

**MIEKO
KAWAKAMI**

**ALL THE
LOVERS
IN THE
NIGHT**

A NOVEL



Europa
editions

ALSO BY
MIEKO KAWAKAMI

Breasts and Eggs
Heaven

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First publication 2022 by Europa Editions

Translation by Sam Bett and David Boyd
Original Title: *Subete mayonaka no koibitotachi*
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Book design by Emanuele Ragnisco
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ISBN 9781609457006

Mieko Kawakami

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*Translated from the Japanese
by Sam Bett and David Boyd*



**ALL THE LOVERS
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Why does the night have to be so beautiful?

As I walk through the night, I remember what Mitsutsuka said to me. “Because at night, only half the world remains.” I count the lights. All the lights of the night. The red light at the intersection, trembling as if wet, even though it isn’t raining. Streetlight after streetlight. Taillights trailing off into the distance. The soft glow from the windows. Phones in the hands of people just arriving home, and people just about to go somewhere. Why is the night so beautiful? Why does it shine the way it does? Why is the night made up entirely of light?

The music flows from the earphones filling my ears, filling me—it becomes everything. A lullaby. A gorgeous piano lullaby. What a wonderful piece of music. It really is. It’s my favorite piece by Chopin. Did you like it too, Fuyuko? Yeah. It’s like the night is breathing. Like the sound of melted light.

The light at night is special because the overwhelming light of day has left us, and the remaining half draws on everything it has to keep the world around us bright.

You’re right, Mitsutsuka. It isn’t anything, but it’s so beautiful that I could cry.

Did you get the boxes?”

When Hijiri Ishikawa called, I'd just finished my work for the morning and was filling a pot with water to make a little spaghetti for lunch.

“Yeah, last night. But I haven't opened them yet.”

Once I had the pot on the burner, I switched the phone from between my chin and shoulder into my left hand, went back into the other room and crouched down in front of the two cardboard boxes that had come the night before, then gave one of them a little push. It didn't budge.

“No rush. There's a lot in there. You've got tons of time before the deadline, but it's still a lot.”

“Don't worry,” I said. “I'm used to it now.”

“You think?” Hijiri teased. “Sometimes you can be okay with something, then the next day comes and it's a totally different story.”

“Yeah, I know, but I feel like I've got this under control,” I laughed. “Maybe because I haven't opened anything yet.”

“Why do they always have to use so many sources? Can't these people write anything on their own? I guess they're all like that, but this one's practically all quotes, right? The author probably wrote less than half the book.”

On the other end of the line, I heard Hijiri laughing through her nose. “I had a hard time just getting everything to the front desk. I was honestly worried that they might not give me workers' comp if I threw my back out.”

“But we got lucky,” I said. “I can't believe that all the books we needed were available from the same place. It's like a dream.”

Hijiri laughed.

“You're right about that,” she said. “By the way, I took the liberty of looking over the first proofs.”

I poured a warmed-up packet of meat sauce over the spaghetti and ate my lunch. When I was done, I pulled my bangs back with a headband, took my pencil in my right hand, and set up my makeshift bookrest (a

large drawing board that I bought at an art store in Shinjuku and kept propped up at an angle on my long-neglected Greek dictionary and vocabulary book, and told myself would be a temporary solution until I got a proper bookrest, though four years had gone by in the meantime), sliding it up against my stomach as always to make sure it stayed put, then stared at the pages before me, working my way through the manuscript, questioning one element of text after another.

When I got tired, I'd do some stretches, alternating between rotating my neck and arms, then go into the kitchen and make myself a hot cup of tea, letting it cool as I sipped it slowly.

I felt as if I could sit there and work at my desk as long as necessary, but I knew that unless I took regular breaks here and there I'd start to overlook things when I least expected it, so I made sure to take a break every two hours. Once I'd relaxed for a good moment, I went back to my desk and repeated the same process, again and again.

As I worked my way through, I used the reference table that I kept to the left of the manuscript, which summarized the interpersonal relationships, timeline, and plot at a glance, checking for inconsistency with what the characters in the novel were actually saying in the relentless stream of dialogue. This novel in particular, which I had started reading two days earlier, had introduced so many people over a number of years, too many names to count. Since the story took place in a large mansion, I also had a sheet with the floorplan on it.

The name of the corset. Whether or not plumerias have white flowers. Is Charles Dickens *really* Charles Dickens?

Using my dictionaries and the internet to double-check proper nouns and historical facts, I would go over the text multiple times, just to make sure, whenever something tripped me up, even a little. Along the way, I found various kinds of spelling errors, making corrections with my pencil and flagging each one with a question mark.

