THE RULE OF TAGAME

Kenzaburō Ōe

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1

Kogito was lying on the narrow army cot in his study, his ears enveloped in giant headphones, listening intently. The voice on the tape had just said, 'So anyway, that's it for today – I'm going to head over to the Other Side now,' when Kogito heard a loud thud. There was silence for a moment, then Goro's voice continued: 'But don't worry, I'm not going to stop communicating with you. That's why I made a special point of setting up this system with Tagame and the tapes. Well, I know it's probably getting late on *your* side. Goodnight!'

The recording ended on this rather vague and unsatisfactory note, and Kogito felt a sudden, excruciating sadness that seemed to rip him apart from his ears to the very depths of his eyes. After lying in that shattered state for a while, he put Tagame back on the nearest bookshelf and tried to go to sleep. Thanks in part to the soporific cold medicine he'd taken earlier, he fell into a shallow doze, but then a slight noise wakened him and he saw his wife's face glimmering palely under the fluorescent lights of the study's slanted ceiling.

'Goro committed suicide,' she said softly. 'I wanted to go out without waking you, but I was worried that Akari would be frightened by the rush of phone calls from the media.'

That was how Chikashi broke the news about what had happened to her only brother, Goro, who had been Kogito's close friend since high school. For a few moments Kogito just lay there in disbelieving shock – waiting, irrationally, for Tagame to start slowly vibrating, like a mobile phone receiving an incoming call.

'The police have asked Umeko to identify the body, and I'm going to keep her company,' Chikashi added, her voice full of barely controlled emotion.

'I'll go along with you till you meet up with Goro's family, and then I'll come back here alone and deal with the telephone,' Kogito said, feeling as if he were paralysed from head to foot. The avalanche of media calls probably wouldn't begin for a few hours at least.

Chikashi continued to stand silently beneath the fluorescent lights. She watched attentively as Kogito got out of bed and slowly put on the woollen shirt and corduroy trousers that were draped over a chair. (It was the dead of winter.)

After Kogito had finished pulling a heavy sweater over his head he said, 'Well, then,' and without thinking he reached out and grabbed Tagame off the bookshelf.

'Wait a minute,' said Chikashi, the voice of reason. 'What's the point of taking that thing? It's the cassette recorder you use to listen to the tapes Goro sent you, right? That's exactly the sort of absurd behaviour that always infuriates you when somebody else does it.'

2

Even in his late fifties, Kogito still took the streetcar to the pool, and he had noticed that he was usually the only person on board with an old-fashioned cassette recorder. Once in a while he would see a middle-aged man listening to a tape and moving his lips, from which Kogito deduced that the man must be practising English conversation. Until recently, the streetcars had been teeming with crowds of youths

listening to music on their Walkmans, but now those same kids were all busy chatting on mobile phones or nimbly typing text messages on the tiny keyboards. Kogito actually felt nostalgic for the days when the tinny cacophony of popular music used to leak out of the young people's ubiquitous headphones, even though it had seemed annoying at the time. Nowadays, he concealed his bulky pre-Walkman recorder in the gym bag with his swimming equipment and wore the oversized headphones clamped around his greying head.

The old-fashioned cassette recorder had originally been given to Goro, back in the days when he was still working as an actor, as a perk for appearing in a TV commercial for an electronics company. The recording device itself was just a common rectangular parallelepiped, but while the design of the machine was absolutely ordinary, the shape of the large, black, ear-covering headphones bore a curious resemblance to the giant medieval-armoured water beetles known as *tagame*, pronounced 'taga-may', that Kogito used to catch in the mountain streams when he was a boy in the forests of Shikoku. As he told Goro, the first time he tried using the headphones he felt as if, after all this time, he suddenly had a couple of those perpetually useless beetles fastened on to both sides of his head, crushing his skull like a vice.

But Goro said coolly, 'That just tells me that you were a kid who couldn't catch anything worthwhile like eels or freshwater trout, so you had to be satisfied with those grotesque bugs. I know it's a little late, but in any case, this is a gift from me to the pitiful little boy you used to be. You can call it Tagame or whatever, and maybe it'll cheer that poor kid up, retroactively.'

Goro seemed to think, somehow, that the cassette recorder alone wasn't a sufficiently grand gift for Kogito, who was not only an old friend but also his younger sister's husband. That was probably why, along with the cassette recorder, he also gave Kogito a very attractive miniature trunk, made of Duralumin – an item that demonstrated Goro's genius for assembling interesting little props, whether to enhance his personal lifestyle or to add atmospheric complexity to one of his films. And in that beguiling mini-trunk were twenty-five cassette tapes.

Goro presented Kogito with this quadripartite gift (trunk, cassette recorder, headphones, tapes) one evening after they had both attended a sneak preview of one of Goro's films at a large movie theatre in downtown Tokyo. Afterwards, riding home alone on the train, Kogito stuck one of the cassettes, each of which was identified only by a number stamped on a white label, into Tagame – for he had, in fact, already started to call the machine by the nickname Goro had suggested.

