

# Cyclist : Go Over the Mountain Pass

*Murasawa Takehiko*

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## « Main Characters »

Murata Shohei	Director of Mikawa Heart Clinic
Mamiko	Shohei's wife
Murohara Yui	Japan Airlines cabin attendant
Aleda	RCC (Rapha Cycling Club) manager
Christine	RCC London member, metastatic breast cancer patient
Uematsu Ayaka	Female reporter at a Fukuoka TV station
Sugimoto Eiichi	Sports Bike Shop Manager
Nakae Masao	Associate Professor, Cardiology, Chikushi University
Yamada Hideki	Professor, Thoracic Surgery, Chikushi University
Hoshino Kenji	Director, Orthopedic Clinic
Hagio Natsumi	Outpatient Nurse, Mikawa Heart Clinic
Irie Yumi	Administrative Staff, Mikawa Heart Clinic
Esaki Rumi	Head Nurse, Mikawa Heart Clinic
Kawazoe Rina	Childhood friend of Murata Shohei

*Although names that evoke real people and organizations appear, this novel is fiction based on fact. With that in mind, I would like to thank the RCC (Rapha Cycling Club) and my cycling friends for giving me a meaningful life. I hope that Christine and Aleda's activities to support researchers will spread and that great medical breakthroughs will be made for many women suffering from metastatic breast cancer.*

## Cyclist : Go Over the Mountain

*Takehiko Murasawa*

### Chapter 1: London Flight

How much time has passed since taking off from London Heathrow Airport on a misty, cold, rainy evening? Even though it was only a few hours ago, the cool 19 degrees Celsius air he felt on his skin as he moved between terminals already feels nostalgic to him.

A reserved silence in the midst of the constant noise, like the tinnitus he has recently started to deal with. If he slept a little longer in this comfortable JAL seat, the boiling Japanese summer would surely be a rough welcome to him, who had just completed a small challenge on his first short trip in a long time. Come to think of it, Heathrow in the early morning on the way there was also an airport shrouded in a thin mist so quiet that it seemed like a plateau in late autumn.

Murata Shohei, lying on his back, woke up from a light sleep when he sensed a cabin attendant hiding under the soft pale gray bedding to check that his seat belt was fastened. However, he didn't feel bad about it at all.

On his first precious vacation in five years, he really wanted to enjoy the slightly longer and more luxurious time in business class on a European flight flying south, avoiding Russian skies, but as he said goodbye to England beyond the window as the rain streamed by, he easily succumbed to the sleepiness that hit him as soon as we took off.

While the time difference was undeniable, the fatigue he had accumulated during the past few months of preparations and the many jobs he had put together, as well as the short trip he had taken, had finally come flooding back to him now that he was on his way home. He fondly recalled that he had taken a similar flight schedule the previous two times, and had barely needed to sleep on the plane. Perhaps this was the cruelty of the five years since turning 60, and he was trying to accept the creeping of old age.

He had left Fukuoka on the last flight to Haneda last Thursday.

The London flight arrived at Haneda on Tuesday evening, and he would transfer to a flight to Fukuoka immediately after customs clearance, and it would be past 11pm before he finally reached his bed at home. And from the next morning, in a corner of Japan where temperatures easily exceed 35 degrees every day, his mundane work-filled days would return to him as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had happened.

At the outpatient clinic, where a doctor friend is in charge, a false notice is posted saying, "The director will be away on a business trip for a few days at a conference." Since he had actually had the opportunity to give presentations at many conferences before COVID-19, there are probably no patients who would doubt this and question the staff.

In the past few years, he had never been away from the clinic for even a few hours, let alone a day, to take a break from outpatient care, but his long-awaited and hectic secret vacation was about to come to an end.

"Murata-san, I'm very sorry to have woken you up while you were resting. However, we will be flying in an airspace where strong turbulence is expected for a while. The captain just gave the seat belt sign. Please fasten your seat belt over your bedding when you are resting."

The flight attendant in a white jacket spoke to the still sleepy Shohei with a sympathetic look on her face, and did not forget to smile kindly.

"My name is Murohara, Mr. Murata. I've been taking a good rest so I've refrained from serving you, but I'll come back when the seatbelt sign is off. Please wait a little while."

"Yes, thank you."

He had just woken up and didn't understand the situation well, but it seemed that enough time had passed that the other passengers had been served. He felt like he had missed an in-flight movie, and Shohei's usual stinginess reared its head.

After a period of repeated violent vertical and horizontal shaking, the seatbelt sign finally went off.

This seat, 7A, which has no seat in front of it, felt more private and quite comfortable. It was the same on the way there, but perhaps because of the extremely weak yen, or perhaps because Japanese people's enthusiasm for traveling abroad has cooled down, for some reason there were hardly any Japanese passengers around, even though it was a JAL flight on a major route in July. It was a very strange feeling for him, as it had been five years since he last flew there, but he didn't hear any Japanese around him and it felt good that his long-awaited European trip was still continuing.

Waking up like this, Shohei realized he was feeling hungry for some reason. This was probably because the plane was leaving London in the evening, which was late dinner time in European time.

Almost at the same time he was thinking of pressing the call button to call the flight attendant,

Cabin attendant Murohara appeared in front of Shohei in a white jacket, as if she had sensed his feelings, and gave him a coquettish smile as if to say, "You can't hold it in any longer, can you?" This was exactly what he thought, and Shohei naturally returned the longing smile.

"Murata-san, would you like something to eat? At this time, we are offering you a choice of dishes from the a la carte menu. Please feel free to ask. What would you like to drink? As you can see on the list, we can also provide a variety of wines."

"Ah, no alcohol. Unfortunately, I can't handle it. When I was younger, I had some on an airplane and felt sick from Paris until we arrived at Narita. That's traumatizing for me."

Murohara, the flight attendant, seemed to suddenly have a funny feeling, and she smiled at Shohei like friends would, patiently waiting for him to order.

"Understood. Please wait a moment."

After racking her brains and taking her time to choose a few dishes to order, Murohara recited the menu without showing any sign of annoyance as she disappeared behind the curtain.

Shohei also liked to use the controller in her hand to search for a movie to watch while eating something delicious.

"Murata-sama, sorry to have kept you waiting. Please enjoy your meal."

After skillfully setting up the table, she arranged Shohei's ordered items on the table. Then, with a slight bow, she seemed to be heading towards the other passengers.

Shohei has a niece who works for the same airline, and although she is currently on maternity leave and not working as a flight attendant, he has not yet been able to fulfill his promise to see her as a passenger at least once.

Shohei's wish to take his elderly parents, who are his grandparents, with him, has not yet been fulfilled, as his father died of COVID-19 three years ago and his mother has not been healthy enough to travel abroad safely during that time. Although he enjoys watching videos of his great-grandchildren on his smartphone from time to time, his mother has not given up on the dream of seeing her granddaughter dressed as a flight attendant on an airplane in a white jacket, even if only once before she becomes too weak to move.

When Shohei had finished eating, Murohara came to clear the dishes.

"I have a niece who is about your age. She is currently on maternity leave, but she showed me a photo of her looking happy after passing her promotion exam, wearing a white jacket." He told me her age and maiden name. I can't remember her married name.

"Oh, really? She's my junior by two years. She's a hard worker, so she passed her promotion exam early. I heard that her father was a doctor at a university hospital. Excuse me, but you also seem to have a doctor-like vibe, Murata-san. Is that so? We shouldn't pry into our customers' private lives, though."

Fortunately, it didn't seem to be a busy time for service provision. Most of the passengers

seemed to be sleeping peacefully or quietly enjoying movies.

Perhaps feeling a sense of closeness, Shohei introduced himself briefly to Murohara, who introduced herself as Yuzui.

When Shohei was still single, he had once spent an exciting time with an ANA stewardess he had become close to on an airplane while staying in Paris, but it had already become a distant memory of his youth.

"Did you go to London for a conference? Unfortunately it was raining, but it was cool. Did you enjoy your time in London?"

She assumed that Shohei was traveling alone, as he was wearing a well-tailored blue long-sleeved linen shirt. It was a little early for summer vacation, and business trips for doctors were not very common, so it was all the more so.

"No, I went to Nice for a visit."

"Are you a man traveling alone to the south of France?"

Murohara looked at Shohei's slightly tanned face, wondering if it was true.

"Yeah, it would have been even better if you had been with your girlfriend, but unfortunately you were traveling alone."

For some reason, Shohei said "girlfriend" instead of "wife." He was not pretending to be single to the flight attendant in front of him, but it might have been because a woman suddenly came to his mind.

"Oh, that's great. I'd also like to cycle in Nice, which I've always wanted to visit."

"Do you like cycling, Murohara-san?"

"I'm still a beginner, but I started riding road bikes two years ago. But I have to be careful when cycling in the streets of Tokyo. Some of the crew are serious about cycling and are members of a cycling club in London."

"That's amazing."

"She seems to have left her road bike at a friend's house. I'm jealous that she was able to enjoy cycling with the local club members in the suburbs of London during her two-day stay, but I still have a long way to go. But one day I'd like to ride freely through beautiful natural scenery such as the Lake District in Scotland, the mountains and coasts of Provence in France, and the Dolomites in Italy."

Shohei listened to Murohara Yui talk about her dreams with the joy of a young girl with a smile.

With her long limbs, it's easy to imagine how beautiful she would look while cycling. Shohei wanted to teach her the joy of cycling in the beautiful scenery of the south of France.

"Actually, I went to Nice to participate in a cycling competition."

"Really? Is that true?"

"We just call it ETAP, but do you know ETAP de Tour de France?"

Her bright expression clouded over again. It's not surprising that she didn't know.

"You must be familiar with the Tour de France, a professional race around France, right Murohara?"

"Yeah, I don't know the names of the riders, though."

"The location changes every year, but this year, a competition was held in Nice that opened up the 20th stage of the Tour to amateurs. The Étape is the most popular amateur road race in the world, and many people gather from all over the world. There were about 20 Japanese people participating, but most of them seem to live in Europe."

Murohara listened to Shohei with interest.

"Actually, it's not a road race, but more accurately called a Gran Fondo, where people race to complete a long-distance mountain course. The race was on Saturday the 6th. I was actually on my way back from there, so London was just a transit stop."

"Now that I think about it, I heard about that race before from someone at a cycling club in Tokyo called RCC."

"Are you Mitsui-san?"

Murohara Yui looked at Shohei with a shocked expression.

"No, I heard from a man named Goda who has since left the club. Are you also a member of RCC Tokyo, Murata-san?"

"Yes, I've been a member since the first year. #798 is my membership number. However, I usually live in Fukuoka, so I haven't been to the new store yet. I've been to the old Tokyo store a few times, though. But I've ridden with Goda-san and Mitsui-san in various places in Kyushu."

"Is that so? And was Nice wonderful after all?"

"Yes, it was my second time in Nice, but it has beautiful seas and wonderful mountains, and it's like heaven for cyclists. I hope you'll try cycling in southern France someday, Yui-san."

"What, your second time? Was the first one also an Étape?"

"No, the first time was the RCC Summit, a four-day event that only RCC members could participate in. It seems that the summit hasn't been held since the pandemic."

Murohara Yui looked at Shohei with a jealous look as he happily spoke. "That's wonderful, I envy you, Murata-sama."

"I suppose so. I envy your youth. I want to be young again. Free time in the future is a real treasure."

It's hard for him to take time off work, so he's not sure if he'll be able to participate again next year. He feels like he's passed a major turning point in his life, and this is his true, unadulterated feelings.

It's not that Murohara can't understand how he feels, but she seems a little confused about how to respond to the gray-haired man sitting in front of her and talking with such gusto.

"I'd like to participate in this Étape race someday. Are there any female participants?"

"Yes, there are a lot of them. But it's less than 10%. One woman I know in London is a breast cancer survivor, and she participates in the Étape almost every year, and always finishes the race with flying colors."

"That's amazing."

"Well, Christine trains a lot on a daily basis. She's almost 50, but by completing this very tough course, she wants to truly feel the wonder of being alive. In Nice, I wasn't able to meet her, but I wonder if she participated this year as well. I'm looking forward to seeing the photos she posts on Instagram when she gets back to Japan. If you finish within the time limit, you get a gold finisher's medal. "A gold medal? That's nice. But it must be an amazing course that a beginner like me can't even imagine. Murata-san, how was it? I'm sure you'd be thrilled if you finished such an amazing race." Shohei, who was called Murata-san for the first time, was a little hesitant about how to respond to Murohara Yui, who was very interested in Etape. She will probably take a step further into the world of cycling from now on. He wanted to help her expand her dreams and hopes. Shohei carefully chose his words while thinking about a distant world, and answered briefly with a bright smile as she stared at him, now old enough to be her father. "It was a wonderful experience. I was very satisfied..."

