

What Are the Parents Like?

By Seigo Hatasawa
Translated by Mari Boyd

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

MOKICHI HARADA, 8th grade head teacher, 55 years old.

JUNKO SHIBATA, mother of Airi Shibata, 39 years old.

NATSUKI TODA, homeroom teacher of Class 3, 8th grade, 25 years old.

MISAO YASHIMA, mother of Reira Yashima, 38 years old.

RYOHEI HASEBE, father of Midori Hasebe, 40 years old.

TAEKO HASEBE, mother of Midori Hasebe, 42 years old.

SHIGENORI HENMI, grandfather of Nodoka Henmi, 77 years old.

TOMOKO HENMI, grandmother of Nodoka Henmi, 69 years old.

JIRO MORISAKI, father of Shino Morisaki, 45 years old.

MASAKO MORISAKI, mother of Shino Morisaki, 47 years old.

SHOJI NAKANOWATARI, principal of Seiko Gakuen, 59 years old.

TORU ENDO, a hired manager of a newspaper sales outlet, 31 years old.

TAMAYO INOUE, mother of Michiko Inoue, 34 years old.

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Winter. It is 7:00 p.m. in the conference room of a private school called Seiko Gakuen Girls Junior High School in Tokyo. There is an entrance upstage center and a number of tables and chairs in the reception room. Harada enters with Mrs. Shibata following.

HARADA: Please come this way.

MRS. SHIBATA: Thank you.

HARADA: (*Offering her a chair.*) Please take a seat.

MRS. SHIBATA: Thanks. (*Sits.*) Excuse me. My husband should arrive shortly.

HARADA: I see.

Harada exits. Mrs. Shibata is tense and looks around with apprehension. At that moment, Toda enters.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh. (*Half-rising. Toda approaches Mrs. Shibata in silence.*)

Excuse me...

TODA: Which do you prefer, coffee or tea?

MRS. SHIBATA: Please don't bother.

TODA: Would coffee be all right?

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh, really, please.

TODA: Excuse me.

Toda exits. Pause. Mrs. Shibata makes a call on her cell phone but cannot get through.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*Leaving a voicemail.*) I've arrived at the school, dear. What shall I do? I'm alone here. Please get back to me as soon as you can.

Mrs. Shibata closes her cell phone. Harada enters. Following him comes Mrs. Yashima.

HARADA: This way, please.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thank you.

HARADA: (*Offering a chair:*) Please.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thanks.

Mrs. Yashima sits down.

HARADA: Kindly wait here for a while.

MRS. YASHIMA: Please take care how you treat my daughter.

HARADA: There's nothing to worry about. The teachers are with the students.

MRS. YASHIMA: I would really prefer to take her home as soon as possible.

HARADA: When everyone is assembled, we will start the meeting immediately.

MRS. YASHIMA: How long will it take?

HARADA: Well, that I cannot tell.

MRS. SHIBATA: Excuse me, sir.

HARADA: Yes, what is it?

MRS. SHIBATA: It's about my husband. I can't get in touch with him.

HARADA: Oh.

MRS. SHIBATA: Well, eventually I should be able to.

HARADA: There is no need to worry. Not everyone has arrived yet.

MRS. SHIBATA: I see.

HARADA: Please excuse me. I have to go.

Harada exits. Mrs. Shibata and Mrs. Yashima are left to their own devices.

MRS. SHIBATA: Good evening.

MRS. YASHIMA: (*A beat.*) Good evening.

MRS. SHIBATA: Are you the mother of an 8th grader in Class 3?

MRS. YASHIMA: I am, but...

MRS. SHIBATA: It's good of you to come.

MRS. YASHIMA: Calling an 8th grader back to school at 4:00 p.m. and keeping her until 7:00 p.m.—what's going on?

MRS. SHIBATA: Well, it can't be helped after what happened in the classroom.

MRS. YASHIMA: My daughter had nothing to do with that.

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh...

MRS. YASHIMA: This is all totally absurd.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh.

Toda returns.

MRS. SHIBATA: Ah.

TODA: (*A beat.*) There was no coffee.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh.

TODA: Would tea be all right?

MRS. SHIBATA: Please don't bother.

TODA: Excuse me, but would tea do?

MRS. YASHIMA: Please, don't trouble yourself.

TODA: Tea would do, wouldn't it?

MRS. YASHIMA: Aren't you Ms. Toda, the homeroom teacher?

TODA: (*A beat.*) Yes.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thank you for taking care of Reira.

MRS. SHIBATA: Ah yes, thank you for taking care of my daughter.

TODA: Oh, not at all.

MRS. YASHIMA: Does she have any problems at school?

TODA: (*A beat.*) No, not really.

MRS. YASHIMA: How is Reira right now?

TODA: Hm?

MRS. YASHIMA: She is highly strung.

TODA: In that case, I will go and take a look.

MRS. YASHIMA: Could you kindly give her this?

Mrs. Yashima hands a bottle of Evian mineral water to Toda.

MRS. YASHIMA: Reira can't drink tap water.

TODA: I see.

MRS. SHIBATA: Excuse me, Ms. Toda.

TODA: Yes, ma'am?

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter.

TODA: Excuse me.

Pause.

MRS. SHIBATA: School is not a relaxing place, is it?

MRS. YASHIMA: Uh, what?

MRS. SHIBATA: I think these slippers are to blame.

MRS. YASHIMA: The slippers?

The two mothers are wearing brown vinyl slippers with the school name on them.

MRS. SHIBATA: They are made of shiny vinyl with the school name printed on them—just like at a hospital.

MRS. YASHIMA: Oh, yes.

MRS. SHIBATA: They make a flapping sound I really don't like. I feel insecure on my own two feet. Is that the right word? Most of the teachers are wearing canvas shoes. Why don't they wear slippers? What do you think?

MRS. YASHIMA: Isn't that to distinguish between the visitors and the staff?

MRS. SHIBATA: (*A beat.*) Oh, I see now.

MRS. YASHIMA: Slippers are only useful for wearing in the bedroom after taking a shower.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, really.

A pause. Harada enters. Mr. and Mrs. Hasebe enter a tad later.

HARADA: Please come over here.

MR. HASEBE: Thank you.

HARADA: Please make yourselves comfortable here and wait.

MR. HASEBE: Yes, thank you.

HARADA: Excuse me.

MR. HASEBE: I appreciate your consideration.

Harada exits.

MRS. SHIBATA: How do you do?

MR. HASEBE: How do you do?

MRS. SHIBATA: Are you the parents of an 8th grader in Class 3?

MR. HASEBE: Uh-huh.

Pause. Toda enters with cups of tea on a tray.

TODA: Excuse me for keeping you waiting.

Toda serves tea to Mrs. Shibata.

MRS. SHIBATA: Thank you.

Toda serves tea to Mrs. Yashima.

TODA: Please have some tea.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thank you.

TODA: I've given Reira the bottled water.

MRS. YASHIMA: How was she?

TODA: (*A beat.*) Uh?

MRS. YASHIMA: She was very shocked by the news.

TODA: Please don't worry. We are taking good care of the students.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thank you.

MRS. HASEBE: Ms. Toda.

TODA: Yes, ma'am.

MRS. HASEBE: Thank you for everything.

TODA: Would tea be all right for you both?

MR. HASEBE: No need to bother.

Harada enters and Mr. and Mrs. Henmi follow.

HARADA: Ms. Toda.

TODA: Oh.

HARADA: What are you doing?

TODA: ...I am, uh, serving tea.

HARADA: Never mind that kind of thing.

TODA: I cannot abandon my duties, sir.

HARADA: Leave the parents to me and go take a rest.

TODA: I am perfectly all right.

HARADA: No, you aren't. Go.

TODA: (*A beat.*) Yes, sir.

Toda bows formally and exits.

HARADA: Please come this way.

MR. HENMI: Thank you.

HARADA: Please sit over here and wait.

MR. HENMI: Thank you.

HARADA: Excuse me.

MR. HENMI: Yes, of course.

Mr. and Mrs. Henmi bow to the other four parents and sit down.

MRS. SHIBATA: Are you the parents of an 8th grader in Class 3?

MR. HENMI: Yes.

MRS. SHIBATA: Excuse me for asking.

MR. HASEBE: Is that the homeroom teacher?

MRS. HASEBE: Uh-huh.

MR. HASEBE: She is very young.

MRS. HASEBE: She joined last year, a graduate fresh out of college.

MR. HASEBE: So she's newly graduated and a new hire?

MRS. HASEBE: That's what I heard.

MRS. SHIBATA: The students call her Natsuki.

MR. HASEBE: Natsuki?

MRS. SHIBATA: Her name is Natsuki Toda.

MR. HENMI: Ah.

MRS. SHIBATA: "Natsuki got on my case today—" That's how my daughter talks about her teacher all the time. She says Natsuki is a pushover but a good teacher.

MR. HASEBE: Is that so.

Harada enters, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Morisaki.

HARADA: Please come this way.

MR. MORISAKI: Thank you.

MRS. MORISAKI: Thank you.

HARADA: I am very sorry that we had to call you in suddenly like this.

MRS. MORISAKI: That's all right. I had some free time and so did my husband.

MR. MORISAKI: Actually, I had another meeting at 8:00 p.m.

HARADA: We are very sorry to take up your precious time.

MR. MORISAKI: No, no, not at all. This is a major crisis for your school.

HARADA: Thank you very much for your consideration, sir.

MRS. MORISAKI: You must have had a lot on your hands from this morning.

HARADA: Yes, well, that is to be expected.

MRS. MORISAKI: I was completely taken by surprise.

HARADA: Yes, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: The Alumni Association is prepared to do whatever is necessary to be of assistance. Please feel free to discuss matters with us.

HARADA: Thank you very much.

MRS. MORISAKI: I hear you are going to hold an emergency school meeting. Is that right?

HARADA: Yes, ma'am. It will be at 9:00 tomorrow morning.

MRS. MORISAKI: Is it better if the president of the Alumni Association attends?

HARADA: (*A beat.*) That is up to you, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: Really. Oh yes, about the Seiko Hall project, it seems feasible.

HARADA: Is that right, ma'am?

MRS. MORISAKI: Isn't it, my dear?

MR. MORISAKI: The plan has been approved by the board of executives at the head office. But the amount of funding has yet to be decided.

HARADA: We are deeply grateful for this.

MR. MORISAKI: We should take advantage of this opportunity to renovate the ceiling as well as the flooring. The building is quite dilapidated.

HARADA: We are certainly indebted to you for your generous support.

MR. MORISAKI: Not at all, not at all.

HARADA: Well then, when Mr. Shibata arrives we will be able to start the meeting with full attendance.

MRS. SHIBATA: Please forgive me, but I haven't been able to reach my husband yet.

HARADA: He must be very busy.

MRS. SHIBATA: I will try one more time.

HARADA: Please do.

Mrs. Shibata moves to a corner of the room and takes out her cell phone. She calls, but there is no response.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't catch him.

HARADA: Oh no.

MRS. SHIBATA: Please go ahead with the meeting. Please.

HARADA: In that case, I will call the principal to attend.

MRS. YASHIMA: Excuse me.

HARADA: Yes.

MRS. YASHIMA: Are we moving to the auditorium?

HARADA: No...

MRS. MORISAKI: I suppose the others are gathered in a separate room.

HARADA: The principal will explain the details. Please wait a moment.

Harada exits. Pause. Toda enters. She has a tray with two cups of tea on it.

TODA: Excuse me for keeping you waiting.

Toda serves tea to Mr. and Mrs. Hasebe.

MR. HASEBE: Thank you.

MRS. HASEBE: Thanks.

MRS. MORISAKI: Ms. Toda.

TODA: Ah, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: You had a very bad experience.

TODA: Oh, uh...

MRS. MORISAKI: Is the meeting going to be held here in this room?

TODA: Excuse me everyone, would tea be all right?

MRS. MORISAKI: Wait. What I meant was...

TODA: Excuse me.

