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I decided to stop by Dad's even though it had only been three days since I'd last seen him. Black clouds rolled across the sky at a rapid pace. Sporadic squalls of wind brought down pattering raindrops that soaked, lukewarm, into my button-down shirt. It was nearly the end of July, but the rainy season seemed to have no intention of ending.

Having resigned myself to getting a little damp, I was walking unhurriedly the under-ten-minute route from the station when, for some reason, a memory from the previous winter flashed vividly into my mind: the time I had invited everyone to dinner.

It had been the beginning of December. We all gathered at Namba for an early end-of-the-year party where we dined on crabs. The "year-end party" was just an excuse; my real motivation was to bring together Chie, my parents, and my kid brother. I knew everyone would make a big fuss if I told them beforehand, so when the day came, I brought Chie along without any advance warning.

Nothing had spoiled yet, not at that point. I'm certain every last detail of that night will continue to lurk in my memories forever, enveloped in the brilliance of those last moments right before everything started to break apart.

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Mom had dyed her hair a lighter shade and put on her treasured black pearl pendant. She had scooped the crab flesh out with a practiced hand, looking happy and at times earnest as she prepped enough for Dad's plate too.

Dad had been the same as ever, complaining the saké I poured went straight to his head, even though his smile made it clear he didn't mean the jab wholeheartedly.

I could tell Mom and Dad had taken a shine to Chie the moment they saw her, and I was amused watching my brother, who had gone unusually meek, try to make a good impression without being too obvious about it.

As we continued to drink and the gathering grew lively that night, there was no doubt in my mind that Chie and I would get married, that we would have children, that my parents would remain healthy, anticipating a future with grandchildren coming over to play.

That all felt like it had only been a week ago. I could very nearly smell the savory steam rising from the hot pot.

Could any of us there that day have foreseen even one of the tragedies that were to come in rapid succession almost immediately afterwards?

The first was Chie's disappearance. Less than two months had passed when it happened. With no warning at all, she stopped coming in to work and vacated her apartment.

Then, in the following spring, when I was still struggling to overcome the first surge of that shock, my Dad was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. Ironically, this became the impetus that forced me out of my constant state of obsessing over Chie.

After he learned it was inoperable, my father stubbornly

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refused all drug- and radiation-based treatments. Besides, the doctors said they doubted such therapies would help, even if they forced him to take them.

We were left with no choice but to accept that Dad would soon be gone. It was only natural that everyone in the family—including Dad—steeled themselves for the inexorable progression of events that would result in him passing away before Mom.

And yet she lost her life, all too soon, in a car accident two months ago.

I had never given much thought to the existence of God or fate, but I couldn't help thinking that there was something out there, chimerical and malicious, placing spiteful traps all around me.

Another sudden squall spat rough rain and wind into my face. But the house was already visible up ahead. Between the gate and the entrance in the narrow and heavily shaded garden the stand of Nandina bamboo—no taller now than it was when I was a kid—swayed in the wind.

There was no response from inside the house after I tried pressing the intercom and knocking at the door, so I had to use my spare key. I stepped inside and noticed the house felt deserted, as though long since abandoned. I had come by a number of times when my parents had both been away, but it had never felt this vacant before. The air inside was completely transformed.

I looked around, not quite ready to venture further inside, and felt a still-raw sadness rise in my chest. The familiar single-flower vase on the shoe cupboard had a covering of chalky dust. When Mom was still alive the small glass vessel had

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always boasted a fresh seasonal flower. The corridor, always polished clean, had given off a subtle waxy scent. Even when no one was in the house it had felt alive, like it was breathing.

I stuck my feet haphazardly into a pair of slippers among those scattered along the entrance to the house proper and made my way down the corridor, peering into the kitchen and the bathroom as I did. When I caught sight of my tired face that I hadn't bothered shaving that morning reflected in the clouded mirror, I instinctively rubbed a hand along my cheek.

I tried searching the house, still probing my stubble with the tips of my fingers.

Where'd Dad go?

He visited Gran at the nursing home on Sundays, but it wasn't a Sunday. He had mentioned he ended up taking more aimless walks now that he was living alone, but would he really go out when the weather was this poor? It was possible that he had gone to the hospital if his condition had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

With Mom gone and Dad in his weakened state, I knew I should move back in and live with him. One of the reasons I hadn't was because Dad didn't want me to, and because I was unable to step away from the shop I had opened a couple of years earlier that was still running on a hand-to-mouth basis.

