

Another

yukito ayatsuji

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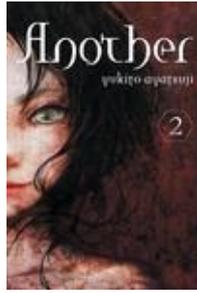
Volume 2

Yukito Ayatsuji



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Part 2

How?.....Who?

Chapter 10

June V

1

The next day began a peculiar lifestyle at North Yomi.

It was unpleasant at first, obviously. I knew the answer to *How could they?* but only felt all the more out of place and rebellious. Intellectually, it was understandable, but emotionally I couldn't accept it.

Every single person in the class, including the teachers, treated Mei and me as if we didn't exist. In response, Mei and I acted as if every single person except the two of us wasn't there. What a twisted, unnatural situation.

Still, no matter how warped or unnatural, gradually people get used to the situation they find themselves in. Since the rules were crystal clear, I would even say it was a couple steps up from how terrible I'd felt at my last school. As day after day went by, I started to see that things really might not be that bad, and that idea started to win out.

It's not so bad... I mean, compared to the unsettled situation of only a few days ago when the "what?" and the "why?" had been obscure, this was way better. And on a totally different level, I'd say, yeah, it probably was way better.

The solitude of Mei Misaki and me, alone out of the entire class.

In other words, it's equivalent to freedom for me and Mei, alone out of the entire class.

Like maybe... I would entertain slightly childish fantasies at times.

Now no matter how Mei and I behaved in the classroom of third-year Class 3, no matter what we talked about, no one would be able to say a word about it. They all had to pretend that they saw nothing and heard nothing.

Even if Mei dyed her hair some crazy color. Even if I suddenly busted out singing in the middle of a class, or did a handstand on top of my desk. Even if we started loudly discussing plans to rob a bank. Even then, everyone would most likely continue pretending that they couldn't see or hear us. Not even if we were to embrace like lovers in the middle of the room.

Hold it right there, Koichi.

Better put the brakes on run-of-the-mill fantasies like that, given the present circumstances. Got that, kid?

Anyway...

In a certain sense, this offered an incredibly peaceful, low-key environment that I never could have achieved in an ordinary school setting.

I interpreted the situation that way, too.

And yet behind the calm and the tranquility, of course, tension and wariness

lingered; anxiety and fear; dread, inescapable, brought about by constantly wondering whether the “disasters” for this year were going to keep happening.

So it had gone for a little over a week after this phase of our lives had begun. Even when June was half over, there had been no new incidents.

I think the number of times Mei stayed home from school and skipped classes during this period dropped considerably.

On the other hand, it went up for me. No question about it.

But though the issue would normally have been cause to alarm an educator, the head teacher, Mr. Kubodera, never reprimanded me for it. And no way could he inform my grandparents, who were my guardians here in Yomiyama. According to Mei, when there were parent-teacher conferences for high school placement counseling, or whatever else, they arranged for a different teacher to sit in on the meeting for the student who was “not there.”

From time to time, the assistant teacher, Ms. Mikami, acted deeply agonized, too. I would be lying if I said that didn’t bother me. But...I couldn’t exactly voice my complaints to her. I really don’t think I could have.

I was following along fine in class. The teachers would most likely massage my attendance record, and if I could knock out the exams, what was the problem? Barring anything crazy happening, getting into high school was going to be a breeze thanks to my dad’s connections, so...

These little rebellions had been my only option. And the thought rose all on its own, *Nothing wrong with that, is there?*

2

Mei and I, the two “non-existers,” would often go up to the roof of Building C on days when it wasn’t raining. We ate lunch together up there sometimes, too.

I had my grandmother’s homemade lunch, as usual. Mei would typically nibble on some bread while drinking tea from a can.

“Kirika doesn’t make your lunches for you?”

“Sometimes. When she feels like it.”

Mei’s answer to my question was indifferent. Without any serious moaning or self-pity.

“Maybe once or twice a month. But to be honest, they taste awful.”

“Do you cook for yourself or anything?”

“Nope.”

And here again, the shake of her head was indifferent.

“I can heat up ready-made stuff, but that’s about it. Isn’t that what everyone does?”

“I’m good at cooking, actually.”

“You are?”

“I was in the culinary arts club at my last school.”

“...That’s different.”

Not something I wanted to hear from Mei.

“Then can you cook me something sometime?”

