

Name

Date

Place

THESE PEOPLE

By

Chickarrin, Duane, Jim, Lisa, and Shingo

Jim Gore

17 October 20XX

Convenience Store

NIHILISM

The first part is over, and now we're in the long part. The rush came right on time and didn't stay, like it never does. Now, we return to waiting for nothing to happen. I have an obligation to be paid for my personal sacrifices. It isn't a choice, not at all. I have to be present, in this place, in some way or shape. Otherwise, I'm see-through.

I sometimes witness the lives of people like me: passionless cashiers, bored and dull young people, people who don't care for anything except eating and fucking life away. 'Cause my job, my worth must be watching and waiting to be told someone else's reality; and if I'm being honest, part of me feels good giving sympathy; but part of me also feels like a doormat; and I also must be conceited for feeling good about myself for this.

My sacrifice is wasted, though. My time is wasted on mandatory voyeurism—my exchange for gas money—but I guess nothing much changes when I meet my peers or friends or whoever else on my own time. Because I've gotten in the habit of watching and encouraging passively the behaviors I think can result in something good. Let me do you a favor we don't come back from.

Friendship—help each other move bodies or drive each other to work when we're out of a car. Us five, we're friends, and had I not been here, I'd have been with them. Maybe it's just desperation. Though, I'd never tell them that, even if I did know.

I don't hardly miss anything except spray-tan, cheap DVDs, stupid jokes, bootleg merchandise and farmers' market T-shirts. I don't hardly miss anything worth having, but then, it's all I got goin' on right now, so what the hell? Keep it up, keep on, the circle will close again. I'll be there this time to see it all.

No words are wasted. I'll tell 'em all tomorrow, just you wait.

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

18 October 20XX

Japanese Club

THESE PEOPLE

“Bring suicide to your parents like the gifts cats bring home to their owners,” I say to the group. And there’s like, a shock.

These people are in my circle. We’re close. We get along well, we all like Japanese stuff like anime, culture, music, and... yeah. We’re good friends.

We don’t usually talk about these sorts of things, but Jim says, “What? You don’t wanna kill yourself, you know?”

“No suicide pledges!” Duane throws his hands up in the air.

“Why do I feel like everything’s all *messed* up?” Chickarrin starts crying, falls into Duane’s arms, and I think I must’ve done something wrong. She could be really sensitive. I forgot.

“Far beyond isn’t so distant.” Jim says. He pushes his glasses up like an anime character, and it would be stupid if it was another time, but it didn’t matter here.

Why did I say that? I thought it was a little funny, but, like, I don’t know, I don’t get what it was for, I guess.

“Whatever. You guys know I wouldn’t do *that*, right?” I look around the room. “You know it was only a joke!”

“Right!” Chickarrin and Duane say together.

“When you look at causes of death,” Shingo says, “a lot of the time it’s inexperience that causes it. It’s these inexperienced things that cause a lot of people to be hurt or dying. Does that make sense?” And I guess it makes sense, but I don’t know what that had to *do* with anything.

“Gotcha, Shingo-san!” Chickarrin throws her arm around his shoulder and bursts out laughing.

“There is *nothing* moral in the world!” he says, and everything’s cool.

Chickarrin Fann

19 October 20XX

Japanese Club

SAAKURU

“Saakuru” is the word for “circle” or “club” in Japanese (that’s サークル in katakana), and I’m a part of Japanese Club (日本語のサークル)! In it, there’s Jim Gore (who I took Chemistry with), Lisa S (I *still* don’t know her last name), Duane Swanstone (friends since *forever*), Shingo Brown (“*Just Shingo*”), and me, of course!

We’ve been in the club together for a long time. I keep track of all their names and stuff, because, well, I want to remember them the best I can! They sometimes call me the “club historian,” keeping track of activities... old members... new ones... inside jokes, whatever. The joke can get old sometimes, because I care a *lot*. I hope they know that. That’s what it’s all for!

We get some new people who show up for like, a day or two, but this is the core group. This is the *friend* group, and you can roll your eyes, but it’s the truth, *really*. We’re really close.

But anyways, we talk... watch anime... do origami... play games... and a lot of other stuff. It’s lots of fun, and I get to see them all at least three times a week (and also sometimes on weekends). Honestly, sometimes it isn’t even about Japanese culture or anything, but we just sit and *talk*. That’s where we have “deep” conversations, and that’s what makes our friendship really work. Because we can do fun stuff, but also, things get serious sometimes.

Sigh... but there’s some stuff I don’t like talking about. I don’t always like... I don’t always do well with the whole thing about *cutting* and... it’s a little hard because it makes me feel weird about the *marks* on my *arms* and... I haven’t been wearing *short socks* a lot because of that... and just don’t bring up my parents, *please*?

Please (I’m begging you)!

Duane Swanstone

21 October 20XX

Japanese Club

ROCK SWANSON

They call me “Rock Swanson.” They say my name reminds them of someone. It’s kinda funny.

“Rokku-san... otanjoubi wa...” Chickarrin starts piecing together her broken Japanese. “*totemo tanoshikatta... desuka?*” It sounds more like she’s askin’ herself.

“What was that?” I say.

“Rock, was your birthday *really* fun?!” She pounces from her desk to face me, makin’ some kind of hand gesture. She doesn’t know sign language, she calls it “kawaii” and says it’s something “guy-arus” do.

“I did absolutely *jack*-shit.” I chuckle. It’s the truth, anime girl.

Funny thing about me, most of the other kids in this club know or think they know *some* Japanese. I don’t know hardly any. I never took the class, don’t watch anime, none of that. The funny thing, the really funny thing, though, is why I’m *here*, and it has to do with this so called “guy-arū.”

Me and Chickarrin, for some damn reason, got on well forever ago, and have been friends since. And no, we never kissed, and we never slept in the same bed. We’re more like brother and sister, but no, not that, that doesn’t sound right. That’s inappropriate, but y’know what, just forget it. We’re good friends, and because of that I joined this stupid club, and because of that I met the rest of these clowns, and for some reason it worked out.

Maybe this is a goddamn anime. Maybe she wears those schoolgirl skirts and “sayfukus” for a reason. Maybe there’s a reason she always wears those long, baggy-ass socks. Maybe all her keychains and trinkets matter for some reason. She only has one key. Maybe I just don’t get it—or better yet, I should just stop caring. This is alright enough, why should I? Chickarrin must have it figured out. She oughta teach me somethin’ sometime.

Shingo Brown

23 October 20XX

Japanese Club

IT'S NEVER LUCK IT'S ALWAYS GOD

Shingo, just Shingo. Only Chickarrin calls me Shingo Brown, my “full name,” or better yet “Buraun-san,” but everyone else just calls me Shingo.

And beyond this room, I don't really know these people. But I still come here to sit around, chat, watch trashy OVA's and make paper cranes, still.

“Hey, Shingo-san,” Lisa pats me on the shoulder. “what's your real name?” she whispers.

“Shingo, *duh*.” I crane my head around to look at her. She's sitting behind me, her face is flat and cool. She's a natural blonde with brown eyes, so blonde, so brown, it's surprising. Expressionless, plain, Lisa S never told me her last name, or anyone else. Why, I don't know, but because of that, she had no right to know my first.

She leans back. “*Pff*, You're no *fun*...” she says. She had this well-worn fatigue in her eyes, all mixed up with discontent, frustration. It reminded me of the eyes soldiers have in old war books. That *look*, it doesn't punch you in the gut until it punches you in the gut, until someone like Lisa S wraps you in plastic and smashes your head with a rock. *That* look...

She could say some fucked up, cryptic things unprompted, like “A machine that moves dirt has two arms that hold a shovel,” or “What are you gonna do? Give up and die?”

“It's never luck, it's always God,” she said to me once.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked. We were sitting alone in the classroom. The others weren't here yet. It was right before summer ended. Everything looked fake outside. The clouds tasted like angel food cake, and the sky was blue, hard, nondescript and plastic. It was warm, dry, and fake.

She wore a Japanese schoolgirl costume, black skirt, knee socks, her hair was put up, she didn't answer my question. She said nothing.

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

24 October 20XX

Backyard

IN THAT AS IN

The answer to your question depends on the question. Is it a good question? What is “good?” Is it your favorite four-letter-word, or is it fuck?

Don’t think I didn’t see you looking at me that way. Don’t think I don’t know what that means. When you saw me kneeling in the backyard, with my hands tied together, why were you in my neighborhood, anyways? How did you get my address, creep? Take a picture next time. It’ll last longer.

Take a picture. Go ahead, do it. Take out your phone and take as many as you like. I’m tied to this fence, I’m helpless, I’m wearing a seifuku, and I’m wearing latex underneath! He put a blindfold on me, and I can feel everything.

I rub my fingers against the burns in my wrists. I work hard, but you wouldn’t tell from my body. You don’t know my pain tolerance. You don’t know what the boils and lashes look like. You don’t know anything.

