

# NO ONE'S PERFECT      Part II

English	Chinese	Notes
<p><b>2—Full Speed Ahead</b>  <i>My Middle School, High School, and Cram School Years</i></p> <p>The Dribbler!            The Festival Guy            Yatchan            A Love Letter            Exam Capers            Twenty-Five Warriors            Water of Life            Math: 7/200 ...            Ambitions            The Joys of Cram school            A Miracle</p>		
<p><b>Full Speed Ahead</b>  <i>My middle School, High School, sand Cram School Years</i></p>		
<p><b>The Dribbler!?</b></p>		

***What the ...?***

The transition to middle School was my smoothest. There was something reassuring about going to Yohga Junior High, the local public school, with my old classmates from Yohga Elementary. The school officials basically had no objections, and I was able to enroll with no trouble. I guess it counted in my favor that I'd been attending elementary school without an escort since third grade and obviously enjoying life at school as much as anyone, if not more.

The great thing about middle school life is the afterschool clubs, which go into high gear during these three years. Guess which one I belonged to? It may be a bit of a search. No arms, no legs, in a power wheelchair: a kid with disabilities like this would most likely head home at the end of the day and read a book. Or if he joined a group, it would probably tend to be one of the more sedentary ones. Well, this kid signed up for—basketball!

Was I out of my mind? My motive was very simple. By the time they reach junior or senior, people start to go in different directions: the energetic, high-spirited kids to the sports clubs, the serious, quiet types to the cultural clubs. Most of my friends were full of energy

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the more sedentary ones

and high spirits (judging by the amount of trouble they got into) and almost all of them had signed up for a sports club, so I thought “I will too.” I wanted to join; I joined. In the process, the possibility that it might be too much for me, or a nuisance to everyone else, completely slipped my one-track mind.

This magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck the Ototake household first. It took a lot to shock my parents, who were accustomed by now to their problem child’s bizarre behavior, but this time even they were stunned.

Father: “What the ...!?”

Mother: “I just don’t understand how our son’s mind operates.”

When I was born, my parents had decided on a policy for my education: they would bring me up to be strong. Whatever else they did, they wouldn’t raise a child who ran away from things, using his disability as an excuse. But this time, I’m told, they wondered if they hadn’t gone too far.

The problem child was not to be talked out of it, however. Not knowing where to turn, they phoned the vice principal.

Mother: “Uh, my son has just come home and calmly told us he’s joined the basketball club ...”

a sports club

slipped my one-track mind

using his disability as an excuse

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be talked out of it

Vice Principal: “Yes, well, I’ve discussed it with the coach, and since it’s what the young man says he wants to do ...”

Mother: “I do hope it won’t inconvenience the other students ...”

Vice Principal: “Well, it’s not as if he’ll be playing in games ...”

### ***Coach***

Shreee! The referee’s whistle shrills. “Substitution, Yohga, No.8.”

The other team and the crowd all turn and look at the Yohga bench. But no one gets up. They see only the coach’s confident smile. Then, glancing down, they spot a player hauling his butt out onto the court. Yes!!

Any coach who would play me had to be as nuts as I was. Ours was an original, to put it mildly. He was a ton of fun. A big bear of a man with a shaved head, a beard, and a heavy, rolling gait. If you gazed out the window during class and saw a figure striking a sort of tai chi pose for no apparent reason, that’d be Coach. This unconventional teacher was, in short, Yohga Junior High’s celebrated “character.”

He wasn’t just eccentric, though. Nothing ever fazed him. He took everything in stride; that was his style.

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Perhaps the school allowed me to sign up for basketball because the club had a big-hearted coach.

Going back, then, to when I joined up. So far, so good, but—you've got to be wondering—how on earth did I play? I couldn't lob the ball high enough to shoot baskets, but I could make passes over a fair distance, thanks to the workout that my shoulder muscles had gotten playing dodgeball in elementary school. But it took more than that to get me off the bench. I had a selling point, and that was dribbling.

Not in a wheelchair, as you might imagine (especially since there's a whole sport called wheelchair basketball). I got down and moved around under my own power. I was already confident of my quickness—I could turn on a dime. Now I just had to combine these moves with ball handling. In other words, how much of my speed and mobility could I keep up while dribbling the ball? That was the question.

First, I practiced until I could keep my rhythm. Dumdumdumdumdum. It wasn't easy. Other people bounce a ball just below waist height, which means they have a split second before it comes back. Since I dribble a ball at around the height of most people's calves, however, it hits the ground and

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returns in no time, so I have to keep my arms moving on the double. This was the hardest part.

Next came dribbling while in motion. This wasn't too easy either. The ball had ideas of its own. I was always bumping it against my legs or sending it rolling every which way. Little by little, though, I began to see results, and before I knew it I could dribble almost as fast as I could run.

One look is worth a hundred words, as the Japanese proverb says. No matter how much explaining I do, it's probably quite hard to picture. It's too bad I can't put on a demonstration for you!

### ***Drills, Drills, Drills***

My teammates were surprised by my progress, but since they'd known me from grade school they'd probably had an idea that I could manage this much. It was the coach who got a real surprise. When I said I wanted to join the basketball club, no doubt he'd figured I would just be getting some exercise. But from here on in, his reaction was terrific.

Coach: "Ototake, you've gotten very good. I'm amazed. Now how about practicing dribbling with your right arm as well as your left?"

Ototake: "But I've only just gotten the hang of it on

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the left, and I'm left-handed. I've never tried it on the right, and—”

Coach: “So, that's what practicing is for.”

Duh! It was my claim to fame that I'd try anything once, and Coach had beaten me at my own game. Back to square one. First, I practiced just bouncing the ball. Since I don't use my right arm much, I was already in trouble—I couldn't seem to keep it straight. When I finally had that down, it was time for dribbling on the move. But I couldn't get the hang of it on the right side. The ball did what it wanted, my movements were clumsy. Improvement came more slowly than in the left-handed drills.

After working with the ball day in and day out, I gradually got used to handling it on the right. Now I could dribble on either side. I was so high on my own progress, I couldn't wait to show Coach. But when I triumphantly showed off my right-handed dribble, his reaction was unexpected.

Coach: “Nice work, Ototake. The next step is to try a crossover. You want to practice switching the ball to the other side quickly.”

Ototake: “.....???”

Coach: “When a defender comes from the right, you dribble on the left. When he's on your left, you dribble

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on the right. If you can switch fast, you won't give it up easily."

Defender? What defender? Whoa—is he talking about a game? If I do this assignment well, Coach is planning to play me.

I trained intensely. Switch left-to-right. Switch right-to-left. A quick turn of the shoulder. Keep the speed up as you switch. I also worked on a spin move to fake out that "defender." Dribbling right-handed was still the hang-up though. I kept losing the ball on the crossover. The monotonous drills were sometimes a drag, but I never wanted to quit.

One thing kept me going: I wanted to find out what it was like to play in a game. Thinking about it now, I realize I may have been deluding myself. Maybe Coach had no thought of playing me; maybe he was just giving me something new to do so I wouldn't get bored. It would be kind of funny if he'd ended up having to play me because I was so darn fired up about a game.

### *Secret Weapon*

Whatever the real story might have been, once I was in, I was partying. Playing in a game felt just as good as I'd expected. If you've shot a few hoops, you'll know

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that the lower you dribble, the harder it is to steal. Mine is bound to be below the other players' knees. I call it the subterranean dribble.

We must have boggled the other teams' minds. While they're still wondering, "Can this guy walk?" he starts dribbling, then slips past below knee level, slices through(under?) the wall of dithering defenders and drives down the court with his nifty dribble. That was my job.

Our captain was a great three-point shooter. He would get open and in close enough for me to complete a pass. Then he'd turn and sink a three-pointer. Another great assist by the self-styled "secret weapon."

But even though I called myself the secret weapon, if a halfway decent team seriously came after the ball they could take it away with no trouble, and our defense was really loose. Let's face it, we might as well have been playing four-on-five. Coach, of course, has my heartfelt gratitude for giving me the chance to play regardless—and so do my teammates. In fact, when I said I wanted to join the club, they were the ones who persuaded him by offering to keep an eye on me.

I was a pest during practices, too. As I worked on drills in a corner of the gym, the ball was forever

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<p>rolling out onto the court and interrupting play. And anybody could see that our team’s strength would be reduced if I took the court. But no one ever showed the <u>slightest resentment</u>. They always called out, “Let’s go, Oto. Relax, we’re with you, man.” As younger students entered the club, they must have wanted the chance to play themselves, but they <u>swallowed their feelings</u> and <u>cheered me on</u> with all their might. Some of them even accompanied me to and from away games.</p> <p>I owe my happy memories of club time to the cooperation of everyone who let me have my own crazy way. I’m proud to think that <u>my being on the roster</u> was a symbol of great teamwork.</p> <p>When I open my graduation album, there I am, wearing the No.8 jersey and a big grin. I got that smile as a present from the whole team.</p>		<p><u>swallowed their feelings</u></p> <p><u>cheered me on</u></p> <p><u>my being on the roster</u></p>
<p><b>The Festival Guy</b></p> <p><i>One-on-One</i></p> <p>I’m often called “the festival guy.” It’s true, I love festivals. I used to go to all the fairs at the neighborhood shrine, and my heart beats faster at the sound of flutes and drums.</p>		

I've always loved not just actual festivals but any festive occasion. Partying under the cherry blossoms, birthdays, class outings, fireworks displays, school plans, Christmas, New year's ... Whenever I heard of an upcoming event, whether in or out of school, I always felt a buzz of excitement.

In middle school, the two big annual events are Sports Day and the Cultural Festival. At sports Days, although I'd get into the spirit, my body wouldn't follow through. For a disabled person, to play a major role at Sports Day is only a dream (though when it comes to being cheered on and applauded by the parents, I may have been a star). And so I set my sights on the Cultural Festival. I wanted to get involved, put it together, and above all, have fun.

You couldn't just volunteer for the job, though. Each class elected one boy and one girl to the Cultural Committee, which did the work for the festival, arranged parties for the graduating students and the incoming freshmen, and so on. There was also a Cultural Steering Committee which coordinated all these events; one boy and one girl were elected to this from each grade. I decided to run for the Steering Committee in the second semester of seventh grade.

My rival was the guy who lived across the

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street—the same one who’d proposed the Terrible Trio’s cleanup after the shrine fair. He was a pretty tough opponent, talented in sports and academics, an outstanding leader who headed up the sports Day cheering squad. We’d had a friendly rivalry going in class committee elections since grade school. As far as liking the spotlight was concerned, we were evenly matched. The time had come for a showdown.