“Wh—? Uh, sure. One of these days,” I replied after a moment’s flustered hesitation. How far in the future would that day be? The thought, half-formed, occurred to me as I answered. “Speaking of, you used to be in the art club, right?”

“When I was in first year, yeah. I’ve known Mochizuki since back then.”

“What about now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you in the art club now?”

“There was no art club in second year. Or I guess I mean, they put the club on hiatus.”

“But it started back up this April, right?”

“Yeah, and I showed up a couple times in April. But once May started, that was it.”

Meaning she couldn’t go anymore because she’d become “not there.”

“Was Ms. Mikami the sponsor in your first year, too?”

There was a slight pause during which Mei glanced at my face before replying, “Ms. Mikami was **too**, yeah. There was another art teacher who was the main sponsor. But in our second year, that teacher transferred to another school, so...”

So then the club had gone on hiatus for a year until Ms. Mikami had made up her mind to take on sole sponsorship of the club, huh? I see.

“That reminds me. You were drawing a picture up here once, remember? The first time we met up here, you had a sketchbook with you.”

“Did I?”

“I saw you with the same sketchbook in the secondary library, too. Did you finish the picture you were drawing?”

“...For now.”

She had been drawing a picture of a beautiful young girl with ball joints. I remembered how Mei had said, “I’m going to give this girl huge wings, last of all.”

“Did you put the wings on yet?”

“...Yeah, sure.” Mei’s eyes lowered, hiding a shadow of sadness. “I’ll let you see it one of these days.”

“Okay.”

One of these days, huh? How far in the future would that be?

As we progressed through this undeniably trivial conversation, I felt as if we spent a lot of time talking about me, though I wasn’t fielding an unusual number of questions. I talked about my dad being in India. About my dead mother. About my life before I came to Yomiyama and about my life after. About my grandparents. About Reiko. About my collapsed lung and being hospitalized. About Ms. Mizuno...

But unless I asked Mei a specific question, she didn’t make any effort to talk about herself. In fact, even when I did ask her something, most of the time she would resist answering or dance around the issue.

“What do you do for fun? Draw pictures?”

I even tried asking her questions formally like that.

“Actually, I like looking at pictures more than I like drawing them, I think.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Even then I only mean art books, really. We have a ton of them at my house.”

“Have you ever been to an art exhibit?”

“Living in a rural town like this, you don’t get a lot of opportunities for that.”

She told me she preferred the Western art that predated Impressionism. And that she didn’t actually care for pictures like the ones her mother, Kirika, painted.

“What about dolls?” I asked on an impulse. “What do you think of the dolls Kirika makes? Do you not really like those, either?”

“...Well, y’know.” In a reflection of her words, an ambiguous cloud came over her expression. “I don’t hate them. And there are some that I like, but...”

I decided not to push any further. In the most lighthearted tone I could manage, I said, “You should come visit me in Tokyo sometime. We’ll go visit the art museums. I’ll show you around.”

“Okay. Someday.”

Someday...

Just how far in the future would that be from this moment? Again the thought rose in my mind half-formed.

3

“You want to go take a peek into the art club room?”

It was during lunch on Thursday, June 18, that Mei suggested this.

It had been pouring rain all day, so there was no way we could eat on the roof. Still, the two of us who were “not there” were reluctant to eat in the classroom like everyone else. When fourth period ended, it was as if we’d signaled to each other: we both immediately got up from our desks and left the classroom. That was when Mei made the suggestion.

I could think of less interesting places to go, so I quickly agreed. “Sure.”

The art club room was on the first floor of Building Zero, all the way at the western end. Originally, the room had been a regular classroom. It had been divided in two and was now half as big and being used as the art club room. The next room over was the culture club room. There was a placard hanging on the door that said “Local Historical Society.”

“Oh!” someone cried out as soon as we went in.

There was already someone inside.

Two girls I’d never seen before. Judging by the colors of their name tags, one was a second-year and the other was a first-year. The second-year had a narrow, calm face and a ponytail, while the first-year had a major baby face and glasses with red frames.

“Misaki-senpai!” the second-year with the ponytail exclaimed. She blinked in wonder. “What are you...?”

“I felt like coming over,” Mei replied with her usual dryness.

“Didn’t you quit the club?”

“I’m just taking a break from it.”

“Oh-h-h, really?”

This from the first-year with the glasses.

