

# THE CRY OF MORNING GLORY

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## **THE CRY OF MORNING GLORY**

Though it was raining in a dewy rainy season, Aiko began to jog when she found a truck parked in front of the store. It was not that she herself would be late in particular if a truck that was scheduled to come at eight arrived five minutes earlier. There was no need to hurry, but she had expectation somewhere in her mind that it might be the truck Takita drove. She had her unbleached hemp skirt splashed with mud from her low pumps. She slackened her pace when she realized it, but her umbrella was shaken with somehow buoyant feeling. She may have always been like that not only for Takita but also on the attendance day after she took two days off in a row. She was a little bit excited at speaking to people.

Good morning, she said in a loud voice. A convenience store at this time zone had many male customers. Most of them bought cigarette and newspaper, weekly magazine, drink and bun. In the store a few people stood in a line at the two registers; there were other men in a suit and a working cloth; two female customers stood in the cosmetic corner. Of course they didn't response, and those who said 'Good morning' in response were only Satomi and Kondo, and the head of the store talking with a driver about the magazine corner. Though the driver also turned around with the voice of the head of the store, it was not Takita.

She changed to a blue uniform in a hurry and changed places with Kondo. As the manual, she repeated 'good morning' and 'thank you very much.' Meanwhile she pressed the age buttons on the register for customers and counted change. There was no distinction of sex for primary school kids, but she had to press buttons for junior high school, lower than thirty, higher than thirty, and higher than sixty by sex. She couldn't

smoothly judge the right age and press the right button in an instant half a year ago and was scolded by the head of the store some few times. 'Judge roughly. That's enough.' He said so, but it was particularly difficult to judge higher or lower than thirty, and she sometimes happened to look hard at customers' faces. But now she didn't much worry. It was because she herself was thirty now, but she made a point of pressing the button for higher than thirty when she hesitated over which to choose. She felt that even if it was to check on a hot-selling line of goods, it was too sketchy to lump thirty to fifty-nine together. But even so, she came to consider that it was an important boundary while she continued to make such distinction for half a year. It was strange, since she came to feel that she was over the boundary. If anything, such feeling might have had an effect on her to let down her guard and be taken in Takita's invitation. Aiko thought of it as she pressed the green button for male customers higher than thirty five times in a row.

She greeted customers coming in and out one after another as the manual and as usual, but the feeling that she wanted to speak to whoever he or she was had already disappeared. She felt that greeting that received no response was lonelier than staying alone in her room.

It was April that Takita who delivered goods at three in the afternoon called out to Aiko who just finished her work and got out of the store. His truck was parked in a gas station on her way back to her apartment by walk. He spoke to Aiko who happened to come along, 'Where are you going?' When she turned around, a cherry was in bloom behind the weather-beaten, firm smiling face of Takita. Aiko suddenly recalled the words cherry-blossom viewing, though she had no definite aim to go in mind.

'I want to see cheery.'

She was surprised at what she said in an instant, but Takita said with a carefree, smiley face.

'Have a ride? I am on duty, so I go around to some convenience stores, but cherry is blooming in places on my way.'

It was probably because she felt easy about such Takita's personal character that he usually made Satomi and Aiko laugh with cheerful jokes and naturally spoke to the head

of the store. Aiko felt as if she had gotten free of her routine work when she got into the high passenger's seat of the truck. When she got and had a can of coffee Takita bought from the gas station at ease, though she hadn't recently drunk any can of coffee these days for saving, she felt it strangely nostalgic and sweet.

Takita made a point to wait for Aiko at a vacant lot ahead of the gas station when he came at three in the afternoon, and moreover though it was limited to when Aiko was on the first shift, but not at eight in the morning and at two in the night. It was a drive to go around to convenience stores in the same route, but it became Aiko's will power to live. Aiko thought that soon she was going to allow her to enjoy pleasure she hadn't letting her to do for long years.

Up to the time of cherry, spring greenery and azalea, and recent sweet flag and pomegranate, and hydrangea, Aiko probably had had more than ten rides on the truck. But perhaps because Takita came irregularly, Aiko was not aware of what she aimed for and didn't think deeply about the relationship with Takita.

It was about the beginning of May. Takita sent Aiko to the vacant low where she got in his truck as usual and gave her seeds of morning glory at parting.

'These are likely the oldest and the same seeds as those bloomed in the Heian period.'

Though those black seeds he said he got from his friend were in a translucent film case, Takita said that since he couldn't grow them, he wanted Aiko to have them. 'What color are they?' Aiko asked as she was aware of Takita's warm and thick fingers she touched together with the case. 'He said they are beautiful blue.' Aiko had a feeling it had been a woman who said so, but she decided to have them.

