

Memorial Tree.

Yu Mogami.

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Ikegami got up and was disoriented for a moment. The room was empty. The smell of new construction materials assailed his nostrils. He was in his studio apartment. Ikegami was the new section chief of Minato Electron which was a firm of IT machinery. He was recently transferred to a new factory in Nagano prefecture, and it was the first morning at his new post.

Just yesterday, Ikegami left his house. He behaved as if it was just a usual business trip as he said to his wife, Naoko, " I' m going now."

Naoko made a sad smile. When Ikegami was putting on his black leather shoes at the front door Naoko shouted toward the second floor.

"Kazuya! Dad's going. Say goodbye."

Ikegami finished putting on his shoes and waited a moment, but there were no signs on the door of the second floor.

"Kazuya!"

"It doesn' t matter. Take care of Kazuya when I' m gone. If there's any emergency, call me."

He left the house immediately, tearing himself away from Naoko's eyes. When he started to drive away, he tried to get a final glimpse of his son at the second floor. Kazuya's shadow could be seen behind one of the windows.

Meanwhile, back in his apartment, Ikegami put away a futon and opened the window. A mountain range covered in snow stood in front of his window like a folding screen. When he took a breath, cells in his body awoke in the chilly air. Now, it's the right time. By achieving the project of this new factory, this would be his chance to get promoted. He clenched his fists, determined to succeed at this project.

He headed toward his company factory through a road between the rice fields. Rice stems and grass could be seen growing from the frosty ground after the rice harvest around October. A gray building stood in the

desolate landscape sleeping under that winter night. Construction was still going on so sand and building materials could be seen at the vacant lot around the building.

Ikegami entered the main building through gleaming automatic doors. Inside, the white walls of the hall are dazzling. Covering the carpeted floors of the aisles were corrugated cardboards for protection. The interior was still also under construction. Ikegami went directly to the third floor. Desks were arranged neatly on the wide floor. Glass walls surrounded three sides of the room, so Ikegami's office was very bright. Minato-Electron produces and sells small computers and equipment. The company tries to meet the growing demand for the latest trend in the information-oriented business. Increasing demand exceeded the capacity of the current factory in Kawasaki city. Minato decided to construct a new factory in Nagano prefecture. Ikegami has been assigned as a member of the new factory construction project and the leader of the information system development team. The information system was the nerve center of the factory.

Ikegami had no time to be sentimental over his new office. Production materials and equipment were transported for the factory operations after the consecutive holidays in May. The final preparations and last checks were awaiting Ikegami's approval.

In the factory, Ikegami passed through the production lines. The parts from the manufacturer were automatically stocked directly into a warehouse by a belt conveyor after their barcode and delivery statement have been read. Many automatic conveyance cars called "robot-car" were coming and going in a middle of the product assembly line on the third floor while playing electronic sounds.

As Ikegami walked alongside a robot car that was playing electronic sounds, he remembered what happened at home the previous day. His son, Kazuya was a junior high school second-year student. Ikegami thought it would be the right time for Kazuya to devote himself in preparing for the high school entrance exam. But Kazuya didn't want to concentrate on studying anymore, unlike before. He always listened to music nowadays. Ikegami's wife, Naoko worried about it, asked him to call their son's attention many times before. But Ikegami was busy with his work so left

them alone. After dinner, Ikegami stopped Kazuya from leaving the dining room as he headed for his bedroom.

"How were your final exam results, Kazuya?" Ikegami asked his son calmly. Kazuya didn't answer while sitting on the sofa. So, Ikegami continued, "I asked your mother, and she said they were worse than your midterm exam results."

Naoko came back from the kitchen and joined the conversation.

"The teacher also told me that everyone will do their best from now on, so you can't feel relieved just because you're doing a little better. The future is important. Kazuya." Kazuya glared at his mother as if she was talking too much. Ikegami also scolded him.

"Your mother's right. If you don't care, you won't get into a good high school."

Kazuya visibly annoyed and shouted, "Too noisy! I know what you mean!"

Ikegami continued, "If you understand what I mean, then stop listening to music and instead you should study hard!"

In exasperation, Kazuya yelled, "Too noisy! Just go away, go back to Nagano!"

"What!" Hearing Kazuya's rough words, which he had never heard before, Ikegami forgot himself and hit Kazuya across the face. Kazuya rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand, glared at his father with tearful eyes and left the room recklessly. Ikegami can be gentle with others, but he is short-tempered with his own son. In his head, he knows that he must listen carefully to what his son is saying, but he can't help himself from criticizing Kazuya. In the past, the two of them used to enjoy playing catch and soccer together.

As he shook his head, he almost hit a robocar. Ikegami reminded himself that this was not the time to think about such things.

This factory is fully computer-controlled and automated and operates 24 hours a day seven days a week. Therefore, the system for automatically controlling the entire factory is complex and diverse.

Ikegami's group was in a race against time to prepare and evaluate the system. They have a proven track record in automating individual production lines. However, it is a different story when it comes to the systemization of the entire factory that integrates all lines. They have

done an initial assessment before the start of operations. But it's just a standard case test with a small amount of data. They can't predict what will happen in the mass production of the actual operation. Ikegami could not relax until he has tested all the processes in the production line. But it's impossible.

After the consecutive holidays, the day finally came for the factory to start operating. It was a sunny day in May at 9:00 in the morning. All employees gathered in front of the main entrance for the opening ceremony. Meanwhile the executives from the parent company, Minato Electron, and this new subsidiary, Nagano Minato Electron, faced them. The executives were in a good mood due to the fine weather on the day of the start of operations. On the other hand, many of the employees, including Ikegami were nervous. The executives took turns standing in front of the microphone using high-spirited words to highlight the significance of the new factory and its future development.