It was close: only a dozen votes separated us. He could easily have won. I still remember that day—how I waited for the results after class, almost praying. He was doing the same. The count came in. I was happy at winning, but my feelings were mixed. We had fought fair and square, but somehow I felt bad for him.

Being neighbors, we naturally went home the same way. He took me by surprise by saying, “I’m commin’ over to hang out at your place.”

That made me feel better. I remember even more clearly what happened when we got home. “I lost to Oto,” he told my mother. “By a few votes. Bummer.”

“And you still came home with him? Boys are so uncomplicated.”

No, you don’t get it, I wanted to say. It’s not because boys are uncomplicated. He was thinking of my feelings, even though it meant swallowing his own

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disappointment at such a near miss. I wonder what he's doing now? He used to dream of going to med school. I hope he has. I know he'd make a good doctor.

### *The Candidate*

Being on the committee was even more fun than I'd imagined: making and putting up posters after school, getting to know the older students, who seemed very grown-up, and the teachers—once, when we stayed especially late, the vice principal had ramen noodles delivered for us all.

Gradually, though, I wanted to do more. The Steering Committee only got involved once a program was finalized. That wasn't enough for me. The real decision-making body was the five-member Student Council: the President, the Vice President, and the chairs of Cultural, Sports, and Campus Steering Committees. After I'd been working on the Cultural Steering Committee for a while, I started aspiring to be its chair.

When the Student Council election came around in December of my eighth-grade year, of course I ran for the position. But at this point an unexpected rival appeared. A boy from the Swimming Club. He'd never been the type from who took part in committees and

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things until now. It was rumored that he was running because he wanted the extra points that student Council members get on their transcripts.

I caught fire. I didn't know whether that rumor was true, but I prided myself on having served three straight terms on the CSC. You wouldn't catch me losing to a guy who was running for the sake of his student record.

Even in junior high, we were required to make election speeches. We had to make the rounds of the classrooms during lunch breaks. Facing the senior classes was the worst hurdle—I was really nervous at the prospect.

Then a powerful backer appeared. Waka-san, the senior who was the current chair of the CSC. We had been on the Committee together for a year and a half, and he was especially kind to me. He was captain of the baseball team, a very outgoing personality, admired by everyone. When he offered to go around with me and make a campaign speech, it gave me a real boost.

After I spoke, Waka-san would take over and talk about my work on the Committee. He was hugely popular among the seniors. I'm sure he was much more effective than I would have been if I'd spoken for

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I also called on the cooperation of some seventh graders. I asked the CSC reps, basketball club members, and students I knew by sight from my neighborhood to stir things up when I came to their classrooms.

“Yo! Ototake-san!!” Rousing yells filled the air as I entered. Guys, I thought, you’re going too far. But they sure did stir things up. The seventh graders who didn’t know much about me must have gotten the impression that I was pretty popular,

My grueling(!?) campaign was rewarded by a landslide victory. There were three candidates for CSC chair, but I drew almost two-thirds of the vote. Thanks, of course, to Waka-san and the seventh graders.

Boy, that junior high school wasn’t afraid of anything. First it lets a guy in a wheelchair into the basketball club; then it elects him to the Student Council.

### ***Empty Cans and Ghost Stories***

On January 4, the five newly elected Student Council members got together. We made a New Year’s visit to Meiji Shrine to pray for the success of the council’s

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future activities. Someone had suggested that we'd get into the mood better if we went on the first day of the year, but because of my wheelchair the other members chose to wait until the massive crowds that gather on the first three days of January had dwindled. We were a team. I prayed: "Please let me work to create a great festival with this wonderful group."

Besides the festival, we planned all the school events, from Sports Day on. Since we also gave the opening and closing speeches at each event, I had an increasing number of opportunities to speak in front of people.

Another major job was marshaling the whole school for morning assembly. "Quiet, please. Each class please form two straight lines." Little did I know, back when I was always too busy chatting to get into line, that one day I'd find myself giving the orders.

These were things that the Student Council routinely did, but we also tried out some new ideas. First, there was the "Good Morning Campaign" that we launched in April. We came half an hour early, waited at the school gates, and said "Good Morning" to the students as they arrived. It was a busybody attempt to cheer up those students who started the day walking with their hands thrust into their pockets

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Next, we tried recycling cans. The aim was to clean up the streets and I raise funds at the same time. We soon found we were onto a good thing—we hadn't realized how many people tossed their cans away. Once we had a few, we childishly wanted more, more, more. We approached liquor stores in the Yohga area: "Excuse me, we're collecting empty cans for our school. Would you mind if we came a couple of times a week and picked up the cans left in the trash containers beside your vending machine?"

While all the owners said okay, they asked us to come just before closing time. And so collecting became a nighttime job: eight or nine o'clock, not the usual hour for a middle school Student Council to meet. But it was fun to explore the city together after dark.

One day on our rounds, the chairman of the Sports Steering Committee said, "Hey, that was a good haul today—let's all go to the park!" We headed for the wide open spaces of nearby Kinuta Park. It was pitch-dark and quite creepy. Just When you were wondering "Where's so-and-so?"—"Gotcha!"—you'd jump out of your skin. Later, we told ghost stories around a flashlight that someone had brought. What started out as a recycling drive had somehow turned

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into a night of playing Who's the Chicken?

It was after midnight when I got home. Some of the kids caught it from their parents, but today it's a good memory. Maybe the five of us, supposedly the pride of Yohga Junior High, were just a bunch of goof-offs!?

### ***The NEW Cultural Festival***

By the autumn of ninth grade, I'd gotten used to working on the Student Council; now it was time for my last Cultural Festival. The usual festival had two parts: an interclass choral competition and an exhibition of works made in art, shop, and home ec classes. The students always practiced extra hard and stayed late to finish their exhibits.

We came up with an idea. Instead of a festival where everybody did their thing and then it was over, we wanted to plan something extra just for the fun of it. We had the perfect excuse: commemorating the opening of the new gym. "A fun festival. A festival to remember." That was our slogan.

It was hard enough preparing the usual kind of festival. But because we already had two years' experience and had seen how the older students went about it, we were pretty sure we knew the procedure. This time, though, there was a new twist, and we were

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on our own. The headaches began at the planning stage. Even in setting the schedule for making decisions and getting things ready, we were feeling our way.

At the same time, we had fun. Because it was the first time for everyone, we had a real sense of putting something together ourselves. Even simple decisions, such as what music to play as people came into the hall, were batted around and around.

“We need a tune that will liven things up. What about ‘Can You Fight Twenty-Four Hours a Day?’” (a vitamin tonic jingle that was a big hit at the time).

“What we need is a classic in a quiet mood. Billy Joel’s ‘Honesty’ would be just right.”

By now we’d retired from club activities, and after school we would head straight for the Student Council room at the end of the first-floor corridor and put our heads together over the program.

The main attraction was decided: party games in which the classes would compete, each class would be tighter than at any other time of the year. Providing a chance for them to go up against each other should generate a lot of excitement—a festival to remember.

The teachers weren’t happy at first, but in the end they gave us a free hand. Maybe it was a reward for all

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<p>the enthusiasm we'd shown so far.</p> <p>After the regular program was over, all the students gathered in the gym. Representatives of each class came up on stage and competed to see, for example, who could <u>stick their face in</u> a basin of water the longest. The older teachers were clearly not very pleased.</p> <p>But the audience loved it. It would have been a waste <u>to let that hyped-up mood just fade away</u> after the official program was over. We'd looked for <u>some way to keep it going</u>, and we hit the jackpot. We hadn't expected such screaming excitement ourselves.</p> <p>Perhaps it wasn't exactly <u>what you'd call "cultural."</u> But we achieved what we'd set out to do and gave the students what they wanted, and <u>by those standards</u> it was a very satisfying Cultural Festival.</p> <p>What good is an event, after all, if it isn't fun? That's why they call me "the festival guy."</p>		<p><u>stick their face in</u></p> <p><u>to let that hyped-up mood just fade away</u></p> <p><u>some way to keep it going</u></p> <p><u>what you'd call "cultural."</u></p> <p><u>by those standards</u></p>
<p><b>Yatchan</b></p> <p><i>Reserved Seats</i></p> <p>Young people are said to grow during the junior high school years. They <u>have a lot on their minds</u>: personal relationships, their academic future, love. A vague</p>		<p><u>have a lot on their minds</u></p> <p><u>sets their nerves on edge</u></p>

anxiety constantly sets their nerves on edge. Their parents only tell them to study, their teachers do nothing but tie them down with rules. Their frustration builds up. And then, in the timeless way, it's turned on those weaker than themselves. Junior high is the stage at which bullying is most common.

What happens when a disabled person, who is seen as a weaker member of society, enters such an environment? This was the main concern those around me had when I started junior high. They were afraid that my friends might no longer be so friendly. We would all be growing up. They might not spend time with me as they used to, they might not help me any more. I have to admit to feeling a little uneasy myself.

To add to these concerns, nearly half the students at Yohga Junior High came from another neighboring elementary school. I would have to make new friends. There's a big difference between make friends when you're six or seven and when you're twelve or thirteen and have reached the age of reason. My disability, which in first grade had been an asset in making friends, would now be a burden. I wasn't sure I could carry this off ...

To go back to the beginning of seventh grade: when our homeroom classes were announced, sure enough, I

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was surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I looked around the classroom for someone I might begin to make friends with. In the midst of all the commotion, there was one boy slumped at his desk with a bored look. This was my first encounter with Yatchan.

We'd gone to the same elementary school, but were never in the same class and had hardly ever talked. He was a quick thinker and certainly not bad at his studies in those days. He was also athletic, one of the five best swimmers in Setagaya Ward. In sixth grade, he was a leader in his class.

In junior high, though, he gradually changed. Everything seemed to be too much trouble, and little by little he began to cut classes. He hardly ever spoke to his classmates. You could see a pack of cigarettes more or less concealed in his jacket pocket. He was the type the teachers called "delinquent."

I was intrigued by him. He seemed to have a certain quality that I lacked. Tall and handsome, he was popular with the girls. Even a boy could see how cool he was. His way of looking at things out of the corner of his eye gave him an aura all his own. Next to the other new junior high students—really only glorified sixth graders—he seemed very mature.

There was a place at school—the landing of the

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stairs—that was his reserved seat. He was always sitting there lost in thought. Sometimes alone, sometimes with his pals. One recess, I happened to look up the stairway. As usual, he was there. He was on his own. I seemed to remember he'd left class during the last period saying he didn't feel well, and had supposedly gone to the infirmary.

I'd been thinking all along I'd like to make friends with him, but there hadn't been any real opportunity. Before I knew it, I was on my way up the stairs. My heart thudded faster with each step, as if I was about to ask a girl for a date. I perched next to him, my heart racing. He glanced over but didn't seem to take much notice. Whew. I'd been secretly afraid he would snarl, "This is my place. Get lost."

