

Sluggish Symbol, Inane Illusion (緩慢な表象と虚ろな幻想)

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Prologue

— *Every one of us has the capability to produce a single work worthy of being called a “masterpiece” in our lifetime.*

I’m sure all of you have heard this quote from a once-renowned educator and politician.

Of course, I’m familiar with it myself.

The first time I heard it was from my 4th grade elementary school teacher.

“Long ago, every book in the bookstore was written by someone from the profession of ‘author’. Their writings, penned for various reasons, were considered by others to be valuable, and so they went on to write books.”

The teacher flipped through the social studies textbook as she spoke.

The book on the table next to the teacher was “the teacher’s book”. From where I sat, I could see her name written on its spine.

A girl in the front row raised her hand and asked a question.

“But how does making writing a profession make it any different from what all of us do?”

This concern was undoubtedly in the minds of the majority of the class. Several of the students raised their voices in agreement.

The teacher smiled and waited for the class to settle down.

“Those from the profession called ‘author’ each wrote several stories during their lifetimes. Some of the more popular authors produced many tens of books.”

“Many tens?”

“Wow...”

“But the readers were greedy to read more and more new books, so more and more new authors appeared. Many people who wanted to become authors started publishing their ‘personal story’ on the Internet, and the desire to make these stories into books became commonplace... finally one day, a well-respected teacher said, as I quote:

— *Every one of us has the capability to produce a single work worthy of the title ‘masterpiece’ in our lifetime.”*

The teacher said this and with an unabashed grin, placed her book on the pedestal.

“And then, in this country it became mandatory for everyone to write and publish a single book in their lifetime. That includes me, all of your dads and moms, and of course all of you.”

The winter afternoon sun shined diagonally in through the windows.

The teacher then declared in her well-projected voice,

“In other words, every single book you see in a bookstore now—is someone’s first and last masterpiece.”

I no longer remember the title of the book that the teacher showed us that day.

But I do remember her expression very clearly—part pride and part embarrassment.

Thus begins our tale, set in a time where career authors have long disappeared.

Chapter 1 - Saki Mitsumura

Saki Mitsumura was a special girl.

In the midst of her high school classroom's constant commotion, the air around her seemed to exhibit a special type of tranquility.

Sitting by a window, her beautiful profile with long hair shining dark brown in the sun gave Saki appearance of a skillfully crafted doll.

She excelled academically. But it wasn't like grades meant anything. No one ever bothered her or asked for her help.

Head always in a book, she hardly ever spoke with her classmates.

Everyone was conscious of her presence, and yet no one came into physical contact with her, as if she was enclosed within glass walls.

Saki Mitsumura was that type of person.

That's why one day when she suddenly spoke to me, I thought to myself, "This girl is like a doll come to life!"

"What'cha reading?"

It was the same voice that had given the correct answer when called on by the teacher in class.

I was the only student who stayed behind in the classroom after school. At least that's what I thought until now. I gazed at my sunlit desk for a moment and then raised my head to see the source of the voice.

Saki Mitsumura stood directly behind my desk, staring at me with her hair held back to keep it falling in her face.

"What'cha reading, Sakizaki?"

I hadn't answered her question, so she repeated herself.

For the first time, I realized this girl—who was in the same class as me—was a living, breathing human being.

I hurriedly showed her the book which lie opened on my desk.

"It's an atlas."

"An atlas?"

Her well-formed eyebrows drew together in distrust.

The girl's response was only natural. The atlas I had before me was published over 20 years ago.

Even the country names were considerably different. But I liked reading this atlas that I'd found at home.

Looking at it, my imagination would run wild and I'd think about using this country name or that location for the setting of my own novel when I got around to writing it.

But I didn't say anything about that to her.

You see, I'm not very fond of talking about things that haven't been directly asked of me.

Saki looked intently over my shoulder at the atlas, and then withdrew a step.

"You don't read novels much, do you?"

"Nope."

In my elementary school days, I had heard that long ago there were career authors, and to be honest, I wish I had been born back then.

I've also heard that the obligation to publish, given to citizens as the final stage of compulsory education, was a symbol of our country's high cultural level. But the reality was that there was a good and bad side to this practice.

I have no interest in reading novels written by students with the carelessness of a summer homework assignment.

Even assuming a book was written with heartfelt emotion, there is no guarantee that it will be a good fit for me.

Word of mouth or online review sites don't help much. The way I see it, the act of reading a book essentially boils down to choosing a person.

That's why I don't read too many books. Even if by chance I do stumble upon a novel I really enjoy, that author's second book will never exist.

By forcing everyone to write, the number of readers is decreased significantly. I sometimes wonder if the politicians back then had considered this.

Hearing my answer, Saki nodded.

"Did you write your book yet?"

“Nope.”

“Have you found anything you want to write about?”

“Not yet.”

I stated the facts frankly and to the point.

What could this girl be planning? I wish she would just cut to the chase.

As if reading my mind, Saki smiled broadly.

Just as I was thinking, *Wow, she’s as cute as a real girl*, she spoke again.

“In that case, would you mind reading my book that I’m about to start writing?”

I digested what she said for moment and then realized that *this girl is crazy*.

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Despite looking very much like a doll, she was human enough to say some pretty crazy things.

But I’d never say something like that out loud. I refused her offer in a more socially appropriate manner to avoid hurting her feelings.

“But everyone will want to read your book.”

That was an undeniable truth. Whenever news got out that someone finished their book, all their classmates would rush to the bookstore.

By the same token, there were many who would keep quiet, wanting to avoid creating a big fuss when their book came out.

But to a large number of people, there wasn’t much difference between their personal book and a journal posted in the elementary school hallway at the end of summer break.

If the cutest girl in school was writing her book, I’m sure everyone would be interested.

That is why Saki should just pick whomever she likes from the crowd. Just don’t involve me.

I stood up, intending to go home, but Saki didn’t back down.

“But if everyone read my book there’d be no point.”

“Books are made for everyone to read. They are published, after all.”

“But I want someone to read mine before I publish it. Someone who will keep quiet about it and hasn’t written their own book yet.”

“Oh, you want someone to proofread your manuscript?”

For all of us who have been given the obligation to publish, the government has set up funds to assist with things like cover design, illustration, and revision.

Up to age 18, the author is responsible for ten percent of these costs. After that, the percentage changes based on age and income, but naturally there are those who want to create a book good enough that is worth spending money on, and well as those who are satisfied with a half-ass result if they can avoid spending money.

Getting detailed advice about things like plot structure will cost a certain amount of money.

And I guess asking a friend or classmate help out with proofreading is one option.

But count me out.

“You’d be better off asking someone else.”

Even if the author was a smart, beautiful girl, I don’t want to help read through a badly written novel.

And even assuming the book was well written, it will not necessarily mesh well with me.

If the book was something I bought, I could simply close it and never come back, but when proofreading a classmate’s book there is some level of responsibility.

I closed the atlas, packed it into my bag, and quickly left my desk.

As I headed for the door, I heard her voice from behind.

“Your presentation in last year’s language class...”

Startled, I quickly turned around to face her.

My reaction was because she had reminded me of a time I had “talked about things that haven’t been directly asked of me.”

Our eyes met.

Her brown-colored eyes reflected the evening sun, giving them a red tinge.

“I bought and read the book you presented in class: ‘Memories seen by a corpse.’ ”

“No, it’s ‘Memories traced by a corpse,’ ”

I said, and immediately realized I’d been tricked.

Saki grinned again. She had purposefully said the title incorrectly. I was sure of it.

She repeated the title, clearly enunciating it this time.

“I could really associate with ‘*Memories traced by a corpse.*’ So I became interested in the one who had recommended it, you.”

“That book didn’t sell at all. Its author has long since been forgotten.”

“I haven’t forgotten it. Neither have you.”

— *I’m on the verge of saying something unnecessary*, I thought to myself.

I don’t want to get involved. That’s not the type of thing I normally do.

For expressing the things deep inside of me using words, one book in a lifetime is enough.

Even for that single book, I want to reduce my words to the bare minimum, and not ruin it with unnecessary words.

Because when something is put into words, it changes irreversibly.

She spoke, and once again it was as if she saw right through me.

“Read my book, pretty please—just do that, and you’ll never have to write anything yourself.”

It was a beautiful declaration—one completely devoid of waste.

In response to her statement (which sounded more like an order than a plea) I frowned silently.

Now you have some idea what a weird person Saki Mitsumura is.

Chapter 2 - Masatoshi Sakizaki

Saki Mitsumura was a weird girl.