Standing in the front row, Ikegami wavered between excitement that he had finally come this far and anxiety about the future. Under the blue sky, he wanted to boast that it was them, the project execution team, who had raised everything up to this point, not just lip service executives. At the same time, he felt with a shiver that perhaps this was the unveiling of a fiasco.

The ceremony moved to the memorial tree planting. The chairman and president of Minato Electron and the president of Nagano Minato Electron planted the saplings. The saplings that had been heaped up with soil by the staff swayed their small leaves in the breeze. Perhaps these trees will be carefully managed and take root this land. Compared to that, the employees who have been seconded to Nagano Minato Electron, must take root upon this barren land on their own.

After the ceremony, the production operations began. The staggering number of materials and people led to confusion at times because they didn't know what to do in the beginning. Running around in confusion, some workers forgot the training from Ikegami about the system. Moreover, the storage of the transferred parts has not been completed yet. There was no choice but to suspend the introduction of new products until all stocks were inventoried. They had to proceed with work that was in

progress only. Ikegami regretted that this delay has affected his production plan, but this was just the start of bigger problems to come.

Three days later, the goods to be transferred finally finished inventory and the shipping instructions were all immediately sent out. A huge load of shipping instructions was dumped on the delivery staff who were not used to so much work all at once. To solve the mounting shipments awaiting delivery, the machines and workers had no choice but to keep working day and night.

Ikegami thought of going home during weekends because his home was two hours away by car. However, this plan would not push through. On Saturday, the work operations were moving well in trying to catch up with production delays. And Ikegami and his team of workers had no choice but to work even on Sundays to fulfill demands by line workers. Ikegami by himself doesn't make the computer software. But he couldn't just let his subordinates work and take a rest by himself.

Ikegami seldom stays at his apartment which doesn't even have basic furniture. He ate all three meals in the company cafeteria. At the apartment, he only went back there to sleep. Of course, the futon was left unfolded. He was in trouble because the laundry piled up, but luckily there was a cleaning shop nearby, so he was saved.

One day early in the morning his phone rang. Ikegami answered the phone in a sleepy voice.

"Are you okay?" It was Naoko.

"Oh, what? What happened?" Ikegami inquired into the phone.

Naoko's voice sounded tired when she answered, "I don't know what to do. I haven't heard from you since you left, so I was worried. Whenever I call you, you won't answer the phone."

Ikegami's voice in turn was apologetic, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm busy. But I'm fine, so you don't have to worry. How about you? How is Kazuya doing?"

Naoko continued, "Well, I'm doing okay, somehow. Kazuya is still the same."

"Really?" Ikegami was surprised.

"Listen, can I call your company when I want to contact you?"

"Sure. If it's an emergency, go ahead. I'll put the phone in the apartment on answering machine mode, you can leave a message anytime." Ikegami told her. Naoko seemed to want to talk more, but Ikegami cut her off.

Ikegami was the first among his colleagues to get married. When he graduated from university and joined his first company, his roommate in the dormitory for singles was organizing social activities to meet colleagues. So, he joined a bowling event just for fun, and there he met Naoko. After their game, they went for a walk along a nearby river. They had juice and sweets, and they talked about politics. Although Ikegami sympathized with those who severely criticized the politics of the Liberal Democratic Party, he always took a critical position. And he instinctively felt that going any further was dangerous. Naoko said she worked at a nearby company and seemed to have just joined the circle. After that, Ikegami began to meet with Naoko alone and never joined the social group again.

After getting married, Naoko resigned from work before Kazuya was born. Ikegami wanted Naoko to stay at home. In their fifteen years of marriage, it was the first time for him to live apart from Naoko. In the course of building the new factory, Ikegami failed to give much attention to his family.

During conversations with other workers, Ikegami came to know about their wives coming to take care of their personal belongings and checking on their husbands, but Naoko never came to look after him. He understood that Kazuya needed his mother's support, however, Ikegami felt lonely sometimes.

A month has passed since the factory started operations. The workers were starting to get disgruntled as the unreasonable overtime work for emergency responses accumulated. On one particularly busy day, Ikegami was compiling a report at his computer. Mr. Terashima, the section manager of the semi-unit assembly line, came and sat down in front of Mr. Ono, the manager. Mr. Terashima is a veteran section manager and is older than Mr. Ono.

"Well, we're in trouble because we can't do anything. We don't have the parts to make sub-units. Also, when the parts arrive, we will be forced to rush the sub-units as soon as possible. That would be so unthinkable!"

While throwing a glance at Ikegami, Mr. Terashima was arguing with sarcasm and whining at Mr. Ono. With a wry smile, Mr. Ono lifted his hips slightly, lowering his head and said, "I'm sorry. We should be over the peak soon, so please cooperate for a while longer."

With a sigh, Mr. Terashima replied, "In the past, when there was an emergency, I would bow to the warehouse staff and they would give me the parts, but now bowing to the machines won't help. Even though I know the parts are there, I can't get the parts. It's regrettable."

Mr. Ono added, "Once things settle down, efficiency will increase."

Mr. Ono was also trying hard to appease Mr. Terashima.

Mr. Terashima seemed to feel a little better after saying that, but he remembered something and sat down again. "Come to think of it, when I went to the warehouse manager, he said something strange. The number of parts in stock on the computer and the number of actual parts often did not match. The difference seems to be getting bigger."

