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Ich nannte ihn Krawatte

(‘I Called Him Tie’)

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Kumamoto wrote poems. His exercise books were full of them. Forever searching for the perfect poem, his obsession, he sat completely withdrawn from the world, a pencil jammed behind his ear, a poet through and through – a poem himself.

We were in the final year of school together. Both under the same pressure to pass. He took it more lightly than I did. Or at least, he acted as if he did. What’s the point of studying, he quipped, when my path is already mapped out for me. Impossible to miss. The footsteps of those who trod it before me. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father. All lawyers, who’ve paved the way for me. I don’t have to study. They’ve already done it for me. I just have to regurgitate it and spit it out afterwards. I owe them that. Look! He showed me one of his exercise books. Ripped and torn. Father says society doesn’t need oddballs. Well, he’s right. It’s just that I can’t help it. I spent hours taping it back together.

Under one of the pieces of tape I read: Hell is cold.

The most perfect line, he said, that he had composed so far.

Hellfire is no warming fire.

It freezes me.

Nowhere is as cold as this burning desert.

Thick pencil marks. Pressed into thin paper. In some places a fragment was missing. It doesn’t matter. Kumamoto beat his chest three times. It’s all here inside. My jisei no ku.

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At first I didn’t understand him. I didn’t understand him any more than the poems he wrote. I read them and understood the words that formed them. I understood hell, and fire, and ice. But the abyss

that they described, to understand that would have required a way of reading that descended deep deep down, and I shied away from it, probably because I suspected that I was already there, but refused to believe it. All the same. If I'd understood him then, things might have turned out differently, but who knows? Who knows what something's good for and whether it matters that it's good? As far as I remember, good isn't a word that Kumamoto ever used.

We became friends nonetheless. Good friends. I admired his tenacity. He emitted the light of somebody who knew exactly where he was going, and that it would be terribly lonely there. He cared nothing for opinions. He laughed with those who laughed at him. He just said, like he'd said about his father: Well, they're right. I can't help it. He said it with a wink. It was a winkaway line.

What did he admire in me?

I don't know. Maybe that I stuck to him like glue. I trusted in him and his cheerfulness. I trusted that there was someone there who'd always stay young, and who, when I was dead, would still, with snow-white hair, be dreaming of the perfect poem.

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We met mostly in the evening. He loved the twilight. The light at that hour, he said, is mournful and joyful at once. It mourns the day that has passed, it rejoices in the night that has fallen. We strolled aimlessly through the streets. Kumamoto, dragging me behind him, the scent of a strange landscape surrounding him. He smelt of earth, frozen several centimetres deep, of strange plants that concealed themselves underneath. If they sprouted, I asked myself, what would come to the surface?

The answer was a crossing.

Kumamoto stopped. Above him a shampoo advertisement streamed in neon letters. Men and women rushed around us in great waves. We were an island in a surging sea. Suddenly, a grasp, and Kumamoto was holding me tight. He was clutching my arms with both hands. I've got it, he cried. There is no perfect poem! It can only be perfect in its imperfection. Do you understand? I didn't want to understand. Him, in my ear: I have an image in my mind. I see it clearly before me. Its colours are piercing in their sharp definition. But as soon as I have registered it fully, it explodes, and what I write down are isolated fragments that don't make up a whole. Do you understand now? It's as if I were trying to glue together a vase that's been broken, piece by piece. But the fragments are so crushed that I don't know which belongs to which, and no matter how I join them together there's always a fragment left over. This fragment though! It makes the poem. Through it alone the

poem attains meaning. There was a fever in his voice: Let my death poem be a vase, with water flowing through its mended cracks.

He let me go. I staggered. I felt the impression of his fingers on my arms.

You're sick, I whispered.

He retorted: So are you.

It was a warning. I heard it and chose not to hear it.

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Some days later, in physics class, Kumamoto slipped me a note. It said: Tonight at eight. At the crossing. I want to make it up to you. I still have the note. I know exactly where in my room, in which drawer. Under the old old stone with the insect trapped inside. Sometimes I get it out and read, word by word, like a prayer: Tonight at eight. At the crossing. I want to make it up to you.

His sickness?

I think it was his absolute determination. He wanted and wanted and wanted. To make up for it. He knew that he couldn't honour what he owed his forefathers, and he knew that his cheerfulness wouldn't last forever. You can't keep on claiming: I can't help it. From a certain age, that he didn't want to reach, you have to accept that you can always help it. That was his sickness: he realised too young that nothing is perfect and he was too young to draw the right conclusions from it. That I suffered from the same sickness – perhaps he wanted to warn me of that.

