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Risky Reading

Today, you are busy -- so busy you did not get around to leaving a short posting for visitors, curious about what you're up to. Yesterday, you were busy as well -- not finding time to change the dated background music on your homepage. For some reason, the day before yesterday you were also busy -- so that you didn't get around to posting a picture that would give a clue to your recent activities. I can't guess why but your busy schedule started about three days ago, around the time when the heavy rain alert was issued for the central region and the heavy rain warning for the southern region. It was a torrential rain coupled with thunder and lightning. The rainy season has begun. Where, and what could you be doing?

Have you found a new job? If so, you must be extremely busy, adjusting to a new workplace. Or have you gone on an overseas trip after boldly withdrawing all your savings in the bank? Could you have gone on the trip with your ex-boyfriend, by any chance? Could it be that the heavy rain has incurred some damage? If you were hospitalized for a fracture then it's understandable you wouldn't have the energy to change your homepage status from busy to sick. Do you have someone nursing you? Did you perhaps burn yourself, baking bread that required a lot of effort? Is the injury so serious you can't type on the keyboard? Are you really that busy? While I was wrapped up in daydreaming about your suspicious whereabouts, the sudden downpour through the open space of the window drenched the stack of books that were on the desk. Among the books that got wet were several new books of which I haven't even read the preface, some were taken out from the bookcase for me to read them again; and above all, there was a book you had at one time borrowed from me.

As I was carefully turning the pages to examine the condition of the book, I discovered the red marks. It was the blurred smudge of a magic marker. Since I don't underline my books, and the lines were not there before I loaned the book to you, it was clear you had made those marks. But I don't want to put the blame on you. After all, I was the one who offered to loan you the book, and said you could also underline in it. When I got the hair dryer to dry the muddled words, some of them became visible like a clenched mouth. Like a child just learning to talk from his mother, the following was the sentence I managed to read with difficulty: And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

Bingo. It was in a book by Nietzsche you had borrowed from me. The longer I stared at the red marks, it felt like I was not the one gazing at them, but rather, the red marks were glaring at me. It was the last book you had borrowed from me. If it's all right, let me take back the word, last. Let only the weak souls who are obsessed with self-consolation use this word. Therefore, let this be the last time for the word "last."

The monsoon rain, which seemed like it would pour down forever, lasted two days and a night but your busy life does not show a sign of slowing down. I suffer on account of your busy life but at the same time I take comfort in it. For your busy life might send you back to me. The people who come to me are of two types, those who are idle enough to leisurely relish the shame of thinking they are useless, or those who are so busy that they don't have

the time to take pleasure in how useful they are. If only you came back, I would unreservedly condone all your indifference and no news of all this time. Is this what I said when I loaned you the book. In Turin, fiercely embracing the horse, which was being whipped by the horseman, Nietzsche cried to the horse, I understand you. I too understand—you, and your busy life that is difficult for me to substantiate, not to mention the red marks. I understand them all. After all, it's my job.

I've heard of music, and art therapists but I didn't know there were book therapists. Gosh, you must have read tons of books. Nine out of ten people who saw my business card reacted this way. It's called a *reading*, not a book therapist. I was very firm about fending off their superficial curiosity. This kind of superficiality, unless one cuts off the sprouting bud, will grow uncontrollably. It will grow to turn all things in the world into false information. Then there are those who ask me, what is there to read these days? In such an instance, I straighten myself and answer, pay me, and I'll tell you. As a reading therapist, I comfort and treat people's maladies of the heart with books. Like a physician who diagnoses and gives prognoses to his patients, I check the psychological state of my patients and recommend books that would be of help to them. Eighty percent of all remedial results are because of the placebo effect. And nothing could beat the book for being the most effective placebo effect. There is hardly any side effect. Any addictions? They are most welcome.

There are two types of people in the world: those who don't read and those who are unable to read. My clients are usually the latter. I deal with people who want to read books but don't have the emotional energy, or people who can't decide what book they should read. For the latter, the problem is that there are too many books in the world. Those of you determined to get a book but who turn away from the bookstore or library because you are overwhelmed by the books that fill up the shelves, or those of you who cannot satisfy your heart reading books that everyone else is reading, all of you, come to me for peace of mind and be reborn.