I don't remember what we talked about; maybe we hardly talked at all. I only remember an indescribable sense of being at ease I'd never felt before. I was so comfortable there that soon I had a reserved seat of my own.

### *A Lonely Leader*

He may have been what was called a "bad kid," but he certainly wasn't bad at heart. He took no part in the widespread bullying, and he didn't start fights.

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Part of his appeal must have been the way he looked out for others. Once, before a particularly unpopular teacher arrived in class, one of the boys stamped a blackboard eraser all over the teacher's desk, covering it with chalk dust. The boy did it to rile him, and it worked. The matter was reported to our homeroom teacher, and suspicion at once fell on Yatchan.

The teachers all eyed him accusingly. We heard he was given a grilling by our homeroom teacher. Yatchan would never have pulled such a childish prank, but, to our astonishment, he took the rap.

"Why don't you tell them the truth?" It may have been the first time I'd spoken sharply to him. "We all saw who did it."

"I don't mind, Oto. I'm their usual suspect anyway. It'd mean to go and rat on the other guy?"

What could I say? While admiring him all the more for his sense of honor, I felt sad that Yatchan had given up on himself.

People sought his company. Boys with pent-up emotions they couldn't handle on their own. He didn't give them advice or help, but they came anyway. It was enough just to hang out with him, I guess. Maybe there was something healing about it. And maybe I was one of them.

covering it with

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That solitary air of his



He looked lonesome, though. Surrounded by all those companions he was, for some reason, alone. That solitary air of his made me feel lonely myself—I wanted to understand him and earn his trust.

There was trouble, once, when one of his buddies got into a fight and made some threats using his name. Yatchan’s status as “the boss” at Yohga Junior High meant that his fame had spread to other schools, and the kid who’d gotten into a tight spot may have thought he could get out of it by using his name.

Yatchan didn’t like fights, as I’ve said. But since his friends turned to him whenever they had problems among themselves, he was constantly caught up in feuds. And so his reputation traveled ahead of him. Now it was happening again. He hadn’t wanted to cause trouble, but he was dragged into a quarrel with another school.

After the incident, he seemed even more alone—at least, that was how it looked to me. For a while, he distanced himself from his usual companions. Perhaps he was sick of dealing with that scene and all its hassles.

He seemed comfortable around me, since I wasn’t involved in the incident; in fact, I didn’t even know the whole story. The two of us spent more time together.

made some threats using his name

caught up in feuds

was dragged into a quarrel with

distanced himself from

that scene and all its hassles

during class time

During recess, we were always in our reserved seats. And not only during recess—gradually we began going there during class time as well. I thought this wasn't right, of course, but I told myself it was only temporary.

I knew he'd go back to his crowd again. Whether he liked it or not, they wouldn't forget Yatchan, the head honcho of Yohga Junior High. They couldn't get by without him, and he wasn't the kind of guy who would let them down. He was simply taking time out. He was probably just weary; he wanted a break from his usual world, and he'd chosen me to keep him company.

On fine days, we skipped class and hung around in a nearby park.

"Want one, Oto?" he'd say, exhaling a lazy cloud of cigarette smoke.

"No, not for me."

"Uh-huh."

He never insisted. I wasn't completely guilt-free about cutting classes, but whatever guilt I felt was blown away by my happiness at being with him.

### *My Guardian Angel*

The teachers weren't too thrilled. Though they distrusted Yatchan, they apparently didn't jump to the

the head honcho of

get by without

let them down

was simply taking time out

wanted a break from

keep him company

guilt-free about

was blown away by

conclusion that he was bullying me. But they did think he was exerting a bad influence on me. I was told, “Don’t get too mixed up with him,” and the same was spelled out to Yatchan too. The teachers seemed to have the wrong idea about him.

Going back to where I began: What happens when a disabled person, who is perceived as weak, enters the emotionally turbulent world of middle school? Most likely he will be bullied. Especially if he’s as pushy as I was at the time. I’d joined the basketball club, I was on a committee. I stood out in my year. In other words, I was the kind of “smart aleck” that some people no doubt would have liked to teach a lesson. If the truth be told, there were probably kids who thought, “That guy makes me puke.” But I was never bullied.

I think Yatchan’s presence must have made a big difference. The other students may have regarded him with a variety of feelings—awe, hero-worship, respect—but all agreed he was definitely someone you didn’t take lightly. And there was I, his sidekick. That probably made it difficult to bully me. You could say he was my guardian angel.

It’s true he wasn’t the type who gets straight A’s and listens to the teachers. Okay, so maybe in their eyes he was a “problem student” and a “delinquent.” But when

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label “loser”

<p>I think of all the kids Yatchan rescued—kids who couldn't talk to the teachers about their troubles—I wonder if <u>it's right to slap the label "loser" on a boy who, just by exiting, was able to make those troubles go away.</u></p> <p>Yatchan came to see me once after we graduated.</p> <p>"That's great, Oto, you going to a top high school. Me, I dropped out in the end. No diploma here."</p> <p>He'd left high school and become an electrician. For the job he'd had to <u>get his hair cut</u>, dye it again—black instead of bleached-out brown—and <u>bite the bullet</u> no matter what his customer said. Next to a solid citizen like him I was still a kid.</p> <p>"But, Yatchan, I'm still <u>sponging off</u> my parents. You're working, you <u>earn your own living</u>. You're great."</p> <p>"Think so? Nah ..." He flashed the appealing embarrassed grin I hadn't seen in a while.</p> <p>I wonder whether, nearly ten years later, our reserved seats are still a favorite hangout at the junior high. And whether the kids all have a lot on their minds.</p>		<p><u>get his hair cut.</u></p> <p><u>bite the bullet</u></p> <p><u>sponging off</u></p> <p><u>earn your own living</u></p>
<p><b>A Love Letter</b></p>		

### ***A Springtime Incident***

By the start of ninth grade, I was on the Student Council and becoming known around the school. As the new students arrived that April, I began to realize that I was actually in my final year of middle school. At basketball, too, we were all practicing hard together for our last tournament. You could say that life was full in every way.

That spring, there was an Incident.

I think it was during art class. There was a prod from the boy behind me. “Ototake, a first-year girl said to give you this.”

“What is it?”

“How should I know?” He snickered. Not a ...? I snatched the envelope and, careful not to let the teacher catch me, opened it up. The handwriting wasn’t the cute round style of most teenage girls. The lines were written in a clear, flowing style.

*Hello. you probably don’t know who I am, but I know you. I see you at the gates every morning, greeting people with the other members of the Student Council. I always feel refreshed and ready to face the day when you say “Good morning.” Lately, though, I’ve been feeling a little down, because I have to come early to train for the Inter-High athletics and I don’t get the*

on the Student Council

an Incident

during art class

a prod from the boy behind me

a first-year girl

snickered

in a clear, flowing style

*been feeling a little down*

*that every morning*

The chisel I was holding

chance to say good morning to you, my very favorite ninth grader. I used to look forward to that every morning and I really miss it. I promise I'll do my best at training, though. You keep up the good work too.

NAME, Class 4, Seventh Grade

The chisel I was holding shook so much I nearly cut myself. I realized my face was bright red. People must have wondered what was wrong with me. I tried desperately to look as though nothing had happened, but the corners of my mouth were stretching wider and wider and there was nothing I could do about it. I went drifting off into a daze. Totally out of it.

A love letter. The first I ever received.

### ***A Young Man's Heart***

Her letter meant more to me than I understood at the time. I'd always believed that love could grow between me and someone I might get to know in classes or clubs or committees, if we talked and communicated and she came to understand what I was like as a person. That had been my idea of love until then.

But this girl was different. I didn't even know her by sight, let alone to talk to. She couldn't possibly know what I was like. If I call it a plain old crush she might be upset with me, but in fact it was the kind of crush

as though nothing had happened

went drifting off into a daze

I'd always believed that

understand what I was like

know her by sight

let alone to talk to

couldn't possibly know

there's no accounting for tastes

the thing is

It's not that

that younger students get on older students all the time. So, okay, we could just say there's no accounting for tastes and let it go at that. But the thing is, she must have liked the look of me, wheelchair and all.

It's not that I wasn't popular with girls. On Valentine's Day I received as many chocolates as any boy in the class, if not more (In Japan, the girls give the boys chocolates on Valentine's Day). But these weren't the special "you're the one" chocolates. It was just that, since I talked with boys and girls alike, I was friendly with many of the girls, and they would bring one gift for the boy they really liked plus one for Oto-chan. So when I say I was popular it sounds good, but it doesn't mean I was the type that girls fall in love with.

In elementary school, I'd watch out of the corner of my eye as the girls squealed about how gorgeous the boys on the soccer team were. I was envious, but I knew I wasn't the heartthrob type. I knew a guy in a wheelchair couldn't hope to catch the girls' eye just by the way he looked—to attract their interest, I mean, not their curiosity or sympathy. I felt that way, I have to admit, but at the same time I told myself that a disability had nothing to do with love. Mine was a complicated young man's heart.

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I told myself that a disability had nothing to do with love.

Those tangled feelings

I tried to fake it by telling myself that

looks aren't important

it's what's inside that

Those tangled feelings became still more painful when I reached middle school. As we entered adolescence, romances were blossoming. Of course, it was the good-looking guys who were popular with the girls. Although I tried to fake it by telling myself that looks aren't important, it's what's inside that counts. I still didn't see any girls beating down my door. As I continued to be just a friend who was fun to talk with, I can't deny thinking that even I would have a chance if only I had arms and legs.

### ***Barriers to Love***

A single letter blew all this away. We'd never talked, and yet she sensed something in me. It was like being told that, all along, I'd been okay just the way I was. I was on top of the world. I don't mean I thought I was God's gift to women, but simply that I began to have confidence in myself and in the possibility of love. "Hey, how about that?" I thought. "I can have an ordinary relationship too."

I'm not saying that a disability is never an issue when it comes to love. It happens: a boy gives a girl the brush-off because he just can't see himself going with a girl in a wheelchair; a girl dumps a boy by telling him, "I can't communicate with you because of

any girls beating down my door.

I can't deny thinking that even I

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God's gift to women

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when it comes to

gives a girl the brush-off

No matter how brave a face we may put on it

the hard fact is that



your hearing problem.” No matter how brave a face we may put on it, the hard fact is that people with disabilities do have a handicap in love.

But I think the important thing is not to turn your disability into an excuse. True, when your heart’s just been broken, it may be the first thing you think of. If only I could see, if only I could hear ... But was that the real reason it didn’t work out? Even the most beautiful woman in the world may be unlucky in love. Love never goes exactly as you want. And besides, who’d be attracted in the first place to somebody who’s so down on themselves? “I’m disabled, so what can I expect?” Women only feel sorry for me. I don’t stand a chance. That’s a pretty effective way of driving away the love you might have found.

