

TAEKO TOMIOKA

# BUILDING WAVES



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TRANSLATED BY LOUISE HEAL KAWA



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Back when I used to watch a lot of prime-time TV, there was a particular dating game show that always caught my attention. At first the young men and women were divided by a wall, and each had to imagine what the other was like only from their voice. Then when the host yelled out “Time to Meet!” the divider would be raised, and the couple would have their first conversation face to face. This conversation invariably kicked off with one member of the couple asking the other, “What do you do in your spare time?” As I watched week after week, I heard the same old question over and over. Eventually, I was sick of hearing it. But there was no denying it was a good way of getting to know something of the other’s private life or personal side.

“What do you do in your spare time?”

“Hmm, I guess I go for drives and stuff.”

“Oh, you’re into cars?”

“Yeah. You too?”

“Yeah.”

When I was a student in the sixties, no one in my circle of friends had a driver’s license. I know that kids nowadays all go to driving school in the summer vacation of their first year in college, but still a response like “I go for drives and stuff” irritated me to no end.

*What exactly is someone’s personal life . . . ?*

“So what do you do in your spare time?” I asked.

I found it amusing that I had resorted to the same line of questioning as the young people on the dating game show. At the same time, I reasoned that this line of questioning might just be a universally-accepted, logical approach to getting to know someone.

“Let me see . . . mostly I just drive around.”

“Oh, in your car.”

Right then, in the beginning, I wasn’t remotely interested in learning any more about this man’s private life. I mean, we weren’t anywhere near a car and I didn’t see any connection between the man and the concept of driving, or even to a car. Nowadays, being able to drive a car is nothing out of the ordinary. But I suppose I have to admit that, for me, there was still something special about it.

And so, when the man had finally turned up in his car, I was momentarily dazzled by the combination of this meticulously cared-for vehicle and the man behind the wheel.

“About how much does a car cost?” I asked.

“Well, it depends. The most expensive can go for just about anything. This one cost me one and a half million yen.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty expensive.”

“It’s just an average car.”

“A car’s something you’d buy on credit, right?”

“Yes, normally. But I paid for this one in cash. My financial controller is generous about those sort of things.”

I didn't own a car and couldn't drive, which put me pretty much out of touch with today's society—fact I was well aware of. It was only someone like me—unable to operate what had become a everyday piece of equipment—who would think it so special. But it did turn out that through his flippant use of the term *financial controller* to refer to his wife I had managed to uncover a tiny bit more of this man's personal life.

“Expensive, though, aren't they—cars? Or maybe I'm just cheap. Perhaps career women are a cheap by nature,” I said jokingly. But the man took me at my word.

“It must be really difficult for you women to have a career—unless you've got your husband's understanding anyway,” he replied, a serious expression on his face. The moment I heard him use the phrase *your husband's understanding*, I immediately tried to forget he'd said it. What exactly was a husband supposed to understand? Whenever Japanese wives say to each other “You're so lucky to have your husband's understanding,” the phrase always sounds empty, as so many clichés do. But I don't doubt that if I turned to the speaker, the kind of person who thoughtlessly tosses around that kind of expression, and told them how meaningless it was, they wouldn't have a clue what I was talking about. I had scant tolerance for any of these kinds of platitudes, so when the man said “you have your husband's understanding,” I was so busy trying to keep talking, to hide how much it bothered me, that I got all flustered.

If we'd been on that game show, the red, heart-shaped lamp that signaled a successful match would never have lit up. It only took a couple of minutes in the man's car for me to come to this conclusion. The man, for his part, seemed totally bewildered by my conversation.

“This is the first time I've ever talked to an intellectual woman like you,” he commented.

I laughed. “Look, I wrote a few poems when I was younger. Really, the word *poet* is a bit of an overstatement. I was more like a disreputable hack. I wasn't earning any kind of honest living—I was a reprobate, scum of the earth . . .” I was laughing but I realized he was staring at me blankly and uncomprehending. This wasn't a look of reproach for my fake badass routine—it was all too obvious that he'd just never heard the terms *hack* or *reprobate*.

“But I've seen books of your poems in the bookstore. If you've been published then you must be an intellectual,” the man persisted, apparently in earnest.

“Is that right?”

“Sure it is,” he grinned triumphantly.

There being nothing more to say on the subject, I instead grabbed a box that was sliding around on the back seat.

“Are there tapes in here?”

“Do you want to listen to something?”

“What kind of music do you have?”

“*Song of the Seasons, Song of Daybreak*, you know—traditional folk songs. That kind of thing.”

“Huh?”

“Shall I put one in?”

“Um . . . I’m fine, thanks.”

Without warning, he launched into a rendition of *The Seashore Song*. His powerful tenor voice, exactly what you’d imagine springing forth from a large body like his, resonated through the car. He didn’t seem to put much effort into each note, yet there was volume to spare. His rich, hearty voice never seemed to crack or falter.

“You’re in a good mood,” I remarked.

“Of course. I never get to go for a drive with a woman next to me,” he replied seriously, then resumed his song.

I looked over at him. “You must be at least six feet tall.”

“Right. Six feet two inches.”

“And about 180 pounds?”

