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## Writing Sample

Tomoka Shibasaki

"Right Here, Right Here"

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SHIBASAKI Tomoka

### Right Here, Right Here

From the time I got off the bus to when I reached the foot of the bridge, I met almost no one.

I was at last standing right in front of it, and it didn't appear to be as steep a climb as I had thought it to be. Maybe the steep part came after the tollgate, which the car that had just zipped past me was about to go through. I couldn't find the entrance to the pedestrian walkway, so I walked down the sidewalk that ran alongside the IKEA that had been constructed right next to the bridge. The IKEA parking lot was mostly empty, but there were people on the store's shuttle bus when it came by.

The bridge was almost two kilometers long, leading to the Osaka-ko area on the other side. I had taken the city bus across it many times. It was neither a suspension nor a truss bridge, but rather was supported by its extremely widely spaced piers alone; from certain angles, the roadbed appeared to be hovering in mid-air. Every time the bus climbed that sharp gradient, I would feel a sense of elation just as though I were lifting off on the Railroad to the Milky Way. *Whoooooaa, just like a sightseeing plane!* At its highest point, the bridge is 45 meters above the water. There aren't any tall buildings around it, and the fencing is low, so there is nothing at all to get in the way of the view—you can see all of Osaka from the top. The view is probably even better than ones from observation decks on towers and skyscrapers that you have to pay to get into.

I knew that you could walk across it. All of the bridges around here were more than 30 meters above the water, so that the ships could get to the industrial areas, but of all of the bridges I would want to ascend, this was the highest and longest.

The sky was overcast with a mottled pattern, to the point that I didn't know where the sun was. The low-slung clouds were the very ones that brought the rains of early winter. Ahead was the entrance ramp to the pedestrian walkway, enclosed by fencing under the bridge as it started to rise up. The wire fencing had turned black from rust and exhaust fumes. There was no crosswalk leading from here to the pedestrian entrance, which was located on the other side of the road, but there was also virtually no traffic here. I walked across to the entrance, where I took my camera out of my backpack and took off my gloves.

The pedestrian ramp attached to the bottom of the bridge, turning this way and that. It felt familiar to me. When I was a child, I would make my way to swimming school every week via a pedestrian walkway under the Hanshin Expressway that connected to a different ward of Osaka on the other side of the water, and I would occasionally cross a bridge a little further upstream on my way home from high

school. I would shoulder my nylon bag from the swimming school and peer over the railing at the surface of the water far below. The green river didn't have a single centimeter of visibility, but still I would see the scary dark shadows of fish; they looked like they were monsters from Ultraman, creatures with the power to suddenly change shape. Their black legion churned in continuous pursuit of one another. Underneath that ramp was bicycle parking and a scrap yard. The factories on either side of the highway were always dimly lit, and there were almost never other people there.

Compared to that, the view from here—of a parking lot down below with brand-spanking-new cars, and an endless expanse of empty land on both sides—was terrific. The pedestrian ramp twisted right and left, and for a brief moment, when it jutted out for a stretch from underneath the bridge, the view opened up. Water had pooled here and there on the reclaimed land below, where development plans had stalled; it appeared that it couldn't be maintained indefinitely, either.

The pedestrian ramp joined up with the roadbed just past the tollgate; the two were separated only by a fence, not even waist-high, made of slender metal piping. At this point, the bridge was already 20 meters in the air. I could already see the factories across the water, and the blue arched bridge beyond. Across the traffic lanes, off the other side I could see the Minato Bridge, which looks like a red steel-framed ladder. It was a beautiful view. Thinking I could no doubt get some great shots, I grabbed my camera again and clicked the shutter in every direction. Then I took my iPhone out of my left pocket and took some video footage of a housing complex through the gaps in the outside fence.

The outside fence was typical for pedestrian bridges. It was about 1.2 meters high, with only a row of steel bars set about 15 centimeters apart. It was easy to take photos through it, and I pictured in my head the panoramic landscape I would be able to see if I went to the highest point on it. I began to make the long ascent. There was a sign saying that bikers had to get off their bicycles and walk them across, but a man came toward me from the other direction riding his bike. You can't ask him to walk it for two kilometers, I thought, but then again, the wind was up and he looked a little wobbly. After the cyclist went by, I didn't see another person the entire way to the top. It cost a hundred yen to cross, so even cars were thin on the ground.