Some men prefer tall women, some women go for chubby guys. My mother declares, “Handsome men make me uncomfortable.” (My father, of course, asks with a wry laugh, “So what does that make me?”) I don’t suppose a disability is actually an asset in too many people’s eyes, but don’t let that stop you. In the end, it all comes down to what you, as a person, have to offer.

If you said to a girl something like, “Sure, I’m disabled. But I’ve got better taste in clothes and more

turn your disability into an excuse

the first thing you think of

never goes exactly as you want.

who’d be attracted in the first place to

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but don’t let that stop you. In the end, it all comes down to what you, as a person, have to offer.

<p>brains than that other guy. And, believe me, nobody could care for you more than I do,” your chances of getting her attention would go up significantly. (Though it may sound a bit corny.)</p> <p>I received several more notes from the girl who wrote to me, and souvenirs from places she’d been. In the end, I wasn’t able to return her feelings. But <u>it was she who</u> gave me a whole lot more courage when it comes to love.</p> <p>I wonder if she still has the second button from my school blazer (the one the girls like to ask the boys for a graduation because <u>it’s nearest the heart.</u>)</p>		<p><u>it was she who</u></p> <p><u>it’ s nearest the heart</u></p>
<p><b>Exam Capers</b></p> <p><i>Choosing a High School</i></p> <p>In their third year of junior high, everyone begins to <u>grow restless</u>. Some kids comb <u>the high school listings</u> looking for entrance requirements that match their level on practice tests, others <u>shriek over the best-looking outfits</u> in the uniform catalogues. <u>Everybody takes to carrying around exam guides. It’s a heady time of mingled hope and anxiety.</u></p> <p>Like everyone else, I was <u>agonizing over</u> choosing a school. It was not that I didn’t have somewhere in</p>		<p><u>grow restless</u></p> <p><u>the high school listings</u></p> <p><u>shriek over the best-looking outfits</u></p> <p><u>Everybody takes to carrying around</u></p> <p><u>It’ s a heady time of mingled hope and anxiety</u></p>

mind. Toyama Metropolitan High—a school with a tradition that goes back over a hundred years.

The orthopedic surgeon who'd treated me since I was little had often talked about Toyama high. A keen sports fan, he had taken on the job of team doctor for their American Football club.

“You don't often see such fine young men these days. Their dedication to football is impressive. They've got character, too, and above all they've got guts.”

When I started thinking about where I wanted to go, I immediately remembered these words. I wanted to meet these great guys, and maybe end up becoming a fine young man myself.

Dream on. To get from Yohga to Takadanobaba, where Toyama High is located, would take nearly an hour by train and involve changing lines. Traveling by train in a wheelchair is difficult enough, but commuting every morning in those unbelievable rush hour crowds was all but impossible.

I would have to give up. Or so it seemed, until my father made a startling suggestion.

“We can move.”

“Wha ...???”

“Let's move within wheelchair commuting distance of Toyama high.”

was agonizing over

It was not that

goes back over a hundred years

they' ve got guts

Dream on.

where Toyama High is located

involve changing lines

all but impossible

Or so it seemed.

made a startling suggestion

“But ...”

“No problem. My office is in Shinjuku anyway. It’ll be more convenient for me.”

We’d moved to Yohga in the first place because it was handier to my kindergarten. Even to contemplate the effort and expense (as much as six months’ rent up front) all over again ...

For a while I thought over whether or not to take up my parents’ generous offer. No, it was way too much to ask. But then again, if it was a question of finding a high school I wanted to go to within reach of our house in Yohga, the answer was that there wasn’t one.

And so I decided to take advantage of their bold and extraordinarily thoughtful proposal. To live up to their generosity, I started studying in earnest. This would have been around June.

### ***Thrills***

At an interview with my parents present, I was told by my homeroom teacher that I was aiming too high. Toyama was the hardest of the metropolitan schools to get into. “You have only a fifty-fifty chance of being admitted, and even then, there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to keep up once you’re in.”

I’d been warned. No doubt he was right. But I didn’t

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I thought over whether or not to

it was way too much to

the answer was that

take advantage of

To live up to

I started studying in earnest.

with my parents present

the hardest of the

a fifty-fifty chance of

care—I still wanted to go to Toyama High. That was the one thought in my head.

But there were adverse circumstances. Under the admission system of the metropolitan high schools, you can't count on getting in simply by doing well on the day of the exams, because more weight is given to your school reports. The higher your grades, the lower the score you have to get on the exams, and vice versa.

Nearly everyone who tried for Toyama High had straight A's. That meant that on the entrance exams they had to get a minimum of 420, which averages out to 84 per subject. Unless something went very wrong on exam day, they were home free. But in my case, although my grades weren't bad in the five exam subjects (English, Japanese, math, social studies, and science), there was a catch: phys ed.

Since middle schools rate your performance relative to your peers, I inevitably scored low in phys ed. This naturally dragged down my total, so that the minimum I had to get on exam day shot up to 460, or 92 per subject. It wasn't going to be easy.

For once, I was really in a cold sweat. Since I was only trying for the one school, I had to pass, no matter what. I had visions of spending a year cramming at home as a junior-high *rōnin*, a “masterless samurai,”

No doubt

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so that the minimum I had to get

in a cold sweat

waiting to have another crack at getting into my school of choice. It was an alarming thought.

### *Thrill City*

Six months went by in a flash, and the exam season was upon us. And then my parents did something so rash it sent chills down my spine.

We were going to have to move for me to go to Toyama. Our choice of apartments was quite limited, because not many places check out when you have all the constraints that arise with using a wheelchair—no steps at the entrance to the building, an elevator if we lived above the first floor, room to park the chair in the (usually tiny) hallway, and so on. Add the fact that we had to be able to move in precisely at the beginning of April, and our options were practically zero.

Miraculously, one apartment turned up. But, we were told, there was someone else interested who was still wavering. It was up for grabs, so to speak—and so, would you believe it, my parents go and sign the lease!

I was stunned. It was definitely the right move if I passed, but the key word was if. Looking back, I don't know whether to praise their decisiveness or be amazed at their recklessness.

Even more shocking was the fact that they told me.

I had visions of

have another crack at

an alarming thought

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check out

Add the fact that

It was up for grabs, so to speak

Normal parents, even if they signed the lease, would surely have kept quiet about it so as not to increase the pressure on their son. But not my folks.

“We’ve already signed the lease, so you’ll have to pass, or we’re in trouble.” It’s a rare parent who piles on the pressure like this.

“But I don’t know if I can ...”

“Well, do your best.”

Okay, okay, I get the point, but still ... What was it they said when I signed up for basketball? “I just don’t understand how our son’s mind operates.” I wanted to say the same thing to them. But perhaps I was wrong to expect them to behave like normal parents—for it was clear to me now how I’d come by my own reckless nature.

### ***A Rainy Day in March***

I’ve always been good at not blowing it on the big day—never fluffed my lines in the drama festival, never choked at the crucial moment. So I could be confident of that much. This time, however, the bar was set too high. My chances really were fifty-fifty.

The pass list was due to be posted a week after the exams, on March 3, Dolls Festival Day. Of course, I was planning to go and look at the bulletin board myself, but it rained that day. We decided my mother

so as not to increase the pressure

piles on the pressure

What was it they said

it was clear to me now how

blowing it on the big day

fluffed my lines

at the crucial moment

was due to be posted

put such ominous thoughts out

would go and look.

The results were to be released at 10:00 A.M. When my mother's call still hadn't come by half past, I couldn't help thinking ... Trying to put such ominous thoughts out of my head, I told myself there must be a long line at the pay phone. This was before the days of cell phones, and there was no way for me to contact her. Was she wondering how to console me? I learned then what it means for time to stand still.

It was nearly eleven when the phone rang: I'd passed. It turned out that my mother had fallen into the clutches of a famous talkative acquaintance on the way there. Why today, of all days? God plays some pretty mean tricks.

It didn't seem real at first, maybe because I hadn't seen the notice for myself; all the same, happiness welled up slowly inside me. I was vaguely thinking, "So hard work does pay off." And we wouldn't have to break the lease. In retrospect, my parents say they signed because they had faith in me, but even with all the faith in the world, that took some nerve. Still, it turns out they're only human. They told me later that in the month before the entrance exams, they could barely eat for anxiety. I felt a little guilty when I heard this, but then, judging by the fact I didn't notice a

what it means for

It turned out that

on the way there

welled up slowly inside me

hard work does pay off



<p>thing at the time, I guess I wasn't too calm myself.</p> <p>Anyhow, I'd passed. The whole song and dance certainly hadn't been easy. But all my worries evaporated the moment I heard the good news. What began to occupy my mind instead was the new life that would <u>start in a month's time</u> and <u>the new encounters that awaited me</u>. What did the next three years have in store?</p>		<p><u>in the month before</u></p> <p><u>start in a month's time</u></p> <p><u>the new encounters that awaited me</u></p>
<p><b>Twenty-Five Warriors</b></p> <p><i>Turned to Stone</i></p> <p>In April 1992, I became a freshman at Toyama Metropolitan High School. We newcomers <u>were given the red-carpet treatment</u> by the upperclassmen.</p> <p>Toyama has a lively student activities scene, and there were <u>over forty clubs scrambling for</u> new members. Before classes and during breaks, <u>squads of athletes</u> in their team uniforms <u>ran whooping down</u> the hallways, while the performing arts groups <u>came charging into</u> our classrooms and struck up a tune or staged an impromptu skit. Basically, we freshmen were overwhelmed by all the enthusiasm.</p> <p>I was getting on well with a kid named Ryo. At 6'2"</p>		<p><u>were given the red-carpet treatment</u></p> <p><u>over forty clubs scrambling for</u></p> <p>先を争って、～を獲得しようとする40以上のクラブ</p> <p><u>squads of athletes</u></p> <p><u>ran whooping down</u></p> <p><u>came charging into</u></p>

and 198 pounds, you couldn't miss him in a crowd. Naturally, the sports clubs were all over him; his desk was always surrounded by recruiters at recess.

We sat near each other and, it's true, I envied all the fuss being made over Ryo right before my eyes. Not that I wasn't getting invitations too, of course: the *go* and *shogi* (Japanese chess) clubs, the literary society ... but none of those interested me.

It must have been about four days into the semester. Once again, the upperclassmen from the sports clubs were right there in front of me, swarming around Ryo's desk. I made up my mind to speak to one of them.

"Uh, I'd like to join too ..."