Up to the next time she met him, Aiko asked permission and borrowed tools from the owner of her apartment, ploughed grassland behind the bathroom and planted the black seeds in there. She went to a fertilizer shop to buy oilcake and bone dust and put them in there. She thought she shouldn't till wide too much and turned over the soil as wide as two shovels and as long as about one meter, but a film-case full of the seeds were

quite dense. She gazed on the land turned deep color from her room on the second floor and watered them almost every day until the beginning of the rainy season.

Aiko didn't understand what change growing something that way brought about in her awareness. But in reality, because of it, Aiko friendly spoke to the owner of her apartment for the first time and borrowed the shovel from him for the first time, too, since she moved into the apartment two years ago. Two years had elapsed since she moved into this apartment, but she'd never gone to the northern side of the town where there was the fertilizer shop. A considerable effort was rather required for one to live without making friends like Aiko in this small town with a population of about 20 thousand people. Because of it, Aiko first worked as a cashier for a large supermarket, and she quitted there, after which she started to work for a convenience store near her home. The salary was cheap, so her savings decreased little by little, but as long as she did as the manual at both working places, time passed without arousing any of her emotions. Aiko felt that it was important until now. Such life might have started to change with Takita, no, with the seeds of morning glory.

When Aiko had a ride on Takita's truck at the beginning of June, they kissed from no one for the first time. Aiko didn't know whether Takita was a married man, but she felt fresh reliability from a little bit older man who suddenly became quiet. The vehicle strayed off a wet road into a wood in the rainy season, and Aiko gave herself to him under a big loquat in the foothill of a village in a mountain valley where there was a Shinto shrine. In the midst, she saw still small green loquat fruits, and drops of water covered the surface and trickled down incessantly.

The next time was in between apple fields. The previous time was in a dark cedar wood. Takita used time to have dinner to make love to Aiko in the wider room of the truck.

Aiko liked Takita's look that got back to his usual cheerful face as if nothing had happened. She thought that his face that became meek at that time was humorous.

Aiko returned to the convenience store when she got off the truck, and often took home a packed lunch just before sell-by date which Satomi kept without throwing away.

The salespersons thought Aiko entered the store as a customer and showered voices of ‘May I help you, madam?’ over her. Then Aiko involuntarily returned her smiley greeting to high-school part-timers and the head of the store in his fifties who returned their smiley greeting again. It was a thing that she never did until she planted the seeds of morning glory.

More than anything else, she went to a haberdasher’s shop yesterday for the first time since she came to this town. She bought a hemp skirt, though it was a little bit expensive, and also three pieces of underwear. It was the first time in this town that she bought underwear other than cotton half-shorts soled in the convenience store. She often got out of the room and went to the backyard for no particular reason, but in addition to it, as the seed leaves grew larger, she took a walk and went to go shopping from the backyard as it was.

This morning, she looked down at the seedlings of morning glory growing thickly about ten centimeters, boldly changed the underwear by the window into which the rain was blowing a little, and put on the hemp skirt. In any case, only the brownish roofs of a storehouse of the landlord and the stucco walls of a warehouse of a neighbor were seen outside the window, so she had no worry to be noticed by others, but still it was a dramatic change for Aiko. Aiko expected to see Takita today after an interval of five days since morning.

Takita seemed likely drive a night delivery truck on the day and the next day. When Aiko asked the head of the store on the third day morning, he replied, ‘I have no idea on their rotations,’ but she immediately began putting the just received fireworks in line on the shelf.

Aiko thought that she was going to have ‘*tama-oroshi* (to be purified to drive out evil spirits)’ Satomi invited her for a long time, though she didn’t think it should be on this occasion. Aiko approached Satomi between packed lunches and buns placed face to face and said as she took packed lunches out of a basket and put them in line on a shelf.

‘Well . . . do you think that place is all right today?’

‘Oh, you’ve finally made up your mind to go there . . . Wait a minute, please.’

Satomi said it and began walking with Jumbo Source Yakisoba and a packed deep-fried chicken lunch in her left hand and a handy barcode reader in her right hand, but she quickly realized and put the lunch and other on the shelf, and trotted up to a pay phone outside the store. She was probably going to ask their convenience.

Aiko told only Satomi that she delivered a baby before.

Satomi, who had three children, was smallish yet a big sister type. She often pointed with her jaw at a male customer in the store and smiled to Aiko from the next register, ‘How do you like that?’ When Aiko smiled and didn’t respond to it, she held on to Aiko, ‘All right then, tell me your type. I’ll search for it.’ So Aiko confessed that she delivered a baby once so as to hush Satomi. But some time later Satomi began to say, ‘Go to have “*tama-oroshi*” to see your child.’ ‘It’s strange, but I am sure you’ll know it if you go there. You’ll be able to meet your dead child.’ Satomi said a more mysterious thing recently. ‘You won’t be able to have a new man if you are not purified to drive out an evil spirit and make sure of it.’