Toda exits.

MR. MORISAKI: Is *she* all right?

MRS. MORISAKI: Her behavior is a little strange.

MR. MORISAKI: You'd feel a bit strange if such a thing happened in your own class.

MRS. MORISAKI: Hm—

MR. MORISAKI: What's more, she was the first one to discover the body.

Mrs. Shibata moves to the corner of the room and takes out her cell phone. Mrs. Yashima takes out a cigarette and lights up.

MRS. MORISAKI: Hold it there, you! What are you doing?

MRS. YASHIMA: What am I doing?

MRS. MORISAKI: You're totally off the wall.

MRS. YASHIMA: I do have a pocket ashtray, if you don't mind.

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Saying that, she displays a small ashtray.

MRS. MORISAKI: That's not the point. Schools are fundamentally non-smoking areas.

MRS. YASHIMA: But the teachers smoke, right?

MR. HASEBE: No, nowadays all schools are non-smoking institutions. On school premises, smoking is forbidden.

MRS. YASHIMA: Is that right?

MRS. MORISAKI: That is so obvious, tsk... Really!

Mrs. Yashima puts out her cigarette.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*Into the voicemail.*) Dumbass.

Nakanowatari enters. Harada follows.

NAKANOWATARI: Good evening. I am Nakanowatari, the principal of Seiko Gakuen school. Thank you everyone for coming today. (*All bow.*)

Nakanowatari and Harada sit down.

NAKANOWATARI: We thank you deeply for taking time out of your busy day to attend this meeting. I am sure that you are well aware of the incident from the media coverage on TV and by the evening newspapers. Nonetheless, Mr. Harada, the 8th grade head teacher, will summarize today's incident for you. Mr. Harada, please come forward.

Harada steps up front.

HARADA: This morning, Michiko Inoue, an 8th grader in Class 3, committed suicide. I will now present the details. Ms. Toda, the Class 3 homeroom teacher, was the first to discover her body. Entering the school at 7:10 a.m. when the school gates opened, Ms. Toda conducted some school business in the staff room. Around 7:40 a.m., she went to her classroom to replenish supplies. That was when she found Michiko Inoue, who had hanged herself from the school broadcasting system speaker above the blackboard with a vinyl rope around her neck. Ms. Toda immediately contacted

the staff room and with the male teachers who came running to her assistance, she used the AED and attempted artificial resuscitation. However, the student was already in a state of cardiopulmonary arrest. At 7:57 a.m., she was pronounced dead by the ambulance staff who had responded to the emergency call.

It is a most regrettable situation. Already about 100 students had come to school, but the principal decided to have all the students sent home. The police investigation began at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 11:23 a.m. The conclusion reached by the police was that the student most likely committed suicide. As far as the school was concerned, we held an emergency staff meeting and notified all the students in Class 3 to come to school at once. The situation was explained to them and voluntary questioning was conducted.

MR. HASEBE: Voluntary questioning?

HARADA: As the suicide was committed in the classroom, we must consider the possibility of its cause being connected with the class.

MR. MORISAKI: You have a point.

HARADA: Concerning Michiko's suicide, we have held an investigation.

MR. HASEBE: Have you discovered anything?

HARADA: Not at this point, we haven't.

MR. HASEBE: Not at this point?

NAKANOWATARI: During the investigation, at around 5:00 p.m. today, a letter was delivered to Ms. Toda in care of the school.

MR. HASEBE: A letter?

NAKANOWATARI: The sender was Michiko Inoue. (*A beat.*) We presume that it was posted before her death.

Harada stands up and draws out an envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and reads the letter out loud.

HARADA: "I was bullied by my classmates. In the beginning they just ignored me. I did not know why. But I could see that I was at fault. So I tried apologizing. But they did not forgive me. I became confused. The bullying gradually escalated and going to school was like suffering. I got depressed having to get up in the morning, and I began to hate myself. I am really sorry. You asked me many times if I was OK, but I couldn't tell you. I am sorry I caused you concern. I was happy when you invited me to eat lunch together. I enjoyed your classes. I am glad I was in your class."

Harada pauses hesitantly and then continues to read out loud.

HARADA: "Class 3, 8th grade. Shino, Midori, Nodoka, Reira, Airi."

Harada puts away the letter in his inner pocket. He sits. Pause.

MR. MORISAKI: What does this mean?

HARADA: It is as you heard.

MR. MORISAKI: And the names?

NAKANOWATARI: They are written in the letter.

MRS. SHIBATA: Why is my daughter's name in that letter?

NAKANOWATARI: You may ask, but...

MRS. MORISAKI: Why is my daughter's name the first in that letter?

NAKANOWATARI: Er—, you may well ask, but...

HARADA: After receiving this letter, we decided to focus our investigation on the five named students, Shino Morisaki, Midori Hasebe, Nodoka Henmi, Reira Yashima, and Airi Shibata, and let the others go home.

MRS. MORISAKI: Then the only students left here are our children?

HARADA: Yes, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: Are we the only parents called in?

HARADA: Yes, ma'am.

Pause.

MRS. YASHIMA: What do you mean by an investigation?

HARADA: The school staffers are talking to each one of them.

MRS. YASHIMA: Are they being treated like criminals?

HARADA: No, of course not.

NAKANOWATARI: Please understand our perspective. We have to take all possible measures.

HARADA: I would like to ask all of you—were your daughters acting strangely at home?

MRS. YASHIMA: Are you saying that my daughter bullied her?

HARADA: No, no.

MRS. YASHIMA: And that led to Michiko committing suicide? Are you saying that it's the parent's responsibility?

NAKANOWATARI: No, no, no.

MRS. YASHIMA: But isn't this a meeting to establish that? Isn't it?!

NAKANOWATARI: We are not saying that. We are not saying that. However—

MRS. YASHIMA: What's your "however" about?!

Pause.

NAKANOWATARI: Er—, in accordance with our school motto *Veritas et philia*, or "truth and friendship," the teachers are united in the daily dissemination of a liberal education based on God's guidance. To foster mindfulness in each student, we have made concerted efforts in creating an educational environment promoting thoughtfulness and respect. Both the teachers and administrative staff are deeply shocked and saddened by this incident.

MR. MORISAKI: And what do you expect us to do?

NAKANOWATARI: Er—, what shall we do?

MR. MORISAKI: Are you being funny?

NAKANOWATARI: Oh no, so, we would simply like to discuss matters with you.

MRS. MORISAKI: Discuss?

NAKANOWATARI: Discuss how to handle this situation.

Toda enters carrying a tray with seven cups of tea on it.

TODA: Excuse me.

NAKANOWATARI: Ms. Toda.

HARADA: I told you to rest.

TODA: What are you going on about? I am quite all right.

MR. MORISAKI: You are very pale.

TODA: (*Tight.*) I am all right. Thank you always for your concern.

MR. MORISAKI: Not at all.

Toda serves tea, and then sits stiffly at the lowest ranking position.

MRS. MORISAKI: Excuse me, Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MRS. MORISAKI: Does "Shino" refer to our Shino?

HARADA: I believe so.

MRS. MORISAKI: Are you sure it refers to our Shino?

HARADA: Only one student in Class 3 is called Shino.

MRS. MORISAKI: Is that right?

MRS. SHIBATA: I heard that there is another girl called Airi in that class.

HARADA: Ah, yes, there is. Airie Akiyama.

MRS. SHIBATA: Right, right. Isn't it possible that the letter refers to that girl, not mine?

HARADA: The spelling for Akiyama's first name is different. It's spelt A-i-r-i-e. Airie with an "e."¹

MRS. MORISAKI: With an "e"?

TODA: Exactly.

MRS. MORISAKI: Oh, I understand.

MR. HASEBE: So have you found out anything?

HARADA: Hm?

MR. HASEBE: As a result of having investigated our daughters.

HARADA: Uh, not really. We do know that all five were in the same clique. With the addition of Michiko, the clique comes to a total of six.

MRS. MORISAKI: What is a clique?

HARADA: It refers to a group of friends. The students hang out in groups.

MRS. MORISAKI: Does the school decide the groups?

HARADA: Oh no, it's a natural gathering by the students themselves. Girls who get along do everything together, like moving from classroom to classroom or eating lunch together. Nowadays, the girls are hypersensitive about their own clique. If someone can't join one, she will be alone all the time.

MRS. MORISAKI: I see.

HARADA: But recently, she wasn't getting along well with her clique.

MR. HASEBE: What do you mean by that?

HARADA: Michiko was spotted in the classroom eating lunch alone. When asked "What happened?" she said, "I was kicked out of my clique." The pattern of ostracizing her apparently began around Christmas Mass last month.

MRS. SHIBATA: Kicked out?

HARADA: Yes.

MRS. MORISAKI: Does that mean the girls ganged up and excluded her?

HARADA: But all five agree that "there was no bullying."

MRS. YASHIMA: Of course there wasn't.

MR. HENMI: Is that true?

HARADA: Huh?

MR. HENMI: Are all five of them really saying that?

HARADA: Yes, they are. Have you noticed anything?

MR. HENMI: (*A beat.*) Uh-uh.

MR. HASEBE: What are the girls doing?

HARADA: Each one is waiting in a separate room.

MRS. YASHIMA: They're separated?

HARADA: Some new information may come in. You never know.

MRS. YASHIMA: Mr. Harada, do you understand my daughter's difficulties?

HARADA: Uh?

MRS. YASHIMA: I requested that, as much as possible, she is not to be left alone.

HARADA: Please be assured. A teacher is with each student.

MRS. YASHIMA: Please allow me to see my daughter.

NAKANOWATARI: Right now?

MRS. YASHIMA: Yes, right away.

NAKANOWATARI: That is difficult.

HARADA: We would like to have your daughter in our care for a while longer.

MRS. YASHIMA: Then you are treating her like a criminal after all!

HARADA: You misunderstand.

MRS. YASHIMA: Do you really believe that my girl bullied someone, Mr. Harada?

NAKANOWATARI: No, that is certainly not our intention.

MRS. YASHIMA: Reira would never do such a thing.

NAKANOWATARI: Ah, yes, well...

MRS. MORISAKI: We want to see Shino, too. If we talk with her directly, I'm sure we can clarify what happened. Don't you think so, my dear?

MR. MORISAKI: Uh-huh.

MRS. MORISAKI: She's not the type to do such spiteful things.

NAKANOWATARI: Er—yes, well.

MRS. SHIBATA: The same applies to my girl. There must be some kind of mistake.

NAKANOWATARI: We can certainly understand your feelings as parents.

MRS. YASHIMA: That's not the point. Reira is a different case.

MRS. MORISAKI: Why should your daughter be special?

MRS. YASHIMA: Different is different.

MR. HASEBE: Excuse me, but your talk is not helpful.

MRS. MORISAKI: What?

MR. HASEBE: It is the school's responsibility to investigate the facts. We have to

understand that. (*Mrs. Morisaki falls silent. To Harada.*) After this meeting, we can take our daughter home with us, right?

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: In that case, I will stay and cooperate.

Pause.

TODA: I will go and take a look at how the students are doing.

NAKANOWATARI: Oh, yes. That is a good idea. Go ahead.

Toda exits.

MR. HASEBE: Have you visited Mrs. Inoue's?

NAKANOWATARI: Yes, I went by just a while ago—to the wake. They live nearby.

MR. HASEBE: How was she?

NAKANOWATARI: Of course, she was in grief and mourning.

MR. HASEBE: No, that's not what I meant. I'm asking if she was questioning the school's responsibility or such.

NAKANOWATARI: No, she seemed overwhelmed with the immediate matters at hand.

MR. HASEBE: Were you able to talk with her?

NAKANOWATARI: I informed her that we were gathering her daughter's classmates and questioning them.

MR. HASEBE: What about the letter?

NAKANOWATARI: I have not told her yet.

MR. HASEBE: I see.

NAKANOWATARI: I thought that we should discuss that matter first with you who are here. To be honest, we did not know how to respond to this situation.