“More than that.”

“I’m guessing you’ve never had any serious illness.”

“No, never. The past few years I haven’t so much as caught a cold.”

“That’s probably because you don’t poison your body with stuff like this,” I grinned, lighting a cigarette.

“Right. I don’t drink and I’ve never even tried smoking.”

“Perfect health.”

For the past month, I’d had a constant headache. From the middle of my forehead, around past my temples, to behind my ears, it felt as if my head was being squeezed by an iron band. There seemed to be no way of loosening it.

*The Seashore Song* continued. In that wholesome, crystal-clear tenor. He spun the wheel with arms that looked sturdy and strong. He hadn’t made a single lighthearted comment the whole time we’d been together, but I assumed that *The Seashore Song* was his way of communicating his good feelings. He was entirely contained in his own bubble of healthy wholesomeness, completely indifferent to how bored I was. You couldn’t really call him overweight, but he was bulky, like one of those sixth-grade winners of a school fitness contest. You’d see their photos in the local newspaper, bursting with energy and vitality. They always reminded me of samurai warrior action figures. His hair was cut short too, like a professional athlete’s, a pair of glasses the only distinguishing mark on his untroubled face. Even these weren’t particularly thick, so they didn’t obscure his cheerful expression in any way.

“Don’t you like any popular songs? How do you feel about jazz or rock?” I asked in the face of the interminable *Seashore Song*.

“It’s not that I don’t like them. I just can’t sing them. That vibrato sound—like the one you get in *enka* songs—I just can’t get it right. Whenever I try to sing that way, people tell me to stick to folk songs.”

“That’s unusual for a Japanese person. Unless you’re very young. Usually if a Japanese person tries

to sing a foreign song, any song really, somewhere along the way, that vibrato creeps in and it turns into *enka*. Well, at least with the over-forty crowd.”

I grinned, knowing that he was forty-two. However, he chose not to show his solidarity with his generation and said simply, “I just like folk songs.”

That was a total conversation killer if ever I’d heard one. There was nothing to do but pass the time by talking; hopefully I could entertain the man and at least amuse myself doing it. It had plainly escaped his notice that providing what amounted to some kind of one-way chatting service was my only source of entertainment here with him. It wasn’t taking me long to work out that he wasn’t the kind of person who liked to strike up a conversation, or even considered it a way for two people to have a good time together. I had to abandon all hope of that.

But really, I decided, it wasn’t that he was taciturn by nature, or shy, or even inarticulate. I concluded, rather maliciously, that he just didn’t have anything to say. Oh well, I supposed it was probably better than having to sit there bored, nodding in agreement while he tried to explain mundane concepts that most people already understood (such as the term *vibrato*) in an interesting or amusing way.

Normally if two strangers want to get to know each other better, there’s really no alternative to conversation. You can try joking around the whole time, but that method only works with some people. And there’s a point at which bland, neutral small talk is no longer enough—without asking about each other’s personal life, there’s really no other way of getting to know someone. So, in most cases, you chat casually about your hobbies, work, or family, and in turn listen to the other person chatting about the same things. In other words, it is a straight exchange; you offer information about yourself and acquire information about the other party in return.

I had believed that most human beings possessed this basic knowledge of the etiquette of discourse and knew how to employ it to make pleasant conversation. This man possessed none of that. When I asked him what he did for a living, he replied that he was a salaryman, or salaried worker. When I asked him if he worked for a trading company, he simply said, “Nothing that exciting.”

“A government office?”

“No.”

His replies were so terse that outside of naming every occupation under the sun, I was never going to get anywhere. So I gave up. The only question he had given a clear-cut answer to was the price of his car. Maybe I should assume that this was the one area of his life he was confident about.

Still, little by little, I had come to know more about this man’s personal life. Using a mixture of imagination and guesswork, I had filled in the details around the little information I had, and I had constructed in my head a more or less full portrait of who he was . . .

*Every morning he wakes up and descends the stairs from his apartment on the fifth floor of a concrete-block building. This concrete box had originally been painted cream or a whitish gray, but over the ten or maybe twenty years have passed, it has turned steadily darker. Here and there linger yellowing lines, testifying to where cracks in the outer walls have been filled in. As he leaves for work, the sole*

*of the man's shoes echo loudly in the narrow stairwell.*

*In the middle of the "village" created by row upon row of identical concrete boxes stands a bus stop. Up until three years ago, the man used to commute by riding this bus for thirty minutes to the nearest train station. Now that he has joined the growing tribe of car owners, he climbs into his beautiful cream-colored, unblemished car (I admit that's a strange adjective to apply to a car) and drives himself to work.*

*Any concrete-box village has parking spaces between each box with a whole array of different colored cars in a line. Each of the boxes consists of four or five floors, with many apartments on each floor, meaning the inhabitants' dwellings are squeezed together into one cramped space. Each dwelling is made up of several small rooms. The one inhabited by this man consists of two small bedrooms, one tiny living area and an only slightly roomier kitchen-dining room, along with a single bathroom and separate toilet—a total floor space of just under six hundred square feet. The rent is about twenty thousand yen a month. He says it's too inexpensive to ever consider moving. I suppose that's not an unreasonable attitude . . .*

This was all I knew (including the embellishments I'd added from my imagination) of the living environment of this man who never revealed anything of his private life. My imagination had been spurred into action not so much by my curiosity, but by the fact that he behaved too much like some airhead girl who never really has an opinion about anything, and I've always wanted to squish those kinds of people like bugs. It turned out he wasn't hiding anything interesting, nor was he secretly a prince pretending to be a pauper; he was nothing more than a regular apartment dweller. If only he had mentioned the K—— apartment complex in the first place, everything would have been simpler.