Is treatment really possible with books? you asked. It was an innocent question. You were a client who needed assurance you had not come to the wrong place. There is a statement carved on the entrance of the ancient Thebes library in Greece, "A Place Where the Soul can be Healed." Purposely, I answered with conviction. Like an obedient student, you nodded your head slowly. You went so far as to murmur in a whisper, I am sorry for asking a dumb question. You acted as though you had committed a grave impropriety, and didn't know what to do. You looked like you were on the verge of tears. Counseling you was not going to be easy. That's how our meeting began—with no special expectation or unusual excitement—like a book found by coincidence on a shabby and secluded shelf, a book that had never been checked out, and thus its existence, hardly noticeable. A plain-looking book that once you've perused was not likely to be picked up again. You were such a book. I asked you how you came to me and you said, Sir, I am a thoroughly worthless person, I am but a pest.

I fill out the reading card the first time I meet my patient. It's nothing noteworthy. I simply compile basic information about your taste in reading. There is no need to get nervous. Just think of it as a patient's chart in a hospital. Well, you know, like the card where they put down your blood type, height, weight, your history of illness, as well as your family's. The questions in the chart are so explicit it can make you ill at ease or blush. Not too long ago I went to the dentist for the treatment of a cavity, and was asked to fill out one of

these. Questions about how much I drink and my smoking habits were somewhat acceptable. I could also tolerate the question about whether or not I grind my teeth when I sleep. But I had to resign myself to questions like, if I had a bad breath, and how serious was it. Compared to that, my patients are asked to fill out a reading chart that is respectable and refined to the point of being problematic. The most recent book you read? The book you found moving? The book you want to recommend to someone who's special to you? The ideal questionnaire is one that induces the respondent to provide the truth and not the "right" answer. To do that, you have to make sure the respondent is not on guard.

From the counseling I did for the quarantined youths who have committed this and that crime, I learned that curiosity is the born enemy of suspicion. I once counseled a boy who habitually set fire to foreign luxury cars. He was fifteen years old. The young arsonist would not open his mouth all three times I met with him. What made him so tight-lipped was not his wariness toward me, but most likely his hostility toward the world. His eyes, brooding and razor sharp, appeared to view the world as an implacable foe, and me, just one more deserved enemy he showed contempt for with his uncomfortable silence. It was a book that I unthinkingly brought with me that got him to talk, although inducing him to say anything had appeared utterly improbable.

What was it that made the boy's eyes twinkle with curiosity, the boy who was mutely awaiting, without an ounce of hope, an impending punishment for the crime of setting ablaze seven cars in total? It could have been the unusual title, or the design of the book cover, which reminded one of a blazing fire, or the inflammatory profile of the author who had committed *hara-kiri* hailing the glory of the Japanese Self Defense Forces. If it were not any of these then, instead of an impersonal form, or a tape recorder merely recording the sharpened silence, it could have been the book, awkwardly placed on the table. This book, so-to-speak, could be analogous to the wooden horse that brought about the downfall of Troy with one stroke. After reading the novel, which aestheticized the interiority of the arsonist who set a time-honored temple ablaze, the boy poured out his feelings like a dam that burst. What the boy discovered in the novel, which was written by a writer from a foreign land who chose a bizarre form of death, was something he had never once disclosed to another person, something he was too preoccupied negating—himself. *Because not being understood by others was his sole pride, he did not feel the desire to express himself in order to make others understand him. He thought it was fate he lacked that which would make others notice him. Like a pig, loneliness got steadily fatter.*¹

When he read the above statement, the boy confessed he felt a simultaneous relief and agony, like when pus is removed from a wound. The agony must have been from coming face to face with the peerless monster lurking within him, and the relief came possibly from realizing that the monster was not peerless after all. Agony is the beginning of a psychological cure, and bliss is the end. Reading cannot change the past; however, it can help one come to terms with it. The moment he discovered that there existed another person who has thought the same, the moment he feebly experienced the joy of being understood

