FROM THE AUTHOR OF OUT AND THE GODDESS CHRONICLE

SWALLOWS

NATSUO KIRINO

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HARD-BOILED EGG

1.1

A single white egg rattled around the bottom of a small pot. At the local Miyoshi Mart, a carton of ten cost 198 yen—the cheapest option around here. At a rate of one a day, the whole carton would last for ten days. Cheap, packed with protein, easy to prepare. Just put one in a pot with some water, wait fifteen minutes, and done: a hard-boiled egg.

"Do you know what makes an egg an egg? If you boil it for fifteen minutes, it becomes hard-boiled. That's the definition of an egg. In cooking, it's important to know the essence of your ingredients."

Isogai-san, one of the patients in the nursing home where Riki used to work, never got tired of repeating this refrain. She would sit up straight in her wheelchair, giving off a proud, standoffish vibe, though her pink pajamas were splattered with food stains.

Isogai-san's name was written in a complicated character that no one could read. Whenever someone pronounced it wrong, she snapped back, correcting them: "It's Isogai." Sometimes she would point to her lapel and say, "It's Isogai," even though she wasn't wearing a nametag and no one had addressed her. And so she became known in the nursing home as the old woman who went around saying, "It's Isogai," and "Do you know what makes an egg an egg?," regardless of whom she was talking to.

But there were no hard-boiled eggs at the nursing home cafeteria, since many of the elderly people there were incapable of peeling an eggshell to begin with. And, besides, hard-boiled eggs could get stuck in their throats. So the only egg dishes the cafeteria served were a sickly sweet dashi-maki egg (always a hit), a dollopy egg-drop soup, or, on rare occasions, a soft-boiled egg.

That's why Isogai-san's obsession with hard-boiled eggs was a mystery to everyone. Over time, rumors circulated that she used to work as a cook, which made people more forgiving of her specific brand of dementia. She also developed a reputation for having a spot-on analysis of the nature of an egg.

One day, one of the nursing home staff told the elderly patients about a famous chef she had read about on the internet, who was always going on about the "essence of ingredients." As a result, patients who had up till then vaguely sympathized with Isogai-san's "essence of the egg" speeches came to agree with her much more readily. Shortly thereafter, however, Isogai-san caught a cold, developed influenza, and died unexpectedly.

If the nature of a chicken egg is that it becomes hard-boiled after eight minutes, what about the egg inside a woman's body? If you boiled it, how long would it take to harden? "Oh, Isogaisan! Tell me—what is the essence of a human egg?" Riki called out the familiar name as she stared into the boiling pot.

Riki had worked at the nursing home for almost two and a half years, from age twenty-one to twenty-three. It had taken her that long to save 2,000,000 yen, day by painstaking day. For most people, that might seem like nothing; but for Riki, the only

reason she was able to put away even that much was that she'd been living with her parents the whole time.

She was hired at the nursing home, which had recently opened near her parents' place, shortly after graduating from a junior college in northeastern Hokkaido. Her parents were overjoyed when she was hired, saying it was a good thing, since sooner or later they were bound to end up there anyway. But on her first day at work, Riki glimpsed an old woman playing with a ball of her own feces, and immediately wanted to quit. She couldn't believe people actually did things like that.

As it turned out, however, it wasn't the nursing home's fault that Riki didn't last long. Wherever she went, it was the same. Even after moving to Tokyo she still couldn't hold down a job. Sometimes she wondered whether she was the problem, whether she was just too impatient. But eventually she realized what made these jobs so intolerable to her: it was the sense that her fate was already decided, that there was nowhere else to go—while, in reality, she still had no idea who she was, or what she wanted to do with her life.

A while back, a friend of hers from high school had gotten a job at a nail salon. It was then Riki realized that people who were sure of what they wanted to do in life and pursued their goal single-mindedly were stronger and had a much easier time of things. Her friend had gone to a nail-technician school in Tokyo for a year, then started working at a salon managed by the school. Now she was working at the salon's main branch, in Shibuya. Whenever Riki looked at her friend's Instagram, she could tell she was thriving. Her boyfriend was a hairdresser who worked in Harajuku. But it wasn't Shibuya, Harajuku, or the boyfriend that Riki was jealous of, so much as the sense that her friend seemed fulfilled.