As Kogito was fumbling around, trying to insert the headphone plug into the appropriate jack, he must have inadvertently hit the play button, or perhaps there was a feature that automatically started playback when you inserted a tape. In any case, his fellow passengers in the tightly packed train car looked extremely startled when a loud, brassy-sounding female voice suddenly began to emanate from the vicinity of Kogito's lap. 'Aaah!' the woman shrieked through the tiny speaker. 'Oh my God! I think my uterus is falling out! Oh, no, I'm gonna come! Oh my God! I'm coming! Aaaaaah!'

As Kogito learned later, that tape was one of twenty similarly sensational recordings made by illegal electronic surveillance. Goro, who had a taste for such things, had been talked into buying the tapes by a colleague at a certain movie studio, and he had been wondering how to dispose of them. Since he seemed to consider loosening Kogito up to be one of his missions in life, Goro mischievously decided to bequeath the collection of 'blue tapes' to his bookish brother-in-law.

Earlier in his life, Kogito wouldn't have had the slightest interest in such sordid diversions, but at this particular time he threw himself into listening to the illicit recordings non-stop, over a hundred-day period, with a zeal bordering on mania. As it happened, Kogito was going through a rough patch in his life, and he had found himself plunged into an abyss of anxiety and depression. When Goro heard about this from Chikashi, he apparently said, 'In that case, maybe he needs a little hair of the dog, so to speak. When you're dealing with humanity in its coarsest, most vulgar form – I'm talking about that scumbag journalist – the best antidote is more of the same.' Kogito heard about

Goro's prescription from Chikashi, after the fact, but she remained blissfully ignorant of the contents of the tapes.

Kogito's depression had been brought on by a series of vicious ad hominem attacks on him by the 'scumbag journalist' Goro had mentioned, who was the star writer for a major newspaper. Needless to say, the highly personal criticisms of Kogito and his work – attacks that had been going on for more than a decade – were presented as the solemn discharge of the journalist's civic and professional duty.

As long as Kogito was busy reading and working on various writing projects, he didn't think much about his widely published enemy's vendetta against him. But late at night when he suddenly found himself wide awake, or when he was out walking around town on some errand or other, the peculiarly abusive words of his nemesis (who was a talented writer, no question about it) kept running through his head like toxic sludge.

Even though the reporter was known for being meticulous in his newspaper work, when he sat down to compose his poison-pen missives to Kogito he would take dirty-looking, mistake-ridden manuscript pages and smudged faxes of galley proofs, cut them up into small pieces, scribble unpleasant 'greetings' on those grubby scraps of recycled paper, and then mail them to Kogito's home address along with copies of the journalist's own books and magazine articles, many of which were obsessively devoted to Kogito-bashing.

In spite of himself, Kogito would immediately commit every word of the loathsome tirades to memory, but whenever it looked as if one of his enemy's vitriolic insults might be about to pollute his brain again, all he had to do to calm himself down, whether he was lying in bed in his study, or out and about in Tokyo, was to don his headphones and listen to the honest voices of 'vulgar humanity'. As Goro put it, 'It's really astonishing the way listening to trashy stuff like that can take your mind off whatever's bothering you.'

Fifteen years went by, and one day Kogito was packing for an overseas trip. While he was searching for some of the research material he needed to take with him, his eyes happened to light on the miniature

Duralumin trunk tucked away in a corner of his study. Over the years he had turned it into a repository for the libellous books and articles that were constantly being delivered from his nemesis, the accursed journalist, but it still held those electronic eavesdropping tapes as well. What if his plane crashed, and Chikashi happened to listen to those steamy tapes while she was putting his affairs in order posthumously? To avoid that potential catastrophe, he tossed the tapes into the trash and then asked Chikashi to find out whether the little brushed aluminium trunk was something Goro might like to have returned.

Goro apparently said yes, and so it was that the Duralumin trunk found its way back to its original owner. But then, after another two or three years had passed, the same elegant container turned up at Kogito's house again while he was abroad, teaching in Boston. This time it was packed with a batch of thirty or so different cassettes, not lurid surveillance soundtracks this time, but rather tapes of Goro rambling on about various topics. Goro explained to Chikashi that he would be sending new recordings as soon as he got them finished, with the goal of eventually filling the container to its fifty-tape capacity. When Goro mentioned that the contents were nothing urgent, Chikashi replied jokingly that since Kogito was approaching the age where he could soon begin losing his mental acuity, she might suggest that he save the tapes for his dotage.

But when Kogito returned from the United States and saw the new batch of tapes, he was seized by a vague but insistent premonition and immediately popped one of them into Tagame. As Kogito had suspected, the voice that came booming through the headphones belonged to Goro, and it soon became evident that the purpose of the tapes was to tell the story, in no particular chronological order, of the things that had happened to Kogito and Goro after they became friends at school in the Shikoku town of Matsuyama – 'Mat'chama', in Goro's idiosyncratic pronunciation.

Goro's way of speaking on the tapes wasn't a monologue, exactly. Rather, it was as if he and Kogito were having an extended conversation on the telephone. Because of this, Kogito soon got into

the habit of listening to the tapes before he went to sleep in his study. Lying on his side with the headphones on, he would listen to the recordings while a host of thoughts floated languidly through his mind.