I don’t know how long I’ve been out here. I don’t know what time it is. I don’t know why I lie. I don’t smoke. I don’t take from the liquor cabinet. I get touched. I touch myself. I use Dad’s lighter all the time. I die.

I have nice legs. I like to show them off. My parents always said I had good legs, and so, like, I don’t know, that just always felt good to hear. In that, as in, I don’t mind, if I’m being honest I don’t mind if you look at me that way. And I can’t do anything. I’m stuck here.

So, it’s cool, these tights are warm. It’s probably like, twenty degrees out or something? I think it’s starting to snow. One time, Dad dressed me in a sack and chained me to the fence. Now I’m soaking wet. I cried so hard, all the makeup ran down my face.

What do you think? What do you think, Shingo-san?

Chickarrin Fann

25 October 20XX

Japanese Club

HOW DO YOU RETURN FROM THAT

“How do you *return* from that?!” I said, and then I give him a good, slug in the arm!

“You just do!” he says, “What can I say? Some things just um, you just gotta work it out, in what ways you can.”

Me and Rock are talking right now (*watashi wa ima Rokku-san to hanashite imasu*). I don’t remember how it started, but we ended up talking about *crushes* and *love* and all that ooey, gooey stuff. He had a girlfriend for awhile. We didn’t talk that much around then.

But they broke up, and now we chat all the time (I wonder why)! The meeting just ended, and I’m waiting for my ride. We stand in the lobby, and he waits with me. There’s nobody else around. It’s dark out.

He has a car, and he can leave whenever. But he still waits here with me, in this dead, dull lobby. The tile on the floor *shines* like a chalky, red and green checkerboard. The sky is dark like lake-water... not really blue. Not really.

I like the way he laughs. He’s good at it (*jouzu desu nee!*). It makes me feel warm when it’s cold outside. It makes me wish he *embraced* me, and I could feel the roughness of his jacket, and his face, and his hands, but it’s all so *warm* (*atataakai nee*).

Ask him! Do it, Chickarrin, ask him! Ask him before it ends! Ask him before it’s over! Ask him before I might never see him again! Ask him before I might never see the sun again! Ask him before I get in that car and go dark places! Ask him before he doesn’t look at me! Ask him before I eat cold french fries for dinner, in the kitchen, alone, and there’s *trash* on TV, and Mom isn’t home—and nobody else is—just ask him, get it over with! Get it over with!

“Sumimasen. Shitsumon ga arimasu,” I said. He looks at me like he *always* does.

Jim Gore

25 October 20XX

Convenience Store

FUNCTIONAL FANTASY

This place is surreal. It's like a dream eating at me, secreting weakness, distraction, and a dulling, limitless patience. But then a customer walks up to me. And then I notice her appendages.

"Alright, that'll be \$14.97," I say to her.

"Thank-you-thank-you!" she says. Notice her overgrown nails and stained skin. Look at it.

Gross, right? But still, I hand her the bag. I watch her walk outside, into the concrete abyss—the sprawling, suburban pit—and then she disappears. The sun has set. I already forgot her face.

We wait all night for nothing. Days are diseases and the sky rots until there's maggots in its carcass. The music here is thin, nostalgic and disorienting. It destroys a perception of time and induces my simulated happiness, useful only to force a crude expression of politeness. Take it away, and the effect follows.

Look outside. Remove the fake grass, malnourished trees and bushes, and it's all concrete. It'll all be some day, and there will be no moon left to illuminate the world's decomposition. Almost everywhere's like this.

I bet they're having fun. I missed club to reflect on a dead earth. I missed that cheap, scuzzy thing that's the most I really care about. My patient disease keeps me waiting for an arbitrary end, and I just keep on saying nothing until we're there. Silence feeds itself. Witness my contribution.

The meeting started two hours ago; I punched in about two hours ago. I imagined mobility would make for more exciting things than going to work or a Japanese club. But what more excitement is there to find here? There's not even sidewalks outside. You are trapped; I am trapped; no one wants you going anywhere. Domestic slaves prevent your escape out of fear of being alone.

The moon is watching. I spit in her liquified eye.

Duane Swanstone

25 October 20XX

Japanese Club

WEIRD NAMES

They all have weird names. Shingo, Chickarrin, I think Jim's the only one that doesn't. Well, that is, when Chickarrin isn't calling him "Guro-san." Oh yeah, and Lisa, I guess.

"Hey, Guro-san!" she says, "Harowiin ni nani wo shimasuka?"

"Wakarimasen," Jim says.

And, y'know, he thinks he's good at Japanese, and most people think so too, but I swear, half the time that's all he says. And it means "I don't understand," so, I call bullshit, a little. But who cares, he's whatever.

"Un. Wakarimasu, yo," Chickarrin puts her hand to her chin and makes a funny face. "Rokku san wa?"

"I'm 'onna get together with my family and eat a shit-ton of candy. Oishii, desu *nee*. Isn't that how you say it, right, Chickarrin?"

"Rokku-san wa Nihongo ga totemo jouzu desu *nee*!" she squeals.

"Oh, *sugoi*, you learned how to say that by yourself!" Jim says. He kinda had this jackass thing about him, I swear.

"Screw off, and no, I didn't. Chickarrin taught me," I say, "She's my '*Nihongo no sensei*,' she calls it."

"You'll need better help," he says.

"Like you can do any better, 'Wakaru-san!'"

"What'd you call me?"

"Wakaru-san!" I said, "That's your new nickname!" I point at him, and Chickarrin starts laughing, and I like that.

Shingo Brown

26 October 20XX

State Road XX

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Lisa was talking to me about God again, like she does. And it's the weirdest thing, because she doesn't pray, she isn't religious, but she brings it up to me at odd moments.

I gave her a ride home yesterday. "I'd rather not be here," she said. We were in my car.

"Where, this town?" She looks out the window, empty. The words are empty, and what I can see of her face is also empty.

"No, not that," she says. Then what?

We pause for awhile. We don't say anything, neither of us, and I just drive. She gave me the address without reservations. This is a rough side of town, but... just keep on driving. I don't know the worst that can happen.

"I'd rather not sleep covered in urine." I listen to these sweet, meaningless words leak all over me. Got it, Lisa, I understand. Me neither. "Dad was worried he was gonna drop it when we took it down the stairs."

"Took what?"

"Oh, my grandma's old mattress. She died, and like, we took some of her old stuff. For some reason."

"Are you good?"

"What's it matter to *you*?" Her tone changed. From distant to bitchy, how's that for repaying a favor? I didn't have to do this. I could've let you stand there in the cold. I can't believe I did this. I never would've thought in a million years.

"I just wanna know what's up," I say. How's that for compassion? I think I did alright. Are we friends now? Don't be too hasty.

I've known Lisa S for awhile. And by that, I mean I've known *of* her. I didn't speak to her very often in class at all. She never looked at me or said my name and had no reason to. I can't say that apathy was reciprocated, but I can't say I ever thought I'd take her home. But watch yourself, now.

"Friends?" she asks.

"Sure. Why not?"

"You're making *me* your friend?"

"Somethin' wrong?"

And she pauses. She doesn't say anything. And I don't give a shit. Friends or no friends, whatever. Forget it.

"No. We're friends," she admits. She lets me in. Maybe now I'll hear some heavy shit. Maybe it's got something to do with her last name. Maybe it's a bad idea. Maybe I have no good reason to know, and really, I don't.

"Turn around. Take me to your place."

"Fuck." And that's all I can say. I pull into a gas station so I can think. "Will you open up if I do this?"

"In what way?"

"What kinda fuckin' way is there? Just say what's on your mind." I'm out of my depth. I hope nobody gets any ideas.

"I'm hot and like to have a good time," she says to me. I can't tell if she's being serious. I can't tell if this is really happening, or what she wants if it is. But then, I can feel my sweat on the steering wheel against my skin, and I can tell I'm sweating because I'm fucking nervous. So yeah, this is real.

"Yeah, like, daughters and dogs, lots of bodily fluids, yeah, I'm not proud of anything except just being alive!" she says. "I used to pray for times like this. Are *you* made in the image of God?"

"I'll take you home if you stop talking." So much for opening up.

"Gotcha." We slept in the same bed that night. Motherfucking Lisa S, you are sadistic.

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

31 October 20XX

Garage

MY DEAR

My throat hurts really bad. What if I started coughing up blood, Shingo-san? God, where *are* you, already? Who notices my corpse if I die alone? Will it be you?

It's like torture waiting here. There's huge piles of ash all over the floor. This place stinks of shit, piss and cigarettes. I gag. I gag again, I gag so much. Everything fucking smells because Mom didn't sweep again. Again.

They're fighting again. I hear muffled screams and like, the sound of meat slapping... my parents. "Motherfucker!" she says, and she—Mom—is crying really hard, because Dad hits really... hard. So I... I just have to wait. If I say nothing, I'll be okay. Just don't fucking talk.

"Sit in the garage. Be cold, my dear, I'll put my hands around you and make it nice." Those are *his* words, not mine, like the kind of shit that happened all the time back then... I hated it, really. So *gross*...