¹ Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. The page number is not provided on purpose. If this deliberate inconvenience turns you off, then henceforth dismiss all the footnotes. The thirsty one will look for the well; therefore, if you are curious about the precise page number, I suggest you look it up in the said book, starting from the very beginning until you ascertain that there is indeed such a sentence. Compared to the efforts you have to make to look for a particular bench, a fir tree, an island or a valley which are not even on the map, that were in the backdrop of a drama or in such and such a movie, it's a piece of cake. I pray that reading shall set you free.

by another, the monster he unknowingly nourished disappeared altogether. The arsonist returned to being an ordinary kid, and I discovered a newly paved path as a reading therapist.

If you tell me the books you have read, I can tell you who you are. The lists of books, in themselves, are your autobiography, and the chronicle of your soul. Just dismiss and laugh at the gossip that Rousseau the author of *Emile*, a classic text on education, put his children into an orphanage. Stop guessing whether or not if Lewis Carroll -- a mathematics don at the University of Oxford -- had not been a lifelong bachelor, would he still have written *Alice in Wonderland* for the young daughter of the Dean at his College. What you have to discover through reading is not cleverly disguised personal history of the author, or any ideology persuasively wrapped in what's called the message of the book, but you, yourself.

It's not like I am doing something impressive. I have no intention whatsoever of making a silly joke or flirting with you. *All that I can call mine is my inexpressive face, hence it's not possible for me to say anything funny.*² When it comes to reading, I am only your guide. Whether you discover paradise or hell from reading, it is entirely up to you. If you are fiercely vigilant, hell might not be such an intolerable place. If you tell me what kind of books you've been reading, then I can draft the hell in your mind. But I felt sorry for you because the list of books you have read was not sufficient for me to let you know who you are. For a thirty-year old adult the list was unbelievably impoverished, and your taste was all-over the place, and therefore difficult to figure out what you were truly interested in.³ You were like a book with no preface or index, in other words, one written without any consideration for the reader. That is why I was flummoxed to find out you were working for the public library.

What book should I have recommended to you? If you had been under-aged, and were having an illicit affair with a middle-aged man, I would have suggested Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. After I had a middle school girl, who was in a relationship with an older man because she needed money for her abortion, read this book, she terminated her liaison with the middle-aged man who had been paying her for sex. This young girl, having been reared by a single mother, will from now on look for someone who loves her, not someone who will look after her. At present, she is working very diligently at a part-time job, in order to go on a backpacking trip next summer. If your heart is aching from an unrequited love, I would recommend a Columbian writer's novel—so that at your deathbed, when you are in pain for not having confessed your love, you would not lament as follows: *the only reason why it's painful to die is because I am not dying of love.*⁴ If you were a precocious girl who scribbled in your diary a nihilistic maxim like, "One lives not because life is worth it, but because life is not worth killing oneself for," I would have you read J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye*.

You were not an easy book to read in several ways. Like a sloppily translated book, your sentences were vague, and the context, off the point. You seemed flustered when it came to expressing your thoughts and feelings. Even more so, you didn't seem to know what kind of person you were, or what you wanted. You stalled for a long time when I asked if you wanted coffee or tea, then barely managed to squeeze out, "whatever you want," and heaved a sigh of relief as though you had unloaded a heavy burden. When I asked how you

² James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

³ For your information, the following is the main part of the information you provided for the reading chart. Book you read recently: *Diet! Let's Do It Right*; Book that moved you: *Demian*; Book you want to give to someone special: *You Who Are Always Within Me When I Close My Eyes*; Book you want to read next: *Twenty-seven Reasons Why Bakers are Beautiful*.

⁴ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

liked the book I recommended, you gazed at me like a herbivorous animal, with your meek and startled eyes, mumbling, “what do I know?...” It was virtually impossible for me to assess from your undecipherable gloomy eyes what your idea of hell was. What was it that you hoped to attain from reading? In the middle of filling out your reading card, you asked hesitantly. Pardon me, Sir, but what book ought I read to bring a clean end to a seven-year relationship with my boyfriend? How can I end it without pathetic tears and with no regret? Was that really what you wanted out of reading? Was it merely that? Or was it maybe you way of making a joke to soften the stiffness of our meeting?

