

social exercises for modern relationships

or: it's lonely when you're not around

One day, Yamamoto Masami decided she'd had enough. She would give her husband one more week—just one—to wake up and acknowledge her, appreciate her, make love to her (and, she hoped, not someone else; she couldn't bear the thought,) before she would leave. It had been over a year since the last one, and now that she had to think about it, perhaps never for the first two. A terribly sad state of affairs indeed.

Seven years ago, Masami-san was swept off her feet by one Yamamoto Hiroshi, a self-made man with a keen eye, which granted him a reputation as a true entrepreneur. It wasn't about the money, far from it: no, Tanaka Masami (as she once was called, what seems like a lifetime ago) didn't even know he had money. In any event, her family were fairly well-to-do—not enviously so, but enough to send Masami-san to the best schools, earning her place in the University of Tokyo, to become a respected barrister.

About Hiroshi-kun, he was starting up a café-by-day/nightclub-by-night in the Roppongi district, which had already begun to show signs of his golden touch. His formal education wasn't particularly admirable—though those that knew him figured it was because he was bored of it, rather than struggling—but he managed to pull through, quickly finishing studies in some obscure course at Waseda University (at least it was still a very high-ranking university.) Apart from studies, he was a handsome-looking man with a proud posture and a kind face. Masami-san herself had an inherent beauty, thanks to her mother's genes, so the pair were something of a perfect couple.

They met on the steps of a public park. It was a nice day, and both happened to be having their lunch break on those steps. Unfortunately, due to Hiroshi-kun's leisurely pace, he had invariably become late: he had already overshot his lunch break by 14 minutes. Masami-san had slightly better timing, having stood up to brush her coat down before walking the steps and back to work (to be five minutes early.) Hiroshi-kun, being late, stood up and turned around in one swift motion, the years of kendo practice being put to good use. Half-eaten lunch in hand, he began to power up the steps, knocking right into Masami-san and emptying his *gyoza ramen* right onto her.

Somehow, after the initial anger and frustration, they fell in love. A whirlwind romance, they were married with full parental blessing within three months (and most of that time being wedding preparation.) They spent a night in a five-star hotel, before getting back to work, deciding to take a proper honeymoon half a year down the track, when it was slightly more convenient. During the Christmas break, they jetted through Europe, with most of their time in a cute bed and breakfast cottage in French country-side. After four weeks, they decided it was time to return to Tokyo, back to the real world.

How, then, did things get so bad? It seemed like everything was going perfectly, so how did it come to the desperate and melancholic act of separation? It would probably had to have started about a couple of years ago—after Hiroshi-kun was taken ill for a week or two, which was strange seeing as he hardly ever fell sick. He exercised regularly, they both ate fairly healthy meals, and it seemed Hiroshi-kun had always been blessed with a strong immune system.

The family doctor wasn't entirely sure what was wrong with Hiroshi-kun, only being able to order test after test to no avail. It's not that Hiroshi-kun was particularly ill, either: there was nothing of a violent sickness present. He simply didn't have the strength to get out of bed. During this period his hearing diminished, he found it hard to see (a struggle for someone used to clear eyesight one's entire life) and from time to time was unable to tell when the doctor was taking blood, along with any other sense of touch.

A little over a week, or a little under two, on a fine Spring morning with the *sakura* petals gently wafting down, he jumped out of bed with a start. He felt fine. Better than fine in fact, he felt amazingly well rested. All his senses were back to normal, and he didn't feel sluggish in the slightest. He resumed work that very day. Just like that, everything was fixed, and they soon forgot about the episode almost altogether.

day one of seven

anata doesn't need to check on any of his businesses for the next week. Or at least he can check remotely from his computer. This makes it a good week to start. I applied for my leave a few days before, taking this Tuesday to the next. To start off this judging week with the maximum possibility of success, I decided to change our regular breakfast of a biscuit with coffee: I will cook him a special breakfast and see if he reacts in any way.

I start out with high hopes, almost fantasising about the nice things *anata* might say or do. I imagine being swept up in his embrace, whispering nice things to me, like he used to, making me feel warm and giddy. The thought of past events is enough to put a smile on my face, hoping, always hoping.