When Ikegami heard this, he stopped typing on his keyboard. A chill ran down his spine. "No way!" he groaned but no sound came out. If the number of parts in stock is more than the actual parts, it means there are no parts even though a delivery instruction has been given. If it is the opposite, even though the parts are in stock, purchase orders will continue to be given. And the outcome will continue to grow. It could become a major problem.

Ikegami and Ezaki immediately began investigating. Certainly, the account Mr. Terashima was talking about had a widening difference in the number of stocks versus the number of available parts. However, in some accounts, the numbers were correct while in other cases they were slightly different. Before the transfer from the old factory, the numbers could have been inaccurate. He wanted to think so. However, the matter was too serious to be dismissed straightaway. The two of them carefully tracked the recorded data of incoming and outgoing inventory of the inaccurate account. In the system, the incoming and outgoing data that has been recorded for the past month was enormous. As Ikegami tracked down the incoming and outgoing data, he became anxious about whether the incoming and outgoing data itself was recorded correctly. Distracted, he lost track of what he had been following with his eyes and had to start over from the beginning of the page.

At midnight, it was dark outside the window. All workers had gone home, only a few people could be seen on the floor in the distance. Only the sounds of the two men flipping through lists could be heard. Several discrepancies in incoming and outgoing data were found. But why did it happen? No common factor was found. The two of them tried to suggest possible causes, but when confronted with data that contradicted them, they were confounded. They spread out the lists of program sources and attempted to explain the data history from the program's logic. He repeatedly traced the logic from the beginning of the program. His tired head was spinning, and the program seemed perfect. Strangely, he was not sleepy, but his brain wasn't working properly. He had a feeling when he's desperately trying to escape like in a dream. But his body was paralyzed, and he couldn't move.

It was before dawn. Outside the window, which had been pitch black, became white. Ikegami went to the washroom to wash his face. Ikegami looked at his own face in the mirror. His face was oily and his eyes lifeless. He slapped both his hands on his unshaven cheeks now covered with stubble and muttered, "Damn!"

There will probably be more bugs in the program. Unless incoming and outgoing data of all accounts are checked, it cannot be said that bugs have been eliminated. Also, they must figure out a way to fix the stock numbers that have gone awry. There are over 100,000 parts listed in the inventory. The enormous amount made Ikegami dizzy, so he put his hands on the washbasin to steady himself.

When it was time to start the day, Yamane and several workers came to work. They belonged to a company that provide supplementary work to Minato Electron. After a few hours of reviewing the program and searching for the cause of the discrepancy in the numbers, Ikegami's team found one bug. Ikegami felt the blood rush to his head, resisting the urge to punch Yamane, as Yamane bowed his head. Even if he punched this guy, things wouldn't go back to normal. Ikegami immediately went to his manager's desk to report their finding. Mr. Ono's words were surprisingly soft as they came from above Ikegami's head who was looking down.

"Well, I understand. It's the first time, but things like this happen all the time. Thank you for working all night. I'll explain it to the managing director."

Mr. Ono mistakenly believed that all bugs were gone by now. Ikegami tried to tell him that there might be more bugs. However, Mr. Ono got a phone call and Ikegami missed his chance to explain.

As Ikegami returned to the machine room, he wished that all the bugs would be discovered by the end of the day. But as he entered the room, he was greeted by laughter from Yamane and their team who were having a break from their search for the bugs. Ikegami lost his composure for a moment, and couldn't control his anger, shouting,

"What are you doing? Do you know what the situation is now!"

Hearing Ikegami's outburst for the first time, Yamane and the others looked momentarily at Ikegami with surprised faces. Ikegami said to Yamane in a menacing voice, "This bug has completely messed up our inventory. I'll ask your company to take responsibility."

Yamane stood dumbfounded. Ikegami thought he had said a little too much. Then, realizing that even if he let out his anger here, it would only expose his disgrace, he told Yamane, "Find all the remaining bugs today!" When Ikegami looked around, several people returned to their desks with pale faces.

Even though Ikegami worked hard until 6 pm that day, the bug removal did not proceed as expected. Ikegami returned to his apartment with heavy steps. He walked into the room and pressed the answering machine button and there was a message, "Dear, I'd like to talk to you about something. Can you come back as soon as possible?"

Ikegami felt like he had heard Naoko's voice for the first time in a long while. He thought of calling home at once, but was overcome with exhaustion, took off his clothes, and collapsed on the futon.

The next day and the day after that were hellish days for Ikegami. In the morning, when he sat down at his desk, reports of bugs being discovered soon piled up. Mr. Ono, in his manager, turned to Ikegami as if he had swallowed a bitter bug. Suddenly, Ikegami got a call from the warehouse manager. "Our inventories are messed up, and we can't continue

to work. Please do something quickly!” Ikegami’s heart began to race, and he broke into a cold sweat.

Subsequently he was grilled by company executives from the headquarters. Production delays and product shipments were irreparably affected.

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Two months later in mid-July, Ikegami was trudging along the corridor at noon. The sun was burning outside the window, but inside the factory, where the powerful air conditioning works, it felt like another world. The ceiling and walls are pure white, and the reflected light hurt his tired eyes. The factory is new, so everything was still pristine. Ikegami felt nostalgic for the old factory in Kawasaki where walls were dirty. The factory was as hot inside as it was outside in summer. The production line was scattered all over the place and was not a smart line. However, there was a rhythm of labor that had been built up over the years, and there was a relaxed atmosphere in the workflow of people and goods.