The farther I walked, the higher the bridge rose pleasantly into the air. The housing development that I had just been looking at across a level plane was now far below me, and without quite realizing it I found myself over the sea. The surface of the water was leaden, where the river poured into the sea. There seemed to be hardly any current, but everywhere I looked the surface of the water rippled, making it appear as though only the top were flowing, moved by the wind.

There were factories along the shore, and cranes for hoisting large ships were drawn up along them. The massive cranes appeared to be thirty meters tall and were painted red. They had been loaded onto squared-off barges. It was a mystery why the whole thing didn't topple over.

I stopped to take photos. I steadied my hands on the railing and took a few shots, then crouched down and took some footage on my iPhone through the fencing. My camera was attached by a strap to my wrist, but there was nothing like that on my iPhone. If it slipped out of my hands it would fall straight to its doom, I thought, carefully bracing it with my left hand. It would cost a lot to replace it, and it would be a total pain to get everything straightened out and set up a new phone.

I stood up and kept walking. The view was fantastic. Perhaps because I had lived on the ninth floor of a municipal housing block from ages two to sixteen—the very time they say is most crucial in the development of one’s personality—I didn’t have the least fear of heights. Tall buildings and observatories didn’t bother me, obviously, and even when for work I had to climb the emergency ladder attached to the outside of a fuel tank at a plant in the Coastal Industrial Zone, I didn’t feel afraid. That plant had looked a lot like the industrial areas here now.

I stepped carefully on the concrete, making my way forward. I had already come several hundred meters. I could see the highest point of the bridge in front of me, but it seemed that the farther I walked toward it the more it receded into the distance, and I still couldn’t see the roadway beyond it. My plan had been to get to the center of the bridge, the very highest point, take some photos, and go back the way I had come. It didn’t make sense to keep going forward; on the far side of the bridge was a warehouse district, with buses that only ran once or twice an hour.

The scenery became ever more fabulous with every step forward. It felt as though I were flying in a small airplane above the city.

Somewhere along the way, the giant red cranes had joined with the rest of the city, and I was looking down at even the heavens above them. Boats came and went across the water where the two rivers met, leaving white lines in their wakes, but the sound didn’t reach here. The only thing that could be heard was the occasional clank of metal on metal from a plant somewhere.

A cold wind was blowing, and I pulled my knit cap lower over my forehead. A man in a sauna suit came up from the other side and ran past me. Before long, I had arrived at the top, and I could at last see where the road descended ahead, gently curving to the left. I rested the camera on top of the railing and shot off a roll of film, and then took a series of ten videos on my iPhone. To my right lay the streets of Osaka, laced with the various waterways. A still-new, blue steel-framed arch bridge. Factories. Houses that blanketed the land as intricately as precision-instrument parts. Apartment towers that had popped up here and there. Farther off, the silhouette of Mount Ikoma. In just a few spots, rays of light pierced the thick, grey clouds. It kind of looked like a sacred painting. To the left, Osaka Bay shone dully. I imagined it was probably blinding if you came at sunset.

Relieved that I had dropped neither my camera nor my iPhone, I looked ahead of me. The road went on and on into the distance, and far ahead I could see the hotels at Universal Studios Japan, the towers for the suspension bridge of the Bayshore Line of the Hanshin Expressway, and, in the direction of Nishinomiya, the

city extending into the foothills of the Rokkō mountains. The ascent hadn't been any steeper or longer a climb to the top than I had imagined, so it seemed a shame to turn around and go back right away. But at the same time, it was cold just standing around up here, so I turned to make my descent.

That was the moment.

I was standing just a little bit past the absolute top, and the path I had walked was ever so slightly rounded, stretching down to where I had first started from. The fencing that had been on my right was now to my left, and through the gaps in the metal bars I could see the dark surface of the water. The ripples that had seemed not to be moving at all were, I could see now, flowing in the direction of Osaka Bay.

At that moment, I had the feeling the bridge was slowly moving in a direction opposite to the current. The chasm of space beneath my feet—45 meters down, however many hundreds of meters from shore to shore—that void tore through the center of me in a flash.

Suddenly, not only was I unable to take a single step forward, I couldn't even wiggle the tips of my fingers. My whole body drained of energy, and my legs went wobbly on me.