I finish cooking, humming to myself, and quickly tidy up to make things presentable. I straighten a lock of hair away from my field of vision, and head toward the bedroom to wake him. Before I take two steps, he shuffles through the kitchen door, looking a little tired, a little dazed. He's looked like that pretty much permanently for quite a while now. Oh well, I think, not exactly to plan but that's okay. I greet him warmly, asking after how he slept.

"Unh."

I hold myself from frowning, trying desperately not to let my hopes dash to the ground like so many times before. Perhaps he'll have more energy to talk to me nicely after he's eaten. Yes, I tell myself, he's just tired. I regain balance on the cliff-edge of my emotions, trying my hardest not to fall into the darkness of

despair that I have often in the past. I fake a smile and usher him to eat before breakfast gets cold.

He grunts at me that he's not hungry; that he's heading out, without saying where. I try to enquire where my husband is going without making it sound like I'm prying, but he manages to keep his destination shrouded in obscurity. I'm losing my balance, thinking our first day together has already been cast aside. Changing tack, I ask him when he'll be home; perhaps I could prepare a lunch for us to eat out in the courtyard?

He says but a few words as he walks away, towards the front door. He won't be home until late evening. My blood throbs through my head, like some kind of Molotov cocktail of confusion and disappointment, all mixed in with loneliness and that special feeling of dashed hope. The door slams on his way out, almost with an air of finality.

I sink to the floor, leaning back against the kitchen bench, willing myself to cry. I might feel a little better if I could just cry. But nothing comes. Perhaps I've already run out of tears.

hiroshi-kun's world view, part one

The first time Hiroshi-kun lost all his senses, he knew he should have been fearful. Something was very wrong and nobody knew how to fix it. Yet, oddly enough, he didn't feel very much at all. Looking back on it, he rationalised his lack of conviction by attributing it to the illness. If it could be called as such. In any event, he often told himself he couldn't feel any emotion, just like all the other senses he had lost to the condition.

He felt no fear of death (the prospect had never bothered him, perhaps because it was one absolute certainty, therefore he felt no need to worry about it,) nor any regret (he had managed to achieve a fair amount in his life,) no sadness at the thought of never seeing his wife again, no curiosity as to why this was happening. He felt nothing.

After recovering, he assumed things would go back to normal. They mostly did, too: he could do all the things he used to do, he felt love for his wife, he became curious as to what had happened to him. He was returned all his senses, for the while at least. Every now and again though, he would have one of ‘those’ dreams. He couldn’t call them nightmares; they weren’t horrific or frightening in any way. Sometimes, he would dream that he had awoken, and become unable to move. Unable to sense. His dreams would mimic his condition to the letter. It felt so real, but every time he would wake up from it, unharmed. The dreams continued in this fashion, starting out around once a week, and then twice, and then once every two days, until he was having the exact same recurring dream every single night, without fail.

It didn’t bother him, though. They were just dreams; he himself was fine. There was nothing for him to worry about.

day two of seven

Brave face, brave face. You can do this, I tell myself. It’s another day, a second chance. For a day at home, I still take care with my appearance, hoping *anata* will compliment me in some way. Steering on the safe side, slightly away from my emotional cliff’s edge, I fill my mind with nondescript thoughts: what I should wear, how I should style my hair. If I spend my time hoping like yesterday, I might end up a mess on the floor again. I must put on a brave face. I’ll make him breakfast again and see how things go from there.

I run through the list in my head, keeping myself occupied: eggs, fish, tofu, rice. I decide a more Japanese breakfast might work better, watching the ingredients come together until I am happy with their result. The kettle thermometer tells me it has hit eighty degrees: *anata* likes his tea hotter than tradition dictates. I close my eyes as I take in the aroma of *genmaicha*, the roasted rice smelling almost like heaven to my nose, especially on cold days.

When I enter the bedroom *anata* is nearly finished dressing. He always stands in front of the mirror, doing the button second from the top downwards, tuck-

ing his shirt into his trousers, then the top button before a tying a full Windsor. Not that he really ever needed to wear a suit, but he usually preferred it instead of having to find something suitable to wear for work: a suit required less thought, he always said. Today though, he was pulling on a long-sleeved rib knit. I wonder whether he's going to stay home today, given his casual style.