I felt bad judging her just because she'd made a slightly odd request of me, but the next day something happened to convince me completely.

I always darted out of the classroom as soon as school was over, but today she'd somehow preempted me.

I was the first person to reach the school's main entrance, where I opened my steel shoe box.

Someone had placed a letter inside it.

Its white envelope was addressed to me.

I flipped it over; the sender's name was nowhere to be found. But I recognized the beautiful handwriting.

I'd always seen these clean characters on the blackboard expressing the correct answer.

"...Saki"

By no means did I did get excited that this might be a love letter, but when I realized she'd sent it, what little expectations I had dispersed like dust in the wind.

I tried to return the letter to her shoebox----but stopped my hand midway.

Orderly characters written on stationery paper were visible through the partially transparent envelope.

With only a glance, I knew it was a novel. A chill ran down my spine.

My intuition is wrong pretty much all the time.

But now, for the first time ever, I knew that my intuition was right.

In other words----I knew that once I read this letter, there was no turning back.

“Read it.”

The gentle voice moved something deep within me.

When I turned around, just as I expected Saki was standing there.

My beautiful classmate—even in her everyday standing pose she was a work of art.

I took one look at her imposing form, standing like a lone victorious soldier on the battlefield, and answered weakly,

“I don’t want to get involved.”

The moment that words are used to express a thought, they restrict that thought.

The instant the words are spoken, that thought is transformed.

In order to convey information to another person, a small sacrifice is required, like a spray of water disappearing into the air.

But I wasn’t willing to make that sacrifice.

That’s why I wanted to avoid saying anything unnecessary.

Getting involved with another person’s novel was the last thing I wanted to do. This was because I also had to write my own book someday.

Saki wrinkled her well-formed brows into a frown.

I held out the envelope to her.

“Give this to someone else. You’ll be better off that way.”

“But I wrote this for you.”

“I don’t understand why you chose me.”

Could she really have been that impressed by ‘Memories traced by a corpse’?

I'm happy she enjoyed it, but I only introduced it to her. I didn't expect her to repay me in any form.

But upon seeing my response, she suddenly smiled wide-eyed at me.

My eyes were drawn to the sight of such fragile beauty, like flowers being scattered from a cherry blossom tree.

"----Sakizaki, you're always so careful with your words."

I gasped.

But I won't say that she had figured me out.

After all, that could have been said by anyone. It was well known that I, lacking any particularly close friends, was silent except when I had something important to say.

But the next thing that came from her lips, nobody else could have said.

"You don't have to write a single word of your own. Just read my story for me. The book I write will remain with you forever. It will surely change your life—more than a countless number of stories written by others."

Saki clasped her hands together in front of her and bowed her head.

"So please read my story."

Her words were utterly beautiful, lacking even the tiniest bit of waste.

----She's quite sure of herself.

The book I write will change your life—what the hell is she talking about?

But her words resounded deeply within me, as if they were part of a story told just for me.

I looked down at the white envelope in my hand.

I only hesitated for a few seconds before opening the thin envelope. I withdrew the single sheet of stationery.

It contained the beginning of a story.

There was something about the passage—a sense of serenity—that touched me.

I held my breath and followed the string of characters with my eyes.

Before I knew it, there was a lump in my throat and tears streaming down my cheeks.

----*This girl is completely crazy.*

Her self-confidence was the real thing.

I now understood.

Saki would—without a doubt—change my life.

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“So will you do it?”

Before I knew it, she was right in front of me, leaning over slightly and staring intently at me.

Maybe she was trying to determine my facial expression when I had my handkerchief held to my eyes. I had the urge to tell her “No!” just to spite her relentless persistence pursuing a wounded enemy.

But that would be an unnecessary utterance. So I simply nodded.

“Yeah, count me in. Is this the story you are writing? Around how many pages are you planning?”

“3,500 pages.”

“What?!”

That number of pages would easily amount to the combined size of ten to fifteen regular-sized books. With that thickness, she'd have to spend quite a bit of her own money.

Even ignoring financial considerations, that book would be long. Too long. Bookstores wouldn't be happy and printing companies likely wouldn't be either.

But more importantly, any book that long would surely have unnecessary parts. This girl should give some consideration for her readers.

As if sensing my unspoken thoughts, Saki puffed her cheeks out and pouted.

"Let me get your advice about that stuff later. For now, I'm going to start writing, so just read."

"...I want to see the plot outline ahead of time."

"There is none."

"What?!"

Writing a 3,500 page book without an outline—what in the world is this girl thinking?

Maybe she's planning to spin off an epic side story in the middle of the main story arc.

For some reason, Saki was now standing tall with a defiant attitude, head raised.

"Also, if I told you about the story in advance, you'd know all the plot twists and it'd be no fun, right?"

"I'd still rather see it first. Modifying the plot structure after you write all 3,500 pages would be a nightmare."

"But it'd be no fun right?"

"..."

This girl is hopeless. She's not even listening to a word I'm saying.

She's looking to recruit someone to proofread her work, then doesn't listen to suggestions. Certainly, since everyone has their own perspective it's not necessary to listen to every single piece of advice, but there's a limit to everything. It's like going mountain climbing in the snow wearing a thick animal costume—there's a mix of "That makes sense," and "Are you crazy?"

Saki realized I was getting annoyed and quickly waved her hand in front of me.

“Don’t worry. I write really fast.”

“Just please make sure you don’t end up finally publishing your book when we are both 80 years old. If that happens, I’ll have to hurry up and fulfill the responsibility for writing my own book.”

“Wait until I finish writing the book. I promise I won’t make you wait long.”

“But it’s 3,500 pages.”

“I’ll finish by the time I’m 18, before I get old and senile.”

Saki smiled, ignoring what I said.

There was her defiant attitude again, but she was making sense.

“There are some conditions though.”

“I have some as well.”

“My first is that the manuscript I give you has to be read in front of me. I want to see your reaction.”

“My condition is that you don’t tell anyone I’m helping you out with your book.”

“Sure, and that goes the same for me. My other condition is----you can’t start writing your own book until you finish reading mine.”

That’s a strange request, I thought, but I guess she wants me to focus on proofreading.

I wasn’t planning on publishing my book until after high school anyway. I plan to spend ample time carefully refining my words.

Reaching agreement on the conditions, we both nodded.

“Alright. So when should I start?”

“Right now.”

Saying that, she pulled a few pages of report paper from her bag.

I guess the paper from her letter came from that. I was so excited about reading through the next part of her story, I almost screamed.

Saki grinned at me.

“Let’s go, Sakizaki. It’s time to get busy novel writing.”

I just couldn’t resist her words.

Chapter 3 – Introduction

When I was with Saki, staying unnoticed was nearly impossible.

Her good looks inherently attracted attention. On my own, my presence was the equivalent of a heavily diluted Calpico soft drink, whereas adding her to the mix resulted in a layer of undiluted flavor floating at the top.

When Saki was with me—a normal guy who lacked any special talents—she stood out even more. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to walk a few steps apart from her on the way to our destination; or even better, I could just meet her there.

This all went through my head as she led me to a small restaurant.

The building's red brick walls crawled with vines, and stained glass lined the inset windows.

Lunchtime was over, and the restaurant seemed to be shut down for a few hours until dinnertime. On the door hung a "Closed" sign.

Saki pushed opened the door without a moment's hesitation, causing the sign to sway back and forth.

I couldn't help but ask.

"Are you sure it's safe to barge in like this?"

"It's not like it's my first time."

This didn't quite answer my question.

Come to think of it, if the restaurant didn't want people coming in, they'd probably lock their door. Since they hadn't, I guess she was allowed to enter. After all, beautiful women always get special treatment.

But if there was some special reason they didn't lock their door, I'd really feel bad for the restaurant.

As I was thinking this, Saki added,

"If it was locked, I'd just break down the door."

"Then I'd really feel bad for the restaurant."

"It's OK. That's what this place is for."

"I don't think it's OK to do this sort of thing."

But Saki just ignored my logical argument. It seemed like whenever I was with her, I was made to say unnecessary things. How terribly unpleasant.

Since the restaurant was not in operation now, it was pretty dark inside.

There were four larger tables that sat four people each, and three smaller tables that sat two, arranged with ample space between them.

For a moment I thought a waitress might come to greet us. But no, that wasn't going to happen.

Saki chose the smaller table farthest from the door, inviting me to a chair that was positioned in a deep nook in the wall.

With a practiced hand she switched on the desk lamp there.

...But why would there be a desk lamp on a table in a restaurant, anyway?