MR. HASEBE: I see.

MRS. MORISAKI: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: May I take a look at Michiko's letter?

HARADA: Why?

MRS. MORISAKI: I would like to check something.

Harada looks at Nakanowatari, who nods his head. Harada takes the letter out of the

inner pocket of his jacket and hands it to Mrs. Morisaki.

MRS. MORISAKI: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Morisaki accepts the letter with a show of reverence before reading it.

MRS. MORISAKI: Oh—of course.

HARADA: Huh?

MRS. MORISAKI: “I enjoyed your classes. I am glad I was in your class.”

“Class 3, 8th grade. Shino, Midori, Nodoka, Reira, Airi.” The student names follow her expression of gratitude to Ms. Toda.

HARADA: That is true.

MRS. MORISAKI: Isn’t her naming those classmates an expression of gratitude to them?

HARADA: What?!

MRS. MORISAKI: Well, as the letter starts off with “I was bullied by my classmates,” you tend to connect the names with the first sentence, but that’s not what she meant.

HARADA: I don’t understand what you are saying.

MRS. MORISAKI: The bullies are elsewhere. The inner relations of our girls’ clique had changed, so her friends couldn’t help her even when they wanted to.

HARADA: Now that makes me wonder...

MRS. MORISAKI: Can’t you interpret it like that if you read it without prejudice?

HARADA: Excuse me for saying this, but isn’t that a very forced reading?

MRS. MORISAKI: I do not think so!

HARADA: Could you kindly return the will?

MRS. MORISAKI: (*A beat.*) Yes.

Mrs. Morisaki returns the letter.

MR. MORISAKI: You said that you haven’t shown it to Mrs. Inoue yet.

NAKANOWATARI: No, I haven’t.

MR. MORISAKI: But the word “yet” implies that you will show it to her at some point?

NAKANOWATARI: Well, that is surely a matter of course, is it not?

MR. MORISAKI: Then, the mother will learn the names of Michiko’s classmates.

NAKANOWATARI: Well, that is inevitable.

MR. MORISAKI: The information will become public through the mass media and so on. Is that right?

HARADA: It may very well.

MR. MORISAKI: Can't something be done about that?

HARADA: No, that would be left to the mother's discretion. It is not something the school can interfere with.

MRS. MORISAKI: Uh, excuse me a moment, Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes, ma'am.

MRS. MORISAKI: Since my mother's time, I have contributed to this school in very many ways, as you well know.

HARADA: Excuse me, but this problem and your contribution are different matters.

Pause.

MR. HASEBE: Is it true that the issue of bullying has not yet been verified? I realize that the interactions within the group are a problem...

NAKANOWATARI: That is correct, at least at this point in time.

MR. HASEBE: Well then, at least at this point in time, we cannot assert that there has been any bullying. Is that right?

NAKANOWATARI: I see no problem with your statement.

MR. HASEBE: In that case, the credibility of this letter can be considered questionable at present. Isn't that right? In other words, Michiko could have listed five names without any legitimate reasons. That possibility cannot be denied.

NAKANOWATARI: I understand what you say.

MR. HASEBE: Isn't it dangerous to make hasty decisions?

NAKANOWATARI: Huh?

MR. HASEBE: You spoke earlier of handing the letter to her mother, didn't you?

NAKANOWATARI: Uh-huh, well, it can't be avoided.

MR. HASEBE: Her mother will believe the contents 100%. Of course she must. The note is written by her own daughter. She may publicize it to the mass media. But that may be a false charge. What will happen to our girls then?

NAKANOWATARI: (*A beat.*) That would lead to a public outcry.

MR. HASEBE: The school's accountability will be questioned.

NAKANOWATARI: No, now, that...

MR. HASEBE: Isn't it better to contain the problem? (*Nakanowatari falls silent.*) The

school and the parents should cooperate.

Pause.

NAKANOWATARI: Excuse me. Allow me to confer with the rest of the school administration. This is not a decision that can be made just among ourselves here. Kindly give me some time.

MR. HASEBE: Excuse me for bringing up these issues.

NAKANOWATARI: (*To Harada.*) Let us go.

HARADA: Yes, sir.

Nakanowatari and Harada exit.

MRS. SHIBATA: Fantastic!

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MRS. SHIBATA: Excuse me, are you a lawyer?

MR. HASEBE: No, I'm a teacher. At a high school.

MRS. SHIBATA: Ah, a school teacher.

MR. HASEBE: Yes.

MRS. SHIBATA: No wonder you are familiar with the situation.

MR. HASEBE: Not really.

MRS. MORISAKI: Is your wife also a school teacher, if I may ask?

MRS. HASEBE: Yes, I am.

MRS. MORISAKI: I thought so. Many teachers marry their colleagues. Splendid.

MR. HASEBE: Uh, it's a small world, you know.

MRS. SHIBATA: So that's why you are wearing canvas shoes.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MRS. SHIBATA: I wondered why you weren't wearing slippers.

MR. HASEBE: Oh, I see.

MRS. SHIBATA: Why do school teachers wear canvas shoes?

MR. HASEBE: They have to be able to run.

MRS. SHIBATA: Why?

MR. HASEBE: When students flee, you have to run after them.

MRS. MORISAKI: Do female teachers run?

MR. HASEBE: It's the reverse.

MRS. MORISAKI: Reverse?

MRS. HASEBE: When a student comes after you, you have to be able to escape!

MRS. MORISAKI: Really!

MR. MORISAKI: What's the strategy in a situation like this? For the parent?

MRS. HASEBE: Huh?

MR. MORISAKI: What I mean is, when your own daughter is accused of being a perpetrator.

MR. HASEBE: Isn't the most important thing to trust your daughter?

MR. MORISAKI: Trust?

MR. HASEBE: Parents provide the last fortress for their offspring. A child will know with certainty whether her parents believe in her. With such ties, a family can ride out most difficulties.

MR. MORISAKI: I see.

MRS. SHIBATA: Is there a lot of bullying in school?

MR. HASEBE: Yes, it is rather common.

MRS. SHIBATA: Is it very difficult to cope with?

MR. HASEBE: It must be.

MRS. SHIBATA: It must be?

MR. HASEBE: I have no experience in handling cases of bullying.

MRS. MORISAKI: Don't you serve as homeroom teacher sometimes?

MR. HASEBE: Uh-huh.

MRS. MORISAKI: Isn't there bullying?

MR. HASEBE: Uh-uh.

MRS. MORISAKI: None?

MR. HASEBE: None. Not in my class.

MR. MORISAKI: Is it a matter of leadership after all?

MR. HASEBE: No, I don't think so.

MR. MORISAKI: Is there a knack to it?

MR. HASEBE: If I may say so, you need a resolute attitude.

MR. MORISAKI: You have to take charge in a no nonsense way?

MR. HASEBE: Simply put, you are correct.

MRS. MORISAKI: But physical punishment is prohibited nowadays, isn't it?

MR. HASEBE: Uh-huh, we live in enlightened times.

MRS. MORISAKI: What about at your school? Is there bullying?

MRS. HASEBE: Yes, there is.

MRS. MORISAKI: Even in your class?

MRS. HASEBE: Uh-huh.

MR. MORISAKI: Are you teaching at a public school?

MRS. HASEBE: Yes, but...

MRS. MORISAKI: Public schools have a lot of problems, I hear. (*Mrs. Hasebe does not speak up.*)

MR. HASEBE: I teach at a metropolitan high school, but the decline of schools is not due to whether they are public or private.

MRS. MORISAKI: Are voluntary questionings conducted each time?

MRS. HASEBE: Yes, they are.

MRS. MORISAKI: Such an unpleasant expression! It sounds like something in a crime series on TV.

MRS. HASEBE: Yes, I agree.

MR. MORISAKI: Are the facts usually established by that method?

MRS. HASEBE: No, very little is established.

MR. MORISAKI: Why is that?

MRS. HASEBE: The students don't speak the truth.

MR. MORISAKI: Huh?

MRS. MORISAKI: Does that mean they don't trust the teachers?

MRS. HASEBE: No, that's not it. Well, in a sense, maybe you are right.

MRS. MORISAKI: What do you mean?

MRS. HASEBE: No one says, "I did it." No student admits to bullying.

MRS. MORISAKI: But if many students are questioned, excuses and evasions become difficult to make.

MRS. HASEBE: Recently, bullying has become quite ingenious.

MRS. MORISAKI: Ingenious?

MRS. HASEBE: They make sure that they're never caught. Even if they are caught, they have plenty of time to make up their story.

MRS. MORISAKI: Still, there are students in the class who are not involved in the bullying, right? Do those students also agree to the story?

MRS. HASEBE: Yes. The choice is between joining the bullies or being bullied. If you're not careful, you will become a target.

MRS. MORISAKI: That is incredible...

MRS. HASEBE: The upshot is the whole class bullies one student. That is inevitable.

Mrs. Yashima takes out a cigarette and lights up.

MRS. MORISAKI: Tsk, tsk, no smoking.

MRS. YASHIMA: Oh, I'm sorry. I was feeling irritable.

MRS. MORISAKI: Give me your cigarettes and lighter.

MRS. YASHIMA: What?!

MRS. MORISAKI: Your cigarettes and lighter. Allow me to take care of them for you.

MRS. YASHIMA: Why?

MRS. MORISAKI: I am sure you will have moments of irritation later on, too. Then you would be tempted to smoke again, wouldn't you?

Mrs. Yashima and Mrs. Morisaki glare at each other. Mrs. Yashima gives in to Mrs. Morisaki's overbearing attitude and hands her the two items.

MRS. MORISAKI: After this meeting, I will return them to you.

MRS. YASHIMA: I don't want them back. They're just cheap things.

MRS. MORISAKI: Indeed.

Mrs. Morisaki receives the cigarettes and lighter. Toda enters.

TODA: Excuse me.

MRS. YASHIMA: How are they?

TODA: They are all behaving as usual. Reira and the four others.

MRS. YASHIMA: As usual?

MRS. MORISAKI: You mean that they are behaving well, right?

TODA: (A beat.) Uh-huh, something like that.

MR. MORISAKI: That's to be expected. After all, a student has died.

Mrs. Shibata moves to a corner of the room to use her cell phone. She listens to the trill for a while and then shuts the phone off.

MRS. MORISAKI: So you still can't reach your husband?

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh-uh.

Nakanowatari and Harada enter.

NAKANOWATARI: Excuse me for keeping you waiting.

The parents comport themselves on the return of the principal.

NAKANOWATARI: I have just held an emergency conference with the head teacher and the teachers of the 8th grade. We have decided not to make the letter public.

MR. HASEBE: A wise decision.

NAKANOWATARI: Oh, thank you.

HARADA: This is a provisional measure until the facts are determined.

MR. HASEBE: Ah, well, I suppose so.

MRS. MORISAKI: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MRS. MORISAKI: Could I see Michiko's letter?

HARADA: Why?

MRS. MORISAKI: I would like to etch her last words and feelings into my heart.

Harada looks at Nakanowatari, who nods. Harada takes the will out of his inner pocket and hands it to Mrs. Morisaki.

MRS. MORISAKI: Thank you.

Mrs. Morisaki receives the letter with reverence, moves to a corner of the room, and then opens it.

MR. HASEBE: Ms. Toda, I have a question.

TODA: Yes, what is it?

MR. HASEBE: How can I put it?... Did Michiko have a tendency to tell lies?

TODA: No, she didn't.

MR. HASEBE: Do you mean she didn't as far as you were concerned?

TODA: She didn't tell lies to me or to her classmates.

MR. HASEBE: In that case, even if she didn't actually tell lies, did she ever act out to attract attention?

TODA: What are you trying to say, sir?

Suddenly, Mrs. Morisaki takes out the lighter and sets the note on fire.

HARADA: Stop that!

Mrs. Morisaki throws the flaming note into the trash can.

MRS. MORISAKI: Michiko, I have shared your pain.

HARADA: What the hell are you doing?!