I stare at the light. It's just a bulb in a cage. I let it burn out my pupils until everything's like, shiny, kinda.

But yeah, my tights are torn. What's Shingo gonna think? Well, shit, I can just tear 'em off and stick myself on his lap, whatever, it's cool. Don't stress, I'm *not* stressed. It's just more of the same, I'm used to this shit. You hear it enough, it stops mattering. You hear it enough.

"Fucking slut!"

I hear the floor shake. "Bastard!" And then I hear it shake again, and it just kept happening. I put my hands to the heater. I see new marks on my forearm. Some of them are gray, and I can still feel a numb stinging. When I shower, the water'll probably peel the skin off.

I could be here all night, Shingo. Please, my dear, please.

Chickarrin Fann

1 November 20XX

Japanese Club

LOVE MEMORY

I kissed him last night (don't tell anyone!). Finally, I did it! We were alone after club. We watched everyone else leave, Lisa and Shingo were walking really, *really* close, and Guro-san had this pouty look on his face (he had to work, he wore his uniform *all* club). But me and Rock just waited there, and it made my head and legs feel strange. I could fall right into him.

"Whatcha think about Shingo and Lisa?" he says, "They're like a couple of love-birds. Ain't they?"

"Oh, it can't be *that*! Shingo's cold as *ice*!" Yes, he is, just like the icicles hanging off the roof right now. But he's warming up, and he just might break off and crash into the ground! Lisa, what are you doing with that boy?

"I know it ain't beyond *you*, of all people, to see the way they been lookin' at each other." He's got my favorite smile on right now.

"Stop! What are you saying?!"

"Exactly what it sounds like I'm sayin'!" Laughing is like a drug. I always feel so light and airy. You make me feel that way, Rokku-san. Sugoku daisuki da yo! I love you extremely.

So I come up closer to him. So I get off the bench and walk over to stand by him. He's close (*chikai nee*). They changed out the lights recently, and now everything looks so much warmer, like his skin, like his body. His rough hands are never hard enough to make the rest of him that way. Make me a memory, *Rokku-san*. *Watashi to kekkonshimasenka?* Won't you marry me?

"Sugoku... *daisuki*... da yo..." I say it. And then I started sobbing like a big baby.

"Hontou desuka?!" I fall into his arms like *always*, and "Nakanaide kudasai. Boku wa... boku mo... *daisuki*." His face got really near to mine, and I felt like I was in heaven.

Jim Gore

1 November 20XX

Convenience Store

PERSONAL AND STRUCTURAL DANGERS

The horror is collective. The sun goes down, falls flat on its face, and we begin the long journey to unfulfilled anticipation. *We* do.

“Havin’ fun?”

“Eh, somethin’ like that,” I say to him. It’s my lead, Austin Homer.

“What’d you do all day?”

“Other than bein’ here? Not a whole lot, I suppose.”

“You still in that Japanese club?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“What’s that like?”

“Eh, nothin’ too, incredibly serious. Just a place to chat, hang out. I get bored. There’s nothin’ to do around here.” That last part is true. There isn’t shit to do for fun other than shop, and I find the practice unfortunate. I disrespect subdivisions, the people that live there, and how they use their money. Consumerism can eat me.

“I tell you, what this place needs is a rec center.” And Austin isn’t wrong. He had a lot of good things to say. How do I feel about his company? I like it, fine, I’ll admit. That also surprises me. “I hope you guys can turn it around. With all the inequality, and now the government’s goin’ for your retirement, it’s just like, *man!* All I want is for people not to have to struggle no more.”

There was somethin’ about that last part. I let him speak and his words melt into me. They must’ve stunned me like cattle. Though, it could also be my own isolated, vulgar, commodified condition. Never mind my humanity, I’m a customer service associate. I’m your doormat.

“The fear I have is how we’re gonna get there. There’s no turning back,” I say.

“Yep, *yep*. I feel sorry for your generation. It’s early so far, but it’s hard to go bad this early.”

The facade of my job dies at this hour. There is no place but here. Outside, the desolate, inhospitable void offers illusions of flashing light, cars accelerating into nothing out of fear of death. Frenzy invades the night. Here, though, it’s safe—in what ways it is.

The stark overhead lighting threatens us. Revelatory, it slices us open to find nothing of relevance. What it exposes here is nothing we don’t live with. So, disembowel me. My stomach is clean.

“If I couldn’t have that, at least I can have this,” he says, but I can’t remember what we’re talking about. Even still, I start responding in a way that makes sense. I wasn’t paying attention, but I was still inside the conversation. I still live in the machine even when I don’t notice.

“I just wanna be comfortable. I just want a decent house—doesn’t have to be big—decent neighborhood,” I say. “I wanna have good food to eat, good insurance, just be comfortable. I don’t want much more than that.” I describe what I want out of life, the basic things I’ve recited in my head over and over again. I must really mean it, too. Or maybe I just tell myself that.

“But *man*, I’m sure you know, everything’s gotten so expensive recently! I remember when you could get a loaf of bread, a gallon of gas and a gallon of milk for \$4, about. Ain’t that way no more,” he says. “Heh, things were different back then. I remember, my parents would send us outside, and just say, ‘Be back before the lights turn on,’ and we would just run around all day. We’d ride bikes, we’d, we would do just, *whatever* we wanted. We could go anywhere or do anything just so long as we were back before dark. Nowadays, though, it’s different. You have these kids who just sit on their phones and watch *other* kids play. It’s like, what?!”

“It’s wrong. That’s no way to grow up, I think. It’s not a real-life experience, and all that technology can go away. You can’t get rid of going out and playing with your friends.” I say this, but the trouble is how I grew up. The trouble is the kind of “friends” I had in my formative years. I wish I had a childhood like Austin’s. I wish I didn’t live in a convenience store.

Duane Swanstone

23 November 20XX

Basement

END OF DAYS

I heard before that mankind's "end of days" would be when he made peace with himself and nature. And because of that, he builds his own utopia, without war, strife, chaos, corruption or none of that. I wonder if I'm not gettin' mine.

This damn girl was gunnin' for me the whole time. This is just like that thing she was tellin' me about in anime, the "childhood friend archetype" she calls it. And yeah, we do watch the real sappy kinda stuff now. She says it's good for "immersion" and language-learning.

Because she's been teachin' me Japanese, too. I know bits and pieces, expressions and stuff now. But it's fun, I don't mind it. Who am I kidding?

It shoulda been obvious it was gonna go this way. I mean, it says somethin' 'bout me, that I'd join this stupid club just to spend more time with a *gyaru*—she finally figured out how to pronounce that one—and, well... yeah. It shoulda been obvious.

She won't take me to her house, or won't let me go there yet. Maybe we're not that deep into it, maybe her parents aren't for it, whatever. Either way, she waits for me after club with a bag full of DVDs and comics—that's "manga" in Japanese—and we go to my house, fire up the DVD player, and sit back, relax, and just...

Alright, this is between you and me, but I don't think I've felt this excited about somethin' in years. She's ecstatic—I think is the right word—youthful, *lovely*. If I say I love you, it's rare, but I do for her. Really, I love her.

"Your basement is so *nice*!" she says to me. It isn't, not in my opinion. It's just an unfinished basement with a big TV: only half-carpeted, walls are bare, but it's right next to the furnace room, so it's the warmest in the house. It's cozy in the winter.

But anyways, she likes it here, and my parents love her. “Certainly an *improvement* over last time!” my mom said she was. Rosa Migno, when me and her were together that really shut me and Chickarrin’s relationship down. Now I know why. This is why.

There’s textbooks, bootleg OVAs, some dirty *doujins* and other nonsense scattered all over the coffee table. I tell her it’s important we clean this mess up when we’re done. My parents’d be on my hide had we not. She’s got this chaotic way of workin’, I notice. It ain’t bad, she gets things done, but it *is* messy, for sure. I like my clean space, so, we’ll have to work on that. But for now, I don’t mind the extra pickup.

“Why do they draw girls like that?” I ask. “I find it a little... I don’t know how to feel about it.”

“Oh, that’s a *bishoujo*! It mean’s ‘*cute girl*’. They became really big in the ‘80s and they’re *everywhere* in manga, anime, games, everywhere!”

“Why do they all look the same?” Really, it’s a genuine question: why do they all look alike? But she just bursts out laughing. I don’t get it, really.

“There’s so many nuances!” she screams.

“Shhh!” *This* late? If I woke my parents up now they’d *really* tear me a new asshole.

Of course, I’d be responsible ‘cause Chickarrin’s a guest, and *I’d* made the mess, and *I* got her to scream, and “Is she okay?” and yeah, Dad, she’s fine, I ain’t done nothin’ to her.

“*Sorry*,” she whispers, “You wanna make out?” What the hell.

“Wha?”

“Do you wanna *make* out?” she gets off the ground where she was sittin’ and moves towards me.

“This is sudden,” I say, and I’m not against it, but shit, girl, “Hold on!”

“No,” she says, flatly, and then she starts to crawl on top of me on the sofa. Fuck, it’s hot in here.