Sitting on a table with a desk lamp between us brought to mind an interrogation room. Perhaps this was a special table for eating pork cutlet rice bowls, since the detectives often gave those to suspects during questioning in old TV police dramas.

"The table is used for book reading,"

Saki said, as if reading my mind yet again.

She sat down in the seat farthest from the wall as if she'd been there many times before. Then she motioned to me to take the opposing seat.

I had so many things to say, but I simply complied with her request and sat down.

"So, I guess I'll start reading the manuscript you showed me before."

"Aren't you going to order a drink or anything?"

"There is no waitress here, and this may in fact be considered unlawful entry."

"If you want coffee, there is a machine over there."

She pointed out a drip coffee machine of the kind you typically see at family restaurant drink bars.

I nodded, walked up to the machine, and poured coffee for two. When I returned to the table, I put one of the cups in front of her.

Gazing at the steaming cup of coffee, she spoke.

“When we get arrested for illegal entry, I wonder if the severity of our crime will be affected by whether or not we stole food or drinks.”

“If this is actually illegal entry, I wish you would have told me before I made coffee.”

“It’s just a joke. This restaurant rents out its space for book writing during non-business hours. I’m the one currently assigned.”

“Currently assigned?”

“They rent out to one person at a time. Nobody else will come until I’m finished writing.”

This sounded a little strange to me, but the dim inside of this restaurant was somehow a perfect fit for her, and this was enough to make me think she might be telling the truth.

Saki suddenly turned her gaze toward the nearby wall.

On a built-in bookshelf was a jumble of books with various titles and bindings.

When I found a book on it with a familiar title, I instinctively reached out for it.

“This is ‘Memories traced by a corpse’ ...”

“Yeah, I read it myself, when I was in middle school.”

I almost said, “That’s the same time I read it,” but held my tongue.

So on that day in class she had already known about the book. She knew, but kept quiet about it. I was questioned about a book from someone who was already familiar with it.

The thought of this was enough to turn my face red with humiliation. I was thankful the interior of the restaurant was so dark.

It was also fortunate Saki wasn’t looking at me. She was still glaring at the books lining the wall.

“There’s one thing in common with all these books.”

“That they all have been written here?”

“That’s also true.”

“There’s something else?”

“You’ll understand eventually–If you read my book, that is.”

She removed the report paper from her bag and handed it to me.

“You can start with this.”

“I’d be honored.”

I began to read the manuscript.

I wasn’t used to reading horizontal script, but her writing possessed a special power that made me quickly forget that.

I came to a description of the main character standing upon a grassy field. I turned a page, read some more description, then turned a another page----

“Saki?”

“Yes?”

“The intro is really long.”

Wow...Including the first page she’d given me, there was about 5,000 words just to describe the scenery. This was long. Too long. So this is what a 3,500 page book is like.

She even went as far as describing the kinds of grass and other plants growing on the field. But is that really necessary? She’s so good at writing such extraneous description, but that makes it all the more tiresome to read.

Saki responded to my comment with a blank look.

“Why do you think so? It’s only less than 0.1% of the entire book.”

“It’s not a question of percentage...I hope that writing a 3,500 page book doesn’t mean you are making the descriptions ten times more detailed than normal.”

“But aren’t you curious about all the plantlife that the main character is walking through?”

“If the main character was a plant biologist I would understand, but...”

“He isn’t going to study biology.”

“Then you don’t need that level of detail!”

What is this girl thinking? She’s never going to get to the main story line.

Being that this was a manuscript, I was even more uncomfortable having no idea where the story was going to go.

However, she responded to my criticism once again with a disapproving grimace.

“Why do you think it’s unnecessary?”

“...Because it’s not relevant to the story.”

“But this is where the story takes place. There is no such thing as irrelevant information, right?”

“That’s where you are wrong.”

I made this declaration despite the fact that I couldn’t make up my own mind.

I haven’t written my own book yet. That’s why my feedback comes from the point of view of a reader.

But at the same time, it’s also from the point of view of someone who will be an author someday. When it comes to books, everyone is on equal grounds here.

“The more information you give, the harder it is for the reader to decide what information is important. If you aren’t careful, it will be hard for the reader to follow the story and get absorbed in your book.”

“But it’s up to the reader to decide the importance of information, right? A book where every sentence contains only necessary information is nothing but a puzzle.”

“You have a point, but it’s a matter of degree.”

I guess you could say it’s up to the author to strike the proper balance here, but Saki was a bit on the extreme side.

After considering the best way to get my point across, I gave it another try.

“If you ask too much of the reader, they’ll won’t be able to even finish your book. They’ll end up quitting a few pages through the introduction.”

By forcing everyone to write a book, the overall quality of published works cannot be maintained.

These days, a book is valued by the quality of its introduction. Gone are the times when there was a guarantee a book was published because someone liked it.

But Saki responded to my well-thought criticism with a grin.

“Even though this is my one and only book?”

...If she is going to take that stance, we’re not going to get anywhere.

Each of us is only permitted a single book. That’s it. Saving something for a future book is not an option.

To put it bluntly----what people think of a book after it is published is, for the most part, irrelevant.

With the enormous number of books published each month, those released in the previous month are quickly overshadowed by the new releases.

Each day we are inundated with so many books, stopping to pick up one and read it is practically a meaningless endeavor.

That’s because regardless of demand, that author will never publish another book.

Given this, a person has no choice but to put their entire heart and soul into their one and only book.

I sighed and looked Saki right in the eyes.

“Nevertheless, I want you to fix it.”

“You’re asking me to compromise my principles?”

“Yes. Otherwise the quality of the work will suffer.”

It she wants to write a book just for the purpose of self-satisfaction, she should do it alone in a private room.

There’s no need to show it to me. After she writes whatever she likes, she can just show it to her fans.

They’d probably love her book regardless of what she wrote.

But you can count me out.

Saki continued to stare at me as the silence stretched on.

I wonder if this is what she meant by her first condition of “reading the book in front of her”. How terribly awkward this is. Saki’s facial expression remained calm no matter how long I stared at her.

Saki began speaking slowly, with a soft voice.

“I guess maybe it would be more interesting if I cut it down some.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“OK.”

Saki agreeing so easily made me feel as if she’d somehow side-stepped the issue.

She mumbled while writing in red ink on the report paper I’d returned to her.

“You know, I only write what I personally think is interesting.”

“Sure.”

“And what you think is interesting.”

“Why me?”

“Therefore, I couldn’t care less if not even a single other person in the universe didn’t like my book.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Does this mean that if Saki’s book is not well received, the blame fall on me, the proofreader?!

It’s not like I care, but something about this didn’t sit well with me. Saki shook her head.

“I’m the one who decided to write that kind of stuff.”

It might have been my imagination, but somewhere within her dignified voice I thought I detected a hint of indifference.

I felt a chill, and brought my coffee cup to my lips.

When I lowered my gaze, I could just picture the swaying grasses of her world in bright, vivid colors.

Chapter 4 – City

In the modern age, where book publishing has become obligatory, novel writing “how to” magazines have become increasingly popular.

While I have the feeling that this sort of thing can be learned naturally just from reading enough books, perhaps there is a certain percentage of people who want to make sure they understand such techniques.

From the magazine rack at a convenience store, I chose the one that had the least amount of unnecessary content.

There were some titled “Write a book that sells!” or “Popular book designs!”, but I would worry about those things later.

Now I had a more fundamental problem. Fortunately, Saki had a brain smart enough to comprehend even the most difficult of techniques.

Magazine in hand, I glanced at the store’s bookshelves on my way to the register.

There was mostly manga and how-to books, with the other genres containing only books from famous authors.

For the first printing, authors don’t receive royalties since the government covers the publishing costs.

Authors make money beginning with the second printing. However, with the exception of those written by well-known authors, most books never get a second printing.

This is probably related to the fact that the average person doesn’t engage in large-scale advertising for their book.

Collectors will search for books on their own, and word-of-mouth helps promote the good ones, but the majority of the consumer market just won’t put much effort into discovering interesting books.

As a result, the books that sell well all are written by famous authors, and advertised on TV commercials and posters all over.

I’ve heard there are companies that will advertise one’s book, but with the current state of things where authors can’t make money from an initial publishing even if their book sells, nobody will go through the trouble of using such a company.

And, even if your book sells, there will never be a sequel.

That's why those who truly love books will put as much effort as possible into their one, and only book, such that they are completely satisfied with it.

And they hope that their book will be remembered by someone.

“One lifetime, one book...”

To be unfettered by the shackles of time...

To preserve one's ideas...