I was already familiar with the K—— complex. It stood on top of a hill overlooking K—— yato, which was an old word for valley. It wasn't only K——, but within the sprawling M—— City area there were many other place names that ended in *-yato*. Five years ago, when I first moved to this area, I was amazed when I looked at a map and found how many place names had this suffix. All these places were situated between hills. The frequency of the suffix *yato* testified to how hilly the land was in this region.

I lived several hills away from the K—— apartment complex. The local terrain featured both high and low hills, and I lived on one of the lower ones. But high or low, homes had been built on the slopes of these hills and people had come to live in them. The valleys too were chock-full with them. In the M—— City vicinity, there were numerous apartment complexes like the K——, and the population was constantly increasing.

There had never been any question that the person this man called his "financial controller" was his wife. In most Japanese families, the woman is in charge of the household budget, so it wasn't too unusual of a title. That expression had even been popular at one point. At the same time, though, there was a whiff of something underhanded and ingratiating in the title. By handing over his full salary to his wife and having her run the household completely, the man was also absolving himself of any responsibility for financial problems. The flip side of complete trust is total dependence. In the matter

of household finances (actually, it's not only limited to finances) many men treat their wives like mother and play the role of little boy. That might be okay inside the home, but I wondered just how appropriate it was to use the phrase "my financial controller" and reveal that kind of relationship to outsiders.

*This same wife also descends the concrete stairs every day on her own way to work. She takes the bus from the apartment village to the local station, changing trains twice. It takes her almost two hours to reach her office in the city. Every morning at five A.M. she gets up to prepare breakfast, then at six she and her husband eat together. The wife takes the concrete stairs first, at about five minutes to seven. Half an hour later, the husband climbs into his car. It takes him about twenty-five minutes to get to work. In the early evening, the husband gets home first at around four thirty. The wife arrives at the local train station at six. She does the shopping, then gets home around seven P.M., and starts cooking dinner. The two of them eat around eight. Afterwards, the wife cleans up, washes the dishes, and at nine thirty or ten P.M. finally falls into bed. The husband stays up until eleven watching TV. Except for weekends and holidays, they never deviate from this timetable. Every day without fail, you could set your watch by the sound of the wife's footsteps, then the husband's footsteps echoing in the stairwell.*

"Don't you ever make dinner while you're waiting for your wife to come home?"

"No. She doesn't like me to."

Since meeting me, the man's timetable had started to vary slightly. He had some free time between four thirty and seven P.M. That became the time for our secret trysts. Well, I say trysts, but it was nothing more than driving around in his car, just as he always did in his spare time. I'd tried all sorts of things to try to loosen that iron band around my head. Now, clutching at straws, I had decided to hitch a ride as he went about doing his favorite thing, "just driving around."

The "around" was, more specifically, the rolling hills of the region. Dotted here and there among the hills and valleys were sites where remains from the late Stone-Age Jomon period had been discovered. Adjacent to one of these sites stood a tiny community cultural center that served as a kind of museum. Inside, I'd seen a panoramic model of the whole area around M—— City, showing all its hills and valleys. Viewed from above, the undulating land rippled like the waves of some great ocean. It wasn't difficult to imagine how, thousands of years ago, human beings had noticed that these sunny hills overlooking flat and lush, suitably water-retaining valleys were an ideal habitat, and had decided to settle here. As the man and I drove along the asphalt roads that cut across the hills and the almost overly wide roads that swept through the valleys, then navigated the steep ups and downs of the roads passing through residential neighborhoods, the waves of the panoramic model from the museum came to life.

"Without a car I could never have been able to get way out to a place like this," I said, gratefully.

I was the kind of person who always walked if possible, and had been totally left behind by the new car culture.

On our way home, I spotted something familiar. "Look, isn't that D—— Park? I've been here before. It takes over an hour on foot from my place." In response, the man drove into an almost

deserted, weed-filled lot marked *Parking for D—— Park Only*.

D—— Park had a large lake and I'd heard that it was absolutely stunning when the irises or the plum trees were in bloom. It had been during the New Year's vacation several years ago that I'd decided on a whim to pick up a map and take a walk around the area, eventually ending up here.

"Hey, aren't there people in that car? I'm sure I saw somebody in there. What are they doing in the middle of a parking lot like this?"

"Looks like they've got the seats tipped back. They're up to something," he replied.

"Aha! I get it—you tip the seats back. Yeah, right, it looks like a couple of kids. So when you saw them they're up to something . . ."

The man rolled his eyes as if to say I was a bit slow to catch on. I really knew nothing about the culture of car ownership.