By moving just a little bit, I could clamber over this flimsy guardrail and plunge into the sea. There was no one else on the pedestrian path with me, and it would be so easy to do. I didn't have the energy to stop myself from jumping. I could make it happen without anyone realizing it.

My feet wouldn't budge even an inch, but I managed to turn my head to look around; there was no sign of anyone in front or back of me. The occasional car came past, but there was probably no way they could stop for me on this kind of road. I took a deep breath and stretched my right hand out until I could grasp the railing separating the walkway from the road, but my feet refused to move and I wound up contorted in an awkward position, nearly falling backward.

I could dial 110, the police emergency number. *Are you calling about a crime or an accident? Um, I have suddenly become unable to move at the top of the Namihaya Bridge—is there any way I could have someone come out here and help me out? I didn't have any trouble the entire way up, but I got to the highest point and everything kind of froze. They wouldn't be happy with me. But who cares if they get upset? Every once in a while you see them on the news helping a cat get down from some tall place it's stuck in. If they help cats, surely they'll help out a human being. One way or another I need to figure out some way to get back. 110. I don't care if they don't like it. Isn't a life worth the expense to the public?*

The path that floated more than 45 meters above the surface of the Earth was turning over, slowly, like the planet rotating. It was really the water in the background that was moving, but I was afraid that if it kept tilting like this I would be thrown off.

In the far distance, I could see the IKEA building. Somehow, I had to get there.

I moved forward by sliding my left foot along the ground. If I let down my guard even a bit, I might turn and start running toward the railing. I tried to put the river, and even the factories and cranes, out of my mind, and looked only at the ground in front of my feet. *It's a regular road a regular road this is just a regular old road.* I was able to get my left hand over to grip the railing separating the walkway from the road. I looked at the small trucks as they came by, but their front windshields reflected the sky and I couldn't see the drivers' faces. I breathed cold air in through my nose—it flowed to the back of my sinuses, cold as ice.

\*

The last train out of Sannomiya bound for Umeda, making all stops, had clusters of girls here and there who looked like they were on their way home from a wedding. It was probably an auspicious day for a wedding, and the weather was good, too. The high temperature was over 35 Celsius. That kind of heat lingered even into what was just about the middle of the night.

“Honestly, when I got to the IKEA dining area, I went straight to a seat by the window without ordering anything and went into a trance. All I could think was, I thought I was going to die. Everything else was completely blank. If anyone had been sitting near me they would have been freaked out—you know, here's this girl with her eyes glazed over.”

“We all have to go. The bus for it leaves from Osaka-ko? Oh, maybe we should just go by car ...”

“Cars are a hundred yen and scooters are ten.”

“Ten yen? Ten? Why even bother collecting it?” Sachiho's eyes widened. She was sitting to my left. Apparently, she was going to ride the roller coaster opening at Fuji-Q Highland the following month, the new Guinness world record holder for steepest drop, 121 degrees. But she wanted more genuine thrill-seeking.

“That must have been awful. Things like that always scare me. I probably wouldn't have stepped foot on it to begin with.” Narahara was sitting to my right, shifting his gaze from place to place as he spoke. He was a former coworker of the photo developer who had appeared with me at today's talk event. Narahara came to hear the talk and briefly said hello. Afterward, I went out for gyoza with some of my friends, including Sachiho, but by chance we ran into Narahara again when we were waiting for the train at Sannomiya Station. According to the printer who had appeared on stage with me, Narahara was much better than him at the job, but now Narahara was doing something completely different. I hadn't asked what exactly. Narahara had wire-rimmed glasses that perfectly accented his silver hair. He told me he was still in his 40s, but he wouldn't give his exact age. Our mutual printer friend lived in Sannomiya, so he just walked home, and Narahara had found himself waiting for the train by himself. I was just thinking that since we had bumped into each other again I would have to say something to break the ice, when he spoke to me: My wife

says she wants me to take her to IKEA tomorrow, he said. I suppose you guys go to those kinds of places all the time? Oh, that's right in my neighborhood, I said, and I told him my story about the bridge.