## Chapter 2 To the Summit

When he was a university student, Shohei Murata used to travel alone by bicycle for several weeks during spring and summer vacations. There was a small boom in bicycle transportation using night trains, so he connected his wheels to guesthouses and youth hostels from Hokkaido to Shikoku and Kyushu, and he had no doubt that his free days of youth would continue forever.

No one could connect him to anyone through a cell phone, and no one could promise him the future, such as weather forecasts or reservations, through a smartphone. The young man believed that the most valuable things in life were a minimum of cash, plain, worn-out clothes, endless freedom that no one tells him to do, endless time that is unrelated to a schedule, and physical strength that does not tire even if you keep moving your feet all day.

Rather than his friends happily dating and indulging in sexual desires night after night, to him, surrendering himself to a journey blown by unpredictable winds seemed to fulfill his days of

youth that seemed to be bursting with energy.

His studies at medical school got busier every year, and with the national exams coming up, he had a huge amount to remember, and his medical knowledge was so abundant that it was spilling out of his head, but strangely, he never thought that such diseases and disabilities would be a hindrance to his own future. Rather than lacking imagination as a medical student, he was probably just one of those ordinary young people who could not yet realize that aging and death would be a part of their own lives.

After he started working as a doctor at a hospital and research institute, Shohei was faced with a job that was much busier than he had imagined as a student, and he completely distanced himself from cycling and sports. In an attempt to bear the weight of the unavoidable responsibility, he worked so hard that he barely took a break and cut down on his sleep, and he no longer had the time to even think about the proverb that doctors do not take care of themselves.

Time passed, and nearly 15 years had passed since he opened a new clinic in his hometown. During his first medical checkup at his daughters' request, Shohei was told in a strong tone that he was at a dangerous crossroads due to lifestyle-related diseases. He was 18kg over his ideal weight. It was the result of not stepping on the scale for nearly ten years. He got what he deserved.

At 52 years old, he had a pitiful middle-aged belly. He was easily aware that he had fatty liver, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and sleep apnea without even being examined, and he couldn't avoid taking naps to relieve his extreme fatigue. He knew very well where it would lead, and as a cardiologist, Shohei knew better than anyone how to cure it. If he continued like this, he would surely be diagnosed with diabetes soon.

His goal was to lose more than 15kg quickly. All that remained was to actually put in the effort. Although he had been so busy with work that he forgot himself, a strong feeling of "I want to enjoy life more. I can't stand growing old like this..." welled up inside him, and it certainly pushed him to look for excuses for the things he didn't like.

As the textbook methods began to produce results little by little, Shohei's original diet method, which mixed in various innovations, succeeded in losing 15 kg in less than a year while enjoying daily life. It was simply a matter of properly practicing what he usually instructs his patients in the examination room, but his patients were worried that Shohei himself might be suffering from cancer or a serious illness.

The best thing was that in addition to the diet that focused on meals, he actively incorporated several types of aerobic exercise halfway through. As long as Shohei, who is well-informed, puts it into practice, he can easily regain his ideal body. At the same time, he also regained his



positive attitude and the joy of instructing patients.

"It is important to gradually tighten up while exercising, rather than losing weight in a way that makes you gaunt."

This was the standard phrase Shohei used when instructing his patients on the types and menus of exercise therapy.

He took the road racer he bought the year he entered university and raced all over the country back to the shop where he bought it to have it serviced so that he could ride it, and started riding his bike again whenever he had time. The trick to exercise therapy is to continue doing what you love and have fun doing it.

Nearly five years have passed since then, and Shohei's life outside of work, which has become increasingly busy, revolves around cycling. Fortunately, he has not regained his weight, and his athletic ability seems to visibly rejuvenate with each passing year.

It was about a year after he resumed cycling that he discovered Rapha. When the Rapha Cycling Club (RCC) was founded in 2015, he immediately paid the annual membership fee and became a member without knowing what the benefits of joining were. The biggest motivation was his desire to ride overseas, especially in Europe, someday.

Rapha, a young organization founded in the UK, aims to hold the RCC Summit, a special stage somewhere in the world once a year. The first year was in Tuscany, Italy, and the second year in Southern California, USA.

In February 2017, Rapha hosted its third summit for club members from all over the world. The location of the event, scheduled for May, is the Côte d'Azur in southern France, a place Shohei has always longed to visit. The event immediately captured the heart of the doctor living in the countryside.

This year marks the twentieth year since the opening of his clinic, and he had been secretly thinking that he would like to go somewhere overseas and take an exquisite bicycle trip as a reward for himself for working nonstop without a single day off.

He had always wanted to visit areas and famous mountain passes that had interested him, such as the snow-capped Alps and the Dolomites with their huge rocky mountains. However, he had no hesitation in choosing an event that Rapha proudly presents as his first overseas ride destination.

His passport, which had been lying dormant in the back of his desk drawer for a long time, had expired quite some time ago, but when he found out about the summit, he spent his time thinking about various things, wondering if there was any way he could participate. Of course, if I paid the fee and applied, I could participate, but my biggest concern was whether I could

really take nearly a week off work without interfering with the operation of the clinic. One evening, a fascinating photo and text appeared on the Rapha website.

### **Rapha Cycling Club Summit 2017**

This year's RCC Summit will be held in the Côte d'Azur, one of the world's leading cycling meccas. This region, with its blessed climate, diverse roads, and beautiful scenery, has long been loved by many professional athletes and is also their home. Why not join us for a wonderful weekend in this perfect place for exhilarating rides and relaxation? There will be plenty of fun things to do in the evenings, such as special events and VIP guest appearances. The Côte d'Azur is a travel destination where you can experience some of the best rides in Europe. From the famous Col de la Madone, which tests your strength, to the challenging tour of the Gorges du Verdon, to routes that allow you to enjoy the beautiful scenery along the coast, there is something for every rider.

The region has a spectacular change in terrain, making it possible to design routes of various levels of difficulty. Regardless of the level of difficulty, the stunning views of the towering limestone and red granite mountains unique to this region will provide the perfect backdrop for your ride. Long and short courses are available on each day, and participants will ride while supporting each other with their group members. A ride leader and support car will also accompany you.

As soon as he finished reading, Shohei was drawn to contact Mitsui of Rapha Tokyo.

"The Summit is a special event held only once a year for members only. It will be the best trip that only RCC members with the same hobbies and ideas from all over the world can participate in."

Even though Shohei didn't have a passport, he immediately purchased a plane ticket online that night.

The trip he had envisioned was starting to become a reality, but the more difficult problem for him was how to justify taking time off. The time he could take off work was extremely tight, and he had to request a substitute doctor, which was very costly.

To what extent would his patients tolerate his absence? Due to his lack of experience, anxiety rose up one after another. He thought about how to make all the arrangements as carefully as possible without telling anyone around him.

"What's the matter?"

Shohei thought he might not be able to hold back the tears of joy when he received his new passport, so when he went to the prefectural office, the tears actually started to flow, so he

started laughing to hide his embarrassment.

"Hey, there's this RCC summit, and I want to go. Is that okay?"

Shohei first told his wife Mamiko, with whom he was living separately due to work, in mid-February, three months before the event.

"Sure. Where?"

"Cannes."

"What? I was thinking of going with you someday. Can I come with you?"

"I'll just ride my bike, but you can't ride a bike."

"You'll do some sightseeing, right? Just bike all the time?"

"Yeah, it seems like you'll just be riding your bike all day."

"Oh really. Then next time, take me to the south of France without a bike."

Contrary to his expectations, he easily cleared the first big hurdle.

In late March, thinking that he couldn't put it off any longer, Shohei called the head of the medical department at his old university hospital to request a doctor.

"How am I going to explain to the staff and patients that I went out to play for five days, even hiring a substitute doctor?"

Various conflicts swirled in his heart.

"I understand. Please tell me the details, and I'll do something about it."

The straightforward female head of the medical department surprisingly didn't ask him about the reason for his absence.

Feeling a small sense of guilt, Shohei nervously requested the medical department to send a doctor, but was relieved to hear the unexpectedly gentle tone of the request.

With about a month until the departure, the head of the medical department faxed a list of doctors to be dispatched to Mikawa Heart Clinic. Now Shohei could finally tell those around him that he was taking time off.

"I'm going on a trip from May 11th to 16th."

"Where are you going?"

"France."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, by yourself."

"Who's the substitute doctor?"

"I asked him, and it's already been decided."

"Is that so? Be careful."

The conversation with his parents, who live with him, lasted only twenty seconds, and that was all.

His family knew that since Shohei opened his new clinic, he had never even had a two-day weekend, let alone traveled abroad. The only time he took a few days off was when he was hospitalized for surgery after breaking his wrist last year. His parents would understand without saying anything, but he still couldn't bring himself to say that he was going for a bike ride. In a few more days, Mamiko, who lives separately, and the staff would gently tell him the truth.

He could just put up a notice to inform the outpatients, but what was important to Shohei were the staff who were working hard. Everyone knew that he had never taken a day off from the clinic for fun since opening, but when he asked himself if he was treating them well, he felt a little embarrassed.

He gathered his senior staff, bowed his head, and simply told them how he felt.

"I want to take a break to refresh myself."

Unexpectedly, the staff's reaction was favorable.

"If you become mentally ill, it will be a problem for us and the patients."

Someone said, and overlapping laughter gently enveloped him. A sense of relief immediately spread throughout his body.

Without realizing it, everyone had grown beyond Shohei's expectations. For the first time, he realized that he should have been more honest and told those around him that he wanted to take time off, instead of just complaining.

Soon after, they took the initiative to write notices to post in the outpatient clinic, and secretly checked over the things he had prepared in advance, such as how to contact France when he was away, and instructions and guides for substitute doctors.

And so the preparations for the trip to the south of France began in earnest.

An event called "RIDE FOR KUMAMOTO" was held over Golden Week, co-hosted by Rapha and the local cycling community, to support the recovery from the Kumamoto earthquake that had caused great damage in April of the previous year, starting from Oguni Town in Kumamoto Prefecture, the birthplace of Kitasato Shibusaburo.

On his way back, Shohei stopped by the tea room "Chanoko" in Minamioguni Town. "Thank you for your hard work. How was the course? Did you enjoy it?"

"It was wonderful. I was able to enjoy early summer in Kitaaso."

The owner, Matsuzaki, is a connoisseur of various hobbies, and is known as a cyclist who is in charge of course design for the immensely popular cycling event. Throughout the year, his shop has an atmosphere where many cyclists naturally gather. Shohei was one of them.

"The exhilaration of racing up to the top of a mountain that is normally off-limits with special permission from the forestry association is indescribable. The view is special. I wanted to close the shop and participate too."

Matsuzaki, who was also in charge of the course design this time, looked both sad and happy. "That's right. The wind blowing up as if chasing the early summer wild birds singing and flying in the sky hits my face, and the grandeur of the majestic mountain ranges of Aso and the Kuju mountain range can be seen from there. The weather was also good, and it was just the best."

In the back of the shop, you can see the faces of several people who enjoyed the ride together. Kubota from Rapha Tokyo is one of them. Shohei decided to sit at the empty seat at his table. "Kubota, I'm going to participate in the RCC Summit next time, but I'm actually a bit worried about my communication skills and leg strength. Since it's called a summit, I'm sure it's only for advanced riders. I wonder if it's okay for someone like me to participate..."

Kubota, a young staff member at Rapha Tokyo, knew about Shohei's reservation.

"The second summit was held in California last fall, and I was the first Japanese staff member to participate. It was a dreamlike experience that I would never have had if I had stayed in Japan. The next one is the third, and Murata will be the first and only Japanese participant." Kubota, with a playful expression on his face, added words that were neither an invitation nor encouragement.

"There are many doctors from Europe and the US who will be attending, so I think you'll have a good conversation, and I definitely don't want you to miss this chance. The staff from our UK headquarters are preparing the best location and the best hospitality in the south of France. I'll tell our chief staff, Areda, about Murata-san. I'm sure they'll make it a wonderful time." Hearing these words, Shohei's anxiety seemed to ease a little.

"Murata-san, are you going to participate in the RCC summit in the south of France? I'm a little jealous. I also thought about closing the shop for a week and participating in the summit, but it's the tourist season and it's our busiest time. No matter how much I begged, my finance minister wouldn't give me permission. Ha, ha, ha, ..."