It was not that Aiko took Satomi’s words seriously. Far from it, she thought that it was impossible to see her dead child and Takita was not her ‘new man’ at all. She saw the stout body of Satomi who left the pay phone over a weekly magazine rack. A transparent door opened and a whitish clear sky peeped. While she watched the darkish face of Satomi with a slight smile is coming up to, Aiko searched for the right words to express Takita as if she had been pressed for an answer.

‘It’s all right. He’ll wait for you at four.’

Nodded to Satomi’s words and shook her long hair giving her thanks, Aiko chewed over the words that came to mind once again and confirmed them. *No, Takita is not my new man at all. He is the first man I wished—.*

Got into a bus as was told by Satomi and on her way to a next town, the memory she had sealed for years came across Aiko’s mind after a long interval. Raped two times—. Though she hadn’t recalled it in such words until now, she felt again she could make them

things of the past by binding them that way. In the bus only a man and a woman apparently 'higher than sixty' speaking of the button in the convenience store were sitting side by side. Aiko recalled her parents before she knew it when she watched the back views of theirs from the rear seat.

At the first time, it was not long after she came up to Tokyo from her parents' home in Yamanashi Prefecture, but in any case, she returned to her parents' home and went to see a doctor in a hospital, after which she told her parents how it happened. About there were three men, too. She was taken into a lane on her way back to her lodging and was knocked down to the dirty concrete floor of an empty building as was planned beforehand.

She was unable to tell the pain and the heat that went through her body at that time, but she confessed that no matter how she thought there was at least one student of the same special school after she couldn't make up her mind whether to tell. Aiko used a regional dialect such as '*amachee*,' which means tickle, in the classroom and was badly laughed by classmates. The men who tore her pantyhose in the dark unanimously said, '*Amachee?*' 'How do you like *amachee?*'

After that, her mother suddenly became cold from an insinuating attitude until then. Her father recovered from the quietness he was shocked to fall into at first, but her mother kept wearing cold and contemptuous light deep inside her eyes. After sending off her father who was going to a nearby factory and her sister who was going to high school, Aiko stayed in the house with only her mother for three weeks without doing anything, but she wrote a notice of quitting school on her sister's desk without making a form and left the house as she told she was going to mail it. She headed for a station aimlessly and thought she was going to a place from where she couldn't see Mt. Fuji taking a sidelong glance at dazzling Mt. Fuji on her way. She thought that Mt. Fuji she always looked up at from her childhood and she saw from the living room and the same room as she used together with her sister was really disgusting at that time.

When she tried to recall the things at the second time, the core of her head felt dizzy. What came to her mind instead of the scene she couldn't recall were things about the child to whom she gave birth.



After she started to work for the convenience store, she sometimes suddenly recalled headlines of newspapers when she put delivered magazines and newspapers in a line on shelves.

‘An Infant’s Corpse in Woods. More Than a Month after Death. A Girl?’

‘A Girl Infant’s Dead Body Abandoned in Woods. 1 or 2 Months after Death. Cause of Death Unknown. Searching for Witnesses.’

‘A Court-ordered Autopsy on an Infant in Woods. Can’t Judge Stillbirth or Death after Birth.’

Where Aiko read those articles reported day by day two years ago—.

After she left the house, she worked for inns and pachinko parlors with dormitories in places. Kyoto, Osaka, Tokyo, and before coming to this town . . . yes, on the outskirts of Sendai. Scenes of the inns Aiko worked for were mixed and were not clearly distinguished one from another, but Aiko recalled herself clearing away the dishes and the tables cluttered with the leavings of meals in a room where a dinner party was ended, and then in contrary to it she recalled only the insipid worktops and chairs in the kitchen of the inn.

When she gave herself up to a nearby police station, she was quickly transferred by car to another police station, and the detective who had confronted her for a few days afterward put a newspaper issued a few days ago silently on the table.

‘A Woman (28) from Yamanashi Prefecture Arrested.’

The sunburned face of the policeman had a countless number of wrinkles. She couldn’t read his age and emotions. Aiko read the article nervously as she was anxious about that face, but she didn’t think that it was about her.