She takes my hands, and I can’t see what they’re doing, but I feel more and more of her skin.

Shingo Brown

25 November 20XX

Japanese Club

IS THAT A SIN

“A politician and a famous person celebrate this day! Ha!” Jim roars.

“Yep, that’s right. *Sou desu yo!* Mina-san, omedetou gozaimasu!” Duane gives a thunderous applause.

“That’s right Rokku-san! Nee, *nee!*” Chickarrin hollers in her Japanese-English creole.

Everyone’s having a great time, and I don’t think anything happened.

Like usual, the fun was made, not found. We responded to a gesture, or motion, expression, something probably small and meaningless, which led to this moment. You don’t even know it’s happening until you’re in it.

I look out the window and see it’s snowing. A wall of white, a thundering, perplexing beating, it looks so beautiful from inside here. I hate being in it, though.

But that doesn’t matter, because I’m not. I’m here right now, surrounded by four people, sharing time and space. We exchange expressions, and in practice, we become a single, careless thing, not bothered by petty stuff like snow falling. I can let go of my control—live a little—but I still have it, it’s still mine.

Wow. Look at that face. Look into those dark eyes, so dark they’re like holes, like pits in the earth, carved out with a shovel. There’s something about the streaks at their edges, like red lightning in an egg-white sky. The marks of sleeplessness, intoxication, sickness, I can’t shake that part. It’s like looking at a stray dog.

I held her in my arms the other night. She was half-naked, her hair was slimy, she felt like a dead fish and for the first time I noticed...

But she cracks a smile. I looked at her long enough—and forgot what was happening around—and she noticed. I have pale relief. Alright, Lisa S, fucking alright. I'll forget about the scene in the bathroom, I'll forget about how your room smells, I'll forget the shit all over your basement floor. I'll take you home with me after this.

“Hey, look, Shingo-san's starin' at his girl!” Rock snaps me out of the illusion. And I figure he could snap both of our necks while he's at it: mine and Lisa's, I mean.

“Rokku-san, *yamete!*” Chickarrin protests. She begins grabbing and hitting him on the chest. He doesn't mind.

Jim puts his hands behind his head and just laughs. But I don't bother to pay him any mind. It doesn't matter.

Lisa's wearing her school uniform like usual. Her hair's done up, she has the windbreaker, the black skirt, and thigh-highs on. Chickarrin's wearing just about the same thing, but her socks are baggier, and she has a lot more keychains. She's wearing a shit-ton of spray-tan and she just dyed her hair again, too.

Jim's got his work clothes on, like usual, and Duane just opted for a jacket and cargo pants again. Me, I'm just wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, like always.

Like always, I notice, we're dressed exactly the same. There's only ever small changes in wardrobe. It's *always* the same: perfect, seamless, predictable, pleasant, novel, whatever. We're stuck right where we are.

Someone brings up this one specific scene and, then we try to avoid the “H Word” and then, we put on a bootleg miniseries from the '90s nobody's heard of, and we laugh at the shitty dub.

We trade manga; we eat snacks; we talk about the new series being adapted; we play obscure games on an old TV, and we just laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh.

The classroom extends and twists to fit the occasion. The room is alive, and we never have to change. It doesn't end.

Jim Gore

24 November 20XX

Convenience Store

25% MORE FREE

“You finished with signs?”

“Yeah,” I say to Austin, “The front’s done. Should I scan down promo?”

“Nah, we’ll leave that for the closer. Dailies done?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool,” he says, and then he leaves me behind the register. The morning is through, and now I just wait. Fine, I’ll deal.

I borrow some receipt paper and start drawing. I get bored of that and practice kanji. I get bored, so I flip the sheet over and start journaling. And then a customer comes up.

“Hi, do you have rewards?”

“Yes,” and then they punch in their phone number. I’m back on the assembly line, hopefully not for long. All these people, wasting their money on bullshit that’ll end up in the trash a year from now, I don’t know how to feel about myself for facilitating the process.

So yeah, buy your holiday treats. Hey, you, you really think you’re saving money? That’s what I wanna ask. “Deals,” “savings,” I get sick of those words. Go save yourself for once.

You don’t get it until you’re in it. No, the customer is *not* always right. You, yourself, aren’t entitled to shit.

Me and Austin talk about it all the time. “The public don’t work for the public, *we* do,” he said once, and there is a distinction. You don’t serve yourself. You’d look down at this kind of work.

It changes you. The music here is bad and customers are like slot machines—you never know for sure but you can always bet on losing—but I still feel *elevated*, in a way. It’s a confusing, intangible

positivity: my simulation of happiness. My job necessitates enthusiasm in the face of monotony, and also nothing at all. There's no reward, no end, no meaning. Chase your carrot on a stick.

Maybe it's the profound isolation that makes you better at communicating. You'll bite at the prospect of any human company; you're that desperate. And it's revealed to me how I feel about myself. It's revealed to me that I've been—and still sometimes am—more of a chicken-shit than I've known. It makes me wonder how others think I am. My kanji skills don't correlate to my conversation skills, I've noticed, and that's really the trouble.

Shingo came in today, which was a first. Besides texts, there isn't much intersection between our “outside” lives. He bought a bunch of bandages, some pain meds, gauze, all that stuff. I can guess who it's for.

“How ya been?” I ask a question I never would've a few months ago.

“Okay. You?”

“Pretty good myself, thanks,” and I say it like I really mean it. Fuck, maybe I do really mean it, even with all my self-doubt. I could tell myself it's just part of the job description. I could.

He had an absent look in his eyes. Ever since he and Lisa hooked up, he's just, I don't know, seemed vacant. Butterfly love, sure, but it's made him a sourpuss. It went from Shingo and Lisa are *in* the club to Shingo and Lisa *are* a club. Duane, Chickarrin and I have all noticed. We haven't said anything yet, though.

And another thing, Duane and Chickarrin have been leaning that way too. Duane insists I call him “Rock” per Chickarrin's request, and Chickarrin wants to go by “Chika” now. All they do is babble in their Japanese—which has gotten better actually—but it's all they do anymore. They hardly talk to anyone else or *about* anything else. Well, look at me, complaining about people speaking a foreign language in a foreign language club. Some club member that makes me.

Fuckin' Chickarrin, I always thought that was stupid. You can't spell that in katakana. It should be *Chikarin*, “チカリン.” It pisses me off, but who cares.

Chickarrin Fann

28 November 20XX

Bedroom

EVENTUALLY

Eventually, I'll have his baby. Eventually, we'll have matching rings. He'll give me a diamond (even though I don't *need* one). We'll raise our children somewhere with every season, without dirt, or filth, or trash in the streets, or in their beds, or anything like here.

And... and they'll also have lots of good food to eat. And also, I'll always take them to the doctor on time. They'll have the cleanest teeth, they'll get all their homework done, and I'll always be there. Mama will always be there. Eventually, it'll be like this. But not today...

Today, I'm laying in bed, looking at all the dishes on my nightstand, and Rock—*my* rock—said it grossed him out, but he was nice about it (even though he's... throwing up right now). Totemo byouki desu...

Mom put cardboard in my windows so nobody would look in. It's really dark outside and inside. I turn my lamp on, and I see stuff floating in the air. The floor's covered in clothes, and I almost trip on some cans when I crawl back in bed. Now I can see what's on me.

It's exactly like he said. It happened exactly like he wanted. I press my index and middle fingers on my stomach, and it stretches when I pull them away. It smells like fish. Sakana ga suki desuka?

Sugoku oishii desu yo. Watashi wa kono tabemono ga ichiban suki desu...

This is my favorite food. Will you still love me when I tell you that, Rokku-san? Would you let me tell you that? I'd eat your vomit. Anata no byouki wo tabemasu. I will eat your disease.

Come back now. I've waited for so long, but I can't anymore. You're the one I wanted since I was *shougakusei*, *desu!* I need you more than anything in my messed up world. I've been alone for so long now, but now, you're finally here.

I never want you to leave again.

Duane Swanstone

28 November 20XX

Bathroom

COMFORT WOMAN

Fuck, that smell, sweet *Jesus*. I don't think I've smelled somethin' so foul before, fucking rancid, like sulphur. One summer when I was a kid, I got a whiff of a deer left in the sun for a week, but, this, this was worse, shit. I'm so sorry Chickarrin. I'm fuckin' beyond words.

I wipe off my face. Just goin' in this bathroom, I felt the need to wash my hands. I didn't wanna touch nothin'. The floor was greasy... scattered with crumbs and clumps of hair.

Don't be a sissy. You've done *so* much worse for a piece of tail. This is nothin'. Be a man and get back to that kid—that *girl*. You came all over.

The mirror's cracked. I get a quick look at my stupid face, and I look even stupider than usual. Grin an' bear it.

I'm not wearing nothin', and I feel even nakeder just walkin' down the hall. I'll stop there, though, 'bout my body. But I'll say, that carpet felt crunchy on bare feet. When I saw it—it was this nasty, beat-up floral fuckin'—I had reservations 'bout walkin' on it barefoot, but I guess I'd shed all inhibitions doin' what I done tonight. Motherfucker, I am *hysterical*. Forget it. How is *she*?

