【その他】

The Siding
— Boys in a Winter Storm —

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退避線
— 冬嵐の中の子供達 —

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It was a clear mild day. The temperature hovered around twenty and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Yuichiro left home just before noon to go and have a look at the Nagoya Marathon Race for Women. He was wearing the usual stuff, his exercise pants, long sleeved shirt and sandals. The race was scheduled for 12 noon at Mizuho stadium and the runners would come down the main street in Horita before turning back, running up the street and taking a left turn north. He decided the best view would be at the corner of Horita street, where the runners turned.

To get there he had to cross a level crossing and get over the main highway. He turned left at the big stove factory and headed directly east towards his destination. He passed the two scrap iron warehouses where hundreds of tons of scrap iron were stored. It was Sunday so the giant iron doors to these buildings were closed. Next to the scrap iron stores there was a gap. Once, a long time ago, there had been a factory there, but it was gone now. A few meters inside the open space was a statue. It looked like it was made of bronze, but he could see that it was covered in rust. He wasn’t sure where the rust had come from. Perhaps from the surrounding factories.

Yuichiro stopped when he got to the open space and took a moment to look at the statue. He couldn’t get near since there was a barricade in front to prevent trespassers. He remembered being told the statue was of the owner of a small blade manufacturer whose factory was once on that site.

He remembered the man. He saw him almost every Saturday around the neighborhood. But it was so much the man he found interesting, it was a woman the man knew and Yuichiro had spotted many times. She was interesting because of the impact she had on Yuichiro.

For a few years during Yuichiro’s elementary school days, and up to the time when a huge typhoon struck the area, the woman leased a small shop at the back of a block of shabby apartments next to the canal, just beside a draw bridge. Yuichiro’s father rented an apartment in the same building. He remembers when it was built, made of the cheapest materials. Even as new it looked like it had been there for years. The apartment block was divided in three. Both the first and second floors of the first section were rented by the woman, the middle sections held his father’s warehouse on the first floor where the father stored his construction materials. On the second floor there was a young factory worker living there. The third section was a distance from the bridge side. A older couple in their fifties lived on the first floor, the man was a carpenter. Upstairs from them a younger couple who had a young boy. But recently they moved out.

The old man, by that he means, the client of the woman, came to the shop infrequently, but usually about twice a month. The man had come in the late afternoons on a Saturday, just as the neighborhood kids were tiring from playing all afternoon after the half day at school. As he arrived he’d poke his head through the shop curtain, especially in Summer, since the door would already be open, or through the glass door in winter. He’d sit by the corner of the counter, facing the canal and the bridge.

The woman had a son. Though Yuichiro was a little confused about the son at first. One day he saw him come home. He parked his bicycle and went down to the canal to throw pebbles into the water. He looked as if he was in an advanced class in junior high or in a lower senior high class. Yuichiro couldn’t be sure. Then Yuichiro saw him again, arriving home, parking his bicycle, this time in a different place and going down to the canal. Yuichiro couldn’t be sure. He couldn’t understand how he’d got from the canal, back in his bicycle, or where he’d come
from. It wasn’t until Yuichiro went down to the canal that he noticed there were two sons. Two identical twins. And what’s more, he couldn’t tell them apart. They rarely talked to each other, let alone to Yuichiro. They always appeared rather indifferent towards him, idly throwing stones into the canal, ignoring him as if Yuichiro wasn’t there. He could never work them out. It wasn’t until later that he discovered they were the woman’s twin sons. Were they the old man’s sons? Yuichiro had never seen the old man talk to the twins, so he could never be sure.

Until the New Port Bridge was constructed in the late 60s’, residents, businessmen, factory workers, variety of school kids, junior and senior high students, and college students used this draw bridge as their community zone. At rush hour the bridge road was jammed with these students, businessmen, and labor workers. Along with them, lots of bicycles, bikes, cars, and trucks were elbowing through the crowds. When a ship passed by, the bridge beams had to be raised. During that time the passers-by had to wait five to fifteen minutes until the beams came back down.