The shop owner, who brought Kubota a chocolate parfait and Murata a coffee, was smiling brightly as usual next to a table lit by the light coming in through the large glass windows.

During his lunch break, just a few days before his departure, Shohei was found by a nurse preparing his road bike to take to France in a bike bag.

"You're taking your bike?"

She exclaimed in surprise. She seemed to have thought he was going on a sightseeing trip.

"It's only five days, so you can't go far, right? Maybe Korea or Taiwan?"

"That's a secret until you get back."

He himself was still wrapped up in a strange feeling of wondering if he was really going to France.

With a brand new passport in hand, Shohei set off on his first short trip abroad in twenty years. After a full day of travel, he arrived at a small seaside airport, filled with the sunlight of the south of France. It had been twenty-five years since he had set foot on European soil.

One after another, summit participants carrying sturdy bike bags began to gather in the arrival lobby. A group of six Koreans appeared, and the only woman spoke to Shohei in Japanese. She was a cheerful, healthy woman who introduced herself as Becky. He lived in Japan for two years and now works as a Japanese interpreter at a plastic surgery clinic in Seoul. Thanks to her, one of his anxieties faded away, and he gradually felt like he was traveling around the world before opening his own clinic.

After a 30-minute drive on the highway from the airport, he arrived at the hotel in the town of Mougins. It was a simple stone building built on a large site that looked like a golf course, and was filled with the atmosphere of Provence that you often see in French movies.

There were no other guests in sight, so perhaps the club had booked the entire building.

He was handed the room key in French, but it seemed like he had to go out into the garden and enter through a different entrance. He immediately got lost on the way to his room. Although there were many people around him, he couldn't tell the difference between the club staff and the participants, and he was confused about how to ask who to ask. When he was in trouble, a woman with a lovely smile showed him around.

"You're Shohei from Japan, right? Ken asked me. I'm glad you came."

I guess she was a staff member after all. She never stopped smiling. "Here we are. It's right above my room. Enjoy the summit."

He managed to catch what she said, but Shohei had a hard time getting used to British English. It sounded like she introduced herself as "Alera," but perhaps she was the "Aleda," the chief staff member that someone had mentioned. She was a beautiful and elegant woman, far from the tan and muscular looks that are common among cyclists, and was completely different from what he had imagined.

A delicious-looking lunch was served on the garden terrace next to the pool while waiting for the bicycle to be delivered from the airport by a separate truck.

At the table Shohei had chosen, an American from San Francisco, an Englishman living in Edinburgh, and a Czech man were already seated and chatting happily. Shohei, a Japanese man, was also greeted with interest, and the conversation flowed with occasional laughs.

"Which ride will you choose today, Shohei?"

"Considering the time difference and the fatigue of the long journey, I think it'll be a coastal route around the Antibes Peninsula."

In response to the friendly Czech man's question, Shohei showed him an idea he had thought of in Japan before arriving.

"Isn't that short course for women? Since you've come all the way from Japan, why not try something harder? That area is nice."

The Englishman, who had cycled in Provence a few times, encouraged Shohei. It seemed to be a 60-kilometer route through the national park to the southwest, with an elevation gain of 1,000 meters. He was worried because he didn't know how strong the other people were, but he couldn't refuse and decided to do it.

It was his first experience shipping overseas, so he nervously assembled his bike, but fortunately there didn't seem to be any problems.

They split into three groups based on their self-declared leg strength, and set off at 4pm with a total of about 40 people. Shohei was in the slowest group, which included several women, but they moved forward at an incredible speed. A seed of worry quickly began to grow in his heart, wondering if he would be able to keep up to the end.

On his left was the Mediterranean Sea, which he saw for the first time from the ground. After riding along the deep blue coastline with its ups and downs, the small group of about a dozen people left the road leading to the low mountains to the north and passed the barrier that marks the border of the national park. The view was spectacular as they started climbing towards the towering red granite mountain that suddenly appeared there. At the end of the curve overlooking the sea, several reddish brown rocks towered over the green trees.

"What a wonderful view. Where are you from?"

Shohei spoke to a young Asian woman who was filming with a matchbox-sized video camera.

"I'm Thai, and I'm studying abroad in London. It was amazing to see the beautiful sea that continued on and on, but the mountains and valleys ahead look wonderful too."

The Thai person who was called by name seemed to be a university student.

The three and a half hour first ride soon after arriving was a beautiful route, and made him feel a pleasant fatigue.

The dinner party that night started at 8:30, when the sky finally started to darken. Shohei, who was suffering from severe jet lag, listened to the passionate conversation between Simon, the founder of the club, and the British man who had won the overall Tour de France, dozing off from time to time.

When he went to the restaurant the next morning, the group of Koreans he had been with the night before was already eating at the very back. Shohei exchanged greetings with gestures,

and seeing Kelly, who he had ridden with the previous day, he sat next to him. Kelly, a 54-year-old British man with a lush red beard and a shaved head, was one of the few participants of the same age as Shohei. He was a friendly man who ran an IT company, and it seemed this was not his first time in Provence. He had the same leg strength as Shohei, and they got along well on topics other than cycling. To his left were a German businessman living in Paris and a German man from Hanover talking in German. Shohei sat down and raised his hand to greet them. They looked very sturdy, but they returned his greeting in English with smiles on their faces.

While I was enjoying talking with Kelly for a while, a tall, middle-aged woman with short blonde hair from London sat down to Shohei's right.

"Good morning, I'm Christine from London. We were in the same group yesterday, right? Did you come from Japan just to join the summit?"

He remembered her well from the previous day's ride. She didn't look fast, but she pedaled powerfully with her long legs, just like the men. She seemed quiet during the ride, so I was surprised and happy that she spoke to me like this.

"The other people were surprised when I told them I came just for the summit. There seem to be a lot of participants from clubs in London."

Kelly, also from England, was from Manchester, so it seemed she had never met her before.

"Yes, there are five women alone. It's fun to travel with the cheerful Aleda. I can't run as fast as her, but this is my first time in Provence, so I'm looking forward to it."

For the second day, Shohei chose a 90-kilometer route with an elevation gain of about 1,300 meters, taking in the beautiful coastline and the eagle-nesting villages scattered in the mountains. We gathered in the hotel square and received a detailed explanation from Aleda, the chief staff member. Shohei listened closely to avoid getting lost or left behind in a foreign land, but the briefing gave him a sense of security.

Shohei chose the slow group again today, but the ride leader, Aleda, reminded everyone once again.

"Unlike in the UK, we ride in two rows on the right here. Keep a small gap between you and the person in front. Look after each other. You all have the map data in your Garmin, right? Let's go."

As soon as they started riding, the group went over a small hill. It was a typical southern French scene. He was already feeling the Provence atmosphere when they first took a short break in Biot, a small town on a hill. Smiles appeared on everyone's faces.

The slope was not steep, but if you are late, you may get lost at the roundabout and fall or go off course. Everyone would be happy if you helped them out at such times. The chubby Welsh



woman followed her desperately to avoid getting lost. When Shohei had a flat tire, a Dutch man stayed behind to help him.

The group rode in two rows along the coastline of Cagnes-sur-Mer, which was full of light. It was not a luxurious place, but the sea was truly azure. The colors and the vastness of the Cote d'Azur are impressive. It's a little cooler than Fukuoka, and we were lucky that the forecast for thunderstorms didn't work out. It seems that the clear skies will continue from tomorrow onwards.

After enjoying the deep blue sea while feeling the sea breeze, the group finally heads for the mountain that can be seen to the north. At a fairly fast speed, we climb smoothly to an altitude of 400 meters. The Eagle's Nest Village, which looks like a building block, and the stone-gray houses that crawl along the mountain slope show Shohei the scenery of southern France that he longed for.

"Shohei, don't leave me and ride alongside me."

Although Aleda said this in a tone of admonition, riding in a double file feels a little strange for a Japanese man. He is out of breath at a faster speed than expected, and he can't even find the words to reply to her.

A staff member went ahead in a car and prepared a lunch venue in a square with a good view of Vence. Lunch was quite substantial, including coffee, and it was interesting to have a large group of people have a picnic-like feeling.

"Shohei, don't give up on the girls and try a little harder."

Everyone burst into laughter when Aleda encouraged him as he was being overtaken one after another on the uphill. It was a good time of communication with lively multilingual conversation. There were fewer climbs after this, so some people looked relieved.

Looking at the route map, it seemed that the next place we would pass was Tourrettes-sur-Loup, a famous eagle's nest village. There are about 80 eagle's nest villages in Provence. The towns of Grasse and Vence, which are well known in other countries, were originally small eagle's nest villages.

A large arch bridge that is said to have existed since Roman times. Shohei could see the village of Gordonne, which is particularly famous as an eagle's nest village, from the top of a cliff 750 meters above sea level. He was secretly excited at the thought of climbing up to the village on the cliff tomorrow.

"Aren't you going to join us?"

When Shohei returned to the hotel, a Korean woman named Becky called out to him. A short hill climb race called the Rapha Championship was planned for the evening of the second day, a little further away, but he wanted to rest his legs in preparation for the big ride the next day.

"I have to participate as a representative of Japan. You're still young, aren't you?"

Even though she knew he was the oldest, the bossy Aleada from the side urged him on.

"Okay, I'll go."

Contrary to his true feelings, he blurted out.

Even though it was only about 1,500 meters, Shohei was overtaken by a woman who started 20 seconds behind him. It was Christine, who he had talked to at the table with him this morning.

"Isn't there a handicap for seniors?"

He complained with a wry smile as she passed him calmly.

"How old are you?"

"Fifty-seven."

"You're still young enough. I'm a \*\* survivor."

She snapped back at him.

But what survivor did she say she was? He couldn't hear what he was saying because of his own heavy breathing.

After the pleasant dinner party that night, a dozen people gathered in the lounge next door. Many of them were women who were worried about their leg strength. Aleada and the other staff members were reconsidering the next day's course, sitting around a large map with stern expressions on their faces. Shohei listened carefully to what the staff members were explaining. The course on the third day, which could be called the main event, was a big ride with a distance of 160 km and an elevation gain of 3,400 m. It was no exaggeration to say that he had flown all the time and money from Japan just for this. However, looking at the situation yesterday and today, it seemed like a very hard challenge to ride with the other members at that speed.

Listening carefully, he heard them say that they were going to make a shortcut course of 100 km in a hurry.

"If you're not sure you can keep up, I'll upload the map data for the shortcut course tonight, so make sure you download it to your cycle computer."

It was Aleada who was at the center of the discussion and said this loudly. She probably made that decision after seeing the leg strength and stamina of the participants. Some people may be disappointed, but it must be a rational decision, including safety. If several people drop out along the way, it will be difficult for the staff to deal with them.

The more Shohei listens to her explanation, the more it seems impossible to him. It's a shame, but it looks like he'll have to take the shorter route tomorrow.

On the morning of the third day, Shohei woke up early, probably due to jet lag, and headed to the restaurant at seven o'clock. He had decided last night to join the shortcut course that departed at nine-thirty, so it was a little too early, and he was still relaxed in jeans and a T-shirt.

"You came all the way from Japan, so why aren't you joining the Big Ride?"

Several people around him called out to Shohei.

Many of the members who had already prepared for the ride were gathered together and eating. When Shohei spotted a Thai woman with similar leg strength among them, his heart suddenly started beating fast.

She had listened intently to Aleda's explanation last night, and was about to join the Big Ride, understanding how difficult it would be. His heart was immediately stirred.

"In that case, I'll do it too..."

He finished his breakfast early and hurried back to his room to get changed.

He managed to make it just in time for the departure, but the young male course director was already finishing his briefing.

"Today's ride will be quite tough. If you're not confident, you can change to a shorter course even halfway through. That's also a good route used for Ironman races."

It was a little hard to hear, so Shohei asked him directly later.

"Would I be able to do it? I came from Japan, so I'd really like to go."

"Honestly, I think you'd be better off on the shorter course."

The man, who seemed to have forgotten how to laugh, spoke politely but coldly.

Ben, a senior staff member who had been listening to their conversation, interrupted the two.

"Well, just try it out, and if it seems too hard, we can take a shortcut along the way. It's not a crazy speed, so let's go together."

Encouraged by those words, Shohei started running, but he was confused by the sudden high speed. It was nothing like the previous day.

As soon as he started climbing a small hill just five kilometers away, he fell behind. The Thai woman, Ping, was also late as expected, but the nearly thirty members continued to climb further and further ahead at a speed that they could never catch up with. No one tried to wait for the slower members, and at that point Shohei's hopes were quickly dashed.