From ten in the morning to six in the evening, the detective didn’t ask her many things as he faced her in a small room everyday. Sometimes he faced her for about an hour without a word or looked at peach flowers outside the window. All he wanted to ask was only one thing: whether the child was alive or dead at the time of childbirth. ‘Stillbirth’ Aiko repeated it many times, but in case Aiko delivered the baby alone in a dormitory of

the inn instead of a maternity hospital, it was difficult to prove it more than showing that the baby was alive.

Aiko didn't know whether he wanted to charge her with suspicion of murder at any cost. But because she brought the baby with her into a mountain for burial, if the baby was stillbirth it couldn't be a criminal case. Why she left the dead child in a closet for a month —, though that question remained, in any case the life and death at the time of childbirth was the vital point.

After all it was vaguely acknowledged as stillbirth and the case against her was dropped. But the voice of the detective who quietly asked Aiko over and over again without yelling and banging the desk lingered deep inside her ears for some time. 'Are you sure it was dead?' She felt that she had heard that voice since she moved into this town of Fukushima Prefecture.

Aiko didn't know what '*tama-oroshi*' was like. But as Satomi said, she felt that if one's departed soul borrowed the mouth of a woman called *Sensei* to speak it would be limited to one and only case one was born alive. Satomi came up to Aiko who was putting soft cream into the refrigerator the other day and said as he sighed, 'It's really strange.' 'A dead friend of mine really grew older,' she said heedless of a high-school customer as she typed in the register. If the child Aiko delivered was alive at that time it should be near three about this time today. Aiko wished '*tama-oroshi*' fail and she make sure of the stillbirth of her child, but she wanted to feel better, anyway. She was an average student with no special ability in both junior high and high schools. And moreover, she gave birth to a child of the man who raped her to be pregnant and was investigated in charge of murder. She didn't have any expectation what life would wait for her in the future. But for some reason Aiko wanted to know the circumstances of childbirth that had not lived in her memory. 'I don't remember well,' she repeated any number of times, but the detective didn't believe her. But actually she had no memory before she wrapped the bloody navel string and placenta in a towel and headed for a Shinto hot spring shrine in a street before dawn.

Even though it was the child of a customer of the inn she didn't remember, even the face, it was impossible to kill a newborn child—, considered that way with complete confidence, Aiko felt she could move ahead, though she didn't see the future.

Aiko couldn't think of anything at all in the future, even about Takita. But in a little bit brighter mood, she recalled the flicker of the morning glory seedlings she saw this morning. They had already grown tall and thin about twenty centimeters, and a great many flickering vines were already eager for partners they could hold to.

When Aiko found her way to beneath an eight-story condo from a station, a strong rain suddenly began to come down a little. When she ascended to the sixth floor with an elevator, light shone in from beyond an already weakened misty rain. She was certain that she felt a little bit strange about the drenching rain that came down as if someone kicked over a bucket.

Aiko handed an envelope into which she put 20 thousand yen as was told by Satomi to a woman at the reception and sat on a sofa to wait in the waiting room, but meanwhile the feeling of wasting money may have changed into an excessive expectation before she realized it. By and by Aiko sensed a sound so high she was afraid she couldn't hear passed through her body when she was ushered into a boarded room at exactly four. Aiko walked toward a woman sitting in front of a thing that could be called a Shinto shrine. That appearance was reflected in a mirror paneled on one side of wall, which reminded of a different level of world like the sound.

The woman in a white *kimono* (a padded, sleeveless shirt) and a blue *hakama* (pleated trousers for formal wear) was closing her eyes. Aiko first looked at the mirror and then a window on the opposite side over which it started raining when she sat on a cushion about two meters away from her. Aiko was engulfed in an air different in kind, which was hardly thinkable that she was in a room of a condo. The woman opened her almond eyes, and Aiko thought as if the whole room had opened up the mouth of a different world.

'All you want to see is your child. Is it correct?'

With those remarks, Aiko was unable to see the woman's eyes. Aiko didn't know how much information Satomi provided the woman with beforehand, but she felt the eyes 'are seeing' everything. They were severe and purified like Mt. Fuji in winter. Speaking of the buttons of the register, Aiko hesitated over whether to choose 'higher than sixty,' but she thought that it had nothing to do with *Sensei*, as she already called her *Sensei* in her mind,

When Aiko nodded, that woman spiritist quietly smiled and then asked, 'Could you tell what kind of child it was?'

'Should I tell you that?'

'... I see.'

The spiritist said with peaceful and tranquil eyes when she touched the long hair did up in the back of the head with her white fingers and returned the hand after she replied.

'The spirit of a dead person you want to meet doesn't always descend... the spirit of a dead person that wants to meet you descends, so please don't misunderstand it.'

Aiko didn't understand what she said in an instant. She just thought vaguely that there was the spirit of a dead person that wanted to meet her.