A shabby coffee shop stood close to the draw bridge and the road. Across the river on the west shore, there were a variety of factories, big and small, many long shore facilities, business offices for import and export, many other firms, and schools. The east side led to a wide street where street cars and buses ran. Across the street there was the ‘Kouraku Gai’ or ‘Enjoy Port Town.’ These gaudy entertainment districts consisted of a number of eating and drinking places, several movie theaters, pachinko shops, bookstores, minor department stores and a variety of shabby shops. Some of the liquor shops had opened up illegal brothel houses as these were not publicly admitted areas for that purpose.

In spite of having a geographical advantage, the shop always had few customers. Yuichiro didn’t realize why in those days but later, Yuichiro somewhat concluded that the woman was not amiable, she always looked vacant, seemed to look like always thinking about other things even when she was serving sake or appetizers. She never smiled either. She only showed her gold teeth when a customer came to pay the charge.

Many businessmen and labor workers, went directly to that tacky entertainment district, crossing the draw bridge, peering at the shabby coffee shop from the corner of their eyes. It was particularly the young labor workers who would prefer to go to the gaudy districts to enjoy their freedom after working like slaves all day. The street was also framed by showy, colorful neon lights in a variety of layouts, and titles of the shops lit up and sensual pictures of half naked women were displayed on the front of the movie theaters. Cooking smoke, mixed with tobacco smoke, along with the filthy smell of urine, stung people’s nasals. In the corners of the restaurants and bars, were a few street singers plucking their guitars and accordions, hunting for their clients. The sun was sinking beneath the thick fog covering Yokkaichi bay area.

Around that time a newcomer moved into Yuichiro’s neighborhood. His name was Nishiki, which originally meant ‘glory’, but local children used it phonetically, which meant it sounded the same as the word for ‘python’.

Yuichiro remembered him when he went to kindergarten. On his way there he passed over a river. At that time it looked less like a river to Yuichiro and more like a huge pond. There were tied up logs floating on the surface. Yuichiro saw a small boy not unlike himself trying to move two tied up logs using a long bamboo like stick. But they were so heavy it was a struggle. Yuichiro was struck by the oversized running shirt and pants the boy was
wearing. They almost drowned his small frame. That was their first encounter, although at that time, other than noticing his oversized clothes, Yuichiro didn’t pay much attention to him. After entering elementary school Yuichiro occasionally saw the boy playing in the school ground.

At the beginning of the new semester, the boy moved to Yuichiro’s neighborhood. Now Yuichiro had no option but to recognize the boy. And there was something strange about him too. Something ominous. Something evil.

Before he moved to the neighborhood Yuichiro had several friends, two of them were the same age as him, two were Yuichiro’s younger brother’s friends. They all played together, occasionally they’d go to the main railway line sidings which was few hundred meters away from the draw bridge. There were lots of tall bushes growing wild at the end of the tracks. Small bamboo bushes grew along the edge of the street running beside the river bank. The bushes ran for about twenty meters. There was a pathway cut lengthways through them to allow for people to access. The boys being smaller than the bushes used it as a secret passage to the big field. The boys spent many hours there, forgetting about school, their houses, and their worries. Yuichiro thought it looked like Manchuria from the movies he’d seen. He’d even made a small wooden sign with the word ‘Manchuria’ painted on it.

The newcomer Nishiki quickly found a friend in Nishi, son of a small timber manufacturer, and Hiroshi, son of a small restaurant owner. The three got closer after Yuichiro fell ill with scarlet fever which put him in hospital for a month. Many others neighborhood boys also fell under Nishiki’s influence.

The group was clearly under new leadership and enjoying it. As a result Yuichiro fell away from the others, jealous and alienated. To his dismay, his group had turned from innocent adventurers to indulging in petty theft. They had started shoplifting in candy stores and stationary shops. Often they would steal toys and books from larger stores too.