The shop was a cafe called Shaggy Head and was located at the foot of Mt. Hachidaka. It had a one-fifth-acre playground for dogs, and I ran it on a membership-only basis for dog owners and their pets. From there it was a three-hour round trip. Counting all the housekeeping work necessary around opening and closing times, it was pretty rough.

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So, for the time being, I made do with frequent visits whenever I was able to get away from work.

At one point three generations had lived together under this roof, and while the house was old it had plenty of rooms.

On entering the living room I saw that the incense stand that had been there three days earlier had been put away, leaving only the plain-wood memorial tablet and a photograph arranged on the small bureau.

The photo was of a much younger Mom, looking directly at the camera with a slightly tense smile on her face. I stood there gazing at my mother's image for a while, without even pressing my hands together. The pain had subsided but tears welled up in my eyes anyway, as if by conditioned reflex.

Force of habit carried me upstairs to keep looking even though I knew Dad was out. The floorboards groaned in places, on the stairs as well as along the second-floor corridor.

At the end I knocked, just in case, then opened the door to Dad's study, really nothing more than a small room with a large bookcase. On the low table was an ashtray with a few stubbed-out cigarettes. Dad had labored to give up smoking a decade earlier, but I guessed he'd started again, having lost any reason he'd had to abstain.

A number of books and scrapbooks were stacked towards the edge of the table, all related to worldwide projects that aided children. Even when he was young and poor, Dad had always kept up donations to a number of such organizations. He subscribed to a few newsletters and was also dedicated to collecting articles and papers about children facing poverty and abuse. Once, when I was a kid, he had found me and my younger brother looking through his scrapbooks without

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permission and scolded us. Come to think of it, that was the only time Dad had ever actually shouted at us; never before or since.

I decided to wait for a while in the kitchen downstairs and was just closing the door to the room when I noticed one of the sliding panels in the closet to my right was a couple inches ajar. There was something about it that piqued my interest. The closet ran the length of the wall but was halfway blocked by the bookcase and so could only be opened on one side, and therefore it was unlikely that anything but junk was stored inside.

The room was tiny but with its atmosphere of a sacred space for Dad I was wary to go in, especially in the master's absence. Regardless, I padded over to the closet and slid the door open.

Inside was a jumble of dust-covered boxes of various sizes, all in disarray as though someone had rifled haphazardly through them. One of the boxes positioned at the front of the top shelf was open, which made me think that Dad had pulled it from the back to look inside.

What had he been hoping to find? I reached inside, suddenly curious, but all that emerged was drab old clothing. To make matters worse, as soon as I pulled out the clothes from their orderly folds inside the box they became unwieldy and I realized it would be a task to get them back in as before.

Seeing nothing else for it I hauled the box to the floor and had begun fumbling around to get the contents back in order when I found a musty old handbag buried at the bottom. It was something a married woman might use. It was white and designed for use during the summer.

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I initially assumed it had to be one of Mom's, but when I took it in my hands and looked it over I felt an inexplicable sense of foreboding. *It's not hers*, I decided, not knowing the source of my sudden flash of conviction.

I had never seen it before, yet it was familiar. An oddly distorted sensation crawled up from the bag, from the leather that had yellowed over time, from the rust-speckled metal of the clasp. I felt my body threaten to start trembling.

I was hit with an urge right then to put the bag back into the box and shut the lid tight, but that brought with it a mysterious pang of guilt. I used the back of my hand to wipe the sweat that had beaded up on my forehead, and, with trembling fingers, gently undid the clasp.

Inside was a small packet made of *washi* paper. The napped surface of the paper bore an inscription in faint black ink: Misako.

Carefully opening the packet, I found a bundle of hair, black, about two inches long.

Goosebumps broke out all over my skin.

It was—it had to be—a keepsake, hair from someone that had died.

Misako was Mom's name, and her funeral had been held only two months earlier. But the hair was jet black without a single strand of white, so it couldn't have been from then. If it was Mom's it was something taken years ago, back when she had still been young. But who would have done that, and for what reason? Why prepare something like this, so long before her actual death?

I felt a deep sense of something sinister.

