act meaning. So, we are free to do whatever we please. Otagawa will be footing the bill for everything, by the way. The mark is a first-timer to the Gion Festival, and he doesn’t seem to be the brightest bulb, so have at it!”

Maruo assigned each of them their roles. The big, bearded, intense-looking man in the corner would be in charge of the muscle; Maruo would direct the entire operation; Konagai would handle procurement and logistics; and Misaki would be in charge of the schedule. In addition, they would each play a character and interact with the mark during the show.

Konagai thought that this was getting a little preposterous. “This is a lot of work for a prank,” he confided to Misaki.

“I’m not sure I’ll be up to it,” she agreed.

“You’ll be fine. After all, you’re used to the spotlight. Me, I’ve only ever worked backstage.”

“Our last team leader seems to be running late, but she will serve as our creative director,” announced Maruo.

Konagai had been joking and smiling with Misaki, but the moment he heard these words, the smile slid off his face. He rubbed his stomach, feeling a leaden weight settle in. For some reason, he had a bad feeling about this.

Looking around the many faces in the crowded room, Konagai caught sight of one with which he was all too familiar. It belonged to a woman who was standing on the other side of the lounge, sweeping her haughty gaze across the room. Maruo caught sight of her and called out, “Hoy, Yamadagawa! Over here!”

“Hey, sorry for being late...” The woman stopped and let out a gasp when she noticed Konagai.

“Not you!” Konagai groaned.

“My word, you two are acquainted?” exclaimed Maruo, feigning surprise rather unconvincingly. The notion that Maruo had recruited Konagai for theater work while remaining ignorant of his history with Yamadagawa Atsuko was far fetched, at best.

Yamadagawa Atsuko had been the bullheaded creative director of “The Count of Monte Crackpot”, a guerrilla theater production that was staged during the cultural festival the previous year. Bulldozing through every obstacle in her path, she directed the construction of the Crackpot Castle in the Clouds on top of the engineering building. Her freewheeling, absurdist vision and iron grip on the production drove Konagai to exhaustion, which ultimately led to his resignation from the company.

Just as Konagai began to get up, Misaki smiled at him and asked, “Do you two know each other?”

“Now, now, Konagai, no need to look so, you know, *irate*. Sit down, there’s a good lad!” Maruo urged him, a wide grin still plastered on his face.

Frozen on his knees, Konagai looked at Misaki, Maruo, and Yamadagawa in turn. Yamadagawa’s face was inscrutable. No one said a word until Yamadagawa finally took a seat, shooting a withering glance at Konagai.

“Don’t burn out on us this time,” she sneered.

Konagai bristled. "You wish!" he snapped back.

Konagai had a reputation for being easily flattered, but he also never backed down from a challenge.



By the end of May, the group had met three more times and hammered out the plot. Each time, the discussions were held over food and drink at Seikitei, which meant the bills quickly racked up. "You just let me handle it," Maruo assured them confidently. Konagai thought that confidence was astonishing, considering none of it was Maruo's own money, but that didn't stop him from eating and drinking his fill.

Maruo and Otogawa had already settled on the concept of an Ersatz Gion Festival: the details were left for the group to decide. Maruo proposed that, rather than simply conjuring up a fantastical festival, they concoct a narrative to go along with the manufactured phantasmagoria, and over the course of much debate and discussion, they pieced the story together.

According to this invented lore, each of the Yoiyama floats was maintained by its own neighborhood preservation society; each society reported to the Gion Festival High Council, the magisterial body responsible for disciplining those tourists who dared flout the precepts of the festival; and holding sway over the council was a mysterious figure known as Lord Yoiyama (they later decided that Lord Yoiyama would be played by a goldfish). Fujita, their unfortunate quarry (and Otogawa's friend), would be apprehended on the pretense of having broken some rule, and consequently be dragged to various stations around town for interrogation before being hauled off to face the empyreal judgment of Lord Yoiyama.

This, Fujita's trip through hell, would form the substance of the Ersatz Gion Festival.

Knowing what a sucker the mark was, they decided that they would have to rely on size and spectacle to keep him in thrall. With the city thronged for Yoiyama, though, staging sets on real streets was out of the question.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Konagai.

"Nothing to worry about," said Maruo smugly. "Otogawa has friends in town. All we do is borrow a few of their houses and lure the mark inside, simple as that."

"Is it, though?" Misaki mused. "What if he runs away?"

"Well, let's see, let's see.. We can lock him in a cage, so he can't get away, and carry it on a litter. Like a mikoshi, you know, with all the guys wearing happi coats shouting and chanting carrying the shrine on their backs. It'll be fun, like a carnival ride!"

"And if he starts screaming?"

"Then we'll stuff his mouth with something. Perhaps something, you know, festival-y..."

"A chimaki!" cried Yamadagawa Atsuko.

"Well, those are quite delicious, I suppose."

"Surely she means the talismans they make from bamboo leaves?" Misaki pointed out. "They sell them during the Gion Festival."

"Ah, I see. Yes, yes, I daresay it would be rather difficult to talk with a dry bundle of leaves in your mouth."

"Right? Sometimes I surprise even myself," boasted Yamadagawa.

“All right, I think we’re ready to get going,” Maruo declared.

“I don’t even want to think about how much this is all gonna cost.”

“No need for worry, my friends, all the money comes no strings attached,” said Maruo, and just as he had assured them, Otagawa gave the plan his blessing.

○

Konagai went on break shortly past noon. After slurping up a cup ramen in the back room, he took a walk for a change of pace.

He bought a drink from the vending machine in front of the smoke shop and sipped it slowly, watching the crowds drift by. Some people were already wearing yukata. Couples sauntered down the street, holding hands that must have been sticky with sweat.

As he let out a yawn, Maruo called again.

“Hey, Konagai, glad to hear from you again. I’m doing the final check on the rooftop passages right now. Once we get these lanterns lit, it’s going to look *magical*, you know? Heady stuff, right?”

“Happy to hear it.”

“And with all the torches glowing below, and Takayabu with the shaved head and his whole body painted white, just standing there...I think my heart would stop, don’t you think so?”

“Sounds great.”

“But I’m telling you, Takayabu just does not want to shave his head, you know, he just keeps chickening out, so I had Yamadagawa give him a little pep talk, but really, I hope he gets himself together soon, I really do...”

“Poor guy.”

“Anywho, with Takayabu out for the mo’, we’re a little shorthanded here. You couldn’t, you know, ditch that lame job of yours and come over early? And I hope you’ve been practicing with that chimaki.”

“Don’t call my job lame. I’m not going anywhere until five.”

“That’s just too bad. I was supposed to meet with Otagawa, but he hasn’t showed up. You know, he just never picks up his phone, can you believe it?”

For all his complaining, Maruo sounded quite sanguine.

“Welp, I’ll be waiting for you. Get off early if you can.”

“It’s not going to happen.”

Konagai practiced thrusting the chimaki a few times before heading back to work.

○

With the plan having been finalized in May, the first days of June found the club beginning preparations in earnest. Maruo walked around giving pep talks; Takayabu chanted the Heart Sutra incessantly, preparing for his role as a demonic monk; Misaki, who was to play a maiko, practiced speaking the Kyoto dialect; and Yamadagawa Atsuko threw herself into the work of bringing the ideas teeming in her mind to life. Still, the mastermind of the entire project, Otagawa, was nowhere to be found.

Konagai knew better than anyone how onerous dealing with Yamadagawa Atsuko could be. “Yamadagawa doesn’t have any imagination,” he had once claimed. “Calling it imagination is giving her way too much credit. She’s just a nutcase, and all of her ‘ideas’ are just completely incoherent.”

And just as he had feared, all sorts of requests from Yamadagawa Atsuko started to roll in: washi paper and bamboo strips in bulk for a papier-mâché Kintarō; cardboard, plywood, distemper paint, wire, rope, Christmas lights, and lanterns for the goldfish float; rush mats for seating the mark; wooden lanterns for illumination; daruma dolls, lucky cats, and carved wooden Buddha statues; wind chimes, carp streamers, and pinwheels to hang from the ceiling, and large fans to blow them with.

Failing to meet even one of Yamadagawa’s requests would have been an affront to Konagai’s honor, and so he went out and got washi paper, bamboo strips, cardboard, plywood, distemper paint, wire, rope, and Christmas lights. He constructed lanterns by buying up cheap paper lanterns in bulk and wrapping them with thin paper on which he had printed “Goldfish”. He bought rush mats and wooden lanterns at a home improvement store. He enlisted the help of Kinezuka Enterprises, the company Otogawa worked for, to get the Laughing Buddha statues and daruma dolls and lucky cats.

The goldfish globes did give him pause. They were supposed to be glass orbs suspended from the ceiling like wind chimes, with live goldfish swimming around inside. Konagai had never seen or heard of such a thing. He didn’t have a choice, though, so he headed to the discount store and bought a bunch of round, transparent plastic wind chimes, painstakingly modifying them one by one.

Each new commission from Yamadagawa found Konagai venting fresh frustrations to Maruo, but for all his grumbling, he always pushed his trademark ingenuity to its limits to complete each order.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were enjoying this,” observed Maruo.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Konagai retorted. “I wouldn’t be here if I had a choice, okay? I’m just doing my job!”

All of the completed props were carted off to a house behind Kinezuka Enterprises. True to his word, Otogawa had pulled some strings and secured the use of several adjacent houses and gardens.

Upon learning of this, Yamadagawa’s ambition only grew, and she resolved to transform the entire block into an unearthly facsimile of Yoiyama. She sequestered herself in her new workshop, only infrequently going to campus.

Her pet project was the goldfish float, Kingyohoko. As Konagai lived in the vicinity, he was often asked to help out. Maruo and Misaki were usually sitting in the workshop with a crew of college students, hard at work pasting paper to bamboo strips or toiling at some other fiddly task. Occasionally Takayabu would be there too, hunched uncomfortably over a goldfish globe. Yamadagawa would be standing in the middle of it all, urging their efforts on. Every time Konagai came onto this scene he was hit with horrible flashbacks to his theater days.

Maruo, the nominal director of the operation, cheerily consented to everything that Yamadagawa proposed, so the project soon devolved into a potpourri of Japanese tropes,

bearing almost no resemblance to the real Gion Festival. Privately, Konagai referred to this collection of knickknacks as “Yamadagawa Theater”.

One day, as Yamadagawa paced around the workshop carrying the enormous, still-unpainted papier-mâché Kintarō, Konagai pulled her aside and told her, “Don’t you think this is a bit much?”

She scowled at him. “Excuse me, I’m being *creative* here.”

“Then why don’t you go back and be creative in the theater company?”

Yamadagawa merely sniffed at him as Maruo glided in to defuse the tension.

“Now now, Otogawa is quite pleased by the direction our work is taking. In fact, he regards Yamadagawa’s imagination quite highly.”

“Ha, see!” shouted Yamadagawa, nostrils flaring triumphantly.

Konagai barely glanced her way. “You’re telling me you’re okay with tossing away all the actual traditions and making up a bunch of fairy tale gibberish? Doesn’t it bother you that none of this has anything to do with Kyoto, or even the Gion Festival? Even the mark can’t be stupid enough to swallow all this crap.”

“Perhaps, perhaps you’re overthinking things. What do you know about the Gion Festival, hmm? What about Kyoto traditions? I will be the first to admit that I don’t know the first thing about either of them.”

“I don’t know anything either,” Konagai admitted.

“You see? Nothing to be worried about,” beamed Maruo. “And lest we forget, our mark is just as oblivious.”

Even with so many things on her plate, Yamadagawa managed to keep a close eye on even the smallest details. Takayabu had it the worst of all: not only did he have to paint his body white for his role, he was also being coerced into eating bugs. Courtesy of Otogawa, Maruo had gotten his hands on Ōshū Saikawa hellgrammites, a traditional Chinese medicine. Yamadagawa’s brilliant idea was to use them to make the demon monk even more horrifying.

“All you have to do is scarf a few of them down. Maruo, get more from Otogawa,” she ordered.

“Gimme a break,” Takayabu groaned, burying his face in his hands. “How am I supposed to eat bugs?”

“It’s traditional medicine, you’ll feel strong as an ox.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to use that strength for?”

Yamadagawa’s face lit up again when she heard those words, and in true thespian fashion, whenever Yamadagawa looked happy, Takayabu was about to look sad.

“What if we made the monk super strong? I bet the mark would wet himself. We should make him crush something really hard with his bare hands—no, one-handed!”

“What about walnuts? Those are pretty hard to crack,” offered Misaki, who was sitting in a corner of the room taking wind chimes out of a box and laying them out.

“That sounds like a great idea!” Konagai swiftly piped up, but Yamadagawa immediately shot it down.

“That won’t work,” she said dismissively. “Too small, doesn’t have any impact. There’s nothing scary about it, and what kind of monk walks around carrying walnuts? It doesn’t make

any sense. We need something freakier, like...I know! We can use one of those creepy golden lucky cats!"

"That makes even less sense!" Konagai objected, but his protests fell on deaf ears.

"Can you crush a lucky cat with one hand, Takayabu?" Yamadagawa barked.

"Are you kidding? What do I look like, some kind of freak?"

"Oh. Well, that's a letdown."

It fell to Konagai to craft a crushable styrofoam facsimile.

She's really lost it this time, he privately concluded. A bristly-faced, hellgrammite-chomping, lucky cat-crushing, Heart Sutra-chanting monk: sure, it was scary, but it didn't make a lick of sense, and it *definitely* had nothing to do with the Gion Festival. Konagai didn't know what they were trying to accomplish anymore.



Konagai had returned to his post under the umbrella in front of the convenience store, selling drinks and wiping away sweat.

Glancing around, he saw Misaki's sedate figure in the crowd. Noticing him staring, she smiled and approached him. Her hair was tied up in a tight bun, as it always was during her Saturday afternoon visits. With her lofty posture and calm demeanor, she was easy to pick out of the crowd.

"Lunch break?" asked Konagai.

"Indeed. One bottle of tea, please."

Konagai plucked a plastic bottle out of the icy water and wiped it off before handing it to Misaki, who put it to her forehead.

"Ooh, that feels nice," she sighed. "How are the preparations coming along? I do feel terrible that I can't make it until later."

"Maruo seems to have it under control. You done any practicing with the hagoita?" Konagai asked.

"Perish the thought!" Misaki laughed. "I'll see you later then?"

"Yup. I'm looking forward to seeing your maiko impression!"

Misaki bobbed her head and walked away.

After meeting Misaki, Konagai had learned that ballerinas were not just graceful, delicate creatures.

It all started with the golden lucky cat.

At Yamadagawa's insistence, Konagai had fashioned a styrofoam replica of a lucky cat statue. It was a little rough around the edges, but from a distance it looked passable. Satisfied with his handiwork, Konagai brought it to the workshop.

The production was well advanced, and the house and its grounds had taken on a most peculiar semblance. Save for Maruo, Misaki, and Yamadagawa, the workshop was empty that day. Yamadagawa was bossing Maruo around, while Misaki was twirling around an enormous hagoita which Konagai had picked up in a thrift store in Ichijouji.

“What dark schemes lurk in your mind?” she muttered to herself, her Kyoto accent still stilted and uncertain. “Only a wolf would claim such innocence in the guise of a lamb. Your guilt, sirrah, is quite manifest! I bid you, speak!”

Konagai acknowledged her with a nod as he passed, making his way over to Yamadagawa, who sat on the floor with her usual scowl, inspecting a row of Shigaraki tanuki ornaments and lucky cat statues.

“It’s done,” said Konagai, handing her the styrofoam lucky cat.

Yamadagawa harrumphed and turned it over, eyeing it shrewdly, then crushed it between her hands. “Good,” she said.

For a moment, Konagai was speechless. “What are you doing!?” he eventually spluttered. “Do you know how hard I worked on that?”

“We wouldn’t know how hard it would be to crush unless we tried it, would we!”

Sensing the sparks flying between the fiery duo, Maruo and Misaki rushed to break up the quarrel before it came to blows. Maruo attempted to reason with Konagai, while Misaki did the same with Yamadagawa. But Yamadagawa’s ire, once sparked, could not be extinguished, and she turned her fury against Misaki, mocking ballet and jeering her inept Kyoto accent.

“Don’t like it? Then you come up with some ideas!”

Misaki was caught off guard. “We, we could, um, put out cotton candy?” she stammered. Unsurprisingly, this proposal did little to improve Yamadagawa’s mood.

Konagai attempted to come to the rescue. “Cotton candy is a great idea! It’s fanciful! And sweet!”

This only made Yamadagawa angrier.

“Forget the stupid cotton candy!” she shrieked. “You want cotton candy, you can go out to one of the stands and buy it yourself!”

“S-see, Konagai thinks it’s a good idea too...”

“Oh, stop being full of yourself. Konagai’s only said that because he’s being nice! He’s nice to everyone!”

A dangerous look came over Misaki’s face. “I’m *not* full of myself!”

She raised the hagoita over her head threateningly, but Yamadagawa immediately grabbed her arm and twisted it. Ignoring Misaki’s cries of pain, she wrenched the hagoita away and began to raise it over her own head.

“That’s enough, Yamadagawa,” Maruo said. “As far as I’m concerned, this is all Konagai’s fault. There’s no point in squabbling with Misaki.”

“The hell it’s my fault,” Konagai muttered.

Yamadagawa shrugged and tossed the hagoita away, then sat down. Misaki picked it up, said, “I’m sorry,” in a very small voice, and left the workshop.

An awkward, uneasy silence reigned over the room.

As he left for home, Konagai glanced into the inner courtyard. Misaki was standing in a corner of the garden, waving the hagoita around. Even under the shadows of the gloaming, he could see the sinew rippling on the pale arms poking out of her T-shirt.

She’s definitely got spirit, Konagai thought to himself. Anyone who lost heart after such a silly incident probably wouldn’t have had the toughness to become a ballet dancer in the first place.

Noticing Konagai watching off to the side, Misaki turned towards him, hiding her face behind the hagoita.

“My my,” she purred, “You are disgraceful, sir. Avert your prurient gaze, this nonce!”

“That’s not how you use ‘nonce’,” Konagai laughed.



The sun continued to slowly wend its way across the sky as Konagai mindlessly slaved away in the store. Around four in the afternoon he was beset by another wave of drowsiness, yawning as he took an expired sōmen set off the shelf and tossed it in a basket.

Switching over to the register, Konagai felt the atmosphere in the store grow noticeably tense, and he looked up to see an extraordinary hulking figure enter the store.

As Yamadagawa Atsuko had ordered, not a single hair remained on Takayabu’s gleaming, freshly shaved pate, though his beard was untouched, elevating his already intimidating presence to new heights. The contrast was even more striking for Konagai, who knew Takayabu as a diligent grad student who often could be seen tutoring younger students. Though outwardly he looked fearsome, on the inside he was sensitive and kindhearted, and Konagai had grown to like him over the previous two months.