There were always lines that defied comprehension. When I found myself stumped as to whether something like this was intentional, or maybe some quirk of the author's, I emailed Hijiri and asked her for advice. When we couldn't solve it between the two of us, I left a note for the author in tiny script, asking for clarification.

Three years ago, at the end of April, I quit the company that I had started working for just after graduating college.

It was a little publisher that nobody had ever heard of, where they produced books that made you wonder who would ever read them. The only thing that they had going for them was their name.

The specifics of any job in publishing will vary slightly, depending on the scope and personality of the company, but on a basic level, it's all about making and selling books. One of the various jobs required to make that happen involves reading and re-reading the many sentences that ultimately make up a book, searching for any typos and linguistic or factual errors—in other words, proofreading. That was what I did for this small company. I was a proofreader, spending every moment of my day, from morning to night, hunting for mistakes.

Although I'd quit only after thinking things over from all possible angles, I'm still not sure why I felt like I had to leave. I feel sort of stupid saying I was tired of dealing with people, but when it comes down to it, I guess there's no other way to put it.

From a young age, I couldn't bring myself to contribute to conversations like a normal person, much less socialize or go out with people, and I was never able to acclimate to the particular atmosphere of that little office. At first, my coworkers invited me out for dinner or drinks, but I always declined, offering a string of vague excuses, and at some point they stopped asking. Before I knew it, I'd been left entirely alone. No one ever spoke to me unless they needed something, and when candy or cookies showed up during the workday, the box always went right past me and moved along to the next desk. It would have been one thing if the others had literally left me alone, but their indifference, over time, showed hints of bitterness, which became apparent in their silence and their looks, to the point where going to work became difficult to bear.

Once I was spending all of my time alone, not talking to anyone, I started to hear people whispering about me at odd moments in the day. A few of my coworkers even used a secret language that they thought I didn't understand to talk about me right in front of me, making jokes at my expense. Once this had become normal, they started asking me all kinds of nosy questions that had nothing to do with work. Aren't you going to get married? Why not? What do you do on your days off? I said that I stayed home. They laughed, practically snorting. What'll you do with all the money that you're saving? This kept going, one question on top of another. If I was silent, unsure of what I was supposed to say, the

girls seated nearby would prick their ears up, careful not to look away from their computer screens and trying to keep their lips sealed as they laughed without making a sound.

Most of the questions came from a woman in her fifties, as if she were the leader of the group. She was the sort of person whose manner of speaking conveyed an immense pride in having built a family along with her career, raising two wonderful children. I had been seated next to her since my first day at the company (and if I hadn't quit, I'm sure this never would have changed until the day that she retired). None too shy about speaking her mind, she waited for those moments when it was just the two of us. Apparently offended by what she saw in me as the self-absorption of a single woman who did nothing with her life but work, she reminded me at length, sighing periodically, of how much effort it required her to keep her life afloat, and how easy things were for people like me. When the other girls were around, she never said anything of the sort, but picked on me instead, to win their favor.

The more I worked in silence, and the longer I stayed at the company, the worse it felt to be there. One day, I overheard two of the new girls, who were almost ten years younger than I was, saying I was only playing nice because I had nowhere else to go, that I must be allergic to fun—as if I was to blame for never turning down a job or ever being late for a deadline. This made me so confused. What kind of fun was I supposed to be having? If somebody asked me to do a job, and I didn't want to do it, what was the right way to turn them down? If I thought about things long enough, I would always lose track of my own feelings, which left me with no choice but to proceed as usual, without taking any action. Maybe the girls were right about me having no place else to go, about there being nothing fun about my life.

That was when I got a call from Kyoko.

“The person they've been using ended up quitting, and they're looking for someone who can step in right away.”

I hadn't seen Kyoko in years, and this was definitely the first time she'd ever called me, so at first I had no idea what was going on. However, since she insisted that there was something urgent that she wanted to discuss, I agreed to meet up with her to talk that weekend.

Kyoko was an editor who had worked for ages at the company, but she quit a few years after I started in order to go into business for herself.

She described her work as editorial production.

“I started picking up a lot of work on the side, and now I have a team of people working for me. We do photography, editing, design work, writing projects. I don’t even know what kind of business I’m running anymore.”

She opened her mouth wide and laughed. It was a sort of conspicuous laugh that I remembered well. Then there was the funny way she said my last name—Irie—that made me feel a bit nostalgic.

