

## The Precarity of the Housewife in Kirino Natsuo's "Rusted Hearts"

Kathryn Hemmann

Precarity is a frequent theme in Kirino Natsuo's bestselling suspense fiction. The term "precarity" is used to describe a state of uncertainty regarding employment and income security, but it may also be used to describe a lack of other resources, such as physical safety and emotional stability, that negatively affects the lives of people alienated or marginalized by society. The emotional precarity experienced by the teenage protagonists of Kirino's 2003 novel *Riaru wārudo* (2003; *Real World*, 2008) leads them to assist in a crime that ends in the death of two young women, while the two murdered sex workers in *Gurotesuku* (2003; *Grotesque*, 2007) have no social safety net to shield them from the dangerous situations that they enter on a regular basis as a result of their financial precarity.<sup>1</sup> Many of Kirino's stories also portray double standards relating to gender, especially the economic disparity in the earning power of women and men. The author has repeatedly stated that one of the biggest problems facing women in Japan is economic, remarking in an interview that "I worry that a lot of women are just going to wind up enduring poverty. Japanese men don't see women their age as equals."<sup>2</sup>

In her groundbreaking 2013 monograph *Precarious Japan*, American anthropologist Anne Allison provides numerous examples of how the crumbling social support systems, undermined by neoliberal public policy, have failed people in every demographic of Japanese society, from children to the elderly.<sup>3</sup> As Allison demonstrates, however, economic precarity is especially harsh on female workers in Japan, whose "rights are minimal at best" and who "experience the worst gendered wage disparity of all industrialized countries."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the most prominent concern of Kirino's work is the pain and frustration women suffer on account of societal double standards that

result in economic and emotional precarity, and her fiction gives voices to marginalized women who would otherwise go unheard.

Literary scholar Amanda Seaman has connected Kirino's work to a larger wave of women's mystery fiction that began to swell in the last decade of the twentieth century. Seaman views this rising tide of female crime writers as being fueled by a concomitant increase in the number of women joining the corporate workplace and other public spheres. As Seaman explains: "Due in no small part to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985 and to Japan's booming economy until 1992, record numbers of women entered all levels of the workforce. While the end of Japan's bubble economy slowed (and even reversed) this progress, women are still working in all sectors."<sup>5</sup> In *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture*, Sari Kawana quotes the early Shōwa avant-garde author Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889–1936) as saying that "detective fiction is like the serum for diphtheria," and explains this analogy by commenting as follows: "It was as if the Japanese reading public was suffering from some kind of historical and cultural diphtheria, and the patients sought out detective fiction as treatment."<sup>6</sup> Just as mystery fiction served as a means of combating issues that were perceived to be social ills afflicting Japanese society at the beginning of the twentieth century (such as accelerating urbanization and the entry of women into industrial environments), so too does contemporary crime fiction act as a lens through which to view the challenges faced by women in Japanese society at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In her short story "*Sabiru kokoro*" (Rusted Hearts), published in 2000 in a collection of the same name, Kirino demonstrates how housewives, supposedly the inhabitants of an idyllic *onna tengoku*, or "housewife heaven," are revealed to be in a precarious position when observed from the broader perspective of a larger socioeconomic context. Financial constraints and the lack of supportive social networks render it difficult for women to leave their families, and divorce is often not an option. This is a striking departure from the stereotype of *onna tengoku*, in which women are believed to be free from the stresses and pressures that assail men in the workforce. According to this stereotype, while their husbands leave the home before the sun comes up and slave away at their jobs to support their families, women go grocery shopping before meeting their friends for lunch, after which they might enjoy tennis lessons or cultural pursuits such as classes on printmaking or flower arrangement. Housewives

enjoy lives of leisure, pursuing their hobbies and spending time with their children, while their husbands are at work. Women control not only their household budgets but also the distribution of weekly allowances (*okozukai*) to their husbands, so they are free to invest in their own lifestyles.<sup>7</sup>

Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock, writing about discourses that construct menopause as a “luxury disease” (*zeitakubyō*) in Japanese society, has described the fantasy of *onna tengoku* as follows:

Housewives have had their day sardonically described as *san-shoku hiru netsuki* (three meals provided, with a nap thrown in). The rhetoric associated with them implies that, in contrast to all other Japanese, many are selfish, idle, unsurpassed consumers who fill their endless empty hours with a life of luxury and ease unknown in Japanese society before this time.<sup>8</sup>

According to the attitudes that stem from this preconception, if women experience any physical or psychological symptoms associated with menopause then they are thus encouraged to be more active and give back to society by engaging in volunteer activities. The assumption underlying the classification of menopause as a luxury disease is that the work performed by housewives, from managing the household budget to childcare, is not actually work. As housewives do indeed work but receive no money for their labor, their situation is in fact more precarious than the idea of the *onna tengoku* would suggest, as many do not have access to the financial resources they need to leave or even take a vacation from their work, which is socially construed as leisure.

Kirino highlights the contrast between the appearance of stability and the reality of the precarity that governs the existence of housewives. Although “Rusted Hearts” is not expressly feminist, and although it offers its readers no solutions for the problems it raises, the story’s housewife-centered perspective pushes back against stereotypes pertaining to housewives in two ways. First, it demonstrates that even though housewives seem to live quite comfortably, they are actually in a precarious situation, as they have few resources of their own to rely on should they wish to leave their families. Second, it illustrates how, even though housewives might seem to lead relaxed lives, the labor they perform has discernible value outside of the boundaries of home and family. “Rusted Hearts” therefore resists the idea of *onna tengoku* and restores subjectivity to the

women targeted by discourses that downplay the social and economic contributions of private and domestic labor markets.

In “Rusted Hearts,” Kirino illustrates the problems inherent in the division between family and work when it comes to women’s labor. The author complicates this problem by showing that, even if such a division is arbitrary, it is still very real in terms of wages and employment. There are no easy fixes for issues concerning the labor of housewives, housekeepers, and caregivers, as neither temporary paid employment nor the emotional bonds of female homosociality are a defense against economic precarity. Kirino’s feminist project is not to suggest solutions, but rather to demonstrate that the legal construction and the economic functions of the family are difficult for women to escape altogether. As Iwata-Weickgenannt remarks concerning the similarly ambiguous ending of Kirino’s novel *Metabola*, “Kirino makes clear that crude binaries such as ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ and ‘exploiter’ and ‘exploited’ are of little use when faced with the complexly interwoven and entangled power relationships of the world we live in today.”<sup>9</sup> Although misconceptions concerning *onna tengoku* are counterproductive to discussions of women’s labor, Kirino suggests that it is possible for the home to provide a refuge for people who must deal with economic and emotional precarity; and, as such, it is not easy for feminists to discard the concept of the family. The roots of Japan’s demographic crisis are deeply intertwined with gendered economic precarity, and “Rusted Hearts” presents a case study of what this precarity looks like, not in terms of numbers or data sets, but in terms of its effects on real human lives.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kirino Natsuo, *Riaru wārudo* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2003). Kirino Natsuo, *Real World*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2008). Kirino Natsuo, *Gurotesuku* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2003). Kirino Natsuo, *Grotesque*, trans. Rebecca Copeland (London: Vintage, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Michelle You, “Top 10 Books: Natsuo Kirino,” *Theme Magazine* 10 (Summer 2007). <http://www.thememagazine.com/stories/natsuo-kirino/>. Accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda C. Seaman, *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Sari Kawana, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction & Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Brasor and Masako Tsubuku, "Okozukai vs. Hesokuri: An Alternate View of Home Economics," *Japan Times*, July 5, 2011. Yen For Living Blog, <http://blog.japantimes.co.jp/yen-for-living/okozukai-vs-hesokuri-an-alternate-view-of-home-economics/>. Accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Lock, "Centering the Household: The Remaking of Female Maturity in Japan," in *Re-Imagining Japanese Women*, ed. by Anne E. Imamura (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, "Precarity Discourses in Kirino Natsuo's *Metabola*: The Okinawan Stage, Fractured Selves and the Ambiguity of Contemporary Existence," *Japan Forum* 24:2 (2012): 154.

## Rusted Hearts

(Sabiru kokoro, 2000)  
By KIRINO Natsuo (b. 1951)

Translated by Kathryn Hemmann

Fujieda Kinuko had decided that if she were going to leave she'd leave on March 23, which was her husband Yoshiyuki's birthday. There couldn't be a nastier present.

March 23 had another meaning as well. Yoshiyuki had probably forgotten the date, but, on this exact day ten years ago, he had taken Kinuko from Tokyo and brought her back home and, in a certain sense, handed down her sentence. On that day Kinuko firmly made up her mind to leave her husband in ten years. In other words, March 23 was the secret anniversary of Kinuko's decision to leave her marriage.

83

It was a Saturday in March ten years ago. Spring break was coming up, and the morning was warm and relaxed. Kinuko was living in an apartment in a university town called S City in the suburbs of Tokyo. After her daughter left for elementary school and Yoshiyuki set off for the university where he worked, Kinuko was doing laundry while thinking over her plans for the afternoon when the intercom began ringing persistently. Figuring that it must be a delivery, Kinuko rushed to the foyer.