"I swear I'm not making this up. I must have sat there for about an hour. I could see the bridge through this big old window, perfectly framed. And I zoned out looking at the bridge and those colorful IKEA flags fluttering out there. And all I could think was, I have returned from a very scary place. I don't think I have ever gone blank like that in my entire life.

"This one? Is this it?" Sachiko had been pecking away at her iPhone, and now she showed me the image on her screen. Behind a field of vacant land, a tall, elevated roadway stretched out. I hadn't gone back ever since. "This looks totally amazing. And people can walk across for free!"

All was dark outside of the train carriage, and in the spaces between the heads of the people sitting across from us, we were clearly reflected in the window.

On the bullet train down from Tokyo in the afternoon, it had been all tunnels past the Mukogawa River, and I hadn't been able to see a thing. So I had wanted to look at the scenery here on the Hankyū Kobe Line, heading for my family's home in Osaka, but the only thing visible was the lights of the buildings along the tracks as they whizzed by.

I had agreed to today's talk event because it was held at Sannomiya in Kobe. After the earthquake in March, my thoughts had kept going back to Kobe. It had probably been a decade since I had walked around in Sannomiya, and I had trouble connecting all of the buildings in my memory that had been in the process of being demolished with the various new buildings that stood in their places. It was only ten minutes' walk from the station to the cafe where the talk was to be held, but it was hot out. I didn't know whether I had walked up that slope before or not, and I never had that sensation of, *This is different from before*, or, *This is unchanged*, and I felt it was very possible I was walking the street for the first time. And just now when we came down the slope on the way back to the station and saw the wild clutch of drunk girls in their skin-baring outfits as they were reflected in the headlights of the taxis, even then I felt that somehow the whole area was lively in a wholesome way. Although, thinking back, until now I had never been in Sannomiya close to the last train.

"Actually, I went to the bridge thinking that I would publish an essay with photos as part of a series I'm doing in a newspaper, but then I thought that it wouldn't be good if I were to publish something about it and people went there and something happened to them. So I killed my own story. I took a ton of photos that will go into the file, and I started all over again taking photos of the ferryboat."

"Ferryboat?" Narahara replied as one would expect him to, but Sachiko was absorbed in her iPhone.

"In order for ships to be able to pass through to get to the factories, the bridges have to be about 30 meters above the water, but that makes it difficult for

people to walk across. So there's a ferry. It isn't like the Yagiri ferry where the boatman paddles you across. It has one of those *putt-putt-putt-putt* engines. Everybody takes their bicycles across on it."

"How about that. You certainly do live in a unique place." Narahara's Kansai accent seemed old-fashioned for his age, and moreover, his intonation was extremely precise; I decided that he must come from a family with deep roots in the area. Even though it wasn't a work day, he was wearing a white open-neck shirt and gray slacks; he looked like an office worker out of an Ozu Yasujirō film who had taken a wrong turn and wound up on a Hankyū train in the present. He held on to the handles on the bag in his lap with both hands. All he needed was a straw boater on his head.

"I totally want to go. Tomorrow, let's do it tomorrow." Sachiho, still lost in her Internet search reverie, quickly started thumbing out an email to someone on the cell phone she held in one hand. I was seeing Sachiho for the first time in two years. She had seen information about my event on somebody's Twitter feed and had dropped everything to come see it.

"Since that moment, I've all of a sudden become afraid of heights. If I'm fully enclosed in glass or something, then no problem. So skyscrapers or Ferris wheels—not that I've gone on one to check it out—but those should be fine. But if it's something I can fall off of, if I could really fall from it, then even if I'm two or three meters off the ground it's just, *scary, scary*. I can't take those staircases in overdesigned shops with their minimalist handrails. At the time, I lived on the fourth floor, but it got to the point that every time I went out on the veranda to hang up my laundry, I just *had* to look down over the edge. I moved to a second-floor apartment."

"That's the last thing you should be doing. If it's scary to you, then you shouldn't be looking," Sachiho said, even as her right thumb flew over the surface of her cell phone.

"Yeah, how do I explain it ... I can't stand not confirming it. It's like I want to experience that feeling of looking down and *ai-yai-yai*. I'm checking to see if the fear is still there."

"I don't understand what you're saying." She had finished dashing off her text and was sending it off.

"It's like a sign of addiction, maybe. I always have this expectation that maybe it's going to get better. I mean, considering that nothing really happened, I keep thinking maybe things will go back to the way they were. The view from the bridge was really fantastic, and I really want to go again ..."