It was early evening and still light, but the park gate was locked.

"So you can do that in a car! I'm beginning to see that a car can be very versatile." I was impressed.

"I thought it was open until six in the summer," the man remarked, completely indifferent to my veneration of car culture.

"I'm getting thirsty. Can we get something to drink?" I asked.

"There aren't any cafés around here—just family restaurants." This was an English phrase I had never heard before.

"What's a *family restaurant*?"

We took a short drive, to a glass-sided, octagonal building by the side of the highway. The man drove into the huge adjacent parking lot. The words *In* and *Out* in English indicated the entrance and exit. It wasn't the first time I'd seen this restaurant's name—I'd read it from bus or taxi windows. I realized it was probably a chain.

"I get it. If you're in a car, you need a place to park. If we'd spotted a coffee shop we wouldn't be able to park there—so they designed places like this for the car enthusiasts. So that's why these kinds of places have been popping up all over recently," I said, once again filled with admiration.

While I had been impressed by all sorts of things, I had managed to forget the iron band around my head, but unfortunately, this man's free time was almost over.

"It feels like America in here," I remarked as we were shown to our seats. It wasn't just that everyone around us was eating hamburgers and drinking Coke—it was the atmosphere, like a typical roadside diner in an American movie. The faces of the other customers, sleepily sipping their Coke reminded me of the young boy and girl I'd glimpsed through the car window in the parking lot at D—— Park. I looked over the menu, complete with color photos of the offerings.

"I'm hungry, but I don't really feel like a burger. I'll have coffee and a slice of chocolate cake," I said, noting that even a child who hadn't learned to read yet would have no problem ordering with these large, vivid photos next to the list of choices.

"I'll have the same."

"Aren't you hungry?"

“I guess I am.”

“So why don’t you have something more?” I suggested, but then remembered he’d be going home and eating dinner at eight o’clock.

“Do you ever go out to this kind of place with your wife?” I asked.

“Sometimes on the weekend I ask her if she wants to go out for coffee, but she always refuses, so I end up just coming and drinking a cup by myself.”

“So you never eat out at all?”

“She doesn’t want to. She doesn’t like going out on her days off.”

“I suppose when you have to go out to work every day you feel like staying home when you can,” I remarked. “That and there must be laundry and other housework to catch up on.”

I couldn’t tell whether he couldn’t stand being hungry any longer, or he had an enormous appetite, but after polishing off his chocolate cake, he ordered a sandwich. Maybe that’s just how it is with men.

“If you eat that much before dinner, you’re going to end up getting fat,” I teased him.

“Yeah, I guess so,” he replied complacently.

I wasn't remotely interested in things like the man's heritage or family background, but if I didn't even know what kind of work he did it was pretty difficult to hold a conversation. It might be okay in some romantic movie where the heroes fall in love without even learning the other's name, but I was supposed to be driving around with him for fun. As I was the one who had asked him to let me ride along, I couldn't sit there and pout because it wasn't going my way. At the same time, when the other person didn't have anything to offer to the conversation, I couldn't start grilling him like a police interrogator. While seeming to joke around, I could subtly steer the conversation to coax him into dropping some clues, but not when the other party point-blank refused to cooperate. When he'd given me the brush-off one too many times, I found it difficult to believe it was out of some kind of humility or modesty. When my questions, carefully worded in a roundabout manner so as not to make him feel uncomfortable, were continually batted away like some irritating fly that had landed on his face, I began to believe he was either incredibly dense or just plain rude. Was he too dim-witted to get my jokes? I got worked up enough to begin wondering all this about him. I decided that if he was going to give me so much trouble then I was just going to have to blow his cover and expose his identity to myself.

*And you know what, I bet it's not even much of an identity. Drop that fake veneer of politeness that you use to pretend to others you're a normal, emotionally healthy individual!* I thought as my old reprobate tendencies came crawling back to the surface.

"So do your children go to T—— High School?" I asked as we drove past its gates on our next excursion. T—— was one of the regional public schools of this hill country.

"No, I don't have any children."

"I don't either. Childless couples are definitely a minority. We minorities are always having to put up with being cross-examined by the majority. Don't you agree? When you're still young, all sorts of people take it upon themselves to comment how you haven't any children yet, and when you get old they ask you why you never had any. They always tell you how lonely you must be."

"Uh-huh."

"It's pretty cruel for an infertile couple. But at least they get the sympathy vote for not being able to have any. It's worse for those of us who could have had children but chose not to. We can't really avoid getting the third degree."

"Uh-huh."

"Some psychology expert wrote that when couples have no kids it means that one or the other of them hates their own parents. When I heard this, I thought there might be some truth in it. Sometimes I hated my parents so much I thought if they hadn't existed I wouldn't have had to be born."

"I guess you could feel that way."

"But without kids and both of you working there must be so much money that you've run out

places to put it. I guess you hide it under the floorboards or something,” I said, resorting to jokes again. A response along the lines of “No kidding, we had to build a shed behind our apartment building for all the cardboard boxes stuffed with rolls of banknotes” would have given me something to work with. Then at least we’d have been able to enjoy a silly exchange. But in the presence of the man my words had nowhere to go, and just ran around in endless circles.