"This is Mrs. Aojima!" a woman cried out in a shrill voice while knocking at the door.

"Is there a problem?" Kinuko felt her voice tremble. She was thunderstruck. Could this really be the wife of Aojima Hitoshi?

"This is Aojima's wife! Hurry up and get out here!"

The woman's voice pealed forth from the intercom exactly as if she were summoning a criminal. There would be trouble with the neighbors if she continued to make a huge fuss like this, so Kinuko hurriedly opened the door to the foyer. She found two women standing outside. One of them, who was about Kinuko's age, seemed like she was about to go off at any second. She was wearing voluminous black clothing that made her look like a crow. This one was probably Aojima's wife. The other woman was slightly older, and

her face resembled that of the first woman. She wore teal clothing with a yellow hat. The older of the two women broke the ice.

“I’m this woman’s sister. Who do you think you are?”

“What do you mean, who do I think I am...?” Kinuko was at a loss for words.

“Don’t try to play dumb with us,” she lashed out viciously. Aojima’s wife glared at Kinuko silently.

When she noticed that this woman was clutching an umbrella despite the fair weather, Kinuko backed away.

“What are you talking about, ‘Don’t play dumb,’” Kinuko mumbled in defense.

Suddenly the woman in black shouted, “You adulterous harlot!”

Without thinking, Kinuko darted her eyes toward the apartment door on the other side of the hallway. She and Yoshiyuki lived in a faculty dorm. It was a low-rise complex of three stories, and it didn’t have an elevator. The apartment doors on each floor faced each other. Across from Kinuko lived a woman married to someone who seemed to have been an assistant professor since the dawn of time. In addition to having a big mouth, this woman was the building’s community watch officer and resident snitch. Kinuko definitely didn’t want her to hear what was going on.

When Kinuko spat back “How rude!” in a tight voice, she was cut off by the older woman, who countered with, “Which one of us is the rude one here?”

“You’ve come up with this accusation out of nowhere! You don’t have the least shred of evidence.”

“My husband stated very clearly that you were his lover!” Aojima’s wife screamed hysterically.

Kinuko couldn’t believe her ears. “That’s a lie. There’s not any sort of relationship between me and Mr. Aojima.”

“It’s a lie, is it? But he told me, he told me that he was having an affair with a certain Fujieda Kinuko who lives in S City. He said that you had just been an acquaintance at work, but then he got a phone call from you. He told me that you two always meet at a place in Roppongi called Hotel Ibis.”

Aojima’s wife delivered these words with an unnecessary amount of force. Her eyes were drawn together and slanted upwards in a caricature of outrage. If she kept shouting like this, the encounter would never end.

Kinuko rushed to shut the door, but, before she could lock it, the

two women forced it back open.

“Please stop this.”

To Kinuko’s entreaty, the older woman responded flatly, “You can’t get away.”

“If you won’t come out, we’ll just stand here and make trouble for you. We’ll keep doing this until your husband isn’t able to stay at the university any longer.”

Aojima’s wife emphatically thrust the tip of her umbrella against the reinforced steel door. The sound reverberated down the hallway. Kinuko resigned herself to the situation.

“Fine. I’m coming out now, so please hold on.”

Thoroughly flustered, Kinuko went back into the apartment and picked up her bag and keys. In the meantime, the two women had flung the door open and were looking around the inside of the apartment shamelessly. When she saw Kinuko come back out with her purse, Aojima’s wife screamed, “Where do you think you’re going?!”

“What do you mean, where? We can’t do this here. We can go to the park, or....”

“I’m not going anywhere. We can talk right here. You’re not in a position to say what we can and can’t do!”

Realizing that the two women had come just to harass her, Kinuko stood in the foyer in a daze. They didn’t come to talk, but rather to get a look at the face of the woman named Kinuko and shame her by broadcasting the affair to her husband and the whole neighborhood. Kinuko was shocked that Aojima could be married to this woman. She was angry at Aojima for confessing his involvement with her, and she was disgusted with herself for entering into a relationship with Aojima even though she didn’t like him that much. It exhausted her just to think about having to make an abject apology to Yoshiyuki. She didn’t want to imagine what would happen afterward, and she found that she didn’t care how this matter was settled. She could almost hear the sound of her last thread of patience snapping. Kinuko stepped into the first pair of shoes she saw in the vestibule, shoved past the two women, and fled from the apartment.

Kinuko had nowhere to go but Mita Chikako’s apartment in Tokyo. Chikako was a classmate from her high school in Sendai, and for some time now Kinuko had been going to Tokyo once a month and accumulating trysts with Aojima under the pretext of visiting Chikako.

Kinuko looked into her purse for the first time after arriving at the train station. There was nothing there except for her beat-up wallet, a



promotional packet of tissues that she had been given somewhere, and a single tube of lipstick. She only had five thousand yen. Her hair was messy, and she wasn't wearing any makeup. Even worse, she had on jeans and a sweatshirt and socks covered with fuzz, an outfit she wouldn't have worn even to the neighborhood grocery store. She was dogged by the fear that the two women were chasing after her, so, without looking back, she bought a train ticket and made her way to Tokyo.

When she called Chikako, her friend told her to come to her apartment right away. Chikako more than likely felt responsible for helping Kinuko fabricate an alibi. She was the daughter of a wealthy family, and an apartment had been bought for her in the high-rent Zeimusho-ura area of Tokyo's swanky Azabu district, where she lived happily with her daughter and her second husband. Chikako had been through some rough times during her divorce, and she had handled it better than most. Still, even Chikako was flustered when Kinuko told her what had happened.

"This must have been terrible for you," Chikako said sympathetically when she saw Kinuko's face in her foyer. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Kinuko saw herself reflected in a large mirror hanging in the foyer. Kinuko was 37. Her face looked terrible without makeup. Although she felt that this incident had to be some sort of punishment for transgressing against her marriage, she just couldn't handle any more humiliation. She buried her shame deep within herself and sighed without saying anything.

"Your husband called a while ago."

"What did he say?"

"He said he's coming to pick you up in three days, and he wants me to keep you here until then so he can come during spring break."

No, Kinuko thought, he's probably not coming now because he doesn't have the money. The salary her husband received as an assistant professor at a public university was only just enough to keep food on the table. Kinuko envisioned Yoshiyuki's bitter face. It seemed that Aojima's wife had somehow managed to contact Yoshiyuki at school and inform him of the circumstances. Kinuko was worried about what would happen to her daughter Aoi. She was certain that news of this business had already spread through the neighborhood.

While waiting for Yoshiyuki, Kinuko tried to contact Aojima several times, but it seemed that he too was running away, and she

couldn't catch him. Kinuko passed the point of anger and grew depressed.

Aojima had been her boss at the cosmetics company where she worked before she got married. Her flirtation with Aojima had been enjoyable but noncommittal. After she married Yoshiyuki, however, she grew bitter as she nurtured the fantasy that she had been forced to give up a chance at a romance with Aojima. She had the opportunity to go to Tokyo once a month for a cooking class, and during one of these trips she took a chance and called Aojima. He had said he wanted to see her too, and they quickly rekindled their old relationship.

Lying to Yoshiyuki that she was staying over at Chikako's place, Kinuko would spend the night at a hotel with Aojima. The affair went on for about half a year. Once she actually saw him in person, Aojima had turned out to be a cheap and wimpy little man, but Kinuko had more fun with him than she did spending time at home with her husband. By having an affair, she got to feel like a woman again while getting back at her husband at the same time.

Marrying Yoshiyuki had probably been a mistake from the very beginning. When she was first presented with the opportunity to meet with him as a prospective marriage partner, she learned that he was a lecturer at a prestigious national university and felt like marrying him for that alone. She had been young and foolish. Kinuko had enjoyed studying and her grades had been good, but, when she was in high school, her mother had disclosed to her that she was adopted, and she had given up on advancing to college. She also had a younger sister. Ever since she was little, Kinuko had a habit of turning down snacks and toys, saying "I'm fine" even if it was something she really wanted. Although she wasn't consciously aware of it, at some point she had probably picked up on the fact that she wasn't her parents' real child. Kinuko had talent, but she felt pressured into not continuing her education. Her bitterness and feelings of deprivation gave her an inferiority complex, which in turn led to her stubborn desire for an elite marriage partner.

When she met Yoshiyuki in person, her first impressions were that he was boring and wore frumpy clothes. When they went out to eat, he only ordered for himself before handing the menus back to the waitress. When they went on a walk he paced briskly in front of her as if he were walking alone. Kinuko sensed somewhere in her heart that he was a self-centered, childish man who could only talk about himself, but she pushed the marriage forward anyway. When she later

overheard Yoshiyuki's relatives gossiping about how Yoshiyuki had wanted to marry a prettier woman with a better educational pedigree, Kinuko realized how stupid she had been. She had turned a blind eye to Yoshiyuki's faults because of his elite status, and Yoshiyuki had overlooked her own shortcomings because she was meek and obedient. In a certain sense, they were a good match for each other. Unfortunately, no love or affection was born from the happiness accompanying their wedding. The marriage was a failure, and Kinuko gradually realized that married life was something she must simply endure; happiness was something not meant for her.