Placing a tin of hard candies and a can of coffee on the register counter, Takayabu looked at Konagai, his face so scrunched up that it was difficult to tell whether he was smiling or weeping.

Takayabu was a senior member of a sports club that Maruo had joined, and had been chosen for this project solely due to his imposing frame. Maruo’s original rough draft had only slated Takayabu to intimidate the mark with his size, but Yamadagawa Atsuko had had other ideas during the planning sessions.

“That’s not even close to exotic enough,” she insisted. “A demonic monk would be perfect here. Picture one walking at you, chanting the Heart Sutra. *That’s scary!*”

“But I’m not a monk, and I don’t even know the Heart Sutra...” came Takayabu’s halfhearted rejoinder.

“Then learn it,” Yamadagawa said, in a tone that brooked no discussion. “The mark is going to meet Takayabu later in the performance, kind of like running into a boss character, right? So we need Takayabu to be really scary. Right now he has the size, but he doesn’t have the scare factor. He just, like, oozes niceness, and that’s not going to work at all.”

In the face of this verbal onslaught, Takayabu could find nothing to say.

In the ensuing silence, Yamadagawa put a finger to her lips and sank into contemplation, but she quickly came up with an image.

“Body paint,” she announced. “We’ll paint his body completely white!”

“That’s scary,” Maruo said. “Perhaps a little too scary?”

“That’s the point. We’ll paint him all white, and then have a light shining from below him...no, not a light, a torch. A demon monk painted all in white, lit with flickering torchlight. Let’s go with that!”

“I don’t know about torches, that just sounds like a fire hazard,” Konagai objected.

“Then find me some torches that won’t be a fire hazard, but just in case, don’t forget the fire extinguishers,” Yamadagawa blithely said. Takayabu and Konagai hardly had time to register their own surprise before she continued, “Oh, and Takayabu? I want to see your head shaved by Yoiyama.”

Back in the convenience store, Konagai and Takayabu nodded at each other over the counter, sharing a moment of camaraderie.

“Konagai,” Takayabu greeted him. “Shaved my head, just like I was told. What’s the verdict?”

“It cuts quite a figure. That’ll be 420 yen.”

“I thought I’d leave the beard. That shouldn’t be an issue, right? You think Yamadagawa will get mad?”

“It looks perfect. 80 yen is your change.”

“Man, I already freak out all the undergrads in my lab. This is just going to freak them out even more. I hope they don’t all skedaddle on me,” he murmured, sadly chanting the Heart Sutra as he exited the store. He seemed to have learned it by heart, as Yamadagawa had ordered him to. From behind the register, Konagai watched this magnificent figure shuffle out of the store, and pressed his hands together in silent prayer.



Konagai reflected on the biggest tussle he had had with Yamadagawa.

This one had been about the nagashi sōmen.

By July, Yamadagawa’s imagination was boiling over, and no one could stop her. Otogawa, the mastermind of this whole affair, was enraptured with her handiwork, and Maruo delightedly spurred her on. Yamadagawa was riding high.

After trading a few body blows, Misaki had removed herself from the fray, while Takayabu had never entered the fray in the first place. The only person capable of checking Yamadagawa from running amok was Konagai.

Yamadagawa insisted on moving Kingyohoko, her *pièce de résistance*, onto the roof for the climax of the performance. Always obliging, Maruo quickly secured the use of an old building on Sanjō Street. This was in fact the very building which contained the ballet studio where Misaki worked.

“We’ll build a big tatami room on the roof. At the signal, all the walls and the roof will be torn down, and we’ll get a nice breeze going. Kingyohoko will start rolling in slowly, and that will be our climax. It’s so magical I feel a nosebleed coming on!”

What with all the running around for tatami mats and sliding screens and rope and tarps (even having to call in a favor with an acquaintance on the cultural festival committee), Konagai’s patience was already stretched to its limit. And now, Yamadagawa was yammering on about running bamboo pipes through the room and having a cohort of strange men eat nagashi sōmen. It was all just so unnecessary: something had to give, and that something was Konagai’s last shred of patience.

“Nagashi sōmen, my ass! What do you need that dumb shit for!?”

“It’s not summer without nagashi sōmen! It’s supposed to be mysterious and pointless!”

“Enough already! Enough with all this useless shit!”

Yamadagawa Atsuko hurled a can of paint at him. “God, you are so *useless*! It’s not like I’m asking for much! I give you all these good ideas, and all you can do is complain. I’m so mad, my head’s about to explode!”

With all eyes on them, Konagai leapt at Yamadagawa, attempting to jam his fingers up her nose. She shrieked, her sharp nose twitching. “What the fuck!”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll stop up your nose so the blood pours out your ears!”

“I don’t have time for this!” Yamadagawa pleaded to Konagai, whose arms were being pinned back by Takayabu. “I won’t have a chance like this again! Please just let me do this, just this once!”

“You want to do something crazy, take it to the theater! Don’t pull me into this!”

“No one else will work with me but you!”

Even Konagai had to pause when he heard those words.

There wasn’t much of a decision to be made after that. The next day, he drove a light truck towards the bamboo forests in Rakusei, accompanied by Takayabu and Maruo. They stopped at Katsura Station to pick up Misaki, whose parents lived on a property with a bamboo thicket. Konagai complained the whole way about Yamadagawa, whose insistence on nagashi sōmen was the cause of all this, yet who was too busy with finishing up Kingyohoko to come along.

The mosquito repellent that Misaki had prepared did little to dissuade the swarms that buzzed through the thicket from feasting on the men as they sweated away cutting down bamboo.

Takayabu was especially adept at this work, which he said was due to the presence of a bamboo thicket in his hometown. On the other hand, Maruo quickly tired, as Konagai had expected, and made a big show of fleeing the mosquitoes, leaving Konagai and Takayabu to bear the brunt of the work.

“Sorry for dragging you into this,” Konagai apologized.

“Hey, I don’t mind,” said Takayabu. “You know, I’ve been thinking, you’re a pretty good guy.”

“What, you’re calling me a pushover?” Konagai growled, suddenly irritated.

“I mean, you complain a lot, and you get into all these big fights, but you still end up going the extra mile for Yamadagawa.”

“I don’t like where you’re taking this, buddy.”

“I heard from Maruo that she quit the theater group. Apparently she tried to do something really big, but no one wanted to work with her.”

Konagai stopped cutting for a moment and looked at Takayabu, who was wiping his face with a grubby towel and smiling at the dappled light filtering through the bamboo leaves.

“I didn’t know,” Konagai mumbled. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Too embarrassed, if I had to guess. She is a pretty egotistical person after all,” Takayabu chuckled. “But she seems to be enjoying herself now. And that’s not a bad thing at all, is it?”



As Yoiyama drew closer, the race to finish up all the preparations reached a fever pitch.

The club filled a wall with pinwheels and set up an array of industrial fans to spin them; they hung windchimes on the lintel of the tatami room; they fixed the gilded folding screens to seemingly automatically collapse (though this was actually done by hand); they cut and hollowed out the bamboo stems with hammer and chisel, and set up the water supply and drainage for the nagashi sōmen; they lined up lanterns and Shigaraki tanuki and lucky cats; they crafted and hung up dozens of goldfish globes; they built a cage and mikoshi to contain the mark; they decided on obtaining goldfish for the goldfish globes from the goldfish scooping booths at the festival on the day of Yoiyama; they even secured a supply of helium gas for the giant carp balloons that Yamadagawa wanted to fly in the garden.

The house that would be used to entrap the mark was largely completed, but the rooftop set that would host the climactic showdown with Lord Yoiyama remained unfinished, with but little time left before the day of the event. Building an entire tatami room was no mean feat, even with unlimited funds, and on top of that the whole edifice had to come apart in the blink of an eye.

The floor was laid with tatami mats, the perimeter lined with sliding screens, a sheet stretched over the whole affair as a ceiling, but the problem of breaking it down remained.

“We’ll just have to use raw manpower,” decided Maruo.

With the help of students enlisted from campus, the sheet ceiling could be pulled away and the screens toppled. A borrowed generator was brought up to power the lights in the room and on the float. The storerooms of Kinezuka Enterprises were emptied to fill the chamber of Lord Yoiyama with trappings of power and majesty: Hina dolls, an oak desk, innumerable kaleidoscopes, celadon porcelain plates, old lamps, glass orchids, old empty bottles of Akadama port wine, more lucky cats and Shiragaki tanuki, faded banners, folding fans; anything and everything was brought in to bedeck the room, whether or not it was authentic or substantial or relevant.

The night before Yoiyama, Konagai took Maruo along in the truck to Otagawa’s childhood home in Nara to pick up the Super Goldfish, a creepy, oversized goldfish.

“Don’t even *think* about falling asleep on me. Damn, thirty thousand yen doesn’t even begin to cover this job...” Konagai grumbled as he drove.

“Now, it’s a tad bit late to back out now, right? Am I right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m long past that point.”

“Ha, that’s what I like about you, you know? Yamadagawa thinks so too. Well, wake me up when we get there...”

“Dammit, don’t you dare!”

It was the wee hours of the morning by the time the truck pulled up to the building on Sanjō Street, where the crew was awaiting the arrival of the fabled Super Goldfish. They carried the water tank up to the fourth floor of the building, where they draped a cloth over it: inside the building during the heat of the day, even a Super Goldfish was no match for the sweltering rays of the sun. The Super Goldfish would be mounted on Kingyohoko just before its debut.

“Look at its face, it’s so condescending!”

“We’re sure this isn’t a real monster...right?”

After everyone was done oohing and aahing and deciding whether the brawny specimen was even still a goldfish, Yamadagawa went up to the roof to put the finishing touches on the float, while everyone else wound up loose ends back at the house. As the hours passed, Takayabu went back to his research lab, Maruo absconded for his beauty rest, and one by one the other students slipped out of the workshop.

Engrossed in the nagashi sōmen apparatus, Konagai glanced up only to find himself suddenly alone in the metamorphosed chamber. Somewhere in the house a clock was chiming four. Konagai stood up and stretched, realizing that his shift started at nine.

Misaki popped her head in a doorway. "I'm going to head home," she announced.

"Whoa, you're still here?"

"I guess I got really into it."

Turning out the lights and shutting the door behind her, Misaki asked, "What do you say we check up on Yamadagawa? There were still a few things about Kingyohoko she wasn't happy with. I bet she's still working on the roof."

The two walked down Muromachi Street, heading for the building on Sanjō Street and climbing to the roof.

The roof was mostly bare, the tatami and screens piled in a corner and covered with a tarp. Kingyohoko stood alone, a dim silhouette piercing the sky. Above the faint lights of the city, a hint of blue was creeping into the inky blackness of the night sky. It had stopped drizzling, and the air was cool and crisp.

Yamadagawa was dozing underneath a blanket on a sheet beneath the float.

"Aww, look. She's fast asleep," Misaki cooed, peering at Yamadagawa's still figure.

"Yeah, she's sleeping. I don't think *aww* is the word I would use, though."

"Don't be mean, Konagai!"

"Me, mean? Surely you jest. Personally, I think I've been incredibly patient."

"True, you have, but still!"

"Even if I am being mean, so what? You're wasting your sympathy on this idiot."

"Sir, really I must protest!"

Konagai had no qualms about calling Yamadagawa an idiot, but looking at her sleeping visage, he did feel a pang of sympathy.



Konagai and Yamadagawa Atsuko met during freshman year of college.

Some student theater companies achieve renown, but these are far outnumbered by groups that, far from basking in the limelight, often eschew it entirely, popping into existence and fading out just as quickly. After all, anyone can announce the formation of yet another theater company wherever and whenever they please. Konagai was never quite sure why Yamadagawa had chosen to join one of these fly-by-night companies, but he was hardly in a position to criticize, given that he had joined the same company merely on a whim.

He was equally unsure of how he had fallen into the unenviable role of being the point man for all of Yamadagawa Atsuko's madcap schemes. In all likelihood it had happened during sophomore year, when they came into their own as lead players within the company.

Nothing pleased Yamadagawa more than building extravagant sets that overshadowed the meager material that was performed on them. At first Konagai did his utmost, but little by little he wearied of being under her thumb. Realizing her grandiose plans took money and effort, and cash in particular was not something that the members of the company had in abundance, but heedless Yamadagawa pressed on, leaving Konagai to deal with the consequences. Even austerity could only take him so far.

The impromptu theater company could be dissolved just as quickly as it had formed, and the other members all gradually lost their enthusiasm for continuing to perform under its banner. During the fall cultural festival, they staged a pop-up performance entitled “The Count of Monte Crackpot” in bits and pieces all over campus, intending it to be their last hurrah. However, the astounding reception the performance received breathed new confidence into the hitherto wavering company members, and the future of the group seemed bright.

But Konagai was done.

The roving nature of the performance should have precluded Yamadagawa from indulging in her usual penchant for fantastic sets. But she had different ideas, insisting that the climax of the show should have a spectacular backdrop, even going so far as to demand that the set be built in secret while the festival was going on. All of the performances across campus would culminate in an extravaganza on top of the engineering building, in a grotesque fortress called the Crackpot Castle in the Clouds. The tribulations that Konagai underwent in the process of realizing Yamadagawa’s vision were excruciating beyond description.

Enough was enough, he decided, quitting the company while the exuberant remaining members began to lay plans for their next performance. Yamadagawa said nothing as she watched him walk away, which Konagai took as a lack of gratitude for everything that he had accomplished.

What a piece of work, he thought to himself.

But as the months went by, Konagai began to realize that his time in the club had been the most exciting and fruitful days of his entire life. He *lived* for Yamadagawa Atsuko’s grueling projects. Now that he was unshackled from her, each day was dull, monotonous, devoid of motivation. He had thought that one day, he would recover from his exhaustion and return to his old self, but this had turned out to be wishful thinking.

After being finagled by Maruo into working with Yamadagawa once again, he had finally come to understand why that was. Though it pained him to admit it, he understood all too well now that Yamadagawa was the spark to his fire.



As the sun sank towards the horizon, people poured onto the streets for Yoiyama, more and more of them wearing yukata.

His shift finally over, Konagai stumbled through the crowd, his lack of sleep apparent in his unsteady gait. The lanterns on the floats had been lit, transforming the streets around them with their eerie glow.

“Yoiyama kinda has an aura, I guess. Maybe Yamadagawa’s freak show will work after all,” he contemplated. “Damn, but this is a lot of people.”

Not wanting to head straight to the workshop, he slowly ambled down Muromachi Street. A group of girls wearing red yukata flitted by him. Glancing up, he noticed a couple sitting on an apartment balcony above him, sipping beer and watching the crowds go by. "Man, I wouldn't mind being up there right now," he said to himself.

A call came from Maruo.

"Where you at, Konagai? Work all finished?"

"I'm just wandering, trying to clear my head."

"Ah, to be young and carefree. Well, I thought you'd like to know, the nagashi sōmen tests went swimmingly. It really is a headscratcher, why it's there at all. Let's see, the industrial fans were strong, so strong that they blew all of the helium carp balloons away. Yamadagawa was, you know, absolutely furious!"

"Damn, what happened to the balloons?"

"Hm, I suppose they must be floating away somewhere. It's *rather* unfortunate."

"Unbelievable..."

"Anywho, don't dawdle too long, I need you here, you hear?"

Konagai hung up but continued to walk around aimlessly anyways. Just past Minami-kannyōyama, a giant clothed in the black garb of a monk stumbled out from Nishikikōji Alley. Even with the streets as packed as they were, his intense aura was unmistakable, and the crowds parted naturally around him. His intentionally unshaved bristles only added to his ferocious image. Konagai reckoned that if he were to see behemoth painted white, emerging from the light of a torch, he would probably faint too.

"Takayabu!" he called out.

"Hi, Konagai. What do you think? This monk stuff suits me pretty well, I'd say."

"You look more like a fallen monk if you ask me."

"I bet I live more like a monk than most monks. Abstinence, that's me," Takayabu said, happily showing Konagai the hand towel that he'd bought from Tōrōyama after finally being able to visit it for the first time.

"Well, better not dawdle too long. We'd best get going."

"Yeah, but I was thinking...my part's pretty much done anyways."

"Don't say that. You might as well see it through to the end, right?"

In the midst of their conversation, a little girl suddenly ran smack into Takayabu. "Oh?" he said, startled.

The girl's expression froze when she saw him looking down at her, and she immediately backed away, tears brimming in her eyes. Before Takayabu could say anything to her, she turned and dashed away madly, disappearing into the crowd.

"Come on, I'm not that scary am I?" he muttered, sounding injured.

"She probably thought you were going to eat her up!"

"I'm really not that bad a guy, I promise!"

The two turned and walked north up Muromachi Street. Past Kuronushiyama, the festival mood was considerably tamer. They came to an empty parking lot on the left side of the street.

"Let's see what they're up to," said Takayabu. They hopped the fence on the west side of the parking lot and walked through a false alleyway hemmed in by black wooden walls. They emerged in the annex of Seikitei, which had been converted into a curio shop. Maruo was inside

dressed as a cagey sales clerk, having a paltry mustache affixed to his face by a girl from the makeup crew. He turned towards the two as they entered, looking rather proud of his new whiskers.

“What do you think? Dashing, eh?”

“Okay Takayabu, let’s get you painted up,” said the girl.

“Do I really have to?” asked Takayabu, becoming visibly flustered.

“Yes, you really have to. Come on, chop chop. I’ve got everything laid out in the next room.”

Konagai inspected the motion of the gold-leafed sliding screens before crossing the inner garden to the house on the north side, where the nagashi sōmen room was set up. On the second floor, countless pinwheels spun in the gale winds generated by a cluster of oversized fans. Students moved quickly between the goldfish globes hanging from the ceiling, placing newly caught fish in the bowls with swift, practiced motions. Konagai tapped on one of the globes, smiled as the fish inside darted around nimbly, and gave a satisfied nod.

At the end of the hallway, he came across a maiko gazing through a round window. She turned back to look at Konagai and fanned a large hagoita over her face to hide mouth.

“Bid thee welcome, sir,” Misaki trilled.



On the roof, Yamadagawa Atsuko was bossing around a gaggle of students, who ran around arranging tatami mats and bringing up odds and ends from downstairs. Some of them carried around sliding screens aimlessly. The sight of the normally drab roof covered with tatami mats was quite remarkable.

Presently, Maruo joined them on the roof.

“Say, Konagai, I hope you’ve done some practicing with the chimaki?”

Konagai grabbed Maruo’s jaw with one hand, pushed on his cheeks so that his mouth opened, and thrust the chimaki inside with lightning speed.