"Chickarrin?" I shut the door very quietly.

"Rokku-san! Rokku-san!" But she don't give a shit. She slams into me, and man, I get a big slice of her body all at once, and I also feel somethin' slimy running down my stomach. Fuck, it's mine, and it's on her hands and she's touching me with it, *fuck*. Please, pardon my profanity.

She sticks her mouth against my ear and whispers very lightly. "Watashi... watashi wa kitanai?"

"Iie, iie!"

"Watashi wa karada ga warui?"

"Zenzen warukunai yo! Your body isn't bad at all!"

“Sou? Atama ga warui?”

“Iie! There ain’t fuckin’ nothin’ wrong with ya, for *chrissakes!*”

“Then show me,” she says. She holds me tighter and tighter, and I swear she’d make my blood stop flowin’. “*Misete.*”

“*Hai.*” She sticks her tongue in my mouth. I take my hands off the walls and put them on her. She’s warm, and I don’t mind that sticky feelin’ on my skin so much no more.

I put my hand on her back and she just falls into my arms. She really likes it when I carry her. She says my arms are “so big!” and kicks her legs and squeals. This time, she ain’t said a word, though, but I don’t mind.

I lay her on her back, and well, she just flips over on her stomach. She spreads herself wide open. I take a good, long look, until my nose starts runnin’. She’s so tiny.

We don’t say nothin’ then. I throw my hard hands on her and stuff myself inside. I press my fingers into her back. I make her scream, and I fit my hands around her throat to make her stop. I lick her neck and ear. I get a good taste, and I think I could chop her up and eat her. It’d be the sweetest thing I ever.

I don’t smell nothin’ no more but cheap hair grease, spray-tan, deodorant and her *stink* underneath it all. My smells—B.O., fish—aren’t worth shit compared to this. Frankly, I couldn’t stand it before, but then she asked me out, and well... chemicals, so many chemicals on a grimy, little body. I can’t tell nobody. You wouldn’t get it.

I forget everything. I have no idea how much time’s past, and we just keep goin’. I look down now and see her on her knees. She stares at me. Her face is soaking wet. Her cheeks are red, her makeup’s runnin’ everywhere, and she’s covered in spit and other stuff.

She licks her lips. She runs her tongue left to right. She blinks away the tears, opens up, and lets me in.

There ain’t no end of days.

Shingo Brown

28 November 20XX

Home

RITUAL OF POSSESSION

I like watching her eat. I like watching how those hands hold a cheeseburger, and how her teeth slice into the meat, cheese and bread. I like that peaceful look in her eyes when I watch her and she doesn't notice. Or maybe she does notice. Maybe she likes it.

I like the way she spits. I like watching her brush her teeth and spew the gunk from her mouth when she's done. It lands in the sink filled with bright red clouds, and it reminds me of fertility. It reminds me of her scarred womanhood.

I asked about her body awhile ago. She'll stand there without clothes on, and never say anything about it. From what I can guess, she's been battered. I wonder if a boyfriend did this to her. I wonder if a family member did. Even still, she gives me a special privilege. Only I get to see it, and she tells me this.

"Hold still. Stop squirming." Her words feel like her hands. She pushes my flesh back and forth mechanically, and it's the monotonous, bored action that gets to me. She doesn't even care.

"You're great," I say when we're finished. And really, I mean it. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanna use your shower," she says.

"Be my guest, please."

I sit there without pants and watch her leave me. No "Would you like to join me?", no nothing. I hear the shower turn on, and I think it was this I stayed home for—again. I told my parents I was getting together with friends, that I wouldn't be able to make it to dinner. I told them that, and here I am, wearing nearly nothing, holding my face in my hands. This is getting expensive.

But I could listen to that shower all night. I can imagine her rough hands sliding up and down her worn, filed limbs. Such a scrawny, beautiful, pulverized frame. When's it gonna be?

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

30 November 20XX

Garage

DOGGY

I spent a lot of time in here when I was little. I never stopped, I guess. I still come out here to smoke, and when they get really loud, but I don't like to. It's really cold in the winter, and the floor's, like, really gross without shoes. It also smells really, really bad. It's like gasoline, but also like, sweat.

We used to have three dogs, but they all died. One of them died in the winter, but the ground was frozen, so we had to drill a hole. I didn't cry, though. I never really liked them.

They were loud, they slobbered, they were gross, and really mean. They'd get in your face, they'd steal shit off the counter. No, they weren't good pets.

We trained them when I was a kid. Me and Dad, we'd go out here—where we had, like, old mattresses—and we'd do tricks with them. I remember, he had me sit really still, and the dog... did something I don't know *how* to explain.

Basically, I'd get on my knees... and wait there until Dad gave a command. And then they'd come over and they'd climb on top of me. It was always really cold because I wasn't wearing... he never really explained why. I guess it helped.

He liked to take pictures. He took a lot, actually. When it started, the dogs didn't, like, know what to do, I guess. But they learned fast.

I didn't like it. It felt weird, and like, I remember how it felt inside me, and it only happened a couple times, but...

We stopped playing with the dogs, and Dad just took pictures of me in swimsuits instead. He stopped a few years later. When the dogs died, he said I was all grown up. He said I was beautiful and kissed me. He always says I'm the favorite.

I can't stand that motherfucker. I can't stand that fucking bastard for what he'd done to me. It's like you think I didn't know what was going on. I mean, part of me didn't, I was still just a fucking... *girl*.

"Doggy," take a picture, take a video, "it'll last longer!" I've been looking through your shit, I saw all the grody shit you keep under the workbench. I found it *so* easily. You disgust me. You don't even care enough to *hide* what you are.

Month, day, year... hand massage... mouth... shot... this, that. All the way at the bottom, there's a picture of a little girl standing there. It's probably cold. Her teeth are white and her body's soft. She's swan-blond with dark brown eyes.

She's naked and smiling.

You can't fuck. You can't hurt me. You can't punish me. You can't do anything. You can tie me up in the backyard and cover my eyes, but that's still not enough.

I've heard those sounds so *many* times. I've heard your pants unzipping, peeing, I've heard you stroking yourself, I've heard you ejaculate, your load is pathetic. If you're gonna do it on my face, don't be a bitch. You're a fucking *faggot*.

You fucking sissy, spread your legs. You should let me tie you up on a dirty mattress and play with you. Let me do you like you did me. I'll torture your sex organs until they look like mine. I'll milk you until your shaft *bleeds*, and then I'll keep going.

And like, that's why I don't wanna... Shingo-san. I just like, don't feel anything there anymore. No, don't touch me. I'll give you a handjob or a kiss or my panties if you'll get me a bite to eat, or if I can wash my clothes at your place, or sleep on your floor, or wash my hair. Just please don't touch me there, Shingo, please.

Just talk to me.

Just help me out.

Just be a friend, for God's sake.

Jim Gore

1 December 20XX

Convenience Store

THE MIRROR

“Use the mirror,” Austin reminded me. On the store’s back wall, there’s a mirror overlooking the aisles. This helps keep track of customers. I feel like that’s half of what you do in retail: watch other people. You watch them, you wait for them, you look for them when there’s nothing there. You trick yourself into thinking they’re there when they’re not.

So, use the mirror right, and you can see everyone. You know if they’re coming towards you or away from you; you’ll know how many of them there are; how far away they are, and so on. Maybe that makes me a professional voyeur, getting paid gas money to watch people buy shit. It ain’t a bad gig.

It’s different when you know someone, though. It’s different when a friend, relative, peer, or whoever comes in. There’s already a conflict between who I am at home and what I become here, but it’s all the more complicated when another side of me gets involved. The persona I put on in the circle doesn’t exist here until Shingo comes reeling into my store. Don’t tell anyone what I do here.

Don’t tell anyone the things I do for others.

He’s looking for the sexual wellness section (down aisle twelve on the right). That kid never seemed to like me. I’ve been in close proximity with him for four years now and I know for a fact Lisa didn’t see him any different. But it finally happened. She must’ve been right. She’s got more color in her cheeks, her clothes look cleaner, she has more clothes. Yeah, I noticed.

We talk about him. Lisa started texting me about him unprompted. She used to ask if I could give her a lift, and I obliged her. And then eventually she started asking to use my washer and dryer, and I hardly knew her, but whatever, “Sure.” We did that for awhile, became tight, until we stopped. I didn’t know why, and I still don’t, but I have a better idea now. There’s a plan, I think.

It's extortion. I think it's funny. She's asked me for ideas, for "exchanges," for "services" she could "provide". Some underwear for a decent meal, a nude for a shower, a handjob for some new clothes, it's capitalism. An economic relationship of costs and benefits, a vaguely sexual transaction for money, or resources, or human dignity, sacrificed in one regard to fulfill another.

It's like she desexualizes herself for survival. It's like she distills her bodily functions of urges, desire, lust, whatever, and pawns it all off for some poor bastard's allowance. That's a dark way of thinking about it.