If Mom had died from an illness, perhaps then I would

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have been less agitated. I realized in hindsight that she had been acting strangely in her final month. She would sometimes nod along to a conversation but not actually understand it, and she would occasionally burst into tears in the middle of watching coverage of distressing incidents on the news.

One time I caught sight of her when I was on my way home from the train station. I had happened to glance back and seen her walking towards me, coming home with some shopping. I will never forget her face—she had looked terrified, like an empty shell. Mom was only a few years into her fifties but that time she had looked gray and worn out, like an old woman. I instinctively turned my gaze away, feeling as though I'd witnessed something forbidden. It had seemed like the face of another side of her, a side she would never have willingly revealed to Dad or me. When she noticed me she seemed to panic momentarily, but then her usual smile quickly returned and she called out, sounding happy: “Oh hello, Ryo dear!”

When I reached out to relieve her of the supermarket bags she carried in both hands I looked down and noticed she was shuffling along in Dad's sandals. They were too big for her feet and her socks stuck out, blackened from dirt where the tips touched the ground. At the time I read nothing more into it, telling myself it was all due to Dad's illness, that she was just upset because of it. And, perhaps, that was actually all it was.

Two months ago Mom and Dad had been on their way back from seeing Gran. Dad said they'd been standing side by side at a red light at a crosswalk when Mom stepped out into the road without warning.

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“By the time I managed to shout out she was already gone, nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t even grasp what just happened. I don’t remember hearing any of it, not the collision, not the squeal of brakes, not the noise of people around us. I just stood there, watching everyone running about in confusion around the truck right in front of me like I was watching a silent movie.”

On the night of the funeral the two of us sat in the kitchen when Dad told me this, and it was as if he was mostly talking to himself. Our unspoken mutual understanding was that he would be dead too, before long. My brother fell into a drunken sleep after reaching that dazed, cried-out place. But Dad did not weep or abandon himself to heartrending grief, not for the accident that had taken his wife, not for his own impending death. Instead his eyes contained something elusive, not sadness or fear but something pale and dry. I could only describe it as an emptiness.

As we sat facing each other, unable to find words to share, I began to suspect it had been nesting inside him from before I could remember, that I had been dimly aware of it the whole time. I recalled Dad sitting hunched over the low table in his study, lost as always in page after page of the scrapbooks he had filled with so many photographs. Children with sarcomas dotting their faces, ravaged by AIDS; emaciated kids, the shape of their bones visible through their skin; small, naked corpses, abused and discarded... Maybe it’s strange for me, his own son, to say, but there was always something a little eccentric about Dad.

I gazed at the bundle of black hair in my hand for a few more moments, then wrapped it back up in the paper. I didn’t

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know what else to do.

I had just popped the clasp shut, having put the parcel back into the handbag, when a memory sprang into my mind like a jack-in-the-box bursting open. It came rushing back, something that had for some reason been absent from my memories for a very long time. Yet it was crystal clear, as though it had never slipped from my mind at all.

I was four at the time, so this had happened over twenty years ago. I had spent a long while in hospital with pneumonia or something like that and when I finally got home after being discharged I had become convinced that my mother had been replaced by someone else.

If not for seeing the bundle of hair, I doubt the memory would have ever resurfaced for the rest of my life. Of course, it was absurd to have thought that someone had taken Mom's place, so this curious memory would have most likely remained dormant, existing as nothing more than a child's illusion, consigned to the dark recesses of my mind along with so many other recollections.

I was told that, during my stay in the hospital, there had been a small fire at our rented apartment. That incident had spurred my parents to move from Tokyo to Komagawa in Nara, where they bought a house to share with my grandparents who were going to move in from Maebashi.

On the day of my discharge I rode the bullet train back with Dad, switching partway to the Kintetsu Line, and by the time we finally pulled into Komagawa I was exhausted, feeling like I'd traveled all the way to the edge of the world. I became utterly bewildered when I walked into the recently-constructed and unfamiliar house and saw Mom run up to

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the entryway and call out, “Ryo, you’re back!”

No, I thought, you’re not my Mom.

“You’re such a strong boy, Ryo! Mommy’s so sorry she couldn’t come to visit you,” she said, hugging me close, her eyes wet with tears. I stiffened, feeling awkward in the embrace.

Of course I tried to explain this to Dad and my grandparents, even to Mom herself. “What happened to my Mom?” I would ask. But the adults only laughed. They wouldn’t take me seriously, teasing that I’d forgotten what she looked like after not seeing her during the months in hospital.