When I left the house that evening the air was damp and close. A wet cloth that wrapped itself around my body. I was nervous, I ran, the melted asphalt under my feet. I could already spot him from a distance. He had turned his face towards me. A scorching gaze, he looked at me. Raised his hand, shouted something. His mouth opened and closed again. I couldn't make it out. Drowned out by the noise of the street, his cry had long since faded away when he, a swimmer, plunged into the traffic before my racing eyes, without looking around. He held his hand high above his head. Brakes squealed. The hand hovered for a few seconds in the heavy air. Then it sank down. Someone screamed: An accident! Gasping for breath, I reached the spot. Sharp elbows digging into my side. I burrowed through the throng of passers-by. Kumamoto, covered in blood. His hand. Slender and white. Sirens wailed. I stepped back. Blind. Blinded. Was pushed away, far back. Hey, you! Everything ok? I had collapsed on the pavement. Next to me a rubbish bag, burst open. Rotten meat. I passed out. When I came to he'd already been removed. Above me, an advertisement for face masks. Everything ok? I stood up and left.

I left for home, my legs shaking. Everyone I met had his eyes. Kumamoto everywhere. Dense bodies, underneath them bones, organs, nothing lasting. His death – was he really dead? – had given me x-ray vision. I remember the woman walking in front of me. She was beautiful. Delicately built. I looked at her back and, breathing in and out, I watched her spine, swaying to and fro as she walked. The motion of this spine, I understood all of a sudden, is inclined towards death. I remember the man who rushed up to her, took her by the arm, kissed her hands. Him too: ashes and dust. My parents. I remember. Mother, a skeleton, sat in front of the television. Father, a skeleton, drank frothy beer. Ah, there you are at last. Bare skulls that eyeballed me from staring holes. What will become of you, I heard. Roaming the streets late at night. Have you forgotten? Your future! Father bit into a piece of raw sausage. Ripping teeth. I lurched down the corridor. My shadow, behind me, into my room. The door fell shut quietly.

Here, take a sip. You need to drink something.

The tie, red and grey-striped, brought me back to the park.

Slowly, he said, there, that's better.

I was glad that he said nothing more than that.

Because what's there to say, I continued. What's there to say if your words have run dry? After the door had fallen shut behind me I felt a speechless emptiness. I lay down, speechless, in my mind I ran towards the crossing again. Kumamoto's mouth. What had he called out? Again and again I tried to read it from his lips, again and again I failed. Had it been a word? A word like freedom? Or life? Or happiness? Had it been a no? Or a yes? A simple greeting? Goodbye, perhaps? Had it been my name? Or: Father? Mother, perhaps? Or something that had no meaning and it was pointless to wonder what it was.

I spent the rest of the night in a state of detachment. I didn't sleep, yet I slept the sleep of a sleepwalker. As soon as I closed my eyes I saw the hand in the darkroom of my memory, Kumamoto's hand, as it peeled itself off, horribly isolated, lifted itself from the black asphalt. It had pointed at me. Of all the bystanders, at me. And what had shocked me the most about it had been the shame that had suddenly welled up inside me, this: I don't know him. He doesn't belong to me. I'm glad to be pushed away. From him, lying there, in pain. The shame had gone as suddenly as it had come but it was no use to persuade myself afterwards that it had been a natural reaction. It was

there, I had felt it, it had still been there, and with it, anger, this: Why had Kumamoto made something public that concerned only him and him alone? Why had he forced such cowardly shame on me? Never again, I swore, would I attach myself to anyone. Never again be entangled in anyone's destiny. I wanted to enter into a space without time, where no one would ever shock me again. Let life outside move on. I wanted to lock it out, hide myself away from it, not allow it to happen to me. That one fragment that gave Kumamoto's death poem its meaning had gouged itself into my mind.

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The next morning I stayed in bed. Nothing out of the ordinary. I had often skipped school before. There had been times when I'd stayed at home for three or four days and they'd left me in peace because I had clever reasons. As long as you bring home good marks. Thanks to the remaining shreds of diligence I had in me, I had soon made up for the classes I'd missed.

But this time it was different.