Toda runs to the trash can, scoops up the ashes, and looks at them earnestly.

HARADA: What if her mother finds out? What're you going to do?

MRS. MORISAKI: Seiko Gakuen is not just any school. We are Seiko Gakuen Girls Junior High School. There cannot be any bullying here!

HARADA: That is...

MRS. MORISAKI: Of course there is no bullying. That is common sense. Don't you already know that in your heart of hearts?

HARADA: Wait a moment.

MRS. MORISAKI: You are an accomplice, too.

HARADA: What?!

MRS. MORISAKI: You could've stopped me... You were also thinking that a letter like this would be better lost.

HARADA: Th-that's ridiculous!

MRS. MORISAKI: (*To Mr. Hasebe.*) What's your opinion?

MR. HASEBE: Nothing can be done now. (*Beat.*) What's gone up in flames can't be brought back.

HARADA: What do you mean by that?

MR. HASEBE: We have to treat it as if it never existed.

HARADA: Impossible! I can't do that.

MR. HASEBE: I have reservations, too. But I see no other way out. The letter is gone for good.

MRS. SHIBATA: That's right.

MR. HASEBE: To report that there was a will, but it got torched. Wouldn't that put the reputation of this school at risk?

HARADA: That may be as you say, but...

MR. HASEBE: Who else knows about this will besides us?

NAKANOWATARI: The vice principal and the six 8th grade teachers.

MR. HASEBE: If that is all, something can be done.

NAKANOWATARI: Humph—

MR. HASEBE: It's for the sake of the school.

NAKANOWATARI: (*Slowly.*) I realize that.

MR. HASEBE: Let's come together on this point—there was no letter to begin with.
Are we agreed on this?

All nod their heads.

TODA: That was Michiko's last letter to me.

MR. HASEBE: I understand how you feel. But please set aside your personal attachment.

TODA: But it was her last letter.

MR. HASEBE: It has been reduced to ashes.

The intercom rings. Harada takes the call.

HARADA: Hello, hello. This is the higher education guidance room. Huh? Ms. Toda. Yes, she's here. Kanako Ishii's?... She's here at school? Oh, please wait a moment. I will be there right away.

Harada puts down the receiver.

NAKANOWATARI: What's happened?

HARADA: The mother of Kanako Ishii, who's in Class 1, 8th grade, is here—with her daughter. They want to talk to Ms. Toda.

TODA: Yes, sir.

HARADA: I will go, too.

NAKANOWATARI: Good.

HARADA: I'll be back in no time.

Harada and Toda exit.

MR. MORISAKI: Why are they here at this time of day?

NAKANOWATARI: I have no idea.

MRS. MORISAKI: Why is a girl from another class here?

NAKANOWATARI: Well. I really don't know.

Pause.

NAKANOWATARI: I think I will go and take a look, too.

Nakanowatari exits.

MRS. HASEBE: If the police find out, there will be an uproar.

MR. HASEBE: Oh, you'd have to expect some noise.

MRS. HASEBE: "Some noise"? Destruction of evidence is a bona fide criminal act.

MRS. MORISAKI: Excuse me. Aren't you a parent, too?

MRS. HASEBE: (*A beat.*) Yes, I am.

MRS. MORISAKI: Parents desire their children's happiness. Don't they?

MRS. HASEBE: I hope so.

MRS. MORISAKI: In that case, please get in line with the rest of us.

MRS. HASEBE: What do you mean by that?

MRS. MORISAKI: To use a popular expression, you are KY.² You aren't OK; you're KY. You can't read the room. (*Mrs. Hasebe smiles wryly.*) Why are you laughing? That's rude.

MRS. HASEBE: Excuse me. I recalled my own school for a moment.

MRS. MORISAKI: What do you mean by that?

MRS. HASEBE: When we ask the students who committed pickpocketing or bullying, they usually play the KY card. They say (*with a lilt*), "We just read the situuaation."

MRS. MORISAKI: What are you trying to say?

MRS. HASEBE: Nothing really.

MRS. MORISAKI: You're being absurd.

MRS. HASEBE: Which of us is being absurd?

MR. HASEBE: Taeko.

MRS. HASEBE: (*Hesitates.*) Yes.

MR. HASEBE: You are at fault. (*His wife remains silent.*) Apologize to Mrs. Morisaki.

MRS. HASEBE: (*Hesitates.*) I apologize. (*Mrs. Morisaki lets out a sigh.*)

MR. HASEBE: The choice of words may be different, but the spirit is the same. We must be united. We must brush off the sparks of fire that have fallen on our children.

All nod. Pause.

MRS. SHIBATA: Come to think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves.

MR. MORISAKI: You're right.

MRS. SHIBATA: Let's take advantage of this moment.

MRS. HASEBE: Wait, this is not the time or place...

MRS. MORISAKI: Well, I am the mother of Shino Morisaki. I am also the president of the Alumni Association.

MR. MORISAKI: I am the father of Shino.

MRS. SHIBATA: Shino is captain of the basketball team.

MRS. MORISAKI: That's right.

MRS. SHIBATA: My daughter says that Shino's an ace and really at the center of it all.

MRS. MORISAKI: It's nothing.

MR. HASEBE: I am the father of Midori Hasebe.

MRS. HASEBE: Mother of Midori.

MRS. SHIBATA: Midori gets top grades, right?

MR. HASEBE: Uh, I don't know about that.

MRS. SHIBATA: My girl's dream is to best Midori.

MR. HASEBE: Is that so.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*To Mrs. Yashima.*) Now, who's...?

MRS. YASHIMA: I am Reira Yashima's mother.

MRS. SHIBATA: Is Reira the one who transferred in, this summer?

MRS. YASHIMA: Yes, she is.

MRS. SHIBATA: Airi was making a big fuss—that she'd made friends with a returnee, who speaks perfect English.

MRS. YASHIMA: Uh, it's no big deal, you know.

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh, who...?

MR. HENMI: I am the grandfather of Nodoka Henmi.

MRS. HENMI: I am Nodoka's grandmother.

MRS. SHIBATA: Great! Oh yes, I'm the mother of Airi Shibata. I'm sorry to say my husband is still out of reach.

MRS. MORISAKI: Where does your husband work?

MRS. SHIBATA: At Unico.

MR. MORISAKI: Unico Holdings, is it?

MRS. SHIBATA: Yes, that's right.

MR. MORISAKI: There was a special on that company on the Nikkei Satellite News last week.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, really.

MR. MORISAKI: You know, that company is on the rise. It certainly is. Most places cannot implement a thorough management reform like that.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*A beat.*) Uh, really.

MR. MORISAKI: But it is amazing.

MRS. SHIBATA: What are you referring to?

MR. MORISAKI: Our daughters are friends, but we're meeting for the very first time.

MRS. MORISAKI: Not for the very first time, dear. We've met at class meetings, alumni meetings, and others. So our paths have crossed a number of times.

MRS. SHIBATA: All were just brief hellos.

MR. HASEBE: That's pretty standard, I think.

MRS. MORISAKI: It's not as if we live in the same neighborhood.

MRS. SHIBATA: Seiko students commute from various parts of Tokyo.

MRS. MORISAKI: Students from Saitama and Chiba prefectures have increased.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh really.

MRS. MORISAKI: About 30% are graduates from elementary schools in Chiba, Saitama, and Kanagawa. Roughly half of them commute from home.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh.

MRS. MORISAKI: In my time, there were more students from this district. Girls who commuted from Mukojima or Arakawa felt out of place here.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, I see. You're talking about the graduates. As the president of the Alumni Association, you would know.

MRS. MORISAKI: Aha, are you a graduate, too?

MRS. SHIBATA: Yes, I belong to the Class of '42.

MRS. MORISAKI: I was Class of '34.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh, you are my senior. Excuse me.

MRS. MORISAKI: Not at all. We have a large number of OG parents.

MRS. SHIBATA: I would expect so. After all, graduates would naturally want their daughters to attend Seiko.

MRS. MORISAKI: Yes, of course we would.

Pause.

MRS. MORISAKI: What is Michiko's mother like? She probably attended the entrance ceremony.

MRS. SHIBATA: Um, I don't know.

MRS. MORISAKI: Yours was in Class 2 in 7th grade, right?

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh-huh.

MRS. MORISAKI: They were in the same class.

MRS. SHIBATA: Were they? I don't remember.

MRS. MORISAKI: Does anyone remember?

All shake their heads.

MRS. MORISAKI: I heard that Michiko's mother works part-time at a supermarket.

MR. HASEBE: Part-time?

MRS. MORISAKI: Right. Moreover, it's a supermarket in Mitaka.

MRS. SHIBATA: Really...

MR. HASEBE: Didn't you say that she lives near the school?

MRS. MORISAKI: She changes trains to get to work. If she worked at a supermarket in her own area, she'd be found out by someone.

MR. HASEBE: Ah, I see.

MRS. MORISAKI: She's in charge of laying in the stock, so she has to be there early. What do you think?

MRS. SHIBATA: What do you mean?

MRS. MORISAKI: Well, can you believe that she'd do such a thing? A Seiko parent working part-time at a supermarket?!

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh, well...

MR. MORISAKI: We shouldn't rank occupations...

MRS. MORISAKI: There's no father in the family, I hear.

MRS. YASHIMA: That shouldn't be an issue.

MR. HASEBE: Did you hear this from the girl herself?

MRS. MORISAKI: No, the alumni meetings bring many people together. So information is naturally abundant.

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh.

MRS. MORISAKI: Also, I heard that Michiko herself was working part-time.

MRS. SHIBATA: Working?

MRS. MORISAKI: Can you believe that? One of our students doing part-time work? It's impossible.

MRS. SHIBATA: It's against the school rules.

MRS. MORISAKI: That's not the point.

MR. HASEBE: Our Midori was on good terms with her.

MRS. MORISAKI: That's right.

MR. HASEBE: Excuse me. Midori never talks about school. So we don't know anything about her friends.

MR. MORISAKI: Not to worry. Most students are like that, you know.

Harada, Toda, and Nakanowatari return.

HARADA: Excuse us for keeping you waiting.

MR. MORISAKI: Thank you for taking care of matters.

HARADA: Kanako, in Class 1, 8th grade, and her mother came to see us just now.

MR. MORISAKI: What was it about?

HARADA: This evening around 5:00 p.m., a letter was delivered to Kanako. The sender was Michiko, who must have posted it before her death.

MRS. MORISAKI: Oh no!

HARADA: I have it in good keeping.

Harada takes out an envelope from his inner pocket.

MR. MORISAKI: Masako.

Mr. Morisaki takes away the lighter from his wife.

HARADA: "Kanako, thank you for having lunch with me. When someone put mud in my lunch box, thank you for sharing your rice with me. Thanks for waiting at the front entrance after school. Thanks for searching for my outdoor leather shoes. When my new jersey was lost, and then found in the compost bucket in the school kitchen, you helped me wash it at the faucet by the playground even though it stank horribly. I was so happy that time. I never thanked you properly. I am very sorry."

Harada pauses.

HARADA: Class 3, 8th grade. Shino, Midori, Nodoka, Reira, Airi.

Pause. Mrs. Morisaki furiously charges up to Harada, snatches the letter, and shreds it quickly with her bare hands.

MR. MORISAKI: Masako!

HARADA: Stop that!

TODA: Noooooo!

Toda, continuing to half scream, collects the shreds of paper. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Morisaki also collects them and stuffs them into her mouth.

MR. MORISAKI: Spit them out! Spit them out! (His wife, with her mouth full, sounds as if she is saying no.) Spit them out! (His wife seems to be saying no.)

HARADA: Mrs. Morisaki!

Mrs. Morisaki swallows hard.

HARADA: Mrs. Morisaki! (Mrs. Morisaki indiscriminately takes a cup from a nearby table and drinks.)

All are astounded. Pause. Toda is slumped on the floor. Harada helps her get up and move to a chair.

MR. HASEBE: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: How was she? I mean, Kanako.