“Phanko, phanko!” cried Maruo, his eyes wide. After a short struggle he extricated himself and spat out the chimaki.

“How could you!” he spluttered, a spray of saliva accompanying his words. “But that was good, very good!”

“That’s how I give medicine to my dog at home,” Konagai chortled. “So? Where’s the mark?”

“At the present moment he should be meeting with Otagawa in Seikitei. Otagawa will give him the slip shortly and convene with us here.”

“If it goes according to plan.”

“Nothing to worry about, I assure you. The mark is an idiot, after all.”

“Yeah, but so are you.”

“And yourself!” Maruo said genially. He walked to the center of the roof and clapped his hands. “Attention, your attention please! Let us practice the last scene with Kingyohoko. Screens, line up there, in formation. Konagai, if you would, go and tell us how it looks from the inside.”

Konagai sat crossed-legged on the tatami mats as the screens closed up around him and the cloth was draped overhead. It wasn't the most convincing tatami room he'd ever seen, but it wasn't completely implausible, either. His mind began to drift as he sat in the middle of the 10-tatami room. The voices of Maruo and the others sounded oddly muffled on the other side of the screens.

A rattling sound came from a large bureau in a corner of the dim room, and Yamadagawa Atsuko came crawling out from behind it.

"The hell were you doing there?" Konagai demanded.

"Not bad, not bad," Yamadagawa nodded to herself, plopping down beside him. "It'll do, I guess."

"Mm, we did work pretty hard on it. I'm completely spent."

"Me too."

"Bullshit."

"No, I mean it. I couldn't keep doing projects this big."

"Huh. You happy with how it turned out?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"You're not thinking about going back to the theater company?"

"No, I think I've done enough. Besides, it wouldn't be the same without you there."

Outside the screen, they heard Maruo give a muffled command. The sheet slid off the top of the room, revealing the afternoon summer sky painted with the ruddy colors of the setting sun. The screens surrounding them toppled with a great *whomp*, letting in the whispering evening breeze. Perhaps it was merely that his eyes hadn't adjusted to the light, but from up here on the rooftop, the town seemed to be wrapped in a wistful haze.

Directly in front of them stood Yamadagawa Atsuko's magnum opus, Kingyohoko. Its grotesque, riotous form brought back memories of the Crackpot Castle in the Clouds, her masterwork from the previous autumn. Konagai thought about all the things he had crafted—the homemade lanterns, the goldfish swimming around inside the globes, the haphazardly scattered clotheslines wrapped in electric lights—silly contrivances, one and all, but how beautifully they would shine and sparkle in the dark when the sun went down!

Yamadagawa cried out and pointed. On top of the building across the street was a spherical water tank, and gently bumping against it was a tangled bunch of red carp balloons.

"So that's where the carp went!"

"We should probably go grab them when they come down."

"Hey, Konagai?"

"Yeah?"

"For the longest time, I thought that goldfish turned into koi when they grew up."

"Well I'm afraid you were wrong about that."

"Yeah, I guess I was."

At the base of Kingyohoko stood a man, his arms folded as he nodded admiringly. He made a beeline straight for the tatami mats and extended his hand to Yamadagawa to shake.

"Thank you! It's incomprehensible, marvelous, beyond my wildest dreams!"

Yamadagawa beamed.

“What’s the verdict, Ootogawa?” Maruo asked.

Ootogawa responded with a vehement thumbs-up.

“Ladies and gents!” he announced. “What do you say we get out there and fool this fool!”

Yoiyama Corridor

Chizuru had never lived alone before.

She grew up in the Katsura neighborhood of Rakusei, the western part of Kyōto, and during college simply commuted from home. Little changed after she graduated and got a job: to get to the head office in Yodoyabashi, she took the Hankyū line to Umeda Station, and after her transfer to the Karasuma branch in Kyōto during the spring, it was a simple matter of waiting for trains and transferring lines at the station.

The bicycle ride to Katsura Station took about fifteen minutes, passing old neighborhoods along the ancient highway, by open canals, through fields and groves. When the rain was too heavy for umbrellas, she would go to the nearest station and take the bus instead. After getting off the train at Shijō Karasuma, she walked to her workplace on Karasuma Street.

Some of her colleagues were jealous that she could commute straight from home. Though it was now her workplace, she had frequented the area around Shijō Karasuma since she was a child, and knew a few faces around this part of town. She had attended Suzaki Ballet Studio in Koromonotana-chō until middle school, and her uncle's place was just a short distance away in the middle of town.

The sudden appearance of Ms. Suzaki at her counter came as quite a surprise.

Seeing Chizuru in uniform, Ms. Suzaki greeted her courteously.

"Hello, Chizuru," she said. "I didn't you know you worked around here; why don't you ever pop in and say hello?"

Her tone was half-joking, but Chizuru hadn't forgotten how strict she could be, and felt herself freeze up. She was astonished that Ms. Suzaki still remembered her. Thrown off-kilter, she found it impossible to respond in her normal way as she went through the motions of opening a bank account.

"How unreliable she must think me," she later reflected, burning with embarrassment.

Her usual affected maturity was quickly stripped away whenever she ran into someone who was familiar with her past.

How difficult it was working in a place that had known you since you were a child, Chizuru thought to herself.



One Saturday afternoon, Chizuru departed for Shijō Karasuma.

Stepping off the Hankyū train, she ascended from the platform and emerged in an underground corridor, running east to west directly below Shijō Street. The dreary tunnel lined with colorless tiles had remained unchanged for as long as Chizuru could remember. This station was always crowded on weekends, being the junction of the subway's Karasuma station and the Hankyū line, but today's crowds were exceptionally large, and among them could be seen quite a few yukata.

Today was Yoiyama.

As she walked west along the tunnel, the noise that reverberated from the ceiling lessened and the traffic became thin. At the end of the corridor she climbed up a short stairway on the left-hand side. The stairway led to the basement level of an industrial exhibition hall, which was populated with an old-fashioned barbershop, a hole-in-the-wall café, and a tiny travel agency. Her father and uncle had often taken her to this café when she was a child. The dingy row of shops felt every bit as morose as it had when she had been small. She was oddly fond of the place, and sometimes made it a point to stop by on her way home from work. By the time Chizuru got off work, though, the café was already closed, and she rarely saw it open for business except on the rare weekend visit.

Chizuru's attention was drawn to a red balloon floating in front of the entrance to the public toilet that lay between the barbershop and the café. The gaudy splash of color looked out of place in the otherwise bleak hallway, and the sight of it made Chizuru strangely unsettled.

She stepped inside the travel agency that lay past a bend in the hallway.

Chizuru was going on a trip with her coworkers, and somehow it had fallen to her to make all of the arrangements. She didn't particularly enjoy traveling with others, and making all these preparations was a pain, but now that she had finally settled into her job she didn't want to refuse lest she seem selfish. The man in the agency was quite amiable, though, and their business proceeded swiftly. By the time Chizuru left the shop, she felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

She hadn't decided what she would do afterwards. Perhaps she would stop by Yanagi Gallery, or pop into Suzaki Ballet Studio.

She was still pondering what to do as she walked back through the corridor when she heard a voice behind her call out.

"Chizuru?"

She looked over her shoulder to see Mr. Yanagi standing behind her.



Mr. Yanagi wasn't yet thirty, yet his genteel demeanor and calm, gentle tone perfectly befit him as the owner of an art gallery on Sanjō Takakura. Chizuru couldn't help but think that he was the very model of a modern self-made man each time she saw him.

Her uncle had a long association with the Yanagi Gallery. She had met Mr. Yanagi last winter while visiting her uncle's studio, and since then she had always taken the opportunity to visit the gallery whenever he sent tickets for solo exhibitions in the mail. She had never bought a painting, but Mr. Yanagi always received her warmly.

She had heard that Mr. Yanagi had been working at an art gallery in Tokyo, but had come back to Kyoto to take over the family business when his father had suddenly fallen ill. She wasn't familiar with any of his work, but was too uncomfortable to ask him to show her, for fear that she wouldn't be able to give a meaningful opinion and thereby disappoint him.

"Are you busy at the moment?" he inquired.

"Not at all," she said. "I'm just having a stroll."

"Then, would you care for a cup of coffee?" asked Mr. Yanagi, motioning to the café.

Warm music and the aroma of coffee enveloped the pair as they entered the café. Regulars wearing everything from windbreakers to suits were seated around a long oval table, perusing magazines and newspapers. An old man wearing a cap silently smoked a cigarette, while a group of four old spinsters chatted happily, filling the café with their laughter.

"I haven't been to this café in forever," Chizuru admitted. "My father and uncle used to take me here."

"Your uncle does seem fond of this café."

"I don't think there's anything particularly special about it. It seems kind of, I don't know, *dated*."

"Well, I would say that is one of its advantages. I would never be able to relax in a café that was *too* trendy. It would never do for a hideout."

"A hideout?"

"There are times when one requires a degree of solitude. I live with my mother, you see, and she comes with me to work as well."

The conversation drifted on without pause. Each visit to the gallery was spent much the same way, in idle gossip about her uncle's paintings or anecdotes about the eccentricities of Mr. Yanagi's father, the previous owner of the gallery. Mr. Yanagi was quite masterful at weaving floating threads of conversation together in such a way that the conversation never fell into a lull or moved to a new topic unnaturally: it simply flowed. Visiting the gallery and talking with him always soothed Chizuru.

A small painting by her uncle was hanging on the wall of the café.

"Are you going to pay a visit your uncle after this, Chizuru?" asked Mr. Yanagi.

"I'm not sure. I mean, I was thinking of it, but today might be..."

"Because it's Yoiyama?"

"...Well, yes."

"My father told me the gist of it."

"I still remember it, or pieces of it anyway. It used to be so frightening before, but now that it's been fifteen years..."

Chizuru tried to recall what her cousin looked like, the one with whom she had visited Matsuno'o-taisha, but all she could remember was a photograph in an album at her parents' house. The photo was of the two of them all dolled up on the grounds of Matsuno'o-taisha. They bore a strong resemblance to each other. Her father and uncle had taken them to the shrine together to celebrate Shichi-go-san, so there was an identical copy of the picture in her uncle's house.

"If I may make a personal request, Chizuru...would you go visit your uncle?"

"Huh?" Chizuru said.

At a loss for words, Mr. Yanagi averted his gaze, something that Chizuru had never seen him do before. He must have been worried about something. There had to be something on his mind.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Yanagi?" asked Chizuru. "Has something happened with my uncle?"

A silence fell over them.

Finally, Mr. Yanagi said, "Look, over there."

Chizuru looked up. Mr. Yanagi was pointing at the window into the corridor. In front of the glass door of the barbershop floated the red balloon.

“That balloon,” Mr. Yanagi muttered.

No sooner had he spoken those words than the balloon popped on the other side of the glass without a sound.



Earlier in July, at the beginning of the month, Chizuru had been walking back after work.

The sky was covered with dark rainclouds brooding over the canyon of buildings. The constant rain that had fallen all through the afternoon gradually abated, turning into a fine drizzle that, despite being an imperceptible patter on the tops of the umbrellas, still blew in from the sides. The sticky air was so oppressive that a few minutes' walk on the bright, rain-slicked sidewalks was enough to leave one clammy with sweat, intensifying the steamy haze that lay over the nightbound streets.

Reaching the northwest corner of the Shijō Karasuma intersection, she walked south over the zebra crossing.

She was in front of the exhibition hall, preparing to descend to the subway as usual, when she heard the ringing of a gong intermingling with the high piping of a flute. She stopped in her tracks and looked around. The sound seemed to be coming from the second floor of a building on the other side of Shijō Street. Behind the glass she could see youthful members of the Kankohoko⁹ Preservation Society carrying instruments, practicing for the Gionbayashi. She joined the queue of people waiting at the bus stop and watched the group play, listening as the music wafted through the streets and dissolved into the softer pitter patter of the rain, paying no attention to the rivulets of sweat streaming down her temple.

After that day, Chizuru always made sure to pass by the bus stop on her way home from work. It wasn't that she enjoyed the way that music made her feel all melancholy—on the contrary, she found it quite eerie—but she just couldn't bring herself to leave it alone every night. No lights on the second floor meant that there was no practice today. Each time Chizuru saw that the windows were dark she felt let down, yet simultaneously relieved at not having to hear that music.

Back in the present, Chizuru walked up with Mr. Yanagi and emerged up on the street, where across from the bus stop Kankoboko towered into the sky, straining to pierce the heavens. With Mr. Yanagi by her side, the music of Gionbayashi no longer seemed weird and unsettling.

The awning of the Gion Festival Information Center was displayed in front of the exhibition hall, as were stacks of pamphlets detailing the locations of the floats as well as the route for tomorrow's parade. Chizuru took a pamphlet. With the day wearing on, both Shijō Street and Karasuma Street had been closed to automobile traffic, and pedestrians roamed the wide boulevards. Police officers patrolled the crowds, and here and there could be seen people holding one-way only traffic placards.

⁹ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/kankohoko.html>

From the middle of the Shijō Karasuma intersection, all that could be seen was an ocean of people stretching out in every direction. Watching the stream of people walking this way and that was enough to make one's head spin. Rows of street stalls extended along Karasuma Street to the north and south, seemingly to go on forever.

"I do apologize," said Mr. Yanagi, "for being so presumptuous with you in regards to the matter of your uncle."

"No, I appreciate your concern. I'll be sure to drop in on him," said Chizuru.

"Many thanks. I'm sure he will be quite pleased," said Mr. Yanagi, bowing his head earnestly as they stood in the middle of the intersection.

As they began to part ways, Chizuru felt a sudden anxiety come over her, and had a strong urge to stop him from leaving. Overwhelmed by the notion that she was being abandoned in this sea of people, she wanted to have him accompany her to her uncle's house, but he had already disappeared into the crowd.

"For goodness' sake," she chided herself. "Stop being a child!"

The sky was gloriously clear above the buildings. Only a few clouds drifted along beneath the golden rays of the sun. Chizuru was nervous walking along the middle of Karasuma Street, which was normally filled with cars. It felt as though she would be swallowed up into the sky at any moment.

Glancing by as she walked past Takoyakushi Street and Rokkaku Street, Chizuru noted that even these alleys were packed with sightseers. The air rang incessantly with the shouts of children hawking chimaki. Karasuma Street was much wider and easier to navigate than the narrow side streets, so Chizuru took the opportunity to look through the stalls as she continued to stroll down the avenue. Spectators were seated here and there in front of the office buildings. A flock of birds circled overhead, drawn by the mouthwatering aromas coiling up from the food carts. Chizuru bought a mini castella at one of the carts.

Still reluctant to head over to her uncle's house on Rokkaku Street, she passed by the intersection and circled up to Sanjō Street. Turning at the brick bank building at the corner of Sanjō Street, she came to the front of Suzaki Ballet Studio. The old-fashioned, dark green electric lamps at the sides of the entrance; the tall, narrow windows dotting the facade of the building; everything looked just as it had when she had attended classes here. One of her uncle's oil paintings hung in the lobby of the old building.

As Chizuru stood there taking a long look at the building, two primary school-aged children, probably sisters, pushed open the door and spilled out onto Sanjō Street. The two girls both had their hair tied up into glossy buns, looking for all the world like two acorns rolling about. They skipped past Chizuru, laughing. It was hard not to smile at the sight of them, scampering along holding hands so tightly it was as if they were tied together by a string.

We were like that too, mused Chizuru, watching the girls run off together.



The normally deserted side streets were positively swarming with people here to see the floats. Chizuru wended her way through the crowds, heading for her uncle's house.

The house had originally been the residence of her grandparents, and over many years the fragrance of incense had seeped into its walls. After Chizuru's grandfather passed away, her grandmother had come to live in Katsura, and for a time the house had stood empty. It had been ten years since her divorced uncle had begun to use it as his studio-cum-residence. Chizuru liked the old wooden house, out of place as it was tucked away between modern shops and apartment buildings, like a relic from another time. Because of its location, the property was often in shadow, but in the back there was a proper garden, filled with flowering dogwood trees that had been planted by Chizuru's grandfather. The house was right in the heart of downtown Kyoto, and the only way in or out was through a narrow paved stone path that squeezed in between tall commercial buildings. All of this made the house feel like a hidden getaway, which Chizuru had found mysterious and enchanting since she was a little girl.

The road leading to the house was guarded by an iron gate, beside which was mounted a letterbox with the name "Kono Keiichi" on the front. Even at noon, the stone path beyond the gate was only dimly lit, and as Chizuru crept forward the noise from the street behind her quickly diminished. Looking up, she saw only a thin cutout of sky between the tops of the buildings.

Underneath the overhang of the house was a red fire bucket. The wooden lattice door was shut.

Just as she was about to knock, the door was abruptly pulled open, revealing the face of her uncle peering out.

Chizuru sucked in a breath, and let a beat elapse before angrily snapping, "Don't scare me like that!"

"Er, sorry," her uncle muttered. "I figured you'd be showing up any minute now."

Chizuru found it somewhat curious that he knew that she would be coming today, but she was even more concerned about her uncle's appearance.

"What's happened to you?" she gaped.

"What do you mean?"

"You look awful! It's like you've become an old man overnight!"

"You sure do like to harp on that, don't you..."

"No, I'm know this is the first time I've mentioned it."

"Really? Well alright, come on in."

Her uncle smiled wanly and turned around to go inside. Chizuru followed him into the entrance hall, which gave off a faint odor of decay. She noticed that the back of his neck looked just the way her grandfather's had just before he died. It had only been a month since her last visit, yet his hair was much whiter than she remembered it, and he seemed to have become worryingly absentminded. Anxiety began to gnaw at her.

The corridor continued on past a staircase leading to the second floor. Her uncle headed into a six-tatami room.

"I'll make tea," Chizuru called, walking towards the kitchen further down the hallway.

"I've already made it," grunted her uncle, settling down on a tatami mat.

Stopping to look in the room, Chizuru saw that there was indeed a tray holding a teapot and teacups, along with a burbling electric water boiler.

"Are you psychic?" she gasped.

"Come on here and sit down. Let's have us some of that mini castella," said her uncle.

“Could you smell it?” she asked, shaking the bag.

“Something like that,” mumbled her uncle.

The living room was quite cool, even without air conditioning. The paper sliding door was thrown wide open, opening out onto a narrow veranda, beyond which they could see the garden. The two of them contemplated the view as they sipped tea and ate the castella.

“You met Yanagi earlier, didn’t you?”

“Did he call you?”

“He’s a fine man,” her uncle said, ignoring her question. “His father was a fine man too, but the son is something all of his own. I owe him a great deal.”

“I visit his gallery from time to time. He sends me invitations in the mail.”

“How kind of him.”