As new tapes continued to arrive at regular intervals, Kogito would listen to each one, and then, almost as if they were having a real-time conversation, he would punctuate Goro's recorded remarks from time to time by pressing the pause button and giving voice to his own opinions. That practice quickly turned into a routine, and before long, even though Goro couldn't hear Kogito's responses, communicating by way of Tagame ended up almost entirely replacing their occasional phone chats.

On the night in question, a few hours before he learned that Goro had plunged to his death from the roof of his production company's office building in an upmarket section of Tokyo, Kogito was indulging in his customary bedtime ritual: lying in bed listening to the latest tape, which had been delivered by courier earlier that evening. While Goro rambled eloquently along, Kogito would stop the tape whenever the impulse struck him and interpolate – not so much his own views any more, but rather his natural, spontaneous conversational responses to whatever Goro might be saying. What Kogito remembered about that evening's session, in retrospect, is that he was suddenly struck with the idea of buying a cassette recorder with editing capabilities, which would allow him to cobble together a third tape that incorporated both sides of his lively and occasionally contentious 'dialogues' with Goro.

At one point there was a stretch of silence on the tape, and when Goro began talking again his voice sounded very different. It was immediately clear from his blurry diction that he'd had a few drinks during the break, and had forgotten to stop the tape. 'So anyway, that's it for today – I'm going to head over to the Other Side now,' Goro said, quite casually.

After that declaration, there was a sound that Kogito eventually came to think of as the Terrible Thud. It was the sort of dramatic embellishment you would expect from a high-tech film-maker like Goro, who was known for his skilful use of sound effects and

composite recordings. Only later did Kogito realize that the thud was the sound you might hear when a heavy body fell from a high place and crashed on to the unyielding pavement below: *Ka-thunk.*

'But don't worry,' Goro went on, 'I'm not going to stop communicating with you. That's why I made a special point of setting up this system with Tagame and the tapes. Well, I know it's probably getting late on *your* side. Goodnight!' he concluded cheerfully, in a voice that bore no trace of intoxication.

Kogito actually thought, more than once, that maybe that portentous announcement ('I'm going to head over to the Other Side now') was the last thing Goro said before he jumped, intentionally pre-recorded to serve as his final words, and the remarks that followed the thud, made by a totally sober-sounding Goro, were the first dispatch from the Other Side, using the Tagame cassette recorder as a sort of interdimensional mobile phone. If that was true, then if Kogito just went on listening to the tapes using the same system, shouldn't he be able to hear Goro's voice from the Other Side? And so he continued his bedtime ritual of chatting with Goro almost every night, via the medium of Tagame, running through the collection of tapes in no particular order – except for the final tape, which he put away in the trunk without bothering to rewind.

3

Kogito and Chikashi arrived at Goro's house in the seaside town of Yugawara just as the body was being brought home from the police station, but Kogito managed to avoid seeing his dead friend's face. There was a small private wake, after which Umeko, Goro's widow (who had starred in many of Goro's films), planned to stay up all night watching videos of Goro's movies with anyone who wanted to join her. Kogito explained that he needed to get back to Tokyo to take care of Akari, their son, who had been left at home alone, and it was decided that Chikashi would stay in Yugawara and attend her brother's cremation the following day.

Glancing towards the coffin, Umeko said, 'I could hardly recognize

Goro's face when I saw it at the police station, but now he's back to looking like his handsome self again. Please take a peek and pay your respects.'

In response to this, Chikashi said to Kogito, in a quiet but powerful voice, 'Actually, I think it would be better if you didn't look.'

Meeting Umeko's quizzical eyes, Chikashi returned her sister-in-law's gaze with a look of absolute conviction and candour, overlaid with sadness. Umeko clearly understood, and she stood up and went into the room with the coffin, alone.

Kogito, meanwhile, was thinking about how distant he had felt from Chikashi while she was staring at Umeko with that strong, defiant expression. There was absolutely no trace, in Chikashi's utterly direct look, of the genteel social buffers that usually softened her speech and conduct. *This is the way it is, and there's nothing we can do about it*, Chikashi seemed to be trying to tell herself as well, in the midst of her overwhelming grief and sorrow. *It's fine for Umeko to gaze lovingly at the destroyed face of Goro's corpse and imagine, wishfully, that those dead features have been miraculously restored to their original handsome, animated form. As his sister, I'm doing exactly the same thing. But I think seeing Goro's face would just be too much for Kogito to bear.*

As Chikashi perceptively surmised, the prospect of viewing Goro's dead body filled Kogito with dread, but when Umeko voiced her request he automatically started to stand up. He couldn't help thinking that he would never be mature enough to handle something like this, and he was engulfed by feelings of loneliness and isolation. But he was conscious of another motivation for agreeing to view the corpse as well: he was curious to see whether there might be a mark stretching along Goro's cheek that would indicate he had been talking into a Tagame-type headset when he jumped. The impact, Kogito theorized, could have left an imprint that would still be visible now, and he had reason to believe that scenario wasn't merely his own wild conjecture.