It seemed that these girls hadn’t been let in on the special situation of third-year Class 3 (though since there was a rule that said “no telling anyone outside of class,” that wasn’t surprising). They began talking to Mei in a perfectly normal way, which was better proof than anything.

“Um, who’s that?” the second-year asked, looking at me.

Mei quickly replied, “My classmate, Sakakibara. He’s friends with Mochizuki, too.”

“Oh-h-h, really?”

The first-year. Her reply was in exactly the same tone, as if she were replaying a default recording. Her expression was exactly the same, too, and she had kind of a bashful smile...Urk. This might not be so awesome for me.

“He said he’s interested in the art club, so I brought him over,” Mei said, offering just enough of an explanation.

“Oh-h-h, really?”

“Are you going to join?” the second-year asked, throwing me completely off-kilter.

“Uh, I wasn’t going to...I mean, I dunno. I...”

As I struggled through my response, Mei slipped right past the two girls. I followed her lead and walked into the room.

It was kept much more neatly than I’d expected, somehow.

In the middle of the room were two big worktables exactly like the one in the art room. One wall had been made into lockers for the club members, and on the opposite wall were big steel shelves with art supplies and a bunch of other stuff neatly arranged on them.

“Mochizuki hasn’t changed,” Mei remarked, walking up to one of several easels that had been set up in the room. Looking at it, I saw a copy of Munch’s *The Scream*—no, not an exact copy. The background details were probably pretty different from the original painting, and the man with his hands over his ears kind of looked like Mochizuki...

...And at precisely that moment, in walked Yuya Mochizuki himself.

“Oh, senpai.”

“Mochizuki-senpai!”

Hearing the two girls’ voices, I turned around, and there at the door was Mochizuki. The second he saw us, his face transformed, as if he’d just run smack into a ghost or something.

“Uh, c-could you two come with me for a second? Now?” he said to the girls, keeping his eyes off of us. “I need your help with something right away.”

“Oh-h-h, really?”

“But Misaki-senpai is actually here for once...”

“Just come with me.”

And so Mochizuki left the room, practically dragging the two girls with him.

Turning back to *The Pseudo Scream* on the easel, Mei let out a quiet snicker. It was infectious, and I stifled my own laughter.

It would be tough to treat us as if we were “not there” and ignore us with those two outsiders there, since they didn’t know what was going on (and of course he couldn’t explain that to them). That’s why he’d needed to get out of there any way he could. But what exactly was Mochizuki going to conjure up for those girls to help with “right away”? As my imagination worked it over, I started to feel sorry for him.

Mei moved away from *The Pseudo Scream* and toward the back of the room. She pulled something from the shadows of the lockers.

A white cloth had been wrapped around the entire thing, but the shape of it told me that this, too, was an easel. Mei gently pulled the cloth away. A French size-ten canvas sat on it backward. Mei gave a low sigh and then turned the canvas around to the front.

It was a half-finished oil painting. I didn’t need to ask to know this had to belong to Mei...

The canvas showed a portrait of a woman dressed in black. Her features revealed at a glance that it was her mother...However.

Bizarrely, the face was being split in two. From the top of her head, through her forehead, eyebrows, nose, and mouth. Her entire face was being ripped open in a “V” shape. Such was the subject of this painting.

On the right half of the torn face I could discern a faint smile. And on the left, an expression of sorrow. The painting showed no blood and no subcutaneous structures, so it didn’t seem graphic at all. But it was plenty grotesque, and in pretty terrible taste...

“At least they didn’t throw it out, I guess,” Mei murmured. “If someone like Akazawa were in the art club instead of Mochizuki...”

She might have destroyed it on the rationale that the painting of someone who’s “not there” can’t be allowed to exist. That’s probably what Mei was implying.

“You’re going to take it home?” I asked.

“...No.” Mei gave a slight shake of her head and turned the canvas back around. She wrapped the cloth around the easel and returned it to the shadow of the lockers.

4

Right as we came out of the art club room and back into the hall, we ran into Ms. Mikami.

Naturally, we had to ignore her. And she had to ignore us. I understood that, but my steps stuttered to an inadvertent stop for just one moment.

Maybe that was why Ms. Mikami came to a stop, too, then turned her eyes away from us uncomfortably. I thought I saw her lips tremble as if to say something...But it might have been my imagination. It all happened in the brief span of a few seconds in the dimly lit hall, after all.

On Thursdays, fifth period (our next class) was art with Ms. Mikami, but we

weren't planning to go. Due to the nature of the class, the teacher and the rest of the class obviously had it easier when the two "non-existers" were absent. Same with the extended homeroom in sixth period.