A week went by. My parents were worried. Another week and they were disgruntled. Another week and they were in despair. In despair for a long time. Then disgruntled again. Finally worried. And so it went on, back and forth, until I could no longer tell if weeks had already turned into months and months into years. I had barred the door to my room. Knocking was futile, I didn't answer. Depending on whether my parents were worried or disgruntled or despairing, their knocking had a grey or a black or a white sound. It coloured the silence that had sucked me in and that resembled the silence of a dark forest. You walk along a winding path. Treetops swaying, the sun slants down through the branches. Spider's webs shimmer in its rays, delicate structures made of the threads of dreams. You think: How quiet it is here. And realise the next moment that you were wrong. The silence of the forest is a suffused silence. It is suffused by the sound of the birds, the snapping of rotten wood. Beetles whirl. A tired leaf swirls down. The silence murmurs like music, like a song with no beginning or end. All other songs originate from this song. In my room I realised: Silence has a body. It is alive. The dripping of the tap from the kitchen. Mother's fluffy slippers. The ringing of the telephone. The fridge opening. Father's slurping. Through the plugged keyhole I could hear the outside breathing, and I was relieved I no longer had to add my own breath. My scalp prickled. I felt my hair growing.

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Did he get in touch again?

Who?

Kumamoto.

No, I shook my head. I don't know what happened to him, and to be honest, I don't want to find out either.

Why not?

He wrote his poem. Do you see? Now I'm writing mine.

What if he's still alive...

...I've still spent two years in my room. The last two years of my youth – given away! Given to him, someone who must be dead in his innermost soul, I can't imagine it any other way.

Can I read it? Your poem?

It's not finished yet.

But it's right there.

Where?

On the back of your hand.

So many scars. I hid them quickly.

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Black salsify, a noodle salad, two croquettes.

He scattered the few remaining crumbs for the pigeons that had gathered around us, their wings flapping. He stamped his feet. They whirred away. Came back with fluffed-up necks. Had forgotten that he had just shooed them away. Poor animals, he murmured. It must be terrible. With no memory. But perhaps not as terrible as we think. I mean. If you were to forget everything. Wouldn't you then also forgive everything? Yourself and others? Wouldn't you be free from guilt and remorse? An electric crackling, as he wiped an invisible spot from his trousers with his sleeve. No, that would be too easy, wouldn't it? To forgive, to be truly free, you have to remember, day in, day out.

Do you want to continue with your story?

Yes, I want to forgive. The sentence came out of me just like that.

I'm not a typical hikikomori, I continued. Not like the ones they talk about in the books and newspaper articles left at my door now and then for me to read. I don't read manga; I don't spend my days in front of the television and my nights in front of the computer. I don't build model aeroplanes. Playing video games makes me queasy. I want nothing to distract me from the attempt to save myself from myself. From my name for instance, from my heritage. I'm the only son. From

my body, whose needs haven't stopped sustaining me. From my hunger, from my thirst. In the two years I've served, my body overcame me three times a day. I would creep to the door, open it a fraction, pick up the tray that mother had put there for me. When no one was at home I slipped out, into the bathroom. I had a wash. Strange, this need to have a wash. I brushed my teeth and combed my hair. It had grown long. A glance in the mirror: I'm still here. I suppressed the cry that was sitting in my throat. I wanted to save myself from it too. From my voice, from my words. The words with which I'm now putting on record that I don't know if a typical hikikomori even exists. Just as there are many different kinds of rooms so too are there many different hikikomori, who've hidden themselves away for many different reasons and in many different ways. While one, I've read about him, spends his fading youth practicing the same tune over and over on a guitar with only three strings, another, I've read about him too, has built up a collection of sea shells. At night, when it's dark, he walks to the sea, his hood pulled down over his face, only returning home at the break of dawn.

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I'm lucky that they've left me in peace so far. Because there are some who've been lured out. They're promised reintegration. Rehabilitation too. Work. Success. Mouthing flimsy promises they lead them step by step, back into society, that great collective. They get them used to fitting in. They harmonise them. But I'm lucky. They count me out. They don't send social workers to my door to talk at me for hours. Books and newspaper articles, when I flick through them, Father's aftershave, then a muffled knock again, the imprint of Mother's finger in one of the rice balls, this little bit of life is just enough, just bearable still. They allow me to do this. That's why I'm lucky. To be part of a family that allows me to do this, to lock myself away. Out of shame, mind you. No one must know that I'm a hikikomori. They told the neighbours that I was on an exchange in America, and after I started going outside again they told them I'd returned, and needed some time to get used to being back in the country. I'm lucky to be part of a family that's ashamed of me.