To avoid being crushed by the world...

In world where every person is allowed to write, are there truly that many masterpieces within the stories of humanity?

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“I don't think so, Sakizaki. If you're going to get lost in thought, I wish you'd do it at a more critical part of the story.”

“Critical part?”

Indeed, the manuscript I'd been given was still just the introduction. Even if she cut down the description of plant life beneath the main character's feet, intro was intro.

Ideally I wanted to decide what should be cut after reading through the entire book. But if I did that, we wouldn't likely finish by the time we were 18 years old. So I've just been freely cutting parts day by day.

Saki spoke defiantly as she looked through the report paper which I'd marked up in red ink.

“Even you yourself think there is a mix of good stuff and crap. The masterpieces are there. But many are worthless.”

“But the opportunity is given to so many people. Surely, there are some great books that wouldn't otherwise have been published, right?”

“If you are just talking about being published, then yeah. But if too many people are given the opportunity, then nobody will ever see all the books made. There are just too many.”

Saki took a sip of the coffee I'd made for her.

Her black eyes glanced upwards at me.

"Sakizaki, did you know that 'all' is the actually the same as 'nothing'?"

----Here she goes getting extreme again.

I didn't voice this sarcastic thought, though.

Certainly, "all" and "nothing" are the same in the sense that neither of them involve any type of differentiation.

That's why giving everyone a chance is equivalent to giving nobody a chance.

Trying to make an appeal that "I am special" has no meaning either, because everyone the same.

Complete and utter emptiness.

Even given such an opportunity, is there really any point in putting a story into book form?

Feeling a little pessimistic, I sipped at the coffee I had made for myself.

Once again, today it was just us two in the dim restaurant. I wonder how often Saki pays the fee to rent this space.

There was a bunch of of things I was still curious about, but I'll figure those out later.

I voiced my summary of the day's proofreading.

"First of all, while the amount of description has decreased significantly, there is still a large number of characters."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

"There's a huge number of them. After the main character finally leaves the plains and enters the city, names are given for every single person he meets there. Even I couldn't remember more than about 22 names."

"Too bad. Only nine more and you would have learned them all."

"There is just too many! How many of those characters are going to reappear later in the story?"

“Some do, some don’t.”

What is this sense of futility I feel even before getting deep into a debate with her?

What’s wrong with me? It’s like I’ve given up from the moment I agreed to proofread her book.

It’ll be fine. I’m sure she’ll understand. Alright, here goes nothing.

“Saki, let’s try to get rid of a few characters.”

“Already? Even though you don’t know what part they will play in the story yet?”

“Later on, the city may burn and all of them may die a terrible death, or you might be planning to use a barrage of description for overwhelming effect at a critical turning point in the story. But let’s cut some characters anyway.”

“Looks like I just got a barrage of criticism from you, Sakizaki. It takes some real guts to completely ignore the intentions of an author.”

“Were you really planning on doing something like that?”

“Nope.”

I knew it.

When I didn’t say a word, Saki gave me a completely stupefied look.

“But Sakizaki, don’t you think it’s strange that a city that is supposed to have a population of around 300 doesn’t have any inhabitants?”

“Appearing realistic and reality itself are two different things.”

This is just like her over description problem.

Even if you describe things exactly how they are in reality, it’s not going to be particularly interesting, nor will it seem realistic.

It’s necessary to strike the right balance, but it’s hard to disagree that having 31 characters in the intro is too many. Even assuming that later all of these characters will develop some special power and play important roles in the main story, I’d like them to appear little by little. I can just

hear Saki saying, “but in the real world people don’t appear little by little,” but this kind of thing really helps improve readability.

I decided to address her complaint before she actually said it.

“Even on stage, crowds are represented by a small handful of people, right? If you try to make everything too realistic you’ll make things disorganized and blur the focus of the story. In this scene, I think three people is enough. And names are unnecessary.”

“Even though there’s no person alive who doesn’t have a name?”

“That’s right, even though there’s no person alive who doesn’t have a name.”

I motioned towards the desk lamp on the table.

Let’s assume that everything on this table is the world you have created. Then the novel you write is the lamp that illuminates things in that world. It shines a light on the things you want to show the reader. Everything else naturally becomes dim and obscured----That’s what I’m talking about.”

The author’s job is to highlight to the important parts the reader should focus on.

Otherwise the story won’t flow. It’ll be nothing but a jumbled mess.

It doesn’t matter how beautiful or how elaborate the world is.

In order to create a story, choices must be made.

Surely there is some meaning in the terrible cruelty of these choices.

When I realized it, Saki was staring at me again.

It was as if she was trying to drill a hole through me. But I had no reason to fear her.

Suddenly, Saki laughed.

“You’re always telling me to cut things out.”

“That’s because you are writing a 3,500 page book. If I’d told you to add things you’d end up with 4,000 pages.”

“If this world was a novel, then I’m sure we would be undescribed, nameless characters.”

“I don’t think you would be.”

If I had to guess, I’d say Saki is the type of person to be a main character.

But Saki, upon hearing my comment, simply smiled and went back to reviewing the manuscript.

“Once we finish this chapter, let’s go on a trip—just us two.”

It was so like Saki to say something crazy like that.

Chapter 5 – A Digression

We are all given the right to publish, but the materials and research expenses come from our own pockets.

I guess this is obvious, but as a result, job-related books always focus on their author's profession.

Unless there is a compelling reason, no one wants to spend their own money to research an unfamiliar topic for their book.

However, this might have been part of the government's plan when they put these laws in place.

A book is a mirror that reflects the life of the person who wrote it.

Each citizen is busy with their own life, and in the modern age there is perhaps no longer a need for anything apart from that.

Shaken back and forth inside an old three-car train, I gazed out the window at the countryside.

The scenery in this tiny fishing village was like something from a postcard. Put simply, it was like everything was frozen in time.

I glanced at Saki, who sat in the seat across from me.

"By now I hope it's OK to ask where we are headed on this research trip."

"To a station."

"That's blatantly obvious, and I'd be strongly opposed to going somewhere that didn't go through a station, since that would entail jumping off the train. What I'm asking is where we'll be going after we leave the station."

"Maybe we should get lunch somewhere."

"Makes sense. Let's do that first."

I'll stop asking questions. Just let her do what she wants.

I had no objection to getting off the train and finding lunch. I was fine with seafood, western food, or anything else.

She can go crazy with a sushi boat or even a grilled mutton dish.

Before I knew it, the our train was passing through the mountains.

After our conversation quickly dried up, we couldn't help but overhear other people talking somewhere in the same train car.

Probably a group of middle school boys. Strangely enough, it seemed that a few of them were talking about the books they'd published.

One of them spoke in an exceptionally loud voice.

"I read your book, but I had no idea what was going on."

"I don't care whether you had any idea or not."

The voice that responded had a slight edge on it.

In the seat across me, I saw Saki close her eyes. Maybe she was going to take a nap. What happened to the research?

"The scenes flashed by so quickly, and characters who were there one moment disappeared the next, freaky stuff!"

"That's because it was all based on dreams I had when I was a little kid. They somehow stuck in my head, I guess."

"Wow, that's pretty cool. Is there anybody else who is writing about that kind of thing?"

"Not sure. Try searching the database for 'dream diary'."

The database contains information on all books written in the country. The general populace has permission to access all published titles, author names, and summaries. Because bookstores can't carry all published books in existence, some collectors use this system to research and order certain books.

"So when are you going to write your book? I hear that if you wait until you are older, you'll never find enough time."

"I'm already thinking about it. It's going to be awesome, since I've been thinking about it since elementary school. You going to love it!"

“I’m surprised you actually want a friend to read your book. I’m going to make sure they don’t stock my book in any of the local bookstores.”

“No big deal, everyone has to write one anyway. Never bothered me one bit.”

“----Sensitive topic, huh?”

“I didn’t know you were awake, Saki.”

“It’s not like I was sleeping.”

Her dark eyes looked up towards the roof. Saki spoke in a soft voice that only I could hear.

“It’s amazing how a book means something different to each person. To some people, it’s like a key chain they clip on their bag, and to others it’s something they store away in a drawer and don’t want to show anyone.”

“Nobody would write a book about things they don’t want to show anyone.”

“I’m sure there are some things you’d only want to show someone who doesn’t know you, right?”

I didn’t answer, but I agreed with that statement for the most part.

I think there are some things I would be comfortable showing—or maybe even want to show—a stranger.

But there is a delicate sensibility involved here, and I can’t speak for others.

Saki took her time to pull a book from her bag.