Nishiki had shown them how to steal. He taught them how to spot the easy places. Old women running small shops were the easiest targets. There was a particular candy shop across the draw bridge looked after by an old woman in her eighties. Her bad eyesight made the job even easier. Two boys would stand in front of the old woman who’d be sitting on tatami in the back of the store. This would block her view, while the others would make themselves only partially visible, picking up and pocketing things with their hands that were not visible to old woman. This technique, however, only worked in stores where the shop owner was really old. Younger shop keepers were much more aware and chased the boys at the slightest suspicion, and shops run by men were no go areas since they could be easily caught in them.

At that time there were other things going on with Yuichiro which would ultimately drive him back into the group. He was mainly concerned for his two younger brothers. They’d become withdrawn and shifty and had started to become disruptive, which was affecting their school work. Their change in behavior and attitude was also noticed by their parents.

The other situation Yuichiro was dealing with was his own health. Before going into hospital he’d been a rather straightforward boy. He was shocked to see the changes in the people around him when he was released.

On top of that he suddenly found himself with no savings when his account was unexpectedly closed by his
father and everything withdrawn. He'd had the account since second grade in elementary school ever since his grandparents had encouraged him to save. Yuichiro’s grandmother was on his third wife, and Yuichiro didn’t like her very much. He liked her even less when he discovered she was only a common law wife. She rarely gave him money and would never give in to him when they played games, which would often leave him in tears. However, one day she gave him a money box. It held ¥500 worth of ¥10 coins, and every time the box became full he went with his grandmother to the bank to deposit it.

To the contrary, Yuichiro’s grandfather was a good man, whenever Yuichiro did well at school he gave him a reward of ¥100. After a year and a half Yuichiro had saved ¥3,000. And even after his grandfather’s death, although there was no more reward money, he kept on saving. Eventually he managed to save a total of ¥6,000.

After Yuichiro discovered the empty savings account he confronted his father. His father claimed that the money was used for Yuichiro’s hospital costs since the family couldn’t afford the treatment any other way. But to Yuichiro this felt like an excuse. Yuichiro just couldn’t understand why he was being held responsible for his sickness, like it had been his fault and his doing.

In order to recover some of the missing cash Yuichiro set about stealing from his father. It was only petty theft. ¥10 here, ¥20 there, pocket cash and small change. However, it was easy and it lead to bigger amounts the more confident he felt.

It was this which brought in back into the group, and his subsequent involvement in shoplifting. At first he was reluctant, but after successfully stealing from a series of shops he found himself getting more deeply involved. Besides it was the group norm and everyone was expected to join in, in whatever the group decided to do. Though the stealing was short lived when one of his brothers was caught shoplifting in a newsagent. The owner just happened to be a close friend of their father and agreed not to report it to the police, but they still had their father to contend with. And it wasn’t just Yuichiro and his brother that received a scolding. Every father and every boy in the neighborhood had been made aware of what was going on. After the stern warnings from their fathers, the boys stopped the stealing and went back to playing in the fields.

One day they brought digging implements and dug a pit in the grassy part of the field. From there they dug out a small tunnel, just big enough to hold one of them. The tunnel led them to the end of the field where they dug up to the surface amongst the long dry grass. This became their secret exit. They spent time widening the tunnel entrance and used the excavated soil to build a mound around the entrance. Any soil they didn’t need was thrown in the river.

Nishi brought some wooden scantling from his father’s factory to lay over the entrance. They covered the wood with a thin layer of earth and camouflaged it with grass and greener pulled from around the field. It was hilly around the entrance, but because of the tall grass that grew there the entrance was concealed.

Nishi and Hiroshi brought two worn smelly mats covered in dried mud, which spread inside the pit on the cold ground. Niwa contributed a broken kotatsu (leg warmer). The filthy kotatsu cover offered them some warmth, but it wasn’t much. In one of the walls Yuichiro carved out an alcove. He positioned a tarnished wooden Buddhist
memorial tablet there it on gradually caught his attention because it didn’t have names written on it, and the others didn’t seem to mind that he wanted to put it in the den.