Nothing came out of the affair with Aojima either. Instead, Kinuko's affair turned her marriage into an even tighter cage.

Yoshiyuki came to get Kinuko three days after she left, on March 23. Wearing a worn-out gray suit and clutching his usual briefcase, Yoshiyuki bowed deeply to Chikako without even glancing in Kinuko's direction.

"I'm sorry that my wife put you through so much trouble."

His words were polite, but his eyes were unmistakably filled with reproach. He blamed Chikako for conspiring with Kinuko. Perhaps Chikako felt ashamed herself. She blushed and lowered her head without saying anything.

"How is Aoi doing?"

Ignoring Kinuko's question, Yoshiyuki took two camera film cases out of his suitcase and placed them on top of Chikako's luxurious living room table, which was made out of a single slab of wood.

"This is for your trouble."

Both film cases were densely packed with five hundred yen coins. If putting five hundred yen coins into film cases can be considered a hobby, then that was Yoshiyuki's only hobby. Kinuko had always thought it was silly how Yoshiyuki changed paper money into coins and fixated on finding ways to increase his supply of film cases. When Yoshiyuki handed the two cases to Chikako, Kinuko glanced at her, and Chikako silently signaled what a pain Yoshiyuki was being.

"Your husband sure is strange," her laughing eyes seemed to be saying.

Kinuko was embarrassed by how clueless her husband was. At the thought of returning to this strange man's apartment as his wife, Kinuko experienced the sudden anxiety of being trapped once again, and her knees trembled slightly.

"Since my wife will no longer be coming to Tokyo, I request your

understanding that your association with her ends here,” Yoshiyuki said without emotion as he gripped Kinuko’s arm tightly. After that, Kinuko didn’t see Chikako for another ten years.



That night, Yoshiyuki slipped into Kinuko’s bed. When Kinuko rolled away from him, he put his hands around her neck. Kinuko closed her eyes, thinking that there wasn’t much she could do if he had decided to kill her. Feeling the strength drain from her body, Yoshiyuki quickly relaxed the pressure in his fingers and whispered into Kinuko’s ear.

“I will forgive you this time. In return, I won’t give you one yen more than necessary. You’ll get a hundred thousand yen a month for food. If that’s not enough, that’s still all you get. From now on, I won’t let you work or take lessons. I won’t let you take more than one step outside S City. I won’t let you see Chikako. That woman was corrupted by her divorce, and she’s been a bad influence on you. If you don’t like this, get out of the apartment and leave your daughter here. But even if you leave, I will absolutely not divorce you. I cannot tolerate any stain on my record. Do you get it? Do you understand? Nod if you understand.”

In other words, Yoshiyuki had ordered her to do nothing less than stay at home and devote herself to being a full-time maid. There was no other choice, Kinuko thought. She would have to compromise. This is what she got for having married for selfish reasons. Her daughter was still young, and she was at the disadvantage of having brought this on herself by having an affair. To make matters worse, she had no money of her own.

Still, Kinuko hated the idea of spending her entire life as Yoshiyuki’s maid. She couldn’t stand the thought of ending up as a mindless slave of someone she neither loved nor respected.

*I can put up with this for ten years until Aoi grows up, and I can save money somehow. Then I can leave.*

Having thought that far, Kinuko finally nodded.

“I understand. I apologize.”

“Fine.”

Seemingly put at ease, Yoshiyuki returned to his own bed.



After that, the days passed peacefully, at least outwardly, but thorns of bitterness grew around the part of Kinuko’s heart that suffered from

being constrained. Ten years exactly. When ten years had passed, she would leave the apartment without warning. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kinuko was only able to continue living by imagining how surprised Yoshiyuki would be when she disappeared.

Aoi finally entered middle school and graduated. After she had taken her high school entrance exams, she spent her free time working at a part-time job to earn a bit of extra money. When Aoi was eventually accepted into a university in Tokyo, Kinuko was relieved. She opened her heart to her daughter.

“I’m going to leave home next March. You absolutely can’t tell your father.”

“What will you do after you leave?”

“I’ll work as a domestic assistant. Your mother can’t do anything besides housework.”

Perhaps because she had noticed the tension between her parents while she was growing up, Aoi, who had always been taciturn and never caused any trouble, didn’t ask any questions or make any objections. Gaining momentum from her daughter’s consent, Kinuko steadily prepared to leave home.

Kinuko had completed every single one of her preparations a week before she carried out her plan. Starting a year before she planned to leave, she had liberally gifted her friends with her favorite tableware, which she had collected with the small amount of money she was able to budget out of her living allowance. She dispensed with her clothing in the same way. She resolutely burned anything and everything that bore any traces of herself, such as her diaries and personal letters. She settled all of her debts so as not to incur any trouble in the future, and she even allowed her friends in the neighborhood to hold a going away party for her. She capped off her preparations by having a futon sent to Chikako’s apartment, where she would stay for the time being.

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The weather on March 23 was sunny and pleasant. When Yoshiyuki left for the university, Kinuko followed him into the foyer to see him off.

“Take care!”

Kinuko was never this cheerful, and Yoshiyuki turned and regarded her with a perplexed expression. Kinuko looked away, avoiding his eyes. Since this would be the last time she saw his back walking away from her, Kinuko went out into the hallway to see him

off. Only when he had disappeared completely did she turn around to gaze at the door leading to the foyer. There was a tiny rusted scratch on the gray steel door. It was the scratch that Aojima's wife had made with her umbrella ten years ago. No one besides Kinuko had noticed it; it held meaning only for her. It was an emblem of shame and defiance. Whenever she saw it, her timeworn resolution to leave home was revived. Even though it had rusted over, the scratch never disappeared.

Before she left home, Kinuko cleaned the house until it sparkled, took out a letter she had written several days ago, and placed it on top of the kitchen table.

*Thank you for your consideration for so many years.*

*Since I have no intention of coming back, please don't try to find me.*

*I'm fine with leaving the family registry as it is, but of course I will be happy to consent to a divorce if you decide to get remarried.*

*If that happens, please let Aoi know. I intend to communicate with her periodically.*

*Farewell,*

*Kinuko*

The only things left in the kitchen cabinets were the generic plates and glasses that she had gotten from the liquor store. As a result of Kinuko's efforts to erase herself from the apartment, her clothes and shoes had disappeared, and the interior of the house gradually lost its charm and individuality. Yoshiyuki, who was oblivious to his surroundings, had completely failed to notice. He was a boring man who looked down on movies and novels and thought that university professors were the most important people in the world. *He must have thought that I was under his control and stopped paying attention. This is goodbye.* Without looking back, Kinuko closed the door and shoved her house key through the newspaper slot. She automatically glanced at the scar on the foyer door when she heard the keys clink against the metal. *Finally*, she thought.

There were several women around the same age as Kinuko waiting for her downstairs in front of the shrubbery. They were all housewives from the neighborhood who had grown close to Kinuko over the past ten years.

"So you're really leaving. Please call us when things settle down."

"I will. But please don't tell my husband anything if he asks,"

Kinuko said empathetically.

“We won’t say anything at all.”

“I wonder what will become of your husband,” one woman laughed, almost as if she were gloating.

“Yeah, he’ll be shocked. He’ll start crying for you to *pleeease* come home,” another woman said, and everyone broke into laughter. The excitement of her friends gave Kinuko the impression that they were enjoying her rebellion as if they themselves were leaving. What Kinuko was doing was something that none of these women would be able to carry through with in reality, even if she secretly wanted to. It was as if Kinuko were fighting a symbolic battle for the other housewives.

“All right, I’m off.”

“Stay healthy.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Will we ever see you again?”

Someone had started crying, but Kinuko smiled and waved and walked leisurely along the path to the station. Everything was completely different from when she had blindly fled from Aojima’s wife to the station ten years ago. Her makeup was perfect, and she carried a million yen in cash, which she had painstakingly accumulated from her monthly allowance of one hundred thousand yen. She had spent a certain amount of money on tableware and food she liked, but she had managed to build up her secret stash by not buying any clothing or makeup or books. She wondered how much her husband, who handed her a scant hundred thousand yen for food, had been able to save. *Those were truly terrible days*, Kinuko thought as she bought a ticket. Still, she was able to fully experience this feeling of freedom because of the hardship she had endured.

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Ten years had passed since she last visited Chikako’s house.

Although her husband had forbidden any contact with Chikako, Kinuko could still call her as often as she liked, and the two talked on the phone once a month. Kinuko had of course gone over her plan to leave home with Chikako.

“It’s been a while.”

Chikako saw Kinuko’s face and smiled happily, but she seemed to be truly bewildered to see Kinuko actually standing in front of her. With a sidelong look she glanced at Kinuko’s attire from top to bottom.

Perhaps, in the ten years that they had only spoken over the phone, Chikako's friendship had cooled off a little. Kinuko, a bit perplexed, looked down at her own skirt and sweater.

"I look like a middle-aged woman."