Chizuru pointed at the small, black tube that her uncle was holding. “Is that a kaleidoscope?”

Yes, I bought it at a stall around the way.”

“It’s beautiful. Can I see?”

Her uncle shook his head, squeezing his fingers around the kaleidoscope. “Nope.”

“Don’t be such a scrooge!”

“You just break things too easily, Chi.”



Talking with her uncle was always tiring.

He’d known her since she was a baby, knew all her faults and flaws. Now that he was getting on in years, he often looked to the past to find things they could both talk about over tea. Occasionally this involved dredging up Chizuru’s past misdeeds, many of which she could hardly remember.

Her uncle still called her “Chi”, like she was still a child. Chizuru was in her twenties, but sometimes her uncle still seemed to see her as a seven-year-old girl. Every time Chizuru thought about this, she imagined her cousin tightly holding onto her sleeve, still looking just as she did in that photograph.

There had been a time when they hardly ever talked about her cousin. Back then, it had been very difficult to hold conversations. All of the experiences the Chizuru shared with her uncle involved her cousin in some fashion, so avoiding the topic made it almost impossible to say a word to one another. Even after that taboo was lifted, they stuck to memories of happier days gone by, always dancing around the elephant in the room. They could talk about anything, as long as it wasn’t Yoiyama.

“How’s work?” asked Chizuru.

“I’ve painted enough, to tell you the truth,” chuckled her uncle. “More than enough for a lifetime.”

“Oh, don’t be such a downer. It’s not like you’re over the hill yet.”

“I am practically a dinosaur, I’m afraid.”

“My mom would burst out in tears if she heard you say that.”

“Well, if I’m a dinosaur, that makes my sister a fossil, eh? Can’t blame her for crying.”

“That’s not the point...”

Her uncle’s mouth bulged as he worked on a mouthful of castella. He slowly turned his head, looking out towards the garden. *He looks so old when he does that*, Chizuru thought somberly to herself.

Hardly any light made it to the garden, even during the day, and now that evening was falling the garden was steeped in shadow. The streets that fenced in the house were filled with the tumult of Yoiyama, yet neither the noise nor the lights of the lanterns could find their way into the room. Chizuru breathed in the scent of the mosquito coils on the veranda as she strained her ears. It felt as if all the commotion she had passed through to get her had been only a dream.

“It feels so unreal...”

“What does?”

“Today’s Yoiyama, but It’s so *quiet* here, you know?”

“Well, it’s always quiet here,” her uncle said absentmindedly.

“Is everything okay, uncle?” Chizuru ventured to ask.

“Is what okay?”

“You don’t look so good. Mr. Yanagi was worried about you too.”

Her uncle leveled his gaze at her. “You’d never believe me anyhow,” he muttered.

“Believe what?”

“But I guess I’ll tell you anyway.”

“Please do.”

“Yanagi, he’s a good fellow. He told me to tell you.”

“Tell me what? Please, you’re scaring me!”

“I’m not trying to scare you. It’s a very simple matter,” was her uncle’s cryptic response. “After today, we won’t ever see each other again.”

The calmness with which he said this only frightened Chizuru even more. She was the one pressing him for answers, yet at the same time she wanted to cover his mouth to stop him from saying any more.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, trying and failing to hide her discomfort with a laugh.

In response, her uncle handed her the kaleidoscope. It was an unusual lacquered piece, not at all like the ones she had played with as a child. Several exquisite goldfish were painted upon it, looking as if they were floating on the water’s surface.



The kaleidoscope—or *mangekyō*—a tube containing several mirrors and filled with a patchwork of colored paper and glass that, when held to the eye and rotated, produces revolving patterns that come to life and fade just as quickly. In the Meiji era, they were also called *hyakuiro-megane* and *nishiki-megane*.

Chizuru’s uncle had begun to show an interest in them last winter, about six months ago.

Mr. Yanagi always brought a gift whenever he came to her uncle’s studio to see how his latest work was progressing. Sometimes he would bring food, worrying about her uncle’s health;

sometimes he would bring in curios that he had picked up in thrift shops as conversation starters; and on occasion he would bring a piece from the young artists who were exhibiting at his gallery.

“He’s like a walking antique store!” her uncle would chortle.

One day, after shooting the breeze for a while, Mr. Yanagi produced a kaleidoscope.

“Now that’s something I haven’t seen in a long time,” her uncle remarked.

“I found it the other day when I was going through some of the things my father left. It struck me as quite an interesting find at the time,” said Mr. Yanagi.

“Lemme take a look.”

Kaleidoscopes were truly fascinating playthings, if you thought about it. A close observer would notice that the swirling patterns would never repeat themselves, like rippling waves on the surface of a pond.

Her uncle peered into it, transfixed. “Fascinating thing, this is. I never thought much of them when I was a kid.”

“If it interests you, you may have it.”

“You sure?”

“I was already wondering how best to dispose of it.”

“Don’t mind if I do, then.”

Chizuru walked in on the pair huddling on the veranda, trying to catch scant rays of sunlight as they peered at the kaleidoscope.

Looking at the two men hunched over facing away from her, she asked, “What’s going on?”

“Ah, Chi,” exclaimed her uncle, turning towards her.

Mr. Yanagi carefully placed the kaleidoscope down and shuffled his kneeling posture around to face her, bowing his head politely.

Chizuru couldn’t help but smile seeing them abruptly adopt such serious demeanors, when they had been so eagerly examining the kaleidoscope only a moment ago.

“This is Mr. Yanagi, from the art gallery,” her uncle said, with a staid expression. “May I introduce my niece, Chizuru.”

“I’m Chizuru. Thank you for taking care of my uncle.”

“Yanagi. The pleasure is all mine.”

From that winter on, her uncle began to read up on kaleidoscopes, even incorporating them into his paintings. He took a special interest in teleidoscopes, which consisted of a tube with a glass marble inserted at the opposite end from the peephole, like an old spyglass, and whose revolving patterns were refracted images of whatever was on the other side of the marble.

As July rolled around, her uncle plunged headlong into preparations for a kaleidoscope exhibition that would be held at Yanagi Gallery in the fall. Once he got focused he would hole up in his house for days at a time. After working feverishly for a few days, he came out to find the streets filled with merrymaking. Turning the corner at Muromachi Street, he was met with the sight of the Koiyama float looming over him. The array of lanterns set the passersby faces ablaze.

It was the night of Yoiyama.

As he walked along, his mind went back to the events of Yoiyama fifteen years previously. He still felt the same sadness there in his chest, but these days he no longer let it show on the outside. *You keep coughing hard enough*, he would occasionally say, *eventually you won't have the strength to cough anymore, but that doesn't mean the sickness is gone*. The people passing him on the street probably thought him just another yukata-wearing sightseer.

He passed several floats, each blazing with light, and finally stopped to rest at a corner in front of a tobacco shop, taking advantage of the presence of an ashtray to smoke a cigarette. A narrow alleyway trailed west from the shop, exuding the kind of solitary atmosphere that made one long for company. It seemed to be one of the few places where the tumult of Yoiyama did not reach.

Hardly a soul was to be found wandering this street, but even here there was a lone stall, drawing him in with an assortment of curios. Perhaps it was only the odd lighting of the bare lightbulb that illuminated them, but there was something bewitching about the wares on display. A cantankerous-looking old man sat in the midst of the display, pouring water into a teapot.

Her uncle looked over the stall. Displayed on top of the tired wooden stand was an array of kaleidoscopes of all colors and sizes. He picked one up and put it to his eye, watching the stand and its assorted kaleidoscopes burst and multiply into glowing shards as he rotated the tube, each tinged with the orange glow of the lightbulb.

It wasn't cheap, especially considering it was being sold at a roadside stall, but he bought it on the spot, not even bothering to haggle the price down. Walking back towards the festivities, he stopped here and there to take a peek through the kaleidoscope. With the streets filled with tourists and drunkards, he didn't feel particularly embarrassed about letting himself being a kid for a little bit.

Her uncle marveled as he watched the lights of festival floats, streets stalls, and streetlamps blur and shift through the kaleidoscope. The flushed faces of passersby dissolved into countless iotas and disappeared. He saw young couples holding hands, police officers directing traffic, middle-aged men wearing yukata like he was. He saw children trailing along with their parents. He saw little girls wearing red yukata darting in and out through the crowds like goldfish flashing in the dark waters of the canals. And in the midst of all these things, he saw the white porcelain face of a girl appear in the images shifting and unshifting through the lens.

As he rotated the tube, the face multiplied, each with the same beguiling smile on its lips. Her uncle's heart skipped a beat, and he snapped his face away from the kaleidoscope. He reached out to grab the red wisp that flitted by in the corner of his eye, but his fingers grasped only air.

There was no doubt in his mind. It was his daughter Kyōko.

By the time he turned around, she had already disappeared into the crowd.



"I couldn't catch up to her," he said.

He had searched for her into the night until he was utterly exhausted, returning home and collapsing into his futon, still clutching the kaleidoscope. Day had broken by the time his

eyes fluttered open again, but feeling as if he had just woken from a long nightmare, he was enervated of even the strength to even get out of bed. He spent the day studying the kaleidoscope he held onto. Fifteen years had passed: there was no way his daughter could have appeared before him, not having aged a day. The pain he felt at having hallucinated such an illusion was unbearable, and he resolved to hole up until the last traces of Yoiyama had faded away.

He passed another night like this, and when he finally shuffled on the stone path out into town, it was to be met with the raucous din of Yoiyama.

"I spent every day after that in Yoiyama," he said. "I would wake up in the morning, the day of Yoiyama. I would wait until nightfall, I'd go into town, look through the kaleidoscope, find Kyōko, reach out to her, watch her run away, again and again, I don't know how many times..."

"Hold on, Uncle. Just calm down."

"I am calm."

"I don't know what you're trying to tell me!"

"But I do. That girl was in Yoiyama the entire time. And so, I will always be in Yoiyama."

The garden grew steadily darker. *If only there was something to break the tension*, thought Chizuru, but she was unnerved that she could hear the sounds of the Gionbayashi all the way over here.

"So, you're telling me that you've been living the same day over and over again?"

"That's why I look so old, see, all these white hairs."

"I don't believe it..."

"That's why I wanted to tell you, properly, because I'm never going to leave this day. Tomorrow will come for you, but it won't come for me. I'm staying here, with that girl. I think it's for the best."

"You're just imagining things, Uncle."

I need to call mom, Chizuru thought.

"You're thinking about calling your mother, aren't you?" inquired her Uncle. "That's what you did last time. She's going to ask you when you're coming home."

"She always asks that."

"She's making gyoza. Go ahead, call her."

Chizuru dug her phone out of her bag.

Her uncle turned to watch the darkness gather in the garden. "I've found her, Chi," he murmured. "I've found Kyōko. It's alright now. You don't have to feel guilty anymore."

"Stop that!" she said sharply, standing up.

"You'll understand too, when tomorrow comes," he finished.

Chizuru left him sitting on the tatami and walked down the hallway to the kitchen, where she hastily called her mother.

"Chizuru? What time are you coming home?" came her mother's voice over the phone mildly. It was exactly as her Uncle had predicted.

"Mom? You've got to come, quick!"

"What? What's going on? I'm making gyoza right now."

"Uncle's acting really strangely."

Her mother's voice changed. "Is he ill?"

“No, not really, but he’s saying very strange things.”

Chizuru’s mother quickly grasped how serious Chizuru was.

“I’ll be right over,” she said. “Are you okay by yourself? Call Mr. Yanagi, I’m sure he’ll come straight away.”

Chizuru hung up and immediately dialed Yanagi Gallery, but no one answered. Listening to the hollow, tinny ringing, her mind drifted back to the events of Yoiyama fifteen years ago.

Her cousin had vanished that day. Considering how crowded the streets were on Yoiyama, lost children were hardly a rare occurrence. But that night no one would have thought that she would still be missing by daybreak, or the next day, or the next year, or fifteen years hence. For years afterward, the girl’s parents, and her grandparents, and the rest of her family all searched for her: filing missing child reports; pleading for witnesses to come forward; looking for clues anywhere they could. But their efforts were all in vain.

Chizuru could no longer recall what her cousin had been like. The only image that remained in her mind was the smiling girl from the photograph.

It had been such a long night.

Her uncle and aunt stayed out for a long time searching for her cousin.

Images whirled through Chizuru’s head: the pale, silent expression on her aunt’s face; her uncle stating merely, “I’m going for another look,” and turning around at the door to head straight back into the crowds of Yoiyama; her father pacing back and forth in the hallway on the phone; her mother’s worried expression when she came to collect her; the commotion of the festival that surrounded her as her mother led her by the hand out of the shadowy footpath; the lights of Yoiyama that hid her cousin away.

She stood in the hallway holding her phone, paralyzed for the moment.



Twilight had fallen over the tatami room by the time she returned to find her uncle gone. Her grasp tightening on her phone, she walked back into the hallway.

“Uncle!” she called, but there was no response. She listened hard, thinking that he might be on the second floor, but not a sound stirred inside the house.

Going to the vestibule, she realized that his shoes were missing. She hurriedly put her own shoes on and slid open the lattice door, but no sooner had she dashed out onto the stone path than they came flying off. She clicked her tongue impatiently and put them back on, glancing up at the inky sky. Save for the small round light glowing beneath the overhang of the roof, the house was dark. Chizuru hurried up the path.

As she opened the iron gate and stepped out onto the street, a wave of light and sound crashed over her. It was almost suffocating. She took a deep breath and began to walk, looking for her uncle.

The air in the narrow street was stifling, and Chizuru’s skin prickled with sweat as she squeezed between people and stalls alike. Her senses were bombarded with the sweltering closeness of the crowds, the blazing lights of the parade floats, the smell of food from the stalls mingling in the air. The feeling of being hounded fueled her ire, and more than a few people grumbled at her as she pushed her way through the crowd. Still there was no trace of her uncle.

Uncle's gone mad, Chizuru thought to herself. Losing her cousin had been extremely difficult for her, but she couldn't even begin to imagine what the loss of his daughter had been like for her uncle.

She thought about what he had said previously: *You keep coughing, eventually you won't even have the strength to cough anymore.*

"Uncle! Uncle!" she called, coming to a halt. Passersby looked strangely at her, giving her a wide berth as they walked by. Now that she had stopped to catch her breath, she realized that she was in the middle of Yoiyama, and a sudden fear took hold of her. Even just standing there was unbearable. Everything around her seemed unreal, phantasmagoric, and her vision began to swim.

"I'm going to pass out..." she moaned, putting her hand to her forehead and stumbling to the side of the road.

In the distance, she heard someone call out.

"Chi," said the voice.

She looked up and saw her uncle standing on the other side of the road. Seeing him squinting blearily at her, she wasn't sure whether she felt pity or anger.

"Uncle!" she exclaimed sharply. "I was so worried!"

"Nothing to worry about, nothing..."

"Let's go back. My mother will be there soon. I'll fix dinner for you."

Her uncle didn't reply, instead staring fixedly into the crowd.

"She's here," he said.

In the corner of her eye Chizuru caught a glimpse of something red flitting by. It was a group of little girls all wearing yukata, their sleeves fluttering like flashing goldfish fins. The narrow alleyway was packed tight with people, yet somehow the girls darted along as easily as if they were floating along a stream. As the last one ran past, Chizuru reached out and grabbed onto her scarlet sleeve. "Kyo!" she blurted out.

The girl turned to look at her and giggled, "Chi! Aren't you coming?"

"...I'm not going," Chizuru replied, just as she had on that fateful Yoiyama night.

The memory of that night came crashing down on her.

They had been holding hands, she and her cousin, and walking along. It was just the two of them, having earlier been separated from her father and uncle.

They were standing beneath the eaves of a building, wondering what to do, when a group of girls their age called out to them. Unlike Chizuru, her cousin was fearless and willing to open up even to complete strangers. She soon hit it off with the girls and agreed to go with them to take a look at something. "You should come too, Chi!" she smiled.

Chizuru didn't understand why her cousin was willing to traipse off with a bunch of girls neither of them knew. She wanted to go and find her father and uncle. Her cousin, though, loftily declared, "I know how to go home by myself! You can just wait here."

Chizuru's temper flared at how egotistical her cousin was being. *Fine, be that way*, she thought. *See how father and uncle scold you for worrying them so.*

"I'm not going," she said, coldly.

Her cousin pouted. "Then I'll go!"

She ran off with the girls and disappeared into the crowd, her movements so light it was as if she was dancing.

Now, her cousin stood in front of her, just as she had done on that day, and petulantly said, "Then I'll go."

As she turned away, Chizuru cried out, "No! Wait!"

Chizuru's uncle stood in her cousin's path. Behind him blazed the lanterns of Koiyama, filling up the entire street with light.

"Help, Uncle! Grab her!" pleaded Chizuru.

Her uncle reached his right hand out towards the running girl. But instead of stopping her, he merely brushed his hand lightly over her yukata. The girl continued on, taking no heed of him.

Beneath the glowing lights of the float, she stopped and turned toward him. Her long hair shimmered around her shoulders, just as it had that day. They gazed at each other for a moment, before she turned and skipped onward.

He watched her go, then turned and looked back at Chizuru. There was no sadness in his face. He gave a little wave, then followed his daughter into the lights of Yoiyama.

Chizuru stumbled after him, but her legs gave out beneath her, and only by the intervention of a man who rushed to catch her did she avoid crumbling to the floor. Even so, she tried to shake him off and run onward. Her uncle had already disappeared with the girls into the shifting crowds. As she fought to free herself and pursue them, she realized that it was her tears that were blurring the lights of the lanterns.

"Calm down, Chizuru," the man said in her ear. "You mustn't chase after them."

Mr. Yanagi held her as she stared into the recesses of Yoiyama, where her uncle and cousin had disappeared. Each breath was heavy and agonizing. She felt again as if she might faint.

"Steady, that's it," said Mr. Yanagi, observing her pale face as she gasped for breath. Chizuru closed her eyes and banished the luminescence of Yoiyama, focusing on Mr. Yanagi's voice to clear her mind.

Even after she was calm enough to breathe normally again, Chizuru couldn't bring herself to open her eyes. Around her swirled the feverish air and noise of the uncounted multitudes in the depths of Yoiyama.

Still holding onto Mr. Yanagi, Chizuru finally mustered the strength to gasp, "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you."

"I believe you," Mr. Yanagi said quietly. "I believe you."

Yoiyama Maze

That morning, when I woke up at seven like always, my mother wasn't there.

From the dining room, which stayed cool even in summer, came the aroma of miso soup and the sounds of the morning news on television. I peeked through the glass door that looked out onto the courtyard and found the view rather strange. Behind the crepe myrtle was a storage shed, its plaster wall reflecting brightly in the sunlight. The door was ajar. I opened the glass door and called, "Mom." Her reply came from inside the shed. What was she doing?