'So please don't run away now matter who descends.'

Without waiting for Aiko's answer, the spiritist said it and rose to her feet toward the shrine. When she repeated bowing that seemed to have some rules, lifted up a piece of red paper as big as a sheet of plain paper for calligraphy from *sampo* (a small plain wood table) and returned, she held up the red paper over the head with both hands. Then when she stared at Aiko much severer than before, she closed her eyes as if to die. Aiko recalled the phrase 'don't run away' and felt uneasy. She put her hands on the chest of the cream color T-shirt she had worn since high school and slid the hands down to her abdomen covered with her brown pleated skirt for some reason.

A round mirror in front and the mirror on the right-side wall, and green *sakaki* (*Cleyera japonica*) arranged in a white vase of the Shinto shrine and the red paper—. Aiko felt as if her life until now had completely been surrounded by the mysterious preliminary

arrangements. What she heard in the tranquil room was only the sound of her own heartbeat, except the rain outside the window.

When the red paper shivered, by and by it turned out the shiver of the whole body of the spiritist. When the sound of the rain died away, she began to hear the high-pitch sound she heard before as if it had come from the red paper.

Things afterward were not apparent however hard she tried to recall in order. She felt a variety of times visited and vanished any number of times as if she had tuned his radio with the volume set high. The hands the spiritist raised seemed lifted up in the air at times, and the fair and firm face repeated to change under the hands and the red paper. Sometimes it reminded of her classmate who committed suicide or her dead grandfather during high school days, but Aiko was not confident of any of those. When the face of the spiritist got back to expressionless, Aiko felt it was merely her recollection. Aiko was feeling the marvel of the face. Where was a sign of a man or a woman, or age in the face—? Aiko was vaguely thought of it as she watched the spiritist's face continues to change like a vessel without true characters.

When the spiritist drooped her head once, started to turn her head, and pushed out forward slowly, Aiko instantly recalled a man who helped her to *sake* in that inn. Strangely enough, she felt as if her body had begun to sway and also felt it was drunken her at that time. The spiritist's head swaying restlessly by and by bent backward with her eyes slightly opened, and Aiko, who was sitting away from the spiritist, became a woman who was knocked down and raped. The core of her head felt numb like at that time. Then, now, she thought she was given some drug as expected. When her breathing calmed down and she came to, the spiritist already got back to expressionless.

It was when she heard a mysterious high-pitch sound resonant with something again. The spiritist's face distorted badly and the eyes that had varied in size stared at Aiko. Were they the eyes of a human being? The moment Aiko thought of it she thought of her child at last. The eyes that seemed to stare at the upper eyelids seemed to search for someone and the whole head roamed about, and it also seemed escaping from something. Perhaps because she stopped breathing, the face flushed. Then before long an explosive escaped

from the mouth, and Aiko was again aware of a too high-pitch sound as the continuation of the explosive.

Aiko, who had placed her hands on her abdomen, suddenly recalled the situation right after childbirth. The child on the bloody towel was probably moving. All she was vaguely seeing were the navel string, the thickness she was surprised at, the surface of it was wet in the waters to glisten quietly and the purple movement of the twisted interior. So she thought that the child connected ahead of it should probably have moved. In front of her eyes dimmed in pale there was the spiritist's face that had a rush of blood to the head and squirmed. Aiko moved back to sit at ease and hugged her knees before she realized it. She felt the child's face she couldn't recall suddenly turned the flushed face and loomed out of a gap between her knees. But she was unable to recall how to cut the navel string or any of the circumstances after the placenta came out.

Aiko also felt that the memory she recalled was just now provided through the spiritist. When she looked fixedly at the face without voicing, it was crying and smiling. It didn't seem a play by the spiritist, but there was no conclusive evidence that it was the child she delivered at that time. Aiko wanted to think that way.

Someone who was being possessed by her as bound by the red paper held up in the air started to crawl out forward with only the knees before long. Naturally Aiko moved back again, but the next moment that sound went through her head like a thin metal again, and the agonizing someone uttered a hoarse voice in the air.

'Mum, help me! Mum, help me!'

Aiko felt like running away from the look of the spiritist who clenched her teeth right after that, rather than getting scared by that eerie voice. The muscles below the projected jaw stretched, and she was bending the body unnaturally forward as if she had been pulled at the same time as if she had been pushed from behind. Then the moment Aiko was just about to fly off she fell over Aiko as if thread that tied her had broken, and the red paper struck Aiko's thigh and was torn. Aiko looked at the head of the spiritist stopped moving and the red paper at the foot of her upright knees alternately, and she was unable to move as if she had been unable to stand up. But when a man in a black suit

appeared from nowhere some time later and pressed the back of the spiritist, all the sounds got back into Aiko's ears at once as if drops of water had slipped out of Aiko's ears. The sound of the spiritist's *hakama* rubbing against the *hakama* when she sat up with moan. The thin voice of a man who called: '*Sensei! Sensei!*' The sound of the rain outside. And the sound of her own heartbeat—. Aiko felt relieved, probably because the rite ended, but she was sure that her child was alive at the moment of birth for some reason. Aiko at that time came to think that it was not an image provided by the spiritist but a memory in her that had rested for years.