She had seen this friend just once since moving to Tokyo, when they met up at a café in Ebisu. This was right around the

time when Riki had started working part-time at a company that sorted flyers and other printed material in West Nippori.

Riki felt intimidated at the mere mention of a neighborhood like Ebisu, and her friend showed up that day looking especially elegant, her hair dyed a stylish reddish-brown, dazzling everyone around her. The moment she saw her friend's elaborate nails, Riki physically and mentally recoiled, scooting back in her chair involuntarily.

She tried to explain away the immense gap that had opened up between her and her friend by the fact that she had never pursued a real career. But when her friend proudly showed off her nails—"Look, I did these myself!"—all she could think was no, it was because she had no talent to speak of that things had turned out this way.

Why was it that things just seemed to be getting worse and worse since she came to Tokyo? There was nothing for her back home in Hokkaido. She'd had a huge fight with her dad right before she left, so she refused to go back, simply as a matter of pride. And, besides, it wasn't like she had the money to pay for the flight.

She had left home with 2,000,000 yen, but somehow it had all dried up within a span of six months. There was the key deposit for her apartment to pay for, and the rental deposit, then the fridge, microwave, bed, furniture, pots and pans, and tableware. All that on top of her ever-increasing living expenses, and the money just seemed to evaporate. And now she had zero savings.

Her frustration with her job, coupled with the sense that she wasn't particularly good at anything, left Riki feeling hollow inside, day in and day out. She never knew that being poor could feel this lonely, this suffocating. Just once in her life, she wanted to experience what it felt like to not have to worry about money.

The misery of buying up all the discounted food at the

supermarket just before closing, trying to find new ways to cut down on her energy bill, walking instead of taking public transit, buying clothes only at used clothing stores: she wanted out of all of it.

The timer went off on her phone. Exactly eight minutes. Riki drained the boiling water from the pot and added cold water to cool off the freshly boiled egg. She stood at the sink and began to peel off the shell. Sometimes pockets of air would get into the egg while it was cooking, and if you rolled it around a bit, small cracks would appear in the shell, making it easier to peel from the bottom.

She should have told Isogai-san that *this* was the essence of an egg. But Isogai-san wouldn't have believed her—even though, if some culinary specialist had said the same thing, she wouldn't have batted an eye. Riki could just picture her narrowing her eyes in suspicion. *This is who I've become*, thought Riki. *A nobody who no one cares about, dismissed even by the likes of Isogai-san*.

Riki poured some soy sauce into a dish and dipped her egg into it. Ever since she was a child, she'd always liked eating her hard-boiled eggs with soy sauce, not salt. That's why she'd hated school field trips: they would only let you bring salt. When she told this story to the first guy she dated after moving to Tokyo, he'd made fun of her for it.

"Soy sauce? On your eggs? Wow, you're really country."

He was three years older than Riki. He had a goatee, and a thick northern Kanto accent. He was a bit pretentious. She'd met him while working as a temp at an import shop, though "import shop" made it sound much fancier than what it actually was, which was merely a clothing store. The man said he only worked there because they let him wear a goatee.

You're one to talk, Riki thought. You're the one who has an accent. Then, as if he'd read her mind, he started bragging about how the prefecture he was from was technically within the Greater

Tokyo Metropolitan Area, so it didn't count as rural, the way Hokkaido did. He was perceptive only when he sensed that other people might be judging him.

Riki was a late bloomer, and he'd taken her for a fool, lied to her, dated other women behind her back, got what he wanted out of her, and left.

Ever since then, Riki had wondered whether there was really any point to men at all. In her eyes, they were rude, stupid beings who only ever thought about themselves. Throwing their dirty shoes on the floor, never putting them away. Leaving the toilet seat up, not noticing if they left a little pee on the floor, and just stepping in it. Opening other people's fridges without asking, drinking the bottle of sparkling wine she'd been guarding like a treasure. Falling asleep spread-eagle in the narrow bed and kicking Riki off. And since he believed women were supposed to serve him, he didn't care if he came inside her. When she told him she was worried about getting pregnant, he laughed, saying if she forced him to marry her because she got pregnant, he'd be the one in trouble.