I headed to the bathroom sink to gargle with salt water before breakfast, a habit passed down from my father. The light coming in through the small window spilled over my mother's red toothbrush. A short while later I heard the back door open, and the soft slap of slippers coming toward me.

"It's this late already?" she said as she passed behind me.

When I came back into the dining room, she was standing in the kitchen.

"What were you doing in the shed so early in the morning?"

"A call came from Kinezuka Enterprises yesterday. I thought I'd search one more time."

"They're pretty persistent."

"But I'm curious about it too."

"We're busy planning the memorial, so it'd be nice if they would stop calling."

My mother came over to the table, murmuring, "Yeah, that would be best."

I stared at the television. "Today is Yoiyama."

"Hm? What did you say?"

"Today is Yoiyama."

"Right," she said softly. "Of course."

After breakfast, we left the house together.

Every day, we walked along Shōkokuji's long outer wall, entered from the east gate and crossed the temple grounds.

Seeing the vibrant green groves of trees reminded me of yesterday's rain. When I left the art gallery around seven in the evening, Karasuma Street was already lit with the glow from the street stalls. I had thought there would be few people due to the rain, but the narrow road was full of multicolored umbrellas pushing up against each other.

"The weather is nice today, so there will probably be a lot of people."

"Yeah."

We took the Karasuma line subway from Imadegawa Station. Yanagi Gallery was on Takakura Street, just off Sanjō Street, on the first floor of a multi-tenant building, about five minute's walk from Karasuma Oike Station. Originally, the gallery was managed by my parents, but after my father passed away, I quit my job at a gallery in Tokyo and came back to help her run the place along with a part-timer who was a student at the Kyoto City University of Arts.

We arrived at the office and began the day's work. The moment we entered the gallery, my mother's entire bearing changed. There was tons to do: exhibit catalogs and information

pamphlets, payments for artists, sending out customer orders, and other bits of general housekeeping.

“Mr. Kōno hasn’t sent over his plan for the exhibition, has he?” My mother furrowed her brows. “I wonder how it’s coming along.”

“I’ll go see him later this afternoon.”

“That’d be a great help.”



That afternoon, I left the work at the gallery to my mother, and went to see Mr. Kōno at his atelier.

I walked along Sanjō Street toward the business district in Karasuma. Although there was still some time before traffic restriction would start, the street was already full of tourists. Outside the comfortable air-conditioned gallery, my forehead was soon covered in sweat. I turned off Muromachi Street and into a narrow alley. The number of people continued to increase. I suddenly stopped and looked up at the hanging lanterns of Kuronushiyama¹⁰.

Kōno was painter who lived alone. His resident and workshop was a standalone house in Ryōtonzushi-chō, surrounded by multi-tenant and residential buildings. Up until just last year, my father often went to visit him, but now I went in his place. Sandwiched between a multi-tenant building and a cafe, and situated at the end of a stone-paved path, the building was quiet even in broad daylight. When I opened the front gate and stepped onto the path, sounds from outside died away as if I were underwater.

I rang the bell and slid open the door. It smelled like old wood inside.

“It’s Yanagi.”

“Ah, Mr. Yanagi, come in, please,” the painter said, looking half-asleep.

We always had our meetings in a small room facing the garden. Since his house was between two taller buildings, there wasn’t much sunlight. The little there was lit the artist’s face with an unhealthy pallor, as if he spent his life underground. I untied my furoshiki and brought out some tansan senbei.

He looked at the wrapping paper and said, “From Arima?”

“My mother went with her friends.”

“I’m glad she’s doing well.”

“Thank you.”

We moved from pleasantries to the business at hand: the gallery exhibition that was set to begin in autumn.

But the painter would only give me vague answers regardless of what I asked. His mind was elsewhere and he seemed to be listening for something in the shaded garden. Then, I suddenly remembered that today was Yoiyama, and cold sweat began to trickle down by back. I looked over at the photograph of the painter’s daughter sitting on top of a chest of drawers. There were two little girls in yukata. One was his niece.

¹⁰ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/kuronushiyama.html>

The painter's only daughter had gone missing the night of Yoiyama fifteen years ago. My father had told me numerous times, "Mr. Kōno still lives in that house because he is waiting for his daughter to return. It's like time stopped in there fifteen years ago."

How did I forget something like that?

I stumbled over my words, trying to change the subject.

The painter looked out onto the desolate garden and murmured, "It's Yoiyama, isn't it? Almost one year since your father passed."

"Yes."

"Yoiyama is a restless time, for both you and me."

"I apologize for coming today of all days."

"Not at all." He waved his hand. "That's quite alright. I apologize as well for being so unfocused."

"I'll call on you again some other day."

"You've gone through a lot in the past year as well, I assume," he said, gazing serenely at me. "You look tired. Try to get some rest."



Coming back out onto the main road from the stone path, I noticed that the number of people walking around had increased considerably. It seemed a bit unreal to me, like I was watching it all happen on a screen. Maybe the painter was right and I was more tired than I realized. It had been a hectic year since my father died.

Soon after I started down Rokkaku Street, I saw a sign for Kinezuka Enterprises. It was on the first floor of a building that also included a language school and real estate company. It was a secondhand goods store my father had worked with for years, but since his death, their persistent phone calls were becoming a thorn in my side. I was about to go in and complain about it when I noticed that they weren't open. The glass door was shut tight and it was dark inside. Old cardboard boxes were piled almost as high as I was tall, making it impossible to tell from the outside what they were selling. It had always been a strange store, and the owner, Kinezuka, was an equally strange man.

I came out onto Muromachi Street and headed toward Shijō Street.

As I passed Koiyama, I heard a shout from above. Leaning out the balcony of a third-floor apartment facing the street was a middle-aged couple who frequently visited the gallery.

The husband held up a beer can and said, "Care to join us for a cold one?"

I smiled and waved. "I'm still on the clock."

"Some other time then," the wife said.

On Muromachi Street, from Sanjō to Shijō, were Kuronushiyama, Koiyama, Yamabushiyama¹¹, and Kikusuihoko¹². When night fell, their lanterns would be lit in a dazzling display visible all through the street. *It'd be nice to come see it after work*, I thought.

¹¹ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/yamabushiyama.html>

¹² <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/kikusuihoko.html>

Turning onto Shijō Street, I entered the cafe in the basement level of the Industrial Exhibition Hall. I took out my papers and a pen, intending to put together a plan for the exhibition. As I turned toward the tables that looked out onto the underground street, I saw something bright red out of the corner of my eye. Floating in front of the barbershop across the street was a red balloon, as if a piece of Yoiyama from above had drifted underground.

Just as I was thinking this, a girl walked past the window in front of me. She stopped for a second and looked at the balloon. I saw her profile as a small smile appeared on her face and felt as if I'd been suddenly stabbed in the chest. It was Mr. Kōno's niece, Chizuru.

We'd first gotten to know each other last year in the winter, when I brought Mr. Kōno a kaleidoscope that had somehow come into my possession. I remembered being slightly embarrassed when she came upon the two of us sitting on the veranda, peering into the kaleidoscope. Since then, she'd visited the gallery a number of times.

I watched Chizuru walk away down the underground street.

I turned back to my papers but wasn't able to make much headway, as I kept getting distracted by the conversations around me.

Giving up, I sipped my coffee and let my thoughts drift.

Almost one year since your father passed. Mr. Kōno's words echoed in my mind.

A year ago, the night of Yoiyama, my father was found collapsed on a mountain road in Kurama. If there hadn't been students hiking nearby, he would've died without anyone knowing. There were no suspicious injuries. When I hurried back to Kyoto from Tokyo, my father was unconscious. The cause was determined to be a stroke, and my father passed away a week later, never having woken up. It all happened too quickly.

There was no reason to suspect the cause of his death, but there was one thing that unsettled me. Why was he in Kurama?

That morning, my father had appeared so tired that my mother suggested he take the day off. He had nodded and gone to go lie down in the bedroom. So why did he purposely go to Kurama? A ceramist he was good friends with lived there, but apparently my father hadn't gone to visit him. I'd thought about this often the past year, but in the end could only conclude that he had gone on a whim. He'd probably felt better after resting and suddenly felt like going somewhere.

But still, the whole city had been full to bursting on the night of Yoiyama, why did he have to collapse alone on a deserted road in Kurama? I knew there was no point asking, but the contrast was almost more than I could bear.

I looked out the glass window of the cafe.

The red balloon suddenly burst without a sound.



When I got back to the gallery, my mother was taking a tea break.

"Chizuru came by," she said.

It seemed like she had headed to the gallery after I saw her in the underground street.

I worked until evening. My mother left early, complaining of a headache.

The man from the corporation came right after she had gone.

I thought my mother had come back to get something she'd forgotten, but thought it was weird that she wasn't making any noises, so I left the office and went out onto the gallery floor. A man about the same age as me stood there, smiling slightly and admiring the paintings.

"Welcome," I said.

He turned, smiling pleasantly. "Yanagi, I assume?"

"That's me."

"I'm Otogawa from Kinezuka Enterprises."

Before I had time to frown after recognizing that name, he quickly added, "I'm very sorry for the constant phone calls—but there was simply no way for us to give up on this."

"I was actually just thinking about contacting Mr. Kinezuka, so you've come just in time. What does he want to talk about?"

"Kinezuka is on a business trip, so I've come in his stead."

I offered Otogawa a chair and poured him a cup of black tea. He sipped with apparent relish.

"Traffic restrictions have started, and the street stalls are out in full force. It's quite a sight to behold."

"It is Yoiyama after all."

"Indeed, it is all because of Yoiyama." He nodded to himself. "It really is something special, you know."

"Right. So, the reason you've come—"

"Okay, okay."

"Last autumn, we showed Mr. Kinezuka all the stuff we had in storage. The things he could take are pretty much all gone, and all we've got left is some junk."

"Not all junk, I'm sure."

He was still smiling, but his eyes were serious.

"Why do you think we have anything else?" I said, starting to get annoyed.

"Because it can't be anywhere else. It was last in your father's possession, and it hasn't been seen out on the market. Therefore."

"You must be talking about the crystal ball."

"That's right," he said happily, making a small grasping motion in the air with his hands. "That's exactly it."

"I haven't seen it though."

"I know. That's why, if you would be so kind to look again—"

"But we're swamped with work here. My father's memorial is coming up soon."

"That's fine. We're not in a hurry, as long as you do try to find it. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after the day after tomorrow, it doesn't matter. Kinezuka is willing to wait as long as it takes. So please, take your time," Otogawa said earnestly, his hands clasped on his knees.

Seeing his expression, I didn't have the heart to refuse him outright.

"I understand," I sighed. "I'll look into it when I have time."

"Thank you so much. And my apologies for being such a bother."

Otogawa bowed and left.

I sat for a moment and gazed off into space. I was extremely unhappy, partly because I couldn't refuse Kinezuka Corp's request, and partly because I couldn't get a read on Otogawa. The moment he had left, his impression of affability disappeared and left me feeling a bit creeped out.

Above it all, why was Kinezuka Corp so interested in something my father had left behind?

I finished cleaning and locked up the gallery.

To clear my mood, I went for a walk around the city.

It had been a long time since I had walked around Yoiyama. Since my father had collapsed the night of the festival last year, it was already over by the time I came back from Tokyo. And when I was still living in Tokyo I didn't have any pressing reason to return to Kyoto when the crowds were at their worst. To be honest, I'd felt that I had had enough of Kyoto altogether.

When I turned from Sanjō Street onto Karasuma Street, the usual office district had been transformed into a city of street stalls as far south as the eye could see. The smell of grilled chicken and corn mingled in the air. The sky was beautifully clear. It was a pedestrian's paradise; people wandered freely up and down the wide street. As I walked slowly through the stalls, two girls with their hair pulled back in tight buns ran past, holding hands. Just from their hair, I could tell that they were students at the ballet school on Sanjō Street. I couldn't help but smile when I thought that Chizuru probably looked just like that when she was a child.

All the alleys going west off of Karasuma Street were stuffed with sightseers and vendors. Floats towered above their dark heads like glowing castles.

I walked all the way to Kita-kannyōyama¹³, but the crowds were unpleasantly thick. I was surprised to find Yoiyama this congested. There was a frightening amount of people from Muromachi Street to Shinmachi Street, and it reminded me of my first time in Tokyo. I gave up on trying to exit at Shijō Street and turned back.

The sounds of the festival faded as I went farther north.

At the intersection of Muromachi and Rokkaku, I saw Mr. Kōno. I was about to call out to him when I saw his expression. He was staring fixedly ahead, but his eyes were empty. It was as if he were a ghost slipping through the flood of people, moving so quickly his feet didn't seem to touch the ground. I had no idea where he was going.

I felt an oppressive gloom pressing down on me. I didn't know if it was caused by my meeting with Otogawa, or by the painter's past, or by my father's death. Rather than finding Yoiyama as beautiful as I remembered, I felt like I was attending a festival in a foreign land.

Lost in thought, I continued walking until I was north of Kuronushiyama. Suddenly, I stepped on something that felt like a small lump of rubber. It was too dark for me to make out what it was. When I bent down to look, I realized it was the dead body of a goldfish.



¹³ <http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/yamahoko/kitakannyōyama.html>

When I woke up at half past seven the next morning, my mother wasn't there. I looked through the glass door. She was rummaging in the storage shed again. When I called out to her, she responded just like she had yesterday. As I was gargling at the bathroom sink, I heard the back door open and the soft slap of slippers coming toward me. "It's this late already?" she said as she passed behind me. At that moment, I was hit with a feeling that something was terribly wrong.

When I came back into the dining room, breakfast was ready.

"What were you doing in the shed so early in the morning?"

"A call came from Kinezuka Enterprises yesterday. I thought I'd search one more time."

I looked at her. "Today too?"

"What do you mean 'today too'?"

I looked at the television. The screen showed an image of Yoiyama as the announcer said, "It is estimated that three hundred thousand people will attend Yoiyama today."

"It's Yoiyama today?"

My mother tilted her head toward the television. "Of course," she murmured.

"Wasn't it Yoiyama yesterday?"

"Are you still asleep, silly? It's today." She pointed at the screen.

"Guess it was just a dream," I muttered.

I had a very strange day.

I had experienced *deja vu* a number of times before. It was an uncanny sensation where I could vividly remember seeing the current scene in an old dream, while the present situation itself seemed far away. Today, that feeling continued for about half a day. The trees inside Shōkokuji, the clear skies, the smell of the gallery, working together with my mother, the faces of the customers who visited the gallery—all of it was the same as yesterday.

Just after noon, my mother said, "You've been acting weird all day. Like you're completely spaced out."

"Yeah, kind of."

"Why don't you go out and clear your head."

"I'll go see Mr. Kōno."

Out in the heat, my forehead began to prickle with sweat; floats towered over sightseers going this way and that in the streets.

It was Yoiyama again.

I made my way to Mr. Kōno's house and halted in front of it.

The shady, stone-paved path stretched out in front of me. The coolness of the air as I walked down it, the smell of wood as I opened the sliding door, sitting face to face with Mr. Kōno, I could remember it all in perfect detail. The photo of his daughter on the chest of drawers. The room that had been frozen in time for fifteen years.

"Today is Yoiyama," I muttered to myself.

I left without opening the gate.



I came out onto Muromachi Street and headed toward Shijō Street. As I passed Koiyama, I heard a shout from above. Leaning out the balcony of a third-floor apartment facing the street was a middle-aged couple who frequently visited the gallery.

The husband held up a beer can and said, "Care to join us for a cold one?"

"Sounds good," I said, "I'll take you up on that."

"Come in, come in."

The wife greeted me on the third floor. Her husband was forty and worked at a bank near Karasuma. A painting from our gallery hung in their living room. Next to it was a tank with red goldfish. The husband stood up when went out onto the balcony.

"Nothing better than drinking in the middle of the day," he said, laughing.

I accepted a beer and the three of us started chatting. The wife said that her grandfather used to run a kimono fabric shop, so she was familiar with this area. I called my mother.

Looking down from the balcony, I thought I could see myself walking through the throng on Muromachi Street. Of course, that wasn't actually possible. But why did I feel like I was reliving Yoiyama in the first place? Even if all of "yesterday" was just a dream, it was much too vivid. If that was the case, then if I chose to act differently than I did "yesterday," then the sense of *deja vu* should fade. Still, I couldn't help but think that right about now, Chizuru was probably walking through the underground street in Shijō on the way to the gallery.

The couple had visited us often enough that we were fairly familiar with each other, and they were good conversationalists, so I ended up staying for quite a while. In doing so, I felt the sense of *deja vu* lessening, lifting my mood. I was sure that all the things that had happened "yesterday" were nothing more than a dream.

It got cooler as the afternoon went on, and the wife said she wanted to go out for a bit. She suggested enthusiastically that all three of us should go together, but the husband didn't seem to be in the mood. In the end, she left by herself, looking disappointed.

"Are you sure you don't want to go?" I asked.

"I don't really want to go wandering around; crowds aren't my forte."

"It can get pretty tiring fighting the crowds during Yoiyama."

"On days like these, relaxing and watching from the balcony is ideal," he said, taking a swig of beer.

We fell silent for a bit.

"One of our clients is Kinezuka Enterprises," he said, suddenly serious. "Yesterday, someone called Otogawa paid us a visit."

"Otogawa?"

"He had some other business, but also mentioned that there was a message he wanted to pass on to you. So you can imagine I was pretty surprised to see you earlier."

"Huh. What did he say?"

"He said you'd understand if I just said that you had a message from Otogawa. It was a pretty strange conversation."

I had just managed to convince myself that "yesterday" was just a dream. Now I was at a loss for words. The husband seemed worried by my silence.

"If you want to talk about it, I'm happy to listen."

I waved my hand hurriedly. "No, it's nothing serious. It's to do with my father's estate."

"I see. Kinezuka Enterprises deals in antiques, doesn't it?"

"I think that's what he's talking about."

"That makes me feel better. I was worried by Otogawa's cryptic way of talking," he said cheerfully. "There's chilled champagne." He headed toward the kitchen.

Alone on the balcony, I thought hard about Otogawa. I met him "yesterday," but the fact that the husband also met him meant that Otogawa was a real person. In that case, I really did meet Otogawa, and "yesterday" wasn't just a dream. What in the world was going on?

"Woah," said the husband as he came back with the champagne.

I looked up and saw him staring at the top of the building across from us. On the roof floated a red carp the size of a steel barrel. It looked like it had gotten stuck on the water tower, and flapped miserably upside-down in the wind.

"Is it a balloon?" he asked, sitting back down.

"Yeah. Surprised me."



Around half past six in the evening, the wife came back from her stroll around Yoiyama. She came out onto the veranda holding a balloon.