"When was it you went there?"

"February of last year. So it's already been a year and a half."

"How about we go together this time? You should be fine with other people there, right? We can link arms."



“And this time if something happens it becomes traumatic for everyone, and wouldn’t that be a disaster. You may want to rethink it,” Narahara said, his smiling face placid and the light reflecting off his wire-rimmed glasses. The situation he conjured up was all too easy for me to imagine, and probably for Sachiho, too. Neither of us had a reply for him.

I changed the subject. “Maybe fireworks would be better? If you go in the other direction from my neighborhood, toward Nishinari Ward, there’s an even older bridge. It spirals up from the ground on both sides, so we call it the Glasses Bridge. The straight part in the middle that crosses the river is maybe thirty meters in the air. My brother says it’s swarming with people when there are fireworks.”

“Oh, yes! Fireworks, then! Fireworks!” Sachiho began searching for summer fireworks events. My mind was full of the spherical bursts of fireworks of the Tenjin Festival that I had watched from the fifteenth floor of a nearby building almost ten years earlier. They floated above the dark meandering river that reflected the twilight sky.

“I don’t do well with fireworks,” Narahara said. “My heart starts beating wildly. It’s exhausting, or maybe I should say that it inflicts damage on my body. Basically, I can’t stand anything exhilarating, sad as I know that may be. You know how in South America, places like that, there are people who die rooting for soccer teams? I watch a first-round game in the high-school baseball tournament, that’s about right where I am. So I guess you could say I pretty much can’t watch any sports. End-of-season major-league baseball games between teams that have already missed out on the playoffs? Those are my speed.”

Finally Sachiho showed some interest in our conversation. She replied to Narahara through the back of my head for some reason. “So what do you like to do? Bonsai, or maybe Go, or ...?”

“I panic whenever plants start to wither, and isn’t Go really just a struggle to defeat your opponent? My favorite thing to do is rattle around the house and eventually say, ‘Ah, there goes the sun for today.’ My wife is always wailing, ‘Oh, I’ve gone and married someone truly dull.’”

“I can see how she’d want you to be a little more active about things.”

“You never travel anywhere?” I had turned my upper body so that it was easier for Sachiho to join in the conversation. I slapped at a mosquito that had landed on the hem of my cargo pants, but he got away.

“Our honeymoon was the first and last time. The plane flight was awful, just awful.”

“IKEA will probably be OK for you. It isn’t that thrilling of a place,” I said, standing up.

Now it was Sachiho’s turn to furrow her brow. “This is true of Costco, too, but I can’t stand the warehouse part. I won’t go in. If an earthquake were to hit, it would be totally dangerous. So I’ll get little things there, but I’ve never bought furniture from them.”

“Warehouse?”

I explained the interior layout of a foreign warehouse club to Narahara, who was sitting straight up with his head cocked to one side. There’s a wide-open warehouse area, kind of like an exhibition hall, filled to the ceiling with stacks and stacks of massive blocks of merchandise ...

“Well, well, is that so? Sounds like it’s difficult to get a real sense of it without actually going there.”

“If they would just do something else instead of that warehouse system.”

“I always thought it was scary, too. I’ve never heard of anything collapsing, but I wonder if they have any sort of plan to deal with an emergency.”

“I’m saying I don’t like being afraid that something *might* fall. I’m not talking about the actual fact of things shaking and falling. That’s a different matter from feeling afraid.”

“I get you.”

“I think it’s a completely different thing.” After Sachiho said this, we suddenly fell silent.

While we had been talking, the train had stopped at station after station. Maybe because it was the last train of the night, the doors seemed to stay open at each station slightly longer than usual. The tepid, humid air seemed to flow in near the doors, but there was no breeze. The number of passengers dwindled little by little, and the number of open seats increased as well. Stations that I had passed through any number of times, that I had looked at any number of times, but at which I had never gotten off the train appeared before my eyes, and the streets that I had never walked spread out before me in the darkness.

“If I had to say something that I do, maybe my answer should be the lottery.” Narahara waited for the door to close before blurting this out. At almost the same moment we turned to look at Narahara. *Ahem, that is considered to be an activity that involves emotional extremes, but ...*

“My wife is the one to look at the results. I like the part that involves researching this and that, doing the calculations, waiting in line for the tickets. Nothing ever really comes of it, but I enjoy the process more than the results.”