"What are we doing for next period?" I asked Mei in a low voice as we walked side by side down the hall.

"Let's go to the library," she answered. "The secondary library, obviously. We might as well eat lunch there, too."

5

Thus, when the bell to start fifth period rang, we were in the secondary library. When we arrived, there was no one else there and no sign of the librarian, Mr. Chibiki.

Mei sat down in one of the chairs that circled the large table and started reading a book she'd brought with her. I'd caught a glimpse of the title when she took it out of her bag: *The Lonely Crowd*. *What kind of book is that?* I wondered. It seemed completely alien to the genre Ms. Mizuno and I had specialized in, at least.

"I borrowed it from the main library," Mei said, her eyes cast down on the open book. "The title kind of spoke to me."

"*The Lonely Crowd?*"

"It's written by a man named Riesman. David Riesman. Heard of him?"

"Nope."

"It seems like something your dad would have in his library."

Ah. That kind of book, huh?

"Is it interesting?"

"Mrm...I guess."

I went over to stand before the same bookshelf Mr. Chibiki had pointed out to me the last time I'd been here, by myself. In exactly the same spot I remembered, I found the item I sought—the yearbook for 1972. I took it down from the shelf and went back to the big table.

I chose a spot two seats down from Mei and sat down, then opened the yearbook. It wasn't because I wanted to see how my mother had looked in middle school again. I'd remembered something **I wanted to check**.

I found the page for third-year Class 3 and scrutinized the group photo on the left-hand page.

Fifth from the right in the second row was my mother as a third-year middle-schooler, smiling a little tensely. Diagonally in front of her—standing a slight distance from the rows of students, all the way to the right side—was a man. Wearing a pale blouson on his willowy frame. One hand resting on his hip, giving a cheerier smile than any of the students, it was...*Yeah, that's what I thought*.

"Which one's your mom?"

Mei's voice came from behind me, surprising me so badly I almost shouted. For crying out loud...We were barely three meters apart. How had I not noticed her standing up?

Getting my nerves under control, I pointed at the photo. "...Her."

"Hm-m-m."

Mei peered at the yearbook over my shoulder, staring intently at the image of my mother's face.

"Ritsuko, huh?" she murmured. "Hm-m-m...I can see it."

Finally she nodded, apparently satisfied. Then she pulled out the chair to my right, sat down on the edge of it, and asked me this: "What did your mom die from?"

"Oh..."

Unconsciously, I let out a sigh.

"She gave birth to me here, and then that summer—it was July. She wasn't doing too well afterward and she caught a cold that turned into something worse."

"...Oh."

That had been fifteen years ago. I guess more accurately, it had been fourteen years and eleven months ago, doing the math.

"Anyway, did you know this?"

I asked the question this time. I surreptitiously watched Mei's face in profile. I thought the eye patch over her left eye looked dirtier than usual today.

"Look at the head teacher for that year's third-year Class 3."

The man in the pale blouson on the right edge of the group photo.

"He comes off totally different now, huh?" Mei replied. "This is the first time I've ever seen a photo from back then."

Oh, yes. The head teacher for her class was a handsome young man...He taught social studies and supervised the theater club or something along those lines. He was quite the fired-up educator. I believe the students thought well of him.

Yeah, that's what my grandmother had said as she worked back through her memories of long ago. She'd been talking about the man in this picture.

Even if he was only in his mid-twenties twenty-six years ago, he would be over fifty now.

The ages matched up. But when I'd looked at this yearbook last time and **noticed him**, just like Mei I'd thought how much he'd changed in twenty-six years.

I checked the name of the teacher printed below the photo, just to be sure. And I was right. It said:

Mr. Tatsuji Chibiki

"Can I check something else?" I asked, lifting my eyes from the yearbook and turning them on Mei. "Last week at your house, when you explained all the stuff that's going on, you kept saying you heard it from 'someone.' Was that...?"

"Right you are." Mei nodded, an amused smile on her face. "I was talking about Mr. Chibiki."

Soon after that, Mr. Chibiki, the “master” of the secondary library, appeared. Right after I had returned the 1972 yearbook to the shelf.

“Oho. Two of you today, eh?” he called over to us after realizing we were there, then went immediately behind his counter. That was all he said. He was dressed in his usual all-black clothes and black-rimmed glasses, and his salt-and-pepper straw-like hair complemented his pale, skinny face. He really was a far cry from the “fired-up educator” my grandmother recalled.