Ikegami and his colleagues eliminated the system bug after about a month of struggling in the quagmire. This morning, Mr. Ono took Esaki to the Managing Director office to explain the plan to normalize the system in the future. Ikegami also participated in investigating the improvement measures because he knew the contents. However, Mr. Ono only took Esaki with him and left Ikegami behind. That was what stuck in Ikegami’s mind.

“Yeah, your back is round. Ikegami-kun.”

When Ikegami looked behind him, Mr. Terashima stood there. To Mr. Terashima, Ikegami probably looked like an old, stooped man at that moment. Mr. Terashima, who was the Manager of the Manufacturing Department, always steps into people’s lives. He was the one who pointed out the first bug. However, he is strangely not hated because he is a warm-hearted person.

“Tera-san, how are you? I’m already exhausted from the summer.”

“No, no, we’re going to have to make up for the delays we’ve made so far. Let’s cheer up. Are you going home and recharging?”

Saying that, Mr. Terashima jumped into the elevator that had just opened. Although Naoko called, Ikegami hasn't gone home for nearly two months. Since the bug came out, he's been working all night and on holidays, so he couldn't even go home. But he is also deeply worried about his home. Somehow, the confusion of the system seemed to settle down, so Ikegami decided to go home during the weekend for the first time in a long while. However, he had a farewell party for Yamane and others on Friday, which was postponed due to system trouble. Ikegami tried to treat Yamane and others fairly as his partners, not as a subcontractor. But when they were trying to fix the problems with the system bugs, he had to give them a lot of heavy tasks. He had to give difficult orders on Yamane and his team rather than Ikegami's subordinate workers. After working all night, although Yamane and his team could hardly stay awake next morning, they had to work more. In the farewell party, Yamane and his team were up until late drinking and savoring their last time together as a team and perhaps from a sense of release from the work pressure.

The next day, Saturday, Ikegami arrived at his house in the suburbs of Tokyo by car in the early afternoon.

"You've been very busy, haven't you? Too busy even to call me back?"

Naoko asked. Ikegami drank barley tea in one gulp and sat down on the sofa.

"Well, I've had a lot of trouble setting up the new factory. I've been without a break for two months since we began. Finally, everything has settled down." Remembering their son, he inquired, "How about Kazuya?" Naoko said curtly, "Today he's at school."

Then they were both silent, searching for the next word. Naoko was playing with her empty cup with both hands.

Ikegami stood up to adjust the air conditioning because the room was hot. Then Naoko said, "Don't turn on the air conditioner too much." When Ikegami turned around and looked at the side table, there was a large white bag of medicine on it. When he picked it up, Naoko's name was written on it.

Ikegami held out the bag to Naoko and asked, "What's this?"

"My medicine."

"So, I'm asking what kind of medicine?"

"Drugs for autonomic imbalance."

Naoko sat absent-mindedly, only answering what was asked. Ikegami finally noticed that Naoko was acting strangely.

"What's wrong? Autonomic nerves?"

"The doctor said there's nothing wrong with it. But at night, my heart is pounding, and I can't sleep well. During the day, my body feels sluggish."

"Why didn't you contact me?" Ikegami's voice sounded worried. Hearing this, Naoko said with a faint smile.

"I contacted you."

"When?"

"Since around June."

At the time he got her message in the answering machine, he couldn't let go of his work even though she asked him to come home. Ikegami tried to explain but gave up.

It was the cacophony of cicadas chirping outside the window that pierced their silence. At that moment, there was the sound of the front door opening, and Kazuya came in. He was surprised when he saw his father at their living room with his mother. "What happened?" Kazuya blurted out. "Finally, I could take a break from work. How have you been?" There was hardly any exchange of words between father and son. "Everything's fine." Kazuya continued his way upstairs to avoid having conversation with his father.

On Sunday, after ten o'clock, Ikegami finally left his bed and went down to the living room on the first floor. It was unusual for Ikegami, who wakes up early even on holidays. When he came home, he was relieved and felt heavy, probably because he had been tired from all the hard work in the past two years. He sat down on the sofa in his pajamas and opened his newspaper. Naoko came in with a vacuum cleaner.

"You look tired, so I didn't wake you up. What about breakfast?"

"I have no appetite this morning."

Ikegami replied without taking his eyes off the newspaper.

"It's bad for your body. Is it the same over there?"

"Over there, I eat all three meals at the company cafeteria."

"I wonder if you are eating balanced meals."

Naoko muttered, but she didn't even recommend breakfast to Ikegami anymore. Then she started vacuuming the living room.

"Are you okay? Relax a little bit," Ikegami told Naoko.

"It's something someone has to do," she retorted.

When she seemed to disturb Ikegami as he sat on the sofa, Ikegami took his newspaper and left for the Japanese-style room. Naoko, who had finished cleaning the living room, came to the Japanese-style room, and when Ikegami was about to stand up, Naoko looked upstairs and spoke in a strong tone, "Kazuya, there's no dog food anymore, so please buy some."

No response from the second floor. Ikegami volunteered instead,

"I'll go." Putting down his newspaper. But just then, Kazuya appeared and remarked, "It's going to rain, so you don't have to do it."

"It's better if it rains." Ikegami responded.

In the end, the two of them decided to go for a walk to buy dog food. The summer sun was already shining. To avoid the sun, the two chose to walk along a promenade lined with trees.