Thinking about it, I haven't spent the time to look at him closely, not for a while. Underneath the slight layer of age (just a couple of lines on his forehead, and the way stubble makes a man look older) he was still there, my husband, the man I fell in love with. A sudden urge overtakes me, and I approach him, reaching out my hands to hold him while he looks at the mirror. Before that happens, just a step away, he turns around, and I stop in my tracks. He doesn't even smile. My hands fall to my sides, as I quietly say good morning. He mumbles a hello back, before walking away into the bathroom. I stand awkwardly, left with a reflection of myself and the slight warmth of air, the trace that says a person was once beside me.

Fidgeting, I begin to say something before I think better of it. Thinking better of it again, I call out to him that breakfast is ready, before returning to the kitchen to finish setting up. He walks in a minute after, and sits down across from me. I scoop him a bowl of rice, hot from the cooker, and tell him to start eating. He picks at the food as if he hates it. I tilt my head slightly to one side, asking him if he would like a cracked egg atop his rice. He declines with the same tired responses I've heard a thousand times.

We eat in total silence, as if the air were too heavy with discomfort for us to speak. Perhaps we just have nothing left to say. Either way seems just as discouraging a situation, and I begin to wonder what we could possibly do, if we did spend more than our usual half-hour segments together. A nervous shock hits me; what if he's bored? What if I hold no more mystery for him, and have become nothing, a mere memory of someone once interesting and desirable?

The queasy feeling this line of thought produces nearly makes me throw up.

hiroshi-kun's world view, part two

The glass plate was installed one night while he was sleeping, a few weeks after his illness. At least, that's what he likened it to, though in all fairness it might have been Perspex. In any event, it was like a sheet of something had been placed in between him and the world. It took him a little while to realise it was there; since it was new it was still fairly clear, free from scratches or smudge-marks. The telltale sign was simply the hollow, distant sound his wife made when she opened her eyes at him, smiling and saying good morning.

His heartbeat sped up, fear or anxiety giving rise to panic. Gripping the bed-sheet, he tested his range of motion: had he gotten worse? Had his illness regressed? Making sure, he found he could grip and move just fine, even if the sensation was a little dulled. He sighed one of relief, getting up out of bed to splash some water on his face.

It was when the water rolled down his own eyeballs, as it would a window, that he realised something was wrong. He wasn't imagining it. He shook his head almost violently, and then blinked hard, hoping it was his imagination. When he peered into the mirror afterward, everything looked like usual. He sighed for the second time today, thinking his recurring dreams were beginning to get to him. He finished getting ready, deciding he would make an appointment with the doctor just in case.

Each time the light flashed across his eyes, Hiroshi-kun noticed the glass plate even more. Each flash highlighted slight scratches, scratches he hadn't noticed before. His glass plate wasn't even scratch-resistant, he thought. He wondered for a second whether this was some indication or foretelling of his upcoming demise, but dismissed the idea. Not that it was totally ludicrous—no doctor, nor test, had yet diagnosed his problem—only the thought that he was too young to die prevented his mind from considering its likelihood.

He left the doctor's office with no more answers than when he arrived. What had been imparted to him was get some rest, and try not to stare at computer screens for too long. Other than that, the nagging presence of the plate grated on his nerves, which made him squint the entire drive home. The scratches were getting worse.

He apologised to Masami-san about the time of his arrival, and that he was going to skip dinner and head straight for bed: he was feeling tired, and the doctor told him to rest. She smiled, in the pretty way she always smiled at him and him alone, and gave him a kiss before playfully pushing him towards the bed. Pulling the covers up to his neck, she told him to get lots of rest, and gave him a peck on his forehead before turning out the lights and closing the door.

She snuck in an hour or two later, falling asleep with her arms around him. Hiroshi-kun slept much better after that. He always did when she was there.

day four of seven

anata didn't tell me where he was going. The worst part is that he hasn't come home for the past two nights. Not a word, nothing. I tried all his regular numbers, but nobody seems to know where he is. Disappointment transforms into anger, before worry. The police disregarded my fears, merely saying he'd probably come home soon. That was yesterday.

The first thing that came into my head was that he had been in an accident of some kind, and was lying up in some hospital, hurt and wondering why I wasn't there by his side. The second thought was that he was shackled up with some other girl. The third, but in an odd way the most frightening, was that he had left for all time, wiping his hands clean of his wife. Clean of me.