Taruto, who was the head of Goro's production company as well as the CEO of his own family-owned company in Shikoku, had taken on the task of transporting Goro's body to Yugawara, and after the

wake he showed the family some things he had found on Goro's desk at the office. Along with three different versions of a suicide note, written on a personal computer, there was a drawing done in soft pencil on high-quality, watermarked paper.

The picture, which was drawn in a style reminiscent of an illustrated book of fairy tales from some unspecified foreign country, showed a late-middle-aged man floating through a sky populated with innumerable clouds that resembled French dinner rolls. The man's position reminded Kogito of the way Akari sprawled out on the floor whenever he was composing music, and this added to Kogito's immediate certainty that the picture was a self-portrait of Goro. Furthermore, the man who was wafting through the air was holding a mobile phone that looked very much like a miniature version of Tagame in his left hand, and talking into it. (Hence Kogito's suspicion that there might have been a headset mark on Goro's dead face.)

4

Kogito left the house of mourning in Yugawara and headed for the Japan Railways station, planning to board an express train for Tokyo. But the moment he walked into the station he was besieged by an unruly horde of TV reporters and photographers who had obviously been lying in wait, eager to talk to anyone with the slightest connection to the late Goro Hanawa.

Ignoring the shouted questions, Kogito tried to steer clear of the ring of jostling reporters, but then a rapidly revolving TV camera collided with the lower part of the bridge of his nose, barely missing his right eye. The young cameraman looked at Kogito with an insolent half-smile; he might just have been covering up his distress and confusion with a facade of arrogance, but Kogito felt that his facial expression was very crass and inappropriate indeed.

After escaping from the mob scene at the train station, Kogito started walking up a long, narrow lane that had been carved out of a hillside of mandarin orange trees and paved with cobblestones. At the top of the slope he found a taxi and climbed in. The driver must have

been acquainted with Goro, because he took one look at Kogito and said, 'I guess it's really true what they say about crying tears of blood!' It was only then that Kogito realized that half of his face was covered with blood from the deep cut on his nose.

Even so, he felt that rushing to the nearest emergency room and getting the paperwork to prove that he had been injured, as a way of punishing that arrogant cameraman, would have been an overreaction. Besides, the cameraman was just the inadvertent point man for that seething mass of journalists, with their insatiable collective appetite for tragedy and scandal. In the short time since Goro's death, Kogito had received a very distinct impression from all the media people, whether they were with television networks, newspapers or weekly tabloid magazines: that is, he had noticed that they all seemed to share a kind of contemptuous scorn for anyone who had committed suicide. At the root of that contempt seemed to be the feeling that Goro, who had for years been lionized, lauded, and treated like royalty by the media, had somehow betrayed them, almost on a personal level, and as a result the fallen idol could never again be restored to his previous kingly status.

For about a week after Goro's suicide, Kogito made a point of watching the *Wide News* programme early every morning and again in the evening. Since no one else in his household showed the slightest interest in joining him, he would carry the small TV set into his study and put it at the foot of his bed, then listen to the sound through his Tagame headphones.

Kogito had expected that he might have difficulty understanding the speech of the younger generation: that is, the anchors and reporters on the news shows, and the actors (male and female) who had appeared in Goro's films. But he even found it hard to follow the remarks of the film directors and screenwriters, not to mention the commentators from the arts and from the larger world beyond, who were more or less his own age. And the harder Kogito concentrated on trying to understand what all these talking heads were saying, the more incomprehensible their babble became.

Meanwhile, Kogito developed a new habit – an addiction, really –

which he was keeping secret from Chikashi. He had surreptitiously resumed the lively dialogues with Tagame that he had been engaging in, off and on, during the three months preceding Goro's suicide, with the army cot in his study as the staging ground. Only now he was doing it on a more serious and a more regular basis than before – that is to say, daily.

Since Goro's suicide, Kogito had made a rule about how these midnight conversations with Tagame were to be conducted, and he was very conscientious about following that arbitrary regulation to the letter.

The rule was: Never mention the fact that Goro has gone to the Other Side. This was easier said than done, of course, and at the beginning, whenever Kogito was chatting away with (or at) Tagame, he was unable to erase Goro's suicide from his mind for even a moment. Before too long, though, new ideas just naturally began to bubble up. For one thing, Kogito was intensely curious about the Other Side, where Goro had now resided. In terms of space and time, was it completely different from the world on this side? And when you were there, looking back across the existential divide, would the very fact of your death on this side be nullified, as if you had never died at all?

Before Kogito met Goro at Matsuyama High School, he had been thinking about what certain philosophers had written on the various types of death perception, but there hadn't been anyone he could talk to about such things. Not long after he and Goro became friends, he broached the subject. In those days – and, now that he thought about it, throughout their long association – their basic style of communication had been infused with jokiness and wordplay, and they tended to aim for humorous effect even when they were discussing profoundly serious matters.

Naturally, it was inevitable that young Kogito would always take a position contrary to those expressed in the rather staid language of the philosophy books he was reading. To wit:

It goes without saying that someone who is living in this world wouldn't be able to talk knowledgeably about his own death, based on first-hand

experience. That's because the essence of intelligent consciousness ceases to be at the same moment that one's actual existence is coming to an end. In other words, for people who are alive and living, death simply doesn't exist, and by the time they experience it directly they're already beyond cognitive understanding.