“Wow, you don’t have to go far before you’re right in the mountains,” I said. We were following a mountain road, lined on both sides by thick, dark woods. I don’t know if it was because I wasn’t used to sitting in cars for long periods of time, but my butt was completely numb. I was suddenly overcome with an urgent desire to break free of this confining space, better known as a car, and to walk around freely. Today wasn’t the usual four thirty to seven P.M. free time, but a national holiday—a whole day free. The man had invited me to drive with him up to a lake which lay on the border with the neighboring prefecture.

By now, I was utterly sick of driving. It wasn’t even the two hours I’d already been stuck in the car today, but after only a couple times driving around, the novelty was beginning to pall.

“How long have you been living in that apartment complex?” I asked.

“It’s been about ten years now.”

“Did you move there for your job?”

“Yeah, it used to take me about two hours by train and bus from my old place.”

“So now, twenty or thirty minutes by car must seem like heaven in comparison. But you said that you’d changed jobs, right?”

“Well, yeah . . .”

“And before . . . ?”

“I was a salaryman before too. But I wanted more holidays. I wanted a summer vacation.”

“So now you’re a teacher?”

“No.”

*How long was he planning to bait me like this?*

From the mountain road, we could see a group of white buildings high up on the summit of the hill.

“Ah, I heard several of the universities had moved their campuses up here. That one must be Q—University. It’s surprising because it doesn’t have the image of being so out in the sticks like this. When you hear the name Q—you picture a college in a seedy downtown area, don’t you? Oh, I hope you’re not a Q—graduate . . .” It should have been obvious that I was fishing.

“That’s okay. I’m not. I didn’t go anywhere as famous as that. I went to the kind of place where you only need to write your name and examinee ID number correctly to get in.”

“Do you mind stopping somewhere?” I asked him.

“But we’ll be in F—City soon.”

“Anywhere’ll do. I just need to pee.”

“Oh I see. Sorry, I’m a bit slow to catch on. My mother was always telling me I’m a bit of a doer, and, to be honest, I think so too.”

“Well, I’d certainly agree that you’re not the most considerate person I’ve ever met.” The physical and mental effort required to control my bladder was turning me belligerent.

“Even my wife tells me she doesn’t have to worry that another woman might fall for me, because I’m so clueless about women’s feelings,” he conceded.

He kept driving, all the way to downtown F—— City, and even then, I’m not sure if it was because he couldn’t find a parking spot or what, but we kept driving around and around the same few blocks. Whenever he spotted a parking space, it turned out to be privately leased, or a customer-only space belonging to some beauty salon.

“Look, we only need a parking space if we’re both getting out. If it’s only me, I can get out anywhere.”

“Oh, right, right. But what’ll you do all by yourself?”

“I’ll go into that café, order a Coke or something, and use the restroom.”

“Oh yeah, good idea.”

About another hour and a half’s drive from the café, we began to glimpse the water of the lake glimmering beyond the trees. I was hoping we could park the car and walk down to the lakeside, but he didn’t say anything. It was beginning to look as if making it down to the shore was too demanding a task for a self-proclaimed dolt. And being locked in this tiny automotive prison was becoming hellish for me. The car was moving, but I was immobile, constrained by my seatbelt. The man’s proposal to “show me the lake” had apparently meant no more than to furnish me with glimpses of water from the windows of his car.

Normally, the view from a window can be captured by words, in the same way we capture our thoughts and express our everyday, private thoughts through speech. Our words give expression to what we sense and feel, and gradually language itself becomes enjoyable, something playful. Through language, even that brief glimpse of lake water might sparkle like some magical landscape. But clearly there was no possibility of achieving such a moment here. Whenever I spoke, it was as if my words were sucked down into quicksand and disappeared. This man was a linguistic desert.

“So is this the first time you’ve been here?” As always, I initiated the conversation.

“I’ve been once before.”

“This far?”

“A girl at work asked me to bring her here once, but we had nothing to talk about. On the way home she said she wanted to stop off somewhere, so we had a coffee and I took her home.”

“I bet she had something entirely different from a cup of coffee in mind,” I laughed.

“I didn’t realize that until much later. See, I’m a dolt.”

“She never asked you to take her anywhere again, did she?”

“After that one time she wouldn’t even drink a cup of tea with me.”

“Not surprising, really.”

“I’m such a dolt.”

“You’re not a dolt or awkward. I just don’t think you’ve got much nerve. You’re scared to leave yo

comfort zone—you know, try new things.”

“I’m a dolt. All the young women at work call me ‘Mr. Safe.’ They don’t take me seriously when I tell them I’m really a leech.”