When they were walking by a small park, a bicycle bell rang behind them. When the two of them were about to turn around, a boy dressed as a delivery man shouted a greeting, "Osu!" and overtook them. Kazuya also raised his hand in response.

"A friend?"

"We're not friends, but we're in the same class."

"A part-time job? That's great."

"His family runs a small diner. He doesn't want to go to school, he just helps at home. I think it's cool that he's following his father in running the family business."

"Kazuya, have you already decided on your school of choice?"

Ikegami inquired calmly, trying not to repeat the mistake he made the last time.

"Not yet."

"Is that so? But it's time to set a clear goal, isn't it?"

"Fine. Dad. Don't worry. I'll decide after consulting with Mom."

Saying that Kazuya quickened his steps and went ahead. Ikegami stopped and looked at Kazuya's back and sighed. His expectations are not easily conveyed to his son. Or as Kazuya knows very well, it is the best time to rebel. Ikegami understood that he lacked conversation skills with his family. And to be honest, he didn't know how to go about it.

When he got home, Naoko told him that the ventilation fan was making a loud noise and that the water in the bath wasn't working properly, but before he could do anything about it, it was already evening. He had a meeting on Monday morning, so Ikegami had to return to his apartment by the end of the night.

Naoko had prepared an early dinner for her family. He had to drive back to the factory in the middle of the night, so he felt heavy. He tried his best to be cheerful while having dinner and he joked, "This is delicious, Mom's Nikujaga soup."

Kazuya retorted, "That's an old joke, Dad. You can do better than that!" This time Naoko came to the side of her husband, "That's alright. If the soup is good, why don't you come back more often. I'll make Nikujaga every week."

"Will you be back next week, Dad?"

Ikegami couldn't give an immediate answer to Kazuya's question. Kazuya continued, "But you're so busy, so never mind."

"No, it's okay. I'll be back."

Ikegami nodded as if to convince himself. However, Ikegami knew very well that he would not be able to go home next week. After that, all three of them fell silent.

It was around 7 pm as Ikegami was getting ready to drive to the factory, Naoko came out to the front door with a package containing his clothes. She reminded him, "Please eat a balanced diet and take care of yourself more."

"Ah, you should take care of yourself. Also, about Kazuya..."

"Eh, what?"

"It was nothing."

Ikegami looked up at Naoko, took a deep breath, and started the engine.

Naoko smiled a little and waved her hand. Ikegami decided that the next time he returned home, he would have a heart-to-heart talk with Kazuya. The figure of Naoko in the rear-view mirror soon disappeared into the twilight. As Ikegami accelerated his car, he tried to forget his heavy-hearted mood.

3

By the end of the year, things started to calm down in the factory. The walls of the factory, which had been pure white, now had scratches and oil stains here and there, and the people and equipment seem to have grown accustomed to them.

Ikegami was happy that the factory had stabilized, but it was also because the production volume was declining. It was the end of the Showa era, which boasted unprecedented prosperity.

As the new year began, the recession became more and more evident. The bubble that had been inflating started to burst. The myth of rising land prices has been broken, and financial institutions that have been mad about land speculation have come to a standstill with huge amounts of non-performing loans.

When financial institutions which had been enthusiastic about investing in information technology suddenly cut back on capital investment, this had a direct impact on Minato Electronics. Sales plummeted and production lines stood still and silent at the factory. The company instructed its employees to thoroughly cut costs, no more overtime work and by turning off the ceiling lights during lunch break to save electricity. Regular employees went home on time, but Ikegami and other managers had to work until late at night because they could not turn their work over to their subordinates. Managers are busy in good times and even busier in bad times.

One day, Ikegami was sitting on a window seat in the dining room on the seventh floor, eating lunch while gazing at the mountain range that looked like a folding screen decorated with silver. A man walked with a tray and sat down at the table with his back to Ikegami. Then, the young women who were chatting in the seats next to him became quiet for a

moment and gazed at the man's back.

The man was a manager in the Purchasing Department. Ikegami is also familiar with him. He's a talkative guy, so if he noticed Ikegami, he would have sat with Ikegami, but it seemed that the guy was avoiding him. Ikegami also knew the meaning of the women's glances.

He was also on an assignment by himself. Rumors were going around that the man fell in love with a young woman working under him and she became pregnant. Ikegami also knows the woman, she was beautiful with long black hair, but she has taken a leave of absence.

Fatigue permeated the back of the man who bent over the table as he ate. He also has some white on his head. He is an excellent administrator, but he failed to get promoted to a higher position. Why did he, who knew all about the company's rules, go astray? When Ikegami averted his eyes from the man, he muttered to himself, "I will never do such a blunder". And Ikegami, who began to eat with his head down, had already forgotten about the man.

Shortly after that, the woman quit the company. When an employee resigns, a notification circulates among the staff informing them of someone's resignation. The irresponsible rumors that he would be demoted in the next personnel reshuffle were relentless.

Ikegami also has a high antenna for detecting changes in personnel. He tried to get any information from his connections to see who was going up or down the corporate ladder. Mr. Ono, the director, might be transferred because he's been working there a long time. Ikegami himself had done a lot of work in the construction of the factory, so expectations of a promotion came to Ikegami's mind that it might be possible.

In early February, there was a meeting, and Ikegami went to Minato Electronics' headquarters in Tokyo. Between two meetings in one day, he visited his colleague, Sawada in his Sales office. They decided to meet after work at a nearby bar.

Sitting on a chair in front of a low table drinking beer, Ikegami began their conversation saying, "I have been living in a single apartment in the countryside, so it's been a while drinking in a place like this."