All the men Riki had met since coming to Tokyo were people she'd never dream of sleeping with even if they were stranded on a desert island. *I don't need a man, I'd rather be alone,* she thought—but the reality was that, with her salary, she couldn't afford to be single.

Riki's current job was working as a temp in the office of Kitamuki General Hospital. Every day, she sat in that old, dim hospital for nine and a half hours—from eight in the morning until five-thirty, when the office closed. But her monthly pay was only 140,000 yen. Of that, 58,000 went to rent—for a cheap apartment that didn't get much light—which only left her with 82,000 a month to live on.

Someone else who had the same job but lived at home might be able to afford a coffee at Dean & DeLuca, but as it was, Riki couldn't even afford a coffee from 7-Eleven. Her contract was supposed to end next year, too, so she'd have to look for a new job after that. She yearned for money and security from the depths of her being.

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Riki pulled the cod roe onigiri she had bought on her way home from work out of the plastic shopping bag. She almost never bought anything from the convenience store because it was too expensive, but today she'd made an exception when she saw a sign that said "Sale: 100-yen onigiri." Giving in to her growling stomach against her better judgment, she'd bought enough to last her through breakfast the next morning.

She chewed the tiny, squishy beads of cod roe with her front teeth. Salmon roe, cod roe, herring roe, mullet roe. Riki imagined all those tiny beads packed inside her ovaries, turning into money.

Once in middle school, when she was at her grandmother's house over the New Year's holiday, she'd had to strip the thin membrane off the herring roe and found herself wondering if each of her own eggs was also covered with something like that. Would you pull on the membrane to yank it out of the uterus? Would it hurt? Would there be fewer eggs over time? What did it feel like to have them removed?

A while back, Teru had asked if she'd wanted to apply to be an egg donor, and she'd done some research about it on the internet. Since then, she'd asked herself, almost obsessively, what exactly an egg was made of. Maybe eventually she'd end up like Isogai-san, talking about nothing but eggs. But, in fact, she had no idea what the essence of an egg was.

Her own eggs would be fertilized by the sperm of a man she'd never even met. Then her eggs would be removed and placed inside the uterus of the man's wife, and become a baby. Did that mean the baby was still hers?

Let's say she applied to be an egg donor, matched with a couple, had her eggs fertilized, and a baby was born. Then, say she got pregnant later in life and had her own child. Would that mean the two children were technically siblings?

Then what if the two happened to meet—fall in love, even? Would that count as incest?

If she got married, should she tell her partner that she'd donated her eggs in the past? And, vice versa, if her partner told her he'd donated sperm, how would she feel about that?

The questions kept coming, and she wasn't sure what to do. After she'd eaten a hard-boiled egg, a cod roe onigiri, and a bowl of miso soup with cabbage, Riki pulled up the egg-donor website she'd bookmarked earlier. Just then, she got a text from Teru.

"Did you apply for that thing?"

They'd talked about applying to be egg donors together. Teru had heard about it from a gynecology nurse she knew, who made it seem like a pretty good deal. Apparently, you could get paid up to 500,000 yen.

"No, not yet."

"Come on, it'll be worth it."

"Maybe."

There was a lot of information you had to fill out on the application. Name, address, occupation, blood type, height, weight, shoe size, previous illnesses, chronic conditions, vision, hair type, skin color, whether you had single or double eyelids, whether you had a history of smoking, whether you had any tattoos or piercings. Then you had to list your passport number, any history of traveling overseas, future goals, reason for applying, and education history. Plus any history of illness in your immediate family, as well as their occupations.

It also said you needed to include a photo of yourself and one of you as a baby, if possible. Riki scrolled through the photos on her phone and found one she thought wasn't too bad. She was wearing her hospital uniform, which she thought made her look more serious.

But as she was filling out the information, she began to doubt whether Teru's application would be accepted, or even her own. After all, Teru had her ears pierced and had gotten double-eyelid surgery. She'd already spent over an hour on the application but couldn't shake the suspicion that it was all a waste of time. What if her eggs weren't chosen? How would she feel then?