“Even the seemingly dumbest of young women is blessed with razor-sharp intuition, so I’m guessing that you really are ‘Mr. Safe.’ That on your days off you do nothing but drive around in your car is a perfect proof. I’m no young woman so I don’t think you’re safe—I think you just like to play it safe. That first time when we ended up at the same table in the cafeteria at the cultural center and I sat at the seat opposite you, I asked you if you’d like some beer. Your response was something along the lines of ‘God forbid!’ And when I joked that it was only frogs that drank water with their meals, you used the excuse that your face always flushes red after half a glass. I don’t understand what’s wrong with flushing red anyway. Even if you’re not used to drinking beer with a meal, if a stranger offered you some and she’s eating at the same table as you, it doesn’t matter whether you actually drink it or not, it’s normal to let her pour you even just half a glass. And you know we had at least introduced ourselves by then. I assumed you preferred not to have anything to do with other people, but that’s not the case, is it? I thought you disliked that kind of forced ritual and were consciously refusing to participate. But it wasn’t really deliberate at all, was it?”

“I was shocked. No one had ever called me a frog before.”

“So you were offended?”

“But then I saw how it could be true.”

“I only said it as a joke. Has no one ever spoken so directly to you before?”

“No, not really.”

“And certainly not a woman, right?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Then as soon as you finished your meal, you stood up and marched right out. I was still drinking my beer, so I was left alone in there after everyone had finished. The other two pairs at our table were married couples so it was understandable that they’d got up and left together. But once you’d put down your chopsticks you didn’t waste any time getting out of there, did you? As a woman, I’d hoped that you’d be chivalrous enough to accompany me a little longer. If I’d been in your shoes and the person across from me had been the only one still eating, I’d have sat a while sipping my tea. It wouldn’t have been for long. And it wasn’t as if we hadn’t already introduced ourselves. I don’t think what you did was because you were a dolt, as you like to call it. What you did to that girl who came up here to see the lake and suggested you stop off on the way back, that was the same thing. Wasn’t it?”

“No, I really am a dolt.”

“We came all this way up into the mountains to see a lake, so I had wished we could walk down to the edge of the water. But it turns out I enjoyed seeing just a glimpse of that sparkling water. If you hadn’t brought me here today, I might have lived my whole life without a glimpse of that lake. Look, it’s getting late. Your wife will be expecting you home for dinner.”

“When I go out I never know when I’ll be back, so she just eats something early by herself.”

“Is that right? Then let’s stop off somewhere shall we? But I’m no young woman, so I’ll tell you straight—this doesn’t mean just a cup of coffee. I mean I want to go to a hotel.”

“Won’t your husband be worried?”

“The only person who needs to worry about whether my husband is worried is me. It’s none of your business.”

The car set off on a different route to the one we’d taken to get here. I guessed we were heading for the expressway where there was a concentration of love hotels. Evidently, even a dolt of a man knew where that sacred place lay. Outside it had turned to dusk. I’d been shut away inside this metal box for so long that I no longer felt human, I’d become a part of the machine. As one, we hurtled on towards different, as yet unknown, space.

“Your face was so cute. I looked at that cute face and it didn’t matter how intimidating you pretended to be.”

After that day, the man used to say this quite frequently. To him, my cute face was some sort of trophy. According to this man, either right before, or right after sex my face always “looked so cute.” My trophy cute face was concrete evidence to reassure him of my womanliness. He’d glimpsed beauty in my face (or imagined he’d glimpsed it) and by this he was able to classify me as a real woman. This had been a tremendous relief to him. Even if I said something deep, he was able to remember that I was still a woman. It was only then that the man’s nerves began to disappear, he started to unwind, and he was able to stop being overly polite. My cuteness also served to relieve him of one more source of anxiety, something that seemed to cause him a great deal of tension, discomfort, intimidation, and plain horror; namely, that I, the woman, was two years older than he. But in the end, thanks to my cute face the man was able to place me below himself, and feel completely at ease.

“Your face was so cute just then,” he’d announce every so often, in the manner of someone brandishing proof of something.

I wasn’t particularly surprised by this shift in the man’s attitude brought on by his discovery of my “cuteness.” It was something I’d expect from the kind of man who used expressions like “your husband’s understanding.”

I tried joking around, saying “I guess I usually have such a horrible face that it really hits you a few times I look cute,” but once he’d got hold of his trophy he wasn’t going to let go. For him, the business of repeating the phrase “cute face” didn’t lend itself to joking. Whether he’d glimpsed it for a brief moment, or whether it had been a brief illusion, my cute face had become a lucky charm. He carried it with him for good luck, and this meant that he was able to go out with me and even have sex without needing to engage me in conversation. Moreover, since uttering the magic phrase, he was no longer able to think of the two of us as a couple. Every time we got out of the car and walked side by side he’d say something like, “You’re just the right height. I always wanted to marry someone of about your height.”

I’m a little under five feet four inches tall, or about average. The man meant that my height was in perfect proportion to his own. He kept on telling me, “I always wanted to marry someone over five feet three inches but I ended up with someone not even five feet.” When I asked him teasingly what he’d do if I were over six feet tall, he replied that there were no such women in existence. In the man’s hierarchy of height, a woman under five feet was unsuitable from the point of view of balance. His sizeist attitude was exactly the same as that of young women set on bagging a marriage partner over five feet eight inches. Personally, I hadn’t grown to the height of five feet four inches just to create pleasing proportions when walking side by side with this man. It just happened that while I was sleeping, somewhere between my birth and the age of fifteen or sixteen, I reached this height all by

myself. Then at around the age of fifteen or sixteen, I was used as a “tall girl,” useful only for standing at a volleyball net, blocking opponents’ shots or shooting my own team’s ball into the enemy zone.