“So if I put in an order, could you buy the tickets for me?” Sachiho asked, again into the back of my head.

“If you win, there’s a handling fee of 70%. I hope that’s OK.”

“You’re really a pro at this, aren’t you? You seemed so nice I let my guard down. Oh, I’m the next stop!” Sachiho always moved in a way that didn’t betray any hesitation or reluctance. She went to stand right in front of the door, clutching her smart card.

“So I’ll see you ... tomorrow night? I’ll call you at some point tomorrow. Yū and Ryō said they can’t wait to see you.”

I was going over to Sachiho’s for dinner the following night. Yū was Sachiho’s son. He was ten years old and was ecstatic that he was finally tall enough to go on

the good rides. Ryō was her daughter, age seven, reported to be proud that she could swim backstroke.

“Do they remember who I am?”

“I showed them your photo in preparation for your arrival.”

Once we were past Jūsō, there were only three people in the car.

“So, are you still making prints of photos yourself?” I asked Narahara.

“No, that was just work. Once I quit the developer’s, I never did it again. That was maybe seven years ago.”

“I just drop them off at the store. I’ve never asked for them to be developed in a particular way. But I thought I might try it once.”

“You can’t go wrong with Mizuno. He’s a true craftsman, and he loves photography.” Mizuno was the printer who was the guest at my event. *So you’re not all that interested in photography?* I didn’t ask when Narahara mentioned Mizuno. At the next station, Narahara got off the train.

The doors hung wide open at Nakatsu Station, where only local trains stop, and Narahara headed out beyond them. At this station that almost no one ever got off at despite the fact that it was only one stop from the terminal, his white shirt floated in the damp darkness, as he walked down the narrow, narrow platform. As I watched him from behind, his posture perfect as he walked, I thought that truly here was someone from another era who had accidentally shown up among us.

\*

I woke up just before ten and went down to the second floor. My mother had already left for work, but there was a note on the table: “Hang up the laundry.”

I heard a car stop out front, and then my brother’s wife and their kid came into the house.

“Huh? I heard that you were coming for lunch today.”

“Ah, sorry, I stayed over last night.” I was wearing an old jersey I had pulled out of the closet. I ran a hand through my hair trying to straighten it out.

“Come on, say hello.” Eriko pushed gently on my niece’s back. Kaho was standing behind Eriko’s legs, as if she were hiding.

My niece stared up at me. “Ilo.” Without changing her expression, she jerked her head away. When I had seen her at New Year’s she had still been wobbly on her feet. But today she crouched down and took her own shoes off. By chance, my niece shared my birthday, and she looked an awful lot like I did in photos of me as a child that I had seen.

Eriko made small talk for a while, and then said, “I just want to go pick some things up—could you watch her for a bit? She doesn’t cry all that much anymore.”

I had been left at home here alone with my niece for about thirty minutes once when she was about six months old. From the moment Eriko left her sight until

she returned, Kaho hadn't stopped crying for a moment, and I ended up feeling like I had let everyone down.

"Sure, that's OK, I think," I replied, but I had no idea what to say to my niece when we were left alone together. I got out some picture books that made sounds that were for Kaho to use when she visited. I started up the electronic melody, but she was bored with it right away.

I remembered that I had an Elmo doll in my old bedroom—you squeeze it and it talks and shakes. I didn't want to take my eyes off of my niece, so I schlepped her up to the third floor and back down again, but she was too heavy for me to carry all that way and she slid down me into what seemed to be an uncomfortable position for her. I felt like a failure all over again.

I pushed the switch on Elmo's tummy, and when that red stuffed animal suddenly started moving around, my niece, who was sitting on the floor, was startled and tried to get away from it. In the next instant, she fell backward with a thump on the floorboard.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry!" I rushed forward to prop her up again, but she was dazedly staring up at the ceiling just where she had flopped over onto her back. I waited a few seconds, thinking that maybe she wouldn't cry. Abruptly, she sat up.

"Are you OK? Did you hurt yourself?" I asked, but my niece didn't answer me.