When the recruiter looked around and saw who was speaking, he froze as if turned to stone. And no wonder: I'd picked the one who was suited up in gladiator gear and carrying a helmet in his hand. Yup, he was from the American Football Club. Looking him in the eye, I asked again, "Please let me join the Football Club."

As for what I could do once I joined, I hadn't given that a thought. My orthopedist's words about the gutsy guys on the football team—which were what made me want to go to Toyama in the first place—just

all the fuss being made over

I made up my mind to

he froze as if turned to stone.

the one who was suited up in gladiator gear

Looking him in the eye

given that a thought

crossed my mind.

naturally seemed to lead me in this direction. I was joining because I wanted to: it was that simple. Like the time I signed up for basketball, the word “disability” never crossed my mind.

### ***My Spot on the Team***

Football being more of a contact sport than basketball, I wouldn't be seeing action as a player. I signed on as a manager, but out of all the usual duties—such as getting drinks ready, taping ankles, and buying supplies at sports goods stores—there wasn't a single one that I could do. Feeling pretty impatient with myself, I let off steam at practices by yelling twice as loud as anyone else. Could I really be useful to the team, or would I only be a drag? I didn't know, but I just wanted to zap thoughts like that right out of my head.

The coaches saw at once what was going on with me. They thought hard about whether there was anything I could do, and what they came up with was a job at the computer. This would be my first return to the keyboard since the end of sixth grade, three years earlier.

In Japan, at least, American football has the image of a sport where big men slam into each other. And

being more of a contact sport than

Feeling pretty impatient with myself,

twice as loud as anyone else

zap thoughts like that

a job at the computer

that's true enough, as far as it goes. Even at the high school level, linemen weigh in at over two hundred pounds, and when you see them, padded and helmeted, rushing their opponents, it may look more like a martial art than a field sport. But there's more to the game than meets the eye. In fact, together with its human cannonball aspect, it has an important mental component—strategy, in other words. American football is played half with the body, half with the mind.

The job I was given was keeping stats: collecting data on the teams we faced and entering them in the computer, then analyzing them for strategic use in the next game. "In a case like this, x percent of Team A's plays are to the right side, y percent to the left. In this situation, they pass x percent and run y percent of the time." It was my task to tabulate these statistics for the coaches. Before a big game, I would often pull an all-nighter gathering data from a stack of videos.

That wasn't my only job. I was also allowed to sit in on the coaches' meetings when they decided the freshmen's positions, and to give directions during practices. I was no expert, but there are points that someone watching from the sidelines can see more clearly than the players themselves.

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tabulate these statistics

pull an all-nighter  
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sit in on the coaches'  
meetings

there are points that

something like a coach' s

So I was neither a player nor a manager. My duties were something like a coach's, but I wasn't exactly a coach, either. My role was very loosely defined. Because it was so free-floating, though, the coaching staff actually expected all the more of me, seeing me as an important conduit between the players, managers, and coaches. And I was able to find my spot on the team at last.

### *How 'bout Those Hornets?*

Our team—the Toyama Green Hornets—was pretty strong, though when it comes to sheer physical size, we weren't even in the same league as the private high schools. As a metropolitan school whose admissions were based almost entirely on academics, we had to include boys in the ninety-pound class just to scrape together enough players, while some of the private schools' clubs could even hold tryouts, they had so many star athletes to choose from. Judged by size, we would probably have been one of the five worst teams in Tokyo.

But what we lacked in terms of muscle, we more than made up for with leadership. Our coaching staff, headed by two former All-Japan players, must have been among the finest in the country. Thanks to their solid tutoring in strategy and mental preparation, the

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hornet

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headed by

Green Hornets had become a high-powered team that always made it to the Tokyo district semifinals.

Somewhere along the line, our rallying cry had become “Kanto Champions.” To beat players twice our size and be the No.1 team in the Kanto (East Japan) region: that was our dream. By the spring of my eleventh-grade year, we were on the way to making that dream a reality.

In the quarter finals for the Tokyo district title, we found ourselves facing the top contender, Nichidai High School No.3. True to its name, the Black Resistance, their team wore black from head to toe. Just the sight of them was enough to strike terror into their opponents.

They were in fact a formidable team. At Nichidai H.S.No.3, players built like Ryo were a dime a dozen. And they weren’t just big, they were strong and fast. Our players said, “They’re like a huge wall moving with lightening speed right before your eyes.” That was what we were up against.

But it was a must-win game. Only four teams from Tokyo would go on to the Kanto championship, which meant we had to reach the semifinals, and that meant beating Nichidai. If we lost, it was the end of the road. The seniors were due to retire. It was all-or-nothing

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situation.

The showdown took place in the rain—football truly is an all-weather sport. We weren't in bad shape, but the Resistance bolted ahead and set the pace. As a steady drizzle fell, a grim mood settled over our bench. But not one of us gave up hope.

In the fourth quarter, the clock was ticking against us. Our squad put up a last-ditch battle. You could no longer make out the Hornets' colors of green and yellow through the mud on their uniforms. You could barely see the numbers on their backs, and yet our men shone as they fought toward their dream.

For my part, all I could do was yell. And tell our guys what a great job they were doing as they came back to the bench during the changeovers. I never felt powerless, though, because, like them, I had something important to do: believe in my teammates and victory.

14-12. A come-from-behind win with seconds to spare. We had each played our part to the end, never losing hope, and that was what clinched it. I couldn't stop shaking. Then, on the verge of tears, I saw a startling scene. A senior who never showed his emotions—he was famous for it—was on his knees on the turf, crying like a baby. I couldn't hold back my

bolted ahead

put up a last-ditch battle

during the changeovers

A come-from-behind win with seconds to spare.

never losing hope, and that was what clinched it

couldn't hold back my own tears as

own tears as what we'd done, and how glad I was to be on this team, really hit me.

Their faces smeared with mud, rain, sweat, and tears, my teammates formed a circle and thrust their helmets high into the air with a roar that sent a chill down my spine. That day—no, we knew why football was our game.

After our dramatic comeback against Nichidai, we were on a roll. We went on to win the Tokyo pennant for the second time in Toyama's history.

But the final curtain fell all too quickly. In the first round of the Kanto Regionals we played the Shizuoka Prefecture champions, Mishima High. The game went back and forth, and when the clock ran out the score stood at 28-28. Under tournament rules, the winners would be decided by a toss-up. As we watched on the sideline, the referee flipped a coin and, moments later, our captain hunched over with his head in his hands. Our dream had slipped away.

For two years, from tenth grade until our last games during the spring tournament of senior year, we'd been football-crazy. Our minds were constantly on the game—in the street, during class, in the bath. It had meant everything to us at high school. With football gone from our lives, each of us felt a crushing

Their faces smeared with

thrust their helmets high into the air

were on a roll

went on to win the

be decided by a toss-up

hunched over with his head in

With football gone from our lives.



<p>emptiness.</p> <p>It didn't take us long, though, to realize what mattered the most: in setting out together to capture the Kanto trophy, we had each found twenty-four comrades we could be proud of.</p>		
<p><b>Water of Life</b></p> <p><i>Michio</i></p> <p>The Toyama Festival is held every September. As a rule, the tenth graders <a href="#">put on art and science displays</a>, the eleventh graders perform plays, and each senior class makes a movie. This program stands a little bit apart from the kind of festival that's currently popular at other schools. For parents and friends who attend, the usual parties and food stalls might be more fun than having to watch amateur plays and movies. But for us, on the production side, Toyama's kind of festival was the best you could have.</p> <p>Our senior class had already made a start on its movie project the previous fall, in eleventh grade. We began by choosing the director. The kids I'd gotten friendly with working on our play that year told me I was the only possible choice, and they'd back me up. Since I've always liked getting attention and taking</p>		<p><a href="#">put on art and science displays</a></p>

charge, I thought this wasn't a bad idea at all. Egged on by the others, I could really see myself as the director. But it turned out not to be so simple.

There was another boy, Michio, planning to try for the job. He belonged to the football club, and we'd been friends since tenth grade. As a running back, he was nicknamed "mojo man" because he had the exceptional body control and balance we associated with African-American players. He tanned really dark, too—at summer training camp, after lights-out, all you could see of him were his white teeth and white T-shirt standing out in the night.

His athletic brilliance wasn't the only thing about him that attracted people. He also had a kind of charisma that's difficult to describe. I'd always known I was no match for Michio.

I never felt outdone by kids who slaved away at their books. Of course, this wasn't because I was confident of doing better than them in school; I just didn't measure people by their grades. Then what was it about Michio that had me beat? In a word, it was his big heart. He seemed to have a kind of bottomless capacity for life. A free spirit that was never hung up about anything. Next to him, I was made aware of my own smallness as a human being.

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In a word,

When Michio went for director, I was disappointed, yet at the same time I was glad. I thought, “There goes my chance,” but I was also full of high hopes for the film we could make with him in charge. I never felt for a moment that it should be me instead. He seemed exactly the right person for the top job.

Several classmates who didn’t know his true worth kept pushing for me. But instead of going along, I talked them out of it. “If you want a really good movie,” I argued, “Michio’s your man, not me.”

And so the project got under way with Michio as director and me as assistant director.

### *Life*

It took us nearly six months to decide our theme and complete the script. Once, we rejected a script that was almost finalized after two or three months’ work. Starting over took a lot of courage. But people said, “Hey, if we’re going to make a movie, let’s make one we can all feel good about.” And we headed back to the drawing board.

It was already May by the time work started on the final script, once we’d officially decided our theme. The theme was “death.” Or perhaps “staying alive” would be more like it. You can tell what a hot topic this was among high school students at the time from the fact

was made aware of

with him in charge

talked them out of it

It took us nearly six months to

Starting over

one we can all feel good about

headed back to the drawing board

that, at that year's National High School Drama Festival, most of the sixteen schools in the final selection did plays on the theme of "death."

This was our plot. Sixteen-year-old Toru and his mother live alone. Several years ago, his older sister committed suicide and his father died in a drunken fight. Since then, life has lost its meaning for Toru. But as he becomes aware of his mother's love for his father, for his sister, and for himself, he gradually realizes that he must get going on living. One day, Minami, the girl he's deeply in love with, is taken to the hospital after an accident. Toru is devastated. His father, who he thought was dead, appears to tell him how precious life is and how important human beings are—every single one of them. But it's only a dream. When Toru wakes up, he learns that Minami has regained consciousness, and rushes to her side. Seeing her again, he realizes something that he had lost sight of: how good it is just to be alive.

We weren't pros; it was the work of high school students. Maybe it sounds cheap and hokey, but I was happy, because the story got our message across in a way that anyone could understand. In fact, when one of my classmates produced this script, my reaction was "Why didn't I think of that?" I was amazed that a

that he must get going on living

something that he had lost sight of

how good it is just to

got our message across in a way that

Usquebaugh

kid my own age had thought about these things and could write about them so well. If any readers are interested, try the drama section of your nearest video store where you'll find it ... not!