Kogito began by quoting that argument, which he had read somewhere, and then proceeded to outline his own interpretative variation on the theme.

'Let's say there is such a thing as a human soul, and it's alive, along with the body it inhabits. In my village, there's a folk belief that when someone dies – that is, when a person ceases to exist in a physical form – the soul leaves the body and goes up into the air of the valley, spinning around in a spiral movement, like a tornado. (The valley is shaped rather like the inside of a wide-mouthed jar, and the soul doesn't venture beyond those confines.) At some point the disembodied spirit reverses its corkscrew trajectory and returns to earth, landing at the base of a tree high up on one of the heavily wooded mountainsides that enclose the valley – not just any old tree, but a specific one that has been selected beforehand by karma, or fate. Then, when the moment is right, the old soul will make its way down to the village and find a home in the body of a newborn baby.'

Goro responded to this bit of folklore with an esoteric reference that showcased his own precociously sophisticated store of knowledge. 'According to Dante,' he declared, 'the right way for a human being to climb a mountain is by going around to the right, and if you take the left-hand route you could be making a big mistake. When a spirit spirals from your valley up into the forest, which way is it moving: clockwise, or counterclockwise?'

His grandmother hadn't shared that logistical detail, so instead of giving a straightforward answer Kogito ventured a wild surmise, half in jest: 'I guess that would depend on how people used to think about birth, and death. If they thought it was *bad* when the soul left an old body and went to the root of a tree, and *good* when that same soul entered into the body of a newborn baby, then I guess the spiral would

be clockwise in the case of rebirth, and counterclockwise for death.'

Then he added, 'Seriously, though, if the soul is able to detach itself from the body in that way, then the spirit must not be aware that it's dead. So what dies is just the body, and at the moment when the flesh ceases to be alive the spirit goes its own way. In other words, the spirit goes on living forever, divorced from the body's finite sense of time and space. To tell you the truth, I don't really understand it myself, so I'm groping around for an explanation. But I think that just as there's infinity and also a single instant in time, and just as the entire cosmos can coexist with a single particle, isn't it possible that when we die we simply move into a different dimension of space and time? If that's the case, then maybe the soul could continue existing in a fourth-dimensional state of innocent bliss, without ever noticing that there's such a thing as death.'

And now that giddy, carefree, existential conversation they had enjoyed on that day in their youth, having more fun fooling around with the high-flown words than with the actual concepts – now, that seemingly abstract scenario had really come to pass. And here was Goro's spirit, lively as ever, talking to Kogito through Tagame as if he truly hadn't noticed that his mortal body had already gone up in smoke.

5

Late that night, on the day after Goro took his leap into the next dimension, Kogito finally made it home with the bloodstained handkerchief still pressed against the TV-camera gash between his eyes. He made dinner for Akari, who had been listening to CDs with the answering machine on and the telephone ringer silenced, and then, after washing his injured face (he kept the light in the bathroom turned off and didn't even glance at himself in the mirror), Kogito trudged up the stairs to his study.

Of course, Kogito was always the one who started the conversations with Tagame, but sometimes, just before he pressed the play button, he had the uncanny feeling that the chunky little cassette recorder was actually psyching itself up for the next round of combat.

For some reason this made Kogito think about the way the real *tagames* – the large, oddly shaped water beetles that lived in the mountain streams of Shikoku – must have amorously bestirred themselves, almost in slow motion, during mating season. All these years later, that image (which may have been pure conjecture) was perfectly sharp and vivid in his mind.

Kogito always left the tape cued up at the end of the previous night's conversation, and whenever he picked Tagame up he always felt as if he were answering an incoming call on the ultimate long-distance mobile phone. And the moment Goro's voice began to speak, with its distinctive Kyoto/Matsuyama accent, Kogito was repeatedly struck by the fact that whatever the topic might turn out to be, it always seemed to be uncannily relevant to his current situation.

Another odd thing was that when he started talking to Tagame, Kogito was far more enthusiastic than he had been about any other kind of discussion with Goro during the past twenty years or so. There was something engaging about Goro's relaxed way of talking across the boundaries that separated the Other Side from the land of the living – despite the fact that his comments often consisted of merciless, searing criticism of Kogito – and even though Kogito was completely aware that Goro was dead, the intensity of their exchanges somehow seemed to overshadow that disturbing fact.

Kogito also felt that he had been forced to take another look at his feelings about his own inevitable death, so naturally there were times when the conversations evoked newly urgent thoughts about what really happens after we die. He could imagine himself, in the not so distant future, travelling to the Other Side with an upgraded, afterlife-appropriate version of Tagame and earnestly awaiting a dispatch from this side. When he thought that there might be no answer to his Tagame signals, for all eternity, he felt such a deep sense of loneliness and desolation that his entire being seemed to be disintegrating.