"Even I don't drink that often. Especially recently, the checking of entertainment expenses is very strict," Sawada replied.

Ikegami asked, "Is sales declining?"

"Oh, not at all. That's why I'm drinking at this time of the day. The company performance has been affected due to the economic recession. The reason for the recession is the changes in the global economic trends."

Sawada continued, "Next time, the company will have an organizational restructure at the same time as the launching of a new product. The company will start a new Research and development department as well as a new sales department. In addition, engineers have been developing an advanced computer server."

"Is there going to be a major organizational change?" Ikegami inquired.

"Yes, it will be in response to changes in the market. However, the real aim in the restructuring is due to the appreciation in the value of the yen and recession in Japan." So, Sawada lowered his voice and muttered.

"What I'm going to tell you is confidential, but Nagano Minato is in deep trouble."

"Eh, what was that?" Ikegami exclaimed in his surprise.

"Nagano Minato made excessive capital investments on the basis of increasing sales during the bubble economy. The fixed costs are a heavy burden. It seems that it became known exclusively upper management that the management team during construction had not hedged risks."

It was the first time Ikegami had heard of it.

He said, "I heard that the collection plan would be delayed, but I don't think so, however I believe the economy will improve again."

Sawada replied, "Well, I hope so, it won't be easy. Not only is this recession cyclical but it will also bring about major structural changes. We are at risk of joining other declining industries. One sloppy decision can cost the company its life. But it's always the underlings who get the blame, not the ones who made that decision. We at the middle management level would most likely lose our jobs. Middle managers are not union members and can be easily laid off."

Sawada used to be positive and cheerful. That's why Ikegami could sense his anxiety. Ikegami thought to himself that when the new factory was first announced, the company executives only highlighted the factory's bright future saying, "Let's go to Nagano and become the cornerstone of business expansion." What could have been behind those powerful words?

he wondered.

"Well, we both don't know what will happen tomorrow. How is your wife doing?" Sawada changed the topics. After that, the two talked about their families and left the bar early.

It was late when he arrived home. He turned on the light and threw his briefcase on the sofa. There was no beer in the refrigerator. He did not inform his family that he would be returning today. But when he got home, he thought he'd find his family at home. The empty living room gave him the feeling of having been deserted by his wife and son.

After a while, Kazuya arrived at 9 pm. Ikegami greeted him with, "Where have you been?"

"I just came from Cram school. You wouldn't know that it's our final push before the entrance exam for high school."

"How about your mother?"

Kazuya responded, "I don't know. She's been coming home late for some time now. Oh, I'm so hungry. I could eat a horse!" He took out a plate of spaghetti from the refrigerator and warmed it up in the microwave.

Ikegami inquired, "Do you live like that now? Just like me?"

Kazuya replied with a hint of sarcasm, "Well now, I'd like to practice living by myself on a work assignment too." Ikegami couldn't help but smile at Kazuya's words.

It was past eleven o'clock in the evening when Naoko returned. Naoko wore a brightly colored suit and looked youthful. And she had a cheerful expression that she doesn't usually have.

"Coming home this late is not good for your health. How are you feeling, do you feel better now?"

Naoko replied with a grin, "I'm okay. I can't stay home all day. I'll get sick from doing nothing."

Ikegami wondered if she drank alcohol, but apparently, that wasn't the case. It was good that Naoko was fine, but Ikegami couldn't calm down and complained again.

"Well, I'm not saying don't go out, but if you don't come back before dinner, who will take care of Kazuya?"

"I feel sorry for Kazuya. But it's his problem to take care of himself

by now, he's already 15."

Her way of speaking was so refreshing that Kazuya stopped eating and looked at his father in surprise. She had a different air than the old Naoko, who used to care first about Ikegami and Kazuya before herself.

The next day was Saturday. Naoko was already up and standing in the kitchen. Kazuya went to school after eating his meal.

While watching the morning TV drama, Ikegami said to Naoko, "It's around this time that the plum blossoms start to bloom. Why don't we go to see the plum blossoms together?"

Naoko looked at Ikegami and answered with a slightly surprised expression. "I'm surprised! It's your first time to invite me, isn't it? Would you like to go out? The plum blossoms at the park are in full bloom right now."

They drove to the park and felt the cold wind against their cheeks. Ikegami put his hands in the pockets of his leather jumper and walked. It's his usual habit that he almost walks alone. He walked a little slower, trying to match Naoko's pace. Naoko was wearing a black coat and a scarf to hide her face. Naoko tried to make conversation, "It's been a long time since I walked with you."

There were several elderly couples at the park. Ikegami and Naoko carefully looked at the flowers one by one. Ikegami liked the white plum blossoms that bloomed on the rugged branches. There were a few flowers remaining on trees, but they stood well against the wind and rain. Ikegami watched the plum for a while. He had never looked at a flower for such a long time.

The two sat down on an old bench on the outside of the plum garden. Both were silent for a while, looking at the scenery around them, Naoko tried again,

"Yesterday, we had a discussion about the school's caretakers. Kazuya is about to graduate, right? Since I'm an official of the PTA, I have to attend meetings regularly, which is tough."

"I see. I understand it's tough on you, isn't it?"

For Ikegami, his feelings of caring for Naoko naturally turned into words.

In the end, Naoko and Kazuya decided on the high school of their choice. For Ikegami, he had no say on the matter. The three-person meeting between the schoolteacher, Naoko and Kazuya was done without Ikegami. A normal housewife would naturally do this, but it must have been a burden on her due to her condition and with no one to talk to.