“We’re up to two people being ‘not there,’” Mei answered, getting up from her chair.

Resting both elbows on the counter, Mr. Chibiki said, “So it would seem. I heard something about it.”

“Do you think it’s going to work?”

“Well, now.” His expression hardened ever so slightly before he answered. “I can’t say, to be honest. It’s never been attempted before.”

Then his eyes shifted to me.

“You understand the situation now, Sakakibara, is that right?”

“Yes, but...”

“But? You don’t believe it?”

“That’s not it...Well, yes it is. Part of me still can’t believe in it completely, I guess.”

“I see-e-e.”

His elbows resting on the counter, the all-in-black librarian dug his fingers into his hair.

“I suppose I can’t blame you. If I were in your position and I heard a story like that out of the blue...Absolutely.”

His hand paused, his hair still caught in its grip, and his eyebrows pinched together sharply.

“However,” he continued, “this is true. This is a phenomenon that is actually taking place in our school, in our town of Yomiyama.”

A phenomenon, huh?

The words Mei had spoken last week, crediting the explanation to “someone,” rose from memory.

*It isn’t anything a person could have done. **That’s the kind of “phenomenon” it is.***

She’d used a similar term. She had also told me, *That’s why this is different from what you’d call a curse.*

When I realized that “someone” was the person standing in front of me now, all sorts of details seemed to come together. As I tried to imagine the fact that this man

who had been the head teacher for third-year Class 3 twenty-six years ago had now, twenty-six years later, switched roles to become a librarian and was still at the school—as I tried to imagine how that had happened...

“Um...”

I stood up and walked over to stand before the counter next to Mei.

“So you were a social studies teacher and you sponsored the theater club. And twenty-six years ago you were in charge of third-year Class 3, so you knew my mother...”

“That’s right. I suppose you realized that when you came here last time and looked at that yearbook.”

“Um, yeah...But how did you wind up here?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Misaki didn’t tell you about it?”

I glanced over at Mei. “No, she didn’t.”

“I see-e-e.”

Mr. Chibiki looked up at the clock on the wall. A little more than thirty minutes had passed since the start of fifth period.

“You have art this period on Thursdays, don’t you? I suppose you’ll both be missing the extended homeroom next period, too?”

Mei and I exchanged a quick look, and then we both nodded.

“We thought everyone would feel better if we weren’t there.”

“No doubt. You made the right decision.”

“Um, sir?” I decided to pose a question that had just occurred to me. “Is it all right that you’re not ignoring us?”

“Could you stop calling me ‘sir’? ‘Mr. Chibiki’ is fine.”

“Oh...all right.”

“It’s because I don’t have any ties to your class, you see. Those with no direct link to third-year Class 3 are what you might call safe. So even if I interact with you two normally, it shouldn’t have any effect.”

Yes, of course. Obviously that’s why Mei had been able to come in here now and then and get all that information out of him.

“Now, as for your previous question,” Mr. Chibiki continued, lowering himself into the chair on the other side of the counter. “Why don’t I take this opportunity to tell you a story? Misaki here has only heard fragments of it so far.”

7

“To be honest, I don’t like to speak too much about what happened twenty-six years ago. Though I may be the last person at this school who directly experienced the

event.”

Third-year Class 3, twenty-six years ago. The death of Misaki, who was popular with everyone. And then...

“Nobody had any ill intentions,” Mr. Chibiki said in a low, pinched voice. “I was still young and clung to certain ideals as an educator...I behaved as I thought right. The students did the same. Though now I find it a frivolous way of thinking. As a result, **that** became the trigger and, in a manner of speaking, ‘the doors to death’ swung open at this school.

“I bear the responsibility for that. I also feel responsible for being unable to stop the ‘disasters’ that began the following year. That’s why I’ve stayed at this school. I quit being a teacher and became the librarian—which was in part **running away**.”

“Running away?” I cut in inadvertently. “How is that running away?”

“Half the reason I stopped being a teacher was a guilty conscience. That I had no right to be a teacher. But the other half was stark fear that if I became the head teacher for third-year Class 3 again, I might be the one dragged to my ‘death’ next. So I ran away.”

“Do teachers die too?”

“If they’re the head teacher or the assistant teacher, yes. **Because they’re members of third-year Class 3.** The teachers who merely supervise classes are **out of range**.”