"So what if you do?" Chikako laughed.

The years had done nothing to Chikako's pale and handsome face. Unlike Kinuko, Chikako's married life had been free from incident.

"You probably thought I wasn't serious," Kinuko said, looking at the table where Yoshiyuki had once laid his two film cases packed full of five hundred yen coins.

"I suppose you're right. I was surprised when the futon was delivered. I didn't know you hated your husband that much."

"I don't really hate him," Kinuko said, not meeting Chikako's eyes. She didn't know what had become the seed that grew into her desire to leave home. "If I had to put it into words, I get the feeling that maybe I wanted to become a traveler and go out on my own. When I think about it, I guess I've felt this way for a long time, ever since I learned I was adopted. When I was trapped at home like that, I felt like I was going to die."

Chikako raised her eyebrows and exhaled a stream of cigarette smoke as if she suspected such an answer was only an affectation. Although Chikako's husband had been assigned to a temporary post in a regional capital, she lived an easy life here with her daughter, who had just graduated from college and started work at a company. Even though she lived right in Tokyo, she had a spacious and luxurious apartment that was so clean it hardly looked lived in at all. Kinuko remembered that she had been jealous of this lifestyle when she was younger. Now she felt that Chikako was a queen confined within her own house, and her jealousy had completely evaporated.

"I feel like I'm becoming a vagrant. I wonder if it has to do with not having a set day when I'll go home, or anywhere to go home to. I don't have anywhere else to go either. I haven't been able to stop myself from thinking about it."

"Hmm," Chikako said with an expression that made it clear she didn't really understand. "What are you going to do now?" she asked, her voice troubled.

"I'll look for a position as a live-in domestic assistant. I can't do anything else besides housework."

"It's not easy to be a live-in maid. Why don't you rent an apartment and then look for a job?"



“What sort of jobs are there for a 47-year-old woman who hasn’t done anything besides being a housewife?”

“I’m sure you’ll find something once you start looking.”

“Even if I did find something, I wouldn’t want it. I don’t have anywhere to call home, so I want to set down roots in someone else’s house. I’m really good with housework.”

For the past ten years, Kinuko’s only hobby and means of self-expression had been to diligently apply herself to housework. She had been a perfect housewife, cleaning the house and devoting herself to cooking. There had been just one thing missing ever since her daughter had left for school in Tokyo. Even though she wanted to work as hard as she could for someone else’s sake, there was no one who would benefit from her hard work. Yoshiyuki didn’t count, of course.

“I want to help out a family that’s in trouble, perhaps a family with a sick person or an elderly person.”

“How gallant,” Chikako said with a slightly sour expression. “I’m not sure how you thought up something like that.”

At that moment, Chikako’s daughter, who was a 23-year-old office lady, returned home from work. She greeted Kinuko politely.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. It’s been a long time.”

“I apologize for staying over like this.”

“No, not at all. Please stay as long as you like.”

As she said this, a glint of annoyance flashed in her downcast eyes.

She couldn’t be happy about having her mother’s friend colonize the living room. Kinuko couldn’t stay here long. For the first time since leaving home, Kinuko experienced loneliness, and she felt even more like a vagrant.



The next morning, Kinuko began her first day of calling people who had posted “seeking live-in domestic assistant” ads in the work wanted section of the newspaper.

Kinuko found three positions, but one of the positions had already been filled. Kinuko decided to give up on another position because she got a bad feeling from dealing with the woman who answered the phone. When she called about the final position, Kinuko was told that she should come as soon as possible for an interview, and she rushed out of Chikako’s house enthusiastically. She was confident that they would like her immediately. With her hair in a clean short cut, she

looked as professional as anyone else. Although her clothes were plain, her fashion sense wasn't bad, and she imagined that she gave the impression of a reliable married woman. She wanted to make herself useful by doing housework, and she was good at it. Kinuko was filled with hopeful expectations.

Kinuko arrived at a large and luxurious house in Suginami, but she was surprised when the door to the foyer opened. The traditional dirt floor in the vestibule was almost completely covered in shoes, and Kinuko wondered how many dozens of people lived in the house. All of the shoes were large men's work boots caked with dirt.

"You're here for the live-in domestic assistant position? Come in."

A fat woman in a tracksuit who didn't look like she was wearing makeup came out and made a brusque gesture with her hand. Since she could think of nothing else to do, Kinuko took off her shoes in front of the door and, trying not to tread on the work boots in her bare feet, stepped up into the house. The rooms were luxurious but slightly dirty, and the unpleasant smell of raw garbage wafted through the air. The cheap industrial carpet rolled out in the hallway was covered in black stains from spilled food.

Three middle school or high school aged boys were slouched on the couch in the living room, absorbed in a video game. Bags of chips were littered on top of the table, along with several plastic soda bottles that the boys were drinking from. None of the boys turned to look at Kinuko. While scanning over Kinuko's resume, the woman in the tracksuit said "Sit over there" without looking up at her.

Setting aside a dirty t-shirt, Kinuko sat on a corner of the sofa. She saw a mountain of dirty bowls and dishes piled in the sink when she glanced into the kitchen.

"As you can see, we have only boys here. They're always hungry. That's why I'm looking for someone who's good at cooking. We've had several people work for us already, but none of them has stayed on for long. You'll need to wake up at 5:00 in the morning and make three box lunches as well as breakfast."

"Is there anything else?"

"You'll need to make dinner too, and something light for a late afternoon snack. On weekends and holidays, you'll need to make lunch. Are you good at cooking?"

"Yes, but I've never prepared meals for a large number of people."

"That's fine, it doesn't have to be anything special."

Kinuko made various excuses and left the house. She knew that

saying she wanted to do her best for other people sounded silly, but she meant what she said. If she didn't, then this house probably would have been fine. Still, she wanted to be careful about where she chose to work. She was worried that most households who employed domestic assistants were just using money to buy labor.

*I'm not a machine, and it's not worth it if I don't have the right motivation. I want to do a job where I feel appreciated as an individual.*

A chill ran down Kinuko's spine when she realized that this is how she would have described her relationship with Yoshiyuki. If Aoi hadn't been there, Kinuko would have been nothing more than a live-in maid in her apartment in S City.

When she returned to Chikako's house and confessed what had happened, Chikako nodded with a self-satisfied look on her face.

"That sounds about right. It's not so easy, trying to make your own way in the world."

Somewhat annoyed, Kinuko didn't respond. She didn't want to hear something like that from Chikako, who had everything given to her.

Kinuko went out for interviews the next day, and then the day after that. Unfortunately, no one told her that she was needed right away to help save a family from miserable conditions. Kinuko couldn't help but think that the housewives were lazy and wanted to solve their problems with money, just like the first woman with whom she had interviewed. This was how capitalism worked: Kinuko could understand it intellectually, but she didn't feel she would be able to deal with living in a house for such a banal reason. No, more than not being able to tolerate a certain capitalistic mindset, she didn't want to be reminded of the sterile relationship between Yoshiyuki and herself. Kinuko kept going to interviews, but it didn't seem that she would be able to find a family that needed her personally, as an individual.

She was moved for the first time by a family in Shōnan. The old mother had been confined to a wheelchair due to a stroke, and the unmarried second son, a company worker approaching his forties, still lived in the house. The young woman who came to pick Kinuko up at the station tearfully asked her for her help with the housework and with her mother's care. Kinuko got a good feeling from the mother, who seemed to like her as well.

The house was an old traditional Japanese mansion, and the rooms were connected by sliding *fusuma* screens, so there weren't individual spaces. Kinuko was on the verge of resolving to take responsibility for

the poor old woman, who was inconvenienced by the house's lack of access for her wheelchair, when a tired-looking man in his fifties entered the room. Upon learning that this man was the oldest son who had come back home after getting divorced, Kinuko declined the offer of employment. Since there were no private rooms, she felt uncomfortable about living in a house with a forty-year-old man and a fifty-year-old man, both of whom were unmarried.

In the end, a live-in domestic assistant isn't a member of the family. She would still be her own person even if she were living side-by-side with the family, and she didn't want to constantly share the same space with everyone. Realizing that this was yet another thing that she couldn't compromise, Kinuko became depressed. She must have been naïve to think that she could devote herself to an ailing family and assuage her loneliness by living with them. Kinuko was exhausted, and she was losing her self-confidence.

Five days had passed since she left home. Kinuko tried calling her daughter.

"Mom, have you finally left home?"

"I left just as I planned. Right now I'm staying at Chikako's house. Have you heard anything from your father?"

"No, that's the weird thing," Aoi said in a strange voice. "I don't think he's worried about you at all."

Kinuko was surprised. She decided to call a close friend from the neighborhood and ask about how things were going at her old apartment.

"Hey, how are you doing? Everyone has been worried about you. What have you been doing since you left?"

Kinuko told her that she was staying with a friend and looking for a job, and then she asked about Yoshiyuki.

"How is Fujieda doing? Have you heard anything?"

"Well, about him," Kinuko's friend lowered her voice, "Apparently nothing has changed, and he's carrying on as usual. Everyone has been watching him like a hawk. He leaves for work like he always does, and I hear there's nothing different about him while he's at the university. Everyone agrees that he's handling it better than expected."