There are some things that never return once they pass. All things we label as “first” are like that. Consequently, all things that are first are without exception also final. A doctor from Prague who endured the unbearable lightness of being by way of an amazing and impressive playboy lifestyle is quoted as saying, “*Once is the same as not being. If we can live only once, then it is the same as not having lived at all.*”⁵ If this made you think of Nietzsche, you can be proud of being a reader of very high caliber. If you could go as far as unraveling a knot called eternal recurrence, it would be perfect. The past is the way of existence for all things that exist. The past will exist for eternity because it no longer exists. That is why the past is the future of the present. Is life that is only lived once futile and hopeless? Do not worry. In this infinite time and space of the universe, your life that is just lived once will repeat somewhere. The important thing is not the repeating of it, but how you will embrace that fact. In brief, the success or failure of reading, the fate of life and death depends on not the facts but on your attitude.

A realtor made a big fortune in real estate. With his wife and two children, he lived a life not lacking in anything. This man disappeared one day. Monetary problems? Problems with women? Nothing of that kind. The private detective who was asked to track him down was able to find him based on information where a similar-looking man was seen. The man explained his recent circumstances to the private detective. A steel beam of a building in construction fell right in front of him as he was on his way to lunch. It came as a shock to him that his life of achievements could come to an end by a coincidental drop of a steel beam. As a result, he gave up everything and took off. Wandering all over, the man finally settled down after meeting a woman and marrying her. He pleaded with the detective to leave him in peace, as he was quite content with his new life. But to the detective’s eye, it did not seem like a man was living a very different life from his previous one.⁶

If you want to be a sensible reader, quickly give up the idea of searching for a lesson in the book. What you as a reader need is not edification but empathy. If you had ever suffered from paranoia or trauma you could have related to the man, but instead you expressed enmity toward the man. You got angry and excited which was so unlike you. He’s a bad person. How could he desert his wife and leave without saying anything. Not a word. If he loved her, there is no way he could have done what he did. It just means he’ll leave again if another steel beam fell on him. He was simply looking for an excuse to get away. You were only concerned with the fact that he had left suddenly. By castigating the man’s action, you were revealing your attachment to what belonged to you originally, while wanting to hide your fear of a breakup.

⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

⁶ If you want to find out more about this episode, read Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*.

Do you really want to call it quits with your boyfriend? You could not readily answer my question. It was quite obvious you were undecided. It is difficult for people who have suffered an emotional trauma as infants to break away or detach themselves from anything. It could be that you were torn away from your mother as early as when you were born. Perhaps you were not joking when you said you had come to me to find a way of breaking up with your boyfriend. My poor patient. If that's the case, your relationship with your boyfriend is not the real problem, but the fact you have come to me to terminate the relationship. Contrary to my presumption that you would be boring, I was beginning to find you quite an interesting read—although it was just professional curiosity.

One proclivity of beginning readers is that they tend to equate the author with the protagonist. The effect of this detrimental reading habit is analogous to a student turning to the teacher for the correct answer, and therefore, weighed down by the author's authority, it makes it hard for the reader to immerse oneself completely in the book. Is it the author's experience, or is it his imagination? Not having read a whole lot, you were no exception and could not identify yourself in the book because you were too conscious of the author's biography.

As though you considered openly asserting yourself a crime, you wrapped yourself in silent humility. Your desire and will, untranslated into appropriate sentences, dissipated gradually; in the end, it was doubtful whether or not they actually existed. You needed an object onto which you could project your repressed desire to your heart's content; in other words, a character that could accept you for who you are and who could make you value yourself. After several trial-and-errors, I came up with *No Longer Human*, by Osamu Dazai. I said with apprehension, make this book yours, for the author's message or his actual life are irrelevant. A book is a mirror unto your soul, so look at yourself in that mirror. Let's do this. Let's assume that the author is dead. You nodded, and said the following -- 1948 is when he jumped to his death into a river. They say it was a joint suicide. The poor guy. Before I knew it, you were reading the author's biography at the end of the book. How simple-minded you are. I nearly burst into laughter at your preposterously sincere reaction. The effects of the conventional reading habits are persistent and obsessive.