Michio, who read a lot and had a broad general knowledge, gave the movie its title. He chose Usquebaugh. This Gaelic word (the root of "whiskey") means "water of life." He said he'd been struck by the way the word takes something we use every day without thinking—water—and puts it together with "life." Perhaps that's a sign of how greatly water was once valued in Europe.

So, what was it that we valued? Michio explained that he'd chosen this title in order to pose just that question: what was precious to each one of us?

Having received the name Usquebaugh, our movie, too, began to come to life.

### ***Different Flavors***

Filming began in earnest in mid-July, after first-term finals, and lasted about a month. But things didn't go too smoothly, because we had the heat to contend with. Mid-July through mid-August is the hottest time of the year in Japan, and filming all day under a blazing sun was a real ordeal. I got off lightly, though, compared to the cast. They had to perform to our strict

after first-term finals

the heat to contend with

under a blazing sun

perform to our strict

director's satisfaction with the temperature in the nineties. Some of the kids even had to wear coats for a winter scene. It was hell just to watch them.

But it was the camera, sound, and lighting crews who suffered the most. While the rest of us were sweltering just moving ourselves from place to place, they had heavy equipment to lug around. And conditions got worse during the actual shooting—even if sweat ran into their eyes or they were eaten by mosquitoes, they couldn't make a sound, and the cameraman couldn't move a muscle. It took real grit to hold down those jobs.

Eno was the ideal chief cameraman. Voted "Most likely to Make a Good Father" by the class, he was the strong but gentle type, and he always got jobs done quietly and dependably. When no one else was interested in making the props for our eleventh-grade play, he'd taken them on and constructed a cherry tree practically on his own. Though he liked to stay behind the scenes, we all knew that Eno was the one in our class who saw that things got done.

The combination of Michio and me also worked really well. Each day, my job as assistant director was over before the camera rolled. I kept track of all the details: where we'd be shooting, what time we'd meet,

director' s satisfaction

It was hell just to

heavy equipment to lug around

during the actual shooting

It took real grit to

got jobs done quietly and dependably

he' d taken them on

who saw that things got done

my job as assistant director

which members of the cast and crew were needed, where the equipment was, who would take it to the new location, etc., etc.

Then, once the ingredients had been prepared, Michio was the chef. While we were filming he was in complete control. He had the skills and the instincts. Watching him direct, I was glad it wasn't me. I think that, between us, we made the most of what each of us brought to the movie.

Usquebaugh had a subtitle: One drop of water. It came from the dream scene, where Toru's father tells his son, "A human being is like a drop of water. One drop of water is so tiny that if it fell into the ocean, you'd never know it was there. But the ocean is made up of drops of water, and humanity is like that too. Toru, I get the feeling you're thinking, 'What difference would one less person make?' But this world is made up of people, one by one. Think of it. Each life is worth something. Each life is precious."

I liked those lines. After we'd finished filming, though, I realized the crucial difference between people and water: one drop of water is the same as the next, but people are all different.

This project made me really understand the phrase "the right person in the right job" for the first time. Of

kept track of all the details

the skills and the instincts

Watching him direct.

made the most of

made up of drops of water

What difference would one less person make

the crucial difference between

course we needed someone like Michio who could direct, but we also needed someone like me who was good at setting things up. And we needed someone like Eno working quietly behind the scenes just as much as we needed the people whose best qualities came out on the screen.

Making the most of what each of us had—our difference—was what enabled us to make a fine movie. For me, it was worth having done the whole project to learn that.

In the publicity pamphlet for the film, I wrote: “What message do you want to pass on to the next generation? Life is precious, people need each other ... There are many possibilities, but when you think about them you might notice something you never saw before—the one thing that’s most important to you.”

Making the most of

pass on to the next generation

**Math: 7/200**

*A celebrity*

Studying was never really my thing. Even after we divided into humanities and science tracks in senior high, I was especially weak in the “easy” math and physics courses that we humanities students took. I knew I wasn’t good at science subjects, and that



knowledge was faithfully reflected in my grades.

I did reasonably well in the first term tests. Even in math, to my relief, I was about average. But then my scores went rapidly downhill. And no wonder. It would've been strange if they hadn't, the way I ate, slept, and breathed football.

For the honor of the club, though, I have to tell you that some of the members gave everything they had to football and still managed to buckle down and get good grades. Bu I just couldn't do that. When I throw myself into something, I lose sight of everything else. I'm just not the "all-around" type. And so, for the first time, I started to flunk out.

One day, wheeling down the hallway with a friend from the club who was quite an underachiever himself, I overheard two girls from the class next door talking in whispers.

A: "Here comes the two bozos from the football club."

B: "I heard they got five points between them on the last math test."

A: "You're kidding? Really? What a laugh!"

I was indignant. To set the record straight, I was about to say, "I'll have you know those five points were all mine. He got zip." But I changed my mind. It

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would've been the pot calling the kettle black.

This sort of thing happened a lot. I knew I was being laughed at, of course, but it didn't bother me. "Gee," I thought, "people are talking about me. I feel like a celebrity." It was my old love of the limelight again. I didn't feel an ounce of shame. Maybe it takes a real bozo to go that far ...

### ***My Number Comes Up***

Eventually, though, I had to crack the books. My math teacher may have had the patience of a saint, but in the autumn of my tenth-grade year it finally ran out.

She had always taken notice of me, lending me books she liked and so on, and she wasn't the straitlaced type, either—she told us stuff like how she washed her hair with mayonnaise or yogurt ("It's good for the hair and the scalp"). But now she warned me in no uncertain terms:

"You're actually not weak in math at all, you know. It's just that you're so addicted to your club. Unless you get at least forty on the next test, I'll have you suspended from football."

This was serious. How could I think of studying when I was giving my heart and soul to football? Only now football itself was on the line, and I had to make that score of forty percent. This was not so simple,

I' ll have you know

He got zip.

the pot calling the kettle black.

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however. It was no use studying just the material that would be in the test, since I didn't have basics. I read the text over and over, turning back now and then to work out the earlier problems. If you're good at math it might not sound like a big deal, but for me it was hell. I was ready to quit any number of times.

When their backs are to the wall, though, I guess people outdo themselves. Sixty-five percent: a high mark for me, slightly above the class average. It was enough to persuade the teacher to let me stay in the club. After that close call, I enjoyed football all the more—thanks to my weakness in math!

There was a sequel to this story. In eleventh grade I had somebody else for math and didn't see much of the teacher in question. Just before summer vacation, when finals were over, I spotted her on the other side of the street near the school. She seemed to have noticed me, too. Cupping her hands to form a megaphone, she hollered across the wide street: "Ototake, how was the makeup test?"

Sensei, puh-leez. Not so loud! And not when I'm with a girl I like a lot—talk about bad timing. And anyway, I didn't need a makeup test this time.

I never did get any better at math. In senior year, on top of the five regular exams, there were also a bunch

It was no use studying

work out the earlier problems

any number of times

When their backs are to the wall.

It was enough to

thanks to my weakness

the teacher in question

Cupping her hands to

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gripping all the while

<p>of “scholastic ability tests” to help us choose a college. I took them because I had to, <u>griping all the while</u>, “Why don’t they <u>make these things optional?</u>” My performance in the other subjects was <u>nothing to be proud of</u>, but math was a disaster area. I <u>couldn’t figure out the questions, never mind the answers</u>, and I gave it up for lost.</p> <p>Tests always have a way of coming back just when you’ve forgotten all about them. Oh well, let’s see how I did: I checked my paper, but <u>my score wasn’t on it</u>. There was only my ID number from the class roll, “7,” <u>penciled in the corner</u>.</p> <p>I <u>looked all over</u> the paper, then peered over the shoulder of the kid in front. Hers had “147” on it. In pencil. Uh-oh ... I took a peek at my neighbor’s. “123.” Pencil again. I’d made a big mistake. That “7” wasn’t my ID number, it was my score.</p> <p><u>Seven out of 200</u>. I never did like math.</p>		<p><u>make these things optional</u></p> <p><u>nothing to be proud of</u></p> <p><u>couldn’ t figure out the questions, never mind</u></p> <p><u>my score wasn’ t on it</u></p> <p>my ID number from the class roll</p> <p><u>penciled in the corner</u></p> <p><u>looked all over</u></p> <p><u>Seven out of 200</u></p>
<p><b>Ambitions</b></p> <p><i>When I Grow up</i></p> <p>“Takagi sensei, you’re our enemy!” I would have been in about second grade when I startled Sensei with this declaration of war.</p>		

“Why am I your enemy?”

“Because you’re a Yomiuri Giants fan, that’s why. Tsutchan and me are Hanshin fans. ”

“But your father’s a giant fan, isn’t he? Is he your enemy too?”

“Yes, he is! So papa and you should be friends.”

“But the Hanshin team’s been doing pretty badly, now, hasn’t it?”

“Mm. So when I grow up, I’m gonna be a pro and play for Hanshin. ”

That was the first thing I wanted to be. A pro baseball player: yeah, right. But like other kids who want to be an airline pilot one day and a train conductor the next, my heart wasn’t all that set on it. Let me run through the career list that followed.

In third or fourth grade, I announced that I was going to be a professional *shogi* player. Takagi sensei had taught me to play Japanese chess because he wanted me to have one thing where I could hold my own, and in this intellectual game which tests your ability to think ahead, a disability makes no difference. I was fascinated. I read up on the game and invited friends over to play.

Sensei had expected me to make a good bit of progress in a year or two, but I let him down in a big

one day and  
the next.

wasn’ t all that set on it

I read up on the game

way. I did get to be one of the better players in the class, but I was no match for him, of course, and more importantly there were also several kids who could beat me every time. By fifth grade I finally realized, “If this is the best I can do, I’ll never be a pro.”

So moving right along, in sixth grade I came out with “I want to be president of the United States.” I still don’t know what gave me that idea. I abandoned in three days later, however, when I heard that in order to be President I’d have to become an American citizen. I really wasn’t willing to stop being Japanese. But I didn’t think, “If I can’t be President of the United States, then I’ll be Prime Minister of Japan.” Evidently being Prime Minister didn’t strike me at the time as a very sexy occupation.

***Law?***

It was in middle school that I began to have a serious ambition. My chosen profession was law. It started with a small thing: I was being a rebellious teenager, and my mother said sarcastically, “If you’re so fond of arguing and talking people down, why don’t you become a lawyer?” I must have forgotten to be rebellious and taken her little dig perfectly seriously.

“A lawyer ... Hmmmm.”