HARADA: She was in a state of high excitation. She cried a lot.

MR. HASEBE: What about her mother?

HARADA: She was calm.

MR. HASEBE: Did you make any requests to them?

HARADA: I pressed the point that the letter had to be kept private for a while.

MR. HASEBE: (A beat.) It seems inevitable. We have to treat it as if it never existed.

HARADA: No, that is not possible!

MR. HASEBE: There was a letter ... but it got eaten. That would be a pretty bad case for the school to admit to, wouldn't it?

HARADA: Ah, indeed.

MR. HASEBE: Who else besides us knows about this will?

NAKANOWATARI: Only Kanako and her mother do.

MR. HASEBE: Under these circumstances, whether there is one or two letters is beside the point.

NAKANOWATARI: Very well.

MR. HASEBE: It is the same as before. There was no letter from the beginning.

Everyone, did you hear that?

Each person either nods or not.

HARADA: Um, excuse me.

MR. HASEBE: What now?

HARADA: I do think we should verify the factual accuracy of the contents of the letter with the students.

MR. HASEBE: Uh, wait a minute.

HARADA: I understand. We don't need to tell the students that there was a letter. We can just say that the information came from a different source.

MR. HASEBE: Thank you for that.

HARADA: If this is all right, sir?

NAKANOWATARI: Well done.

HARADA: Excuse me.

Harada exits. The others return to their seats.

MRS. MORISAKI: In any event, she's a nasty piece of work. Sending out two suicide notes is a sure sign she was getting impish delight out of it all.

MR. HASEBE: I don't think so.

MRS. MORISAKI: I do think so. That girl must have had a really twisted character. (*Toda gets up and stares icily at Mrs. Morisaki.*) Oh my, do you have a problem with that?

TODA: Michiko was desperately trying to convey something.

MRS. MORISAKI: Do you believe it all?

TODA: Believe what?

MRS. MORISAKI: That the girls put mud in her lunchbox, hid her leather shoes, and threw away her jersey in the compost. Did such things really happen?

TODA: She wasn't the kind to tell lies.

MRS. MORISAKI: Let's say it was true. But Ms. Toda, you knew nothing about such happenings in the class, did you.

TODA: No, I didn't.

MRS. MORISAKI: You knew absolutely nothing. Am I right?

TODA: I knew she was alienated from her clique.

MRS. MORISAKI: I don't want to hear any excuses. (*Toda is silent.*) Being a new hire doesn't exonerate you. You are not qualified to be a teacher. The poor students!

NAKANOWATARI: Now, now, she has done the best she could.

MRS. MORISAKI: It is common sense to do your best when you are receiving a salary.

NAKANOWATARI: You may say so, but there are limits. She is human after all.

MRS. MORISAKI: That is just common sense. I, too, am human.

NAKANOWATARI: Ms. Toda is still young. She doesn't have much experience. But being young, she is able to think from the viewpoint of the students. She stays until late after class to talk with the students in the classroom. The students probably find her easy to share their problems with. Probably, many girls who are usually very quiet and introverted are saved by her presence.

MRS. MORISAKI: But she was unable to save Michiko! (*Toda is speechless.*) When she was supposedly listening to her students, was she really listening to them? If she had been actively listening, she would've known about what was going on. (*Toda is dumbfounded.*) Not noticing anything is unforgivable. This is an issue of responsibility. If she had been more attentive, this kind of problem would not have arisen.

Toda flees.

MRS. MORISAKI: Really!

NAKANOWATARI: As you know, she was the first to discover the body. She was the one to conduct CPR. She is in a state of shock. Although she is behaving normally right now, she is under a great deal of strain. Frankly, I am worried about her.

MRS. MORISAKI: Worried?

NAKANOWATARI: Yes, I am.

MRS. YASHIMA: You lock up other people's offspring. Then claim to be worried about their teacher!

NAKANOWATARI: Well, you may say so, but...

Harada enters.

HARADA: Excuse me for keeping you waiting.

MR. HASEBE: How was it?

HARADA: Well, all five deny any knowledge of those incidents.

MR. HASEBE: That's exactly what I expected.

HARADA: Uh-huh.

MR. HASEBE: That means the purported facts indicated in the letter never happened.

MR. HENMI: Wait a moment.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MR. HENMI: Please let me see Nodoka.

HARADA: No, you see. That is difficult.

MR. HENMI: I want to see her right now.

MRS. HENMI: Dear.

MR. HENMI: You stay out of this.

HARADA: I am very sorry but just a while ago I had to say no to Mrs. Yashima.

The intercom rings. Nakanowatari takes the call.

NAKANOWATARI: Huh? Who has? Is that? Oh, yes. (*A beat.*) Er—I see. I will come right away.

Nakanowatari puts down the receiver.

HARADA: What's happened?

NAKANOWATARI: A suspicious character is at the staff entrance.

MR. HASEBE: A suspicious character?

NAKANOWATARI: Excuse me. I will be right back.

HARADA: I will go with you.

Nakanowatari and Harada exit.

MR. MORISAKI: This is all very disturbing.

MRS. MORISAKI: Some roughneck has come to taunt us. The TV cameramen are still around, aren't they?

MRS. SHIBATA: When I arrived, they were no longer here.

MRS. MORISAKI: Oh, really.

Pause.

MRS. MORISAKI: But it's not a big deal.

MRS. SHIBATA: Uh? What's not a big deal?

MRS. MORISAKI: Hiding shoes or doodling in textbooks. That kind of thing is commonplace. In our time, such things happened too.

MRS. SHIBATA: Ah.

MRS. MORISAKI: Like thumbtacks in your canvas shoes and so on. But no one died. We all persevered, graduated, and became adults.

MRS. HASEBE: You can't compare the past and present simplistically.

MRS. MORISAKI: That may be so, but this causes a great deal of trouble for all of us.

MRS. HASEBE: You shouldn't talk like that.

MRS. MORISAKI: But aren't I right? For trivial things.

MRS. YASHIMA: What do you mean by "trivial things"?

MRS. MORISAKI: Huh?

MRS. YASHIMA: Can you talk like that in front of someone who's being bullied?

MRS. MORISAKI: I can. As encouragement.

MRS. YASHIMA: That's so dumb.

MRS. MORISAKI: Are you calling me dumb?

MR. HASEBE: You know, I think there are kids who'd commit suicide over having their leather shoes hidden. But they don't die just because of the shoes themselves.

MRS. SHIBATA: What do you mean?

MR. HASEBE: Michiko must have been in a highly unstable psychological state from the daily pressure she was receiving. In other words, she was like a balloon pumped up to bursting point. In such a state, a strong stimulus is no longer necessary. What I'm trying to say is that when you are considering the reasons for her suicide, you have to think in a more comprehensive way.

MRS. MORISAKI: It's the part-time job. Also, she's from a single-parent family.

(Mrs. Yashima glares at her.) Um, also, her mother is a part-timer.

MR. HASEBE: She was probably in difficult circumstances beyond her control.

MRS. MORISAKI: Huh?

MR. HASEBE: To send your daughter to Seiko on a part-timer's income must be very difficult.

MRS. MORISAKI: Ah, yes.

MR. HASEBE: The mother wanted to send her daughter to Seiko so much that she'd go to a part-time job early in the morning, changing trains in the process. I believe that such a desire would lead to a warped life.

MR. MORISAKI: Warped life?

MR. HASEBE: Yes. A mother's excessive desire can trap her child. Michiko's part-time work was probably to help the family income.

MRS. MORISAKI: That makes sense. Michiko had a driven personality. Her monomaniac tendencies were at the root of her action.

Toda returns.

TODA: Excuse me.

MRS. YASHIMA: How are they?

TODA: (*A beat.*) As usual.

MRS. YASHIMA: By "usual," you mean...?

TODA: The girls are behaving as usual.

MRS. YASHIMA: Well, of course, they wouldn't be smiling happily, would they?

TODA: (*Hesitates.*) No.

MRS. YASHIMA: Ms. Toda, are you all right?

TODA: What are you going on about? Of course I am perfectly all right.

A "blond" young man enters. It is Endo.

MR. HASEBE: Who are you?

Harada comes running in.

HARADA: Hey you, I told you not to—!

ENDO: And I'm telling you it'll be over in a flash!

HARADA: Leave this room!

ENDO: Let me talk to them. Just for a few minutes.

HARADA: If you don't cooperate, I will call the police!

MR. HASEBE: (*To the stranger.*) Who are you?

ENDO: I'm Toru Endo, manager of a *Tokyo Shimbun* newspaper sales outlet.

MR. HASEBE: Newspaper?

ENDO: Michiko was working part-time at my shop.

HARADA: One of our students was working part-time at your place?

ENDO: What's the problem with newspaper delivery? Isn't delivering newspapers a wholesome job?

Endo looks around the room.

ENDO: Are you teachers? (*A beat.*) No, no way, huh? Then those shoes lined up in the entrance belong to you guys.

MR. MORISAKI: What is it you have to say, young man?

ENDO: This letter arrived this evening.

Endo takes out a letter from his pocket and opens it.

ENDO: "Dear Manager, Thank you for your kindness. Thank you for not getting angry when I was tardy. Thank you for giving me an advance on my pay." ... "My friends probably had some reason for their behavior. Thank you for listening to my problems."

Pause.

ENDO: "Class 3, 8th grade. Shino, Midori, Nodoka, Reira, Airi."

Endo watches the reactions of the group.

ENDO: Uh-huh, I thought so. I wondered about that. Yay, bingo!

MRS. YASHIMA: Stop that.

ENDO: They're your kids, right? The ones who killed Michiko.

MRS. MORISAKI: Excuse me, Michiko went and killed herself for reasons we don't know. Her selfish act is a problem for us.

ENDO: Are you aware of what your girl did?

MRS. MORISAKI: My daughter has nothing to do with this incident.

ENDO: Every day, every day, they squeezed cash out of her. In the beginning, it was ¥100 or ¥200; then it grew to ¥1000, ¥2000. Michiko refused. She told them that she couldn't pay as her family was poor. They came back with, "We know you're working part-time. If you don't want the school to find out, you'd better pay up."

MRS. MORISAKI: That is crazy.

HARADA: Did Michiko tell you that?

ENDO: Yeah, sure did.

HARADA: Is it true?

ENDO: She begged me to keep it under wraps. That's what she said. "Don't tell my

mom or the school.” So I kept quiet. There are some frigging sick kids in this world. I was boiling with anger but kept my mouth zipped.

MR. MORISAKI: Leave the premises! Or else I really will call the police.

ENDO: Then I found out that my shop wasn’t the only place she was working at.

MRS. MORISAKI: What?

ENDO: The day before yesterday, I decided to confront her as she seemed in terrible shape. She kept insisting that everything was OK, but she finally spilt the beans.

MRS. MORISAKI: What did she say?

ENDO: (*A beat.*) Michiko was forced to be a sugar baby.

MRS. MORISAKI: What?

ENDO: Sugar baby. Compensated dating!

MRS. MORISAKI: What!

ENDO: They said, “If you can’t earn money, do the sugar daddy circuit.” When she refused, do you know what your wonderful daughters did to Michiko? After school, they dragged her into the girls’ restroom, stripped her, took pics, and threatened her, “Do as we say if you don’t want these pics posted online.”

MR. MORISAKI: That’s ridiculous!

ENDO: If I’d come and shouted down the school yesterday, we wouldn’t be where we are now. Michiko wouldn’t have died. (*A beat.*) She begged me not to tell. Crying, she said, “Please don’t tell anyone. I shouldn’t have given in.”

Pause.

ENDO: You folks knew about it, right? Your beautiful daughters suddenly became loaded with money, right? Before you knew it, they had brand-name bags, brand-name cosmetics, right?

MRS. MORISAKI: That is not true!

ENDO: Check your daughter’s phones.

HARADA: Huh?

ENDO: Michiko’s nude pics should still be in them. Don’t decent parents snoop on their daughter’s cell phones? What’s wrong with you guys?!