It must have been a difficult course for him from the start. And that's probably normal in Europe. If the course was easily conquered by the oldest person like him, it would have been an unsatisfying "summit" for the RCC members from all over the world.

In the end, Ping and Shohei were forced to stop by the course director who was waiting at Gordonne, the eagle's nest village at an altitude of 750 meters that they had looked up to the previous day, and were told to take a shortcut. It's a pity, but we can't cause trouble for the

group. A young Lithuanian man seems to be accompanying us. Shohei and the two young men put their disappointment aside and started riding.

On the way, we entered a small eagle's nest village called Greoliere, where three RCC members had arrived first and were relaxing at a cafe drinking coffee.

"Oh, you guys came too? The scenery is much better here than over there. We weren't late, we just chose this way."

They were cheerful middle-aged men who claimed to have taken a shortcut of their own accord.

An Englishman, a Scottish man, a Dutchman, a Lithuanian, a Thai man, and a Japanese. The six of them laughed at each other's poor legs, hit it off, and decided to ride together until the end. Six people is definitely the perfect size. It was really pleasant to ride in a group, taking pictures of each other and taking breaks every now and then.

The scenery and weather were absolutely amazing. Tunnels carved into the rock appeared one after another on the road that climbed gently along the edge of the cliff. I gave up on the big ride, but the so-called D2 road, which curved and ascended gently at an altitude of about 1,200 meters, was a wonderful road on the cliff, showing a utopian landscape of white rock mountains and the unknown Eagle's Nest Village.

Shohei's heart leapt with joy when he found out that this road was part of the cycling route of the Ironman Race, a global triathlon that originated in Nice. On that day, an amateur race was being held on a circular course around Gordonne, and hundreds of cyclists were competing in the opposite direction from Shohei and his friends, looking like they were enjoying themselves in the magnificent scenery. It was a scene that made me vividly feel the maturity of cycling culture in Europe, especially in France, the home of cycling.

The following Tran road gently curved and descended many times to beautiful villages in the hilly area with a panoramic view. The guardrails on the valley side, made of stone and logs, are almost nonexistent compared to those in Japan. The fact that these structures are in harmony with nature and that they are made by human hands is an important element of the Provencal landscape, but if you get too excited and fall into the deep valley, it could be life-threatening. Shohei was so happy that he couldn't describe it, so he pedaled as hard as he could so as not to be left behind by the other five.

Eventually, they reached the bottom of the slope and came upon the ancient "Route Napoleon". In a small old village in the Prealpes d'Azur Natural Park, the six of them, all of different nationalities, had a quick meal, and then went down the Route Napoleon in the opposite direction to the emperor, to the city of Grasse, famous for its perfume.

And in the excitement, the joyous ride that followed the disappointment came to an end in Mougins.

The six of them returned to the hotel and talked endlessly about their fun ride on the garden terrace, and one by one, the tough guys who had finished the big ride returned with satisfied smiles on their faces. Next to them, a Korean woman named Becky was swimming with someone in the cool May pool, cheering as she did so.

Tomorrow is already the day of our return. At night, a total of 90 people, including participants and staff, boarded two large buses and headed to a restaurant in Cannes. The Cannes Film Festival will be held the following week, and the seaside town is filled with a sense of splendor.

The ride on the fourth and final day and preparations for our return home were a strange time where remaining excitement and passing loneliness intersected. On the wide beach at dusk, a photo session began before dinner. We could also see Simon, the founder of the club, and Ben, the executive who had encouraged Shohei this morning.

"Hey, Shohei. You disappeared halfway through today. Did you take a shortcut?"

"I'm 57, the oldest."

Instead of replying, Shohei told them his age, and the two of them looked at each other in surprise. He was small and had a baby face, so he seemed young to Westerners.

"You're still young. You have to enjoy life to the fullest from now on."

"That's right. I had a wonderful experience, so I want to actively enjoy cycling overseas from now on."

"In that case, why don't you try the Etape next year?"

"Etape...?"

"There are many attractive cycling events in Europe, but if you're going to take the trouble to participate from Japan, the first one is the Etape. The route changes every year to match the Tour, but I've participated in the Etape for five years in a row."

In response to Simon's words, Ben adds with a serious expression.

"Next, the Marmot would be great. You've heard of the Galibier and Alpe d'Huez, right? After that, why don't you try the Dolomites in northern Italy? The scenery and slopes are amazing. It's the most popular in Italy. You can conquer the top three in Europe before you turn 60. You have to keep challenging yourself. But before that, you have to work hard and save money."

The summit participants seemed to Shohei to be experts in enjoying their leisure time.

"Even so, I'm glad you managed to come all the way to the south of France despite your busy schedule. We're hoping for ten Japanese participants next time, so Shohei, please promote it."

At the third RCC summit, they warmly welcomed the first Japanese participants.

When the sun went down and it was completely dark outside, the last supper of the summit

participants began lively in a restaurant where the sound of the waves could be heard gently.

«Award for the person who came from the furthest distance»

It seemed to be an award given to Shohei, who came from the furthest distance out of the seventy people and came alone just for the summit. The presenter was the chief staff member, Areda. Tonight, she had transformed into an elegant woman in a sleeveless black flared dress. Her white pumps had sand from the beach in Cannes on them.

"Shohei, did you enjoy it enough? Let's meet again next year somewhere. At the next summit or at Etape..."

When she mentioned the name Etape, Shohei decided to challenge Etape the following year. Aleda's face was a little flushed from the alcohol, and her smile was even more alluring and cheerful than usual. Gently resting his cheek against hers, Shohei smiled broadly as he posed for the photo Christine took.

"I didn't catch what you said the other day, but you said you were a survivor of something. What does that mean?"

Christine smiled brightly at Shohei.

"She may not look it, but she's a breast cancer survivor. We're planning a charity event this fall..."

Aleda explained it to Shohei.

"It's been four years since her first treatment. Fortunately, she's cancer-free now."

Christine spoke with a wry smile, and to Shohei, she looked perfectly healthy.

"Thanks to the ever-advancing medical science, I can enjoy cycling, which I love, and I'm very grateful to my club members who always encourage me. So I'd like to do what I can to help young cancer researchers." "Wow. I'm an internal medicine doctor, but you don't look like it at all. You've been treating me for almost five years, so I think I can relax now." "Oh, you're a doctor, Shohei? I didn't look like it at all." A little drunk, Aleda's jokey words caused a big wave of laughter around him. He was impressed by Christine, who looked a little gloomy and calm. A wonderful night came, and he enjoyed the short ride on the last day with the people he had become friends with. Before leaving, he was worried that he would be worried about work, but contrary to his expectations, Shohei completely forgot about Japan. He never imagined that he would forget his family and patients, but for some reason he didn't feel even a shred of guilt. The comfort of spending time and space speaking only English. When I opened the window in my room, I could hear the members' conversations naturally, and I didn't watch TV even once during my stay. It was a free and relaxed gathering that gave me the feeling of being an adult. There was a relaxed feeling like a casual training camp, and Shohei felt very refreshed.

Shohei felt a comfortable lethargy as he waved goodbye to several participants in the departure

lobby of Nice Airport. As he thought about finally returning home, memories of the fun few days came to his mind.

He had always convinced himself that it was impossible and gave up, but he felt very glad that he had managed his work schedule and taken the plunge to participate.

The cities of Monaco and Menton, which he had given up on visiting this time due to lack of time, could be seen clearly from the sky. I wonder if he will return someday. He felt the magnitude of what he had gained, but he also felt a strong pull behind his hair for what he had left behind.

### Chapter 3    A Place of Memories

Today, on the autumn equinox, Murata Shohei was working at the clinic from morning, just like on any other holiday, while thinking of his father, who rests in the graveyard of a temple in Higashiyama, Kyoto, where the Higan memorial service is held.

It is very difficult to leave the clinic on any day except Sundays, including the New Year holidays and Golden Week, because of the dialysis patients, but the heat of summer is still intense, so spending a day in the coolness of the clinic is not a burden for Shohei. During the COVID-19 pandemic, patients who wanted to see a doctor would call frequently, even on days when the clinic is closed, but such out-of-hours inquiries have become rare recently.

The electronic sound of an incoming email was humbly ringing from the computer he was working on.

He was in the middle of writing a manuscript to be submitted to a medical journal, the deadline for which was approaching in a week, while monitoring and managing about 25 hemodialysis patients receiving treatment in the dialysis room on the second floor in the examination room on the first floor.

Writing a paper for a practicing physician is not a fun task, and it does not bring him or his clinic any fame or income. At 64, the age when retirement would normally be imminent, the urge to leave as much of a mark on the medical world as possible drives him to continue writing on his days off, even though he cannot leave the clinic anyway.

The ringtone sounds like a convenient chime for a break, so he decides to temporarily stop writing.

Taking advantage of the fact that no one is watching, he makes a bold gesture like Duke Saraie, forcing his old-fashioned back to straighten, which is starting to hunch over, and goes to the refrigerator in the next room to get an unsweetened iced coffee.

"To think that with just this instruction on how to walk, I can buy a house in Monte Carlo and live there..."

Uncontrollable jealousy and envy float in and out of Shohei's head, who is short on time.

He picks up two small bars of 88% cacao chocolate and returns to his desk, where he clicks on his mailbox to open it.

"I wonder what I'll get on my day off~"

Shohei had a feeling that the sender of the email, which was automatically sorted into the "spam" folder for some reason, was someone he knew. It definitely wasn't spam.

It was a British company that plans and sells tours to participate in sports events, and he had used it only once five years ago when he participated in a cycling competition held in France. After that, he applied to participate in other competitions every year until last year, but it was an invitation email from the company that he had been forced to cancel at the last minute due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The application fee that was not refunded over the past four years easily exceeded 300,000 yen.

As if a beautiful witch were inviting a workaholic man who was already over 60 years old to a dream world, several times a year, S company sends him information about popular cycling competitions held mainly in Europe, along with beautiful photos of the competition.

As he munched on a bitter chocolate bar, he opened the email from S company that he had rescued from the spam mail, and it was an invitation to the "Etap" tour scheduled to be held in July of the following year.

"Ah, it's that time of year again"

Shohei sighed softly.

Étape is an amateur competition related to the Tour de France, the highest level of professional bicycle road racing held in France. The real Tour, which is held over a period of about four weeks by top-class professionals, is a very tough competition in which 21 stages are fought across France, and its name is widely known even in Japan.

Among them, the Étape is the most tough one-day course, called the Queen Stage, which is held under the exact same conditions as the professionals, with no stopping at intersections or traffic lights along the way and with the roads completely closed. This is a fascinating cycling competition that is unimaginable in Japan, as it opens up such a dream-like stage to about 16,000 amateurs from all over the world.

Participants can apply from all over the world through the official website, but it is so popular that it sells out every year within minutes of the start of registration, so even if you manage to register, it is extremely difficult to make the hotel reservation you want near the starting point. There is another way to participate, which is to buy a package planned by an event tour company like S, which is officially approved by the tournament organizers.



Like La Marmotte Granfondo Alpes, another tournament that Shohei participated in last time, the big popular tournaments have an age limit of 64 years old due to the harsh nature of the tournament, but fortunately there is no age limit for Etape. Shohei had applied to participate in the popular Italian tournament Maratona Dles Dolomites, which has an age limit until last year, but while struggling with COVID-19, he has reached an age where it is difficult to participate this year. It was a lost four years for him that will never come back.

When participating in the official tour, anyone who makes a provisional reservation one month before the tournament implementation guidelines are officially announced is guaranteed to participate in the tournament, but they will have to pay slightly expensive accommodation fees and fees. He was happy that he could cancel by paying a small penalty if he was not interested in the course that was officially announced in late October.

Shohei had a bitter experience of having difficulty reserving accommodations when he first participated in the Etape on his own, so the following year he invited two doctor friends to participate in the Gran Fondo Alps on a tour run by S Company. Although his junior was disqualified midway through, it remains a strong memory that has not faded.

The information email that arrived announced that the course for the 32nd Etape in July next year would be officially announced on October 25th. It was the same day that the entire course of the Tour de France was announced.

It had already been decided that the Tour would begin in Florence, Italy in late June and end in Nice in late July. If the first Italian opening in 100 years, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the first Italian victory in the Tour, was special, it was also special that the annual final race and award ceremony on the Champs-Élysées Avenue would be held in a different location, Nice in the south of France, for the first time, due to the influence of the Paris Olympics.

"For now, let's make a tentative reservation."

Shohei filled in the necessary information on the application site and clicked the confirmation button. Then, feeling a little relieved, he resumed working on the manuscript he had been working on.