I can't help it, the fear and the doubt and the anxiety all hit me. I rush to the bathroom and feel ill over the sink, clutching to it until my knuckles turn white. It feels like a migraine to end all migraines arrives, the blood coursing through me, rippling pain through my head. Minutes turn to hours and after a while, I feel slightly better, enough to move. My hands slip and I fall with a slight thud to

the floor, my body wracked with shudders. Finally, for the first time in months, the emotion on my face matches how I feel inside. The tears fall as free as leaves in Autumn, and in a fairly standard, undignified manner, unintelligible sobs escape my lips. I'm dying, I think. My heart is dying.

hiroshi-kun's world view, part three

Within weeks Hiroshi-kun could barely see, hear or smell. His sense of touch diminished at a slightly slower rate, but soon after the others, he had pretty much lost them all. For some reason, he kept it hidden from Masami-san, even as its effects worsened. He didn't want to worry her. It sounds silly when one thinks about it in hindsight, but that's how he felt about the matter: he didn't want her to worry.

A lot of the time he couldn't hear what Masami-san said to him, but even if he had, he didn't have much energy with which to answer. Their relationship was showing signs of wear—he might nearly be blind, but not enough to miss that—even so, he had no idea how to fix it; in this state he could barely comfort her. He wanted to tell her every day, but didn't know how. He could barely say hello. He had to concentrate on getting better first. After that, it would be easy for him to show her what he felt inside. He would fix things.

He visited the family doctor fairly regularly, for tests, then for the results, and then more tests, and so on. After a while he began to visit the hospital, as the tests became more intrusive and serious, and slowly it consumed most of his days. Instead of overseeing his businesses, he was getting lumbar punctures, biopsies and other painful procedures. Still, just like last time, nobody could give him any answers. Not a top surgeon from America, not an herbal-tincture-and-acupuncturist from China. He was a lost cause.

Hiroshi-kun was unable to renew his license when his condition deteriorated. He didn't mind too much, though: hopefully all the walking would keep his tiring system from fully shutting down. That night was one of these, walking towards the train station, after seven hours of needles and questions. The pain he

could bear; it wore on his system, but he was too stubborn to admit defeat. He wondered, as he sometimes did, whether he should have been honest with Masami-san to begin with—should he have told her he wasn't doing well?

The sounds of a backfiring old car only just made it through his ears. That is to say, through the glass plate first. He didn't hear the direction it was coming from, or the direction that it was going. He was concentrating hard, trying to see through the heavy scratches of the plate, to make his way home. Unfortunately, that also meant he didn't hear the car, sliding on the wet roads, mounting the kerb and running over him.

day five of seven

“Hello, Yamamoto-san? This is the Nihon Sekijujisha Iryo Center calling. I'm afraid it's about your husband, Yamamoto Hiroshi-san...”

The Nihon Sekijujisha Iryo Center—that was a Hospital in Shibuya. I quickly scribbled the information the nurse quoted me, before hanging up and rushing out the door. *anata* had been in some kind of accident, that much they were sure of. However, they had to identify him through his dental records, because he had no wallet or information on him. They were sorry it took this long to find out who he was. He had not yet regained consciousness.

My little hybrid zips along as fast as I dared to go—probably too fast—and I make my way to the Hospital and through the halls until I find Hiroshi-kun's room. He was still hooked up to a machine that helped him breathe. There were cuts and scratches on his face and arms, not to mention the large bruises. I gasp at the sight of him.

I didn't know what to do; hesitatingly, I tiptoe into the room, sitting down beside his bed, and reach out a hand, lightly touching his, with the tips of my fingers. Then his cheek, his forehead, his nose, his lips. His eyes were closed, but when my slightest snuffle interrupts the silence, I watch in surprise as they open.

“Masami... *suma*—... *sumanakatta*... *hontou ni*...”

I know he's sorry. For the first time in too long, he looks at me the way he used to. His chapped lips crack as he tries to smile for me. I break down in tears, telling him never to do this again. Never. He's stupid, a *baka*, stupid stupid. I hate him, I hate him, but I love him. I always will.

“Masami *mo... aishite-iru...*”

I know. He loves me too.