Kyoko had gained so much weight that I failed to recognize her when she walked into the cafe, but the supple skin of her perfectly made-up face gave me the feeling that she looked much younger than the last time we had met. When I started at the company, I was twenty-two, and I’m pretty sure that she was thirty-two, which would make her just over forty. Not that she didn’t have her fair share of wrinkles, normal for her age, but all the same, she had a certain liveliness about her.

Rolling up the sleeves of the thin black sweater she wore over a soft-looking white blouse, Kyoko looked right at me and said that it was turning out to be a hot one. Unable to respond while looking her in the eye, I let my gaze fall to where her chin met the skin of her neck, nodding at intervals as I listened to what she had to say.

“I don’t know what things are like over there now, but do you have any room for some work on the side?”

A major publisher that Kyoko had been working with was looking for someone who could proofread on a freelance basis, which made her think of me, she said. As it so happened, we had only had lunch together once, with a few other people from the company, but had never shared anything close to a conversation, just the two of us. We may have worked in the same office, but I barely ever spoke with anybody there, just quietly went about doing my job, and certainly had no connection with her. So I was less happy than mystified, maybe even a little uneasy, to hear that her thoughts had turned to me after all these years.

“I could run it through my company, but I’m a little hesitant to make my team any bigger. Anyway, they’re looking for somebody who has experience.”

As she spoke, Kyoko played with a thick silver ring on her index finger. Her skin bulged above the ring’s circumference. Looking at her hand, I took a sip of my black tea, then closed my lips and nodded a few times. The tea was lukewarm, with a bitter, powdery taste.

“I know you’ve got plenty on your plate at the office, and I don’t mean to push, but this is a big company. You wouldn’t have to worry about the work being sporadic. Plus, they’re really flexible. Think of it as a part-time job. If you could carve out just a little time . . .”

I replayed the last words Kyoko said inside my head. *Carve out just a little time.* After I had started at the company and grown accustomed to my work, I stopped watching TV, unable to endure the frustration of not being able to correct the errors I found in the text appearing on the bottom of the screen. I didn’t usually read books or listen to music. I had no friends to go out to eat with or to chat with for hours over the phone. Other than in extreme circumstances, I never brought work home, and was able to take care of all of my responsibilities, research included, during working hours. At the latest, I was always home by eight, in time to fix myself a simple dinner, after which I had nothing else to do.

How did I pass the stretch of several hours that came night after night before I went to sleep? And how did I fill the vast expanse of time before starting my workday?

My memory was blank. All I could remember were the countless characters of text, printed in straight lines on white paper.

“That sounds nice to me,” I said, after a pause.

When Kyoko heard me, she opened her eyes wide. Every inch of her face was smiling.

“That’s great!”

I nodded and looked down at the floral pattern on my empty teacup.

“I’m so glad it’ll work out,” she said. “If anything comes up, don’t hesitate to let me know, no matter when or what it is.”

Grabbing a notebook from her bright orange leather bag, she asked me for my address and my email, which she wrote down swiftly with a thin silver pen.

“You should hear from them pretty soon. Thanks so much! It’s a big help. I owe you one. I’ll be in touch soon, okay?”

Kyoko drank the rest of her coffee and suggested we get going, so we got up and left the cafe. I tried paying for my share, but Kyoko said stop and smiled in a way that made her look a little worried. I apologized and bowed, returning my wallet to the tote bag slung over my shoulder. Ahead of me by then, she turned to say that she was glad that I was doing well and matched my pace for a few steps, then hailed a cab. Before she closed the door, she wished me luck and told me to give her a call if

anything came up.

Hijiri Ishikawa worked at the publisher that Kyoko had introduced me to, in the proofreading department at their giant office.

She did her share of proofreading as well, but she mostly acted as liaison for the freelance proofreaders and the people involved in external production, responsible for sending galleys, manuscripts and files.

As far as the job was concerned, we could have taken care of everything via email, courier, and the occasional phone call, but a few months after we made it through our first winter together, Hijiri started calling me up all the time, whenever she had something to ask, or even when she didn't, just to see how things were coming along.

I met Hijiri soon after starting the side job that Kyoko had arranged for me. We were at a party just after New Year's that the company had put together to give the in-house proofreaders and the freelancers a chance to mingle, introduce themselves and get to know each other better. After gazing at the invitation that Kyoko had forwarded to me, I spent at least three days debating whether I should go before deciding to make an appearance.