Ikegami leaned back on the bench and looked up at the winter sky. At that moment, Naoko took Ikegami's arm and put her face on Ikegami's shoulder. "Hey, when can you come back home? I'm tired of doing everything by myself."

Ikegami peered into Naoko's profile, feeling guilty and couldn't answer her question. Suddenly, the sun hid behind some clouds, the two snuggling up to keep warm against the cold wind, and together they stared up at the sky.

4

A few days later, in the beginning of spring in March, Nagano Minato's president and managing director were suddenly replaced. They were responsible for promoting the construction of the new factory, yet they lost their jobs. Since then, the agenda of the executive meetings were mostly about the decline in business performance. Ikegami and the other middle managers conveyed the information regarding the executive meetings to their subordinates. A reduction plan was put into place to reduce the workforce by 40% over the next 3 years. There was no resistance to such talk, and it was accepted as a matter of course. The workplace was covered by an air of gloom and doom.

One afternoon, Ikegami was called by the director, Mr. Ono. "Mr. Ikegami, regarding the budget for this fiscal year, I have been instructed to cut expenses. I would like your group to cut 30% of your expenditures."

"30%?" Ikegami blurted out in shock. Mr. Ono replied, "Ah, it's the situation as you know, so I can't do anything about it. At this time, I cannot resist what I was instructed by top management." In response, Ikegami said, "So, we have no choice but to reduce the worker of partner companies." Mr. Ono continued, "Yeah. even if we reduce the number of people, we can't lower the quality of the production line support. Well,

please choose from the least productive workers." Ikegami's heart felt like rebelling when he heard his boss's heartless comment. He wanted to say that if the number of people were reduced, the quality of support would also decline. But Ikegami kept silent, the words stuck in his throat. When Ikegami was about to return to his desk, Mr. Ono remembered something and continued.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Yamashita from Izumi Soft Co. is coming the day after tomorrow. I have an appointment on that day, so please look after him." After saying that, Mr. Ono left his seat. Afterwards, Ikegami still stunned and saw him off. Ikegami started to think to himself, Yamashita is coming to confirm the next contract. Mr. Ono and Ikegami were indebted to Yamashita when they were setting up the factory. And it was up to Ikegami to make Yamashita accept the reduction in the number of subcontractors, however he was sure that it would be unacceptable to Yamashita. Before, Mr. Ono promised more forthcoming contracts for Yamashita's firm. So, Ikegami felt frustrated why he had to do the dirty work of telling Yamashita there would be less subcontractors and there won't be any further contracts.

As he passed by the subcontractors, Ikegami saw their work. Some people were so busy with work that they were glued to their screens. There was no difference between the kind and amount of work that the subcontractors and ordinary employees perform. They were always working together.

Unlike Minato employees, the subcontractors could easily be cut off from working at the Minato factory for its own benefit. They could go back to their own companies and take on other jobs. Therefore, they had nothing to worry about, Ikegami thought. However, he knew that in a recession, many workers could be forced to wait at home without another job, and which could lead to their eventual dismissal.

Ikegami thought to himself as he descended the long stairs of the factory, It's beyond my control. What can I do if that is going to be their fate? He was so deep in thought that he stumbled and almost fell, but he managed to stay on his feet. It was dark and he had the feeling of falling into a deep abyss. Halfway down the stairs, he stopped, holding onto the handrail, squinting into the darkness below and unable to fathom the future.

Next morning was beautiful as usual. Ikegami was trying to read through the memos on his desk when he saw Mr. Ono going to Ezaki's desk and whisper something into Ezaki's ear. Ezaki immediately stood up and hurried out into the corridor. Looking back on it, Ikegami remembered that today was the day of the unofficial announcement of personnel matters. It's only natural that Ezaki, who had passed the managers' exam, would receive a job offer. Unexpectedly, Mr. Ono came in front of Ikegami's desk and without any emotion stated, "Mr. Ikegami, please go to the managing director's room."

Ikegami couldn't understand Mr. Ono's words. Why do I have to go to the managing director's room? Do I have an unofficial announcement?

When he knocked on the managing director's room door, Ikegami couldn't control his heart pounding. Just then, Ezaki came out. Ezaki looked at Ikegami for a moment with a compassionate expression on his face, but immediately turned his head away and left.

The managing director with a receding hairline was standing with a smile. But his expression changed when he saw Ikegami.

"As you know, the Minato Electronics Group is currently facing the worst crisis since its founding. Nagano Minato has become a burden on the group and needs to be restructured. When the factory was starting, we were having a difficult time. Therefore, the management has decided to let you work for our subcontractor, Towa Kogyo. And we hope that you can do a better job there."

Ikegami stood at attention and listened to the managing director as the blood rushed to his head with a deafening noise. Why am I being sent to the back of beyond? Towa Kogyo is a small subcontractor of Minato Electronics. Ikegami wondered. When he returned to his seat, he couldn't do anything. And he felt needle-like gazes all around him. Everyone was avoiding his eyes while they worked.

Ikegami left the office early that day, but when he returned to his apartment, he was exhausted and didn't feel like doing anything. Ikegami drove his car to a pub where he had been before.

He wanted to forget about his frustration, so he drank many glasses of sake, but he couldn't get drunk fast enough. The damn faces of the managing director and Mr. Ono kept popping into his mind. The managing director spoke as if Ikegami was entirely responsible for the failures

during the startup. Perhaps Mr. Ono reported that to the managing director. Ikegami grabbed the empty glass from the table and almost threw it on the floor. But he managed to stop himself. Ikegami put it back on the table and left the pub.