At least now there was some relief from the boredom. Thanks to my cute face, something of the man’s personal side was beginning to emerge. As there was no point in trying to converse with the man in words, I now sought to discover this personal side through the language of sex.

To be honest, this wasn’t the sequence of events that I would have preferred. If I’d actually been able to communicate with him through regular conversation, if that had been enjoyable enough, I don’t know whether I’d have pursued sex or not. But my words had been rejected, and none were offered in return. With a person who cannot handle verbal communication, the only way to reach them is through sex.

Come to think of it though, it might have been the opposite way around. Maybe I did imagine having sex with him the minute I saw him, and if conversation wasn’t what I was after, perhaps the tedium that I’d been feeling wasn’t surprising after all . . . But still, no one could have expected such an utter lack of communication. Surely a forty-two-year-old man and a forty-four-year-old woman, each of whom has already experienced a marriage, shouldn’t be like the young people of nowadays who communicate solely with *Seriously?* and *No Way!* and *Cuuute!* I thought we would have had loads to talk about. I also thought that at forty-two and forty-four, we were of the same generation—an age difference of two years was immaterial to me. There can be great enjoyment derived from just talking without being distracted by the fact that we were a man and a woman. For these reasons, I had thought I could get to know this man. My plans were certainly not for a romantic relationship. I had thought that he felt the same way.

But in reality, he was obsessed with the fact that he had never gone out with an older woman before. I have no idea where it came from, but all his specifications for the right, the appropriate woman to go out with, these kinds of things seemed to be so ingrained with him that any woman who didn’t fit these specifications made him uncomfortable. I learned that being younger than him was the most important stipulation, and being about eight inches shorter was requirement number two. He kept repeating, “You look so young!” which I soon realized was his way of tailoring me to the correct specifications, and necessary to his peace of mind.

Sex is one form of communication between a man and a woman (but of course, that is not its only purpose). For me, sex has often been the natural conclusion to an enjoyable conversation. There have been times when I’ve been completely satisfied by conversation alone, and others when I’ve wanted verbal communication to shift or evolve into sexual communication. But with this forty-two-year-old man, neither of these fit the case. There was no verbal communication, so right away I was forced to take a shot at sex.

Later that evening we were lying in a love-hotel bed.

“Are you going away anywhere this summer?”

“We’re planning a trip to Hokkaido.”

“That sounds fun. I’ve never been to Hokkaido in the summer.”

“It’s a package tour. It’s just for my wife.”

“If you’re just traveling within Japan, don’t you think it’d be more interesting to go by yourselves?”

“It’s such a pain to make plans. A package tour is much easier.”

“And cheap too, I suppose.”

“Right.”

I guessed it must have been the cost. If only he could have told me frankly how expensive trips could be if they weren’t done as a package. If he’d just talked about the vacations he’d taken in the past—how they were expensive but how the hotel or the food didn’t live up to expectations. Simply to say that for a salaryman like him it wasn’t possible to take a really interesting vacation, then we would have had enough to get a discussion going.

I looked up and saw the naked bodies of a man and woman “post-communication” reflected in the ceiling mirror. I could see the man’s heavy trunk, fleshy buttocks, and sturdy legs. All of his extra chunk was untuned by any physical work or exercise. He looked larger than with his clothes on. There was the slightest narrowing between his chest and waist, but before you got down to the buttocks, it started spreading again. If you opened your hand as wide as it would go, and grabbed as much as you could, there would still be flesh to spare.

“Look at this flab!” I grinned, watching myself grab hold.

“I used to be thin,” he replied, but without an ounce of regret.

“What a chunk!”

I continued pinching his flesh and trying to get a rise out of him, but he couldn’t be bothered to stoop to me. I tried a different tack.

“You really are the kind of person who likes to play things safe,” I commented. “You had some reason for wanting to stay at this hotel in particular. I can’t believe you drove around the block there so many times. And you even waited for a parking space to open up. I’d have tried somewhere else right away.”

“I pass this place all the time on my way to and from work. I made up my mind that if I ever had the opportunity to go to a love hotel it had to be this one. It just looked nice.”

“You’re right, it’s not bad.”

“You see.”

“Even so, I’m surprised at how much business it’s doing.”

“Well, it’s Sunday.”

“That’s strange.”

“Why?”

“Well, everyone’s come all the way here by car for the exact same purpose. Why do they need to come all this way out into the middle of some rice field? I wonder what kind of person does that? Not that we’re ones to talk, of course.”

I guessed that he’d been here once, twice, maybe many times before, and that the familiarity of the place made him feel safe. It didn’t matter if he had to wait almost an hour for a room to open up—

had to be this place. No matter that there were numerous similar facilities in the vicinity, for this man it was safety first. For his own sense of security, it was quite normal to stop the car at the side of the road and lie in wait for the neon sign on the opposite side of the street to flash to *vacancies*. The moment he finally parked, he climbed out of his car as if he were in his garage at home, casually opened the door to the room and slipped inside. (I hadn't even realized that we wouldn't need a key—that it would be left unlocked for us.) He immediately removed his glasses and took off all his clothes, as if it were a second nature. Then he calmly went off to the shower. It was as if ten years of marriage had given him the confidence that in this case he knew all the correct language. There was no trace of the incompetence he showed in verbal communication. He had the air of a normal, run-of-the-mill forty-two-year-old man. There was nothing of the dolt about him at all.