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Riki entered Kitamuki General Hospital through the back entrance at 7:50 the next morning. She stamped her time card and headed toward the locker room. The physical-therapy nurses who worked at the rehab center were already there. They'd changed into their uniforms and were shuffling into the dim hallway. They were all young and energetic, and every time Riki passed them in the hall, they'd say good morning to her in their chipper voices. It annoyed her, even if she knew it was just a conditional reflex.

It wasn't even 8:00 a.m. and the hospital was already overflowing with patients, the majority of them elderly. As soon as the front doors opened at seven, they'd come in, fighting over the numbered tickets that indicated what order they'd be seen in.

Riki changed into her uniform, a navy-blue vest and skirt, and headed to the office. The first task of the day was to hand out the green folders containing the patients' medical charts. Then she had to sit at the cashier's desk. This required handling the money of sick patients, and sometimes she worried about catching something from them.

Teru was late. The section manager glared at her as she slid into her seat at ten minutes past.

Sorryyyy, my bad, Teru mouthed from her desk. She was a temp same as Riki, but four years younger. She was petite and very thin. Her crooked teeth seemed to overcrowd her small mouth, but for some reason this made her look younger rather than older. Her hair was dyed brown, but her black roots were growing out.

One time, their section manager had told Teru that her hair made her look unprofessional, and ever since, Teru was always talking about how she needed to get it dyed again. Riki didn't think it made Teru look unprofessional so much as unhappy, but of course she didn't say that. It's not like she had the money to go to a beauty salon, either. Her hair was plain black, and she always cut it herself.

Teru and Riki ate their lunches in the break room. Riki never brought anything fancy—onigiri, hard-boiled eggs (she had a hard-boiled egg for lunch almost every day, with the soy sauce provided in the break room), white rice, stir-fry with sausage, simple things like that. But Teru's lunches were on another level. Cabbage, fish cakes, fried pork cutlet—she'd put all her leftovers into a frying pan and cook them together, and sometimes brought in dishes that were unrecognizable. At first, Riki was embarrassed to open her lunch box and reveal the contents of her extremely basic lunch, but eventually she got used to her friend's extravagant meals.

There was a 7-Eleven next to the hospital, but Riki knew her money wouldn't last if she bought lunch there every day. Today, though, she had promised Teru they'd get something there and eat together in the break room, so she took out her wallet and stepped outside. If she didn't indulge once in a while, she'd lose the will to keep going entirely.

Riki wanted the tossed salad, but it was too expensive. That's

why she always ended up feasting on carbs—onigiri, cup ramen, sandwiches, pastries. Even that cost her about 300 yen, which she felt was too much. Today, Teru splurged on cream puffs. A smile of pure pleasure spread across her face as she ate, revealing her uneven teeth.

"Hey—so did you apply for the thing?" Teru asked in her husky voice.

"Yeah, I did."

"The questions were so annoying. I totally lied on the application."

"What did you say for the one about piercings?" Riki asked out of genuine concern, but Teru shrugged her bony shoulders.

"I just lied and said I didn't have any."

"What picture did you send?"

"This one." Teru showed Riki an image that had clearly been edited with an app. Her eyes looked unnaturally big, making her look slightly creepy.

"Seriously?"

"What? I looked ugly in the other ones."

Teru was from a city near Nagoya. She'd graduated from a four-year college. She'd gotten a scholarship, but she'd had to borrow money from her parents for living expenses, and by the time she graduated she was shouldering more than 5,000,000 yen in debt. After graduation, she got a job at a car dealership and worked as hard as she could to pay back her loans. But then she was transferred to the sales department, started getting bullied by a woman who was her superior, eventually had a mental breakdown, and was forced to quit.

After that, she'd done a total about-face, getting doubleeyelid surgery and moving to Tokyo to look for a job. But her search hadn't gone well, and in the end, she'd had to apply to a temp agency. That's how she ended up working at this hospital, only to find that the salary was too low for her to pay back her debt—which was why she also did sex work on the side several days a week. All the money she earned from that went straight to making her 23,000-yen monthly loan payments.

"When the economy's bad, business is good for people like me," she said.