Over on the other side of the field there was a dried up pond which had become a dumping ground for old discarded military gear. Those that hadn’t managed to find work or housing after the war had set up a temporary camp there to forage through the garbage looking for anything they could salvage. These homeless people had already set up there before the boys found the field. They first became aware of the camp after seeing one of its residents, a dirty haired man with a thick beard, sat crossed legged on a concrete slab at the bottom of the nearby railway bridge. That was enough for the boys to avoid approaching that part of the field. Instead they took a bigger interest on the far side. That’s where the freight trains were parked. They were surprised to find the tops of the freight containers laid with thick snow. The gang stood amazed at the long lines of snow covered containers since it hadn’t snowed yet in Nagoya. Had they come from some far off land?

They surveyed the yard, checking to see if there were any guards or drivers before they approached the trains, Nishiki was the first up the side ladder that led to the container tops. After an awkward climb he pulled himself onto the top of a container. “Hey, thick snow, come on, let’s unloaded this.” Nishi and Yuichiro followed him up. The three of them pushed at the thick snow, pushing it over the edge and onto the ground. The mass of snow hit the ground with a dull thud.

Once enough snow had been pushed over the edge the three boys climbed down. They picked up the clumps with their bare hands. It was cold and made their hands tingle. They lifted the large white clumps of snow over to their bicycle and placed them in the side car. Yuichiro pedaled and the other two ran beside the bicycle and cart, all the way back to Yuichiro’s house. Once they’d unloaded the snow they began to build a snowman.

The snowman stood about a meter high. The tall fat snowman attracted the attention of passersby. Some poked at it with curiosity, others just ignored it and carried on their way. Watching the passersby was just as much fun for three of them. They ran around the tenement row gathering other friends who came like a swarm to see the snowman. Everybody wanted to know where it had come from, since all the early warm winters sky had not given them snow so far.

A proud Yuichiro proclaimed boastfully that they had conjured it up using their magical powers. Nishi told the gathering that they had brought it from Atsuta Shrine. However, they still weren’t believed. Nishiki instead offered the explanation that they’d bought the snow from the elementary school.

One day they saw an old woman wandering down by the river. The dark skinned, yellowed white haired tramp tottered as she pushed a partly broken baby carriage. It looked like there was something in the carriage and immediately attracted their interest. The woman crossed the bridge onto the other side and headed towards an old junk shop further along. The boys stopped and watched as she went into the junk shop. They sat and waited while the woman was inside. After a while she came out and headed back towards the field, stopping first at a fishmonger on the way. The boys decided to follow her to see where she would go after that. The old woman wandered
back to the part of the field where they’d been avoiding, since seeing the bearded tramp before. The woman trundled over the garbage and rubble like a ghost passing over the horizon, frightening off the boys and keeping them from going any closer.

Still after a thrill, thoughts of shoplifting surfaced once again. Yuichiro though it was still the easiest way to get whatever they wanted without paying. And although they realized it was wrong, the temptation was still very strong.

Akira, son of a sheet metal processing factory owner suggested they pick up junk and sell it to junk dealers. At first they collected steel cans which were quite rare in those days. However, they gathered what they could find and sold them to a nearby junk dealer. Now they could again afford to buy chocolate. It didn’t take them long to realize that if they filled the cans with sand before smashing them down with a hammer they’d make more money for the heaviest weight. However, the dealer wasn’t that stupid. He caught on quickly and that was the end of that, until Yuichiro discovered that by using a magnet they could collect handfuls of iron shavings from local industrial waste. Akira acquired an anvil, taken from his house, and Yuichiro obtained a box-ful of nails. This time they could afford a lot more chocolate.

Hisao, one of the twins, often cycled through the boys playing field, watching them and studying what they were up to. The boys knew that he hovered around but never paid attention to him. Then one day Hisao came much closer than usual. It made the boys nervous, since up till now they felt it easy to ignore him.