Endo takes out his cell phone. Snapping it open, he shows the screen with Michiko’s photo on it.

ENDO: See, this is Michiko. She was always putting Clearasil on her pimply face.

“Cause I’m butt-ugly. ‘Cause I’m butt-ugly.” “Dimwit, don’t talk like that. You’re only an 8th grader. One day, the ugly duckling will turn into a swan and you’ll be stupefied.” “Huh? Really?” “Yeah, yeah. Promise to date me when you transform, OK?” She’d give a beaming smile. Sure, she wasn’t the cutest chick on the block. But in her own way, she was attractive. Take a look. She was scrawny, flat-chested, short, and her arms were like match sticks. (*A beat.*) Your girls stripped Michiko naked and took pics. Your girls forced her to sleep with strangers every night. Is that what 8th graders do? Is that what people do to other people? Your girls are less than human! Oh, FUCK!

Pause.

ENDO: Today’s gone well. My hope has been answered. The thought was going around in my mind—*what are the parents like?*

Endo brings his phone screen further forward.

ENDO: Now, apologize. Apologize to Michiko. Come on.

HARADA: Now look you...

ENDO: Apologize!

Toda wobbles forward.

TODA: Please forgive me. It is all my fault. Please forgive me.

Mr. Henmi stands.

MR. HENMI: You are not at fault, Ms. Toda.

MRS. HENMI: Dear...

Mr. Henmi comes forward and bows.

MR. HENMI: I apologize from my heart.

Endo looks at Mr. Henmi for a while. Then he closes his cell phone.

ENDO: Listen up. Teach your girls that they did something they shouldn't do to another human being. Make 'em carry the burden of murder all their life. D'you understand?

Endo goes up to Harada.

ENDO: Thanks very much.

HARADA: Excuse me...

ENDO: Yeah?

HARADA: If you don't mind, I would like to talk with you some more.

ENDO: I've said what I wanted to say. That's enough.

Endo hands the letter to Harada and turns around to face the parents and teachers.

ENDO: Excuse me.

Endo exits.

MR. MORISAKI: Incredibly rude! How extremely unpleasant! Why did the school allow such a man into the compound? I was tempted to punch him. By and large, junior high kids nowadays would make sure their parents don't see their phones. They are beyond making such a blunder.

Mr. Morisaki looks toward his wife for assent, but she ignores him.

MRS. MORISAKI: (To Harada.) I hope you aren't going to take his story at face value. (Harada does not answer.) Mr. Harada!

HARADA: Mr. Henmi, just now you apologized to him. (A beat.) Why?

MR. HASEBE: (As if to intervene.) I can understand Mr. Henmi's feelings. Confronted in that fashion with those words, you would be overwhelmed by sympathy. Isn't that right?

MR. HENMI: You don't understand.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MR. HENMI: My wife looked at Nodoka's cell phone.

MR. HASEBE: Whaaat?!

MR. MORISAKI: Is that true?

MRS. HENMI: (*Hesitates.*) She left it out on the table, you see.

MRS. SHIBATA: Did you know how to... you know...? (*Makes operating gestures.*)

MRS. HENMI: Uh-huh, I managed somehow.

HARADA: So, what did you find out? (*Mrs. Henmi falls silent.*)

MR. HENMI: Let them know what you saw.

MRS. HENMI: (*A beat.*) There was an e-mail. "Pimply Moon won't obey, so let's get on with the pics." That kind of thing.

HARADA: Pimply Moon?

MRS. HENMI: I wondered what that meant, so I opened another e-mail. "That bitch Pimply Moon only had ¥1000 on her today. Pimply Moon is wearing that jersey again. Let's throw it in the toilet this time just to show her who's boss." And it goes on.

HARADA: And were there photos? Of the kind, you know?

MRS. HENMI: (*A beat.*) Yes. In the e-mail there was a snapshot of a girl about the same age as Nodoka, undressed and crouching down. I recognized her face and realized that she had come to our house before.

HARADA: It was Michiko Inoue? (*Mrs. Henmi nods.*) Who sent the e-mail? (*Mrs. Henmi says nothing.*) From one person or two? (*Mrs. Henmi remains silent.*) Anyway, it was from one of the five, is that right? (*Mrs. Henmi lowers her face.*) I understand.

MRS. MORISAKI: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: (*Bringing out the will.*) I will take copies of this. (*Mrs. Morisaki does not speak.*) Please excuse me. I must go.

Harada hurries out of the room. After a while, Toda also exits.

MR. HASEBE: What are you trying to achieve?

MRS. HENMI: Uh?

MR. HASEBE: How can you be so self-centered?

MR. HENMI: Self-centered?

MR. HASEBE: Do you realize what you two have done?

MRS. MORISAKI: That's right. Such goody-goody grandparents.

MR. HENMI: We did not intend to be goody-goodies, as you say.

MRS. HENMI: Is acne such a terrible thing?

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MRS. HENMI: Girls that age get acne all the time. So why should Michiko have to

be so tormented?

MR. HASEBE: That's not the point.

MRS. HASEBE: Reasons can be fabricated later. Because her face is bursting with acne. Because she washes her jersey that's been soaked in waste and even wears it again. Because she's filthy. It's OK to bully her. That's how they all rationalize their actions, and that's why they have no sense of guilt.

MR. MORISAKI: Don't talk as if it's someone else's problem. Your girl did exactly what you just said, right?

MRS. HASEBE: So did yours. (*Mr. Morisaki falls silent.*)

MR. HASEBE: No, hold it. Something is wrong here. There was no bullying. Even if there was, our girls were not involved. You mustn't acknowledge any wrongdoing.

Nakanowatari enters.

NAKANOWATARI: I have an announcement to make.

MR. MORISAKI: What is it?

NAKANOWATARI: Concerning the letter, it will be delivered to her mother.

MRS. MORISAKI: Why?

NAKANOWATARI: Besides the two earlier ones, Mr. Endo also received one. It is advisable to consider the possibility of other versions. They may be sent to a newspaper or a TV channel.

MRS. MORISAKI: This is *not* funny.

NAKANOWATARI: It is exactly as you point out, ma'am. This is not funny. The school cannot keep the letters undisclosed.

MR. HASEBE: Are you going to make it public?

NAKANOWATARI: Yes. We will report this to the police. I would like your approval on this matter.

MR. HASEBE: Why has your attitude changed suddenly?

NAKANOWATARI: It hasn't.

MR. HASEBE: Has something come to light? Has anyone confessed?

NAKANOWATARI: No, nothing like that.

MR. HASEBE: How far has the voluntary questioning proceeded? I suppose you have checked their phones. What are the results? (*Nakanowatari does not speak.*) Are you going to believe that punk instead of our girls?

NAKANOWATARI: We are trying to conduct factual verification as quickly as possible. As for now, please approve the letter as a public item.

MR. HASEBE: What's this about "as for now"? "As for now"?

Pause.

MR. HENMI: I don't mind.

MRS. MORISAKI: Now wait a moment. Don't you care about the girls? Michiko was a Seiko student, but she had a part-time job which is against school rules. And she even got herself into the sugar daddy business. She's trash. On top of that, her letter is just a series of unfounded accusations! (*Turning to Mr. Hasebe.*) Don't you agree? (*He is unresponsive.*) What's going on? Speak up.

The intercom rings.

NAKANOWATARI: Uh, Ms. Toda, did you say? ... When? I see. I will come at once.

MR. HASEBE: What has happened?

NAKANOWATARI: Oh, this is not important. Please excuse me.

Nakanowatari exits.

MR. HASEBE: Was that true?

MRS. MORISAKI: What was?

MR. HASEBE: The e-mails about Pimply Moon and her carryings-on. Were they really sent?

MRS. HENMI: (*Hesitates.*) Well, now.

MR. HENMI: Are you insinuating that we are lying?

MR. HASEBE: Maybe it is some kind of misunderstanding?

MR. HENMI: Facts are facts.

MR. HASEBE: That is not what is important. What is important is that we stay united.

MR. HENMI: (*A beat.*) That is enough.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MR. HENMI: What that young man said a while ago is correct. When children do bad things, the parents should scold. They have to teach the children that what they did was wrong. (*Mr. Hasebe doesn't speak.*) I can understand how you feel. We all love our own children. But, if we do not acknowledge facts, when will our children take responsibility for their own actions?

MR. HASEBE: That sounds like a soft sell.

MR. HENMI: No, it isn't. Scold, teach, and reform. Make them walk the straight and narrow. That is the parents' responsibility.

MR. HASEBE: If you acknowledge any fault, that is the end.

MR. HENMI: No, it isn't. Life is long.

MR. HASEBE: You understand nothing.

MR. HENMI: (*A beat.*) I used to be a policeman. I worked in the police department for 40 years. Ten of those years I spent in the juvenile section. There were all kinds of delinquents. They stole cars, tried narcotics, got into fights, and stabbed people. Everyone thinks they are hopeless. But over time, they gradually grow up into adults. That's how it is.

MR. HASEBE: Excuse me, sir. If you believe the whole caboodle that's come up in this case, do you know what'll happen? Do you realize that five girls ganged up and bullied a classmate, tormented her, forced her into prostitution, and then killed her? (*Pause.*) How are you going to get them to acknowledge that? How to make them reflect? How to make them atone for their actions? How to get them beyond this point in their life? It's impossible!

MR. HENMI: (*A beat.*) They will get beyond this point. Isn't that what parents are for?

MR. HASEBE: You are not the parent in this case, right. So you can talk in this idealistic way.

MR. HENMI: That is not true.

MR. HASEBE: You are being irresponsible. You don't have parental responsibility. You don't!

MR. HENMI: You are correct in saying that we are not Nodoka's parents. Last year, her father passed away, and her mother remarried. However her new husband's family objected to a stepdaughter. So we took on the responsibility of bringing up our granddaughter. I still have my retirement lump sum intact and besides that I receive a small pension. We manage to get by. Sending her to this school has been difficult for us. But as she was fortunate enough to be accepted here, we did not want to make her change schools. (*Pause.*) We may have put Nodoka into a difficult position.

Pause.

MR. HENMI: Nodoka told us of the bullying of her own accord.

Pause.

MR. HENMI: Last week, my wife told me about the e-mail. I scolded Nodoka and slapped her. To my question, “Why did you do such a thing?” she cried and said that she’d been afraid.

MRS. MORISAKI: Afraid?

MR. HENMI: Yes. So I said, “You should tell them everything truthfully, including your feelings.”

MRS. MORISAKI: You meant to the school.

MR. HENMI: Yes.

MRS. MORISAKI: But all five of them deny any knowledge. How do you explain that?

MR. HENMI: I don’t know.

MR. HASEBE: What do you mean you don’t know?!

MR. HENMI: What you can’t understand cannot be dealt with.

MRS. MORISAKI: You are just spouting off fancy ideals. Aren’t you actually hoping to escape from the situation?

MR. HENMI: Not at all.

MR. MORISAKI: Wait a moment. When did you hear Nodoka’s story?

MR. HENMI: Five days ago.

MR. MORISAKI: You knew about the bullying five days ago?

MR. HENMI: Yes.

MR. MORISAKI: You knew about it but did nothing, right?

MR. HENMI: I thought that she should come to terms with her predicament and talk with the teacher herself.

MR. MORISAKI: You are too lax. Far too lax!

MR. HENMI: Huh?

MR. MORISAKI: You should have reported it right away to the school or the police.

MR. HENMI: Indeed, maybe I should have.

MR. MORISAKI: It’s not a matter of “maybe”!

Pause.

MRS. HENMI: Excuse me, I heard from Nodoka that last week after school, the five of them rode the train to a Godiva shop in Marunouchi.

MRS. MORISAKI: The five of them? You mean, our five?

MRS. HENMI: Uh-huh. They bought a box of 30 chocolates, each one costing ¥1000.