Oh, so then... I realized something then.

The way Yuya Mochizuki had been constantly obsessing over how much Ms. Mikami had been out lately. So that hadn’t just been him worrying about the health of the teacher he was crushing on. He’d truly been concerned that the next of the calamities might have befallen her, since she was the assistant teacher for our class.

“That’s why I ran away,” Mr. Chibiki repeated. “But I didn’t want to run away from the school entirely. By a lucky chance, the position here in the library became available, so I decided to hunker down **right here**. To always be **right here** to watch how things unfold...Ah, but now I’ve gotten ahead of myself.”

Mr. Chibiki’s lips curved with a fair amount of self-deprecation and he shook his head slowly back and forth. That was the point at which I asked, “The Misaki from twenty-six years ago—was it a boy or a girl?”

“He was a boy.”

I got my answer as if it were nothing.

“Misaki was his first name. Written with the character for ‘cape’ as in ‘Cape Cod.’”

“What was his last name?”

“Yomiyama.”

“Excuse me?”

“It was Yomiyama. The same as the name of this town. His full name was Misaki Yomiyama.”

His last name was Yomiyama? Well...I guess. Like Mr. Adachi living in the Adachi ward or Ms. Musashino from Musashino City.

I looked over at Mei. Mei looked over at me, too, then shook her head slightly. She probably meant *I didn’t know that until he said it just now, either*.

“So Misaki was in a plane crash or something?” I asked, checking the story with him.

“It was a fire.”

The answer was just as easy to get as the last one.

“A story like this typically changes and gets embellished as it passes from person to person. For some reason a version involving a plane crash seems to have caught on, but it was actually a house fire. One night in May, Misaki Yomiyama’s house was completely destroyed in a fire. And his entire family died. His parents as well as his little brother, who was one year younger than him.”

“What caused it?”

“No one knows. They decided, at least, that it hadn’t been a crime. Though there’s a version of the story that says it was a meteorite.”

“Seriously?”

“Misaki’s house was on the western outskirts of town, near Asamidai. There was testimony that a huge shooting star was seen falling near there that night. So people say that could have caused the fire. Though I’ve never heard that any trace of it was ever identified. So this is nothing more than another rumor, I suppose.”

“...Ah.”

“Those are the facts surrounding the death of Misaki Yomiyama twenty-six years ago as I remember them. However...” Mr. Chibiki’s eyes dropped to his hands. His voice grew even lower as he added, “However, I have no confidence that my memories are entirely correct.”

“What?”

“It could be that there’s a gap, or that a revision has been made to some part of them. Without my ever realizing it. And I don’t mean simply because the memories are from so long ago. How should I put it? If I don’t continually work very hard to pay attention, my memories of these events tend to get fuzzy. More than any of the other clutter in there. I don’t know why, but that’s how it seems. Though it may not quite click for the two of you even when I explain it.”

Feedback from “entering the realm of legend”—Those were the words and the image that popped suddenly into my mind.

“What about the group photo after graduation, where Misaki showed up even though he couldn’t possibly have been there?” I asked. “Sir...I mean, Mr. Chibiki, did you see it?”

“I did.”

Mr. Chibiki nodded, then cast his gaze up to the ceiling for a moment.

“I was in that photo, too, in the old classroom here in the former school building. A few days later, the students began to get stirred up and several of them brought the photo in question to me. They shoved it at me. It absolutely looked like the dead boy was in it. Misaki Yomiyama. In fact, I do believe that Ritsuko was one of the ones who came to me back then.”

“My mom?”

“As I remember it, that is.”

“Do you still have that photo?”

“No.” Mr. Chibiki’s mouth drew tight. “They made another print of it for me, but I threw it away. Seeing everything that happened after that, I got scared, to be honest. I even thought the disasters were happening because the thing existed.”

“Ah...” I sighed, and tiny goose bumps pricked both my arms.

“Let’s skip ahead, shall we?” Mr. Chibiki said, dropping his eyes to his hands once

more. “The next year, I was in charge of a first-year class, so I only know what happened in third-year Class 3 that year from a third-person perspective. How they were short one desk and chair at the start of the first semester. How at least one of the students in the class or their relatives died each month. Even when I heard the stories, I never actively made the connection to what had happened the year before. All I did was feel sad at the terrible misfortunes they continued to suffer.