This one conversation set me on wanting to be a

It was in middle school that

My chosen profession

arguing and talking people down

taken her little dig perfectly seriously

lawyer for five whole years, but then, in my high school senior year, I had another change of direction.

One day, I happened to read a newspaper article about how difficult it is to pass the National Bar Examination. There was one piece of data, in particular, that grabbed my attention: the average age of successful candidates was 29.3 years. When you think that most of them would have started preparing for the exam in college, that meant it took them nearly ten years to pass the bar. Having to be up to my eyeballs in study that time was a very nasty thought.

“Who cares,” said a friend, “if life’s a bed of roses afterward?” But suddenly I was doubtful: did I really want to spend the whole of my twenties, a time when people soak up experience, doing nothing but study?

It wasn’t an easy call. I could see that some things might only be attainable through years of hard work. I’m not knocking that kind of life, but I knew I wasn’t cut out for it. I didn’t have the staying power.

And so I thought over whether I really wanted to be a lawyer. I thought about how a spat with my mother first put the idea into my head, and how I’d dreamed of it all this time. And I realized that I’d really only been interested in the image. Lawyers were cool.

I was good at public speaking, I might get through

set me on wanting to

one piece of data

Having to be up to my eyeballs in

my twenties, a time when people soak up experience,

wasn’t cut out for it.

a spat with my mother

a lot of rote memorization

the exam if it involved a lot of rote memorization, and it looked like there was plenty of money to be made. But when I realized that these, plus the cool image, were my only reasons for aspiring to be a lawyer, I began to feel apologetic toward people who actually practiced law. Surely they must have better motives—wanting to help victims of injustice, believing passionately that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. But that wasn't where I was coming from. It would be an insult to the profession to go into it this way. Besides, something told me I'd regret it. When the going got tough, image wouldn't get me far.

What matters in choosing a job, I've since come to think, is having a clear idea of what you want to do in society. If you know that, you'll know where to start looking for a job that enables you to do it. If the right job doesn't present itself, create one. Unless you feel that strongly, you probably won't stick with it, and unless you're that involved with what you do, you probably won't take pride in your occupation. Maybe the world is a harsher place than I think, but I'm not about to do a job when my heart isn't in it.

"Lawyers are cool. "I'd really put the cart before the horse with that one."

*A Wavering Course*

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I was a smart aleck back then. One of the things I'd often mouthed off was the way that many people just drifted with the tide in going to college. Why go at all if they didn't know what they wanted to do? But now I found myself in the same boat. When my ambition to be a lawyer faded, I had no alternative in mind. With nothing left that I wanted to do, college no longer seemed relevant to me. I sent out applications without really thinking. But I couldn't focus on college prep in that state. People were urging me to get a degree because "you never know," but that was the whole problem.

I'd retired from the football club, we'd finished our movie, and I wasn't studying for university exams. I was spinning my wheels. For the first time, I learned how hard life is with no goal. Perhaps what I felt was the letdown that came after being continually on the go, charging toward the Kanto Championship and the Toyama Festival.

The last six months of school were gone before I knew it. By graduation time, nearly all of my friends were making a new departure, whether they'd gotten into the college of their choice or were hustling to find a good cram school. I was left behind, all on my lonesome.

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it's all right to

<p>Then a friend told me, “Oto, you’re too idealistic. How many people have decided what they want to do at eighteen? Of course, it’d be best if you could go to college to study something you’ve already chosen, <u>but don’t you think it’s all right to go there and find out what you want to do?</u>”</p> <p>That woke up me. Okay, then. College it is.”</p>		
<p><b>The Joys of Cram School</b></p> <p><i><b>Finding a School</b></i></p> <p>Takadanobaba, where we lived, is a famous student quarter. It’s also home to a large number of cram schools for those preparing to take university entrance exams; they attend either in the evenings while they’re still in high school, or full-time after they’ve graduated but <u>failed to</u> get into the college they’re aiming for. There are <u>so many cram schools around the station, some famous and some not, that I hardly knew</u> which to choose. Since <u>any one of them would do</u>, as long as it was close to home, I would have thought conditions were ideal. Big mistake.</p> <p>I <u>dropped by one which</u> I’d heard was very good, according to a friend who went there during senior high.</p>		<p><u>failed to</u></p> <p><u>so many</u> <u>, that I hardly knew</u></p> <p><u>any one of them would do</u></p> <p><u>dropped by one which</u></p> <p><u>get me a brochure</u></p>

“Uh, I’d like to come here from next April.”

“One moment, please.” The receptionist disappeared into the back office. I assumed she’d gone to get me a brochure, but I was dead wrong.

When she returned, she said politely, “the school doesn’t have full facilities for wheelchair users, such as elevators and accessible toilets, and so it’s not possible for us to accept you.”

This came as a bit of a shock, but I shrugged it off and looked elsewhere. Again I was turned down for similar reasons. I tried explaining, “there’s no need for an elevator, I can climb the stairs on my own, and I don’t mind if there’s no wheelchair accessible toilet.” But in the end I was refused on the grounds that “We can’t be responsible if anything should happen.”

I continued making the rounds without success. At some schools with entrance steps I couldn’t even get near enough to ask to be let into the building, and at the worst place I was brushed off with “I’m afraid we can’t have people in wheelchairs ...” Hey, come on, I didn’t see any sign outside saying “No Wheelchairs Allowed.”

Even so, I wasn’t outraged, or heartbroken. Just astonished. “Gosh,” I thought, “being in a wheelchair is quite a problem.”

dead wrong

wheelchair users

I shrugged it off and looked elsewhere.

on the grounds that

continued making the rounds

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saying “No Wheelchairs Allowed.”

Having been lucky enough to

Having been lucky enough to grow up with the parents, teachers, and friends that I had, I'd never had any reason to think of myself as "a disabled person." You might even say that this was the first time I'd run up against a brick wall due to my disability.

But this was no time to sit around being astonished. Here I'd made up my mind about college at last and was ready to get to work, and now I couldn't find a place to do it. I really needed a cram school, because I didn't have the willpower to study by myself at home. I was in a jam.

Around this time, I learned from a mailing that came to my address that Sundai Preparatory School, one of the three largest national networks of cram schools, had a branch within reach of my home. Without getting my hopes up too much—surely a major chain would be the least likely of all to take me—I set off at once to check it out. The main building had stairs, but in the new wing there were elevators and no steps. It was fully wheelchair-accessible. Now the only question was whether they would accept me.

The manager who met with me first was reluctant, as I'd expected. "Responsibility" came up. But just as I was about to give up on this school, the younger members of the staff urged their boss to reconsider. It

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But this was no time to sit around being astonished.

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set off at once to

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the younger members of the

must have done some good, because the discussion started moving in a positive direction.

After the interview, I toured the place with one of the younger staff to check out just how accessible it really was.

As we got into the elevator, he said, "Let's give it our best shot together." Those few words cheered me up immensely. The whole ordeal of being refused at every turn was behind me now. I was about to begin my year as a *rōnin*.

### ***The Biker***

The school's location, in Okubo, wasn't far from my home by train, but since it's difficult for me to take the train on a daily basis I would have to commute by wheelchair. This took me exactly half an hour. It wasn't convenient, certainly, but considering what a dead end the schools in Takadanobaba had been, I wasn't bothered at all by the extra distance.

Except when it rained. Then I clutched my umbrella between my left shoulder and my neck, tucking the handle under my leg to steady it in the wind while I drove with my right arm as usual. It was quite a haul. Not only was it an effort to hold that position, but the umbrella blocked my view to the left, making it hard to see traffic lights or cars that came out of nowhere.

staff urged their boss to

one of the younger staff

check out just how accessible

cheered me up

The whole ordeal of

on a daily basis

what a dead end

wasn't bothered at all

tucking the handle under

quite a haul.

Not only was it an effort to hold that position, but

Traveling for half an hour under these conditions was pretty hairy.

If I hardly ever played hooky, even when it rained, it was because I enjoyed the life. It may sound odd to say that I enjoyed cram school, but I did. It was easy to make friends since we were divided into fixed classes (not classes that changed for each lecture), and, unlike most cram schools, Sundai assigned us fixed seats. Also, the fact that over half the people in my class were trying for the same university may have given us a feeling that we were all in this together.

The first person I got to know was Rikimaru—nearly five foot eleven, long-haired and thin-faced, with looks so sinister that a friend once asked me, “Does he do drugs?” Puffing on a cigarette off by himself during breaks, he struck me as being very unapproachable.

One day, I got back from the drinking fountain to find that class had already started. Outside the door I ran into Rikimaru, who was late back from a cigarette break. We had second thoughts about going in, as the teacher of that particular class was pretty scary, and decided instead to wait it out on a bench downstairs. Rikimaru turned out to be nothing like the image I'd had of him; he was a very friendly, decent guy. We soon

cars that came out of nowhere.

hardly ever played hooky

It may sound odd to

assigned us fixed seats.

the fact that

a feeling that

I got to know

long-haired and thin-faced

with looks so sinister that

Puffing on a cigarette off

struck me as being

hit it off when we discovered that, among other things, an old basketball teammate of mine had been a friend of his at senior high. From then on, we hung out together.

Rikimaru rode a motorbike to school, and was really into bikes. Since I'd never had a biker friend before, there was something about him that seemed new to me. At cram school there were all kinds of students—kids who came from outside Tokyo, kids who'd gone to private schools—and Rikimaru was just one of many people from unfamiliar worlds I got to know. That may have been one reason why I enjoyed myself so much.

Summer vacation is the clincher for cram school students—if you can make yourself work over the break, you stand a chance in the exams. When classes went back at the end of summer, my circle of friends grew rapidly. Although our class was large, at over a hundred students, the atmosphere was more like a regular school than a cram school. A bunch of us had a lot of fun together—taking the morning off and picnicking in Kasai Seaside Park, hitting a restaurant's all-you-can-eat special of the expensive beef dish *shabushabu* and polishing off sixteen platters, staging time trials with my wheelchair in a

late back from a cigarette break.

wait it out

the image I'd had of him

hit it off

a friend of his

just one of many people

the clincher for

make yourself work

taking the morning off

all-you-can-eat special

polishing off

staging time trials with my wheelchair

<p>park at night. In fact, we did more in the fun department than I used to do in my football-crazy high school days. <u>It was around this time that</u>, like most people my age, I <u>got myself a beeper to</u> keep in touch with my friends.</p> <p>My main occupation for the year, however, was supposed to be studying. Could I really afford to have such a good time ...?</p>		<p><u>It was around this time that,</u></p> <p><u>got myself a beeper to</u></p>
<p><b>A Miracle</b></p> <p><i>Starting Over</i></p> <p>I was <u>in a bad way academically</u>, as you'd expect after my high school career. <u>The first class I went to</u> at cram school was English. The teacher kept repeating the letters S, V, O (subject, verb, object), but I didn't have a clue <u>what they stood for</u>. I <u>plucked up the courage to</u> ask the kid next to me.</p> <p>"Psst. What's this S, V, O? Some sort of code?"</p> <p>The look he gave me was <u>a cross between indignation and pity</u>—"Is this guy putting me on or could he really be that dumb?"—when in fact I was deadly serious.</p> <p>Since I hadn't taken practice tests for college entrance in senior high, I had no way of <u>knowing my</u></p>		<p><u>in a bad way academically</u></p> <p><u>The first class I went to</u></p> <p><u>what they stood for</u></p> <p><u>plucked up the courage to</u></p> <p><u>a cross between</u></p> <p><u>indignation and pity</u></p> <p><u>knowing my relative</u></p> <p><u>standing</u></p>



relative standing, but it was clear that I was more or less bringing up the rear in a class of well over a hundred. I would just have to start from there. How far could I get in a year? I was looking forward to finding that out as if it were somebody else's problem.