Hijiri's hair, cut short enough that you could see her ears, was dyed a pretty shade of brown. Her makeup was absolutely perfect. I'd never seen such a meticulously made-up face that closely before, and not in a magazine or on a poster or on TV, but in person. A unique aura surrounded her, something like a special layer of light that gave her a brightness greater than the space around her.

I got the sense that Hijiri was always straight with people, no matter whom she was talking to. Around the end of the event, she got into an argument with the male editor sitting next to her, over some tiny little thing, but in the end she shut him up entirely. From two seats away, I witnessed the entirety of the exchange. I remember feeling an excitement I was unable to understand, something about the way she unleashed provocative expressions so effectively, the confidence of her delivery and the way she made her point, how she maintained composure, in those moments where the man raised his voice defensively, as she looked around and smiled. Quick off the mark, she was able to suss out the mood of any situation, adding a smart joke here and there to make people laugh. It only took me a couple of hours to

realize that she was a woman of talents beyond anything I could imagine—even though I was a stranger to such talents myself.

Hijiri and I were the same age, and we were both from Nagano, though from different parts of the prefecture. Aside from these two points and our gender, I couldn't find anything else we had in common, but for some reason she was very kind to me.

Not long after that January party, Hijiri and I began communicating regularly about the details of the work at hand. Sometimes I had to meet with her in person, to turn in a manuscript or confirm some detail, which always made me really nervous, but Hijiri didn't take my anxious feelings seriously, which actually helped me loosen up a bit. Little by little, I warmed up to talking about things unrelated to work. Most of the time, I was simply listening to Hijiri talk, but she insisted that I was fun to be around and laughed to show me that she really meant it, too. When I asked what part of me she thought was fun, she would simply say, "Part? Everything about you," then laugh again with delight, not giving me a real answer. I was never sure how to respond to this, so I'd say nothing and look down. But then Hijiri would tell me, "Don't worry. When I say you're fun, I'm talking about how I feel. I'm just saying that I enjoy your company. There's nothing to get upset about, even if it doesn't make sense to you," and give me a warm smile. I never talked that much compared to Hijiri, but now and then I'd lose track of the time and realize I was having fun as well, quietly surprised that I was capable of such a thing.

About a year after we had started meeting up for work, after one of our in-person sessions, Hijiri asked me how things were going at my day job.

I did my best to tell her, in a roundabout way, how I found the work itself worthwhile, how I knew it was the right kind of work for me, but that the company wasn't the best environment. When I was finished with my roundabout response, Hijiri looked me in the eye and just said, "Is that right?" For a little while, we were both quiet. Her expression made it look like she was thinking about something. The fact that she wasn't saying anything made me worry that she thought I was complaining. Her question had been purely about work—as in the manuscripts I was working on right now, or what was in the offing, but I'd started venting about the company environment, which had nothing to do with her

question and was certainly none of her concern. I panicked, fearful that I had disappointed her, or had even offended her. But I had no idea how to convey this hadn't been my intention. I lacked the confidence to speak well. I was certain that I had said too much already; I kept silent, unsure what I should do, but then Hijiri spoke up and said that maybe I should consider going freelance entirely.

"I know it's freelance, but it's not bad . . . I don't know the details of your current situation, in terms of pay, or health insurance, but I'm sure that someone who works as hard as you could handle four books a month and make yourself 300,000 yen. There'd be highs and lows, of course, but I think you could expect somewhere around there every month." Hijiri looked me in the eye. "It all depends how hard you work, I suppose."

When I realized that I hadn't actually hurt Hijiri's feelings, I was so relieved I could have sighed out loud, but there was more going on. Freelance, 300,000 a month, highs and lows, not to mention her evaluation of me as a hard worker. Some of the words that came out of her mouth left me confused, unable to speak.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

While she tried to get a read on me, I nodded several times and replayed what she had said inside my head. Going freelance as a proofreader . . . Hijiri had told me to consider it. This would mean quitting the company and spending all of my time on the work that I was currently doing on the side. I wouldn't have to go to an office anymore, but I could continue with my current work, at my own pace, in my own way—that was what Hijiri was proposing.

From now on, I could work from home, making my living as a freelance proofreader. I tried saying this several times inside my head. Up until that point, I don't think I'd ever once considered quitting the company, much less doing this work independently, but now that it had been put into words, words that I then whispered again in my own head, the possibility had somehow taken on a terribly realistic weight and resonance, to the point where I began to feel as if this were my only choice, that it had always been my only choice, a happy turn of events that made me feel like I could blush.