Before he knew it, Fukuoka had become quite autumnal. No longer bothered by the intense heat, Shohei had begun to enjoy cycling on weekends from Mikawa City to the depths of the mountains that spread westward. It was still too early for the leaves to turn red, but as he rode along the quiet roads in the valley, gaining altitude, he could feel the occasional chilly breeze. A lot had happened in the month since he had made the tentative reservation, and it literally flew by for Shohei.

In early October, it was decided that the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine would be

awarded to Dr. K, an old friend of Shohei's, and as one of the few Japanese people connected to her, Shohei was interviewed on television and in newspapers many times. A photo of Dr. K taken about 30 years ago in the laboratory in his younger days was seen by many people, and Shohei was often congratulated during his consultations and in everyday life as if he himself had won the Nobel Prize.

Among them, there was a female reporter from a local television station who interviewed Shohei with particular enthusiasm.

Last year, when Dr. K missed out on the award, Shohei published a novel about her under a pen name, but a reporter from N Newspaper Company, who had written an article about it, had given him the real name and contact information of the author, who had taken an interest in her work.

The moment the award was announced, Shohei was suddenly interviewed for a long time by the female reporter, whose face and name he did not know, over the phone. That night, there were many requests for interviews from other media organizations, and she, understanding the situation, said, "I would like to visit you on another day and interview you in detail," and hung up the phone. As she interviewed him, who spoke cheerfully with joy, she wanted to broadcast a slightly longer interview video to affiliated television stations nationwide.

Three weeks later, yesterday, she actually visited Mikawa Heart Clinic accompanied by a male cameraman. It was a windless, refreshing, clear autumn afternoon.

Shohei had wondered what kind of reporter she was from the tone of her voice and the way she spoke during the phone interview, but she turned out to be a slender woman with good posture, long black hair, and beautiful eyes. She doesn't seem to be a regular announcer on information programs, and Shohei had never seen her face on TV before.

"I did a little research on Dr. Murata, and I found that she appeared on many programs, including NHK and TKF, in addition to ours, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Japan. I watched the archived footage."

"Have you seen it? I still think what she said back then is correct."

"Yes. I felt that she was someone who spoke honestly and from her heart."

In her hands, a female reporter who appeared to be in her mid-thirties and exuded an intellectual air, calling herself Uematsu Ayaka, she was holding two novels written by Shohei, covered with sticky notes. They were Dr. K's novel and a full-length novel he had published the previous year, depicting the medical and nursing care fields struggling with COVID-19 clusters.

"I was also drawn into this novel. It's probably mostly based on fact, but it was a novel with amazing details about the medical field that we never knew existed. I've become a big fan of your novels."

He thought it was probably just flattery, but her shy smile and her strangely calm, soothing way of speaking opened up his heart, as he couldn't hide his tiredness from his busy days.

"I'm just a beginner who writes about things I like whenever I feel like it. But I've recently started enjoying writing novels, letting my imagination run wild in my free time or at night. I've finished writing my next novel, and just handed the manuscript over to a publisher the other day."

"Really? You're so busy, where do you find the time to do that? But I'm looking forward to it. Please let me know when it's released."

Reporter Uematsu seemed genuinely surprised. "If you don't mind, please let me know your contact details later. I'll give it to Uematsu-san when it's published, which will probably be in the spring."

This third work is not a medical novel, but the first love story centered on the bittersweet days of adolescence. I don't know if the beautiful 30-something reporter in front of me is married or single, but a woman who is so absorbed in her work that she misses her chance to get married appears in the novel as an important figure.

"It was mentioned a little in the novel I read, but do you like cycling, Dr. Murata? Some of the photos here look like European scenery. France? There are also Japanese scenery. This one says Kokonoe, doesn't it?"

She looks with interest at the many landscape photos with bicycles reflected in them that are displayed on the walls of the hospital, and asks Shohei repeatedly.

"Yes, it's from France. The Japanese one is a work from about ten years ago by a photographer named Atsushi Tanno, who lives in Fukuoka. There are about ten of them in the clinic. He is a cyclist himself, and he skillfully takes wonderful photos from the perspective of atop the saddle. It reminds me of the days when I went cycling with my cycling friends, blending into the autumn scenery of Kokonoe."

"I've also been enjoying cycling for the past few years. It's hard to coordinate my schedule with other people for my job, so I just wander around by myself to places I can go to on nice days."

"Wow, you're a cyclist too, aren't you? This photo is of the shores of Lake Annecy in France, and it was taken when you rode the Tour de France course some time ago."

"Could it be Étape? Professor, you participated in Air Tap?"

Shohei couldn't hide his surprise at her words.

There hadn't been a single woman around him who knew about Étape, and none of his male cycling friends knew much about it.

"Yes, I participated in 2018. In fact, I've already booked to participate again next year."

"That's great. Where will you be riding this time? Will it include famous passes like the Col

du Galibier?"

"No, the route will be officially announced next week, so I still don't know where you'll be riding. But I went to the Col du Galibier, Col du Île-de-Iseran, and Col du Îzoard five years ago when I participated in another race. You seem to know a lot about them, Uematsu-san."

"Another race?"

"It was a Gran Fondo called Marmot. Both races were amazing. It would be great if you could participate someday."

"That's definitely not possible for me. But Professor Murata, I'm here today to cover the Nobel Prize, so I don't have time, but please take a break from work and tell me about a European cycling race next time."

Shohei felt a strange sensation of excitement in his heart for the first time in a long time, but he didn't say anything at the time. "Now, let's get started on the actual interview."

Uematsu Ayaka, who had just met him for the first time, smiled kindly at Shohei.

The interview, which lasted nearly two hours in a reception room overlooking a garden where the leaves were starting to turn red in places, was unexpectedly very enjoyable for Shohei. And when they parted ways, they exchanged contact information without either of them saying anything, and began following each other on social media.

All information about next year's Tour de France will be officially announced at eight o'clock tonight Japan time. It will be broadcast live on the Tour organizers' official website from noon local time, and the route and schedule of the Etape will also be made public at that time.

Shohei had made a provisional application with a tour company, but if he did not confirm his reservation within three hours of the official announcement, his provisional reservation would be canceled.

He was working at a night-time dialysis job that night, so he had no problem with the internet connection, but it was a time of nervousness every year, as he had experienced many troublesome situations in the past, such as his credit card being restricted from use on overseas sites.

At 6pm, the busy outpatient clinic finished, and there were about two hours left until the official announcement.

At the same time as 8pm, the live video changed from the venue scenery to a still image showing the course map of all 21 stages of the Tour de France. Less than five seconds later, it was announced that next year's Etape course would be the 20th stage.

It was a course that had been rumored on the Internet for a while, a mountain course starting from Nice in the south of France. Although the distance was relatively short at 135km, it was

a very tough course with no flat sections and an elevation gain of 4,600m. Although it did not include any super-class mountain passes, it was a difficult course worthy of being called the queen stage, with three first-class mountain passes with an elevation difference of over 1,000m and one second-class mountain pass connected together, and almost no flat areas.

An amateur could ride the same route two weeks before the top-class professionals... With such joy in his heart, Shohei opened the homepage of the website to immediately make his provisional reservation into an official application, and filled out the necessary information. The question that is always asked when entering the time, and the answer that I always find most difficult to answer is the participant's own estimated time to finish the race.

All the top professionals who participate in the Tour de France will surely finish this course within four and a half hours. The top amateur athletes who win the Etape are practically professionals, so they will easily finish in under five hours.

The time limit set by the competition is about ten hours to complete the race. There are several time limit checkpoints along the way, and depending on the starting time, the time limit for the first checkpoint will be stricter. It is a rational method to prevent slower athletes from crowding in front of faster athletes and disrupting their race, but even the time it takes to repair a flat tire will be nerve-wracking. Even if he has practiced a fair amount, it is not easy for even Shohei, who is in top form, to finish within eight hours. But if he honestly declares that, he will probably be put in the group that starts last, and he will be even more exposed to the risk of being disqualified along the way. It would be terrible to force himself to take a vacation and go to France, only to be disqualified before completing even half the race. He will not be able to receive the commemorative finisher medal.

Shohei had a bitter experience when he honestly declared his time at the first race he participated in, and ended up starting at the back of the pack, 90 minutes behind the leaders. Since the time limit is the same for everyone, naturally, a late starter has a high chance of being disqualified. Last time, he managed to finish within the time limit and received a medal around his neck, but six years have passed since then, and now, approaching 65 years old, it is not an easy task for Shohei. The system is a little too strict for female and elderly participants. His best guess is that it will take nine hours, twice as long as the pros, but he filled in the questions section of the website that he could finish within seven hours and completed his application.

His runner number will be sent by email and will arrive just before the race. Worried about his leg strength, he could only pray that he could start as early as possible and as close to the front as possible.

Shohei tried calling his wife Mamiko, who lives far away.

"Are you asleep yet?"

"No, I was just reviewing my French class. Why did you call me on the phone?"

"Do you remember? The Etape course has been announced. I need to make a reservation quickly, so I'll come with you, right?"

Mamiko can't ride a bike, so she's not interested in the event itself, but she's been taking French classes for almost 20 years and has always dreamed of traveling to France with her husband. When the last Etape was held in Annecy, they were able to travel abroad together for the first time in 20 years, and she showed Shohei a lively and youthful appearance after having the opportunity to speak French. After that, there was no time for overseas travel due to the new coronavirus, but he invited his wife again this time because he wanted to see her big smile.

"Where have you decided?"

"Nice."

"Oh, what a shame."

"Eh, Nice on the Cote d'Azur. I thought you wanted to go, didn't you?"

Mamiko's answer was unexpected for Shohei. He thought she would say she wanted to go right away, but for some reason she lamented that it was a shame.

"Of course I really want to go to Nice and Provence. But I didn't tell Shohei, but my parents haven't been feeling well lately. My mother fell in the garden yesterday and broke her femur. She's going to have surgery tomorrow, but I wonder if the rehabilitation will go well so she doesn't end up bedridden. I think it will take a long time. Also, my father has diabetes, which causes blood circulation problems in various organs and legs, and he seems to have some dangerous signs in his heart and brain. So, unfortunately, I don't feel like I can go on a trip with him with peace of mind like last time." "I didn't know it was like that. I'm sorry I can't be with you and worry about you." "It would be fine if it was within the country, but it's France, and it would be bad if it affected Shohei's race. The past few years of the coronavirus pandemic have been too long and unfortunate for the elderly who don't have much time left." "Yeah, that's true. I don't think the children will be able to go with us." Shohei, who has never traveled abroad with his family of four since becoming a practicing physician, thought of his two daughters. I was waiting for an opportunity because it would be even more difficult if I got married, but I remembered four years ago when my plans were crushed by the pandemic.

"I'm sure it's impossible. Both of my daughters seem to be suffering from the shortage of doctors and the effects of work style reform. It's hard for female doctors to obtain and maintain a specialist license because they also have to give birth and raise children. They are both too serious, so I'm always worried that they will become mentally ill or die from overwork. Why don't you invite some junior doctors to go with you again?"

I had already reached out to juniors and friends who seemed interested, but there were major

conferences and research meetings at the same time, so it seemed difficult to participate.

"You won't be able to enjoy traveling if you're worried about your parents. ... I understand. Instead, let's go to Yufuin Onsen in early summer together. It might be a good idea to use Yufuin as a base and do some final training at Kokonoe Plateau just before the tournament. Since we're here, could you please make a reservation at Kamenoi Villa for a weekend in late June?"

With that request, Shohei hung up the phone with his wife. For just a moment, he remembered the smile of Uematsu Ayaka, whom he had only just met the other day.

"That's stupid..." Shohei muttered softly to himself, closed his eyes, and shook his head slowly.

## Chapter 4      Stage 4

It was Aleda, 12 years younger than Christine, who invited her to the RCC Summit. And it was her first trip since becoming an RCC member, and it was one of her most memorable experiences.

It had only been five years since her first cancer treatment, and Aleda had always felt that Christine was living a brave life while worrying about the recurrence and metastasis of breast cancer.

When the next RCC Summit, which Aleda manages, was decided to be held in the Cote d'Azur, the first place for Aleda to do so, she was the first to invite Christine to the trip. She thought that leaving London, where it rains a lot and there are many chilly days even in summer, and going on a group ride in the Provence region for three nights and four days with her close cycling friends would be a dreamlike time where she could forget her worries and have a great time.

"Would you like to go to Provence with me? I've got a great plan."

When she heard that attractive invitation, she was not confident enough in herself to answer immediately. She was not feeling well, and had no reason to hesitate for work or financial reasons, but was simply frustrated with herself for not being able to live with breast cancer.