Never one to give up. Hisao again approached the boys. This time he struck up a conversation with Yuichiro. Before that day Hisao and his twin brother barely knew of Yuichiro, but the snowman had made them curious. Hisao wanted to know where they had come across the snow. He seemed very interested as Yuichiro explained how they’d found it. Hisao nodded with interest looking over at the freight trains with no snow, as Yuichiro explained everything. Hisao’s expression hid his true intentions. There was a sinister look in his face, but Yuichiro hadn’t spotted it.

It was then that the twins were not seen together as much as before. It was always Hisao on his own who would approach Yuichiro and the others. He often carried a small blue colored safe with him, which the boys instantly took interest in. One day he opened the safe, matching up the dials and showed them wads of paper money. This immediately impressed the boys.

“If you accept me into your group, I’ll give you some of this money,” he said. This sent a shiver through the boys. They couldn’t understand why someone much older wanted to be part of their group. None of them quite knew how to react to such a proposal. “Well -” said Yuichiro, hesitating. But Nishiki, a newcomer too, agreed. ‘I don’t mind’, he said nonchalantly. The others remained silent until Nishi and Hiroshi finally piped up. ‘Well, why not!’, said Nishi. The others kept their silence.

Yuichiro, still uneasy, ended up agreeing with the others. “Well - you can come sometimes. That’ll be ok ‘I suppose’.” Hisao grinned. His thin lips displayed satisfaction that he’d got his way.

Yuichiro didn’t quite know what to make of their new member. He was older and seemed devious, but just how
much older and where he lived Yuichiro couldn’t be sure. However, one thing was for sure. Yuichiro was more sensitive and intuitive than the others, and their new addition was making him wary.

Before long Akira and Yuichiro’s parents caught on to their activities and stopped from taking anything else from the house. Instead the boys had to be content with hunting down junk in the streets and derelict land until they could find enough to sell. Enevitably they reconsidered resuming shoplifting, but fear of the wrath of their parents eventually put paid to that idea. The idea of going back to the big field resurfaced. It was raining the day they decided to the location. After confirming there was nobody around the boys set about digging up whatever they could. All they got was a broken windshield and a few dirty gas masks.

A few days later the boys went back. This time there were a few homeless people squatting around, digging the ground. The boys watched from a distance until Hisao arrived on his bike. As usual he was curious about what was going on and listened halfheartedly to Yuichiro’s explanation, before becoming bored and leaving. However on his way home he changed his mind and turned back towards the field.

Hisao loitered for a while, cycling closer and closer to where the homeless had set up camp. He could see an old woman and a dark skinned man. His pale white showed head was in stark contrast to his dark face. Although it was freezing cold, the sun shone brightly in the sky. Although the other boys were further back they could hear the two tramps and Hisao talking. As they got closer it sounded more like laughing, almost as if people were laughing at each other, but it didn’t sound like normal laughter. They quickly realized that the skin head man was actually stuttering and cursing, gesturing with excitement at Hisao, his right hand raised high. The tramp stuttered breathlessly, picking up a stick and throwing it at Hisao’s bicycle. It hit straight on, frightening Hisao who decided it was best to flee. He picked up his bicycle and started carrying it before jumping on, shaking his head. He cycled over to the other, but the indignity of the situation meant he felt uncomfortable with the group so he left. Yuichiro heard him mutter “You’re for it now. I won’t forget you” to the tramp, who shivered as a cold gust blew over the field.

The boys had nothing to do on cold dreary afternoons but huddle inside their pit, warming each other by sticking their feet inside the broken kotatsu. Nobody was particularly interested in talking or going outside, then Hisao arrived. As usual he was carrying the pale blue safe which he’d managed to open. He grabbed a wad of one yen notes and threw them at the boys.

Hisao was met with empty stares as none of them seemed to know what this gesture was about. Hisao smirked ‘Do you want some?’ ‘Yes’ came the replies. ‘Of course’, ‘Candy all round’ said Nishiki. However Yuichiro was less enthusiastic. He felt uneasy about the gesture, and was curious to find out where the money had come from.

“Do something interesting and the money’s yours” said Hisao.