At the same time, it was only natural for him to feel that the impassioned 'conversations' he was carrying on with Tagame, all by himself, were nothing but an escapist diversion, a self-deluding mind

game. As a novelist who'd grown partial to the literary theories espoused by Mikhail Bakhtin, Kogito had started to take the concept of 'playing games' very seriously after crossing the threshold into middle age. Consequently, he knew very well that even if talking with Goro via Tagame was a mere diversion, as long as he was acting on that fantasy stage there was nothing to do but throw himself into the part with all his heart.

Furthermore, Kogito resolved that during the day, while he was separated from Tagame, he wouldn't allow his nocturnal conversations with Goro to seep into his daily experiences. And when he was talking about Goro with Chikashi, or with Umeko, or with Taruto, Kogito made every effort not to recall the conversations with Goro that flowed through Tagame.

In this way, Kogito constructed a barrier between the two types of time – real time and Tagame time – and while he was moving around in one zone he wouldn't permit the other to spill over into it, or vice versa. But whichever zone he happened to be inhabiting, he never denied, at least not to his innermost self, the truth or the reality of what he had experienced in the other realm. From his vantage point on the earthly, conscious side, he firmly believed in the existence of the Other Side, and that belief made the world on this side seem infinitely deeper and richer. Even if his Tagame adventure was nothing but a dream, he still embraced it as a positive experience.

6

One year, Kogito was invited to speak at Kyushu University. While he was in the green room waiting for his lecture to begin, he happened to glance at a timetable and discovered that if he skipped the banquet with the other participants and hopped on the next ferry to Shikoku, then transferred to a Japan Railways train, he could be back at his childhood home, deep in the forest, before the night was over. He asked the assistant professor who was looking after him to make the travel arrangements, and the tickets were purchased while Kogito was delivering his lecture.

By the time Kogito made his way to the house where he was born, it was after eleven p.m. and his mother had already gone to sleep. The next morning, Kogito was up early. When he peered down the covered passageway that led to an adjoining bungalow, he could see the silhouette of his naked mother, illuminated by the reflected river-dazzle that leaked into the dark parlour through the gaps in the wooden rain shutters. Backlit like that, Kogito's mother looked almost like a young girl as (with the help of her sister-in-law) she twined the turban she always wore in public around her head. At that moment, his mother didn't seem to belong entirely to this world; it was as if she had already begun to make the transition over to the Other Side. Her abnormally large ear, which resembled a fish's dorsal fin, was hanging down from her emaciated profile, almost as if that misshapen appendage itself was absorbed in deep meditation.

Later, when they were sitting across from each other at the breakfast table, Kogito's mother began to speak in the local Iyo dialect, which tends to feature more exclamatory sentences than standard Japanese. 'I've been praying for a chance to see you since the beginning of last spring, Kogito!' she began. (It was already fall.) 'And now that you're sitting here, I still half feel as if it's my fantasy eating breakfast in front of me. It doesn't help that I can barely hear what you're saying, of course. I've gotten quite deaf, and on top of that you still don't open your mouth wide enough when you speak, just like when you were a child!

'But anyway, right now I feel as if this is half reality and half fanciful daydream! Besides, lately, no matter what's going on, I'm never entirely certain that it's really happening! When I was wishing that I could see you, it almost seemed as though half of you was already here. At times like that, if I voiced my opinions to you out loud, the other people in the house would just laugh indulgently. However, if you happened to be on television talking about something and I said to the TV set, "You're wrong about that, you know," even my great-grandchild would jump in and try to stop me, saying, "That's rude to Uncle Kogito." They think it's amusing when I talk to an invisible person, but isn't the

television itself a kind of fantastical illusion? Just because there's no machine attached to my private hallucinations, does that make them any less "real" than the images on TV? I mean, what's the basis for that kind of thinking?

'Anyway, it seems as if almost everything is already an apparition to me, you know? Everyday life seems like television, and I can't tell whether somebody is really here with me or not. I'm surrounded by apparitions. One day soon I, too, will stop being real, and I'll become nothing more than a phantasm myself! But this valley has always been swarming with spectres, so I may not even notice when I make the shift over to the Other Side.'

After Kogito finished his breakfast, his younger sister gave him a ride to Matsuyama Airport so he could catch a plane that left before noon. When his sister called Chikashi in Tokyo to report that Kogito's departure had gone according to plan, she added, 'As Mother was nodding off after breakfast, she said, "A little while ago I saw an apparition of Kogito, and we had a nice chat." '

When he heard this story later, Kogito felt unexpectedly moved by his mother's remark. After committing suicide, Goro hadn't really noticed that he'd left this world and become a spirit on the Other Side, had he? When he thought about it that way, Kogito came to see the fluidity between the two dimensions as a positive thing, especially late at night, after he'd been talking to Goro through the magical medium of Tagame.

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One day during the period when Kogito was indulging in long, intense Tagame dialogues on a nightly basis, Chikashi cornered him and, typically, burst out with a torrent of words that had obviously been germinating in her mind for quite a while.

'After all this time,' she began, 'when I hear you carrying on in your study every evening into the wee hours, complaining to Goro and then seeming to strain your ears for a response, I can't help wondering whether this isn't exactly the sort of "absurdity" you dislike so much.