With a serious expression she got to her feet and took three steps. She pointed to the edge of the table and said, "Right here, right here."

She was speaking quickly, and her voice was so squeaky that it may have been in falsetto, but that was definitely what she said. And then, she went to the other side of the table, and this time, pointed at the leg of a chair and said, "Right here, right here." With her right hand still outstretched, she put her left thumb into her mouth to suck on it, and stared at me. The whites of my niece's eyes sparkled with a bluish tint.

"Right here? You hit your head?"

Thumb still in her mouth, she nodded three times.

"Before?"

Another two nods. And then as if she had forgotten all about hitting her head, she walked into the kitchen. As I followed her in, I was stunned. At the fact that the past existed for my niece, at one year and eight months, and that she understood it. At the fact that she had tried to explain directly to me things that had happened in the past. *Before, I experienced the same kind of thing, right here, and right here.*

I heard it all.

My niece, with no one to help her, explained it to me.

"Right ... here." She pointed at some bananas that had been left on the edge of the sink and were jutting out a little bit. "Banana ... right ... here."

"Oh, you want one of those? That should be OK. Didn't you have a treat just a bit ago?"

Kaho jerked her head up and down a few more times. I took one banana from the bunch, peeled it halfway, and tore off a chunk for her.

“Is that good?”

“Guu, guu.”

I ate the rest of it. I thought my niece was taking a look around the room, when she shouted again, “Baad! Wow!” She went running for the window that faced the veranda. The sparrows that had been resting on the veranda railing were startled and flew off into the summer sky.

Exactly thirty minutes after she had left, Eriko came back. I broached the subject: “You know, Kaho is really bright.”

“Well, parents aren’t allowed to say that about their own children. Hey, Kaho, we have to ring-ring for Grandpa.”

Reiko was quite strict that the first thing you did was visit the family Buddhist altar; she was very different from the non-believers in my family. My niece sat properly on her heels on the edge of a cushion that was too big for her, reached out her short arm, and gave the altar bell a good thwack with the stick.

*When would Kaho become aware that her grandfather had died before she was born?* I wondered as I watched her little back. *Maybe she already realizes it.*

The only thing we could say for sure is that my father didn’t know that she was born.

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In February of last year, I didn’t encounter anyone on my way from the bus stop to the bridge.

On the lot right next to the stop where I got off the bus, there was a municipal housing development of five-story buildings. Somewhere in there was the apartment that we lived in when I was born, but I didn’t even know which building it was in. I had a memory of it being on the first floor, to the left of the stairwell, and my oldest memory is of playing in the sand that covered the hard soil somewhere in the development. I felt that if even a single grain of the sand that I saw thirty-five years earlier remained in the complex, it would serve as proof of my birth. That memory itself may be a false memory. Now, on a veranda of these gray buildings built forty years earlier, I could see where some residents had built themselves a bath or a shower unit. By bus, it takes almost thirty minutes from the station, and the bridge that finally connected this dead-end of wards wedged between two waterways to points beyond was built fifteen years ago.

There was a single convenience store, and an old shopping street, but no sign of human life. Three bus stops before the one I used, where the main street turned and crossed over a canal, the big trucks and mixers would continue straight toward an ironworks. There probably wasn’t much traffic coming down this way during the day on weekdays. I was the only person on the bus.

In February, everyone had their windows shut, so even from the apartments in the housing block that had laundry hanging on the veranda to dry, I didn't hear any conversations or television sets. I had fastened my down jacket all the way to my throat, but I could still feel the cold. It almost never snowed here.

Looking at the forlorn trees that had been planted here and there, I thought that maybe this wasn't the place we used to live. There were municipal housing blocks in the first subdivision, the second subdivision, and so on—maybe it had been one we had passed along the way, and maybe the one I had seen at the end of my bus ride was simply one that looked exactly like the one I had actually lived in. I had asked my mother before leaving the house, and she had said *first subdivision, no, wait, second subdivision, maybe—oh, I would know it if I saw it*. Where she lives now is less than ten minutes away by car.

The plot of land on the other side of the housing development was a park where the kids could probably play a game of pick-up baseball. It looked pretty small for a field, but there aren't any particular rules about how big a diamond has to be. It was a Thursday afternoon, so there was no one here, either. There were no cars, and the road was deathly still, but at regular spaced intervals dump trucks and rigs were pulled over onto the shoulder, and in a number of the vehicles I could see the feet of the sleeping drivers propped up in the front windows.