I was staking my last hope on--? this verb requires an object; however, your reaction was surprisingly passionate. "What a reprehensible life I've lived." This sentence, I believe, struck you like lightning. What kind of life did he live? You, faithful to the conventional method of reading books, might have searched through the chronology of the author. Is it really okay to expose one's interior so publicly? What made you uncomfortable was not the content of the confession, but the explicitness of the format called confession. You would have been embarrassed like when you cast a furtive look at someone's private gesture. Was it at the Chungmuro Station or the Euljiro Third Station in Seoul? While waiting for the train to arrive, you matched your foot with the footprint painted on the platform. The footprints were part of the "Stand in Line" campaign. You were astonished that your foot was exactly the size of the footprint on the platform and I was amazed that your shoes were so worn out.

You, who profess an abnormal anxiety about things that are unfamiliar, who insist on wearing pitifully worn out shoes because you don't like the uncomfortable new ones, could not bring yourself to throw away that which belonged to you even when you found out your boyfriend of seven years had sent a text message to your best friend -- "Said I was going on business trip. Set aside time." Even the rage over your cheating boyfriend could not cover up your guilt of surreptitiously looking at another person's cell phone. Yes, it must

have terrified you to have to go through the entire process of meeting someone new all over again, to check each other's past carefully, to adapt to each other again, to reluctantly share the future. Not having the gall to drop everything and take off for a place foreign, all that you did when you encountered a sentence that stirred your soul for the first time was choosing to read the next sentence. *I don't know what it means to live a humane life.*⁷ I too don't have an idea of what a human life means. But I can tell you that stomping on your new shoes so they become all scuffed before wearing them is certainly not what one should do.

Books that are not easily forgettable usually have difficult beginnings. Once you get past the first few pages of the book, you will most likely finish it but it is not an easy task to prevail over the obstacle. You could very easily put down the book because of the abstruse sentences, new characters that pop up in every new page, or minutely detailed descriptions of this and that object. Fed up with figuring out the family tree of the characters with similar names, and elaborate description of the geography or the custom of the region, you might have searched for the film version. With movies, you wouldn't have a problem, no matter how many characters. But when reading a book, you cannot but fully focus on the characters who are not even paid for their roles, for their thoughts take precedence over their speeches, which in turn override their actions.

I wonder, what kind of book you were to me. Unlike Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, you were not the type of book that excited readers with its very first sentence. Moreover, you were not a book that captivated with its flashy cover, or enticed with stimulating illustrations. You were simply a book that I started reading with no particular expectation, or prior knowledge. Besides, the kind of book you were does not disclose itself, making its readers often want to stop reading it altogether. However once I got past the book's gatekeeper, the introduction, the unfamiliar sentences became familiar, the characters' personalities more pronounced, and the story took wings. You were no longer the book that unsettled the reader's heart, but one that softly beseeched, Read me. Don't hesitate to read me. Your whisper, so naïve and innocent, felt almost indecent.

Cautiously but meticulously, I read you. You were born into a family with three daughters. For your father and grandmother, obsessed with a son who would carry on the family patrilineage, you were not a welcomed addition. Your birth, which had nothing to do with your own will, was a catastrophe for your father, and a disgrace for your mother. As an unblest birth, and with a hostile father, the early years of your life made for stereotypical background of suffering. Your mother, who considered herself a sinner, disregarded your pleas to be breast-fed and instead abandoned you to a cold room, thinking she was paying retribution for her sin. When you were a toddler you were put in the custody of your maternal relatives. In truth, it was more like banishment. The child, who learned at the oral stage that even wailing at the top of your lungs did not get her what she wanted had to resort to a life where she had to kill off either the other person's desires or her own. It was a question of destroying the world, or herself. Personality is revealed by a decision made at that moment of the dilemma. You, who grew up under an indifferent mother who thought of retribution as self-torture, undoubtedly chose the latter. Even so, you did not relate wholeheartedly to the self-destructive protagonist of *No Longer Human*.