"Ah, it's so hot," she said, wiping away sweat.

"What's that?"

"Isn't it neat? A monk on Shinmachi Street gave it to me."

The clear balloon was painted with green seaweed, and inside it floated a small, fake goldfish. It looked like a floating fishbowl on a string.

"How did they make this?" he asked, turning it this way and that.

"Don't break it," she said, smiling. "You're such a kid."

"It's pretty interesting." He sounded impressed. "Yanagi, why don't you stay for dinner."

"I couldn't—" I began.

"Great idea," the wife said, getting up.

I looked over at the two of them in the kitchen.

The sky was deepening to indigo, and sparse, pink clouds drifted above the building across from us. As we carried our plates to the balcony, the floats were lit, bathing the streets in their glittering light. I sat down. Directly to my right was Koiyama, and across the street on the left was Yamabushiyama. The sightseers moving through Muromachi Street created a pleasant din. Smoke from the street stalls swirled around incandescent lights and lanterns, licked twisting utility lines and the kimono shop sign, and disappeared into the navy blue sky.

"Look," the wife said from beside me, looking down onto the street. "Those kids are acting strange. They've passed by a number of times now."

"Maybe they're lost."

"Doesn't seem like it. They keep circling around the same area...it looks like they're having a lot of fun."

As I watched, the girls in red yukata made their way effortlessly down Muromachi Street.

Despite the crowds, they moved lightly, like they were slipping through the small gaps between people. It reminded me of goldfish being carried on a current. As I followed their

movements, I became aware of a man standing in the light of Koiyama. It was Otagawa from Kinezuka Enterprises.

He watched with apparent interest as the girls slipped by. Then, as if he knew exactly what he was looking for, he lifted his head and met my eyes squarely. A small smile appeared on his lips and he bowed.

“What’s wrong, Yanagi?” the wife asked, seeing my face.

By the time I left the couple’s house, it was already eight in the evening. The heat from the crowd was fearsome. I made my way as quickly as possible to the Karasuma and Sanjō intersection and got on the subway.

When I got to Shōkokuji I finally felt like I could breathe freely. The trees in the garden were pitch black under the dark blue sky. The residential area was completely silent.

Streetlights dotted the roads.

As I walked along Shōkokuji’s outer wall, I could faintly hear the Gionbayashi. I figured it was coming from someone’s television, but it still felt kind of eerie. I didn’t know why I was so unsettled.

A red light flashed twice, thrice, behind the temple wall. I stopped and stared, but there was only darkness once again.

All of a sudden I recalled the feeling of stepping on the dead goldfish.

That night, I had a strange dream.

I was walking through the crowds at Yoiyama. My father was walking ahead of me. He was holding a balloon with goldfish inside.

“What is that balloon?” I asked. For some reason I was a child once again.

“It’s not a balloon,” my father said, turning around.

He jerked the string, caught the balloon in his hands, and held it out to me. “Look.”

I took it. It felt like it was filled with water, or like I was holding a crystal ball. Goldfish swam in circles inside the transparent orb. How strange. Suddenly there were two more goldfish. *Oh!* I thought, as dozens of red grains appeared, swelled rapidly and filled the ball with goldfish. They burst from the surface and fell in a stream, making unpleasant *plaps* as they hit the ground. I tried desperately not to step on any, but still ended up squishing some every time I moved my feet.

My mother woke me as I was moaning.

“What’s wrong?” She held her hand to my forehead. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“No, I don’t remember what it was.”

“You’re such a child.”

When I got up, the smell of miso soup was drifting from the kitchen. Sunlight streamed in through the glass door. I turned to the television. The screen showed an image of Yoiyama as the announcer said, “It is estimated that three hundred thousand people will attend Yoiyama today.”

“It’s Yoiyama today?”

My mother tilted her head toward the television. “Of course,” she murmured.



I didn't step foot outside the gallery that day.

Every time I stopped working, all sorts of images flooded my mind. My meeting with Mr. Kōno, the feeling of dead goldfish, the view of Yoiyama from an apartment in Muromachi. Overlapping memories of Yoiyama piled up in my head. It was hard to think of them as just a long dream. But how was I supposed to think of them?

Outside, the Yoiyama festival carried on as usual. Almost no one visited the gallery.

At just past four in the afternoon I heard my mother calling me and left the office. Chizuru was standing on the gallery floor.

"It's been a while," she said, bowing slightly.

"Good afternoon."

"I had an urge to come see some paintings."

"That's great. Take your time."

She went quietly around the gallery. I left her to it.

When she was finished, my mother made tea for the three of us. Chizuru seemed quieter than usual. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. Was she thinking about Yoiyama as well?

Since there were no other visitors, we were able to relax and chat. My mother deliberately chose happy topics to cheer Chizuru up.

When my mother left for a moment, Chizuru looked like she had something to say.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I want to ask you for a favor...will you come with me to visit my uncle?"

"Right now?"

"Yes. I know you're busy, but..."

"Not at all." I waved my hand. "I'll go with you."

Leaving my mother to take care of things, I went out with Chizuru.

The clouds were dyed pink as the floats were lit.

The light above the door to the painter's house glowed at the end of the dark stone path.

Chizuru opened the door and called out, but there was no response. It was dark and silent inside.

"I guess he's not home," she said quietly.

Taking off her shoes, she entered and turned on the hall light. After checking the room facing the garden and the dining room, she gave a half-shrug.

"Should we wait a bit?"

"Yes, please have a seat. I'll make some tea."

The noise from Yoiyama was barely audible here.

When was the last time I had spoken to the painter? I hadn't met with him after Yoiyama started looping. As I sat there, I felt like I could almost see his dimly lit face.

Chizuru and I waited for him to return.

"I originally wanted to come earlier," she said worriedly, looking at the clock on the wall.

"But I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Sorry for keeping you at the gallery for so long."

"It's not because of that."

"Was it because of Yoiyama?"

“...I suppose so. I thought I would be over it after fifteen years, but I guess not. You know about it?”

“I heard about it from my father.”

She looked over at the photo on the chest of drawers. “I only remember bits and pieces. My cousin and I were both seven years old.”

“It’s a tragedy. My father also often thought about it.”

Suddenly we heard the front door open.

“Oh.” Chizuru turned toward the sound. “I think he’s back.”

But there were no other sounds, just the feeling of someone’s presence. Our eyes met. Chizuru’s face was pale.

“Excuse me,” a small voice said.

“Who is it?” She made to stand up, but I stopped her.

I went to the front door. Under the fluorescent light stood Otogawa from Kinezuka Enterprises. He was looking at the ground, but straightened up and smiled when he heard my footsteps.

“You must be Yanagi.”

“Yes.”

“I’m Otogawa from Kinezuka Enterprises.”

“I know.”

He nodded. “I saw you come this way earlier. I’m sorry for imposing, but no matter what we need——”

“I know. But following me around like this is making my life pretty difficult.”

“I apologize.”

“Please leave for today.”

He sighed and nodded slightly. “Just one thing.”

“What?”

“Just that we’re not in a hurry. As long as you do try to find it. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after the day after tomorrow, it doesn’t matter. Kinezuka is willing to wait as long as it takes. So please, take your time.”

He bowed again, opened the door, and left.

“What happened?” Chizuru asked as I went back to the room. “You look kind of angry.”

“It’s nothing, just someone trying to sell something.”

The only sound left was the ticking of the clock. The garden was already invisible in the dark.

“If there’s a tomorrow...” I said, without thinking.

“If there’s a tomorrow?” she repeated, cocking her head.

○

When I woke up at half past seven in morning, my mother wasn’t there. I looked through the glass door. As expected, she was in the shed. I didn’t have to look at the television to know that today was Yoiyama.

I slumped over the table with my head on my arms. I heard my mother’s footsteps.

“Are you alright?” she asked in a worried voice.

“I don’t feel good,” I said, looking up.

“You don’t look too great either.”

“I guess I’ve been working too much.”

“Why don’t you take the day off.”

I went upstairs to my room.

Sunlight leaked through the blinds like reflections on water. I lay on the cool bed and stared at the ceiling. After a while I heard my mother leave for the gallery. Every time I was about to doze off, my body would cramp up and I’d wake up again. I drifted in and out of a restless sleep as I tried my best to forget about all that I had experienced during Yoiyama. I didn’t do anything else. I simply stared as the light coming through the blinds got brighter and brighter.

At around four in the afternoon, my cell phone rang.

“Yanagi,” came Mr. Kōno’s voice.

“Sir.”

“Are you alright? The other day, when you brought over the souvenir from Arima, I thought you looked exhausted.”

“Sorry for making you worry. I’m taking some time off, as you suggested—” I choked on my words.

There was a moment of silence.

“When did you bring over the souvenir?” he asked quietly.

“Sir.”

“You’re looping too, aren’t you?”

I said nothing.

“Can you come over tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“I think this has something to do with your father’s death.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. But with all these strange things happening at the same Yoiyama, I have to believe that it has the same cause. It’s human nature.”

He hung up.

I sat up. Father’s death. His estate.

I left my room and went down to the shed.

It was cool, almost chilly inside, and mostly empty. There was nothing apart from a few large boxes and some of my mother’s things. Inside the boxes were some of my father’s books that I kept to read at some point. I spent about an hour methodically looking through the boxes but didn’t see the crystal ball Otogawa had talked about. I searched through my mother’s stuff as well, but it wasn’t there either.

I sat down on an old suitcase.

It was starting to get dark outside. I hadn’t found anything. I looked through the half open door and thought about my mother looking through the shed each morning. She’d said, “A call came from Kinezuka Enterprises yesterday. I thought I’d search one more time.” But was that true?

An unpleasant chill suddenly ran up my spine.
I listened carefully.
I could faintly hear the Gionbayashi.



When I got off the Eizan train at Kurama Station, it was completely deserted. The sky was beginning to darken, and lights fluorescent lights lit up the platform. I was enveloped in cold air coming down from the mountain.

Why had my father come to Kurama?

I stood on the platform, thinking. Maybe he gone north in an attempt to get away from the phantom Gionbayashi. Maybe there was no reason it had to be Kurama; he had simply been running away from the vision of Yoiyama that followed him everywhere. In other words, had he, like me, also been living in an endless loop of Yoiyama? Perhaps he had died before finding a way out.

The reason we were trapped in this was because of the object he had left behind.

Whatever the reason, I decided to first take a look around the area. As I headed toward the exit, I saw something red flashing out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw a girl in a red yukata sitting at the end of the opposite platform, swinging her feet back and forth. I felt like I could hear the Gionbayashi again. A balloon floated away in front of me.

"You must be Yanagi," a voice said from behind.

I turned and saw a man come through the station gates.

"I'm Otagawa from Kinezuka Enterprises."

"Did you kill him?"

"Your father? Of course not." He waved his hands hurriedly. "I would never do something like that."

"But my father—"

"From what Kinezuka said, he died of an illness. Not by someone's hand. But he, like you, was living through repeated Yoiyama."

"Are you looping too?"

Otagawa smiled. "I'm not a demon. Today is my first time meeting you. But you know who I am. That's quite strange."

"You may not be one, but what about your client?"

"I can't tell you about that. Sorry." He sighed. "Well, in any case, I'm sure you know—"

"Yeah, I understand perfectly."

"Meet me in the storage room of the traditional wooden house south of Sanjō Street tomorrow at five in the evening. If you do, you'll know what I mean. The front door will be open."

"I can't guarantee I'll have a tomorrow..."

"If you don't, tomorrow will just be another repetition. You know, Yanagi, your father picked it up by chance. He was fixated on something he shouldn't have. I can only say he got what was coming."

"In that case...why am I also stuck with it?"

“Do you need a reason? What for?” He smiled. “You’ll forget everything once you return it to its rightful owner.”



It was cold inside the shed this early in the morning. The faint light that came in through the small window seemed to bleach the color from the odds and ends lying around the room. I sat down on an old suitcase to wait. The door had been left ajar.

A short while later, I heard footsteps approaching. They seemed surprised that the door was open. There was a short silence.

“Shinichirō?”

“I’m inside.”

The door opened and my mother peeked in. “What in the world are you doing in here?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Why?”

“I want you to return the crystal ball.” I made a round shape with my hands. “You were about to hide it.”

She sighed. “How did you know?”

“Just had a feeling.”

“It was really important to your father. He wasn’t willing to give it to Kinezuka, no matter how much they pestered him. So I figured I could at least keep this one thing.”

“This has caused a lot of trouble for me.”

“Why?”

“I can’t really explain, but I’m telling the truth. You have to give it back to them. It wasn’t something that belonged to father to begin with.”

She stared steadily at me. “Your face looks just like your father’s on that day. Also...he was just like you in that he always knew what I was up to.”

“It’s alright. Once you return it it’ll all be okay.”

“I’m scared.”

“I won’t become like him. Where is it?”

“Inside the suitcase you’re sitting on.”

I stood and opened the suitcase.

Inside was a clear ball wrapped in cloth.



That afternoon I went to the painter’s studio. He showed me to the sitting room without a word. The dim light from the garden illuminated his unshaven face. He poured tea. I looked at the picture frame on the chest of drawers. There was a photo of his daughter.

He took out a black kaleidoscope and said he had gotten it at a street stall in during Yoiyama. He said that through it, he had seen his daughter who had gone missing fifteen years ago, and gotten lost in the endlessly looping world.

“But you know, I don’t mind being stuck in Yoiyama. But why are you lost in here too? What did you do?”

“Do you remember this?”

I untied my furoshiki and took out the crystal ball I had found in the shed. Looking puzzled, he held it up to the light and stared closely at it, then shook his head.

“I don’t remember seeing this.”

“It’s something my father left.”

“What is it?”

I explained the whole series of events regarding Kinezuka Enterprises.

After I was done, he picked up the ball again. “It might be part of a kaleidoscope,” he said, showing me the small crystal ball embedded at the end of his kaleidoscope.

“Are there even ones that big?”

“Probably none that belong to humans.”

I nodded.

“If you succeed, you’ll be able to move on to tomorrow. I won’t be there though.”

“Are you sure?”

Even though he had experienced the same thing as me, I still didn’t quite believe him. I thought that someday he would break the loop and return to the normal world.

“I’m sure. Give Chizuru a proper goodbye for me.”

“She’ll be devastated.”

“Please take care of her.”

Leaving the painter’s house, I headed toward the lively crowds of Yoiyama. If tomorrow really came, I would probably never set foot in Yoiyama again.

I went down to the basement level of the Industrial Exhibition Hall.

I took a seat by the cafe window and sipped my coffee. Across the street floated a red balloon. It was a familiar scene. Before long, she came by. She stopped for a moment to look at the balloon. The small smile that appeared on her lips sent a stab through my chest.

Standing up, I prepared to call out to her.

○

I arrived at the house Otogawa specified right on time.

The front door had been left open, and hordes of university students were going in and out. It seemed like they had booked the place for an event. I stopped a girl wearing a straw hat and a toolbelt.

“Is Mr. Otogawa here?” I asked.

“Yeah, he should be in the storage room,” she said, showing me the way.

I opened the door and stepped into darkness so thick it was almost stifling.

“Mr. Yanagi?” Otogawa called brightly from the other end of the room.

“Yes.”

“It’s Otogawa from Kinezuka Enterprises. Sorry, do you mind closing the door?”

“I’ve brought the thing you’ve been asking for...”

“Alright, wait just a moment.”

I heard some rustling and a thin light appeared. The storage was just as empty as the shed at our house. Projected on the walls were strange images made of shards of colors spinning around, colliding, and breaking apart into various shapes. It was mesmerising to look at.

"It's a kaleidoscope projector. We have a few prototypes," Otogawa said.

I held out the crystal ball. He took it and squinted at it.

"This certainly is it."

"It was in the shed."

"Just as I thought. I'm glad you got it back without any trouble." He smiled wryly. "Or maybe it wasn't so simple? I have no idea, since it's my first time meeting you today."

"I know."

"In return..."

I held up my hands. "I don't want anything in return. Instead, can you explain what it is?"

"My apologies, but we're not allowed to talk about our clients."

"Is it a kaleidoscope?"

He looked surprised. "How did you know? Oops, I shouldn't have said that."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Well, let's just call it a day," he said, showing me to the door.

The house was now empty save for the glare of the lights.

"Oh, are they at rehearsal?" Otogawa muttered to himself.

He held the crystal ball up to the light. "I can tell you one thing. This ball is apparently outside our world. Tonight, we are in the world you see inside the ball."

I thought I caught a glimpse of a red goldfish zipping across the inside of the ball.

Turning, I saw girls dressed in red yukata spilling out of the empty storeroom, laughing merrily.



Under the deepening sky, floats glittered as if enchanted. I leaned against a row of vending machines in front of a wall and stared off into space.

How much time passed?

In the direction of Muromachi Street, I heard Chizuru call out to her uncle. I straightened up and waded into the crowd.

Right in front of me towered Koiyama with its dazzling lanterns. Sightseers jostled below it. Chizuru stood in the middle of the throng. In front of her was Mr. Kōno, looking back toward us. As I was about to approach them, a wave of red erupted like flames all around me. Girls in red yukata streamed by on both sides, running toward Koiyama. Chizuru made to grab the fluttering fin-like sleeves of the yukata.

"Please stop my uncle!"

The girls passed the painter. He held his hand out toward the last one, but only grasped empty space.

He turned and made his way toward the light of Koiyama. For just one moment, he looked back and whispered something to Chizuru.

She stumbled as she tried to go after him. I caught her before she fell. She shook me off.
"Calm down, Chizuru," I said. "You mustn't go after them."

She watched her uncle and the girls disappear, breathing heavily. Her face was still very pale, but she wasn't struggling anymore.

"Steady, that's it," I said.

She leaned her head against my chest and was still for a while. Even after her breathing returned to normal, she didn't open her eyes.

"You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," she whispered.

"I believe you," I said quietly. "I believe you."

"It's too strange."

"I've lived it. So I believe you."

Yoiyama Kaleidoscope

The girl and her younger sister attended Suzaki Ballet Studio, which was in a venerable four-story building on Sanjō Street in Koromonotana-chō to the west of its intersection with Muromachi Street. Each Saturday, their mother would send them off from their white, ivy-covered residence behind Kyoto Notre Dame University, and they would ride the gently swaying subway car to the studio in the middle of town.

The lesson that day proceeded just like any other.

As the girl practiced her steps in front of the giant, hazy mirror, her attention was drawn to the window looking out onto Sanjō Street. The frosted glass admitted only a dim silver light, giving no indication of the festivities that were beginning to stir outside on the city streets. But getting off the subway with her sister at their usual stop, the girl had espied more than a few couples walking along the platform wearing yukata, and thus concluded that today was Yoiyama.