Teru had been open with Riki about her side job, but it had also become a subject of gossip among the hospital staff. One of the technicians in the radiology department had allegedly spotted Riki saying goodbye to a customer in front of a seedy establishment in Shinjuku. This man was the spitting image of Jerry the Minion, and because he was always sweating, even in winter, the women in the office all kept their distance. Over time, he grew resentful and began to spread rumors about Teru. Riki was pretty sure Jerry only knew about Teru because he had been at the establishment himself.

Teru was so desperate to pay back her loans that she was forced to do things to Jerry that she had no desire to do. Riki wanted Teru to stop. Who knew what might happen if the hospital found out. It made Riki furious that men were allowed to buy women yet ridiculed them when they chose to sell themselves.

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"Hey, you know how it says you'll make anywhere from five hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand yen every time you get your eggs extracted?" Teru whispered. "I was wondering why the range was so big, and it turns out it's because they give your eggs a score." Due to her raspy voice, her whisper had the opposite effect, making her immediately audible to everyone in their vicinity.

"What do you mean by score?" Riki asked quietly.

"They give the person whose eggs they're extracting a score. Remember how they made you write your education history toward the end of the application? And include a photo of your-self? They know everything about you. So you'd get a higher score if you were in your early twenties, graduated from Tokyo University, worked for a good company, had no close relatives with serious illnesses, and were relatively good-looking."

Riki wasn't sure how Teru had learned all of this, but it left her feeling uneasy. She had graduated from a local junior college, wasn't especially pretty, and had no real talent to speak of, so she was pretty sure her application would get a low score. Up till now, she'd been going back and forth about whether she actually wanted to be an egg donor, but if it turned out that she wasn't qualified because her score was too low, then all the time she'd spent filling out the application would have been for nothing.

"I might be out, then. I'm already twenty-nine. Plus, I don't have anything that makes me stand out."

"I mean, you're healthy."

Teru stuck her chopsticks into her Styrofoam ramen cup and swirled the broth around. Riki was 166 centimeters tall, and weighed fifty-eight kilograms. She'd had no major illnesses and had no cavities. Though her parents and grandparents didn't have much money, they were happy. But when she thought about her eggs getting a low score, she felt uncomfortable. Were her eggs really any different from the 198-yen carton at Miyoshi Mart?

"Yeah, I guess. But something about it just rubs me the wrong way. It's like we're being evaluated."

"But that's true for literally everything in life," Teru sputtered.

"I guess you're right."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Riki realized how true they were. Her whole life, she'd been told what kinds of jobs she could and couldn't do. All those people who said, *Just try harder, all you need to succeed is the right attitude* were a bunch of idiots.

It didn't matter how much they lectured her about being self-motivated, because she'd been assigned to the lesser group from the get-go. But most people didn't understand this even if she tried to explain. How could they, when even her immediate family didn't? She was poor, and struggling, and there was no one to reach out and lend a hand.

What did Riki's life consist of? Dissatisfaction with her job, having an inferiority complex, feeling bad about not having money, and being lonely because no one understood her. That loneliness had eased a bit since she met Teru, but, then again, Teru was even worse off than she was. Talking to her was depressing sometimes.

"What if they accept your application, though, and you pass the interview? What would you do? You'd quit the hospital and go to Thailand, right?"

After the application, there was supposed to be an in-person interview. And if, by some stroke of luck, she was chosen to be an egg donor, she'd have to travel overseas to get her eggs extracted, since the procedure still wasn't legal in Japan. Which meant she'd have to take at least two weeks off of work.

As a temp, she'd probably lose her job if she took that much time off. Of course, nothing would make her happier than leaving her current job, but how was she going to get by after that? Just the thought made her anxious.

"Hmm, I'm on the fence about it." Riki felt she wasn't being indecisive so much as cautious.

"But your contract is up next year, right? Why don't you just quit a little early and look for another job? I mean it's five hundred thousand yen. Where else can you get that kind of money? Plus, you get a free trip overseas."

Teru had a point. Riki had never traveled out of the country. If she became a donor, she could go to Thailand for two weeks.

What was one or two eggs? As long as they were the Miyoshi Mart kind.

"I do kinda wanna go to Thailand," Riki murmured.

Teru grabbed her arm, her long nails digging into Riki's skin.