Waseda, one of the two most sought-after private universities in the country, was a funny choice for somebody in my position. My image of Waseda was "a happening place." It's often described as a melting pot; to me it seemed a very high-powered, exciting place where individuals with different values could bump up against one another. I had hopes that if I could put myself in their midst, something would happen to me too. You could say I was relying on others to show me the way, and I can't argue with that, but Waseda did seem like the best possible place for someone who was going to college to find out what he wanted to do.

There was another reason, too: it was right there. The apartment where we'd moved so that I could go to Toyama High was five minutes' walk from the main Waseda campus. The School of Literature was directly across the street; you could see it from our window. The School of Science and Engineering was opposite my old school—though with my math there was no need for me to worry about the location of the science

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The School of

opposite my old school

a sense of being connected with

and freaked out

Of the five schools within

buildings. Anyhow, being in the neighborhood gave me a sense of being connected with the place already. If I went somewhere else, we'd have to move again. Waseda was right in front of my eyes. But it was farther than it appeared.

When the first practice tests were returned, I took one look at the results and freaked out. Of the five schools within Waseda I was planning to apply to, my chances of passing had been given the lowest rating, an E, in four cases. The other was a D. I felt as though the result sheet, with its annotation "Need to reconsider." was laughing at me. "What in the world were you thinking? You plan to try for Waseda University with these results?" I'd know in theory that this was about the level of my present ability, and yet, having the facts spelled out to me so clearly was worse than frustrating—it was saddening. Would I ever make it?

### ***Easy Does It***

You could say I had my own style of working. People imagine a rōnin or cram-school student to be always studying till 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. But that wasn't me. I was in bed by a little after ten nearly every night. You may laugh and say those are a grade-schooler's hours, but it's the truth. With my lack of stamina, when I

Waseda

apply to

the lowest rating

The other was a D.

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crash not long after ten

don't get enough sleep I don't function too well the next day. And so I would crash not long after ten.

Besides, I couldn't study at home. It was partly because I'd slack off, of course, but more important, by the time a bed, closet, and bookshelves were squeezed into my room, there wasn't space for a desk. I could see why friends who came over to our apartment often exclaimed, "Is this really an exam candidate's room?"

Working at home would have meant trying to concentrate in the living room, where my parents watched TV. Instead, I became an early riser. I had breakfast at 6:30 and set out with plenty of time to spare for Sundai's study hall, where I worked until classes started. It was actually a "special" study hall; because the regular one was upstairs in the main building, which had no elevators, a preparation room on the first floor of the new wing was set aside as "Ototake's study hall." This was a real boon. Since I had it all to myself, it was perfect for concentrating, and I made progress. I went back there after classes and got down to work again.

So from morning till early evening, I hit the books. When I got home I relaxed, often watching a baseball game with my father, went to bed a little after ten. People laughed and said "You certainly go at your own

I' d slack off

by the time

This was a real boon.

I had it all to myself

I hit the books.

pace,” but I took that as a compliment. It’s important to set your own pace.

I was doing English, Japanese, and Japanese history. I didn’t spend too much time on Japanese since I figured that, up to a point, you either had the knack or you didn’t. I already had a solid grounding in Japanese history, the one subject I’d done seriously in high school, and I calculated that I could probably be ready in time if I started cramming in the fall. That left English, which counted for more points than the other subjects and was considered the key to improving your scores. But I’ve already described the sorry state of my English.

And so English became my top priority over summer break. In fact, I studied so hard that summer, I amazed myself. Sometimes I studied and ate a meal at the same time. (Warning to children: Don’t try this at home!) I think I must have put in a good ten hours a day.

In the fall I went back to living at my own pace, but the summer’s efforts showed spectacular results. From being near the bottom of the class, my grades rose right before my eyes. By September I was in the middle, and by winter I was in the top ten.

All the same, I didn’t kid myself that I was almost

either had the knack or you didn’t

had a solid grounding in

the key to improving

the sorry state of

studied and ate a meal at the same time

a good ten hours

in the top ten

I didn’t kid myself that

there. In the practice tests, my chances of getting into Waseda continued to be rated E or D. Now and then I'd think I'd done pretty well, but even so I only managed a C. I was definitely coming along, but apparently I was still falling far short of Waseda's admission level. I won't say I didn't feel pressed for time, but I kept on at my own pace, telling myself I had several months left.

### *My Horoscope*

January 15. For most people it's a public holiday, Coming-of-Age Day, but for students trying for national universities it's the date of the nationwide "Center Exams." Because I was applying just to Waseda, which is private, I didn't have to take them, but I took a stab at the questions when they were published in the newspaper the next day. Only half seriously, of course.

An hour later, I was wishing I hadn't. I'd heard at cram school that you'd have trouble in Waseda's entrance tests if you scored below ninety on the Center Exams, and I'd gotten seventy in Japanese history, which was supposed to be my best subject. I was too scared even to try the English and Japanese questions. I made a show of reassuring my parents: "Don't worry, don't worry, they say the Center's history questions are quite different from Waseda's." But as

be rated E or D

feel pressed for time

had several months left

Coming-of-Age Day.

took a stab at

Only half seriously.

too scared even to

made a show of reassuring

the blood had drained from my face

I spoke, I could tell the blood had drained from my face.

February 1 marked the start of the entrance exam season for the main private universities. Within a week or two I received several calls from ecstatic friends who'd gotten into one college or another. Since I hadn't even had my exams yet, this only added to my growing jitters. Waseda's were the last on the schedule.

To take my mind off the wait, I worked through some old Waseda entrance exams. When I finished scoring myself, I couldn't help saying out loud, "Huh???" I'd averaged over seventy percent in my three subjects—for Japanese history I'd gotten eighty to ninety percent. Thinking there must be some mistake, I tried several more years' worth, and again I did pretty well. How was this possible? Maybe, just maybe ... My hopes soared.

On February 20, my exams finally started. Since I was trying for five schools, I faced five straight days of exams. They lasted practically all day long. It would be a strain physically, but I just have to rely on willpower if I was going to achieve my cherished goal of gaining admission to Waseda University.

The first day was the School of Education. Because

marked the start

added to my growing jitters

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もう数年分

trying for five schools

practically all day long

my cherished goal of  
gaining admission to

. plus tension

it allocated more points than the other schools to my strongest subject, Japanese history, if I could get into any of them, this would be it. But there was an unforeseen crisis. In the second hour of the history paper, I suddenly needed to go to the bathroom. It was probably due to the unusually cold weather, plus tension. I made it through somehow. There was a break between the second and the third hours but I can't use the bathroom by myself. All I could do was hold on and wait for the third hour to start.

It went from bad to worse, until I could only hold it by rocking in my seat. Just my luck: this hour's paper was Japanese. Unlike history, where you can simply transfer what you've memorized onto the page in front of you, here comprehension and thinking skills count for everything. But my head was so full of wanting to go, there was no room in there for the authors' intentions.

That was that, then. A year's work. Lost because I had to pee.

March 1. The first pass lists were due to go up. They included not only the (ahem) School of Education, but also the School of Political Science and Economics, which have said to have the strictest standards of all Waseda's schools. I knew my chances

made it through somehow

can't use the bathroom by myself. All I could do was hold on and wait

went from bad to worse

Just my luck:

transfer what you've memorized onto

That was that, then.

The first pass lists

I'd scored myself using the model answers that

a glimmer of hope

were slim. I'd scored myself using the model answers that the cram schools had given out a few days earlier, and I was right on the border line. But nobody believed me at home when I said there was a glimmer of hope. And why should they? One of the schools we were talking about was the one where I couldn't think straight during the exams because I'd had to go; the other was the toughest humanities school to get into at any private university. Maybe I was wrong to hope.

My parents' attitude was a clear contrast to my own upbeat mood. They told me later that they weren't worrying over whether or not I would pass—nooo, they were discussing how to be tactful when I came home crushed. The daily horoscope on TV that morning was the final blow for them. For my sign, Aries, it said, "You will be embarrassed in front of a lot of people." They don't usually believe in horoscopes, but on this occasion, they say, they completely gave up hope.

It was pouring. Praying that I wouldn't be crying in the rain, I headed for the site just five minutes away. I was there before I'd had time to think. Because my mother had ended up going to look on my behalf when I'd taken the high school entrance exams, this was my first experience of scanning the pass lists. I'd pictured

was a clear contrast to

how to be tactful when I came home crushed.

my sign, Aries

You will be embarrassed in front of

before I'd had time to think.



myself pushing my way through the crowd to the bulletin boards like a character in a TV drama, and it was a letdown when there weren't enough people there to push through. For those who's already passed at several other colleges, I guess it wasn't worth coming out first thing in the pouring rain. Thinking "Those other guys haven't got their hearts set on Waseda like I have" or some such nonsense, I turned first to the board of the School of Political Science and Economics.

Reciting 4-6-6-4, 4-6-6-4, 4-6-6-4 under my breath, I ran my eye down the list. Gee, that's funny. I looked twice, three times, four, but there was no mistaking it. For some reason, the digits 4664 were on display. Hmm, could my number have been 6446? I took out my ID to double-check, but sure enough, 4664 was right there in black and white. I'd made it. To Waseda. Me!

I needed somebody to pinch me. How could I have passed? And in all five schools, as it turned out. Since I'd only known that I wanted to go to Waseda, I hadn't thought about what to study, or expected to be given a choice. I agonized over it for a week or so.

The entrance ceremony took place a month later. I attended as a freshman in the Department of Political

scanning the pass lists.

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it wasn't worth coming out

I turned first to the board

under my breath

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Science, School of political Science and Economics. Waseda University.		