The spiritist stood up, rubbed her eyes as if she had been awakened from sound sleep, suddenly realized and picked up the torn red paper. At that time, Aiko knew for the first time that some character was written on the red paper with Chinese ink. It was an unreadable and mysterious picturesque design, rather than the contents, Aiko tried to think whether it was written from the first or it appeared in the midst of the rite like a writing done in invisible ink, in a mood of searching for the secrets of his conjuring tricks. The female spiritist came to her senses, slackened her straight eyebrows a little and stared at the picturesque design with the eyes to which intelligence returned. Then she said.

'Offer water in the northeast direction every morning and hold a memorial service for the repose of a dead person's spirit.'

Aiko felt somewhat that it had nothing to do with the design written on the red paper. Aiko, however, sat up straight in a mood of getting back to reality at last, but she was bewildered at quite chaotic sounds that she began to hear. She was aware of the sound of the rain outside the window increasing in volume and also the sound of cars running on the road surface treading on the rain far below for the first time. Aiko heard the oracle fixing her gaze at the spiritist, but there was already an occupational smell in it. The resonant feeling until a few minutes ago completely faded away, and also she didn't feel a different world in the eyes of the spiritist kept staring at the red paper.

The event on the day lost reality within a few days, and she felt those were like an event only in her head. But since Satomi asked, ‘How did you like it? It’s amazing, wasn’t it?’ Aiko often recalled things for those she answered to.

‘I didn’t know whether it was my child, but it looked very agonizing.’

‘Yes, it’s amazing. The face of a human being changed that much.’

Aiko didn’t answer to detailed things, but when time went by, and as the reality of that room vanished off, she came to think it was a thing she originally memorized, and felt painful. When she filled up cans of beer and juice in a narrow and dark place behind the refrigerator cases for drinks, she suddenly thought she knew many more things and felt scary, right after which she bolted out of the dark. *Certainly if it was born alive why it died, I might actually know it—*, trepidation that memory of time without memory might suddenly come back to life seemed to have expanded day after day.

In the meantime, morning glory vines grew one meter tall as they were trained on the plastic packing ropes she braced up to the window on the second floor. She bought long eyebolts, screwed them into the ground, and braced about ten ropes, but since the number of morning glory vines was a lot more than expected, they took on a wild aspect to grow as they entwined around the ropes. She didn’t know what information the vines exchanged with each other, but the two vines that intertwined outwardly the day before got into inside the following day as if they had been pulled to one side, or the opposite was not rare. As told by the spiritist, Aiko offered a glass of water on a shelf above the doorway to her room every morning and put it together with ordinary tap water in a watering can and poured it over the morning glory in the mornings and evenings. But the growth of the morning glory of the ancient kind was so powerful that she thought the water in the glass had contained special nutrition. When she opened the window in the middle of the night and stared at the light flickering on the stucco walls, she suddenly felt the sound of wind. When she looked down beneath the window, the sound of wind was the leaves of the morning glory rubbing against each other below her eyes. Such nights were many when it was clear, and the sound of the rain striking the morning glory leaves was busy when it was raining. Aiko enjoyed the growth of the morning glory. At the same



time she was frightened of the memory that seemed to spring up at any time. She recalled the spiritist's face in agony every time she joined her hands in prayer to the water inside a glass. And when she couldn't sleep and looked down at the morning glory from the window, she quickly recalled the child she enshrined in the closet at that time. She felt that even though she didn't know why it died, she secretly watched the dead child is gradually becoming ugly was because she waited for the child to become a terrible look worth dying. She now thought that she certainly had a feeling she had tried to see the fiendish nature the child's father had in the child.

Without telling such things, Aiko was diagnosed as 'feeble-minded,' but she had been dissatisfied with it for a long time. She thought how she was feeble-minded to lose the memory at that time it was undoubtedly her.