Patients react in one of the two ways to a book with a character that resembles them uncannily. One finds solace and delight, like a child when she first sees her self-image in the mirror; another will find displeasure as though she had encountered someone wearing

⁷ Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*.

exactly the same clothes as her new outfit. Self-identifying leads to self-pity; and the rejection of the character elicits self-negation. By incessantly negating yourself, you tried to prove that you were worthless. Perhaps your latent rage was directed not at your father but at your mother. Your relating to the protagonist was probably hindered because the main character was not a woman but a man. In spite of it, you did empathize with the family feud the he was going through. ***Perhaps this is what you wanted to say. I never smiled at home. As for blood relations, all things with deep ties felt alien to me.***⁸

I suggested you read another book, *The Setting Sun* by the same author who wrote *No Longer Human*, and I couldn't help saying this. The author and the protagonists are two different people, do you understand? Yes. I had to make sure you really understood. You become the author when you are reading the book, okay? Yes. Fortunately, the main character was a woman this time. It was a story about a woman from a fallen aristocracy who after her divorce seeks the love of a writer who had a wife and children. You liked the protagonist who rejected the traditional role of women accepting the wretched conditions of life as her destiny, and who instead sought a new ethical paradigm. I am very impressed with Kazuko's courageous decision to have and raise the baby of the man she loves. For me, I couldn't even dream of it. But then, it is pointless for me to say it, even if hypothetically, because having a child without being married is something that wouldn't happen to me. It was getting more and more interesting. Reading you was becoming steadily more exciting. You were now looking into yourself, based on the book's characters that reflected you. I found myself from a while ago waiting in anticipation for our session.

You were captivated by the concept of a scapegoat. While you were critical of Uehara's indecisive behavior toward the woman he loved and his denial of his own child, you viewed Kazuko as a victim of the old values. *The bastard and his mother. But we will fight against the old mores and go on living like the sun. The revolution hasn't happened yet. It seems more precious lives are needed. To be the victim is the most beautiful thing in the world at these times.*⁹

The victim is not executed for his sin, but he becomes a sinner because he is executed. The persecutors, by worshipping the scapegoat they executed themselves, are able to keep in check the self-destructive instinct of the community. A deeply-felt emotion, catharsis for the classical Greeks, this secret mechanism can just as well be applied to treatment by reading. By regarding yourself as the victim of dated customs, you had hoped to be recompensed for your past that was replete with self-negation. By unsparingly offering your unhappy past to the altar of oppressive custom, what was purged was a sense of shame and what you gained was a moral superiority. Your sorrowful past was now reborn as a history of suffering, highlighting the nobility of the victim. You have finally come to view your wretched past and yourself in a positive way. In the midst of talking about Kazuko's decision to have and raise the illegitimate child, you said this. I read this in the Talmud. If everyone unanimously agrees to punish someone, set that person free, for surely he has been falsely accused. Wow! That you would refer to another book to talk about a particular book. You were turning into an exemplary reader.

I decided to give you an award. It was unusual for me but it wasn't anything more than a reward for your diligent reading. This is what you said when I presented you with a pair of shoes. Did you feel sorry for me? That is not the response I had anticipated. How did

⁸ Annie Ernaux, *Father's Place*.

⁹ Osamu Dazai, *The Setting Sun*.

you know my size? If this were what you had asked with a radiant smile, I would have replied after a purposeful pause. It is my pleasure to read you. I could have offered you a smile while I stealthily pictured myself measuring with a tape measure the length of the footprint on the subway platform, dismissing the suspicious look of the passers-by. But flustered by your response that was contrary to my expectation, I gave you an incongruous answer. I didn't want to waste these shoes. My wife wore them only once, and they got buried in the closet. She has innumerable pairs she doesn't wear because she can't walk past a shoe store without buying. My wife has an obsession for shoes. You listened very innocently to what was a lame excuse. And then, this is what you said. How amazing, your wife and I have the same size.