I thought about the office. The way things felt there. I asked myself what was so special about the place, aside from it being somewhere I could go to every day. Thin cardboard boxes of sweets, visibly displayed on the shelving unit to my left. Someone else's mug. A whiteboard that

had basically turned gray. Computer screens. The sharp pain building in my temples. The quiet hours exchanging words with no one, like a dark dream that never seemed to end. The shapes of the eyes of my coworkers. The clacking of the keyboards. In the midst of all these images, a brilliant white manuscript appeared, packed with freshly printed text just waiting to be read by me, and giving off a certain warmth, but when I blinked its incandescent texture slipped into the reaches of a silence that I knew too well.

My annual salary was 3,200,000.

As nice as it was to collect a salary for finishing whatever work was given to me, it was like Hijiri had said. I was finally coming around to the idea that it was not entirely impossible for me to make a living as a freelancer—provided, that is, I was regularly given work. It had been about a year since I had started working on the side, and the number of manuscripts sent my way, as well as payment for my services, was fairly steady, but working in the privacy of my own home, just me and the manuscripts, slowly going over every word and every sentence, filled me with a satisfaction that was altogether different from doing the same work at the office.

“That would be incredible, if it worked out,” I said, like I was talking to myself. I laughed a little. I didn’t mean to, but unsure what kind of face I should be making, I started laughing, in an odd way that betrayed the fact that I was used to living my life in a daze, without giving anything much thought. Dark waves rolled through my chest, and I wiped my fingertips over and over with the oshibori on the table.

“We actually work with lots of freelance proofreaders,” Hijiri said cheerfully. “Some of them have been at it more than twenty years.”

“Twenty years?” I said.

“Yeah, twenty.”

“. . . But there’d be no, um, guarantee . . . I would have work to do every month . . . ?”

I worried about what Hijiri thought of me for asking this, but I had to ask. Dismissing my concerns, she made a serious face and fixed her gaze on me.

“That’s a really, really important question,” she said, nodding forcefully. “Think of it this way: like every other publisher, there’s no month when we’re not making books. I can’t promise everything will go as planned, but the editorial director thinks very highly of your work,

and he's always saying it'd be great if you could take on more. Seriously. So if you were to go freelance, and you could handle more galleys, it would be a massive help to us. That's the honest truth."

"Really?" I looked at Hijiri, a little perplexed.

"Really," she said a bit louder than necessary, as if to drive away my fears.

"Really?" I asked again, then let out a sigh. My entire face relaxed, and this time I was able to laugh normally.

"I love having people I can trust doing the work," Hijiri said, after a pause.

"Trust?"

"Yeah, trust," Hijiri said with a smile. "It's not the same as relying on someone. It's really different, actually. I mean, I guess it's all about both parties counting on each other."

I nodded.

"It's like they say, trust is a two-way street. Reliance can be one-sided, though. Know what I mean? One side depends on the other. That's not a partnership. And that's why relationships based on reliance are pretty unstable. One little hiccup and everything could disappear."

"Yeah."

"So what good is reliance when everything could fall apart because of some little bump or a change in the wind? That's not how trust works, though, at least not for me. With trust, I'm always giving something back for what I get. There's a balance."

As she spoke, Hijiri scratched the back of her ear.

"And once I trust somebody, that trust never fades."

I nodded quietly, listening to Hijiri.

"That's how it is. And for me, trust doesn't come from liking someone, or loving them. It has to come from how that person approaches their work."

"How they approach their work?" I asked.

"Exactly. That's the key. You can learn so much about a person from how they approach their work. Well, that's how I see it."

"You mean, how serious they are . . . that sort of thing?" I asked.

"Maybe," Hijiri said. For a few moments she stared up at the ceiling, like she was thinking, then nodded several times. "Maybe that's the simplest way to put it. And the type of work doesn't even matter. It could be housework, or working the register at a supermarket, or day trading,

or physical labor, anything at all. And just like the content of the work doesn't matter, neither do the results. The thing about results—whether or not something turns out well—is that it's mostly about luck. Things like that can change. You can make people believe whatever you want. You can fool them like it's nothing. But you can't fool yourself, not really. That's why what matters is how you think about your work in your own lifetime, how much you respect it, how hard you're trying. Or tried. The people I trust are the ones who give work their all—I know it's a stupidly old-fashioned way to put it, but that's how I see it.”

“So . . .” I said, then nodded a few times. “. . . How do you figure that out?”