It was a book I’d never seen before. The title was “Water Hyacinth and Stake”. I couldn’t begin to guess what it was about.

“This is a book published seven years ago by a certain woman. It’s supposedly fiction, but it’s actually an indictment.”

“An indictment...”

“Yes, an indictment of the injustices performed by the company she was working for. False names are used, but the truth is clear to anyone who reads it. She distributed it in a concentrated area around her hometown. You can guess what eventually happened.”

“Interesting. So there are books like that too.”

Truly, each person’s book means something different to them.

If so, what does my book mean to me?

The moment I tried to think about that, Saki smiled at me.

“For example, let’s say I didn’t have very long to live.”

“What an unpleasant assumption.”

“This means that everything I wrote and said would be interpreted to have special meaning, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You might call this a bit of an over generalization, but I feel that in this day and age, authors are too close to their books. You can think of authors and their works as being for the most part equivalent. I bet that those who are opposed to this will consider selling their book far away from their lives.”

Asking someone to evaluate a work without taking into consideration its author is no easy feat.

Of course, the author’s name can be hidden. But no matter what you do, you can’t remove the part of the author that is intimately connected to that work.

This can come from the author’s depth or breadth of knowledge, education, ideas, upbringing, or many other things.

Why it may be possible, authors nowadays haven’t been given the sort of training to hide their personal characteristics.

A book about a beautiful girl who doesn’t have much longer to live—that would undoubtedly sell well.

But Saki would never support that sort of thing. That should be obvious to anyone who knows her.

She would probably prefer to———erase pieces of herself from her book as much as possible.

Her dark eyes fixed on me.

“Before book writing became obligatory, when people died they didn’t leave behind much to remember them by. It was not uncommon for someone to only leave behind their name as the sole record of their existence.”

“That’s true.”

“But now things are different. Books remain.----This means the thoughts of every single person remain.”

An image of a tombstone suddenly came to mind.

A stone, placed when someone dies. This can be likened to a thick book.

Tombstones that once had only names carved into them will now include the deceased’s thoughts as well.

These will go on increase in number forever. Us who remain must walk through these tombstones.

So I asked this beautiful girl,

“You don’t want your thoughts to remain after you die?”

“Exposing my bare thoughts to others would be quite indecent.”

She smiled, as if challenging me.

“Saki, it is our duty to create a story, correct?”

It was as if she was making a small act of defiance----I thought as I nodded.

After that, Saki had us switch trains several times.

We had lunch at a tiny soba shop in the station near the train tracks. We didn’t even leave the ticket gate.

I had croquettes on soba noodle soup. I saw Saki eyeing my food so I gave her half.

“Your taste in food is quite ordinary. But I like it.”

The sight of Saki happily eating soba reminded me of a chipmunk.

After spending half of the day riding on trains, we had returned to the original station we'd started from.

I said to Saki,

“Why did we come back here...”

“What were we searching for was right under our noses.”

“But we weren't actually searching for anything, right? And you made us change trains so many times! You purposefully went in circles, didn't you?!”

“But it was fun listening to everyone speaking on the train.”

“...”

It wasn't actually particularly fun.

Although it was kind of interesting.

Middle school kids, high school kids, graduates, even older folks.

We heard about many different books from many different people.

To some people, their books were not nearly as important as getting married.

To others, they were as important as life itself.

Some even thought of their books as minor annoyances.

These kinds of thoughts had filled the train car.

And she was, undoubtedly, different than all of them.

Saki, sensing my frustration, smiled at me.

“All right, shall we get going?”

“Where? Are we going home now?”

“No. We’re going on a research trip.”

She whispered in a disturbingly clear voice.

“We are going to the house of Mitsunori Sugikata----the author of ‘Memories Traced by a Corpse.’”

Chapter 6 - 'Memories Traced by a Corpse'

The novel "Memories Traced by a Corpse" is classified as a surreal fantasy.

Told in the first person, it begins with a man whom we know only as "I" awaking in an unfamiliar train station.

With no idea why he is there, the main character leaves the station and starts to wander the city at twilight. The everyday scenery around him gradually begins to distort, and discrepancies develop between his memory and what he is experiencing.

He begins to lose his grasp on what is reality and what is not, and as the story progresses even his identity becomes uncertain.

In the end, the boundary between life and death itself becomes blurred, and while walking along the beach with a long-dead schoolmate he reveals that he considers himself as "nothing but a corpse".

The story ends suddenly with a scene of the beach below the moon.

Back then, I'd bought and read a new book almost every week, but my discovery of "Memories Traced by a Corpse" was by pure chance.

One day, in a bookstore I frequented, I came across a man staring intently at something on a display table.

When I followed his gaze, I saw a book's cover depicting a moonlit beach.

There was an illustration of a large beach seen from above, and in its center was a tiny silhouette of a person.

The figure was mostly likely the protagonist. But it was hard to make out any details from its small shadow.

Feeling a certain attraction to this mysterious book, I picked it up.

It ended up taking me three years to decipher it.

Even now, I'm not confident I understand it completely.

That's because the book has carefully thought out hints placed all throughout it.

-----"Memories Traced by a Corpse" is a pandora's box, and its author Mitsunori Sugikata is a monster.

Or so I had thought.

"Go to see Mitsunori Sugikata...You mean in your imagination?"

"I don't understand why I would do such a thing, nor how I would bring you into my imagination."

"It's your imagination, so you'd only be thinking I was together with you, whereas in reality I wouldn't be."

"You make me sound like a really pitiful person. To think I'd go information hunting with an imaginary person who doesn't even exist..."

"Hold on a second—I do exist."

"Oh well. I guess I'll go to Mitsunori Sugikata's place with an imaginary you. That'll be nice since I won't have to pay your bus fare."

"Will you stop already? Why the heck are you trying to visit Mitsunori Sugikata in the real world?"

Whether I existed or not wasn't the issue here, and talking about going out with an imaginary me was just Saki's attempt to annoy me.

Ready to pull my hair out from frustration, I tried to get the conversation back on track.

"Do you really know where Mitsunori Sugikata lives?"

"Of course. He lives in this city."

"That's close."

Naturally, this caught me off guard at first, but after thinking about it, I realized that maybe it wasn't that surprising after all.

Of all the many books that are on sale everyday, there's surely some reason for each book that gets displayed upon a bookstore's table.

The most common reason is simply that the book's author lives nearby.

I guess I'd never considered such an obvious connection because to me, Mitsunori Sugikata was like an imaginary person.

It's not uncommon to confuse a book's author and its characters, but it was embarrassing to have done this myself.

If Saki were to rub this in my face I'd probably drop dead on the spot.

"Silly boy. That means you had thought of Mitsunori Sugikata as a character in his own book, right?"

"I'm not going to drop dead. Sorry to disappoint you!"

"Did you just lose your mind? Or are you battling with an imaginary person?"

"Don't blame me. This is all your fault!"

We're not getting anywhere.

Talking to Saki is just like reading her novel. Long-winded and utterly unproductive.

I said, "Anyway, let's go. Come on already," and lead her out of the station.

We boarded a bus departing for the outskirts of town.

From the last seat of the nearly empty bus I watched the scenery outside the window.

Since we'd wasted so much time on the train going in circles, it was already evening.

Saki began talking from the seat next to me.

"Whenever I let you speak, you're so long-winded and the conversation is utterly unproductive, so I'll just explain."

"You're the one telling me?! This is all your fault!"

"When I was young, Mitsunori Sugikata lived next to me."

"Oh really?"

"He moved away when I was in middle school, but when he published his book we were still neighbors."

While I listened to Saki speak, I tried to recall what I knew about “Memories Traced by a Corpse”.

The book had went on sale five years ago, but like many others it apparently didn't sell very well.

The actual sales figures were only available to the government, and the general public had no way to know them. But judging from the fact that there were very few blogs or sites which mentioned this book, the rumors about it not selling much were probably true.

But at the same time, it was also true that there was a passionate cult following by a small group of people.

To this day there remain around 10 web sites that analyze the so-called “Corpse's Memory”.

Of those, only two are still being actively updated, where two passionate fans continue to chronicle their impressions of this mysterious story.

That gives you an idea how enigmatic and open to interpretation “Memories Traced by a Corpse” is.

There are so many unanswered questions: the identity of the main character and those of the people he is talking to, the true meaning of the cryptic things throughout...

There's surely many people interested in asking the author about the real meaning of these things.

But there was no contact information provided at the end of the book. So we had no choice but to trace the main character's memories ourselves and rack our brains thinking about the story.

----And now, Saki is saying we can actually meet this author.