I tell myself it's a good trick when it probably isn't. I think it can be liberating when it won't, ever, and nothing improves. It isn't sustainable. Who is Shingo in private? What does it say about me for letting her do this?

I saw her cry one time. I hugged her once, and why am I telling you this? What does it matter to you? We aren't in love. This isn't a fucking love triangle.

No, this isn't a shoujo romance manga. We've never kissed, no "I like-like you" or any awkward run-ins. She came to me looking for help, and so I did, and still try.

Shingo-san saw I was taking her home one day.

"No, I can take you home, Lisa," he said. And she had this look in her eyes like I'd only seen a couple of times: that peculiar, devious look.

"Well... if you don't *mind*," she said.

"Of course not!"

"I mean, I could always call my parents..."

"No, it's no problem!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said, "Of course." She was waiting for me where she always waited. She's never told me why she won't call her dad. Her answers to those kinds of questions are vague, but the way she looks, acts, speaks, makes the implications scary. I only hope it isn't worse than I think.

Chika Fann

18 December 20XX

Rokku-san no ie

LIKE A LITTLE GIRL

I got full off ice cream and pie he bought me (to apologize). He was really, really sorry.

“Goumennasai!” he said over and over again. “Goumennasai! Goumennasai! Goumen!”

“Wakatte imasu. Watashi wa daijoubu.”

“Sou?”

“Sou da yo.” And then he kissed me on the forehead and bought me sweets. Everything’s alright now (with the love of my life).

All the boys I dreamed about while I stretched out in bed, my face buried in some cheesy romance manga, this is what I wanted. I wanted a *senpai* who would buy me treats when I was sad, who’d hold me tight and say nice things to me, who would never leave me. I don’t want anything else in the world.

I’m mad (*I’m in love*). Mom doesn’t know. She wouldn’t understand.

“So, who’s that friend of yours?” she asked me the other night.

“Oh, that’s Rock! Er, Duane, I mean...”

“Rock?” She slurred, “Is that a pet-name I hear?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? That’s your man, right? That’s *your* Rock!”

“It’s not like that!”

“Is-too!”

“Is-not!”

Her breath smelled. It was really dark out, but it wasn’t late.

“Hey, Mom!” I shouted (where was she?), “Where’s all the mouthwash?”

“Oh!” She paused. “Sorry, honey, I’ll get some tomorrow.”

“Okay!” I shouted. She paused again.

“I love you!”

“I love you too!” I said. Last time I saw her this early, she was passed out on the couch.

We usually get groceries every week (I think). When we eat, it’s usually frozen (*yasui, nee*). We also have snacks and other stuff sometimes (*mo yasui yo!*). When I really feel *really* hungry, though, I just drink lots of water, and I don’t feel so bad.

But I never feel hungry around *him*. Of course, he always makes sure I eat... but also, he just... *fills me up*. I have him inside of me wherever I go. He is my food. *Rokkusan wa watashi no ichiban suki na tabemono desu*. He is my number-one favorite food.

When he puts those hands on me (they’re so dry!) I love it. When they caress my neck like a loving snake, when they sneak up my skirt like tentacles, when they peel off my undies like a vulture, stealing away my *innocence* like *roadkill*—I scream. I scream, so drunk off *his* feeling, so high, so in ecstasy, so simple, so basic, so stupid, so ecstatic, so wonderful...

“Keep going.”

“Hai!”

“More!” I cry! “More! More! More!” My scream reverberates off the bear walls, flooding through the house and emptying back into me like he *does*. His passion is the color of the ceiling... hard... thick... off-white... it was so drab before. It was so drab until it made me think of him.

Leave me stupid, dull, and naked on the sofa, like Mama was when I was little. Leave seed on my body where her vomit was. Stain me (and show me to everyone). Show my face on screens like hers was; make me famous; make me sick; make me.

Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me! Make me!

Mommy, what will you think when you take me to school tomorrow?

Rock Swanson

19 December 20XX

Boku no Uchi

DEPRECATING GAMES

Boku wa Rokku desu. Amerikajin desuga, Nihongo wo chotto hanashite imasu. Mada naratte imasu. I am Rock. I am an American, but I speak a little Japanese. I'm still learning.

It's all thanks to this little girl. What else can I say? Me, her, and the games we play, she changed me. I couldn't stand all that weeaboo shit before, but look at me now. I'd kick myself.

I busted open her lip and got her some ice cream to suck on. Such a damn, small thing, such a goddamn schoolgirl: little bird, chiisai tori, Chika-chan. Se ga hikukute, totemo kawaii nee.

I disgust myself, I tell you. I know what I am. But I guess I just don't care anymore. This works, it isn't good. But it don't feel bad, either. She wanted it. She waited for it, brought me in. She made me.

I always wondered how these sorta things came about, how you can pair a helpless little *onna no ko* with some *kitanai oji-san*. Tell me, how's that pair end up in the same bed, or bathroom, or locker room?

She's desperate, alone, and can't help herself. She sees me and she sees her dream boyfriend, her senpai. She wants me to help her out. I guess I try. I find her funny, and cute, and well, she's got a nice, tight butt, and well, I like all that, so, I don't mind her cryin' on my shoulder in exchange for a piece. And then I really get into it, and then I go full animal. So gross, so good, so far. So damn far.

This musta been the natural course of events. Is this what God had in mind? Maybe, shit, I don't know. It doesn't matter, really. Ugly bastards go to hell either way. Maybe Chika-chan, that goddamn Chickarrin, maybe she'll get all her wishes granted. Maybe I'll help her get there, a little. We oughta try. But so much anymore, it's just sex, just filth, and there was no bein' ready, and I can't stop.

"You look like a Miranda! You *look* like your name would be Miranda!" She wouldn't look at me when I said that.

Shingo Brown

20 December 20XX

Japanese Club

NEXT TIME

“Keen on kinyoubi!” Duane said, the familiar old phrase. Everyone knew it. Yep, we were all feeling keen that Friday. The brutal winds of great, empty, flat nowhere contorted everything outside, knocking furniture off patios, gently turning cars as they came and went nowhere, invariably, just killing time, burning gas. But we aren’t outside. Me and these people, we’re in this room, together, again.

“So, what are you guys doin’?” he asks. He cradles Chickarrin in his arms. She sat in his lap, and looked happy, but somehow odd. There was just this thing about her face: the way her eyes darted back and forth with this submissive nervousness, her pale cheeks, some new bandages. She’s okay. She’s happy. She’s not alone.

“Work,” Jim said, plainly. “night before and day of.”

“Ain’t no rest,” Duane shot at him with two pointed fingers. “taihen, nee.”

“Eh, daijoubu,” Jim said. I always wondered what his life was like outside of this place. What does he do for fun? What does he have going on? Why does he stick around? I don’t get why it pisses me off, but it does.

Maybe it’s the way he and Lisa still pal around. Maybe it’s the crush I had. Maybe it’s the fact that he was better in class. Maybe it’s because he fit in better. Maybe it’s because of me. Maybe I become what I hate, but whatever. Forget him.

“Shingo?” Duane snaps me out of my head. Now’s not the time, and I’m reminded that it doesn’t matter. Nobody sees it that way, not even her. Besides, I have *her*.

“We’re goin’ to the zoo,” I said.

“Oh yeah?”

Jim Gore

21 December 20XX

Convenience Store

PLAY MESSAGES

I texted her. “‘My dear?’ What the hell’s that?”

“Just for fun lol,” she said. “Just teasing.”

“You sure it’s cool?”

“Yeah why?”

“Idk just don’t want shit to go sideways.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Alright do it.”

“Got it,” she said.

“Good luck.” And then she left me on read. There was nothing else to say. She made up her mind, I encouraged it, hell, I laughed about it. The bastard’s gonna get what’s coming. It feels conflicting. It feels like revenge, which feels right, but it also feels dangerous, stupid, and exciting.

I wasn’t a bystander. Whatever happens next is tangentially my fault. It’s a fucked up life. You need thick skin to get around. It’s due to people like Shingo; you see it also with Duane. I feel especially bad for Chickarrin, but no, I won’t call her that anymore.

Miranda, fucking Miranda.

I went to her house once to trade DVDs. There was rotten shit and insects all over the kitchen floor. And in her room, there were dull knives, porn bootlegs, and crusty, brown gauze scattered all over her dresser. Nobody else was home. I never went back; I never asked for my tapes back, and she never asked for hers.

I see dark spots where Duane puts his arms. She looks like a mannequin without spray-tan. She’s so pale, and she smiles like a beaten animal.

Miranda Fann

31 May 20XX

Nihongo no Saakuru

TOMODACHI TO

Ima, tomodachi to hanashite ite, watashi wa... Nihongo no Saakuru ni imasu (right now, I'm talking to my friends, and I'm in Japanese Club)! Sumimasen, Nihongo ga jouzu janai desuga, hanasuno ga suki desu (excuse me, I'm not good at Japanese, but I like speaking it)!