“If I spend a little time with someone, talk, and look over their work, I can tell right away,” Hijiri said with a grin.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” She raised the corners of her lips, a look that underscored how obvious this was to her. “And those are the people for me—the only ones that I like.” She was still grinning. “I guess I trust that feeling, whatever makes me like them. Though I don't know if it's really about like or love—I've never given much thought to love . . . But what ultimately lasts is something that can't simply change or disappear at any moment . . . It's trust.”

Having said this, Hijiri looked deep into my eyes.

“Anyway, I trust you.”

“Me?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, you.”

Seeing me surprised, Hijiri opened her eyes wide, laughed, and asked what I was so surprised about. I didn't know where to look, so I looked down, unable to look her in the face for some time.

“I trust the way you approach your work,” she said. “And that means that I trust you . . . Sorry if that's a little confusing. But for me, no standard matters more.” Hijiri smiled and shrugged. I looked at her and told her thank you in a quiet voice.

“. . . You know how in our line of work,” she said, “no matter what you do, no matter how hard you look, some mistakes always make it through? I mean, even if multiple people go over the same galley multiple times, for days on end, to the point where they can't read it anymore, no matter how much work everyone puts into it, no book is ever free of errors, right?”

“Right,” I said. And that was the truth.

“You’ll always, always find some kind of a mistake.”

“Yeah.”

“And if that’s true, that means that there has never been a perfect book, and that no job can ever actually be finished. When a book comes out, a year can pass without any mistakes coming to light, but years later, you open it up and there it is: a misprint staring right back at you. It happens all the time, but every time, it’s the worst feeling in the world, right? It’s devastating, you’ve been completely and utterly abandoned.”

“Absolutely.”

“Like, do you know how hard I worked on that thing? It’s literally the worst feeling in the world.”

Hijiri said this like she really meant it.

“Yeah,” I said. “Absolutely.” And I really meant it too.

“Even though all of our experience tells us that there’s no such thing as a book with zero mistakes, we still aim for that perfect book, don’t we? A perfect book with no errors at all. And maybe it’s a battle that we’re bound to lose before we even start, but it’s not like we have any other choice, right?”

I nodded.

“I know we can’t make something out of nothing,” Hijiri said, “but the work we’re doing is still really important. I don’t claim to know anything about literature, or fiction, or criticism, but I’m proud of what I do . . . I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s something to the work we do. Something that really matters. And I get the sense you feel the same.”

Hijiri sat there motionless, lips taut, like she was thinking about something.

“That’s what I live for,” Hijiri said. “It’s everything.”

For a minute, we sat there drinking our drinks. When a group of older ladies seated nearby burst out laughing, we both jumped in our seats, then caught each other smiling.

“I’ll find a way to bring it up with the managing editor. For now, I’ll just say you’re exploring the idea of going freelance. I’ll see if I can get a read on the situation. But I’m serious, okay? It’d mean a lot to us, if you were able to focus on our books like that. I know I’ve said it before, but we really talk about it all the time.”

Hijiri looked at her wristwatch and said that she had to get going. The phone, handkerchief, and notepad that she had unpacked on the table

now went back into her bag. Taking the receipt between her fingertips, she told me she would contact me when we were closer to the deadline, then waved her free hand and went outside.

So I decided to quit the company and become a freelance proofreader. My bosses told me that it was the worst possible time for me to leave. I almost backed down a few times, but there were no contractual impediments, and I was at a decent stopping point with the work that I was doing. Although I didn't give them a clear reason for leaving, over the course of several conversations, I finally managed to make it clear that I was done.

After I cleaned out my desk, filled out the necessary paperwork, said goodbye to the people I needed to say goodbye to, walked downstairs, and left the building, the strength drained from my shoulders, and the world practically tipped sideways. Setting my two paper bags onto the ground, I took a moment to stretch my back and exhaled deeply, then inhaled so deeply that my chest hurt. Once I repeated this a few times, a freshness I was sure I'd never known before spread slowly through my lungs, and I was filled with an awareness of the soft places inside me, spreading outward by degrees. It felt as if the flow of cars, no different than ever, and the greenness of the streetside vegetation, and the air itself were all a little more lucid than usual.

But I was only able to walk within that vivid scenery for a little while. As the company where I'd spent no small amount of time slipped into the distance the feeling that I had done something I could never undo clung to my back and began to pull me down. With every step I took, a veil of darkness came down over all I saw.

Shouldn't I have tried harder to make it work? Had I lost touch with reality, riding high on encouragement from Hijiri? I know I could have done more, tried harder, made it work. Everybody in this life has something they have to put up with. An uneasiness laced with regret climbed its way up my throat, nothing that a voice or sigh could shake.