“Saki, you actually read ‘Memories Traced by a Corpse’ right?”

“Yes. It's a very confusing story.”

“Yeah, I guess that's true.”

This girl doesn't mince her words. It's pretty obvious she just read the book and isn't one of those crazy fans.

Our bus passed through a quiet residential district.

I couldn't help noticing there, alongside the bus, was an old woman who looked to be in her 80s pedaling a bike.

Who is this lady? She's got amazing leg strength. If it was me, I could keep up with a bus.

I wonder if Saki will end up like that when she gets older. Scary.

Saki, who in my mind had just been demoted from a school heroine to a creepy monster, brushed back her long, black hair.

"It's no surprise that it is so confusing. After all, only a portion of the entire story was published."

"Yeah, of course...Wait, what did you say?!"

"A portion of the entire story"? Did she just say "portion of the entire story"?!

What the hell. So while we were struggling with such little information to figure out which interpretation was correct, there was actually more to the story...

"You should of have told me earlier!"

"But I think staying ignorant has it's own perks. As you learn more about this book, you'll experience an altogether different type of joy and suffering."

"Then at least please give me the right to choose."

"Once you find out, you're choice will already be made. It's same as when someone is born, they have no choice but to try living."

"I don't think I agree with you there."

When talking with Saki, somehow the conversation always gets derailed.

We generally end up at the point where I say, "You may be right, but I disagree," so it's a waste of energy to take things too seriously.

I decided to try and steer the conversation in a different direction to prevent her from going off on a tangent with this topic any longer.

"So have you been seeing Mitsunori Sugikata lately?"

“I guess it was three years ago when I met him last.”

“That’s a really long time to be out of touch! Are you sure it’s all right to go see him today?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Hey, pay attention, we are getting off at the next station.”

Right after Saki said that, the bus began slowing down and gradually came to a stop.

Unable to hide my confusion, I stepped off the train and into a deserted residential area.

Though each house had a different appearance, they were all enclosed by tall fences, giving the impression of some far-off country.

I walked a half step behind Saki through this forgotten city, which lacked any signs of life.

With each step I took, tension spread through every cell of my body, until even breathing became difficult.

After traveling less than five minutes, Saki suddenly stopped.

In front of us was an ordinary, yet elegant two-story house. Saki pushed the intercom button on the wall, and a few moments later an old woman poked her head out of the door.

Upon seeing Saki the woman’s face visibly relaxed, pretty despite the lack of makeup.

“Oh, It’s you Saki. Come in!”

“Hello. I hope you don’t mind, but today I have come with a friend.”

Saki stepped aside as she spoke, so I hurriedly greeted the old woman.

I wonder if this was Mitsunori Sugikata’s mother. It was a strange sight to watch Saki interacting with this woman like they were good friends.

We changed into slippers inside and were led to a room at the end of a hallway.

Standing before the door, the old woman said “I’ll go make some tea” and left us there.

Just as Saki put her hand on the doorknob, I asked in a hushed voice,

“I don’t meant to be rude, but is Mitsunori Sugikata still...”

“Alive? Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Because it doesn’t seem like you were away from this place for three years.”

Judging from way the old woman spoke to Saki, the girl had been coming here quite frequently.

And yet she claimed she hadn't seen Mitsunori Sugikata in three years, which seems to imply he was no longer alive.

Saki smiled at me.

It was an amazingly beautiful smile that highlighted the delicate curves of her face.

She turned the doorknob and opened the heavy wooden door.

“Welcome to Mitsunori Sugikata's personal study.”

The sight which expanded before me was a world of its own.

Chapter 7 – The Answer

Mitsunori Sugikata's study was a massive thing, enclosed on three sides by a bookshelf built into the wall.

In the front was a large wooden desk, upon which a single book laid open.

However, there was nothing else remarkable about the room. It had been kept clean, free of even a single spec of dust, but there wasn't particularly anything of interest within.

I looked around the stuffy room, detecting a certain smell often found in enclosed places.

"Wow, there's so many ancient books here..."

Mixed within the books on the bookshelf were several written by the same author.

These were from back in the days when there was still career authors. I called out in amazement at the sight of relics that could not longer be found in most people's homes.

Saki responded with a voice devoid of emotion.

"I don't mind if you look around, just make sure to put everything back where you found it. While these don't have much financial value, they are a precious treasure nonetheless."

"Why are you acting like this is your own room..."

"Before long I'll probably be the rightful owner of these."

"But this isn't your house! You don't live here!"

What the hell is this girl talking about? I just can't take her anywhere.

But this didn't change the fact that I was interested in Mitsunori Sugikata's collection of books. Without further discussion, I went around the backside of the desk.

Just as I began to look at the books there, my shirt collar was suddenly yanked from behind.

I screamed out in a terrible voice at the unexpected attack.

“Gyopgyit!”

“Sakizaki, you sound like a crazy bird...”

“I’m the one who should be complaining here! Why are you pulling my collar?!”

“If you died right now, your screams of anguish during your last moments would be a little underwhelming. Maybe you should get some practice?”

“Who in their right mind practices their last moments?!”

It’s amazing she could do something like this in another person’s house.

Rubbing my neck, I turned to face Saki again.

“It seems like you’re totally determined to rip my head off...”

“Not really. I just thought I would help you adjust your priorities.”

She pointed towards the study desk.

A single hardcover book laid open upon it.

I wonder if this is one of the books she talked about being the rightful owner of.

When I tried to get a good look at the book, she spoke again.

“That book has been there since the day Mitsunori Sugikata disappeared.”

“Mitsunori Sugikata? He disappeared?”

I was so glad to hear he didn’t die. I guess he is still missing somewhere.

Which I guess means...this book is the last clue to his disappearance.

I began to flip through the pages quickly----

“Wait a second. Is this...”

“What’s wrong?”

“This is... ‘Memories Traced by a Corpse’”

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind. Both the main character’s name and the setting was the same as “Memories Traced by a Corpse”. But I’d never read this scene before.

Also, this book was hardcover, unlike than the book I had read. I flipped it over and confirmed its binding was unfamiliar.

“This is really weird... This book is much thicker than the one I read.”

“That’s the second printing.”

“What...?”

“Second printing”? This doesn’t make any sense.

Even assuming that in rare cases books have a second printing, the design and thickness never changes to this degree.

If this kind of thing is permitted, the concept of “One life, one book” becomes fuzzy.

Saki gave me one of her beautiful smiles as I stood speechless.

“Sorry, let me clarify. This is actually the unpublished edition of ‘Memories Traced by a Corpse’. After the first printing was finished, he had this version created for himself. The reason there are so many pages is simply because of the many things he wasn’t able to cut out.”

“I would never have imagined that something like this...”

I was just dying to read this book...

On its own, “Memories Traced by a Corpse” was a surrealist novel where many parts had nearly infinite interpretations.

But the existence of unreleased material totally changes things.

Suddenly Saki grabbed my hand and stopped it from flipping through the book on its own accord.

Wondering what she was up to, I returned her stare.

Several seconds passed with our gazes locked----but she didn’t release my hand.

With a deadly serious look, I asked her.

“Are you just screwing around with me?”

“Yes.”

“Let go.”

What is going on in this girl’s head!

What the hell! Just let me read the book already!

But Saki wouldn’t let go of my hand.

She stared at me with her pitch-black eyes, floating like fragments of the night sky.

“You’ll regret this, Sakizaki.”

“Why would I?”

“Your life will never be the same.”

Why is she making such a big deal out of this?

But...what I have before me is “Memories Traced by a Corpse”. The enigmatic book that influenced me so much.

As if Saki had been right, I felt a mysterious energy coming from this book—the answer to all my questions—and quickly took a deep breath.

She flashed a pretty smile at me once more.

“If you are really fine with that, go ahead and do as you like.”

“Do as I like...?”

I’m sure there are many times where a book can change someone’s life.

That’s to be expected, considering that each of our lives is inextricably connected to our personal book.

And yet, every other book is also connected to someone's life.

----Therefore it's no surprise that another person's book could change my life.

That's why books exist in the first place.

So I nodded.

"I'll do as I like. So let go of my hand."

Saki was silent.

She released my hand as requested and withdrew a step.

I approached the desk and picked up "Memories Traced by a Corpse".

I opened it.

----To this day, I've never regretted my decision.

Chapter 8 – A New Development

A book, which could be considered the authoritative edition of “Memories Traced by a Corpse”.

What I found written there-----was both the same, and yet so very different from the story I had known.

Extra description added here and there. Entire paragraphs. Completely new scenes.