As the counseling sessions went on, I could perceive the change, taking place in you. Your desires, which were previously asleep in you, awoke with a yawn. Your expressions became more cheerful and diverse, and your habit of avoiding the eye contact in conversation disappeared. You started wearing colorful clothes instead of your usual all-black. When you showed up wearing the shoes I gave you, you were no longer the same person who had come to me the first time. Did you really take my word for it – that my wife wore them only a few times, then forgot about those shoes? Was it your getting back at me for my lying? Why can't you be more honest with yourself? You are the protagonist of your autobiography. Are you going to pack it with hypocrisy and self-deception? Is this what you wanted to tell me?

You became more and more radiant. Your voluptuous body was a resplendent sight for me although you kept grumbling about going on a diet. Your sentences, steeped with pulsating energy and glowing confidence, were beautiful in their self-assurance. As if you could not bear to hide your dazzling transformation, you bought a new-model cell phone with a camera. It had five megapixels, and took much better pictures than most of the digital cameras out there. I started a personal homepage, and with nothing on it, I thought I'd post some pictures. You said you'd already posted several pictures of yourself. You said you were going to upload pictures you took of the bread you baked. I asked if you knew how to bake, too. I've been going to a baking school starting a few days ago. I even quit my job to devote myself to baking bread. It's my dream to open a bread store with my name on it. Instead of "bakery," you called it a bread store. Blushing, you said, a bread store. How beautiful you are in your unpretentiousness. The moment that passed, with me glaring at the corner of the tea table separating us, felt long and remote. Cold sweat gathered in my armpits.

You talked about the TV drama that was the talk of town around this time. It's really wonderful to see a main character who, just like me, is not slender, who's not from a well-to-do family but is so self-assured and upbeat. I want to be just like her. What's more, she's a baker. And we are both thirty. She has such a unique name too. As though you had found your alter ego, you seemed enthralled. I could not empathize whole-heartedly, or comment on your passionate reaction. When I confessed I had never seen the drama, you looked at me like I was an alien. The main character has such a comical name. It would cheer you up greatly if you were to watch it. You expressed lingering regret for my inability to relate to this entertaining drama with a protagonist who had a unique name, and I got somewhat anxious. When you told me you would stop coming, my fear was substantiated. I could not just send you away. There were still many books I wanted to recommend to you. How could it be the end? When my true reading of you was going to take place at last. If it's all right, would you like to go out for a beer? I blurted out, without thinking, but you gave your ready consent.

You did not censure your thoughts or hide your feelings at the table where we had come for a drink, spontaneously. Was it from the alcohol from early evening? Or was it because you thought it was the last time? You let out you had never slept with your boyfriend of seven years. What was the reason you delayed having sex for seven years? Above all, what was your motivation for telling me? Your sentences, which I could not comprehend, agitated me. Do you love your boyfriend? I feel comfortable with him -- like an old pair of shoes. What did you do with the shoes you wore before? This was a question I shouldn't have asked. As a reading therapist, analysis, not sentiment, was called for in my reading, but then I'd become much too interested in your private affairs. I stored them in the shoebox for now but I don't know what to do with them. It's cumbersome to keep them, still, I feel bad throwing them away. You gave me a mournful gaze. The ball was in my court again. I did not dare tell you to throw them away. I see; your shoes match your dress nicely. In truth, they looked great on you. What to do, I didn't realize it was this late. Looking at your watch, you were awfully surprised. It was time for your TV drama. The last episode was about to start. I hurried up to squeeze out t How about the rerun? I heard you could watch it again on the Internet.

Today the writer's authority has diminished significantly; conversely, the readers' influence is growing. The meaning of the book is not determined by the writer's creative talent but by the reader's disposition. Some people have said there is much blank space that a reader must fill in, and until that's done, all books remain essentially incomplete drafts. The viewers dictate even the denouement of popular TV dramas. Your taste can resurrect the dying character from a terminal disease, or reconcile two lovers who were fateful enemies.