After putting the receiver down, Kinuko thought that her husband probably found her just as depressing as she found him. Something might have snapped within her husband after that incident ten years ago. She had never thought about it like this. Maybe the person most pleased that Kinuko had left was Yoshiyuki himself. If that were the

case, then she had given him the best possible birthday present. Kinuko was assailed by despair. Suddenly, finding a job—or doing anything at all—felt meaningless.

To console herself, Kinuko went to a department store. She hadn't visited a department store in Tokyo in years, and she was dazzled by all the things she wanted. Kinuko ended up buying a spring coat and a knit suit for interviews, and before she knew it, seventy thousand yen had flown away. Her paltry sum of one million yen would soon be gone. She had lived her life in units of ten yen divided between grocery stores and greengrocers, and a million yen was a large sum of money to her. If she didn't keep track of her money, however, it would disappear like smoke. Kinuko was struck by how precarious her situation was. It was as if the ground she was standing on could disappear at any second.

While thinking about other things, Kinuko had wandered into the department store's basement gourmet food market. Everywhere she looked Kinuko saw rare ingredients and foods she liked, and she couldn't stop herself from buying what she wanted. Finding some balsamic vinegar, she bought it without thinking. She also bought some Kyoto-style pickles from a famous store to bring back to Chikako. It delighted her to buy these two things, since she hadn't been able to find either when she lived in S City.

"I'm back. I got these for you."

Chikako made a strange face when Kinuko gave her balsamic vinegar and the Kyoto-style pickles.

"What's this?"

"It's called balsamic vinegar. It's good for when you're making Italian food. I noticed that you don't have any, so I thought you should try it. And the Kyoto pickles from this place are famous."

Chikako said nothing. Her silence was unpleasant, as if she wanted to convey that she didn't need such things. Kinuko's gifts had probably hurt Chikako's pride as a wealthy and knowledgeable Tokyo housewife.

"Kinu. Haven't you ever thought that your love of cooking is compensating for something?"

Kinuko was struck dumb by the harsh words that finally emerged from Chikako's mouth.

"What would I be compensating for?"

"You're unsatisfied with your life."

Chikako understood her better than she understood herself.

Kinuko figured Chikako was probably right, and she said nothing in response.

Spotting Kinuko's new clothes out of the corner of her eye, Chikako continued her tirade.

"Kinu. If you spend money like this, it will be gone before you know it. You need to get a job instead of going shopping."

Kinuko wondered if Chikako was telling her to get out of her apartment. *Things weren't supposed to be like this*, she thought, as she remembered Chikako's pained expression when her husband came to her house to retrieve her ten years ago.

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Kinuko finally found a place that met her criteria after she had been staying with Chikako for more than two weeks.

Chikako had begun to get irritated with Kinuko, who looked as if she were not going to leave at all, and Chikako herself had found this job posting.

"Kinu, you don't seem like you really want to do this, but what do you think of this place? Doesn't it look like this would be good for you? Do you want me to have my husband write you a letter of recommendation?"

Chikako's leading questions seemed tailored to force Kinuko to make a decision.

"It's not that I don't want to do this, but it just seems so meaningless."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

The money she had saved away had been whittled away to 850,000 yen. Kinuko took the job posting and looked it over.

*Caregiver*

*Live-in position, up to sixty years old*

*Private room, starting at 230,000 yen a month*

*Someone skilled at cooking preferred*

*More details at interview*

*Home located in Mejiro*

*Uchida*

"This Uchida family, maybe they're connected to the Uchida who's in the parliament. That part of Mejiro is filled with huge old houses, and this place has got to be a mansion."

Chikako was excited, almost as if she would be working there herself. Driven by Chikako's enthusiasm, Kinuko had no choice but to call the place. Although she wasn't expecting anything, the woman who answered the phone was the most courteous and pleasant person she had spoken to thus far. She said that she was very sorry, but since there had been a large number of applicants, she would like to interview everyone in person and decide the matter as fairly as she could. Even though her chances probably weren't great, Kinuko felt like going just to see what the house was like.

Far from being a luxurious mansion, the Uchida residence was a run-down and dirty house. In a residential neighborhood filled with beautiful hedge fences, the Uchida house was the only lot where the garden shrubs were overgrown and neglected. The place had a lonely air about it, as if it were abandoned, but a single cherry tree had been planted in the spacious garden, and it was in full bloom. An ornamental pond that looked like it had been carefully designed and constructed by hand was surrounded by round stones in a corner of the garden. Kinuko was reminded of her old farm house in Sendai. She had once tried to build a pond with her younger sister, and they had even released a few goldfish there. Kinuko became nostalgic. Even though she had yet to meet the owner of the house, she thought to herself that she wouldn't mind being employed here.

Once she entered the living room, however, Kinuko was overwhelmed with surprise. At least thirty women were gathered there. They ranged from women about twenty years old to women so old that Kinuko had misgivings about whether they could do housework at all. There obviously weren't enough chairs, so everyone sat on the disheveled tatami mats and impatiently waited her turn.

"Hey, do you know anything about this Uchida family?" a woman around sixty years old whispered. Kinuko shook her head.

"This is the house of the brother-in-law of the Uchida in the parliament. I hear that he passed away a long time ago, but I didn't know that the family had declined this badly. I came here thinking that I might be able to get something out of being employed here, but now I wonder."

Just as Chikako had suspected, the Uchida family that owned this house was related to the famous Diet member. It made sense that there were a lot of applicants for the position, but the economic circumstances of the family were unmistakably strained. Kinuko looked around the musty old room. The sooty ceiling. The children's

graffiti on the post in the *tokonoma*. The yellowing *shōji* screens. The outdated television. It looked as if no one had laid a hand to this house for several decades.

The woman who had whispered to Kinuko earlier grumbled that she had a twenty-year history of working as a domestic assistant, but that she wanted to quit at her current house because caring for the elderly people there had gotten too difficult. She had applied to this house thinking that it might be a little more comfortable. If things were this bad here, though, then she would rather stay at the place she was working now.

“You know, it’s really hard to clean an old house like this. It gets cold in the winter. Also, it seems that there are two old women here.”

“Old women?”

“That’s right.” The woman furrowed her eyebrows as if to suggest that both of these women were already wearing adult diapers.

Kinuko heard a faint voice call her name from the neighboring tatami room. Her turn had come.

Two slightly chubby women who were well-suited to the shabby room sat with their backs to the hanging scroll in the *tokonoma*. The two women, who closely resembled each other, were in their late sixties. Both of them wore drab old people clothing that looked like it had been bought in the supermarket. The old woman wearing a brown cardigan and grey trousers spoke first.

“Hello, my name is Uchida Umeko. This is my older sister Shigeko.”

Shigeko lowered her head deeply with her mouth clamped shut. Umeko’s white hair was cut short and parted to the side. Shigeko wore her hair up in a bun fastened in the back. Even though their hairstyles were different, their resemblance to each other was strong. Umeko looked at Kinuko’s resume, and her face took on a doubtful expression.

“It says here that you’re married. Why do you want to be a live-in housekeeper?”

Figuring that it wouldn’t do any good to hide her circumstances, Kinuko explained that she had left home. As she was speaking, Shigeko, who had been silent up until then, looked right into Kinuko’s face and said, “Well, you would have to have that sort of iron will in order to work here.”

“That’s true,” Umeko said in response.

Kinuko, surprised, looked at Shigeko, but Shigeko had finished talking. At all the houses she had visited until now, Kinuko’s potential



employers had been shocked or frightened when they heard about her situation, as if her husband would inevitably leave a bloody trail behind him when he showed up to bring her back. Umeko, chewing on her pencil stub, asked, "Ms. Fujieda, why would someone as wonderful as you want to become a caregiver?"

"Yes, you're really wonderful," Shigeko interrupted, apropos of nothing.

"I want to do something for other people. I want to make myself useful to people who are in a difficult situation. Isn't that what being a housewife is about? It was painful for me to want to be helpful but to have no one to help."

The two women looked at each other.

"To tell you the truth, we have a very sick person here. He's my son, but he's not doing too well. Can you handle that? Do you still want to help us?"

Shigeko looked at Kinuko as if she were throwing herself at Kinuko's mercy.

Kinuko nodded.

"If you will have me, I will do my utmost to take care of you."

The two looked at each other again, relieved, and then nodded in return.

"Also, we have a girl here named Midori."

With a decisive expression, Umeko folded Kinuko's resume neatly.



Several days later, as she sat in a taxi with her futon and scant personal effects on her way to the Uchida household, Kinuko entertained the fantasy that she was entering a different country with a passport labeled "Housekeeper." She had left the country of Fujieda, to which she would never again return, and she was bound for the country of Uchida by way of the country of Chikako. She felt less like a traveler and more like an exile who had put her home country behind her forever.

As Kinuko got out of the taxi in front of the Uchida house, cherry petals fell lazily over the weathered fence made of wooden planks, and a pleasant fragrance filled the air. Kinuko's grim feelings of exile faded and were replaced by a mellow sense of expectation.