The number of possible interpretations multiplied just from reading a few lines. Things that were obscured became visible.

Every single piece of information served a purpose. I got lost in a maze of my own thoughts.

For the next five hours straight, I indulged myself in “Memories Traced by a Corpse”.

At the end of those five hours, I finally realized Saki had left.

When I went into the hallway to see where she went, I found her eating dinner with the old woman.

Having been told by from Saki to “do as I like” and by Mitsunori’s mother to “make myself at home,” I decided to return to reading.

I spent the entire next week in the study, reading alone.

“So, are you regretting your decision yet?”

When stopping by the study for the first time in a week, Saki saw my ragged form and asked.

For food and drink, I made do with what she had left for me, and Mitsunori’s mother had also offered her hospitality. But it goes without saying that I didn’t go to school during this time. Nor did I return home.

I gave up everything, dedicating myself to reading the book and thinking about its myriad possibilities.

Reluctant to even move my body I sat still on the floor, only moving my eyes to look up at Saki.

“No. I haven’t regretted it one bit.”

I had no reason to regret anything.

I was in bliss just to be able to read this book. I can say with confidence I'm the happiest person in the universe.

My life has had a purpose. I'm grateful to have known this book.

I had nothing else to say to her.

I did feel sorry for Mrs. Sugikata, but I would repay her someday.

Even if it took my entire life. That's how important this book was to me.

But upon hearing my declaration, Saki smiled.

"Sakizaki, I think you're misunderstanding something."

Saki entered the study, her shoes making a loud scuffing sound.

She slipped by me as I lay exhausted on the floor and went to the back of the room.

There stood a bookshelf----but where she extended her hand was not towards it, but to a cabinet below.

Just then, I suddenly had a bad feeling.

Actually, I guess you wouldn't call it a "bad" feeling. Rather, it was something to be happy about.

She opened the cabinet##.

Inside was a large stack of papers.

"These notes were all written by Mitsunori Sugikata himself. There are character design sheets, events that didn't make it to the book, and many other things."

"...These are all his notes."

A single book had taken me one week.

But this was over ten times the material of a single book.

I can't even imagine how much time it would take. But I didn't care.

I had no choice but to read it. I'd embarked on a journey where there was no turning back.

---- into the realm beyond "one life, one book".

Why indeed are we only permitted to write a single book during our lifetimes?

I cleared my dry throat.

"Saki?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think I'm still sane?"

"Of course."

My life will never be the same.

Saki had been right about that. My life had irrevocably changed.

A single story had made that possible.

A story that I couldn't allow myself to overlook even the smallest detail of.

Saki smiled at the me—the new, changed me.

"I chose you because you're that type of person."

"Because I'm a fan of 'Memories Traced by a Corpse' "?

"No. Because you're someone who can't turn back once you've learned something."

" 'Can't turn back once I've learned something'?"

"You felt it yourself, right? That one volume wasn't enough."

Saying that, Saki opened her bag.

She withdrew a thick manuscript and three sets of notes.

These weren't from Mitsunori Sugikata. Instead, they were her own story, written by her own hand.

The story that I'd critiqued as being too long----

"Sakizaki, you have been a great reader."

---- Yeah.

I'd already predicted what she would say next.

Had she not been saying it from the very beginning?

"You don't have to read anything"..."Just read what I write."

She had chosen me, the one so careful with words, the one who couldn't give up an attachment to reading.

Because with just the single book we were permitted to write, things were so terribly insufficient.

Saki had also chosen to not throw away a story that was no match for Mitsunori Sugikata's genius.

Instead, she had chosen me,

and this was surely so that...

"That's why I'd like your obligation to publish."

...she could make this request of me.

Chapter 9 – Defeat

“All individuals must author and publish a single literary work within their lifetime.”

This clause from Chapter 2, Section 16 of the Fundamental Education Act was established long before any of us were born.

One life, one book. This was a strict social rule and considered to be common sense.

Of course, there were rumors of those who bought and sold their obligation to publish, but those deals were done behind closed doors, and if you were caught the penalty was harsh. To make matters worse, you now had a criminal record. For the remainder of your life, society looked upon you as a felon. It's like they used to say to criminals back in the day: good luck finding anyone to marry or hire you.

But was Saki's request really the same thing as crossing this perilous bridge?

No, it was much, much worse than that----a genuine act of madness.

“Give my obligation to publish, to you?”

“Yeah. We just publish both of our books on the same day. I'm even thinking about how we can get through the screening process.”

“You mean we publish two volumes about the same story?”

“In traditional novel terminology, I guess you'd call it a two-volume series.”

“But Saki...”

Was she really serious about this?

She seemed to have no intention of covering up the fact we would be committing an illegal act.

A single person publishing two books----we would be making this transgression public to the world.

Naturally, as the main perpetrator she would surely be arrested, as would I.

Saki was asking me to be her accomplice with full knowledge of this.

From the very beginning, she had chosen me with this in mind.

“——— Have you lost your mind?”

“Of course not.”

“We’ll be arrested by the police.”

“I know that.”

“We’ll be throwing away our lives.”

“I know that too. So what?”

“You’ll also be implicating me.”

“That’s right.”

She smiled, face overflowing with confidence.

“But Sakizaki, you don’t actually care about that sort of thing, right?”

Her beauty nearly drove me insane.

How did I ever end up in a situation like this?

Her request to proofread had been a complete lie. She has taken things too far. I should have declined her stupid offer.

This girl is a total bitch.

She’s a bitch and...but...so I...

“...Show me that manuscript.”

I extended my hand to her.

Saki, as if predicting my response, respectfully kneeled before me.

“Here, take it.”

And thus, I took hold of her world.

What makes a good story?

I’d talked at length to her about this many a time.

Though it wasn’t something I normally do, I put my thoughts into words. I told her “this is how it should be” and tried to pigeonhole her.

About how to make readers happy. How to make a well-written novel, a masterpiece.

---- But now when I look back, none of that really mattered.

All my suggestions evaporated into nothing before a living, breathing world.

That isn’t what the act of storytelling—the act of creation—is about.

“Sakizaki, our job is to *create* a story.”

Just as the Creator had done at the beginning of time.

From the birth of a glorious hero, to the withering of an ephemeral flower.

We create our world in its entirety, one piece at a time.

From the day we were born, we have been given the freedom to do this.

---- As it should be.

My eyes darted across the page, following her story.

“...This is crazy.”

My knees were wet with fallen tears.

“You are totally crazy...”

“I know that.”

“You are even crazier for having chosen me.”

“I have confidence in my ability to judge others.”

“But the craziest one of all is me, who is going along with this.”

My trembling fingers turned the page.

I touched her world.

A world so self-important and so awkward, and yet so beautiful.

An author removing parts of themselves from a book-----what a foolish idea. Saki's world mirrored herself in every way imaginable.

The proud, true expression of-----

If you don't call this love, then I don't know what is.

Once, I had wanted to write my own story.

To pour my whole heart and soul into it. One life, one book.

Atlases lit the fire of my imagination. The more history I learned, the more ideas I developed.

But there was no longer any reason to do that.

“...Even though I haven't actually done anything, even though I'll never be able to publish my own book, I'll be a criminal. A wrongdoer.”

Society will probably see this as a thoughtless act of youthful indiscretion. An act only possible by an idiot who doesn't care about his future.

But such ridicule has less worth than a spec of dust.

The rantings of strangers never bring about anything of merit.

I stared at Saki.

Her good looks called to mind a finely crafted doll.

I gazed directly into those world-encompassing eyes.

“Saki, you are the worst.”

“Yes.”

“But your story...is the best.”

I exhaled deeply.

And wished my breath would somehow reach her.

“If you want to change my life, go ahead.”

I’ll give her everything.

Just as she desires.

“Saki----my book is yours.”

I pray that I as long as I live, I’ll never again face such a terrible betrayal, a terrible defeat.

“Thanks, Sakizaki.”

Her trembling voice whispered softly in my ear.

“You’re really going to love it. After all, I’m writing this book just for you.”

But this lie was all I got in return from her.

Chapter 10 – Graduation

There wasn't anything particularly memorable about our high school graduation ceremony.

I wasn't overcome with emotion or anything like that. The principal's speech was long and boring, and I had to struggle to stay awake.

Any important memories would surely be made now, after the ceremony.

I climbed the ladder leading to the water tower on the school's roof. Saki was waiting up there for me with a hardcover book open.

A pair of two books: one blue, one black.

That's what we published last week.

Once I reached the top, I sat next to Saki and picked up the volume that listed me as the author.