They went to a karaoke spot by Ryogoku Station and ate them there. Nodoka didn't feel like eating chocolate. The money was from that kind of source, you know. But if she didn't eat any, they'd say she wasn't one of them. So she ate some out of fear, but when she was alone later, she threw up on the curb. When she got home, she threw up again. Recently she hasn't been eating her dinner at all.

MRS. MORISAKI: So what are you saying? Are you trying to make out that your granddaughter wasn't at fault?

MRS. HENMI: No, that's not what I mean.

MRS. MORISAKI: My Shino is a bright, happy girl. She would never bully anyone.

MRS. SHIBATA: The same goes for my girl.

MRS. HASEBE: It's useless talking like that. I've been saying this all along.

MRS. MORISAKI: You were the one who told us to believe in our children.

MR. HASEBE: Let's stop this "my girl would never..." line.

MRS. YASHIMA: Reira is different from the rest. She is special. She would never get involved in bullying.

MRS. MORISAKI: Now, why is your girl different, eh?

MRS. YASHIMA: Well, she is.

MRS. MORISAKI: Are you saying that people who've been educated abroad are different? Are returnees so superior?

MRS. YASHIMA: I am not saying that, am I!

MRS. MORISAKI: Then what are you saying?!

Pause.

MRS. YASHIMA: Reira has been bullied before. We came back from New York when she was 11 years old. She was bullied at the junior high in Kawasaki, where our family home is. Every day, she came home with bruises. Someone wrote "foreigner" on her shoes with a felt-tip pen. Soon, she couldn't attend school anymore.

MRS. SHIBATA: So that's why she transferred here.

MRS. YASHIMA: *Seiko* is a reasonably prestigious school. The principal asserted, "There is absolutely no bullying at our school."

MRS. SHIBATA: Oh.

MRS. YASHIMA: Even now, when she is in her room alone, she'll start plucking out her hair one at a time. She also stabs the back of her hand with a pencil. Sometimes she takes a box cutter to her arm. She hasn't recovered yet. That's why you can't

leave her by herself.

MRS. HASEBE: Self-mutilation.

MRS. YASHIMA: I am to blame. Since she was very young, her father wasn't around. After coming back to Japan, I started a company that did business with the U.S. I had many business trips and had to leave Reira with my mother. I had to leave Reira to her own devices. (*A beat.*) I am to blame.

Pause.

MR. HASEBE: I can understand. I am also a parent. I believe that my children would never bully anyone. Thank you for agreeing, Mrs. Shibata. (*Mrs. Shibata nods.*) Then why would Michiko commit suicide? That is the crux of the problem. (*A beat.*) We come back to the family situation. Hers is a mother-and-daughter family unit, so the focus is on the mother. Is anyone here acquainted with the mother?

Some nod their heads, others don't.

MR. HASEBE: We can infer that their financial situation must have been deplorable.

MRS. MORISAKI: Being a part-timer at a supermarket would be really tough moneywise. Wouldn't you say so?

MRS. SHIBATA: Yes, certainly.

MRS. MORISAKI: Her daughter was working part-time, too.

MR. MORISAKI: That manager was a strange fish.

MR. HASEBE: Mr. Morisaki, did you think so, too?

MR. MORISAKI: Of course I did.

MR. HASEBE: Whatever way you take it, his conduct was not normal. His excessive concern for Michiko was a bit...

MR. MORISAKI: Yes, now that you point it out.

MR. HASEBE: This is of course just conjecture, but maybe they had a special relationship?

MRS. SHIBATA: No way. That couldn't be.

MR. HASEBE: Such a frightful thing even to imagine. But if you follow that line of thought, things make sense. The photos that Mr. Henmi saw were taken by the manager.

MR. MORISAKI: Then he came to blackmail us?

MR. HASEBE: Maybe he did. He may have forged that letter.

MRS. HASEBE: But other people got the same kind of note.

MR. HASEBE: No, they didn't. Those letters don't exist anymore.

MRS. HASEBE: I can't believe this...

MR. HASEBE: She may have engaged in compensated dating of her own accord.

What do you think? Otherwise, you can't pay tuition of ¥700,000 from a part-timer's wages.

MRS. MORISAKI: Of course not.

MR. HASEBE: As may be expected, it is possible that the mother was making her daughter engage in such activities.

MRS. MORISAKI: Unbelievable!

MR. HASEBE: Hold on. There are actual cases like that.

MRS. MORISAKI: That is terrifying.

MRS. HENMI: What about Nodoka's story about the chocolates? A 30-piece box with each piece costing ¥1000 comes to ¥30,000.

MR. HASEBE: They have that much pocket money, don't they, Mr. Morisaki?

MR. MORISAKI: Of course.

MR. HASEBE: Let us have Michiko's family situation, her mother's character, lifestyle, and suspicious part-time work, all investigated thoroughly. No, we shouldn't rely on the school but do our own investigation. What do you think?

MR. MORISAKI: There is a detective agency my company uses.

MR. HASEBE: Fantastic!

MR. HENMI: Are you two serious about this?

MR. HASEBE: We have to find out the truth about the suicide. It's pretty clear that the mother is suspicious.

MR. HENMI: Aren't you forgetting something important?

MR. HASEBE: You're not going to bring up "justice," are you? (*Mr. Henmi holds back.*) There is no way you can protect your offspring with something like that.

Toda enters suddenly. She is in a state of shock.

MRS. MORISAKI: Ms. Toda, what is the matter?

TODA: Michiko's home is right nearby, within walking distance.

MRS. MORISAKI: Huh?

TODA: I wasn't wearing mourning, but was ushered inside. I was allowed to offer incense. I also talked with Mrs. Inoue. I did not intend to, but I found myself telling her that you were all at the school. Then...

MRS. SHIBATA: Then?

Then Mrs. Inoue enters. She walks slowly and sits in front of the group. She says nothing. The group freezes up. Mrs. Shibata is overreacting.

MRS. INOUE: Her face was beautiful. (*A beat.*) I was afraid she would look bad. You know how they say that when you hang yourself, your eyes pop out of your head and your tongue dangles out. Nothing like that happened. Pale, to be sure, she was all prim and proper. As the mother I shouldn't say this, but after all is said and done, she's a beauty.

Pause.

MRS. INOUE: I cried. I'm going to cry every day. But somehow I feel that she took the initiative. She thought, decided, and carried it all out herself. I'd like to praise Michiko. When you die, do matters get easier? When you die and go to the other world, do you meet your father and live happily ever after? A police officer told me that hanging is not painful. The brain is deprived of oxygen so you lose consciousness right away. Within ten minutes your heart stops... (*Pause.*) But being told that doesn't do anything for me. "Oh really, that's good to know," wasn't how I could respond. (*A beat.*) You are lucky—you're dead. Do I go on living? Do I still have to live? That's cruel. That's too much.

Pause.

MRS. MORISAKI: Excuse me...

MRS. INOUE: I got one, too. A letter.

Mrs. Inoue brings out her letter.

MRS. INOUE: "I was bullied by friends in my class. At first they just ignored me. I don't know why. But I could tell that I was at fault. So I tried apologizing. But they wouldn't forgive me. Then I got confused. The bullying gradually escalated and going to school was like suffering. I got depressed having to get up in the morning. I hated myself for being like that. I'm really sorry.

To Mom. March 23, Happy Birthday! Sorry, I can't give you a present. Thank you for

letting me attend Seiko. Thank you for packing my lunches. They were delicious.”

Pause.

MRS. INOUE: “Class 3, 8th grade. Shino.” (*Pause.*) Whose daughter? (*Mr. and Mrs. Morisaki exchange glances. Mrs. Inoue looks at them.*) “Midori.” Whose? (*Looks at Mr. and Mrs. Hasebe.*) “Nodoka.” (*Looks at Mr. and Mrs. Henni.*) “Reira.” (*Looks at Mrs. Yashima. Then looks at Mrs. Shibata.*) Mrs. Shibata, what does this mean? (*Mrs. Shibata says nothing.*) You told me that you were in a lot of trouble. You cried about your husband being laid off and all. Do you realize how much bowing and scraping I had to do to get you hired as a cashier? Returning evil for good, huh?!

MRS. SHIBATA: I am sorry.

MRS. INOUE: I thought we were alike. I thought we were friends. So stupid of me!

MRS. SHIBATA: I am really sorry.

Mrs. Inoue goes up to Ms. Toda.

MRS. INOUE: Ms. Toda.

TODA: Yes.

MRS. INOUE: The girls are here, aren’t they?

TODA: Yes.

MRS. INOUE: Where are they? Upstairs?

Mrs. Inoue stands up.

MR. HASEBE: Now, wait a moment.

MRS. INOUE: Why?

MR. HASEBE: I understand your feelings. Nonetheless, the facts have not been established yet.

MRS. INOUE: Huh?

MR. HASEBE: There was no (*a beat*) bullying. That is still only a possibility.

MRS. INOUE: Then why did Michiko die?

MR. HASEBE: Oh, that I...

MRS. INOUE: Your kids killed her.

MR. HASEBE: Come now.

MRS. INOUE: I’ll kill them. (*Mr. Hasebe has no adequate response.*) I’ll kill them.

Mrs. Inoue tries to leave the room. Toda stands in front of her.

TODA: Please forgive them.

MRS. INOUE: Get out of my way!

TODA: Please forgive them. Shino and Midori and Nodoka and Reira and Airi all feel remorse over what they did! It is true. Please forgive them! I beg you. I beg you!

Mrs. Inoue, in silence, grabs Toda by the hair and pulls her down to the floor. Barefoot, she kicks Toda many times. Hearing the commotion, Nakanowatari and Harada come running in, but they cannot stop her. After a while, Mrs. Inoue stops kicking Toda and simply looks down at her.

HARADA: Mrs. Inoue!

MRS. INOUE: I will go now. (*A beat.*) Michiko's wake is in progress.

Mrs. Inoue exits. Harada follows her. Nakanowatari raises Toda in his arms.

NAKANOWATARI: Ms. Toda, are you all right?

TODA: Yes, I am, sir.

NAKANOWATARI: I'll take you to the nurse's office.

TODA: I'm all right, thank you sir.

Toda pushes Nakanowatari's hand away and stands up unsteadily.

MR. HASEBE: Why did you apologize?

NAKANOWATARI: Huh?

MR. HASEBE: What was that about the girls reflecting on their actions? Are they really feeling sorry? Are they?

TODA: (*A beat.*) No.

MR. HASEBE: Why did you lie?

TODA: (*A beat.*) I'm sorry.

NAKANOWATARI: She said that to protect the students.

MR. HASEBE: Impossible. This is a huge problem for us.

TODA: I don't know if those students did such things.

MR. HASEBE: What are you saying now!

TODA: Sir. (*A beat.*) I am a failure as a teacher after all.

NAKANOWATARI: What?

TODA: I can't accept it.

NAKANOWATARI: Can't accept what?

TODA: Those kids are acting normal. They are behaving as usual in their assigned rooms.

NAKANOWATARI: So what about that?

TODA: "Natsukiii, yoohoo, can't I go home yet?" "Natsukiii, have to go to the you-know-where." "Natsukiii, I'm getting huungru. How 'bout ordering pizza. Piiizza." "Hey, do we all go to the funeral?" "Do we have to go in uniform? That sucks."

Pause.

TODA: The person who wants to kill those brats is not Michiko's mother, but me!

Toda looks around the assembled people and bows. She exits.

NAKANOWATARI: Please excuse me a moment.

Nakanowatari follows Toda out.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*To Mrs. Morisaki.*) Excuse me, I... (*Mrs. Morisaki sighs.*)

Harada enters.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*To Harada.*) Excuse me, where is Mrs. Inoue?

HARADA: I have had a teacher accompany her home.

MRS. SHIBATA: (*Relieved.*) I see.

MR. HASEBE: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: Is there any new information? Have the girls said anything?

HARADA: Nothing.

MR. HASEBE: I see.

HARADA: All they say is that they don't know, they don't understand.

MR. HENMI: Even Nodoka?