"Excuse me. I'm the new domestic assistant, Fujieda Kinuko."

There was a loud sound on the other side of the intercom, and a young woman appeared in the foyer. It seemed that this was Midori.

Midori was wearing a startlingly bright red turtleneck and yellow-green pants. Kinuko got the sense that she was the only spot of color in this dim, dark house. Her round nose and slightly separated eyes made her look a bit like a lap dog.

“Umm... What do you want?”

“My name is Fujieda Kinuko. I’m the new housekeeper who’s supposed to start work today.”

“You want to see Umeko? I’ll go get her,” Midori yelled, running off. Kinuko could hear the sound of her slippered feet pounding on the floor inside the house.

Eventually she came back to the foyer. “Umeko isn’t here,” she said, looking up into Kinuko’s face for guidance about what she should do now. Although Midori was already in her twenties, her mannerisms were almost like a child’s.

“Well then, would it be all right if I waited right here?”

Kinuko thought Midori would try to find Shigeke, but she just nodded back and ran up the staircase. Kinuko was a little annoyed at Midori’s lack of tact. It seemed that Umeko was running the house by herself.

Kinuko stood where she was for twenty minutes in the lower area of the foyer, which was covered in black stones. Since there was nothing else to do, she gazed at the cherry branches arranged in the large vase on top of the shoe rack.

“Oh, what are you doing here?” Shigeke eventually walked down the hallway in her bed clothes with her hand on the wall. She seemed to have been on her way to the bathroom when she had noticed Kinuko standing in the foyer. There was a worn-out expression on her face, and dark circles drooped down under her eyes. “You must be Kinuko.”

“That’s right. I spoke to a young woman a moment ago, but...”

“I’m sorry, Midori can be so careless sometimes,” Shigeke apologized, and, turning to the second floor, yelled, “Midori!”

Midori bounced loudly down the stairs. Her eyes were big and round.

“You should have shown her inside! This person is Fujieda Kinuko.”

“Hello!”

It seemed that Midori had forgotten their meeting earlier, but Kinuko couldn’t help returning Midori’s cherubic smile. Midori might be a bit childish, but she was cute. Shigeke placed a hand on Midori’s

shoulder.

“How is Yasuo? Do you think he will be able to say hello?”

Midori jumped up and down in the hallway.

“Today should be okay. He’s doing fine.”

“Good. Well, let’s go.”

Shigeko climbed the staircase one step at a time. Her breathing was heavy, and the staircase creaked under her weight. At the top of the stairs was a hallway connecting three doors. Shigeko knocked on the door at the end.

Kinuko could hear someone saying “Come in” from inside.

A man in pajamas was lying in a bed next to a window. An IV stand and a table with a wash basin on it were next to the bed. The sick man’s face was pallid, and his body was emaciated. Kinuko could tell that his illness was serious just by looking at him.

“This is Fujieda Kinuko. Starting today she is going to be our live-in housekeeper.”

Yasuo raised his thin arm to Kinuko, who had lowered her head to him. His face bore a striking resemblance to Shigeko’s. Since Yasuo was so skinny, his hollow cheeks made him look like an old person. Perhaps he had already made peace with his condition, as his eyes were calm and surprisingly clear. Midori stood at his bedside and stroked his hair.

When Umeko finally returned, she was holding several large shopping bags. Although she was no longer young, Umeko really did seem to be running this house by herself after all. Kinuko could sense Shigeko’s relief as soon as Umeko came inside.

“I’ll show you to your room, since it doesn’t look like anyone has taken you there yet. I’m sorry about that. My older sister has heart problems. Midori isn’t very sensible, and Yasuo is how he is.” Umeko frowned.

“I don’t mind at all,” Kinuko said.

Umeko led Kinuko to a six-mat room in a corner of the first floor. The room was dark and damp, but, on the bright side, it was right by the cherry tree.

“It smells a little moldy, but I hope you can put up with it.”

“It’s not a problem.”

After Kinuko had laid out her futon and arranged her things in the tiny space that had become her new home, Umeko came back in.

“Kinuko, I know this is sudden, but could you make lunch? I have to clean my sister’s room.”

After taking the meat and vegetables Umeko had bought out of the bag and arranging them on the kitchen table, Kinuko asked, "What should I make?"

"Could you make udon?"

"Just udon?" Kinuko asked, thinking it was strange; but Umeko, with a serious expression, said, "We only have five hundred yen per person to spend on meals. I'll leave it up to you. Starting today, please make a budget and do the shopping yourself."

Umeko left the kitchen as if shrugging off a burden. Kinuko, facing Umeko's retreating back, asked, "Do you mean five hundred yen per meal?"

While running her hand through her white hair, Umeko turned and answered, "No, five hundred yen per day."

Suddenly realizing the difficulty of her situation, Kinuko reflected that this would be a chance for her to demonstrate her true ability. She quickly fried a *kakiage* noodle topping out of the vegetables on hand, put it in the udon, and brought it out.

"I'm so happy that someone like you came to work for us," Umeko said, smiling, when she saw the *kakiage*. Taking the bowl, Umeko ladled out a portion for herself and Shigeko. "We'll have ours in the living room."

"Okay. I'll take Yasuo's up to him, then."

"Take some for Midori too. Those two always eat together."

As the housekeeper, Kinuko ended up being the only one to eat in the kitchen. Kinuko was struck by another wave of loneliness. Umeko passed by with the laundry as she was washing the dishes after lunch. Since Umeko was slightly chubby, her knees were bad, and she stopped to rub them.

"Um, Umeko," Kinuko spoke up. "I can bathe Yasuo and help take care of him. Please don't hesitate to ask me."

"Midori does that, so don't worry about it. She adores him like an older brother and won't let anyone else care for him."

"I see."

"By the way, Kinuko, is there any *kakiage* left?"

"No, it's all gone. Why do you ask?"

"When you make it, you should make extra so that you can put it on top of rice in the evening. You'll conserve more oil that way, and you can save time cooking. You'll wear yourself out if you're always this enthusiastic. Please take it easy." Using the same ingredients for lunch and dinner was a disgrace for a housewife, Kinuko thought,

smiling bitterly, but then she wondered if she *was* trying too hard. Still, it was a pleasant feeling to finally be in control of her life for the first time in years.

83

Kinuko gradually got used to life at the Uchida house, and before long she had the place running according to her schedule of housework. Three weeks had passed since she came, and leaves had begun to sprout on the cherry tree in the garden.

Kinuko's existence had become so necessary to the Uchida household that one almost couldn't imagine how things were like without her. She made a schedule for housework and took over the meal planning duties from Umeko, who seemed exhausted and took frequent breaks. She did her shopping at cheap stores she found in the neighborhood, ran the kitchen, and gave detailed directions to Umeko and Midori when they helped her.

Kinuko had decided to concentrate on cleaning separate areas of the house on different days. Monday was the first floor, Tuesday was the second floor, Wednesday was the entryway and garden, Thursday was the bath and kitchen, and Friday was everything else. Kinuko cleaned and polished everything carefully. Despite the age of the house and furniture, everything gradually became so clean it looked almost new. As the house took on a different air, its inhabitants became more energetic. Yasuo often came downstairs to laze around while watching television. Kinuko created arrangements from the plants in the garden, and Midori, mimicking her, adorned the house with flowers. Kinuko, who was talented at cooking, oversaw all of the meal preparations. She bought cheap but good ingredients and planned out meals for everyone in the house. For Yasuo, who had almost no appetite, Kinuko made nutritious, high-calorie meals. For Shigeko, who had a bad heart and moved sluggishly through day because of her depression concerning Yasuo and all the sleeping pills she used, Kinuko made meals that appealed to the palate of an elderly person. For Midori, who had boundless energy, she created a menu fit for a young person. Kinuko and Umeko diligently ate whatever was left over.

Umeko was responsible for caring for Shigeko. Shigeko depended on Umeko for everything, and she couldn't make it through the day if Umeko wasn't there. Midori spent almost all her time on the second floor. When she came downstairs she camped out in front of the

television and laughed, but she applied herself earnestly to the difficult labor of caring for Yasuo, and the household couldn't manage without her.

There was not a bad or mean-spirited person there. Everyone lived together and helped each other, and Kinuko supported everyone. She gazed at the apron that she had ironed with pride. The Uchida household was not what she thought it would be, but it was an ideal world in its own way. It made Kinuko happy to see this old house managed according to her plans. She was a perfect housewife who was useful to everyone, and she felt that this was indeed her reason for living. Kinuko brooded on the thought that the days she had spent with Yoshiyuki had been a waste of her time and talents. Every once in a while, she was overwhelmed by the urge to check in on how Yoshiyuki was living in the apartment that she, the perfect housewife, and poor Aoi had left, but she stifled that urge by engrossing herself in housework at the Uchida residence.

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Midori energetically pulled the weeds sprouting on the lawn as a refreshing May wind blew around her. Along with taking care of Yasuo, yard work was a job that Midori enjoyed. She could be in the garden all day, even forgetting Yasuo. On a day with good weather like today, Midori was absorbed in weeding. The white tips of her fingers were stained black with the soil of the garden, and she hugged her knees comfortably as she watched the confused bustling of the bugs that crawled out of the ground.