Aiko sometimes felt eerie about an unknown way of how long the morning glory grow. And up to where was a program incorporated in the seeds, and from where had something to do with her . . . That thought sometimes suddenly evoked a complicated feeling to the child who grew in her belly. But after all Aiko was led to an easy and bright conclusion that the growth of plant life itself was due to self-indulgent energy. *That man would accept all her past—*. And she felt that Takita would save her from the lonely time she secretly spent going to and from supermarket, convenience store and her apartment. So Aiko even had a feeling the vines of morning glory were able to extend into the heavens and go to a different world somewhere when she saw them growing gently in the air before she went to work. And *if it is possible, I might as well just decide that I killed my child, rather than being troubled with vague memories . . .* Aiko started to think that way.

Aiko felt the time she couldn't meet Takita was long, but still when she looked back on the days she was off work because she got a cold in this winter, she could spent in a mood so cheerful she couldn't believe. Clothing and convenience food she stocked up were put in a closet of the six-*tatami* mat room without furniture, and when she laid down watching the flame of a kerosene heater, she ended up opening and closing the closet many times during changing the cloth, boiling water, and cooking and eating a meal. Aiko

by and by came to feel she now opened the closet right after she opened it. She felt that time itself became a clump of darkness and was stale and didn't pass.

But she now felt that though she actually couldn't meet him for about ten days, time passed without stagnating as if the morning glory vines had grown to extend.

*Cherishing the growth itself is not necessarily praiseworthy*—. Aiko thought of such a thing on a day it suddenly rained in the middle of the night, and quickly felt it was the spiritist's word. But when morning came, she forgot it and was enveloped in groundless light.

An infant whose face was beginning to fuse with a red whitish color suddenly loomed out, instead of a clump of darkness, when she opened the closet. Aiko was not scared of it, though it was the first time. Even if she did something to that child, she felt something was changing by tilting the watering can into which she put a glass of water over the morning glory every evening. Though the spiritist might otherwise say the opposite thing, Aiko these days came to think that karma didn't remain and dwell in her body.

Aiko got irritated in spite of herself when Takita appeared in the store after a long interval. Takita put a plastic case for snacks in front of shelves and was talking with the head of the store, but Aiko stared fixedly at the profile of Takita as she read the barcodes on the packages of snacks with a barcode scanner and put them on shelves. He was saying to the head of the store that he had been off work for days, for he helped the funeral of his relative and also helped them to pack up for moving.

Aiko didn't know what she was irritated at, but in any case when she got out of the store and got into the truck waiting for her in a vacant lot, she bit her lip and stared hard at Takita.

But what rushed from her lips were useless remarks.

'Morning glory grew big.'

It of course didn't sound as blame. Takita smiled and answered, 'Thank you.' Then he vigorously put his left hand on Aiko's thigh from over the hemp skirt she happened to wear. It seemed to pardon everything and her irritation died out.

Afterward Aiko got into the truck three times and made love to him three times in a week. At the third time, thought it was a day it rained heavily and it thundered, Aiko boldly asked after she made love.

'Mr. Takita, do you think I am not quite myself today?'

'... not quite yourself?'

Takita asked back with a smiley profile as he fastened the belt. A flash of lightning instantly passed through the inside of the truck, but a roll of thunder was in the distance and quickly got mixed in the sound of the rain.

'I, now, think I really want to have your child . . . so I think I am not quite myself today.'

Takita glanced at Aiko and then looked at a great many summer camellias in the rain alongside a dim street in front, but before long he muttered, 'Not quite yourself today,' and started the engine. The way he said it sounded like 'not quite herself for a long time' to her, and she was uneasy about the way she said she liked to have his child was too sudden and thought she should add some words.

Then when she came to, she confessed that she delivered a child before.

Aiko was pleased with Takita stopped the engine and said more.

'I think I had the fullest life in my life when my child grew in my belly.'

It was certainly Aiko's real feeling. She knew that some of her colleagues in the inn spoke ill of her, but still she felt that the belly that gradually swelled gave Aiko confidence as it increased in weight. Aiko was recalling herself talkative right before childbirth.

But Takita who fell silent in the sound of the rain for a while looked at Aiko with his painful eyes before long.

'What happened to that child?'

'Died.'

'What about the father?'

‘ . . . ’

Aiko caught a breath for Takita who leaned his back against the seat and waited for an answer. But while Aiko held her breath and recalled the scenes in the spiritist’s place, Takita’s face got untied moment by moment.

‘It takes all sorts to make a world . . . I don’t have a child, but I am married.’

Takita confessed in a cheerful voice as if to balance a thing.

‘ . . . I thought so, too.’

When Aiko said it, Takita said as he scratched his head, ‘Really! You’ve realized it,’ and burst into loud laughter. Though she didn’t see the face in the dim room of the truck, that laughter resounded pleasantly like music.

‘I delivered a baby once . . . is it noticeable?’