I *finally* convinced him to join. Now, we're all here: Risa-san, to Shingo-san, to Guro-san, to Duein-san, to watashi (mina-san imasu).

"Duein-san!" I come up from behind and scare him. "Nihongo no Saakuru ga *suki* desuka?"

"What?" he says, and then he looks at me like he *always* does.

"Do you like Japanese club?"

"Yeah, it's okay." He puts his hands behind his head and leans back (he looks *so* bored).

"Tsumaranai desuka?"

"You'll have to speak in English, please."

"Is it boring?"

"What? No, it's not."

"Sou desuka?" I roll my eyes.

"English!" he says. *Sigh*... is he *really* the one?

"You know, Duein-san, that's a *lousy* nickname!"

"Okay, I guess." He doesn't even care!

"Suwansuton-san! Take that!"

"Take what?" Give up already, *c'mon*!

"Wait a minute..." Oh, it's Jim... *Guro*-san, I mean, actually. I see Shingo-san giving him a dirty look. Why?

“Duane... Swanstone...” Jim starts tapping it out. He does that thing they do in animes where he pushes his glasses up and looks really serious. He must be thinking really hard. “Rock. I got it: it’s Rock! That’s his nickname!”

“*Wah!* Sou desu nee, Rokku-san!”

“What?” Rock says.

“Atarashii nikkuneimu! So long as you’re in this club, You are *Rock!* Anata wa Rokku san *da yo!*”

“I can’t believe it...” he puts his hands to his face. I feel... my heart is up! Kokoro wa ue no tokoro ni arimasu... I think that’s how you’d say it. I think...

All of my favorite people, all in one place: The cold poet, Shingo-san(!); the quick-witted rebel, Guro-san(!); the gorgeous femme fatale, Risa-san(!); and now, the burly altruist, Rokku-san! Everyone is here! *Everyone* is here! Mina-san imasu, *yo!*

“Hey, Miranda!” Lisa says, “What do you think of all these... *men?*”

“Nani?” What?

“It’s like a sausage-fest, isn’t it? Couldn’t we have just *one* more girl?”

“Hai?” I think she’s right (*maybe*)? None of the guys say anything. Jim chuckles, though.

“What? Something funny, Guro?” Lisa looks at him with her scary eyes. She’s kinda like a kowakute, kirei onnesan to me. She’s frightening *and* pretty (and I wish she was my older sister)...

“No, really, I think you two’re on to somethin’! Shingo here was already bad enough, why’d you have to get *Duane* involved?”

“You’re one to talk.” Shingo-san uses his pouty voice (for when he’s really mad but can’t show it).

“Gentlemen, calm down!” Lisa says. She makes a hand motion, and really, I think she’s the one in charge here. She’s the *honcho* (not *head* honcho, that’s redundant). “Miranda-san, go fetch us another onna no ko! Hayaku!” she says to me. But no one would join.

Duane Swanstone

1 June 20XX

Home

COMMAND RESPECT

Summer's here, again. There ain't shit to do—days are slow—but there's trouble in paradise. There goes my good will. There goes my kindness, sure as hell shows me what I can get for it. I'd've done better not gotten involved. Ah, oh well. Who gives a fuck.

Stupid... fuckin'... bullshit... just some words on the tip of my tongue. It tastes like hot rain, roadkill and impendin' doom. The summer is a weird time. You got bloomin' flowers and dead squirrels.

Smashed flesh blows into the shrubs. It looks like a pencil mark on the street. It looks like someone took a bad eraser and tried smearin' the damn thing out. It's a premonition: dead squirrels, pretty flowers, Miranda Fann, Japanese club. How long can I keep this up?

Miranda Fann is the little girl I used to draw sidewalk chalk with. I remember protectin' her from big kids on the black top. She always smelled like a *boy*. She didn't have many friends for the longest time. It's good to see she finally made some.

I sorta remember Jim. I think we took English together. I have nothin' to say about him. He seems alright.

Lisa and Rosa used to talk. That's how I met her, in fact, was through Rosa. She looked kinda like a street person, but she was cool.

Shingo? Never saw him before, know jack-shit of him. I don't like him already, though. I don't know why.

Maybe in the end I'll make some new friends. Maybe Miranda's right about these people. Maybe all that Jap shit isn't for sissies. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I'll get a piece.

“Hey, what was it you wanted me to call you again?”

Jim Gore

14 June 20XX

Home

LESSON

“Thanks,” she says, again.

“Hey, no problem,” I say, again, like always. “Anytime.”

She stands outside the laundry room with shopping bags full of soiled clothes. She organized them by color, I can tell. It looks the same every time we do this: same bags, same clothes, every week, the same thing.

She’s sitting on the floor watching the washer spin, like always. I don’t say anything. I don’t bother to talk; I just witness. She doesn’t care. We do this for a few minutes—wash and wait—until I give up, swallow words, and leave. I’ll leave you to your crazy shit. Usually, it goes like this. But today... I stared at her today, though... for some reason.

“Hey,” she said. “Hey, take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

“Sorry,” I say. It’s all I can think of. Hopefully it’ll move us past this moment. Be cool, forget it, you’ve learned your lesson.

She makes eye-contact. “Don’t be. I don’t mind if you like... look at me, that way.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not how I meant it.”

“No,” she stands up. “I don’t think so.” Back and forth—part-morbid valley girl, part-old soul, part-succubus, part-serial killer—here’s Lisa S.

I watch her standing there. I go into her eyes, so brown, so goddamn brown. Nobody says anything.

“You wanna eat somethin’?” It’s about dinner time, I bet she’s hungry. She’s a skinny shit. I don’t wanna think of her naked.

“Like?”

"I can make sandwiches, pasta," I say. "We prolly have some frozen stuff, too."

"Please, thank you," she says.

"What would you like?"

"You pick." So we split a brick of ramen.

This is the kind of fun I get up to when nobody's home. I feed gangly hood-rats. I let them shower in my bathroom and do their laundry.

"When are your parents coming back?" she asks. She looks pathetic.

"Not 'til after dark." I can guess where this is going.

"Is it fine if I stay the night?" There it is.

"Sure," I say without thinking. But even if I had thought about it, the answer probably wouldn't have changed.

"I'll set ya up in the guest room."

"Thank you," she says, again.

"Ya already said that."

"I mean it, though. You don't have to do this."

"I know."

"Why, though?"

"We're friends," I say, and wow, isn't there some weird, hot shame in those words. It's true, but it feels wrong to say it.

She averts her eyes. She doesn't say anything. The situation's awkward now. Forget it, press forward. I only told the truth. I think I shouldn't feel bad for being honest.

I woke up to find her in my bed. She wasn't there before, that much I distinctly remember. Her ribcage pressed against my body. Her skin was warm and she smelled like piss and old deodorant. Part of me was disgusted. I was also sorry.

"I don't wanna fuck you."

Shingo Brown

20 June 20XX

Japanese Club

FOREVER

I could do this forever. I could stay here.

“I’ve seen you here before! How ya been?” Jim says, as if I don’t come every time.

“Don’t do this to me.”

“Why? It’s fun.”

In a fit of emotion, I say what’s been on my mind for so long. Yeah, I could stay here if not for this motherfucker: “Fuck you.”

“Why the hostility?” he asks. Look at you sitting next to her; look at how you talk to each other; look at all the time you spend. You disgust me. “I’m just some fucking guy.”

“Yamete!” Miranda—no—Chickarrin shouts.

“What?” Duane says.

“That’s ‘stop’ in Japanese... desu.” I get so lost in the two’s interaction that I completely forget about Jim. I completely—no, not completely—forget about Lisa, too. I can’t forget about Lisa.

I sat behind her for four years of Japanese. I watched the back of her blonde head, watched her small gestures, like when she pressed her fist against her cheek, or when she brushed her hair out of her face, or when she cracked her neck, when her face faced mine. Jim was right next to her.

Then, they only talked for pair work. A half-decent accent, understanding of grammar, vocabulary, it froze me. I was jealous for his popularity, and felt inferior for feeling jealous. That’s why it burns me to see this, in this one place.

What does this say?

“Forget it,” Jim says. And then things carry on without anyone noticing.

Lisa. Lisa. Lisa.

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

20 September 20XX

Japanese Club

ISSHO NI NATSU WO OWARIMASHOU

“It’s never luck, it’s always God.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks. Honestly, I didn’t think that far. It sounded deep, I guess. But I’m just teasing him. It isn’t deep. It doesn’t matter at all.

I’m waiting for all my friends to come. I’m waiting for Jim, Miranda/Chickarrin, and Duane now, too. This is my friend group. These people are in my *Nihongo no Saakuru*. We’re really close. We get along really well, and we all like Japanese stuff like anime, culture, music, and... yeah.

We’re really good friends—even Shingo-san, here. He’s a bit of a stiff, but I can’t say I don’t like him. No, not like-like him. I don’t feel that way for like, anyone. I know he has a crush. I notice the way he looks at me, what he says about me that Jim tells me when I’m not here, the way he talks to me. Yeah, I’ve met so many other guys just like him. It gets old.