"Midori, it's time for lunch," Kinuko called out to her.

Midori turned happily. She was wearing the old straw hat that she used for garden work, a white shirt that looked like it belonged to Yasuo, red shorts, and socks with blue and yellow stripes. The hat looked like something that Shigeko's deceased husband might have once worn.

"What are we having today?"

"Pilaf."

"What is pilaf again?"

"It's when rice is soaked in broth and cooked."

"Okay," Midori smiled. "I like that. I like it even better when there is red-colored meat inside."

"Red-colored meat? I wonder what that could be."

Kinuko knelt down beside Midori. The weeds that Midori had pulled were lined up neatly one by one, all facing the same direction on top of a newspaper.

“It’s red with white stripes.”

“Ah, you’re talking about shrimp. You like shrimp, don’t you?”

The wind had blown Midori’s hat off her head. Kinuko stroked Midori’s short hair. She had already noticed that this young woman was a bit slow. She couldn’t do math, and she could hardly read. Still, as long as Midori, who was kind and lovely, stayed in the house, she didn’t inconvenience anyone. Umeko, Shigeko, and Yasuo all adored Midori from the bottom of their hearts. Kinuko once witnessed Yasuo give a frail swat at Midori, but, seeing Midori cower like a puppy, he had apologized immediately.

“We don’t have any today, but I’ll cook some again soon.”

“Will you do it tomorrow?” Midori was always saying “tomorrow.”

“Will do. Let’s go inside.”

Kinuko took Midori’s arm, which was fleshy like a young girl’s. Midori looked up and waved her hand.

“Big brother! It’s time for lunch!”

Kinuko looked up to the window of the second floor and saw Yasuo, who had been gazing down at the garden from a chair by the window, wave his thin arm in return. Looking up at him like this, Kinuko was able to perceive just how ill he looked.

Yasuo’s condition was visibly getting worse with each passing day. It was like a dark cloud hanging over the Uchida house. Up until a month ago, he would come downstairs and relax in the living room or walk around in the garden holding Midori’s hand, but lately it was as if he were strapped to his bed. Kinuko finally approached Umeko after seeing his meal dishes return untouched.

“I’m sorry to ask, but what exactly is wrong with Yasuo?”

Umeko, who was wearing an old fashioned pair of reading glasses and sitting with such good posture that she looked like an elderly teacher grading tests, was shelling fava beans. Although Kinuko hadn’t heard anything specific, she guessed that Umeko had probably been single all her life and moved in with her older sister when she felt herself growing older. Umeko pushed up her glasses and looked Kinuko straight in the eye.

“He has stomach cancer. It’s a really bad case.”

Judging from his extreme emaciation, Kinuko had thought this was probably the case, but she was still shocked when she heard it put into

words. She couldn't find anything to say.

"It was already too late when they discovered the cancer, and we were told that he only had half a year left. It's been almost a year since then, but it's still a shame. He was doing well at work, and he had finally started thinking about getting married. Shigeko took it hard when she saw how quickly he'd aged, but of course the most sorry of any of us is Yasuo himself.

"How old is Yasuo?"

"He just turned forty this year."

Kinuko emptied the colander full of shelled fava beans. The water for the stew had already started to boil. Kinuko added a pinch of salt.

"What was his job?"

"He was an elementary school teacher."

*That makes sense*, Kinuko thought, recalling the hand gestures he made from his bed and how he had waved to Midori from the second floor window. Yasuo fully understood how to convey a message without talking. He seemed like he would be perfectly able to stand at a blackboard and write in large characters that children could read easily. She had even seen him teaching division to Midori on one of his good days.

"What about Shigeko's husband?"

"He taught at a university. It's already been fifteen years since he passed away."

Remembering Yoshiyuki, Kinuko fell silent. Not noticing her discomfort, Umeko rolled up the empty fava bean shells into an advertising leaflet.

"This is just between us. Please don't tell anyone else..."

"What is it?" Kinuko looked at Umeko nervously.

"The last time we took Yasuo to the doctor, he took me aside and told me that Yasuo only has about a month at most."

Umeko kept her voice low, but she sounded almost detached. She had started taking Yasuo to the doctor every week.

"Does Shigeko know this?"

"Don't tell her." Umeko shook her head. "She's already devastated by Yasuo's cancer, and we can't say anything to her now. That's why the two of us have to keep it together. I'm really grateful that you came to stay with us."

"Thank you. It's a good thing Midori is so nice to Yasuo."

"Yes," Umeko said, wiping the table down with a kitchen towel. "That child is like an angel. It's just that..."



Kinuko watched Umeko as she inserted her finger under a corner of her reading glasses and wiped some dirt out of her eye.

“It’s just that it’s sad that Midori doesn’t know anything.”

Kinuko sighed along with Umeko, sympathizing with the anxiety she must feel.

☪

The next Sunday, Kinuko found herself waiting for her daughter Aoi at a café in Aoyama. The café was open to the street, and its tables faced the sidewalk. Kinuko looked around at the outside scenery. The plants in the garden were budding, and the fresh green was beautiful. Kinuko patted the bag at her side fondly. Inside, the first month’s wages that Umeko had given her lay untouched. Her pay was 230,000 yen in cash. The bills may have been covered in folds and wrinkles, and they may have been scavenged from savings stashed in various places inside the house, but that didn’t matter to her. Kinuko was filled with the happiness of having earned this money herself.

“This is your first paycheck, isn’t it?”

Aoi, whom she was seeing for the first time in six months after they had last been together for the New Year’s holiday, was calm and adult-like. Kinuko suspected that she herself had had a hand in shaping her daughter’s attitude when she left home.

“How have you been?”

“I’ve been okay. What about you?”

“How do I look?”

“You look like you’ve gotten younger since the last time I saw you.”

Aoi had dyed her short hair orange, and her lipstick was brown. She wore blue pants under a dark navy dress. As she took in her daughter’s striking appearance, Kinuko was reminded of Midori’s random sense of color. Midori would more than likely be at Yasuo’s bedside right now, since he always came down with a high fever just after noon.

“I’m having so much fun working that I can’t help it.”

“Why? I just don’t get it.” Aoi shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t you hate washing other people’s clothes and cleaning up their messes?”

“There are times when I hate it, but usually it’s okay. They’re not related to me.”

“Mom, you really had a tough time with Dad, didn’t you?”

Aoi cast her eyes downward. She had done her best never to fight with Yoshiyuki in front of Aoi, but her daughter had still picked up on

the coldness in their relationship. Aoi took a cigarette out of her bag. She turned to the side and lit it as if fleeing from Kinuko's difficulty in answering her.

"Dad came over to my place recently," she said, blowing out her words along with the cigarette smoke.

"He came to your apartment?" Kinuko asked, surprised.

"That's right," Aoi said curtly, turning her eyes to the couple at the next table. Their hands were clasped together tightly on the tabletop, and they were both gazing at the sky as if their future were written on it. "He showed up out of nowhere. I was really surprised. He ended up talking about you."

"What did he say?" Kinuko asked nervously.

"That he couldn't do anything about you leaving. That he wouldn't go looking for you, and that he would just keep living as he was now. If you didn't want to get divorced, then he would be happy if the two of you were still connected on paper."

"He said he would be happy?"

"That's what he said. He is who he is, but don't you think he loves you?"

Aoi looked off to the side, embarrassed. Kinuko, thinking of how Yoshiyuki had lived with her without noticing that her things were gradually disappearing from inside the apartment, was seized by an awareness of what she had done. Until this moment, she had simply resented Yoshiyuki's insensitivity without reading too much into it.

"We can't go back to the way things were before," Kinuko asserted.

"I know that. It's the same for Dad as well."

"It's the same for him?"

Kinuko was taken aback by Aoi's bluntness.

"Of course. Since you went out of your way to do something like that to him, it's not like it could be the same as it was before. People can't just forgive things like that."

Kinuko looked into Aoi's cool eyes. She had thought that her daughter was on her side, but she felt suffocated by the frank criticism of a fellow woman. Her daughter had passed out of her hands a long time ago, and at some point she had come to see her parents with the level gaze of an outsider. Kinuko almost couldn't believe that just a year ago she and Aoi and Yoshiyuki had all lived together as a family under the same roof. Kinuko was overcome by loneliness. She felt as if a soft, amorphous feeling in her heart had hardened into a sharp point.

As she walked back to the Uchida residence after parting from Aoi,

Kinuko could see the cherry tree leaning out over the wooden fence into the street. The evening wind tossed its abundant leaves back and forth. Kinuko stopped walking and relaxed for a moment, thinking of how Yoshiyuki said that he wanted to remain connected to her on paper. Perhaps what she had done had been a mistake. She was suddenly full of regrets, but such thoughts faded away as darkness gradually settled into the evening air. Kinuko was much happier living at the Uchida residence than she had ever been during the years she had passed with Yoshiyuki.

83

Several days later, Kinuko was shaken awake by Umeko in the middle of the night.