At home I'd already received a sample copy, but this one Saki had bought personally.

Saki spoke, her eyes fixed on the first volume published under her name.

"I was sort of expecting it, but the examination process really was a total joke."

"The same person would have to read both books to realize what we did. The character and place names are different too."

Our two books depicted the same set of characters in the same world, but each volume described things from the perspective of a different country.

That's why the character and country names are slightly different. It's like one book was written with English pronunciations and one with German.

In the examination, the judges try to catch plagiarism by looking for matching proper nouns and areas of text, which is probably why we managed to get through it without any problems.

Saki breathed a sigh of despair.

“Everyone is able to publish, so from society’s point of view, the significance of a single work is equivalent to zero. The only thing that matters is whether you follow the established rules or not. People just pay attention to the parts that are easy to understand, and ignore the rest.”

“If you look at the big picture, just about everything is like that.”

“How boring.”

Just like that, she ended the conversation.

However, by now they were probably starting to realize what had happened.

News of Saki’s book had spread throughout school, and many people had ordered it together with “my” book.

It was clear that many students had already figured it out. Rumors could be heard all over about our books.

In the middle of one of my many re-readings (I lost count how many), I spoke.

“I heard the teachers were planning on waiting until graduation before reporting us, so the cops will probably come any time now.”

“I guess you could call them considerate.”

“Maybe they didn’t want actively enrolled students being arrested. Especially you, a honor student.”

If one of the brightest girls in the school was exposed as a criminal, the teachers themselves might be suspected.

We didn’t ask for college recommendation letters; it was the least we could do for the school.

Saki and I had stoically accepted the fact that our admission to college would be revoked.

And yet, out of what I guess you could call a societal obligation, we still made an effort to study for college entrance exams.

When the ceremony ended, the campus was bustling with new graduates and those who had come to see them off.

A lower class girl holding a blower bouquet walked restlessly around the campus, as if searching for someone.

I wondered if it was really a good idea for Saki to be up here when there were surely a bunch of people searching for her down below.

I glanced at her briefly, but she was still deeply absorbed in her book. Maybe she was searching for typos. Did she actually expect there to be a second printing?

Presented with a perfect view of her beautiful face from the side, I exhaled slowly and withdrew something from my bag.

I showed it to Saki.

“Take this.”

“...Sakizaki.”

I handed the thick manuscript to her.

Saki looked down at the book’s cover, her large eyes wide in surprise.

“Is this manuscript...”

“I wrote it.”

A manuscript, which no longer had any chance to become a book in my lifetime.

A story never likely to reach the bookshelves, never likely to be seen by others.

But after my college tests ended I wrote it anyway.

I held nothing back, putting my entire heart and soul into it. One book, one life.

“I want you to read it.”

In this day in age, was it commonplace to dedicate a story to someone, or was I just deluding myself?

If nothing else, I guess Saki writing her book “for me” was her own way to atone for sacrificing my life.

Saki had tried to write a story that I would fall in love with. Or at least she hoped it would turn out that way.

That’s why I wrote this for myself. And for her.

It’s not as complicated as it sounds. I simply made the assumption that anything I liked, she would like too.

And the only person to ever read my story would be her. That’s why I wrote this story.

Saki placed the manuscript on her lap. She exhaled deeply.

Straightening her posture, she began to slowly flip through the manuscript.

I watched her long eyelashes. I could tell her dark eyes were following the story, line by line.

Long ago, she had made a request that I read in front of her. Now that the roles are reversed, I’m really surprised she had the courage to ask that.

To be honest, having someone read my manuscript right next to me was extremely embarrassing. I found myself practically jumping at every little breath of hers.

I had ended up finishing my story without any one proofreading it. It was all or nothing, and I don’t think my odds were too great.

Nevertheless, I’d done my best. That alone was certain.

Up above on the quiet rooftop, the only thing I heard was the sound of pages being turned.

Quite a long time had passed, but Saki hadn't looked up from the book even a single time.

Next to her, I gazed absent-mindedly down at the school grounds.

As if we had been discovered, I could see a group of several people pointing towards the water tower and speaking amongst themselves.

I guess that hanging out up here was, not surprisingly, a bad idea. The crowd gradually began to grow.

"Saki, this isn't looking too good."

Perhaps we looked like lovers about to commit suicide together. Before I realized it, several teachers had also come outside and were staring towards us.

We had locked the door to the roof on our way up, but I got the feeling it was only a matter of time until someone reported us, or broke down the door.

I went to shake Saki's shoulder.

But she caught my hand midway.

"What are you going to..." I started to say, but her pale hand grabbed my shirt collar before I could finish.

Staring at me, she brought her face close to mine.

I gazed deeply into her dark eyes and time seemed to stop----and for an instant, our lips touched.

Her long eyelashes gently caressed my face.

A gentle breeze blew by, carrying sand with it.

Her face slowly pulled away from mine.

As I stared dumbfounded, Saki whispered in my ear.

“I love you, Sakizaki.”

Her voice sounded like the clearest, purest thing in the universe.

Still dangerously close, her beautiful face stared openly at me. For some reason, I didn't recognize the person reflected in her dark eyes.

“...Saki, so you've finally lost your mind?”

“I'm being serious. I've your trying to be funny to hide your embarrassment, I'm knocking you off this tank.”

“I won't survive the fall, so please don't.”

What's with her all of a sudden?

If she said the kiss was because she'd practically ruined my life, I'd tell her to leave me alone. It's a little late for that.

But if she said it wasn't for that reason, but rather because she had read my novel and----

“I have no memory of writing something which is supposed to blur the line between the story and the author who wrote it.”

“That's true. The characters are totally different than you.”

“Then why?”

I knew she couldn't lie about this sort of thing.

I hadn't known her very long, but I knew that much about her. What I didn't know is why she had suddenly said such a thing to me.

But then she smiled----a smile so bright that it put to rest all my doubts.

“I love the one who wrote this story--you.”

“What does a story tell you about me?”

“It tells me who you are.----And what else is there to love about a person besides who they are?”

Her hand took mine.

Our lips met.

A kiss of breath, of words.

A vow to spend the rest of our lives together.

Even in this world of limitations, she would live her freedom to the fullest.

“That’s why Sakizaki, you are the one who will change my life.”

On the verge of tears, Saki grinned at me shyly.

Her smile was just enough for a single book.



How should one confront the single book of their life?

Writing can be seen as a projection of a person’s life. Written honestly or not, a book is a mirror that reflects the person who wrote it.

But neither Saki nor I desire such a thing, or consider it to be just.

Books, and the world itself, is much freer, much more open to possibility.

As it should be. As we create our own worlds, in defiance.

From up on the water tower, I looked down at the school grounds.

Someone had apparently reported us—I could see a police car coming in through the school gate.

A large crowd of students had gathered below. Soon the negotiations would begin. We might also be questioned about our publishing violation.

I stood up and offered my hand to Saki.

“Did you finish reading it?”

“Sure did. And I remember every single thing.”

“Wow, you’re a pretty fast reader!”

Could this be the reason for our difference in grades? I was suddenly envious of her, but this wasn’t the time nor the place for that.

I looked down at the manuscript in my hand. I gripped it tightly, nothing but a bundle of printed papers bound by a black string.

The novel I’d stayed up until late to write, night after night. I’d edited it so many places, I don’t know how it ended up.

I glared at the result of all my hard work with an expression part pride, part irony.

Then I untied the string.

I raised my voice so all the students around would hear me.

“If each one of us has the capability to produce a single work worthy of being called a ‘masterpiece’ in our lifetime...”

I removed the string which held together the story.

The white sheets began to spill from my hands.

“...Then I choose to dedicate my book to this girl. This is all I want.”

All for this girl, whom I knew cherished this world so dearly, more than anyone else.

This is the freedom I’ve chosen.

It’s how I chose to confront myself, head on.

And if she truly loves my story-----as an author, I couldn’t be any happier.

The manuscript left my hand and rained down upon the schoolyard in fragments.

I could see a bunch of students starting to move around and collect the falling pages.

Saki looked up at me with a look of utter astonishment.

“...Wow, that was pretty impressive.”

“If even a single person reads one of the pages and wants to see the rest of the story, they’ll go around collecting all the pages.”

“We’ll, aren’t we overconfident.”

“Not nearly as much as you.”

Up until now, I’d been surprised many times by her and lost many battles.

But it was kind of nice to see her surprised for once.

I offered my empty hand to her.

Saki took my hand, acting just like a girl of her age should----

As always, a special girl, my girl.

【End】