I asked him that funny thing I came up with just to see what he would say. It’s really quiet and kinda awkward, so just breathe. Just breathe like always, and it’ll be alright. I’ve done this thing like, so many times before. I’ve done it with my hands tied, and a blindfold, and without any underwear, and on a leash, and chained up outside, and...

But I won’t tell you any of that, Shingo-san. I... *ugh*, I could just scream my head off about all the things that’ve been done to me. I could tell you everything. I could fall apart here and fucking now. Watch me, won’t you?

But I don’t. My poker-face makes me “*appear structured*,” Mama used to say. No man likes a crying whore. “No man likes you, anyways.”

This is so just *fucking* wrong. This is all just fucking wrong. I get so sick of being alone. I don’t even like anime.

Lisa SXXXXXXXXX

24 December 20XX

Reptile House

REPTILE HOUSE

It was so dark out, but I sat on the porch, anyways. I didn't wanna be inside, and I didn't think I'd wait forever. I smoked, and besides the moon, and the snow... that's all I could see, really.

I'd rather be cold than breathe your filthy air. You, Dad, and you, Mom, and you too, Shingo-san, I'd rather die. There's so many different ways I'd rather be tortured than doing what you ask. Paddles, belts, chains, clamps, a battery... you can rub piss and vodka on my scars. Do *anything* but make me do that.

I wasn't waiting long. The snow came down really hard when I finally got in his car, and I wanted to just drive and watch it fall. It was like, really pretty, and I could've stayed there. I didn't wanna check the time. I didn't wanna get out, or even look at him.

When we got to the parking lot, we made eye-contact, and I felt really embarrassed. And that pissed me off. The whole thing just pissed me the fuck off. I hated him, I couldn't fucking stand his stupid face, his stupid haircut, his stupid T-shirts, his weak wrists, his stomach skin, not anymore. He's a fucking worm. Do you like, really think I love you? Get those filthy eyes off me.

We had to do that thing he makes me do sometimes, where we like, hold hands, or each other's arms. I coulda gagged. I could gag, like he makes me when I think of him.

We're walking around, looking at all the Christmas lights they put up. "Having fun?" he asks.

"Yes!" I say, like I really mean it, like the girls on TV, or in porn movies. "It's *beautiful*, isn't it?" I wanna know how far I can take it. When will he get that I'm *not* interested?

"Yes," he says, slowly, deliberately, "yes it is." Don't act like a prince now, dick-cheese. C'mon, when's it gonna happen? When's he gonna ask me to drop my pants and face the wall?

There's so many pretty people around. There's so many girls with like, really good bodies and handsome boyfriends. Some are holding hands, hugging, taking pictures... it looks like love. They look like they're so in love, in this really pretty place.

It's so dark out, but all the lights are so colorful and bright, and, it reminds me of an arcade. It reminds me of laser tag, which, I only ever played once for my... older sister's birthday party. I was really little, but that's not important. His hands are sweaty.

Life is a game.

I gotta wonder what all these chicks think of me and this roach. I gotta wonder what they think of my skinny-little... self. It makes me sad thinking about it. It pisses me off even more, too. Pop the question, Shingo-san. Let's get this over with. We're finished, tonight.

He whispers in my ear. Guess what words: something-something "bathroom," something-something "private," something-something "you," yeah, yeah, uh-huh, I get it, let's get down to business. It's like... like this every time.

We find a bathroom in the reptile house. I don't know what time it is now, but it's really late. It's really cold outside, too, but it's hot as shit in here. Lizards always grossed me out. I don't like slimy, icky, sticky things. Yeah, just like you, you fucking reptile.

There's nobody in here. I stare at him, and he stares at me. I bet you're salivating. I bet you're already undressing me in your head.

"You've been very kind. What do you want me to do?" I ask him. He doesn't say anything. He digs around in his pants for something. Don't you fucking tell me.

He pulls out some cheap-ass condoms. I recognize that brand.

"Okay, and?"

He looks me dead in the eyes. "All the way," he says.

"You're kidding. Here?"

"I'm dead serious."

“No way.” I start laughing, not because it’s funny. Actually, I guess it’s a little funny, for him to think his pencil-dick could go *inside* me. Keep dreaming.

“Lisa,” he says, “*Lisa*. For all that I have... for everything I’ve *done* for you, can’t you give me this one thing? We don’t even have to be a couple—”

“No. That’s not part of the deal.”

“What *deal*? What are you talking about? What, did we sign a contract?”

“Oh, *please*. Don’t tell me you got attached.”

“Lisa, I’ve been attached! Since freshman year, since I first saw you. I’ve had it out for you since then, isn’t it fucking obvious? That’s why I can’t stand—”

“We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Y’know, and, like,” I almost start laughing, “this is honestly kinda perfect. You see, I was thinking about, y’know, calling it off, and—”

“Fucking what?! Are you kidding me? You’re gonna play with my emotions like that and then *ditch* me? You’re a fucking whore, Lisa, you’re a fucking dirty cunt for that, and you deserve everything that’s ever happened to you, you *slut*.”

“Is that all you got, Shingo-san?” Oh, now I’m just asking for it. But what’s the worst you can do?

He pushes me to the ground and climbs on top of me. “Get off! Get the fuck off me! Fucking get off, Jacob, stop!”

He grabs my wrists and pushes his tongue all over me. He takes his hands and starts undoing his pants and when I try to push him off he hits me.

I start screaming and don’t stop.

My skirt is soaking wet.

I pissed all over the floor.

Jim Gore

25 December 20XX

Convenience Store

DIRTY BLONDE

I showed up late to work today.

Everybody keeps a secret. If you get involved, you'll eventually get to knowing so much that it's dangerous to talk about it. So I don't. Not to my parents. Not to my friends. Not to Duane. Not to Miranda. I don't say anything.

"What's his *actual* name?" I asked her. I sounded pissed off; probably too pissed off; seeing red.

She said it. Everything was a haze. "Jacob..."

It's become a whole fucking thing. Nobody has the right, but they'll speak on it anyways. What the hell do they know? And that reminds me of my old cynicism. That reminds me of its presence in my head, that it never really died. Traces, just traces. But who can I blame?

Look me in the eyes and tell me I'd actually take responsibility. Go back a couple weeks, take my weak words, and make me eat them. How little shit could I give.

It won't matter in six months, right, or a year? It won't hurt me. It doesn't hurt *me*.

"Hi! Are you a rewards member?" It's my voice, my words, and beyond the murder in the back of my eyes... nothing's changing. Nothing is happening, and I'm waiting for it, like an animal about to be killed for food. There's no simpler way to put it, Lisa Sieradski. Jobs like workers, masters like slaves, customers like prostitutes. And how coherent is any of this, anyways?

But fuck you.

You coulda gotten anything, from smokes, to liquor, to football cards, fuckin' condoms, fuckin' anything, take your pick. Take it and just walk right out, what do I care?

'Cause tonight, the thoughts are too heavy to give a shit who anyone is. I stop dead in place and just wince, and focus on what I shouldn't be.

Everyone

31 December 20XX

N/A

KOGAL

“I wanna hear the story.”

“But it makes me sick... as a human being.”

“He has zero empathy, no emotions.”

“You like all that fucked up shit?”

“Poorly-housed youth may trade sex for housing, money or drugs.”

“Her father was never good to her.”

“Now, she has little in common with the average person.”

“Her sister was kinda like a stripper at a young age.”

“She’ll close her eyes and still see his face. You know that, right?”

“Fucking nasty.”

“What were they like in school?”

“I dunno, I never met ‘em.”

“That’s not happiness. It never was.”

“Dirty bastards spread disease.”

“Don’t kill yourself!”

“There’s nuances to dysfunction.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s this place that’s messed up.”

“Inhale: I am in constant bloom. Exhale: I am enough.”

“You’re doing a disservice to humanity, frankly. You’re not doing what you *need* to do.”

“It’s *bad*.”

“Either get even, or get even worse,” Mom tells Chickarrin.

“Who are those people down there? They’re waiting for me to break down in tears!” Chickarrin writes.

“I didn’t realize I was going somewhere else,” Lisa articulated.

“High school wasn’t that bad,” Rock determined.

“I’d rather not be here,” Lisa tells them.

Chickarrin slouches. “Mou Nihongo no Saakuru ga nai. There is no Japanese club anymore...”

“I don’t wanna die,” Lisa says.

“I can’t *ever* be at home...” Chickarrin says.

“Take your time,” Rock says.

“You are very kind,” Jim is told.

“Thanks for playing!” the TV screen says.

“I feel powerless,” Lisa says.

“Reflect on your beliefs!” an accuser cries.

“Do you still think of me when you put that shirt on?”

“Lisa Claire Sieradski?”

“That’s my name,” Lisa S says.

“Jacob Brown?”

“Me...” Shingo says.

“Miranda Anne Fann?”

“Hai,” Chickarrin says.

“Duane Peter Swanstone?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Rock says.

“James Ethan Gore, correct?”

“Yes,” Guro-san replies.

“We were friends,” they all say.