“In the end, sixteen people with a connection to the class lost their lives in that one year. Once the graduation ceremony was over, the teacher in charge of third-year Class 3 told me something. It seems that one extra student had made their way into the class for the year. That **an ‘extra person’ who couldn’t possibly have been there** had infiltrated the class. He said that as soon as the graduation ceremony was over, the student disappeared and that was when he finally realized.”

“That Misaki’s little brother was the ‘extra person who couldn’t possibly have been there,’ since he’d died the year before?”

“So it seems. But—”

The edges of Mr. Chibiki’s lips twitched, and he hesitated for several moments before answering.

“It feels more correct to tell you that in all honesty, I couldn’t say. Hasn’t Miss Misaki here told you? Those directly involved in this ‘phenomenon’ plaguing third-year Class 3 can’t hold on to their memories about who the ‘extra person’ in the class is for very long. The memory fades with time, and then it disappears.

“The fact is, by the time a month had passed, the teacher who revealed the situation to me had completely forgotten **what had occurred**, and even my memory of it was becoming unreliable. It’s only because I made notes about it in a notebook at the time that I even barely recall it.”

Suppose a levee breaks and water from the river floods the town. It’s like the water is finally receding...

The metaphor Mei had told me last week, heard from “someone.”

The fact that there was a flood remains, unquestionably, but after the water recedes, the memory of what got flooded and how badly starts to get fuzzy. It’s like that.

It’s more that they can’t help forgetting, not that they’re forced to forget, I guess.

“The same sort of ‘phenomenon’ happened to the next year’s third-year Class 3 as well, and many people died. Those involved began to recognize that this was odd and that something was going on. And then—”

Mr. Chibiki tangled the fingers of his right hand in his straw-like hair, mussing it wildly.

“And then the year after that—in 1976, I was assigned to take charge of third-year Class 3 again. That was when I experienced **it**. As a member of the class that people had already begun to call cursed...”

The year before—1975—had been an “off year.” Clinging to the hope that perhaps those things weren’t going to happen anymore, Mr. Chibiki took over third-year Class 3 for 1976. However.

That was an “on year.”

The result was that in one year, five students from third-year Class 3 and nine of their immediate family members lost their lives: a total of fourteen people. Accident followed on illness, followed on suicide, then murder...There were many ways that they died.

*Maybe it’s **this classroom** that’s “cursed,”* Mr. Chibiki thought. So he appealed to the school and tried changing to a different classroom. That had been right after summer break. But still the months of disasters never stopped. After the graduation ceremony in March, “the extra person who couldn’t possibly have been there” (i.e., “the casualty”) vanished.

And though he’d been the head teacher for the class, Mr. Chibiki said he simply couldn’t remember who the “extra person” had been. He’d collected information later on and found the name of a person **who seemed to be a likely candidate**, but the memories weren’t there as something he’d actually experienced. He’d forgotten. At that point he hadn’t fully grasped this problem with the memories of those involved...

As we listened to him tell the story, fifth period ended and the start of sixth period had left us far behind.

Outside, the rain continued to fall. Over the course of this hour, it had grown quite heavy. The old, grimy windows of the library shook in the wind and raindrops occasionally slapped against the glass.

“...And then three years after that, I once again had the chance to be head teacher for third-year Class 3. I considered quitting my job, but I wasn’t in a position to do it. I prayed for that year to be an ‘off year,’ but that’s not what happened.”

Mr. Chibiki continued his tale in a low voice, and Mei and I continued to listen, not moving a muscle.

“That year was the first that we tried a modest countermeasure suggested by the school. We changed the class designations from the old ‘Class 1,’ ‘Class 2,’ and so on to ‘Class A,’ ‘Class B,’ et cetera. Third-year Class 3 became third-year Class C. We thought that perhaps if the name of the ‘site’ were to change, the curse might be broken, but...”

So it hadn’t worked.

I’d heard that from Mei, so I already knew about it. They’d considered and implemented all kinds of different “countermeasures,” but none of them had had any effect. Because finally, after all the rest, they had found “an effective way to counter the situation”—namely, **this tactic** of “treating someone as if they’re ‘not there’ in place of the ‘extra person’ in the class.”

“...The result was the same. Many people died that year, too.”

Mr. Chibiki let out a long, frustrated sigh, then looked up through his bangs at us to gauge our reactions. All I could manage was a silent nod.

It seems that the ‘extra person’ that year was a girl who’d died in third-year Class 3 in ’76. Once the graduation ceremony ended and that became apparent, I