And perhaps it's this luck that best defines a hikikomori. The good fortune of being freed, for the foreseeable future, from events and eventualities, from the relationship of cause and effect. Of being in limbo in an uneventuated space, with no real goal in sight and lacking the will to reach it. A ball that lies silently to one side and doesn't set any others in motion. By shutting yourself out you fall out of your tight-knit network of contacts and relationships, and you're relieved not to have to do anything about it. This relief: you no longer have to do your share. You finally admit to yourself that you are completely indifferent to the world.

It's not easy to have a hikikomori in the family. Especially in the beginning. You know: There's the door, behind it is his room, inside he's feigning death. He's still alive, you hear him sometimes, all too rarely, pacing up and down. You put his food by the door for him and watch it disappear. You wait. Surely he'll have to go to the bathroom, to the toilet. You wait in vain. At first I only went out when I was sure that no one would disturb my existence. My existence was constituted by my absence. I was the cushion no one sat on, the empty place at the table, the bite out of the plum on the plate that I'd put back outside my door. In my absence I had broken the rule that says that you have to be there and that when you're there you have to do something, achieve something.

But at the same time it's not all that difficult to have a hikikomori in the family. The initial despair subsides. You're no longer in despair about his absence, if anything, you're desperate to hide it. The shame. Our only son. People have started to talk. Funny looks from the Fujimotos. People are whispering that I'm shopping for three when I should only be shopping for two. At least he's pulled the curtains. I hate to think what would happen if you could see him. You know how it was with the Miyajimas. No one had a good word to say about them in the end either.

Father and Mother were agreed: our name and reputation had to be protected at all costs. They argued a lot about who was to blame for me shutting myself away, and who was more to blame. They argued quietly, just quietly enough that the neighbours couldn't hear them. You spoiled him, they said. Or: You were never there for him. But in everything to do with name and reputation they were agreed, and their consensus was to my advantage because it allowed me to retreat even further.

Only once did they try to get me out. At the height of their despair they forced open the door with a crowbar. Father stormed in, he was beside himself. Even if I have to drag you out kicking and screaming! He raised his hand. Kumamoto's. For seconds, in the air. I shied away. It whistled down. Missed me. Sank down, powerless. I said: I can't go on. Said it more to myself. From then on they left me alone.

Were you listening?

A hmm.

Then he was silent. His silence wasn't an assessment of what I'd said and how I'd said it. It was a hmm, nothing more, and with a hmm the sun wandered across the sky. When we started talking again we passed the time with small talk. The weekend. The weather. If it stays fine like this then tomorrow we'll take a trip to the sea. Kyōko loves that. Going on a trip somewhere.

Another hmm.

Then he fell asleep.

It struck me that I had left a lot out. I'd left out, for example, that Kumamoto had sometimes called me his twin. That is to say, he'd said that our souls were twinned. I had left out that I missed him. I had left out that Mother cried about me a lot. And that Father never forgot to slip my pocket money under the door. I had left out that it was precisely these things that I'd left out that gave shape to my story. Kumamoto had been proven right: you could write death poems, millions of them, about one and the same death, yet each one of them said something different depending on what they left out.

41

Saturday and Sunday crept slowly by. We had parted on a light-hearted note. Well. Take care. See you. No awkwardness had set in between us and so I waited all the more impatiently for Monday morning. Would he come again? The question weighed heavily on me. It sounded like the rattling of train tracks. Like a now! now! now! And an unruffled announcement: There will be a delay. Thank you for your understanding. Someone whispers into his mobile: Another one down.

For the first time in a long while I wanted some distraction. My parents had gone out, I saw the lights of their car as it pulled out of the driveway. As soon as they were gone I crept into the living room, on tiptoe even now. I turned on the television. A cookery programme. Changed channels. A baseball match. I left it on while, treading more firmly now, I went from the living room into the bedroom, from the bedroom into the bathroom, from the bathroom into the guestroom. An abandoned bed surrounded by boxes. Well-thumbed books. A teddy bear. Old toys. The familiar smell of things that you'd once cherished. The guestroom had become a junk room. The last guest to have slept here had been Mother's friend Aunt Sachiko. Visitors came seldom now and if they came it was only for a quick word in the hall. The whole house seemed to be waiting for someone to come again and fill it with life. It was a sad house. To comfort it, I went from the guestroom into the bathroom again, from the bathroom into the bedroom, from the bedroom into the living room, and wherever I felt like it, I left a mark, to show it that there was a little bit of life in it still. I moved things. Half a centimetre. Made hollows in cushions and pillows. Swapped one towel for another.