I don't see what good can possibly come of indulging in this sort of charade night after night, and I'm really at my wits' end. Every time I hear you talking so impassionedly to Goro I can sense that you're waiting for a reply, and I know it must be terribly painful for you. I sympathize completely, and I truly do feel sorry for you. It's the same as if by some chance you suddenly died in an accident or something. I think about how puzzled and devastated Akari would be, and how sorry I'd feel for him. It isn't that I think you're doing these late-night seances as a way of gearing up for your own journey to the Other Side, but still...

'In any case, because your study is right above our bedrooms, it's really hard on us when your voice comes floating down. It's a bit like water dripping slowly through a bamboo strainer, and I think it's probably bothering Akari even more than me. No matter how low you keep your voice, and even when it's obvious that you're just listening to Goro's tapes on your headphones, I don't think it's possible for Akari to simply ignore what's going on. So I'm just wondering whether you might be willing to put an end to your sessions, for us?'

And then while Kogito watched, appalled, Chikashi unexpectedly began to cry. He had no choice but to admit that for these past few months he had been so engrossed in living by the Rule of Tagame that he had forgotten that there were rules about living as part of a family, too. On another level, he had been startled by the aside Chikashi had tossed out in the middle of her speech: *It isn't that I think you're doing these late-night seances as a way of gearing up for your own journey to the Other Side, but still...*

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'But I just can't do that!' Kogito wailed. He was alone in his study, lying face down on his army cot with the sheets pulled tightly over his head, talking to himself. 'I know my behaviour has been shameful, getting so immersed in Tagame to the point where it's become a kind of crazy obsession. But there's another person involved in this. I can't very well just announce, unilaterally, "Sorry, pal, it's over." Think about poor

Goro, all alone on the Other Side. How terrible would that be for him?'

Kogito got up, switched on the light and pulled the Duralumin trunk out from under the bed. He had just remembered something Goro had said on one of the tapes, and now, using his own topical annotations on the labels as a guide, he found the tape in question, popped it into Tagame and hastily cued up the relevant passage. Then, as if urged on by the slow, whirring vibration of the cassette recorder, he gave a decisive nod and pressed the play button.

'Of course, you're always like this,' Goro's voice began, ragging on Kogito right out of the gate. 'But from what I hear these days, true to form, you've been acting like a mouse trapped in a bag. When you get right down to it, you've brought all your suffering on yourself, and now you're floundering around helplessly. Chikashi's been complaining to me, you know,' Goro went on. 'She says that same big-shot scumbag journalist has been denouncing you again, in the nastiest, most contemptible way. That vendetta has already been dragging on for twenty-five years now. Don't you think it's time for you to let it go?

'Lately you've been in pretty low spirits, and you've brought Chikashi and Akari down as well. There's no way you can say that's a good thing. Even without having to cope with a depressed husband, Chikashi is someone who's experienced more than her fair share of hard times. When the busybodies say that your family appears to have a pretty cushy life, you should just reply that the pleasant things pass soon enough, as if they'd never happened, but the painful experiences tend to linger on for a long, long time.

'The sort of person who's forever revelling in every little delight with an excessive, borderline-abnormal kind of euphoria, and who does nothing but cling to those lovely airbrushed memories: that, in my opinion, is a thoroughly unhappy and unfortunate person. Chikashi has been through far too much suffering already, but in spite of that she has never turned into the sort of weak person who's always longing to return to happier days. Don't you agree?

'Anyway, I've been thinking about your situation, and I was wondering, how would it be if you took a little breather and left town

for a while? You've been toiling away at the novelist's life for all these years, and I really think you could use some quarantine time right about now. I think if you just got away from your novels for a while... If you left for good it would be rough on Chikashi and Akari, that's why I say "for a while". What I mean is, you need to impose a quarantine on yourself and take a break from the sort of life where you're being confronted by the distressing gutter journalism of this country on a daily basis.'

'Give me a minute to check something in the dictionary,' Kogito replied. 'When you first mentioned this, some time ago, I had a passing familiarity with the word "quarantine", so I didn't take the time to look it up and find out exactly what it meant. But the word hasn't taken root in my mind to the point where I would actually use it.'

After pressing the pause button, Kogito brought out one of his dictionaries and flipped the pages until he found what he was looking for:

> **quarantine** (kwor-an-teen) *n.* 1. A state, period, or place of isolation in which people or animals that have arrived from elsewhere or been exposed to infectious or contagious diseases are placed. *v.* [with object] to put a person or animal in quarantine. 2. *n.* The period of this isolation. Origin: mid–17th century, from Italian *quarantina*, 'forty days', from *quaranta*, 'forty'.

After he had finished reading those definitions, Kogito turned back to Tagame, making an effort to keep his voice as low as possible while simultaneously striving to pronounce every word with perfect clarity. 'Listen, Goro,' he said, before pressing the play button again. 'I know you're using this word to try to advance a certain agenda, and I understand exactly what you're driving at.'

'Of course, it doesn't have to be exactly forty days,' responded Goro's recorded voice. 'You might have a chance to stay away longer. But what do you think about Berlin as a temporary haven, to put some distance between you and that journalist? (On the bright side, *he* isn't getting any younger, either!) For me at least, Berlin is an unforgettable

place. If someone asked me what connection that city might have with your self-imposed quarantine, I couldn't say exactly, but...'