"C'mon, let's go! Let something good happen to us, for once. We can even go sightseeing if we have two weeks. Think about it: on our current salary, five hundred thousand yen is three months of pay, so we can use that time to look for a new job. I promise you'll find another one in no time."

The job at Kitamuki General Hospital was boring, and the work environment wasn't exactly positive. The only advantage, really, was that Riki could commute to work by bike.

"C'mon, you have to look for a new job next year anyway," Teru said, pouting a little. "It's better if you look for one now. The pay is shit here."

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A few days later, they got a reply. Riki's application had been accepted, but Teru's hadn't—even though she was the one who had encouraged Riki to apply. Though the reason wasn't stated, Teru thought it had something to do with her poor figure. That, or her overly honest answer to the question of why she was applying to be an egg donor: "Because it pays better than a parttime job."

Riki had answered: "Because I want to be useful to others." "You know how I am," Teru said. "I just couldn't bring myself to lie. Plus, I didn't think they'd accept me anyway."

Teru had a tendency to be self-deprecating. Like that time the section manager had allegedly told her that her hair looked gross. The manager probably never even said that. The more likely scenario was that Teru had said something like "My hair looks kinda gross today, right?," and the manager had nodded. Then Teru had complained to Riki about how the manager had called her unkempt. That was her pattern.

Riki felt sorry for her. Having that much debt would make anyone despair.

"You should do it anyway, Riki," Teru said with a serious expression. "You're twenty-nine—this is your last chance."

1.2

Pink, pink, pink. Everything from the walls to the curtains was decorated pink. But in slightly different shades. The ceiling was a pastel pink, the walls were more coral, and the curtains fuchsia. The floor was covered with sparkling white tile. Even the middle-aged woman sitting behind her white desk was wearing white. The desk had nothing on it except for a computer. She wore a suit over her pink blouse, and a red heart pin on her lapel that said *Happy Valentine's Day*. Beneath the pin was a name tag that read AONUMA.

The woman looked to be in her late forties and had a prominent forehead and large mouth. A memorable face, and attractive enough. Her hair was dyed a light brown, and she wore white foundation and rose-pink lipstick. Everything in this room was the polar opposite of the hospital where Riki worked. The bright colors hurt her eyes.

She stole a glance at Aonuma-san's left ring finger—it was a habit of hers to check whether or not someone was married. As expected, there was a thin platinum ring around her ring finger. Riki thought it must be the fact that she was married and had a job that gave this middle-aged woman the confidence to wear such gaudy colors.

As Riki entered the room, Aonuma-san glanced hurriedly at

the computer screen, as though she was checking something. For a while, she didn't look up. Riki looked at a photo on the wall of a young mother smiling happily as she held an infant to her breast.

Teru had told Riki that her initial application could still be rejected if she didn't pass the interview, so she assumed, from Aonuma-san's expression, that she was looking for a reason to reject her. Riki was wearing an outfit from GU, sneakers, and a cloth bag instead of a purse. It was obvious from her appearance that she was poor, and that she had only applied to be an egg donor for the money.

"So sorry to keep you waiting," Aonuma-san said, finally looking up. She was smiling, but her thin, penciled-in eyebrows were knitted together, giving her an uneasy expression.

"Please, have a seat," she said, gesturing toward the white chair in front of the desk. As Riki pulled the chair out, she noticed a heart-shaped pink cushion on it.

"You're Riki Ōishi, correct? Thank you so much for your application."

"Of course," Riki responded quietly. And then, like magic, Aonuma-san pulled a bottle of Evian water out from under her desk and placed it in front of Riki.

"Help yourself to some water if you like. There's a lot I want to ask you, but, please, make yourself comfortable first."

Riki thanked her and picked up the bottle of water. It was chilled, and left tiny droplets on the palm of her hand. She wiped her hand on her pants and took a swig.

Aonuma-san seemed to be waiting for Riki to finish drinking before she spoke.

"Again, thank you so much for taking the time to come today. Our company, Planté, is an American assisted-reproductive-technology clinic. My name is Aonuma, and I'm the Japanese agent for the company. Nice to meet you."

Aonuma-san handed Riki a business card with horizontal writing on it. *Planté*, it said, followed by the company's California address and the woman's name and title: *Kaoru Aonuma, Japanese Branch President*.