And put the clocks back a minute. Photos from a distant past smiled down from the walls in the hallway. I stopped at one of them. It showed the three of us in front of a backdrop that had been added in later. The Golden Gate Bridge. Above it, a gigantic, bloated moon. We'd never been to San Francisco. I turned the photo around to face the wall.

42

And? Did you go to the sea?

No. He tried to laugh, and failed. Kyōko said I looked exhausted and I should just sit around for once and have a quiet time. She said I'd work myself to death otherwise. Typical Kyōko, she knows me too well. She knows that I'm someone who finds it difficult to do nothing. At least I was once. But that's quite a while ago now.

Two months?

Yes. Two months or so. Time's been a vague concept since I lost my job. That said, I no longer know how I ever managed to pass that time. It seems to me that I've only ever worked, worked, nothing more – and unlike many others: I actually enjoyed it.

Then why are you here?

I couldn't keep up any more. He spoke without looking at me, his face turned slightly to the side. I had begun to stick out at the office. Ten young heads. Among them, mine, grey. Twenty hands, among them, mine, too slow. I stuck out as someone on the decline. Even when we'd go for drinks after work I'd slowed down. While the others drank till they passed out, I drank half as much and still passed out. It's no fun to lie there and not know how you'll make it to the next day. You start asking yourself all sorts of questions. You look in the mirror and quickly look away. You avoid using the word old. But it slips out of you at exactly the wrong place and time. And you're out of place yourself; somehow you no longer fit in.

43

Once, I tripped. It was an accident. I was carrying a pile of papers into a colleague's office. A slow-motion shot. There was the cord. I saw it. Had one foot over it safely already. The other got caught. The papers scattered. Black numbers surrounded me. One red one: fifty-eight. They laughed at me. Ten ties were my witness. Twenty eyes, one look. He's gone, one whispered, he's definitely gone.

My accident, the only major one in the thirty-five years I'd been working, set off a chain of mistakes and uncertainties. I had tripped up in the truest sense of the word, and I'd let much more

than just a pile of papers slip out of my hands. I looked at myself carefully. Something wasn't right with me. I felt my arms and legs. Walked tentatively up and down the corridors. Tried one way of walking, then another. Bought shoes with slip-resistant soles. Only to establish: What I'd lost wasn't the ability to walk in a straight line, it was a certain spring in my step, a self-assurance. I could no longer catch up with myself. I was lagging behind myself.

44

And this tiredness.

It came like the first snow in winter. Everything had been yellow and red and blue still, just before, and now it was white. And everything had been a house, a tree and a dog still, just before, and now it was a shapeless mound and I didn't know what lay underneath. Tiredness blanketed me. A lead weight. I would sit in the metro on my way to work and think about how I would set about standing up. I would stop sitting down. I'd stand up straight, one hand in the strap, so it couldn't overcome me to start with. It was a fight against gravity. My eyelids would fall shut from trying. The darkness after they'd fallen shut won more and more power over me.

That treacherous tiredness.

Soon it had not only my limbs, but also – can that be – my brain in its clutches. I understood what I was assigned to do, but at the same time I didn't understand it. A weight pressing down on my neck, I was treading a thin line, and a typo or a spot on my shirt would have been enough to send me tumbling head over heels into the abyss. But I didn't stumble again. I fell asleep. For the first time in thirty-five years, I should emphasise that, for the first time in thirty-five years I fell asleep at my desk one Monday afternoon. It was no brief nodding off. No. No wading in shallow waters. More a plunge into a bottomless sea. I was a shipwreck, eroded by algae, and fish swam in shimmering shoals through my belly.

45

When they shook me awake I knew: I'm gone now. In my mouth was the stale aftertaste of a dream I could no longer remember and I almost wished they hadn't woken me from it.

Not long after that I was let go.

Not efficient enough, they said.

I packed my things and threw them in the nearest rubbish bin. A weight fell from my shoulders. Yes, I'm ashamed to admit that for one delicious moment I felt only relief. They didn't need me any

more. I didn't have to prove anything any more. The feeling of finally having failed intoxicated me. I was the fierce flare of a candle whose flame is being fed by nothing more than the last vestiges of wax. It knows it will soon burn out. And so it burns one last time, brighter than ever before.