The night wind gently caressed his flushed cheeks, gradually calming him down. He stumbled as he tried to get into the car, and Ikegami realized he was drunk. Ikegami decided to leave the car and go home without it. After explaining to the pub owner, he intended to go to the main street and hail a taxi. But there was none in sight. He continued walking unsteadily. Gradually, Ikegami began to feel self-deprecating, and he stumbled and staggered along, ignoring the curious looks of the people he passed. With his dazed head, Ikegami could clearly understand the meaning of the sympathetic look that Ezaki gave him when Mr. Ono took only Esaki with him to explain the new plan to the managing director.

The road was on the bank of the river. Feeling tired, Ikegami began to go down the embankment to take a rest on the riverbed. After a few steps down, Ikegami lost his balance. He tripped on the grass growing on the bank. Drawing a large arc, Ikegami's body rolled down. It was past ten o'clock in the evening, and the riverbank was deserted. Fortunately, Ikegami did not fall into the water.

Later, Ikegami woke up. He must have been unconscious for 1 or 2 hours. He felt pain in his shoulder. He thought he hit his shoulder as he rolled down. As he lay on his back in the dark, he could hear gently flowing water beside him. When he opened his eyes, he felt like drowning in the depths of the night sky. His mind devoid of any thought, he remembered having seen a starry sky like this before. He realized that the night sky reminded him of his first night with Naoko. He continued lying there sprawled out, immersed in the river sounds and the world of constellations.

A couple of days later in the weekend, when Ikegami returned home, he found it difficult to talk to Naoko about his transfer.

"Starting next month, I will be returning to Tokyo.", Ikegami announced after breakfast. Naoko's eyes widened.

"Really! But you don't look happy. What happened?" Naoko exclaimed.

"It's a restructuring. It's like being seconded to a small, affiliated

company and being told to quit if I don't like it."

"Eh, it's terrible. You have done a lot for the company.", Naoko muttered then fell silent.

Ikegami felt relieved after telling Naoko of his predicament. Naoko continued, "It may be unsuitable to say this at a time like this, but I think I should work."

"What?" Ikegami interjected "I'll stick with the company. So that you won't have to work. I'll make sure that we'll get by."

"Sorry. I didn't tell you, but I was invited by the person in charge of the school to participate in a Parenting Book Club. The working mother I met there was strong and lively. They have their feet on the ground and have something for me."

"But are you willing to work again? Is your physical condition up to it?" Ikegami made his concern for Naoko evident.

"Because I've been feeling better lately. Besides, if I get too involved with Kazuya, I feel like I'll end up driving him into a corner."

Suddenly feeling nostalgic, Naoko remembered the first time they met. After a pause, Naoko asked Ikegami, "Do you remember we used to go to that club where we first met?"

"You're right, that's where we first met." The past came rushing back to Ikegami's mind and he continued, "It was an exhilarating time. It seems like a distant world now." Ikegami, too, was led by Naoko to remember the past.

"What? Would you like to be part of that club again?"

"I have no regrets about that time. But this time, I think I'll make my own decision and move on. But it's too late now, isn't it?"

Naoko's cheeks blushed as she spoke these words earnestly. Ikegami remembered Naoko, whom he had just met back then.

"It's never too late to do anything, no matter how old you are. Just think you took the long path instead of the direct route. If you want to work, go ahead. A worthless husband can't say anything," Ikegami said to cover his embarrassment.

After accepting the appointment, Ikegami went around to say goodbye to

familiar people at the Nagano factory and Minato headquarters. He was also able to attend the farewell party for him. One day, as the day of his transfer approached, Ikegami found it too suffocating to remain at his office during his lunch break. So, he went out and took a stroll around the building and came to one of the memorial trees. He remembered the scene of the tree planting as if it were only yesterday. This tree is still young and thin. But it's been a year since it was planted, so it's branching well, taking root in the ground, and claiming its existence. At that time, Ikegami wondered how many people could be rooted in this land like this tree, but he never dreamed that he would be the first to be taken out.

"Mr. Ikegami"

From his reverie, Ikegami roused himself to a voice calling him from behind. It was Ezaki!

"Mr. Ikegami, thank you very much for taking such great care of me."

Ikegami was puzzled by Ezaki's deep bow.

"What's up, you are so formal, aren't you? You have the experience and ability. You deserve this promotion. From now on, do your best." Ezaki must have felt guilty at having been named the successor to Ikegami. Ikegami also tried not to think about such things, but it was true that the conversation with Ezaki had become somewhat little awkward. The two stood side by side before the memorial tree. Ikegami continued, "Even so, you will be here for a long time. You should think about calling your family over." "You are right," was the only reply that Ezaki could give in the quiet afternoon. Ezaki had left his new wife and his mother in Tokyo. Ezaki's wife stayed behind to take care of his mother who suffered a cerebral hemorrhage a year ago. Ikegami remembered the interview when Ezaki said he was going to work away from home. Looking at Ezaki's profile, Ikegami thought that this man would eventually follow the same path as him.

Ikegami was saying softly, almost to himself. "We are human beings. We can't be easily moved here and there just like trees."

The memorial tree will continue to grow regardless of the economic ups and downs of the world. To Ikegami, it seemed like an eerie monster that sucked up everything from the workers and grew thick and big. The wind

was blowing. At that moment, Ikegami thought that the shaking leaves and branches of the memorial tree seemed to be laughing back at him mockingly.