Takita also held his tongue for the sudden question in an instant, but he spat out ash he laughed, ‘I don’t recognize such a thing.’

When Takita started the engine again, turned on the lights and tried to pull out, Aiko said, ‘Sorry,’ and opened the door, bolted out to the road surface after the rain and picked up a handful of summer camellias in both hands. Though she smiled toward the strong lights, Takita’s look was invisible. Takita burst out laughing and said to Aiko who returned to the seat, ‘Let’s go to a conveyor belt *sushi* bar today.’

While they went around to three convenience stores, Aiko lined up white summer camellias on the dashboard in front of the passenger’s seat and gazed on them. A dark reddish and big cloud hung over the sky after the rain, and the sky the days were longer continued to change delicately. Every time Takita carried goods into each store Aiko was alone and thought she should talk with him seriously. But as Takita who returned laughed cheerfully to her, gave a whistle and song a children’s song ‘*Nanatsu no Ko* (Seven children),’ what she wanted to say got mixed with his laughter and song, and before long she came to feel it’s not the thing she should deliberately talk with him. Aiko listened in a pleasant mood to the failure talks of his colleagues Takita spoke as she touched about eight summer camellia flowers in order meaninglessly.

When they changed to Takita's private car after they returned to the transport company, Aiko brought the summer camellias out of the truck and was surprised. Most of the flowers lit by street light changed color to brown, and instead her fingertips were velvety as if they were covered with baby powder. Aiko was surprised at how easily the petals that were deprived of cosmetics by her fingers spoiled and threw them off into a thicket, but she suddenly thought that she should speak of anything further for some reason.

Takita touched the velvety fingertips in a conveyor belt *sushi* bar, grasped Aiko's wrist as he smiled, and licked the fingertips heedless of thin customers: 'tasting a camellia a night,' Aiko uttered a sexy voice and muttered in spite of herself, '*amachee*.' It was so low Takita couldn't hear, but Aiko was unspeakably delightful with the fact that she spoke of that dialect.

'See you again.'

Takita said it as usual and showed a tender smile. Aiko was unable to stop shedding tears while she walked in a street from the vacant lot to her apartment. Then Aiko thought as she cried that she should not wish any further relationship with Takita. *If possible, I want you to meet me sometimes forever as it is . . .*

Tears stopped while she returned to her room and took a bath, but when she used a hairdryer to dry the wet hair, tears gushed out of her eyes again.

She turned off the light in the room, rested her elbows at the window and looked at the stucco walls with tearful eyes for a long time. Apart from tears, it was the posture she did over and over again during last two years she lived in this room. Aiko tried to see the hillside of Mt. Fuji there as usual. But the stucco walls wriggled forever and didn't focus into any image.

Aiko heard a feeble high-pitch voice from somewhere like someone suddenly strummed on his piano. She raised her head that had pressed against her arms, but she didn't know the true colors of a continual sound. She recalled the sound she heard in the spiritist's place first and then the sound of wind at the summit of Mt. Fuji she climbed together with her father in her childhood. But before long Aiko leaned out of the window

to look down at the growing thick of morning glory in the dark. She felt that the sound seemed likely to come from the growing think.

A great many vines grew up to about one meter below the window and spread long tentacles in darkness of the air she could almost reach. Aiko gazed on a cluster of thick leaves into which light didn't reach, but the continual sound seemed the sound of the vines growing at night or the squeak of the vines being intertwined grotesquely.

Tentatively, Aiko went to get a glass of water she didn't offer yet today and poured it thinly from the window. Immediately after the bright splashy water sound died out, an inorganic high-pitched sound returned into her ears again.

Aiko recalled the thickness of the base of grass she saw when she was on the point of going out this morning. It was just like that of the navel string in her memory. Aiko thought of the navel string wriggling as it entwined into darkness and thought that the sound was the cry of her child before birth.

Aiko who went down the stairs with the pajamas on ran up to the seedlings of morning glory in excitement. The growing thick of morning glory merged with darkness was like a wood. Floral buds were dotted slightly white in darkness, but Aiko suddenly thought. *There is no mending if she let them grow further . . .* Aiko looked up at the wood, made sure of a still audible sound, and then fell on the morning glory as she squeezed out of a voice somewhere between a sexy voice and a scream.

Depended on the light of a midget lamp in her room, Aiko tore off the seedlings with both hands one after another as she felt pain. On the way she felt that her hands were cut, but regardless of it, this time, she swung her hands about and pulled and cut down the vines remained up there with all her strength.

The sound of morning glory died away.

The tears that stopped once gushed out again. Aiko crouched down and kept crying at a clump of morning glory in a heap.

\* \* \* \* \*

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