Once something caught her attention, the girl had a bad habit of forgetting about everything else. She made misstep after misstep, looking sublimely unperturbed all the while, failing even to notice Miss Misaki's gimlet eye trained upon her. It was she who had dragged her little sister into taking ballet lessons, yet now she was so bored that it was all she could do to keep herself from screaming in frustration.

During a break, the girl snuck up to the fourth floor, which proved a most enjoyable excursion. The fourth floor was filled with so many marvelous odds and ends, it was as if Yoiyama was creeping in from the roof.

"What a shock that fish gave me!" she reflected, her feet pattering away on the wooden floor. "And how *did* it get so fat?"

"No detours on your way home," Ms. Suzaki reminded the students as the lesson ended at last, though her words seemed aimed at the girl in particular.

The air in the dressing room was thick with the funk of sweat as the girls chatted in low tones about Yoiyama. Some were planning to go with friends, others with parents, and the more the girl listened to them chatter, the more restive she became, until she couldn't stand any more.

She nudged her sister's shoulder, which was slightly damp with sweat, and hissed, "Let's go sightseeing!"

Her sister glanced back at her, looking uneasy. "I don't wanna."

"Don't be a spoilsport!"

Her sister shook her head and maintained a stony silence as they walked down the stairs. She'd never had any sense of adventure; for her, there was always something to fear, something to worry about.

Coming to a red-carpeted landing, the girl grabbed hold of her sister's arm.

"Come on, let's go!"

"But Ms. Suzaki said not to take any detours!"

"Then we won't tell her!"

“What if she finds out?”

“Don’t worry about it!”

The two descended to the first floor and pushed open the heavy door together, coming out onto the street.

A sticky, oppressive fog lay over the city. The tops of the buildings were trimmed in golden sunlight, as were the clouds that floated in the sky above. Sanjō Street was even more crowded than usual.

The girls came out onto Karasuma Street. The wide asphalt valley between the office building cliffs was devoid of cars. Instead, the roadway was filled with children and couples wearing yukata and businessmen on their way home. The girl was so elated at seeing such a rare sight she felt like skipping.

Pulling her sister along, she ran into the middle of the street. Both sides of the avenue were crowded with market stalls, more than she had ever seen in her life, stretching out far into the distance, their electric lights already glowing under the afternoon sun. The mouthwatering smell of grilling food wafted through the muggy air. Standing in the middle of the street looking up, the sky above seemed to go on forever.

The two girls walked along Karasuma Street, Kyoto Tower rising up in the distance in front of them. They entered one of the myriad alleys to find it even more crowded than the main street had been, the heat and noise overpowering. Street stalls had managed to pop up even in this narrow pathway, forcing sightseers to push and jostle as they passed through the alley.

The girl was eager to see the praying mantis which she had heard about in the dressing room. Not knowing where the float was located in this web of streets, she took a map from a man who was handing them out at the side of the road, but finding reading it too difficult, she soon gave up and struck out haphazardly. Her sister trailed along behind her, looking as if she were about to cry.

Between the lights of the stalls, the body heat emanating from the crowd, and the muggy weather, walking through the streets was like being in a sauna. The girl’s hand was slick with sweat as she dragged her sister behind her. Each time she saw something interesting she gave a cry of delight: roasted corn, fried chicken, goldfish scooping, lotteries, hot dogs, tamago senbei, mini castellas, grilled chicken skewers, balloons, takoyaki, target shooting, okonomiyaki, shaved ice, candied apples and strawberries, masks and stuffed animals.

Here and there, she spotted festival floats blazing with lights, rising high above the dark silhouettes of the crowd below.



Just as the girl had well and truly lost her way and was giving up hope of ever reaching her destination, she came across Mr. Yanagi.

Mr. Yanagi worked at an art gallery by Sanjō Takakura. The girl had gone there with her mother once, and she still remembered the fragrant black tea that he had served her. Now, he was loitering by a vending machine, carrying a cloth-wrapped package. He looked a little weary.

“Hello!” the sister chirped, greeting him politely.

“Well, hello there,” he said, smiling.

“Do you know where the praying mantis is?”

“Praying mantis... perhaps you mean Tōrōyama?”

“Yes, that must be it.”

Mr. Yanagi smiled again and gave them clear, simple instructions on how to get there.

“Don’t let go of each other,” he instructed them as they parted ways. “Hold hands tightly, so you don’t lose each other.”

Following the directions Mr. Yanagi had given them, the girls at last made their way to Tōrōyama.

Now that they had found Tōrōyama, the girl’s little sister began to insist they go home. The girl still wanted to enjoy herself some more, but she did feel a little sorry for her sister.

Turning to retrace their steps through the festival, her eyes fell upon a group of girls, all wearing red yukata. Though the alley was packed with sightseers, the girls flitted between them as gracefully as a school of goldfish, darting through momentary gaps in the crowd as if being sucked in. How delightful it would be to go out and enjoy Yoiyama wearing yukata, the girl thought. So beautiful and otherworldly were those girls, even her sister stopped clamoring and trying to pull her along for the moment; she stood there transfixed, her mouth half-open, and her sweaty hand dropped limply to her side.

Why did she let go of her sister’s hand?

Afterward, the girl would come to recall the moment when her sister’s hand slipped away from her own sweat-slicked fingers as one of sheer terror. While she frequently remarked on her sister’s timidity, it was never done with disdain; her mischief often exasperated her sister, but she had never deliberately sought to torment her, and to leave her sister alone in the tumult of Yoiyama—the thought of doing something so cruel would never had crossed her mind.

Perhaps her sister thought that the sweat had made her hand slip, or perhaps she was just that enraptured by the girls in yukata; either way she didn’t notice that the girl was no longer by her side. Her stupor only lasted for a moment, though, and through a gap in the crowd the girl saw her wildly look around, then strike off in the wrong direction, lip quivering and tears brimming in her eyes.

The girl chased after her.

Her sister sporadically disappeared and reappeared through the rippling crowd. Though at times she would lose sight of her, it was easy to pick out her shiny bun, and that lulled her into a sense of security. After tailing her for some time, she noticed that her sister had started to walk at a more leisurely pace; where earlier she had been close to bursting into tears, now she was glancing curiously at the stalls as she walked by. The girl was perturbed by the fact that her sister didn’t seem to be looking for her at all.

“Hey!” she called out.

Her sister didn’t turn around to look, but someone else did. It was one of the girls from ballet class who had been chattering so excitedly about Yoiyama earlier in the dressing room. She was standing next to her parents, and her expression turned skeptical when she realized that the girl was alone in the crowd. She was holding a glistening, partially eaten glazed strawberry on a stick.

“Are you by yourself?” she asked. “You’re not supposed to go off on your own.”

“Yes, I know,” the girl answered, quickly walking away.

It had been some time since she let go of her sister's hand. She returned to the spot where they had parted, but her sister was nowhere to be seen. Since her sister didn't know her way around, standing here and hoping that she would find her way back was optimistic at best. The girl's eyes flickered back and forth as she left the alley, squinting as she scanned the crowds for a glimpse of her sister. Only minutes ago she had thought nothing of the crowds, but now she felt stifled by the masses of people swirling around her.

Trying to cheer herself up, she bought a glazed strawberry from one of the stalls. She bit through the crunchy candy shell and savored the burst of tart, juicy strawberry underneath. It was heavenly.

As she stood in front of the stall eating the strawberry, she noticed someone passing by with a strange balloon. The surface of the bobbing balloon was decorated to look like a fish bowl with images of aquatic plants and gravel, and inside it was actually filled with water and a real, live goldfish. Fascinated, she took a closer look and saw the fish twirl around with a flash of its fins.

"Where did you buy that balloon?" the girl asked.

"This?" smiled the yukata-clad woman who was holding the balloon. "I didn't buy it. Someone gave it to me."

"For free?"

"There's a monk handing them out in front of the brown building over there. Go see for yourself!"

The girl started walking.

I'm still looking for my sister, the girl told herself. But her sister would be so happy if she could get her hands on one of those balloons, too. The girl decided to get two of those balloons and give one to her sister, as an apology for letting go of her hand.



The girl spotted the robed, bearded monk in front of the brown building. His ferocious countenance painted a curious picture juxtaposed with the goldfish balloon he was holding. Occasionally the monk would look up at the goldfish swimming inside the balloon and whistle, and as if in response the fish would swim to the bottom of the balloon flapping its cute little fins.

"What are you looking at, runt?" the monk rumbled, rolling his eyes down to glare at her. "Beat it!"

The girl continued to stare at the balloon.

"Interested in this?" the monk asked, giving it a little shake.

The girl nodded. "Can I have it?"

"Not this one. This is for my niece in Tanukidani."

"Where can I go to get one?"

"Lord Yoiyama was distributing them, but they're all gone now. Popular things, these. If you want one you'll have to wait until next year's Yoiyama."

The girl's shoulders slumped in disappointment, rather theatrically.

The monk brought his giant frame down so he could look at her face, bringing the balloon low enough that she could reach out her hand and touch it. It felt pleasantly cool, like a water balloon. Viewed through the transparent latex, the goldfish looked as if it were swimming in a spiderweb of power lines, silhouetted against the pale pink sky.

The girl made a show of stamping her feet petulantly.

“Do you really want one that badly?”

“I do, I really do! I want two of them!”

“Two! You insatiable wretch!”

“One for me, and one for my sister!”

“Icy,” muttered the monk, scratching his bristly chin. “Icy.”

“What’s icy?”

“I mean, *I see*.”

“*Icy*.”

“Don’t copy me. Where is your sister?”

“We got separated. I’m going to go find her, right after I get my balloons.”

“You dunderhead. There are no more balloons.”

The girl puffed out her cheeks sullenly. Not missing a beat, the monk made the same face right back at her.

“What kind of face is that? Who taught you to do that? What, you think doing that will let you get your way?”

“No one taught me anything!”

“Pout all you want, that’s not going to make a balloon just appear out of thin air.”

“Fine. I’ll just stay like this forever.”

True to her word, the girl situated herself next to the monk and pouted. The sight of the diminutive girl next to this mountain of a monk was quite remarkable, drawing curious glances from passersby.

Just as the girl’s cheeks were starting to get sore, the monk gave in.

“All right, all right, I’ll find one for you.”

The girl puffed out all the air she had been holding in.

“Follow me,” said the monk, leading her into a narrow alleyway between the brown building and the neighboring hair salon.

Even the recesses of this tiny corridor were saturated with the aura of Yoiyama. Large paper lanterns hung from the eaves of many of the houses fronting the alley, forming a lambent orange trail that floated off into the darkness. An old man sat cross-legged on a bamboo bench, bare from the waist up, his face growing steadily redder with each swig of beer. The air was infused with the smoky bouquet of an unseen mosquito coil.

As the girl trotted through the alley taking in the sights with unbridled curiosity, she felt something slither into her sandal onto her bare foot. She screamed and kicked her foot wildly, sending something that looked like a centipede tumbling away onto the dim pathway. Taking off the pink sandal, the girl hopped from foot to foot, flailing the sandal around.

“What was that creepy-crawly! Gross!”

“No need for hysterics. It was just a hellgrammite, nothing more,” the monk said, pointing to the gutter at the side of the road.

Looking into the gutter, the girl saw an endless procession of hellgrammites marching along, their countless legs scuttling in the dirt. The girl gave another shriek and grabbed the hem of the monk's robe.

"Get off! It's hot enough as it is!" he bellowed, shaking her off. "Hellgrammites swarm during Yoiyama, that's obvious!"

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"Why?"

"It's obvious why, that's all. Get used to it!"

"Icy."

Regaining her composure, the girl put her sandal back on.

At the back entrance of the building was a small shop. A round table and chairs were set up by it on the street, though no customers were in sight.

"It's just like we're in France!" the girl whispered.

The sign outside the shop said "CALPIS · RAMUNE · BEER". Over the crackly speakers of the old-fashioned radio on top of the white table, someone was crooning a weepy-sounding song in a foreign language.

"What might you be doing down there, your reverence?" came a voice from above.

A beautiful maiko was leaning out a window on the fourth floor, waving her hands at them airily. In the same window a wind chime tinkled breezily.

"Hello there. What are you doing so high up?"

"Why, the stalls shall be here presently."

"This girl here insists on getting a balloon."

"My, my. But the balloons are gone now, are they not?"

"I believe there may be some left with Lord Yoiyama."

The maiko cocked her head. "Then you wish to see for yourself?"

"That's right."

"Pray wait a moment, then, till the feeding is complete."

While the monk and the maiko were carrying on their conversation, the girl stood on her tiptoes, peering through a window on the side of the building. The other side was dark and murky, as if it were filled with water, but for a moment she thought she had seen a large *something* moving beyond the sooty glass. The pane was pleasantly cool as she pressed her flushed cheek against it, and she was rather enjoying the sensation when a gigantic eyeball filled the window, staring straight at her.

"Eep!"

She jumped back as if physically repelled.

"Is it so difficult for you to just *sit still*?"

"I just saw a huge eyeball!"

"Must have been the koi," said the monk, rapping on the glass. After a moment, there was a flash of scales, and the watermelon-sized fish eye emerged from the depths once again.

"This entire building is a fish tank."

"It's huge!" the girl gasped.

"Hannyaharamita's a splendid fish, he is."

“What’s Hannyaharamita?”

“That’s the fish’s name. I gave it to him.”

“Icy.”

“How many times must I tell you not to mimic me, accursed child!”

○

“I helped raise goldfish when I weren’t no bigger than you.”

“You started working when you were a kid?”

“That’s right, when I was in Kurama. I didn’t get to play all day like you kids do these days.”

As they ascended a spiral staircase, the monk told the girl about the goldfish balloon.

Deep in the mountains and ravines of Kurama, he said, was a pristine and remote valley where few humans had trod, and in this valley was a riverbed which bubbled forth a constant stream of water that was lighter than air. Sometimes the bubbles would get as big as a watermelon and rise up to wander among the treetops, but most of the time they were only the size of a marble, with a lifespan to match. The bubbles would quickly scatter in the wind, diffusing into a thick fog which blanketed the valley. Left alone, they would eventually mix with normal water, lose their lightness, and join the rivulets flowing through the valley. The weightless water was collected in contraptions made of bottles and thin pipes to be sold.

Next to the valley there was a goldfish farm, and by the farm, several enormous round balloons floated in a clearing cut out of the surrounding forest. Inside these balloons, goldfish hung suspended in the weightless water. As a young novice, the monk had earned his pocket money by feeding these goldfish. The fish would converge one after another as he pushed their food through the thin tube that passed through a hole in the bottom of the balloon. Fish that were reared in the mysterious water would become weightless themselves, and once they matured into fine young adults, each fish was sealed inside a balloon of its own.

The natural springs had largely dried up in Kyoto, but somehow in that valley the magical floating water continued to gush forth.

“It’s called tengu water.”

“Why?”

“Again with the *whys*. That’s what it has always been called, and that is all the explanation there is.”

“Icy.”

At the end of the stairs they came to the roof.

Pale pink clouds were scattered about the sky, the sun already below the horizon. A cool evening breeze was blowing as night slowly seeped in from the east. In the middle of the roof was a round pool, which was connected directly with the enormous fish tank that had been hollowed out of the building. A thick mist drifted over the surface of the water. The maiko sat in a small boat in the pool, holding a hagoita and sprinkling glittering pebbles into the water.

Urged along by the monk, the girl looked into the pool and saw a whale of a koi rising towards the surface, its mouth opening and closing. It consumed the pebbles with great decorum. Only then did the girl realize that the pebbles were actually hard candies.

“Koi can eat candy?”

“Can’t get that big if you’re gonna be picky. Time was it used to be only this big,” the monk said, sticking up his thumb.

“That’s amazing!” the girl marveled.

“When goldfish grow up, they turn into koi. Do you know what koi turn into when they grow up?”

“No idea.”

“Fah. You’ll learn soon enough.”

The girl and the monk stood by the pond and watched the fish feeding. After a while, the maiko turned over the can and emptied the remaining candies into the pool, then stuck her hagoita into the water and used it to row to the edge of the pool. The koi turned over in the water, making ripples on the surface of the water.

“Done and done!” the maiko exclaimed cheerfully, springing out of the rocking boat onto the shore.

“Well done, I suppose.”

“And what a fine fish it has grown up to be!”

“Then shall we to Lord Yooyama?”

The maiko scrutinized the girl’s face. “You really want these balloons so deeply?”

The girl nodded emphatically. “But who’s Lord Yooyama?”

“Lord Yooyama is Lord Yooyama, the greatest in all the land—at least for tonight.”

“I tell you, this girl’s curiosity knows no bounds,” the monk said ruefully.

The maiko walked to the edge of the building and held up her hagoita.

The hagoita grew and grew like the magic pole from *Journey to the West*, until it reached all the way to the next building. The maiko tested the makeshift bridge with her foot, then looked back over her shoulder.

“Well, let’s be on our way. Night will fall if we don’t hurry.”



Buildings rose and fell, jostling all around the girl as she journeyed through this world of rooftops.

Each rooftop was like an island, floating above the sunken city in the sea of Yooyama, sprouting water tanks, AC units, small shrines, power lines, antennas. At first the girl was frightened as the maiko led her by the hand over the gaps between the buildings, but she soon grew accustomed to it. The monk trailed along, nearly forgotten.

“This one has the makings of a tengu,” he panted, wiping sweat away as he hustled up behind them. “She’s more used to this than I am!”

“There’s youth for you,” smiled the maiko.

In the precipices between the buildings, the floats could be seen rising up in the narrow alleys. From the ground, the floats seemed as big as castles, yet seen from above they were as petite as the table lamp in the girl’s living room. From this perspective the people in the crowd were tiny too, and viewed from the rooftop the squirming masses resembled nothing so much as the hellgrammites the girl had observed earlier in the gutter.

"It won't be long before this place too is overrun," remarked the maiko.

A lagoon had formed in an area enclosed by several old buildings. Judging from its depth, the water must have been collecting there for many years. The party boarded a boat at the landing that had been built at the edge of the rooftop, and with a heave-ho, the monk began to row. An old lantern hung from the prow of the boat, casting its feeble light over the surface of the water.

The girl reached out her hand along with the maiko and touched the murky water.

"You'd better not fall in. These waters run deep," the monk said grimly.

"How come all this water is here?"

"Long ago, there was a famous well here at the bottom of this pool. The people of this town did all they could to protect it, even when the buildings started going up around it. Eventually the well ran dry, and when it did, people started talking about filling it and putting up a building over it. That's when water started pouring out of the well, and there was so much gushing out that they couldn't stop it up. In the end they decided to construct all these buildings around the well, and that's how this pond was made. It's been seven years, and now the water comes up seven stories high."