Past the park, it opened up into a sprawling field of emptiness. Over the past several decades, any number of development plans had been floated for this reclaimed land, but none of them had turned into reality, and the only thing there was the land itself. Inside the fencing around the space, heavy machinery sat abandoned. They had been digging here and there, but there was zero indication that anything substantial was about to begin.

I was walking down a street that, strangely, had been perfectly constructed between the fenced-off spaces. To both my right and my left, completely bare tracts of land stretched off into the distance, pocked here and there with pools of standing water.

Whenever I walked around alone like this, I worried about getting killed. And not only near open land and factories: In February three years earlier, I had gone to Takao-san by myself. I had gotten off the cable car and was headed for the shrine, and I was frightened to realize that no one was in front of me and no one was behind me. How come I don't get murdered, I thought. It's strange that I *don't* get murdered. Someone could probably very easily kill me, and then be on their way pretending that they had no idea what had happened, and they would never get caught. And yet, I haven't been murdered yet. I must have good luck.

I realized that there wasn't a street that would cross over to connect to the bridge, so I backtracked and turned to the right.

As I continued on, a wall painted a deep blue with that yellow logo on it loomed in front of me, and I followed the street until I was right in front of the IKEA store. This home furnishings store from Scandinavia that had suddenly appeared on

this reclaimed land—where factories and botanical gardens and a subway line and a shopping center had failed to materialize—looked exactly like the stores in Yokohama and Funabashi, to the point that it created the illusion that you had transported to another place. I thought I might head over to the IKEA side of the street. There was no place for pedestrians to cross the wide road as it curved in front of the store. Cars came every once in a while down the road at a pretty good clip, but it had been constructed without any thought to traffic lights or crosswalks, so I looked both ways and walked out into the road. I looked up to find a cheery ad for a sofa on high.

When I was finally standing in front of the bridge, the incline of the opening section appeared more gentle than I had thought. It's a long ways up, I thought. I wondered how many minutes it would take to get up there, and I made a mental note of the time on my watch. And then I kept on walking.

\*

The bullet train I took back to Tokyo was a little late on account of the rain. Sitting in the seat directly in front of me was a singer. She looked much more delicate than she did on TV. She was surrounded by her all-male staff, and she looked bored. I was surprised to see her in an ordinary car, but that was probably the world we lived in now. In the space between her seat and the window, she was doing something on her iPhone; it looked to me as though she might be updating her blog. On my own iPhone, I did a search using her name. On her page, updated one minute earlier, she had written, "The LOVE I receive from everybody turns into strength. I really believe this. I am grateful to you all."

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This is something that happened in the early summer of this year, 2011.

I got out of the taxi on the rotary in front of the train station, and walked down a shopping arcade narrow enough that traffic could only go in one direction. It was almost morning, but the dim light of the place wasn't coming from the sky but from the lights of the arcade. In front of a convenience store that had turned off its sign as part of the energy curtailment sat a pile of light bulbs that had been traded out for LED lighting. The men working there were moving in and out of the store. Thin plastic sheets covered the shelves and walls, but I could still see the figures of unfazed people standing and reading the magazines.

I had moved past the worst of my sleepiness and now my head was merely in a haze. As I watched the scene, a flurry of black shadows tore past me. I looked up to see swallows carving a beautiful arc through the air and coming to a rest on a telephone wire. There were already five swallows up on the line, with another two or three fluttering around them.

Since I had left the taxi, I had heard the swallows chirping around there. The buildings pressed close on either side of the narrow street, and hardly anyone was there; the birds' cries ricocheted back and forth. Their voices flowed over one another a thousand times over, like airy bells, like songs, in this street bathed in the purple glow of the fluorescent lights, the illusory light of dawn, echoing on without pause. The only other people walking in front of me on the street, a drunk couple who appeared to be husband and wife, looked above their heads. Just as I was doing. I had never heard so many swallows crying out at once in my life.

But this was the first time in months that I had been out this late. I tried to remember when the last time may have been, but for all of my flipping through my planner and thinking about it, I simply couldn't remember.

*Translated from the Japanese by Kendall Heitzman*