They all climbed out of the pit, shivering in the cold wind. Hisao took a deep breath from the cold air and pointed to the reclaimed area. “Why not get the junk from there?”

The boys instantly rejected his proposal. The homeless were scary. The old lady, the bearded man. All too scary to go upsetting. Then Nishiki suddenly broke ranks. “I think they’re just nuts. They’re just stealing too. What’s the
difference. Anyway, I really hate those scumbags. Who cares about them.”

Obeying Hisao, the eight boys piled into the side car and headed for their pit where they were to wait for further orders. Akira was volunteered to spy on the homeless. He was small and quick on his feet which made him idle. He stooped down and crept towards the reclaimed area, taking one last look at others before disappearing into the heaps of trash.

The others hid in the tall grass and waited. When Akira returned he looked flushed and was breathless. He had watched as the old woman and the man crossed the railway bridge, probably to the junk shop.

Silently led by Hisao, they all got on the bicycle and side car and headed over to the reclaimed area. When they arrived they saw a makeshift shelter made of old and rotten materials. There was a filthy smell in the air.

Cautiously they pulled away the smelly mat door. Yuichiro was the first to step inside. He stood on a board which gave way, the others snapped too and he sank into a spongy mix of earth and mud. The stench was strong and caught the back of his throat.

Hisao laughed as he pulled out the protesting Yuichiro, who’s pants were caked in foul smelly mud. Yuichiro quickly rubbed the mud from his pants, but it was too much for the others who were in stitches at the sight of Yuichiro panicking. They covered their noses and mouths, trying to protect themselves from the foul smell.

They all went back outside and clambered round to the rear of the shack. But there was no way of getting in from there. It was tightly constructed from mats tied firmly to the wooden structure, and it took a bit of effort. Hisao took out his pocket knife and cut a hole in the material. From there they all climbed through and reentered the shack. Inside there were two leather chairs, two small wooden boxes and a few broken machines. One of the machines was a flickering picture viewer, and there was a charcoal stove dug into the dirt floor. There was a lot of unidentifiable junk laying around too but nobody seemed to know what any of it was.

Nishiki strained as he opened the heavy boxes. Inside he found hundreds of small round metal balls. Nishiki could only guess what they were used for. The balls sparkled as they clanked together. Perhaps they were even bullets he thought. Akira’s cheeks glowed with excitement at the find.

It took two boys to carry each box out of the shack since they were very heavy. Yuichiro brought out a leather chair, while another of the gang lifted the other. Two of the other boy brought boxes of copper which they found sitting beside one of the chairs. Soon the bicycle and side car were packed full.

A shout came from over in the distance. ‘Here he comes’, said the look out. They all turned to see a freshly shaven headed man dashing towards them, wagging his clef arm uncontrollably. His head was shaking side to side. In contrast to his clean shaven head, his face was dirty and blushed with rage. The boys took fright and quickly dispersed. Hisao got on his bike and dashed for the main street. Nishiki took the sidecar completely forgetting about Nishi and Hiroshi who had to run fast to catch up jump into the rear. Yuichiro’s two brothers and Niwa took off towards the railway-bridge. Meanwhile Akira and Yuichiro were still far behind. Akira had hurt his knee climbing out of the shack and was limping, the pain was causing tears in his eyes. Yuichiro, slow when it came to anything related to sports at school, was fast on his feet, especially when he was in trouble. He could see the man getting closer; head wagging, crooked hand shaking, crippled leg shuffling. Yuichioro fell on his knees.
loosing his strength in his desperate scramble across the field. The man grabbed Akira by the sleeve. But to Yuichiro surprise, kept on chasing, dragging Akira with him.

The boys in the sidecar stopped on the main street. They could see Yuichiro trying to run. Although he was giving it everything he’d got his energy wasn’t being translated into power. Instead it was as if he was jumping up and down on the spot. The boys burst into uncontrollable laughter at the comical scene. The man’s crippled form was preventing him from catching up and he’d stopped running. Instead he was gesturing in anger, all the while keeping a tight grip on Akira, who was still weeping from fear. There was nothing the boys could do so they decided to leave the field and hope Akira would be freed eventually.