"I'll give you an answer by the weekend, because I have work commitments."

She had already made up her mind, but she was going to consult with her doctor just to be sure.

"There's no reason to hesitate. I love the Cote d'Azur, too. I want to fly there right now. I'm jealous."

Although the answer from the female doctor, who always greets her with a cheerful expression, was as expected, it made her happy.

"There are no signs of cancer in your body right now, and spending a few days enjoying cycling with a cheerful mind, just like the refreshing weather in Provence, will be good for your mental and physical health."

That same day, she told Aleda that she would participate in the summit.

"I'm glad, Christine. Mid-May should be a pleasant season. It's right before the Cannes Film Festival and the Monaco Grand Prix. I can't wait."

It had been a long time since Christine had looked so innocent and happy.

Christine remembered well the day she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. She was still 40 years old, about four years before the summit. She had noticed a small, hard lump like a stone in her left breast. With a referral letter from her family doctor in hand, she visited Imperial Hospital in London, and after a detailed examination, the doctor in charge explained to her that she had malignant breast cancer.

"You will undergo chemotherapy after surgery to remove the cancerous lesion. You may suffer from side effects. As for the prognosis, unfortunately, with the currently commonly used treatment, it has been reported that about 30% of patients experience a recurrence within five years."

The doctor in charge began to speak with a pitying look on his face, but then his expression brightened and he continued to explain.

"Although the effectiveness of the treatment has not yet been established, our breast cancer research group has some experimental drugs that we are very hopeful will have the effect of suppressing recurrence and metastasis, and they will probably be available within a few years. Young and talented graduate students are also working hard to research new cancer treatments. I'm sure it will be fine, so let's have hope."

She had no intention of continuing to suffer in despair. She imagined herself cycling around the world five or ten years from now, and thought of her parents who had raised her to be a little stubborn.

She was single and prioritized her work, so that night she reported her illness and her thoughts on treatment to her parents, and the next week she believed in herself and underwent a mastectomy, thinking that it was the best time to do so. Of course, it was a sad and difficult decision for a 40-year-old woman.

Since then, not a day went by that she was not aware of the possibility of an early death. While being careful not to cause unnecessary worry to her business clients, she experienced many very painful side effects of chemotherapy for the first six months or so. Although she accepted



that this was something that cancer patients should endure, she often felt depressed by the violent waves.

One of the things that always supported her broken heart was her hobby of cycling, and her friends at RCC London who rode with her almost every week.

"My tough chemotherapy finished last week. I've never felt so depressed before, but you all supported me. Thank you so much, everyone. I'm told that in a few more years, we'll be able to try a new drug with fewer side effects."

Fortunately, her treatment progressed very well after that, to the surprise of her doctor. Not only did her physical condition improve, but her heart felt a little lighter, and she herself felt a positive attitude again.

She wanted to value her work-life balance as much as possible, so she gradually tried to spend more time enjoying cycling with her friends at RCC in her daily life. She became so absorbed in spending time with her good friends that she sometimes forgot that she had breast cancer. It was just around that time that Aleda invited her to the Cote d'Azur summit. There was only about a year left until the five-year anniversary of surgery, which is the estimated date for a complete recovery from breast cancer.

One autumn day, about five months after the RCC summit in Provence in May, Christine had an urge to do something meaningful that she could do.

"Hey, I heard that there's an event to support breast cancer patients in Paris soon. I want to participate and share my feelings. I want to convey that feeling to those around me by going to Paris on my beloved bicycle. What do you think? I wonder if you'll ride with me."

Though it might not work, Christine told her club members about the plan she had been thinking about

"That's an interesting idea. The RCC would like to help out. I'll ask the members too."

Aleda, who sympathized with the idea, called out to the club members, and two others agreed, and soon the plan for the four of them to travel began to take shape.

Two weeks later, she and three other cycling friends, including Aleda, cycled from London to Paris over the course of several days, crossing the English Channel by boat along the way. Her desire to support breast cancer patients grew even stronger.

She did this to support women around the world who were struggling with the same problems but were trying to live strong lives, and to give them the courage to live as cancer survivors themselves. She had nothing but gratitude for the encouragement from her fellow cycling friends in London who sympathized with her.

"Hey, let's do this every year. Next fall, how about cycling from Paris to the next city? For example, cycling together to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. With more friends if possible."

"That's a good idea."

"How about we call it One More City (OMC)?"

Someone said something, and the room was filled with cheerful laughter.

Someone said that the way cancer patients deal with their disease - undergoing treatment, suffering from unbearable side effects, undergoing regular checkups, and overcoming new and troublesome problems one by one - is very similar to the way cancer patients cycle from one city to the next, and then the next, struggling but with hope, moving towards their future goal little by little.

I'm not sure who said it first, as all four of us were drunk at a restaurant in Paris, but in the city of Paris that we had struggled to reach, the female cyclists talked late into the night about their no small dreams.

Christmas that year ended, and a new year came around again, and the five years after treatment, when breast cancer often recurs and metastases, were about to pass.

This coming July, I will be participating in a big cycling event recommended by Aleda for the first time. It's a race called Etape, which I've always wanted to participate in. This year, I will ride the course starting from Annecy in France in the same way as the professionals, but of course it will take more than twice as long as the professionals.

"This may be a bit too tough for me, a breast cancer survivor in my mid-forties. That's why I want to try as long as my physical strength allows..."

Her anxiety is overwritten by hope.

Even though it was still early February and the sky was chilly and spring was still young, Christine and her friends all believed that after five years, she would surely feel cheerful and liberated.

As she was riding her bike along a street near Trafalgar Square in London, where dusk was falling early, on her way home from work to her home in Soho, it suddenly became pitch black and all sounds disappeared around her. And then, all of a sudden, she unexpectedly became an ambulance attendant.

According to the witness who called the ambulance, she had been unconscious on the ground and was having repeated small convulsions.

A few hours later, when she woke up in a daze in a white bed in a small room at Imperial Hospital, where she had been taken, her doctor told her something unexpected, as she was just about to finish her five-year observation period after breast cancer treatment.

"The loss of consciousness and seizures this time are probably due to a metastatic brain tumor. It's been almost five years since the last treatment for the primary breast cancer, and metastasis at this timing is relatively rare, but there are also findings that strongly suggest a

tumor in the bones, so it is likely not a primary brain tumor, but a metastasis of breast cancer." She couldn't quite grasp the situation, but she realized that she could never deny the words of her doctor, who calmly explained the results of the imaging test.

"Finally, I've reached the world of stage 4..."

No matter how much she hated it, she had no choice but to accept the cruel reality that was different from yesterday.

She had experienced the pain of side effects that come with conventional chemotherapy more than she wanted to five years ago, so she didn't want to experience it again, but her simple yet positive personality wanted her to continue living strong from now on. Tears continued to flow endlessly from her eyes as she lay quietly alone in her hospital bed.

Later the following week, Christine successfully underwent surgery to remove her brain tumor, and was able to proudly show off her beautiful shaved blonde head and talk cheerfully to the many friends who came to visit her with concern.

"I wonder? This hairstyle suits me, doesn't it? It might be a little cold when I walk outside, though," she said, smiling at her friends who came to visit her in the hospital room with pity in their eyes.

"Maybe I should wear this hairstyle for the Etape too. It will help with the heat, and it looks fast, right?"

The metastasis of breast cancer to the brain and bones is a shock to patients, making them strongly aware of their death in the not-too-distant future, but one of the reasons she was so cheerful that it overturned the expectations of her visitors was the new treatment her doctor showed her after the surgery.

It is not difficult to imagine that the cancer cells have already reached her brain and bones, and will eventually metastasize to the lungs and other organs, gradually eating away at her body.

The treatment offered to the disheartened Christine was an oral medication still in the clinical trial stage. It was one of the molecular targeted drugs, a new category of cancer treatment, and at this time it was a new drug that could only be tried in the UK. It was said to have a much milder side effect rate than chemotherapy. The hospital where she was taken was the center of development and clinical trials of this new drug, Palvocivir, and if she fully understood that it was in the clinical trial stage and wanted to try it, she could start prescribing it immediately.

Knowing that not all metastatic breast cancer patients could necessarily benefit from the molecular targeted drug she was pinning her hopes on, she was honestly happy about her good fortune, even though she had mixed feelings. And without any hesitation, she told her young

female doctor that she would gladly be a subject in the clinical trial.

On her first night back home from the hospital, she sat in a quiet room and reflected on the turbulent days she had spent in the hospital. It was the warm support of her family and friends that saved her heart from being disheartened. Feeling blessed and loved by everyone who came to see her brought her incredible joy.

Five days after being discharged from the hospital, she slowly pushed open the door to the RCC London clubhouse and entered. She wanted to smile and show her gratitude to her wonderful cycling community.

"Welcome back. You look so healthy. Maybe it's because of that hair."

Her smile was distorted, and as she tried desperately to hold back the tears that were threatening to overflow, her friends looked at her warmly.

She wanted to laugh, but couldn't. The tears just kept flowing. Her lips didn't move, as if she had forgotten how to speak...

After a while of silence in the circle, her trembling voice was finally heard.

"I'm back, just like I promised."

Applause began without anyone knowing.

"We've all been waiting patiently for you. How do you think you'll be able to ride again?"

"Of course. My heart, lungs, and legs are completely fine. My head might have gotten a little worse, though."

Her playful personality didn't seem to have changed.

"That's great. Let's take our time to get in shape and then resume training together for the Étape."

More than ten people from RCC London had registered to participate in the Étape four months from now.

"I'm looking forward to the Étape, of course, but I have one request, Aleda."

"Whatever. You can't lend me money or introduce me to a guy friend. I want it too."

Hearing those words, Christine's usual smile returned again.

"Do you remember what we all said when we ran from London to Paris last fall? How about we run from Paris to another city again next year?"

"Yes, of course. If you do, I'll help you."

"I knew you'd say that. Thank you, Aleda."

Facing the reality of stage 4, Christine wanted to realize what she had been thinking about all this time while in the hospital, and began to talk to her friends about her specific plan.

"My doctor recommended that I start taking a new experimental drug. I don't know the long-term effects yet, but it's a great hope for patients like me whose cancer has recurred. Medical

science is constantly improving, but the efforts of young researchers are very important. I want to provide financial support to these graduate students so that they can work on cancer research without worry. I also want to raise awareness that there are people suffering from recurrent cancer all around us."

The smile disappeared from her face, but there was not a trace of sadness to be found there.

"I see. So, what do you want to do?"

"As I said in Paris last year, I thought it would be nice to hold a bicycle trip that connects cities one after another every year as a charity ride. Like someone said that day, let's call it One More City (OMC)."

Christine's serious gaze made her club members understand her seriousness.

"A charity ride is something like a tough ride event where the club's president, Simon, raises funds on a donation site to support autistic children, and rides from London to Manchester and back. Glory after suffering... is a typical Rapha philosophy."

"Yes, that's it. Cancer patients always encounter various hardships even after treatment, but they have no choice but to live while living with the disease well. This continues until the last day. They can't stop, turn back, or ride two roads at the same time. There are steep slopes and mountain passes, and harsh unpaved roads. Sometimes they get lost, and sometimes they fix a flat tire and keep riding."

Everyone around listened quietly, not wanting to miss her passionate words. "I feel that this feeling is very similar to the daily life of cancer patients, especially those with stage 4 recurrent or metastatic cancer. I think there are many times when you feel like giving up. So I thought that I could go on a bicycle trip like this with supporters, collect donations from people who sympathize with me, and use them to support young cancer researchers. I wonder if you would cooperate."

"That would be great. A never-ending bicycle trip. Since we've been able to carry out Simon's plan to support autistic children every year, I'm sure the plan to support breast cancer researchers will be a success. Yes, I'm sure we can make it work. Right, everyone?"

And so, the annual autumn charity ride plan called the "One More City Challenge" began to take shape. This autumn, the second time, we will ride from Paris, where we arrived last time, to Amsterdam, over three days, mainly with friends from the RCC, and within a few days, more than 15 people had heard about it and offered to participate.

After spending the spring in rehabilitation and overcoming the early summer with training, she finally arrived at the day of the Étape with her friends from RCC London. Fortunately, her physical condition has recovered greatly and is stable, and she no longer suffers from bone pain or bothersome dizziness.

She experienced a distance of over 170 km in one day for the first time, and a difficult course with a total ascent of over 4,300 meters, but she simply turned her wheels and overcame the anxiety many times. She was overwhelmed by the magnificent charm of the French Alps, which beautifully transformed pain into joy. The beautiful scenery on the course, which she could not experience in the UK, and the harshness that she had to overcome, made her addicted to Étape, who had overcome her painful cancer treatment.