What kind of an ending did you want that night? You could have walked out of the pub and taken a taxi home to find out the fate of the two main characters. You could have watched the very finale of the drama that had been a topic of rampant gossip by curious viewers. For you it would not be such a bad conclusion, whereas for me it would have been a huge disappointment. How anti-climactic. It's best to watch the rerun. I assume the readers reading this would agree.

The alternative conclusion is that you complied with my request and stayed with me till late. It is an ending that all but you wanted. Perhaps it was something you too might not have disliked. If only one person wants it, it remains just a dream, but if everyone wants it, it could well become a reality. Besides, I am your reading therapist as well as your reader; therefore I have the right to choose the ending. Subsequently, you were not able to watch the drama that night. You and I drank until the closing time of the pub. The ambience would have been of general joviality. Let's say we shared a pleasant conversation with our . As the night progressed, you let your guard down and your judgment became dulled. Therefore there shouldn't be anything wrong even if we drank a lot more than usual that night. Afterward, we went to a motel.

Details are called for at this point. Details proffer inspiration for the readers. Even a most outrageous story can become plausible by the power of details. How would it be by D.H. Lawrence, who expressed human sexual desire so boldly? Coming back from the bathroom, you, with your warm breath, whispered in my ear, I want to read you. That is how we left the pub, and went to the motel.

And what about a hard-boiled writer like Hemingway? We staggered out of the pub. The night in the city was raucous and sneaky like a rat. Looking at your pouting lips, I thought suddenly, why not? I snatched your wrist, and stomped toward the motel. Or how about in the style of James Joyce who probes obsessively into subtle and complex human

psychology? After the fifth taxi refused to take us, I stole a glance at you who did not seem to be disappointed and imagined perhaps we were thinking the same thing. When the driver of the sixth taxi drove past us, shaking his head, rejecting my shout for your destination. I resigned myself and decided to willingly allow anything. Shall we just rest for a bit? Holding your hand, you, who neither affirmed nor negated my question, I turned my feet toward the back alley lined with motels. As not to have my heart, stirring with excitement and guilt, unveiled, I strengthened my grip on your hand.

Next morning, when I awoke with a headache and thirst, you were not next to me. Your trace could not be seen anywhere in the bedroom or bathroom. If there had been no note on the table adjacent to the bed, I would have doubted the fact you had been with me during the night.

You were sleeping so soundly I didn't want to awake you. I think I am now capable of leaving my boyfriend. Thank you for everything until now. I wish you good health. Oh, by the way, your sock had a hole. I got you a new pair from the nearby convenience store.

You had cleared all your traces from the motel room but probably couldn't do anything about the red blot on the bed sheet. That you had never slept with your boyfriend of seven years was true.

Since that day, I have not seen you. Like a child gone out to play after finishing the delayed homework, you did not leave a trail. I was anxious to see you just once more but there wasn't a way I could get in touch with you. Your cell phone number was no longer valid. You must have changed it when you got your new camera phone. On the patient chart, you weren't asked for your address or phone number. Unless you contacted or came to me, meeting you again was going to be very difficult.

It was strictly thanks to Internet that I was able to find out about your recent affairs. That you opened a homepage was the clue. First I joined the community providing service for personal homepages. There you give the name, age, and gender of the person, and they'll look for the person. Your name, which was more fitting for a man, was a big help this time. There were only two homepages belonging to a thirty-year-old woman with your name.

You were actively baking bread. From baguettes to bagels, which sound familiar to something as strange sounding as rosetta and savarin. In the pictures of yourself that you either took, or had someone else take, you looked happy and full of self-confidence. You posted your daily impressions without any reservation. Formerly, it would've been unthinkable for you. It looked like the drama you enjoyed watching so much has greatly altered your life.

I felt like I was getting to know much more about you than when I was counseling you. Even without meeting, or calling you, I know all about what kind of bread you baked, how you are feeling, people you have met, places you visited. I can read you once more. I can't change your life, like the drama you liked so much; still I am content with it. Even if you are busy reading books I recommended, baking bread, watching TV dramas, or dating someone new, you must not give up on posting your pictures, disclosing your daily life, and updating the background music. For me who is always curious about what you're up to, there is a phrase I dread seeing:
There are no new postings.