Later Akira met with the others. He didn’t seem at all upset. Instead he told them how the man had been nice to him and given him some chocolate. But that wasn’t until after he’d given him a stern warning, not to return. Next Yuichiro’s brothers proceeded to tell the rest how his group crossed the railway bridge and how luckily they were that there were no trains coming and they’d made it across safe.

Yuichiro’s group had gathered the junk and taken it to a dealer near Horita main street. To their surprise they got over ¥6,000 for it. Hisao took 20% and the rest split what was left according to their ages. Seniority meant more money. Yuichiro bought an expensive steel robot he’d wanted for ages. The others were free to spend the money however they wanted and agreed to keep whatever they bought concealed. Nobody wanted their parents thinking they’d been shoplifting. Yuichiro put his robot in the attic.

Boredom soon set in and the boys decided to have another go at stealing. The group were chased after stealing sweet potatoes from the local market. They hid inside the pit for a while before going to the riverside where they lit a fire with some of the dead branches lying around. Once the fire was roaring they tied the sweet potatoes with wire and threw them unto the fire. Hisao arrived late and joined in. Yuichiro gave him half his potato. They ate the roasted potato, twisting their mouths and contorting their tongues which burned from the hot food. Hisao told them there was some good stuff to be had, sitting in containers down the railroad track. Though it would be tough getting at it. Only the older boys would be involved, and they’d have to be one hundred percent for it in order to go. Nishiki and Nishi immediately agreed, but Hiroshi and Yuichiro, feeling slightly awkward, said nothing, instead nodding slightly.

The young thieves climbed up onto an open goods wagon. Through the blinding snow they could just about make out the iron plates stored inside. Being careful not to be spotted by the guards they handed down the scrap iron to the other boys still on the ground. Their hot breadths vaporized in the cold air and were carried away by the blizzard. Hisao nervously kept watch looking in all directions while he handed down the scrap. His eyes twitched as he struggled to see through the heavy snow which was now gathering on his eyelids.

Below him the other boys placed the scrap on the snow covered ground very carefully so that it wouldn’t make a clanking sound. Even in such bad weather conditions any sharp sound could still be easily heard.

It didn’t take long to fill three boxes. Hisao lifted one box while the rest shared the weight of the other two. Only their thick dark clothes could be seen, occasionally through the heavy snow, as they made their way across the
field to where the sidecar was waiting. They fled the siding leaving a trail of footprints, but it wasn’t long before they were covered as the blizzard continued.

It darkened earlier that day. The thick snow clouds stubbornly refused to shift and there was a seething chill in the air. Inside the cozy zenzai shop the boys were being warmed by hot red bean soup filled with sugar. They sweated and their faces glared red in the heat of the boiling food. Yuichiro suggested to the other three that they had more, but Nishi and Nishiki smiled awkwardly. They obviously didn’t like sweet beans. This came as a surprise to Yuichiro, who thought everybody loved sweet beans.

However, there was one person missing that afternoon in the zenzai shop. Hisao had gone on his own to the nearest junk dealer, taking all three boxes. Although the shop owner regarded him with suspicion, he was still willing to trade. Each box weight around 60 kg and Hisao got a lot of money for them, which he pocketed a good portion of. The rest, ¥12,000 and almost a month’s salary for a new graduate was split between the others, a fortune for a ten year old boy, you could buy a lot for ¥3,000. Yuichiro, thought about buying the most expensive robot he could find and with his remaining ¥1,000 he bought some miniature model ships and candy.

The four boys didn’t approach the railway track for about a month, still fearing they’d be picked up and arrested. However, once the thought of going to prison subsided and they were out of money, it seemed like a good idea. Again Hisao was only too willing to tell them what was in the giant containers and how to get at it. Yuichiro didn’t know what tungsten was, though he was assured it had greater value than anything they’d stolen before.