The water in the pond looked awfully murky.

As the boat glided along languidly, the dark surface of the water began to glitter with the crimson light of the lanterns festooning the beer garden on the far side of the pond. A drunkard was leaning on the railing at the edge of the rooftop, waving his hand at the group. Just then, a thumping sound came from the hull of the boat. Peering over the side, the girl saw a great number of glass balls floating in the water, each containing a flickering red flame.

"What kind of person is Lord Yoiyama?"

"I couldn't really tell you myself."

"You mean you've never met him?"

"I have...but he's hard to describe."

"Is he scary?"

"Very scary."

One of the windows in the building before them opened up.

"Watch your head," said the monk.

"Keep your head down," said the maiko.

Riding the water rushing into the window, the boat continued on inside the building. Filing cabinets and cardboard boxes floated down the long, river-like hallway. Paper lanterns hung on the walls. At the end of the hall, a thick pipe extended into the next building, allowing the boat to continue on its way.

This must be what it's like being nagashi-sōmen, thought the girl.

The flow of the river gradually slowed, until they emerged in a meeting room where a single grand chair lay toppled on the ground. The waters of the river ended in that room, and they proceeded on foot up another staircase to the roof.

Here, there were many ways to get from roof to roof. They could ride in baskets along ropes, like cable cars; they could ride the powerful wind generated by giant fans and float through the air. There were even small shrines that concealed folding screens that would take

you directly to the rooftop of another building when you crawled behind them. The maiko knew every one of these secret paths, guiding them from roof to roof.

“Isn’t there a ropeway that’ll take us straight to Lord Yoiyama?”

“Lord Yoiyama may only be reached by taking the proper path,” explained the maiko. “Trying to reach him in a single step is a fool’s errand.”

“Icy.”

The girl saw all sorts of rooftops.

One was covered with pinwheels, looking like a field of flowers. The monk and the maiko each picked a pinwheel and blew them as they walked along. The girl did the same. When the evening breeze blew across the roof, the glittering, many-colored field of pinwheels all spun in unison. By the time they had left the field, the girl’s head was spinning too.

Another rooftop was overgrown with bamboo. As the girl walked the narrow path leading through the thicket, she could hardly believe she was on the roof. It reminded her of visiting her grandmother’s house. The maiko explained how the roots of the bamboo sent their roots through the building, which meant that every year in spring, bamboo shoots would be budding somewhere in the building.

“My brother works in the building, you see. Every spring, he gives me some of the shoots that sprout in his office.”

As they were leaving the thicket, the girl caught fleeting glimpses of something red on the other side of the densely growing bamboo. Stopping for a closer look, she could make out the flitting shape of a red yukata.

“Hey, we’re going to leave you behind,” called the monk.

The girl hastily ran to catch up.

The next rooftop frightened her.

It was covered with countless laughing Buddha statues. The largest was three times as tall as she was, while the smallest was no more than the size of a pea. They all stared up at the darkening sky, mouths open wide with mirth. Looking at all those laughing faces, the girl held on to the monk’s hand tightly.

“Does it scare you?”

“What are all these Buddha statues doing here?”

“Because they were all collected here, over the course of a year.”

“Why were they collected?”

“That’s enough out of you. Watch your feet, or you’ll step on a Buddha.”

Other rooftops scattered around town were covered with lucky cats, or Hina dolls, or Shigaraki tanuki.

At last, the coterie made its way to a rooftop covered with round, red objects.

From a distance it had been hard to see what they were, but up close the girl realized that they were daruma. Past the innumerable daruma gathered there, a float rose high into the air, blazing with lanterns.

“What do the lanterns say?”

“They say Kingyohoko, the goldfish float.”

Something squirmed next to the girl’s foot, joining a long queue of other things making a beeline for the float.

“Hellgrammites!”

Once each member of the cohort reached Kingyohoko, it clacked to a halt and ceased to move, and one after another the hellgrammites piled on top of each other. At last the girl realized that the body of Kingyohoko was made out of a lattice of innumerable hellgrammites.

“This is why all the hellgrammites gather on Yoiyama,” the monk said. “Do you understand now?”

“Icy.”

The float was crowned with what appeared to be a giant telescope, pointed not at the sky but at the streets below. A man wearing traditional clothing and a short mustache was tinkering with the telescope, inserting a transparent orb into the wide end. After finishing up his work, the mustachioed man approached and hailed the group, raising a hand in greeting.

“What are you up to, shopkeep?” asked the monk.

“But of course, repairing the kaleidoscope. I finally managed to buy it back from the shop.”

“My, that’s wonderful news!” beamed the maiko. “When it disappeared I was worried sick what we would do without it!”

The monk leaned over and whispered in the girl’s ear. “That’s Lord Yoiyama’s kaleidoscope.”

“Kaleidoscope?”

“You know, that thing that lets you see all kinds of shapes when you rotate it. Don’t tell me you’ve never played with one?”

“Of course I have. But I’ve never seen one that big before!”

“There’s Lord Yoiyama,” said the monk, pointing next to the float. “Go say hello.”

The girl was sure that “Lord Yoiyama” was nothing more than a middle-aged man putting on airs, so she was quite surprised to discover that he was actually a little girl no older than she was. Lord Yoiyama sat on the edge of the building, dangling her feet idly in the air. As the girl approached through the field of daruma and approached, Lord Yoiyama turned her head and smiled.

In her red yukata, she looked just like a goldfish.



After prodding the girl towards Lord Yoiyama, the monk and the maiko vanished.

“Here comes the koi!” Lord Yoiyama exclaimed, an enchanting smile splitting her face as she pointed towards the eastern sky.

A distant sound like thunder rolled over the roofscape. A moment later, the girl saw a spout of water erupt from the roof of the brown building that she had been in only minutes earlier, and a gigantic koi burst through the mist into the night sky. It was so mindbogglingly huge that she could clearly see its round mouth gulping open and closed as it traced a leisurely arc through the air, its belly turning upward towards the sky in the midst of a somersault. Watching as it twisted its body and sent a shower of glimmering scales through the air, the girl was reminded of a gymnast she had once seen on TV. Passing through the silver mist, the koi transformed into a dragon. Its lithe, shimmering body wriggled between power lines and water

tanks, occasionally dipping down into the crevasses separating the buildings, all the while holding its fearsome head high.

“There, there,” Lord Yoiyama said, picking up two or three wobbling daruma and hurling them through the air like a shot putter.

The daruma tumbled through the air and landed in the mouth of the dragon, which crushed them between its teeth like they were candy apples. A rush of burning wind bowled the girl over as the dragon passed over ahead, bringing with it a stench not unlike mashed crawfish, though Lord Yoiyama’s feet remained firmly planted on the rooftop.

“More! More!” she cackled, her long hair streaming in the wind as she continued to toss daruma to the dragon, which looped over in the sky and doubled back for more.

“There’s nothing to be frightened of,” remarked Lord Yoiyama, while the girl remained sprawled on the ground, terrified out of her wits. “It may look like a dragon, but inside it’s really just a koi.”

“That doesn’t make it any less scary!” the girl said, awestruck.

After feeding for some time, the dragon flew up high into the sky, its hunger apparently satiated. In a moment it had shrunk to the size of an earthworm.

“It looks so small now!”

“It’ll be back, once it’s hungry again. We’ve got plenty of food beside daruma ready for it.”

“I never thought I’d see anything like that!”

“There are plenty more interesting things I can show you!”

Lord Yoiyama took the girl up to the kaleidoscope on top of the float.

“Take a peek!”

As the girl peered through the lens, Lord Yoiyama cranked a handle attached to the kaleidoscope.

With a loud rumble, the kaleidoscope started to turn. Scenes from Yoiyama appeared one after another before the girl—parade floats blazing with lights—street stalls—alleys overflowing with sightseers—shifting and transforming into countless patterns. Weeping children separated from their parents, men wearing yukata wiping sweat away from their brows, young couples holding hands: all appeared and disappeared within her roiling vision.

Spellbound, the girl stared and stared, oblivious to the passage of time.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Lord Yoiyama murmured.

The girl tore her eyes from the kaleidoscope.

The darkening sky was stippled a queer mix of cerulean and pink. Night had approached unnoticed while the girl had been staring into the kaleidoscope, and now the lights of the city were rising up to meet it. The sounds of Yoiyama could be heard in the distance. The girl was unnerved by how dark it had gotten.

“Look.” Lord Yoiyama pointed to the west. “They’ve already reached Aburanokōji Street.”

The bumpy skyline was filled with pinpricks of light thrown off by rows of market stalls that threatened to overflow the rooftops.

“When the stalls get here, that’s when Tenguohoko will come. My job is to watch over the town like this from Kingyohoko.”

“Hm,” the girl frowned. “What’ll you do when Yoiyama ends?”

"Yoiyama never ends."

"Yes it will. It only lasts 'til the end of today."

"We never leave Yoiyama. Yesterday was Yoiyama, tomorrow will be Yoiyama, and the day after tomorrow will be Yoiyama too. Yoiyama lasts forever, so we will stay here forever too."

"We...you mean there's other Lord Yoiyamas?"

"One in all, all in one." Lord Yoiyama grinned. "And so shall you be."

"No, I'm not."

"You are here. That means you are Lord Yoiyama, too."

Lord Yoiyama produced a small, vermilion-lacquered bowl. It was covered with a lid, and the water that dribbled out from underneath formed itself into round beads, like glass marbles, and floated up through the air.

"Aren't you thirsty?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

Lord Yoiyama opened her mouth wide, like the koi, and swallowed one of the translucent silver beads that hung in the air.

"Delicious," she pronounced, offering the water to the girl once again.

"I don't want any!" the girl said. As she backed away, she tripped on one of the daruma rolling around on the ground and fell flat on her backside. Lord Yoiyama's face was pale like a Japanese doll, and though they were the same height, she seemed to tower far over the girl.

"If you drink this, I'll give you balloons, goldfish, as many as you want."

"I said I don't want any!" the girl said. "Forget it, I'm leaving!"

"What a shame...Yoiyama is just beginning...neverending Yoiyama..."

"It's late. I'm going to get my sister."

"Don't worry about that. She will be here soon enough."

The smile on Lord Yoiyama's face filled the girl with an unbearable terror. Hardly aware of what she was doing, she grabbed the largest daruma she could reach and flung it through the air. It struck the kaleidoscope with a low *gong* sound.

Lord Yoiyama exclaimed in surprise and looked back. Seeing the glass bead rolling out of the kaleidoscope, she hastily scrambled after it.

The girl got up and leaped from the side of Kingyohoko onto the roof, kicking daruma out of her way in her flight. As she ran, she almost fancied that the daruma were all screaming as they rolled along.

She reached the edge of the roof, not looking back, and found the monk and the mustachioed man already there. Beside them stood the maiko, holding two balloons.

"What an impossible child!" the maiko laughed.

"High time you went back," said the monk, tying the balloons around the girl's waist.

"Two balloons should be enough for your weight. Put too many on, and you could find yourself floating all the way to Lake Biwa."

He lifted her up over the edge of the building. Looking down, the girl saw the narrow alley far below.

"I hope you've learned your lesson. Don't go following the first damn person you meet."

"Even if they've got something you want!"

A gentle release from the monk, and the girl found herself slowly floating away, sinking lower and lower. Above her, she saw the three figures leaning over the edge of the roof watching her descent.

“Thank you!” she called. “I’m going to get my sister!”

“Best hurry!” said the maiko.

“No wasting time finding her, you hear?” shouted the monk.



Touching down at the bottom of the dingy alley, the girl dashed off in the direction where the sounds were liveliest. The balloons tied to her waist made her body much lighter, allowing her to run along with the greatest of ease. Flying out of the alley, she was dazzled by the deluge of Yoiyama lights that poured over her.

Where could her sister be?

The girl glided along the currents through the crowds. As she approached a crossroads in front of a tobacco shop, she saw the girls in red yukata running across the street in front of her. And running with them, letting the girls pull her along by the hand, was the girl’s sister.

Dazed, the girl followed after them. The balloons tied to her waist made her nimble, yet the girls, swimming in front of her like goldfish, were nimbler still. They squeezed through even the tiniest gaps in the crowd, running further and further ahead. Though her sister was normally slow of foot, somehow the girl couldn’t seem to catch up. The sight of those girls dancing just out of reach infuriated the girl.

On and on the alleys went; it seemed as if there was no end to Yoiyama. The girl feared that those girls meant to take her sister into the very depths of Yoiyama.

“Don’t go with them!” she screamed out of desperation, but her voice was swallowed up by the cacophony of the festival.

As she passed by Koiyama, she noticed a large number of people in the alley happily holding balloons. Light from the stalls glistened off the scales of the goldfish floating inside the jostling orbs.

No sooner had the girls in red yukata run past than, one by one, all of the balloons burst silently, the rubber peeling back like the skin peeling off a grape. The tengu water ruptured into smaller bubbles and scattered to the four corners of the wind, and countless goldfish floated up between the buildings into the sky. The street was filled with cries of astonishment as people gawked up at the spectacle.

“No!” the girl cried, but indifferent to her pleas, both of her balloons split open, and with the escape of her goldfish into the Yoiyama sky, her body suddenly felt as heavy as if it were made of lead. In no time at all she was drenched with sweat.

Thinking that she had lost them for good, her eyes brimmed with tears, but then she saw them vanishing into the entryway of an alley between the buildings.

It was a narrow path, hemmed in by the grey walls of the adjacent buildings, paved with stone.

In the darkest reaches of the pitch black alley burned a single gate lamp, its solitude making it all the more conspicuous. From deeper within came the sounds of the girls’ muffled

laughter and skipping on the stone tiles. But few rays of light from the festival made it this far into the gloomy alley, faintly illuminating the sleeves of the red yukata fluttering around in the dark.

The girls began to rise into the indigo sky one by one, just like the goldfish escaping the balloons.

“Come on!” the girl heard a cheerful voice say. In the alley ahead, one of the figures took another girl’s hand and kicked the floor clumsily.

It was her sister.

The girl mustered every ounce of strength in her body and jumped off the stone floor, grabbing her sister’s ankle and keeping her from floating away. Her sister kicked her legs wildly, trying to escape, but the girl held on tenaciously.

Hearing someone cry out “Sister!”, the girl looked up. Seeing her sister reaching her hand down, she grabbed it and pulled with all her might. Like goldfish congregating around fish food, the other girls floated down towards her sister and started to remove the pins that held her hair in place. A warm, damp wind gusted from the inner reaches of the alley, blowing her sister’s hair this way wildly. Without warning her sister’s weight returned, and the two of them tumbled down to the ground.

Even as the girl helped her sister up, one of the girls continued to try to grab her sister, her red yukata swirling in the air, a chilling smile on her face. The girl’s mind went blank with fury, and she gave the girl a resounding slap on the cheek. The girl in the yukata did not flinch, but merely floated away, still wearing that same smile.

“You know you shouldn’t have gone with them,” the girl chided. “And I thought you were a crybaby!”

“I’m sorry,” her sister whispered.

Embracing her sister, the girl watched the girls depart into the sky.

All of those girls had the face of Lord Yoiyama.

“All in one, one in all,” the girl whispered.



The girl ran hand in hand with her sister, and before she knew it they had come out onto the broad expanse of Karasuma Street. They sat down, blending in with the multitude of people who were seated eating all sorts of street foods from the stalls.

For a time they did not speak.

The girl squeezed her sister’s hand tightly, and her sister returned the squeeze.

After a while, the girl’s sister turned to her and began to ramble.

They talked about the recital in May, the fun they had eating their packed lunch in the dressing room backstage, like they were on a field trip. Later on, they had stood behind the curtains in the wings, watching the older students perform. They both liked watching from the shadows by the stage much more than watching from the seats. It felt almost magical. The thought that one day, they too might be able to dance like that, and become part of that spectacle, sent a thrill through them.

“What do you think we’ll be performing at next year’s recital?”

They chattered on, sitting on the sidelines of Yoiyama.

Having calmed down, they stood up at the same time and walked to the middle of Karasuma Street, silently observing the festivities growing more raucous by the moment. The streets twinkled with the lights of the stalls, and far off in the distance between the buildings, Kyoto Tower glowed like a candle.

“Let’s go home,” her sister said.

Clasping hands tightly, the two girls set off at a run for the white, ivy-covered house where their mother was waiting for them, leaving behind the Yoiyama night.

Afterword

In my college days, one of my dreams was to take a lover with me to Yoiyama. I used to be under the impression that going to Yoiyama with my lover would make my student life complete.

Of course, that notion turned out to be nothing less than delusional.

When I finally did take a girl to Yoiyama, I realized that the experience was really not so great after all. It was hot, and the crowds were massive, and it was tiring: in short, the perfect storm of conditions to snuff out the budding relationship of a young couple.

That is why you should never take someone who is dear to you to Yoiyama.

What would you do if that person were to disappear into the festival crowds and never come back?

As a child, I did not handle festivals well. I hated crowds, and the heat and hubbub of the festival was enough to petrify my timid heart. I was also afraid of getting lost in the crowds. I am still a scaredy cat, but as a child I saw fear lurking in every corner, and at night I would lie awake, wondering to myself, "How is a scaredy cat like me ever going to turn into a grownup?"

On the other hand, I was fascinated by the feeling that I was entering a mysterious, unknown world whenever I went to a festival. Rather than going deliberately as a spectator, I loved to wander into them by chance in the midst of my daily routine. Festivals happen here and there all over Kyōto. Going to Kitashirakawa-tenjin or Yoshida Shrine or Shimogamo Shrine and running into an unexpected festival was always a treat. The Gion Festival's Yoiyama was the biggest of these festivals.

Festivals can be both fun and scary, but the root of these two aspects is the same.

At the time that I was writing this novel, I lived in Kyōto by the intersection of Shijō and Karasuma.

My residence was one street south of Shijō Street, in an elevator-less apartment building on Ayanokōji Street. It was so quiet it was hard to believe that it was so close to Shijō Street, and my commute was very convenient, which made living there quite comfortable.

On Yoiyama, the neighborhood around my flat transformed into that of another world.

The Shijō Karasuma intersection is essentially the heart of Yoiyama. Each time after getting off the train from work, I would be swallowed up into the crowd, making the return to my flat rather difficult. I would walk around the throngs and buy a dinner of yakitori and beer from the street stalls. After pushing my way through the crowds, I would go home and fall asleep, the clamor of Yoiyama still ringing in my ears. My experiences of that time are reflected in this book.

Following the completion of this novel, I have gone to Yoiyama on many occasions.

But I have never been to the parade that takes place on the day after it.

Perhaps I will end my days never having seen that parade. Whenever that thought comes across my mind, I begin to feel that just maybe, I am reliving the night of Yoiyama over and over, in a loop that never ends.