'Berlin, eh? Now that you mention it, I did receive an invitation to go there, for considerably longer than forty days!' Kogito exclaimed, hearing the surprise and excitement in his own voice, which had grown suddenly loud as he momentarily forgot about the need to whisper. 'I'll check now, but I think the offer's still good.'

Whereupon Kogito stopped the tape and went to his study to look for the file in question. S. Fischer Verlag (the publisher who had brought out the first German translations of Kogito's early novels) was still doing so, even though sales weren't what they used to be. Every few years – or, more usually, every ten or twelve years – a new translation of one of Kogito's novels would come out in hardcover, but as a rule the subsequent printings would be in paperback. Whenever Kogito gave readings at places such as the Frankfurt Book Fair or cultural associations in Hamburg and Munich, there would be a book signing afterwards, where they were always able to sell quite a few of the colourful, beautifully designed paperbacks of his work. And now he had been offered a lectureship at the Berlin Free University to commemorate S. Fischer, the founder of the eponymous publishing house. The course was to begin in the middle of November, so he still had time to accept. The department's offer was generous, and they even said that they would keep the slot open for him through the first half of the term.

By the time he climbed back into bed, Kogito had dug up the most recent fax from a secretary in S. Fischer Verlag's editorial division and learned that he still had three days to let them know whether he wanted to accept the position of guest lecturer at the Free University. To his own amazement, in a matter of a few minutes he had made up his mind to take Goro's rather drastic advice and get out of town for a while.

The tape on which Goro suggested a 'quarantine' had been recorded several months earlier, but now his casual suggestion had become a necessity, for a different reason: namely, Kogito's need to

pull himself together and get over his addiction to talking to Goro through Tagame. Even after Chikashi's heartfelt complaint, earlier that evening, Kogito hadn't been able to leave the cassette recorder on the bookshelf for even this one night. And as it turned out it was Goro, his Tagame partner, who had dropped the hint that had galvanized him into positive action. Somehow, mixed in with his decision to make a bold move, Kogito felt a resurgence of his old dependence on Goro.

He was just about to ask, 'What's going to become of our sessions with Tagame?' But then, without pressing the play button, he answered his own question. Or, to put it more precisely, he consciously crafted a response along the lines of what he thought Goro might have said in real life: *That's for you to decide. But when Chikashi criticized your behaviour last night, rather than any annoyance or inconvenience to her and Akari, she was probably more concerned about finding a way to free you from your addiction to our Tagame sessions, don't you think?*

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Nevertheless, right up until the night before he was scheduled to leave for wintry Berlin, Kogito was unable to give up his nightly ritual of talking to Goro by way of Tagame – although he did, at least, make every effort to keep his voice low. The thing was, when he told Chikashi the next day about his decision to go into Tagame-free quarantine in Berlin, she naturally interpreted this action as a direct response to her request: a way for Kogito to take a break from his 'seances' with Goro. That being the case, no matter how much he lowered his voice, Chikashi was probably still aware that the conversations were continuing, but because the end was in sight her silence on the matter seemed to constitute a sort of tacit approval, or at least forbearance.

Then one morning, as Kogito's departure date was rapidly approaching, Chikashi (who had been busying herself every evening with packing and repacking his trunk) said, 'Last night I felt like going through Goro's letters, and I came across a watercolour painting that he sent from Berlin. Would you like to see it? It's a landscape, on lovely paper. It's actually drawn with coloured pencils, then blurred with a

wet brush so it ends up looking like a watercolour. The painting seems to have a really buoyant, happy feeling. On the back is written THIS MORNING IS THE ONLY DAY THAT'S BEEN THIS CLEAR SINCE I'VE BEEN HERE, and on the front, in the lower corner, is Goro's signature.'

Kogito looked at the landscape painting, which was on soft, thick, pale-sepia paper with slightly ragged edges, like a pricey wedding invitation. In classic Goro-style, the paper had been roughly torn into a rectangular shape. The centrepiece of the composition was a huge tree, seen from above: stout trunk, bare treetops, and a chaotic tangle of leafless branches with attenuated tips, all minutely detailed in such a way as to delineate the subtleties of light and shade amid the homogeneous hues of grey and brown. The only green came from the perennial creepers that snaked around the tree trunk, while patches of deep blue sky thickly sprinkled with fluffy white clouds could be glimpsed through the lacy jumble of bare, thin branches.

'Goro must have wanted to paint that sky because it was such a gorgeous colour,' Chikashi said. 'I remember he told me on the phone that Berlin was cloudy every day, from morning on, and then it got dark around four p.m. He said things like, "Berlin in winter isn't a fit place for a human being." But that makes it seem even more remarkable that this painting is so bright and full of life. He was probably walking around the city when an unusual set of coloured pencils in an art supply store caught his eye, and he just bought them on the spur of the moment. And then, when he was looking out his hotel window at the first clear sky since he'd arrived, he suddenly felt like painting it...' ■

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