Reluctantly the others agreed to go too, fearing Hisao as they did. It had to be a snowy or rainy day for their operation to have maximum success, however, unfortunately the last days of winter were all fine, and the conditions didn’t bode well for a huge haul.

It was an overcast day when Hisao decided it was time. All dressed in dark jumpers, they took the usual path along the bank and through the secret bamboo bushes. There were several containers to choose from. They could see the tungsten glitter through chinks in the gray canvas. The canvas was heavy and it was proving difficult to open up. So the smallest of them was forced inside to hand down the metal.

The containers were two meters off the ground where made it difficult to hand down, especially with the heavy canvas getting in the way. The clanking of tungsten landing on the ground jangled their already piano wire nerves. And they froze for a moment, hoping it wouldn’t be heard. After a few minutes they started up again. Even though it was cold, they all sweated profusely. Then there was a voice. They froze again. From the corner of the end container two men appeared.

Everyone’s eyes met. The boys stood frozen as the men approached. An older man, with a squinted eye shouted over at them. There was nothing to do but scatter in panic. Hisao ran to his bike while Nishiki and Nishi ran back towards the bamboo bushes. Hiroshi and Yuichiro crossed the railway tracks, heading another railway siding. The raised siding was difficult to climb up but there was a small tunnel nearby which they could escape through.

A short chubby railroad man chased after Yuichiro’s group but quickly gave up. He hesitated, turning back towards the boys a few times, angered by the huge smirks on Yuichiro and Hiroshi’s faces.
The man with the squinted eyes doggedly pursued Hisao. Hisao found it difficult balancing himself on his bike as he headed over the uneven grounds for the railway track via the reclaimed area. He was stopped by a heap of garbage, so he had to pull his bike up the mound before getting back on to go down the other side. When he looked round he saw his pursuer at the bottom and making his way up. They were about forty meters apart but the man was closing in. Hisao got on his bike and started to make his way down the other side. But, half way down he stumbled, rolling down, out of control until he got to the bottom.

He hit his groin on the saddle, which left him in severe pain. Then when he turned he saw the man had reached the top and was sliding down towards him. So in pain he struggled towards the railway bank. There was no grass yet, as it was too early for that, though there was signs of sprouting.

He started up the bank, dragging his left leg. There was a long passenger train heading his way. The train whistled. Hisao, wanting to cross the track waited impatiently. He turned left hearing his pursuer shouts. When the last carriage passed by, Hisao dashed onto the tracks unaware of another train approaching from the opposite direction. It whistled and Hisao saw the huge dark mass approach. There was nothing he could do.

In the distance Yuichiro and Hiroshi watched as the long passenger train came to a halt. People were running towards it from the main street. They could see passengers leaning out of the window. Yuichiro immediately realized that something was wrong. He trembled as dread spread throughout his body. The color drained from Hiroshi’s face when he too became suspicious of what could have been in the accident. They joined the throng of people racing towards the scene. As railway men scurried to raise the alarm, Hisao lay on a verge beside the tracks, eyes wide open. But there were no visible injuries, until his face starting swelling and became very blue, while blood began trickling from his nose. The man with the squinted up eyes stood over him. He was in a half panic, trembling and confused. Despite his huge gestures, in contrast, he couldn’t muster much strength in his voice which in panic sounded shallow and hollow. The driver cupped his ear, straining to hear what the man was trying to say.

Meanwhile Hisao’s face had turned a purple/red color. His dark eyes had turned a foggy green, and like someone turning off a T. V. his eyes darkened.

While police were driving away onlookers, a police doctor, dressed in white, checked over Hisao, closing his eyelids.

Yuichiro saw the whole thing as he stood there with a tight grip on the ropes. He saw them bring the dirty straw mat from their den and cover Hisao with it.

A white ambulance arrived. It had trouble edging through the onlookers and police fought hard to clear its path. The body was carried into the ambulance escorted by a policeman at the request of the doctor. Yuichiro had no idea where Hisao was being taken.