"In Japan, the legislation around assisted-reproductive technology hasn't quite caught up with the rest of the world, where ART is making huge strides. Our company, Planté, has a great track record of bringing happiness to families who want children. Unfortunately, here in Japan, many people still have misconceptions around the term 'assisted-reproductive technology.' In other places, the discussion around ART tends to be far more advanced. Our Japanese clients are aware of these developments. But the law is out of sync with their needs. That's where our American clinic comes in. To date, countless Japanese clients have benefited from our services and expressed their gratitude to us. We are in the business of helping others—and we take pride in that," Aonuma-san said, puffing out her chest a little. She pulled out a pink pamphlet from her drawer and handed it to Riki.

"Please, have a look."

Aonuma-san opened the pamphlet and showed Riki a series of graphs, explaining how many couples the company had helped through ART. After she'd finished, she put the pamphlet into a clear pink folder with the Planté logo on it and presented it to Riki.

"This is yours. Please be sure to read it over carefully."

Riki took the folder and nodded obediently. Aonuma-san was looking at her with a pleasant expression.

"Is today your day off, Ōishi-san?"

"Oh, no, I work at the hospital, so we don't really have those. I had to put in a special request today to take the morning off."

Saturday morning was usually the busiest time of the week at the hospital.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Aonuma said, bowing

slightly. "Most of our donors are full-time employees, so they say Saturdays and Sundays are the most convenient days for them to come in."

"Ah," Riki said, smiling awkwardly. She wasn't sure how to respond.

"Since it's currently impossible to perform egg extractions in Japan, we'll have you stay overseas for two or three weeks if you're accepted as a donor. I know that's quite a long time—will that work with your job?"

"I think so."

"Are you allowed to take that many days off?"

Aonuma-san's question touched a nerve: Riki recalled the conversation she'd had earlier with Teru. She was silent for a moment. If she took several weeks off before her contract was up, she'd probably be fired. She hadn't thought too much about what she'd do after that.

"I'll make it work."

Aonuma-san eyed Riki suspiciously. Riki avoided her gaze instinctively.

"You mentioned you work at a hospital. Are you a regular employee there?"

"No, I'm a temp." She'd answered honestly, but immediately realized she'd made a mistake, and began to panic. Why would they choose someone like that to be an egg donor?

"As a temp employee, won't it be difficult to continue working there after taking so much time off?"

Riki was cornered. She quickly launched into an impassioned defense. "It's possible I won't be able to continue working there. But I don't mind. I'm twenty-nine, single, and have no plans to get married. As a woman, I really want to do something to help other people. When I read that the cutoff age for being an egg donor was twenty-nine, I wasn't sure whether I'd be qualified, but I decided to apply anyway."

"Yes, I recall you saying that on your application," Ms. Aonuma said, glancing at her monitor screen.

"I'm turning thirty next year, and every now and then it just hits me that I'm not young anymore. But nothing has changed in my own life. And I don't foresee anything changing in the immediate future, either. That's why I want to do something to help someone else, before I turn thirty."

"You're so kind to say that. It makes us so happy to know that noble spirits like yourself want to make the world a better place by helping those in need." Aonuma-san smiled, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkling.

"Of course," Riki said, taking a gulp of her Evian water.

"But, to be perfectly frank, we've received nearly two hundred applications to be egg donors, and the average applicant is around twenty-five. It's quite possible that our clients will prefer a donor who's younger than twenty-nine."

"I see. So does that mean I don't have a chance?"

Riki felt dejected. If that was true, she needed to get out of here quickly, so she could get back to work. She had only requested to be off until noon. She regretted spending the train fare to come all the way to Ginza.

"Wait a minute—not exactly." Riki had already begun to gather her belongings, but Aonuma-san waved at her to stop.

"But my age makes it impossible, right?"

"Not necessarily. Under the right circumstances, some clients might be okay with it."

"Circumstances?"

"Yes, like your employment history, your family situation, your physical attributes."

There it was. The grade-A eggs that Teru had talked about. Riki's eggs were definitely more like the grade-C eggs you'd find at Miyoshi Mart. Who would choose those?