"Completing One More City and the Étape every year is an important thing that allows me to feel whether I can be myself..."

Having found a new goal as a cancer survivor, she began to pedal forward with her supportive friends.

Although the Étape was canceled in one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, Christine had completed four Étapes so far. She was worried about her immune system, so she trained according to the advice of her doctor, but it was especially tough when the infection was raging and outdoor activities were restricted. Although the courses of all the races were very tough and challenging, the sense of fulfillment she felt when she finished the race brought her an indescribable sense of euphoria.

Next year's 2024 Etape will depart from Nice in the south of France, a place that holds many memories of the RCC summit, and she and her friends completed their registration last week. This time, the competition to register through the reservation site was so fierce that it was nerve-wracking, and as always, when you secure a place to participate, you can't help but get excited.

At the end of last month, Christine also successfully completed the seventh edition of her annual One More City. This time, she traveled from Munich, Germany to Venice, Italy. When they saw the bright Adriatic Sea after passing over the Austrian Alps and the Dolomites in northern Italy, they had a momentary sense of accomplishment, but their journey is not over yet.

With the media picking up on their activities, they raised more donations to support breast cancer researchers than they had expected. In recent years, the number of participants has increased to around 40 people, ten times the number of the first event, and she is already planning the eighth event next year.

In addition, One More City is planning to expand its activities from Europe to the United States next fall. Fellow cyclists from RCC San Francisco who sympathized with their activities have offered to cooperate with RCC London, which will make it possible to hold a one-day charity ride with 400 people.

"That's great. I hope I can go to California with you next year."

"It's all thanks to you, Aleda, for talking to RCC San Francisco. Thank you."

"But next year, the pandemic will be over and the RCC summit will resume in the south of France in September, so it may not be possible to go to San Francisco at the same time..."

It's November, and preparations for winter are about to begin in the UK.

Christine, who has many plans for the future, was spending her time peacefully, but she visited Imperial Hospital for the first time in three months for a regular checkup. She is in very good health with nothing to worry about, but she is scheduled to have a chest CT scan for the first time in about six months.

"Hello. How are you feeling? I'll explain after the CT scan results are out."

Seeing Christine's healthy expression, the doctor in charge said in a bright voice.

In 2018, metastases were discovered in her brain and pelvis, and she joined the ranks of stage 4 cancer patients, but for the past five and a half years, thanks to new drugs, she has been able to spend her days without any particularly worrisome findings. The drug, which she started taking as an investigational drug at first, seems to be quite effective in preventing recurrence and metastasis in other patients as well. Nearly ten years have passed since she was first diagnosed with breast cancer, but she is able to enjoy cycling, which has become her reason for living, to the point that others envy her.

After all the tests were completed, Christine was called into the examination room, where she was met by her doctor, whose expression had suddenly turned grave.

"We've found a slight problem. These two white areas lined up here... can you see them? They're not big, but there's a new tumor in your left lung. We think they're probably metastases from breast cancer."

The doctor quietly and clearly explained the condition, glancing at Christine's face from time to time. Before she pointed, the monitor screen clearly showed two white round spots about one centimeter in diameter lined up in the lower left lung field.

"It's almost certain that these are lung metastases from cancer. The new drug has been working well for over five years, but is this the limit?"

Christine looked as if she didn't care, and she had forgotten her usual smile as she asked this.

"It may be that a lesion that cannot be controlled by that medicine has appeared. However, I think that this itself can probably be treated with radiation therapy."

"Do you think it can be cured somehow? As usual, there are various cycling-related events from summer to autumn next year. If you focus on treatment immediately, do you think you will be able to return to your current physical condition in six months when the big cycling competition will be held?"

"That is the French competition that you participate in every year, right?"

The young female doctor in charge liked to talk about cycling with Christine, a cancer survivor, on the way home from the day of the checkup.

"If it is only this part of the body that is treated, it should usually be enough. However, after radiation treatment, the lungs may be severely damaged in parts and harden, reducing lung capacity, so long-term rehabilitation may be necessary. First, let's check whether there is any metastasis to other organs with a PET scan just to be sure."

As Christine looked at the colorful dead leaves fluttering outside the window, her expression became a little cloudy and grim.

"I understand. I'm not going to give up yet. I want to keep running. Please give me the necessary treatment."

Christine expressed her wish while looking into the eyes of the doctor in charge.

"You won't have to worry about the money. It will be covered by public funds and your insurance."

The female doctor gently spoke to the older woman, who was probably heartbroken.

"But... this year's course is particularly tough. I'm not getting any younger, and I wonder if an old lady like me will be able to complete the training before the competition in time."

Christine gave a playful laugh to the concerned doctor.

She had started to face the nightmare as a stage 4 breast cancer patient six years ago, but now she has surprisingly become mentally strong and is about to take on a new battle against this troubling cancer.

## Chapter 5 [Seven Years]

The beginning of a gorgeous early spring. Modest bright sunlight fills the air, and even the occasional cold wind feels strangely soft. This is one of Murata Shohei's favorite seasons of the year. With each passing week, the sun sets later and later, brightening even the most exhausted mood after a day of work.

In the garden of his home, close to Mikawa Heart Clinic, plum blossoms have quietly begun to bloom again this year. A delicate Utsuri-shiro blooms modestly by the pond. A Honbeni droops gracefully next to the entrance. A Kuchibeni blooms quietly on the bank of the canal that runs north of the tatami room. A Utsuri-beni blooms majestically outside the living room window facing west. All of these are old plum trees that Shohei's father had painstakingly and lovingly cultivated. In just a few days, when the third anniversary of his death rolls around, all the flowers will be in full bloom as if they have been remembered.

This was just before the new vaccine that would later win the Nobel Prize was released in



Japan. Shohei lost his father to that terrible infectious disease, and with regret, he continued to see many of his close friends and family die one after another. He himself was infected while responding to a cluster outbreak in a nursing home, and he too was on the brink of death for several weeks. He heard the news of his father's death while he was hospitalized, looking at the falling snow outside the window of his hospital room. He will never forget those days when he felt powerless as a clinician and the unreasonableness of the medical administration, which almost broke his heart.

Three years have passed since that day, full of deep sorrow, and like most people, his life has changed completely, but the dark and tense atmosphere that had enveloped Mikawa Heart Clinic for the past four years has finally begun to brighten up recently.

"Director, how far are you going to ride today? It looks like the wind is pretty cold."

As soon as the Saturday outpatient consultation and dialysis management time ended in the afternoon, Shohei hurriedly started putting on his cycling wear in the examination room, and nurse Natsumi Hagio asked innocently.

The young Natsumi is as old as a mother and daughter between her and Director Shohei. Shohei was secretly grateful to her for her innocent natural talent that somehow brightened up the heavy atmosphere of the clinic, which had been plagued by COVID-19 since he started working there four years ago.

"The sun will set in about four hours, so maybe around Hoshinomura. 80km round trip. It's still pretty cold in the shade, and there's probably a bit of wind. My private parts will freeze and shrink."

"That's... surely sexual harassment. I'll have the head nurse scold you."

She sounded angry, but there was a smile in her eyes. "I'm sorry. The head nurse is scary, so I'll try to keep it gentle..."

Shohei was completely intimidated by Ezaki Rumi, the head nurse who had been working at the hospital since it first opened.

Natsumi tried to hold back her laughter with a look of triumph... on her face.

"The tenth wave is coming to an end. There are hardly any pneumonia patients now. At the beginning, it was scary to see so many people being hospitalized or dying from severe pneumonia, but I hope this will be the last wave."

Before the vaccine was introduced, the mortality rate of dialysis patients connected to Mikawa Heart Clinic was over 20% of those infected. Several staff members who had experienced a terrible cluster outbreak in which many died in the attached nursing home felt mentally exhausted and left the clinic, troubled.

"The first year or two were hellish. I don't want to go through it again, but I'm sure some

weirdo will appear from the neighboring country just when we've forgotten about it."

"There's been a lot of riding this year, right after the New Year. It's quite different from last year, isn't it?"

"I wonder."

Shohei, who hasn't told any of the staff about his trip to France in July, pretended not to be interested in further questions. It's true that he's been doing that lately, but before she started working here, Shohei would spend his free time on his bike, even in bad weather.

He doesn't feel that adventurous anymore, but before the new coronavirus started to flow in from the People's Republic of China, Shohei would often go riding on Mount Seburi, towering to the north, even in the middle of winter. It's a mountain on the border between Fukuoka and Saga prefectures, with a shining white air defense and weather radar floating on its peak far beyond the clear cold air. It feels close, but it's a white sphere 30 kilometers away in a straight line. There was untrodden snow piled up from the middle to the top, and the chances of reaching the 1000m summit were slim, but Shohei, who was not yet 60 years old, was not troubled by the cold and had to brave the descent.

"You don't know what I was like before I turned 60."

"I know. I was a very fat doctor, and when I tried to give dietary advice to my patients, they would laugh at me and not listen."

"What a terrible rumor."

It was mostly true, so Shohei couldn't seriously deny it.

"After I lost weight, I always went somewhere on my bike on Saturdays and Sundays. I would leave right after work at 2pm on Saturdays, come back late on Sundays or early on Mondays, and go straight to work. I had a lot of fun back then."

"For example, where did you go on Saturday afternoon and Sunday?"

"The farthest I went was probably Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture. There was a charity ride for the earthquake recovery. Next was Karuizawa. There was a ride around Mt. Asama, so I took a plane and a bullet train. After that, I think I did the hill climb on Mt. Fuji. Again, I took a plane and a bus from Shinjuku, and cycled up to the fifth station of Mt. Fuji. It was my first time on Mt. Fuji, but I couldn't see anything in the clouds, so I didn't know where I was."

"Eh, that's... not a place you can go on Saturday afternoon. You ride for a long time there. And you come back on Sunday. Is that even possible?"

It was no wonder she couldn't believe it. It was a forced march that Shohei, who is about to turn 65 after the pandemic is over, would never have planned.

"I've cycled to many other places too. On Saturdays, I'd go as far as I could by train, plane, or car, and on Sundays, I'd cycle as much as I could from early morning until the evening, and no matter what means I used, I'd come back without interfering with work. Anyway, in my

case, I don't have enough time and I can't take a break, so I don't mind spending money on transportation."

"That's amazing. Where else have you been?"

Shohei tried to remember the events from ten years ago when he resumed his bicycle trips, but perhaps because of his age, his memories were becoming more and more vague, and he began to worry a little about his own forgetfulness. Of course, it was completely different from the dementia patients he often encountered in his daily medical practice, but he was honestly aware that he was approaching an age where he could appreciate the cruelty of the passage of time.

"That's right. I got to Nara by Shinkansen and JR Nara Line. I arrived at 10pm on Saturday night, and from 7am the next morning I cycled the mountain roads of Nara all day." "Even going to Kyoto is a long way." "But it was fun, the bicycle trip to Nara. It was an interesting project that combined the charm of travel and bicycles, and it was a fresh trip that was a pioneer of today's cycle guided tours. It was planned by a Shiga Prefecture person called Inoue, and it was an interesting event that took us to historical points while riding old roads and secret paths. It's been seven years since then, and I'm glad that such bicycle tour guided tours are spreading all over Japan even during the pandemic. Fujino, a fellow RCC member, is also enthusiastically continuing to plan such tours in various parts of Kyushu, mainly in Oita Prefecture. It's a little different from European ones, and it has a Japanese-style feel to it. There's a sense of tenacity in the air. Anyway, bicycle trips are healthy, super eco-friendly and carbon-free, and the infection prevention measures are perfect. I hope that bicycle trips will become more popular with inbound tourists in the future, as a way to revitalize local areas. It's also encouraging that people I know are taking on new cycling-related jobs while taking advantage of the wonderful environments of Aso, Kokonoe, and the Shimanami Kaido. I'm envious of people who can do the work they love in the places they love. I'm sure it took a lot of courage to start a business or start a business during the pandemic, but I'd like to try something new again." "I guess it's too late to try something new now. So, what about the Shimanami Kaido?" Shohei has given up on the straight punches of young women these days, so he's not particularly angry. I used to go on solo bicycle trips around the islands of the Seto Inland Sea until just before the coronavirus outbreak, and no matter how many times I go, my heart is excited every time I go. Cycling along the calm and beautiful seaside is more comfortable in this season than in midsummer. He enjoys the luxury of watching the scenery from the ferries and boats that connect the small islands. He feels at peace when he surrenders himself to the quiet, lush seaside scenery, and is happy that for just that moment he can forget about his daily work. "Oh, you don't know? I agree. The Shimanami Kaido is now a famous cycling mecca that has been attracting attention from all over the world and many foreigners

actually come to ride it. It's a scenic course of about 70 kilometers one way that connects Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture and Imabari in Ehime Prefecture with a long bridge over large islands, and I've been there several times before the pandemic. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to go since COVID-19, but at my age, it might be a bit difficult to go just on weekends." "I'm sure there are many people whose lives and jobs have changed due to the impact of COVID-19. There were many patients who came to our clinic." "That's right. Things are picking up now, but people who work in face-to-face jobs, such as in the tourism, food and beverage, and apparel industries, must have been greatly affected. Nakao, who is the same age as me and who I've known for almost ten years, quit his job at a ryokan in Aso at the beginning of the pandemic and started a new job that makes use of his cycling hobby while exploring new possibilities. "I see."