Where should I go? Not home. I sat down, still feeling relief, in a tavern, not far from here, and staggered out again five beers later. Mild spring air. Drifting clouds. At one of the street corners I passed, a drunkard was delivering a fiery speech on the state of the nation. A phlegm-filled cough, then he spat. When our eyes met he cried: Brother, where have you been? I turned away in disgust. He followed me. I felt his eyes on my back. He came closer. I felt his hand. Full of rage, I knocked him to the ground, kicked him like crazy. He didn't defend himself, and that made me angry. He didn't return any of my insults. A baby, gasping for breath: Where have you been? I bent over him. His face was blue. My beloved brother. His gasps haunted me.

Only when I got home did the tiredness come over me again. The gnarled roots in the driveway. The asphalt cracked open around them. I barely made it through the garden gate. Kyōko's flowerpots. A glove. Baggy fingers. The key turned brittly in the lock. A tender echo: Where have you been? I slurred: The best thing about work is coming home.

You old fool, you.

I could smell mushrooms and onions.

46

I've never cheated on Kyōko with another woman. I can say that honestly. No temptation was as great as the promise I made to her.

Hashimoto, an old friend from university, used to tease me and call me a coward. A married man himself, he let no opportunity go by – and there were many opportunities because he was a good-looking man and what's more, he made good money. I was amazed at his ability to stroll from one body to another. He said it like that: I'm going for a stroll. How do you manage not to let on? Him, answering: It doesn't take much. It starts with the first lie. You introduce it. Into the system. It takes root in there. In the first stages of growth a mere tug would be enough to uproot it. The second lie follows. The roots run deeper. The third, the fourth, the fifth lie. Now you'd need a shovel. The sixth. The seventh. You'd need a digger. The roots have already branched out a long way. A subterranean network. You can't see it. It would only become visible if you unearthed it, as the hole that remained. The eighth, the ninth, the tenth lie. At some point the system becomes completely intertwined. If you tried to dig the roots up from the ground, the surface itself would collapse.

Hashimoto is still strolling. Just recently I ran into him in a department store. I asked: How are you? Him: No cave-ins. His laughter was unscathed. He had maintained his youthful freshness. And your wife? She's over there, look. He pointed to a group of women standing at a bargain bin. The one with the scarf around her neck. I was shocked. Her face, a ruin. She was a hundred, no, hundreds of years old. What happened? He laughed, flashing his white teeth: Life! Heck! Life! A little too loud. I looked after them as they disappeared up the escalator, him straight, her hunched over, a mismatched couple. They had their backs to each other, each of them alone.

47

What I wanted to say. Lying has its price. Once you've lied you find yourself in a different space. You live under one roof, live in the same rooms, sleep in the same bed, toss and turn under one cover. But the lie eats its way in between you. It's a trench. Unbreachable. It splits a house in two. And who knows if it wouldn't be the same with the truth?

I, who've never cheated on Kyōko, feel as if I had a mistress. Her name is Illusion. She's not beautiful, but pretty enough. Long legs. Red lips. Curly hair. I'm crazy about her. I don't want to start a new life with her of course, but I daydream with her. I take her to the most expensive restaurants in town. I feed her with my own hand. I rent an apartment. I pay for her upkeep. Cost what it may. She gratifies me and my manhood. By her side I'm young and strong again. She purrs: The world is your oyster. She believes in me and my potential, and I believe in her belief in me, and let myself be flattered utterly by it. I'm a lazy adventurer.

At home I float in a bubble. It's so thin that the merest touch would burst it. So I try not to be touched. I sit in front of the television and watch the news. When Kyōko asks me how work went and why I'm not doing overtime any more, or if I've talked to my boss about this or that, I say: Ssh. Not now. She repeats the question. A little less forcefully. I say: Later. Please. She shrugs her shoulders. I hazard a breath. The bubble I'm floating in trembles, almost imperceptibly, as I exhale.

It's a decision.

And with that he unpacked his bento box. Rice with salmon and pickled vegetables again. I've decided to pretend. Because that was my promise: that daily routine, our daily routine would become our refuge. It has to be maintained. Until the last.

Finally he looked at me. Winked. Kyōko's bento boxes just taste too good to miss.