“Kinuko, we’re in trouble, please wake up.”

The light from the hallway shone from behind Umeko. Kinuko couldn’t see the expression on her face, but she appeared to be flustered. Although Umeko was wearing the clothes she slept in, she had put on an apron over them. Kinuko leapt up and buttoned a cardigan over her pajamas.

“What happened?”

“Shigeko has fallen into some sort of coma. She startled me awake because she was snoring so loudly. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get her to wake up. She must have taken too many of her sleeping pills. Ah, what should I do...”

Kinuko soothed Umeko and then ran down the long hallway, her footsteps pounding on the floor. She dashed into Shigeko’s room, which was all the way at the east end of the house. Two futon mattresses were laid out beside each other. Kinuko realized that Umeko, who was worried about Shigeko’s medication, slept beside her older sister. Shigeko was snoring away on one of the futons. Her loud snores, which were clearly abnormal, continued at regular intervals.

“I think we should call an ambulance.”

Umeko, who had calmed down a bit, nodded and picked up the telephone. Kinuko quietly packed a change of clothes for Shigeko into a bag as Umeko changed into gray slacks. Meanwhile, Shigeko, who was laid out vertically on her futon, kept snoring so loudly she didn’t sound like an old person at all. Umeko took the bag Kinuko offered her and said, “I’m going with her, so I’ll leave everything here up to you.”

“I understand.”

Yasuo, who was critically ill, couldn’t leave the second floor, and

Kinuko understood that Midori wouldn't be at all useful at a time like this.

The ambulance arrived within five minutes, and Shigeiko was quickly borne out on a stretcher. After Umeko climbed into the ambulance after her, the house fell into a silence so deep that it seemed as if the previous bustle had been nothing more than a hallucination. Kinuko had returned to Shigeiko's bedroom and was tidying up the futons when a call came from Umeko.

"Hey. Everything is all right. It looks like she took too many sleeping pills after all, and there's nothing out of the ordinary with her heart, thankfully. They're pumping her stomach right now, and they say we'll be able to come home in two or three days."

Kinuko sat down on the floor by the telephone and looked up at the clock. It was three in the morning. She knew she should go back to bed soon, but she was so excited that she didn't feel as though she could possibly go back sleep. Yasuo and Midori had more than likely woken up during all of the commotion, and they were probably worried. Like a nurse making her rounds, Kinuko took a flashlight in one hand and climbed the stairs to Yasuo's room. As soon as she opened the door, a quiet voice called out from the middle of the darkness.

"Kinuko?" Yasuo was awake.

"It's me. I'm sorry about all the noise. Did we wake you up?"

"No, I'm always awake at this time of night."

The voice that came out of the darkness sounded lonely. Kinuko was struck by the thought of how isolated and worried Yasuo must be.

"What happened to my mother?"

Yasuo spoke slowly, perhaps because it was difficult for him to breathe. Still, his voice was clearer now than it was in the daytime. Kinuko pointed the flashlight downwards. The wood grain of the old floorboards shone starkly in the light.

"She took too many sleeping pills and had to go to the hospital."

"Will she be okay?" Yasuo asked anxiously.

"Yes. Umeko just called to say that they're pumping her stomach. She'll be able to come home in a few days."

"That's good."

"Would you like me to bring you something warm to drink?"

Yasuo laughed softly. "Could you do something else for me instead?" he asked.

"What is it?"

Kinuko lifted her flashlight and was surprised to find that Midori, who was wearing pink pajamas, was sleeping in Yasuo's bed. She felt as if she had seen something she wasn't supposed to see, and she averted her eyes. Yasuo, who was wrapped in a quilt, didn't appear particularly concerned, however. Unfortunately, Midori's fat legs were on top of his slender torso, and it seemed that he was too weak to push her away.

"That looks like it hurts," Kinuko said, rushing to his side.

"I can't breathe. She's heavy."

Grasping Midori's fleshy thighs, Kinuko was eventually able to lift her away from Yasuo. Midori continued to sleep deeply, like a child. She mumbled in her sleep and turned away.

"Thank you," Yasuo said in relief. He smiled. "She's a healthy one, this girl."

Kinuko, flustered, silently stood up and was about to leave the room when Yasuo reluctantly added, "Kinuko, could you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"There's something I've always wanted to do but haven't been able to. I'm asking because tonight is as good a chance as any."

"Certainly, go ahead."

"I want to go out into the garden at night and walk around. I want to sleep on top of the lawn in the night air, look up at the stars, and be surrounded by the smell of grass."

Kinuko started to say that she would call someone, but then she remembered that Umeko was at the hospital. Midori was fast asleep, and Kinuko worried that she wouldn't be able to carry Yasuo downstairs by herself. Noticing Kinuko's concern, Yasuo said, "I'll be able to walk downstairs if you help me. I'm a little stronger at night."

Kinuko felt uneasy, but she recalled what Umeko had told her a few days ago about Yasuo having less than a month to live. She wanted to help him achieve his wish while he still had energy. Kinuko wrapped her arms around Yasuo and raised him out of bed. She placed both of his feet on the floor and supported him from the side as he stood up. Yasuo was as slender as a withered tree, and the edges of his bones dug into her so sharply that it hurt. Kinuko supported Yasuo with her shoulder, and together they slowly started walking.

"Will you be able to go down the stairs?"

"Yes."

Taking their time, they walked down the staircase one step at a time. It was difficult for Yasuo to breathe, so they rested several times on the way. Kinuko, who had gone ahead to open the sliding doors in the hallway facing the garden, returned to Yasuo and carried him out onto the lawn. He weighed less than forty kilograms. Kinuko hurried back inside to get a blanket and wrapped him up tightly.

“Thank you, Kinuko, thank you.”

“Won’t the night dew be bad for you?”

“No, the night dew is like medicine, at least for people who are dying,” Yasuo said while gazing at the sky. Kinuko sat on the lawn by his side. It was a warm night in June, and the plants were wet with dew. The night air was heavy with the fragrance of fresh greenery. Kinuko looked up at the cherry tree, which was covered in leaves.

“I wonder how long that tree has been here.”

“That cherry tree? My father planted it as a memorial when I entered elementary school. It’s strange that the tree is still alive even though... Well, everyone planted it together.”

Kinuko had never really talked to Yasuo before. Midori was always stuck to him as if defending him from invaders, and besides, Kinuko didn’t know what to say to someone who was so gravely ill. At some point Yasuo had become friendly towards her, and she attentively listened to his words as if she were meeting him for the first time.

“When Midori came to live with us, everyone thought she was useless, but I ended up taking a shine to her. I had just been informed that I have cancer the day before, and that’s probably why I was able to see Midori’s goodness. I was the only one who understood her.”

“Midori isn’t your sister?” Kinuko asked, expressing a doubt she had held for a long time.

“No, she isn’t. Did my mother tell you that?”

“Yes.” Kinuko nodded her head. “Well, no, I guess I just made that assumption on my own.”

“She came here as a housekeeper, just like you.” Yasuo closed his eyes and took a deep breath, taking in the smell of grass. “My mother realized that circumstances would be difficult after I came here to recover, so she put out an ad for a live-in caregiver. That was when Midori came. My aunt and mother said she couldn’t possibly do anything to help them, but I asked them to hire her for me anyway.”

“Is that what happened?”

“So why did I want Midori?” Yasuo’s eyes sparkled in his gaunt face. “She’s innocent and cute, but it would be depressing if it were just

that," Yasuo said.

"It would also be cruel."

"That's true," Yasuo agreed flatly. "I think I probably wanted to teach her something."

"What did you want to teach her?"

"I wonder. Probably that I was dying. Like a parent teaches a child."

Kinuko turned her face downwards without thinking.

"What is it?" Yasuo asked.

"I feel like that's even more cruel. Midori will be devastated."

"It is cruel, it certainly is. When I die, I imagine she'll be quite upset, but I can do something like this because we're not related. I want to plant the sadness of losing me inside her."

He could do this because Midori was a caregiver with no ties or connections; he could do it because she was like a child who didn't know or notice anything. Sensing Kinuko's anger, Yasuo was silent for a short while.

"Is what my mother said about you leaving your husband true?"

"Yes."

"How is he doing?"

"I hear he's doing well."

"Did you leave him on a sudden whim?"

"No, I had it planned out."

"Your husband didn't notice what you were planning?"

"That's right."

"Then you wanted to plant something inside your husband. You're the same as me."

Kinuko gasped. For the first time she understood the meaning of what she had done by silently putting up with Yoshiyuki for ten years and then suddenly leaving him according to a long-cherished plan. She had wanted to gouge an impression exactly like the rusted scratch on the foyer door into Yoshiyuki's heart. Ever since that day ten years ago when she decided to leave him, Kinuko had wanted to leave a distinct scar on Yoshiyuki's heart.

*I can do it because he's not family.*

Kinuko was about to say this to Yasuo, but, when she looked at his tired face, his eyes were firmly shut. It was as if he was refusing to listen to anything she had to say.

Kinuko lowered her gaze. The sound of a car horn rang out from somewhere far away.