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HENMI: Nodoka is really not saying anything?

HARADA: No.

MR. HENMI: Are you sure she's not saying anything?

HARADA: Yes, I am.

MR. HENMI: I would like to see her after all, please.

MR. HASEBE: Mr. Henmi.

MR. HENMI: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: You mustn't interfere any more.

MR. HENMI: Am I interfering?

MR. HASEBE: (*To Harada.*) Have you checked their phones?

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: Did you find the data?

HARADA: No.

MR. HASEBE: All the testimonies match up. In addition, there is no evidence. Isn't that enough?

MR. HENMI: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MR. HENMI: She told me. She told me everything.

HARADA: Are you sure?

MR. HASEBE: But now Nodoka is not acknowledging anything. That is what is true now.

MR. HENMI: Something has happened.

MR. HASEBE: Facts are facts. You must accept them.

MR. HENMI: Nodoka does not lie.

MR. HASEBE: The long and short of it is that you only care about your granddaughter.

MR. HENMI: You are wrong.

MR. HASEBE: Well then, you explain it. How did all this happen?

MR. HENMI: That is...

Pause.

MRS. HENMI: Excuse me. I told her. I told Nodoka—not to tell the truth.

MR. HENMI: You did?

MRS. HENMI: She was very worried—that Granddad would be angry, that she would break a promise. But I told her it would be all right. That he would understand.

MR. HENMI: That's wrong.

MRS. HENMI: (A beat.) I know. (Mr. Henmi falls silent.)

MR. HASEBE: That is cowardly. So you really do care only about your granddaughter.

People like you are called hypocrites. (Mr. Henmi remains silent.)

MRS. HENMI: Around lunchtime, an e-mail arrived from her friends.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MRS. HENMI: Nodoka asked for help as she didn't know what to do. I took a look at the message. "Whatever happens today, don't give anything away. If we don't say anything, we can get by. Delete all the data from your phones."

MR. HENMI: So that was why.

MRS. HENMI: I was desperate to protect her. That's how I felt. I'm sorry. I was naïve.

HARADA: Who sent that e-mail? (Mrs. Henmi does not speak.) Who sent the message? Tell me. (Mrs. Henmi looks at Mr. Hasebe.)

Everyone focuses on Mr. Hasebe.

MR. HASEBE: No, that's impossible. (Mrs. Henmi remains silent.) Midori would never do anything like that.

MRS. SHIBATA: Kids nowadays are quick to come up with a coherent story.

MR. HASEBE: Come on, you've already deleted that e-mail, right?

MRS. HENMI: Yes, I have, but still.

MR. HASEBE: So there is no evidence. You may have made that all up to trap me.

MR. HENMI: Of course we wouldn't do such a thing.

MR. HASEBE: Well then, show some evidence.

MR. HENMI: Stop this nonsense.

MR. HASEBE: Nonsense! Have you forgotten about your own responsibility?

MR. HENMI: Uh?

MR. HASEBE: You knew about this right? Five days ago, you already knew from your granddaughter.

MR. HENMI: That is true.

MR. HASEBE: And you did nothing, right? Usually, you take action. Usually, you would do something. Isn't that what it means to respond to the signs that children give out? (Mr. Henmi is silent.) If you had fulfilled your duty as Nodoka's guardian, Michiko would not have had to commit suicide. Then this whole mess would not have happened!

MR. HENMI: Uh, you may be right about that.

MR. HASEBE: If you understand, apologize.

MRS. HASEBE: Aren't you getting off track?

MR. HASEBE: You keep your mouth shut. (*Mrs. Hasebe falls silent. Then to Mr. Henmi.*) Now, apologize!

Mr. Henmi bows to Mr. Hasebe.

MR. HENMI: I apologize.

MRS. HASEBE: Mr. Henmi, wait.

MRS. HENMI: I apologize, too.

MR. HASEBE: Not just to me, to everyone.

MR. HENMI: I apologize to every one of you.

MRS. HENMI: I, too, apologize.

Mr. and Mrs. Henmi bow deeply to the assembled people.

MRS. HASEBE: Please stop, Mr. Henmi.

MR. HASEBE: Don't interfere.

MRS. HASEBE: It's not Mr. Henmi's fault.

MR. HASEBE: Then whose fault is this?

MRS. HASEBE: What about us?

MR. HASEBE: Huh?

MRS. HASEBE: Did you notice Midori's signs?

MR. HASEBE: Yes, I did.

MRS. HASEBE: That's a lie.

MR. HASEBE: We don't need to talk about this now.

MRS. HASEBE: That's what I mean. You don't notice, do you?

MR. HASEBE: I am communicating well with her.

MRS. HASEBE: You make her sit in the formal traditional way, shout at her, and hit her. And hit her. Is that what you call communication?

MR. HASEBE: Now that is...

MRS. HASEBE: Midori is doing well. She's studying extremely hard, trying to meet your expectations.

MR. HASEBE: I know that.

MRS. HASEBE: Midori was wearing a ring I'd never seen before. Had you noticed?

(Mr. Hasebe does not speak.) She's begun to leave half her dinner. She doesn't

make eye contact when she talks. She kicks open the toilet door. Every evening, she comes home later than I do. (*Mr. Hasebe is silent.*) Her cell phone bill was ¥60,000 for this month. (*Mr. Hasebe remains silent.*) You knew about it, didn't you? You avoid problems. That's why there is no bullying in your class.

MR. HENMI: Stop it!

Mr. Hasebe slaps his wife across the face.

MRS. HASEBE: In the end, it comes down to this. This is the only way you know. This is the only way you can connect with others.

MR. HASEBE: Shut up!

Mr. Hasebe slaps his wife again.

MRS. HASEBE: I told her to.

MR. HASEBE: Huh?!

MRS. HASEBE: To e-mail her friends. To tell them not to say anything. To say that she didn't think the teachers could pry out the truth from them. To say that the teachers would be relieved if each one of them said, "I don't know anything."

MR. HASEBE: Ugh!

MRS. HASEBE: (*To Harada.*) I'm sorry. (*Harada is unable to speak.*)

MRS. MORISAKI: Um, does what you say apply to Shino as well?

MRS. HASEBE: A whole class can make and keep up a perfectly consistent narrative. With only five, it's a walkover.

MR. HASEBE: (*A beat.*) So you knew all about it. (*Mrs. Hasebe nods.*) When did you find out?

MRS. HASEBE: Last month.

MR. HASEBE: How come?

MRS. HASEBE: It's easy to break a cell phone lock.

MR. HASEBE: Why didn't you tell me? (*Mrs. Hasebe doesn't answer.*) Why didn't you tell me?! (*Mrs. Hasebe is silent.*)

Mr. Hasebe collapses onto a chair. Pause.

MRS. MORISAKI: In that case, all the information is true, then? (*Mrs. Hasebe does not speak.*) Is that so?

MRS. HASEBE: I am sorry.

MRS. MORISAKI: There's no need for you to apologize.

MRS. HASEBE: (*To Harada.*) I am sorry about all the trouble we have caused you.

HARADA: It's all right.

MRS. YASHIMA: Then Reira's also included. (*Mrs. Hasebe nods.*) Why?

Pause.

MRS. YASHIMA: Mr. Harada.

HARADA: Yes.

MRS. YASHIMA: May I go and see Reira.

HARADA: Let me see, that is...

MRS. YASHIMA: I badly want to talk with her. I can't believe all this. But if I go and see her, she'll share with me. Please.

HARADA: (*A beat.*) Reira is in the art preparation room at the end of this hallway. Mrs. Kurata is with her.

MRS. YASHIMA: Thank you.

HARADA: I will join you soon.

MRS. YASHIMA: I see. Excuse me.

Mrs. Yashima exits.

MR. MORISAKI: We'd like to see our girl as well.

HARADA: Shino is in the food storage room. Do you know your way?

MRS. MORISAKI: Yes, I'm an alumna, you know.

HARADA: That's right.

MRS. MORISAKI: I will contact you later after talking fully with my daughter.

HARADA: I understand.

MRS. MORISAKI: At that point, I will do as much as possible for this school.

HARADA: Yes, thank you.

MRS. MORISAKI: I may not be able to attend the emergency school meeting tomorrow. (*Harada listens but does not speak.*) Well, goodbye for now.

MR. MORISAKI: Goodbye.

Mr. and Mrs. Morisaki exit. Mrs. Shibata's phone rings. She answers.

MRS. SHIBATA: Yes. ...How many times do you think I've called you? Listen to the voicemail, why don't you? Where are you? ...What? ...You just dropped by? Listen now, did you really go to your uncle's? ...Oh yeah. Tough. Uncle's had a rough time, too. ...Uh-huh. What? You hit the jackpot? ...Poo? What's that? A stuffed toy animal? Snoopy? Who cares which one! ...Oh, I understand your feelings, but really. Are you going to be like that forever? ...Yeah, I'm still at the school. ...It's difficult to explain over the phone. We are in for a lot of trouble. ...Not that. Well, that, too. ...We'll have to pull ourselves together. ...We have to do our best. Let's do our very best. ...Never mind. I'll explain later. So come home as soon as possible. Airi and I will be waiting for you. ...Oh, wait a moment. Snoopy is probably better. See you.

Mrs. Shibata shuts off her cell phone.

MRS. SHIBATA: I'm ready.

HARADA: Yes, please go to the science preparation room.

MRS. SHIBATA: I'm sorry about the trouble we caused.

HARADA: Well then, take care.

MRS. SHIBATA: Goodbye.

Mrs. Shibata exits.

MR. HENMI: This is a dreadful incident. Please accept my apologies.

HARADA: It's all right. Nodoka is in the multi-purpose room upstairs.

MR. HENMI: I'm not sure where that is.

MRS. HENMI: It's no problem. I'm an alumna, too.

HARADA: Oh, are you really?

MRS. HENMI: If the rooms haven't changed in 50 years...

HARADA: I wouldn't know myself. I had better walk you there.

MRS. HENMI: Please don't bother. It's been a long time since I walked the upstairs hall.

HARADA: I see.

MR. HENMI: The three of us would like to attend Michiko's wake tonight. Do you mind?

HARADA: (*A beat.*) Not at all. That would be fine.

MRS. HENMI: Then, we will go a little later.

HARADA: Thank you for your consideration.

Mr. Henmi approaches Mr. Hasebe, whose head is bowed low, and taps him lightly on the shoulder. Mr. Henmi follows his wife out. Only Harada and Mr. and Mrs. Hasebe are left in the room. Mr. Hasebe still has his head down.

HARADA: What's the matter with your husband? (*Mrs. Hasebe is silent.*) Please go to the staff office for your daughter.

MRS. HASEBE: Thank you. It is getting late.

HARADA: No problem, I have a load of work to take care of.

MRS. HASEBE: Thank you for everything.

HARADA: Midori is in the printing room next to the staff office.

MRS. HASEBE: I see.

HARADA: Uh, excuse me.

MRS. HASEBE: Yes.

HARADA: Midori is a good person. (*Mrs. Hasebe says nothing.*) I will see you later.

Harada exits. Pause.

MRS. HASEBE: What shall we do now? We should talk with Midori first. Then shall we attend the wake?

MR. HASEBE: The wake.

MRS. HASEBE: Yes.

MR. HASEBE: I won't go.

MRS. HASEBE: Why not?

MR. HASEBE: I can't attend the wake thoughtlessly. For Midori's sake.

MRS. HASEBE: Um.

MR. HASEBE: Would it look strange?

MRS. HASEBE: No. We have to go on living.

MR. HASEBE: Right.

MRS. HASEBE: We have to go on living.

MR. HASEBE: Right.

Fade out.

The End

NOTES

1. In the original play, the Japanese character meaning “homeland” of love is used for Akiyama’s first name, while a different character meaning the “principle” of love is used for Shibata’s.
2. KY is a popular Japanese abbreviation for *kuki yomenai* (literally, “can’t read the air”). It refers to the inability to grasp a situation or to someone who isn’t on the same page.