I don't think I'll have to count the rest of the week out anymore.

some days are clearer than others

Hiroshi-kun woke up to the sound of his wife beginning to cry. He almost laughed. He **heard** her. He could see her clearly, her eyes bloodshot and sleepless, puffy lids barely containing all those tears, her quivering lips: the signs of a major weeping session. He smelt the *parfum* on her hand, and the culmination of scents that he associated as her smell: her delicates washing liquid, her shampoo and conditioner, her moisturising cream. He felt her lightly brush his lips, felt the sting of pain as he jostled his injuries, felt love and happiness—from both within himself, and from Masami-san.

Hiroshi-kun almost laughed, but instead only managed to smile. The glass plate had shattered. Something within him, some sort of instinct, told him that he had broken free of the illness, forever. The illness that had nearly killed them both. He told Masami-san that he was sorry. He told her that he loved her.

Sorry: he told her that he **loves** her.

Over the next few weeks, Hiroshi-kun stayed recuperating in Hospital. Masami-san never left him alone. He told her everything, the regression, the tests, that no, he didn't cheat on her, and no, he was never intending on leaving her, but yes, he had been in an accident. He left out no small detail. He realised how stupid it was to keep it from her.

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Sometimes, when Masami-san looks back on this period of their life together, the depression and loneliness register clearly on her face. Sometimes, a tear rolls down her cheek. Every single time this happens, Hiroshi-kun sees this, walks over and bundles her up in his arms. He whispers into her ear: he says that everything is alright. No, better: everything is good. She smiles at him, and he smiles back at her. She tells him she loves him. He loves her too.

She thinks it's lonely when he's not around. He thinks so too.

Original works
guan ming teo

glossary



- **Acupuncturist:** a practitioner of Acupuncture—a system of complementary medicine that involves pricking the skin or tissues with needles, used to alleviate pain and to treat various physical, mental, and emotional conditions. Originating in ancient China
- ***anata:*** a wife will call her husband *anata*. The true meaning of this word simply means ‘you’, though it has special meaning in spousal context
- ***baka:*** meaning idiot in Japanese
- **Biopsy:** an examination of tissue removed from a living body to discover the presence, cause, or extent of a disease
- **Full Windsor:** a style of knot for a necktie
- ***genmaicha:*** a type of green leaf tea with roasted rice
- ***gyoza ramen:*** *gyoza* meaning dumplings, *ramen* meaning noodles—a noodle dish with meat dumplings on top
- ***hontou ni:*** *hontou* meaning ‘honest’ as a way of asking someone to believe them, *ni* is the Japanese particle showing what the indirect object is (who or what an action is directed to)—‘Believe me, I do’
- ***-kun:*** Japanese honorifics. *-kun* is used to address men who are younger or the same age as the speaker. A male might address female inferiors by *-kun*, usually in schools or companies. It can be attached to both surnames and given names. It is less polite than *-san*. It isn’t used between women or when addressing one’s superiors
- **Lumbar puncture:** the procedure of taking fluid from the spine in the lower back through a hollow needle, usually done for diagnostic purposes

- **(Masami) *mo aishite-iru***: *mo* is the Japanese particle to denote ‘as-well’ or ‘also’, *aishite-iru* meaning love—essentially, ‘I love you too’
- **Molotov cocktail**: a crude incendiary device typically consisting of a bottle filled with flammable liquid and with a means of ignition. The term in the short is used figuratively, not literally
- **Nihon Sekijujisha Iryo Center**: an emergency medical center in Shibuya (Tokyo, Japan)
- ***parfum***: a fragrant liquid typically made from essential oils extracted from flowers and spices, used to impart a pleasant smell to one’s body or clothes
- **Perspex**: solid transparent plastic made of polymethyl methacrylate
- **Roppongi**: a district of Minato Ward (Tokyo, Japan,) home to an active nightclub scene
- ***sakura***: meaning cherry, from cherry trees. In Japan, the cherry tree blossoms (*Hanami*: cherry-blossom viewing parties) is a yearly spectacle and event
- ***-san***: Japanese honorifics. *-san* is a title of respect added to a name. It can be used with both male and female names, and with either surnames or given names. It can also be attached to the name of occupations and titles
 - ***sumanakatta***: one of the (many) ways of saying sorry in Japanese
 - **Tincture**: a medicine made by dissolving a drug in alcohol