Every second or third day the man would invite me to spend his four thirty to seven P.M. free time with him. A short distance from my house there was an empty lot overrun with grass and weeds. It was right at the end of a narrow street that ran to a dead end, and consequently was used as a free-of-charge parking lot by the local residents. The man would carefully squeeze his car in between all the haphazardly parked cars and wait for me to arrive. He would always call me thirty minutes before so that I knew he was coming. I worked out that he must call right as he left work. If I couldn't make it that day for some reason, I just had to tell him when he called. Those times, we might agree to meet the next day or the day after that.

One day, about five minutes before the agreed meeting time, I was just getting my shoes on when he rang to cancel. The fact that he sounded for all the world like an unctuous businessman with his choice of, "I'm terribly sorry, but would it be at all possible to reschedule our appointment?" alerted me to the fact that there was probably someone else in earshot. The next time he saw me he explained that he'd been asked to run an errand.

"Don't tell me, I'm guessing that wasn't an order or request from your boss. You probably just volunteered for it. *Oh, that's right on my way home. I'll go!* or something, right? You were probably trying to impress somebody. That's why you canceled on me five minutes before we were going to meet. Some supervisor's wife had asked him to drop something off at her parents' place or something. The guy was probably griping about it to you in private, without thinking, and you fell over yourself to offer to take care of it for him. In other words, you made your boss's personal business more important than your own personal business. The rub is I doubt your boss is going to give you any special thanks for doing it. All that brownnosing never pays off, you know."

"You're right. But how come you got all that?"

"Because you're the kind of guy who's nice to everybody. You're like some kind of good-natured country-western singer. You smile at everybody. If there's a car coming toward you on a narrow street you always stop and wave them through. If we stop at a newsstand to ask the way, you've always got that goofy grin on your face and you're annoyingly polite. It's the same when you pay at the love hotel. You go out of your way to be courteous at a place where most people are trying to be anonymous. The woman at the desk even calls after you to take care. You've got the universal seal of approval from the whole world as a friendly, courteous, wholesome, grinning crooner."

"I guess so."

"So you have a special charm that you put on for strangers?"

"I'm the same at home."

In the end, he never apologized for canceling so suddenly.

"My wife and I, we're always back to back," he said one time, out of the blue.

"What do you mean?"

“We sleep back to back all night.”

“Oh, really?”

“She doesn’t ever seem to be in the mood.”

“Oh, really?”

“And if she’s not in the mood, then it isn’t much fun, you know, *doing it*.”

“I guess not.”

I assumed that he was trying to make conversation with me by telling me that he didn’t have any the other kind of conversation with his wife. But this had nothing to do with me and I had absolute no interest in the topic. I had no desire to hear about his domestic sleeping arrangements. I wasn’t interested in hearing about this man’s wife, and was indifferent to his status as “somebody’s husband.” I was concerned only with the man himself. If he had had children, I wouldn’t be interested in him as the father of these children either.

“I don’t imagine you’ve ever been like that,” he added.

“Me? Been like what?”

“My wife’s always been kind of frigid. Even when she was young. No one could ever call you that.”

“What do you mean by frigid?”

I mean, I understood that he meant his wife was unresponsive sexually, but just like “your husband’s understanding,” it was a phrase that had been tossed around so much that it had worn horribly thin. I couldn’t understand why a person whose sex drive was not particularly high had to be labeled “frigid.” I interpreted his meaning as “My own wife has never particularly liked sex, but from what I’ve seen of you while we’ve been having sex, you seem to enjoy it.” I noticed that for a man who never really talked, once we got onto the subject of sex, he was gladly offering up generous slices of his personal life.

“I know what you’re doing these days, but what did you use to do between four thirty and seven the evening?” I asked. “You certainly weren’t at the supermarket buying your groceries.”

“I told you, I’d drive around by myself, or just go home and lie on the sofa watching TV.”

“So this is a big change for you.”

“It is. But if your husband found out, he’d kill me. Doing this with someone’s wife.”

“So, you’re sleeping with someone’s wife are you? Hey, I’m my own person. I’m not meeting you as ‘someone’s wife.’ And for that matter, I’m not thinking of you as ‘some woman’s husband’ either.”

In the corner of the hotel room stood a minifridge. The air conditioning was freezing cold. It was probably perfectly adjusted to suit someone engaged in strenuous exercise. I wasn’t sure that air could get into this sealed, windowless room. Light bulbs on the walls gave off a bizarre orange glow. The ceiling arched up like the bottom of a boat and was covered with mirrors. *Why mirrors?* I wondered. I supposed it was so you could see your reflections and get turned on even more. You could enjoy the great honor of observing yourselves. It might also work as a device for budding actors to turn the secret room into their personal stage. The actors then become their own audience. Only human beings could come up with such a lonely invention.

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