I had a feeling that Mom might have visited once, not too long after my admission to the hospital, but I couldn’t be sure. Coming to visit was solely Dad’s job. Even after the move he had stayed back in Tokyo, living out of a business hotel not far from the hospital and his work. He’d quit the job once I was out of the hospital.

I have a vague memory of him explaining how it was difficult for Mom to visit me at the hospital—I had probably been complaining about wanting to see her—explaining it was because we had moved far away, and since Gran was in bad health she had to look after her.

So it was true that I hadn’t seen her for a while. In addition, I had come home to a strange place that wasn’t the home I’d known before the hospital, to a town and a house I’d never seen before and where my grandparents who had until then lived on their own had moved in as well. Thinking back, it was probably enough to wreak havoc with a child’s perceptions, and it wasn’t surprising for me to think Mom looked like someone else.

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Yet that sense of wrongness was deep-rooted, like something that went beyond simple reasoning. And even when the casual dismissal of the adults had begun to convince me that maybe they were right, that maybe she was Mom after all, all the while the sense of something being out of place continued to throb, like a milk tooth that was loose but wouldn't quite come out.

I had a hard time calling her "Mom," this person that should have been my mother. There was nothing different about the way she acted around me. She would hug me tenderly when I wanted her to, and throw a fit when I did something very bad. I still couldn't call her "Mom," but it didn't take long to grow attached, either.

I have a few fragmented memories from that time. One time, my mother took me to a bookstore and found a picture book which she bought for me. It was one of my favorites before I was admitted to the hospital—the story was about a terrifying, man-eating dragon—but it had burned in the fire along with my other books and toys. She called out in surprise and picked up the book with an air of nostalgia and smiled at me, and I happily noted a sudden surge in the conviction that she might really be my mother after all. When I got home I was disappointed to page through the book and find that the man-eating dragon that had been so terrifying to look at before was actually not scary at all. If anything, it looked comical. When I told as much to my mother she patted me on the head and said, "You poor thing, Ryo. All sorts of things must seem different to you now after being in hospital for so long and putting up with so many ouchie needles."

Another time, my mother licked free some grit that had

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got stuck in my eye. She assured me it would be fine and, although my eyelid was jammed shut from the pain, it relaxed naturally when she placed her tongue over it. I remember the sensation even now, of her tongue being neither hot nor cold, just soft. She took my head in her hands and directly licked my eyeball with her tongue. The relief stopped my tears, and I remembered then how she had used the same technique to clean dirt from my eyes when I had been smaller. When she was done I asked her how it tasted and she said, “Ryo, your tears are very salty.”

I wondered what else I could have done, during those days filled with such tiny moments.

At some point—at least, this is what seems likely—the discomfort I felt towards my mother came to be replaced by guilt for still feeling that way. And you don’t need much effort to forget guilt, especially when you’re a child. By the time my brother Yohei was born a year later, I had completely forgotten about the doubts I had had regarding my mother. Back then her hair had been black and glossy, without as much as a single strand of white...

I let my eyes fall once more to the handbag still in my hands.

A vague image floated to mind: a woman in a sleeveless dress printed with large flowers, and this handbag resting on her arm. I couldn’t decide whether the image was of my mother before she was replaced or simply a fictitious picture that I had invented.

I didn’t even know whether it was true or not that she had been replaced.

I sat cross-legged on the tatami flooring, lost for a while

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in a daze. Eventually I pulled myself together and dug further into the box I'd pulled the handbag from. It wasn't clear if it had been there from the outset, or if Dad had pulled something else out to hide it, but right at the bottom I found a manila envelope stuffed with papers of some sort, or documents. I opened it to find a collection of notebooks. There were four in total, each a different thickness and design. Each had a number written in the bottom-right corner of the cover, one through four.

I chose one and flipped through it. The pages were crammed full of text, leaving hardly any blank spaces. The sentences were written in heavy pencil, with occasional scuffs where an eraser had been used. The characters were artlessly scrawled across the page, but there was no way to tell if the style was put on or just the author's natural hand.

I took out the notepad marked One and began to read. Nan-Core was written in as the title. I didn't know what it meant. My hand was throwing shadows onto the page so I moved closer to the window. Before long the text sucked me in, and I forgot everything else around me.