"Oh, what kind of work does he do?"

"I don't see him much these days, so I don't know the details, but he guides domestic and international visitors on bicycle trips around Aso, plans and manages events that use bicycles, and collaborates with various people to promote tourism in Aso... Normally, he's at an age where he would retire, so he might be living a leisurely life using his hobbies, but in the case of him, who is also known by the nickname of Director Colnago, when I look at his social media posts, he looks so much younger than me, which is also very enviable."

"It seems like you're always envious of others, but I'm sure there are many people who are envious of you. You have a lot of money, so aren't you a little too greedy? If you don't keep it in moderation, you'll end up being punished and getting seriously injured. If you get seriously injured in a bicycle accident, it will be a problem for both our patients and us, so please be careful."

She doesn't know that seven years ago, Shohei broke his left wrist in a bicycle accident and underwent surgery, and she didn't know in real time that he became more interested in bicycle trips than in remorse, and then traveled to France by bicycle for three years in a row.

Shohei's four years since the pandemic began have been filled with bitter memories of making reservations for overseas cycling events every year, only to have to cancel them just before departure due to the need to respond to the coronavirus.

"Well, it's getting dark, so I'll be leaving soon. I'll leave the rest to you. The last person, don't forget to lock the door and set up security."

He left those words to the staff who were cleaning up, took out a road bike from the bicycle parking lot in the hospital, and went out through the back door.

Today's partner was a bicycle with a frame assembled from old-fashioned thin chromium round pipes. It was an Italian-made "road racer" with plated joints and metallic-painted navy blue pipes that sparkled in the light. The pleasure of riding while feeling the beautiful details

and silhouette that Shohei's generation admired in his younger days as part of his body is indescribable. The outside temperature shown on the cycle computer attached to the handlebars is 8 degrees Celsius. It's chilly compared to the heated interior of the hospital, but there are few clouds and plenty of sunlight. It looks like we can somehow endure the cold for about four hours until sunset.

Now heading east, beyond the mountainous area of Yame, the Aso and Kokonoe mountains stretch out in the distance. The Aso region is preparing for the annual Makino no Oyaki event next month, but it may still be hit by sudden snowfall at this time of year. Nakao-san was the one who guided us on the Oyaki ride that we experienced for the first time last spring, but we're sure he's making new plans for the upcoming tourist season.

The phone rang in Shohei's back pocket. It had been about 50 minutes since he started riding, and the gentle uphill slope was about to begin.

He stopped on the side of the road and tapped the answer button. He heard the gentle voice of Kabashima Chisako. "Doctor, is it okay now?"

She is the manager of the dementia group home she runs, and knows that Shohei often goes out cycling on Saturday afternoons, so she spoke with a pitying tone.

"Yes, it's fine. What's wrong?"

"Tamura Eijiro has had a slight fever since yesterday evening, and just to be sure, we tested him with a simple test kit, and he tested positive for coronavirus. This morning, Yoshida Hamako also said she had a sore throat, and although her test result was negative at the moment, I think she's a little suspicious. The other staff and residents seem to be fine, but we'll be watching them carefully to make sure it doesn't spread."

The tragic cluster that occurred in a nursing home four years ago also started quietly. Nowadays, simple kits have become widespread and simple tests can be done at home, but at the time, all you could do was consult the public health center and ask for instructions on how to respond. If there was a weekend in between, it would take two days for the results to be known, and in that time, the virus would spread and cause tragic results.

"Are you okay with eating? It could be the beginning of a cluster, so please stay quietly in your room..."

"He has severe dementia, so I don't think he'll listen to my request, but we'll all be careful."

Rather than a consultation, it was an expression of his desire to report and share with Shohei, the chairman, the basic policy he had learned and acquired over the past four years. Both Shohei and the staff at the clinic and nursing home have learned a lot over the past four years, even while suffering. Fortunately, the risk has been greatly reduced these days due to the appearance of vaccines and the weakening of the coronavirus itself.

"If there are any changes, please contact me at any time, even in the middle of the night."

Please remind the staff to be careful with their families. Thank you, and good work."

Shohei put his smartphone back in his back pocket and started running again towards Hoshino Village, which is located upstream of the river that flows slowly through the valley. It was still about halfway one way, and the gentle climb to the center of the village, at an altitude of 300 meters, continued. Fortunately, the wind was calm and the cold was not yet severe, but it seemed that there was no time to go to the very end of the village. There was a light rain the other day, but I wonder if it was snowing around here. As the altitude increases and the valley deepens, snow remains unmelted and white in places where the sunlight does not reach easily. At the back of the narrow mountain paths that stretch out like tree branches, there is a small village, and old houses are scattered quietly. Shohei liked to walk alone along such narrow, mossy mountain passes.

The scenery hardly changes no matter how many years pass. Only the color of the mountains, the brightness of the sky, and the presence of birds and animals change with the season. The same light and presence return in the same season, but when he notices the houses where the signs of life that existed the previous year have disappeared, he feels the loneliness of this depopulated area.

He turns left at the village office intersection, passes under a large torii gate, and slowly climbs the slope north. The sun that had been hiding behind the mountains comes out, and his back feels a little warmer. From here, they cross a small mountain pass and travel about 40 kilometers. By the time they return, the temperature will have dropped considerably.

At that moment, the phone started ringing behind them again.

This time it was from a staff member working overtime at the clinic. Shohei again moved his road bike to the left side of the road and listened carefully to the voice coming from his smartphone.

"Good work. This is Irie from the office. We just received a call from the family of Morinaga, a dialysis patient. Morinaga had been hospitalized with COVID-19 since the end of last month, but he passed away around noon today."

"After all, COVID-19 infection among dialysis patients is still a scary thing."

"That's right. Several staff members from the dialysis room will be attending the wake."

Shohei was remembering the last time his father passed away, when neither a funeral nor cremation could be held as normal.

He works every day except Sunday during Golden Week, but for Shohei, this is natural now, and it's a carefree daily routine that doesn't require him to go to crowded tourist spots.

On Sunday, May 5th, Shohei got up at 5am, loaded his road bike into his car and headed for Yabakei in Oita Prefecture. He was going to take part in the Tour de Yabakei, which would

serve as training for the Etape race to be held in July in Nice, southern France.

Instead of taking the highway, Shohei took the road he usually uses for training and set off towards the sunrise. He left the southern edge of Yame city and headed along the Hoshino River. There were hardly any cars passing by on the way, and he wasn't stopped at any traffic lights, as he made gentle curves to the right and left, gradually gaining altitude. Just before entering the center of Hoshino village, he took a left at the fork in the road. From there, the road became steep and made several sharp turns, and he headed north and east, crossing the Mino Mountains, with their 800m-high ridges stretching from east to west, while looking at hundreds of beautiful rice terraces surrounded by stone walls on both sides.

Yabakei held fond memories from nearly 50 years ago. During his summer vacation in his second year of high school, Shohei and two friends went on a three-day, two-night bicycle trip to Kyushu, aiming for the first full-scale cycling road in Kyushu, which was built using an abandoned railway line. The familiar building where they stayed on that trip can still be seen on the other side of the river.

During the opening ceremony, a smiling man wearing a familiar blue polka-dot outfit caught his eye. It was Sugimoto Eiichi, manager of the Iwai sports bicycle shop.

"Good morning, Sugimoto-san. Thank you for adjusting the cleat and saddle position the other day. It seems to fit well."

About ten days ago, Shohei had brought his beloved bike to his shop and had the position of the metal cleat on the sole of the shoe fine-tuned, and the position and angle of the saddle fine-tuned for mountain courses. He had climbed a nearby mountain several times to compare the before and after adjustments, and wanted to tell Shohei, who is about two generations younger than him, that it felt quite good.

"Let's have fun riding together. It's before the Étape, so be careful not to get hurt."

When Shohei first cycled through Yabakei, most of the participants this time hadn't even been born yet. Thinking about that, he was shocked at his own age all over again.

Perhaps it was the order of application, but the participants, starting from the starting gate with the youngest bib numbers, started running with the loud cheers of the host behind them. Shohei had a relatively early start.

It was the last weekend of May, a month in which he had been training smoothly.

There were about 40 patients in the outpatient clinic on Saturday morning, a little more than usual, but Shohei was able to finish his consultations smoothly and on time. As the Étape approached, Shohei felt that his consultations were getting more energetic and his work was becoming more fulfilling.

On fine Saturdays and Sundays, unless he had other business, he would get on his bike and

rush out of the clinic as soon as his consultations were over, but today he was working at his computer at his desk.

"Even though the weather is so nice, why aren't you going for a run today?"

Hiroko Mita, who was working overtime in the office next to the examination room to do end-of-month receipt work, asked Shohei curiously.

"There's a department alumni reunion this evening, so I thought I'd attend for the first time in a while and say hello to the professor and the department chief. I didn't ask them last year or the year before, but the year before that, we asked them to send a lot of doctors because of COVID-19, and they helped us out a lot. And this year, I've asked them to be a substitute doctor for the first time in three years."

"Oh? Is there a substitute doctor coming soon?"

Instead of replying, Shohei printed out an A3 sheet of paper for posting that he had created on his computer and handed it to her. On it was written in large letters announcing that the director would be absent and that a substitute doctor would be treating patients during the Etape participation period in July. The departure is in 40 days, so if we put up an announcement poster now, most of the patients who come for monthly regular appointments will be informed of the director's absence.

"Another European cycling event? Where will it be this time?"

Since he will be away for the same amount of time as he did last time in France, Mita, who has been working with Shohei for 25 years, understands and cooperates without him having to say anything.

"Yes, France again. The one where you can race on the same course as the Tour de France."

"That's the event you participated in once and won a medal. We were all talking about it. You've been training more frequently, and your body is getting more and more toned, so we thought you'd definitely participate in an overseas event."

"That's pretty astute. Yes, that's right. Since I started training in earnest in March, I've already lost four kilos, and my goal is one more kilo. If I can keep training at this rate, I think I can get down to my best weight from five years ago."

"Wow, that's amazing. Please hold another diet seminar for your staff."

Mita said, and turned to Shohei with a bright smile.

"This time it will be for five days. If you know the names of the substitute doctors, please let me know. I will need their My Number and bank account details, and I will also need their personal seals. They are all doctors from the university's medical department, right?"

When Shohei was hospitalized for about three weeks with severe pneumonia from COVID-19, it was difficult for one medical department to handle it alone, and we had to ask another medical department from the university he graduated from to help him. However, in the past,



for similar dates during cycling competitions, the doctors from one medical department were able to handle it. However, due to the work style reform that began in April this year, it is becoming increasingly difficult to temporarily dispatch doctors from a medical department. "Well, because of the work style reform, the medical department could only send me two days, so this time I asked Dr. Yoshitomi, who was a senior to me when I was a university student, to come from Kochi Prefecture."

"What, from Kochi Prefecture? That must be hard to do from so far away."

"Well, my parents' home is here, so I thought it was like going home. But it was a relief. Because of the work style reform, we private practice doctors can't just take time off even when we're sick. If a family member dies, we can't suddenly ask for a doctor, and if we're doing dialysis, we can't take a temporary break."

"That's true. Even if other staff can take time off, you're absolutely essential."

"I'm already 65, which is the retirement age in society."

Having Mita listen to his usual complaints again, Shohei let out a self-deprecating smile on his face.

The annual Chikushi University Cardiovascular Department medical department meeting was attended by many people from all over the country, but after the suspension of in-person meetings during the COVID-19 period, the number of attendees has decreased by about 30% compared to before. Even though there are reasons, it is lonely when I don't see the faces of my colleagues who shared the good times and the bad.

After graduating from university and joining the medical department forty years ago, Shohei has realized that the number of juniors has become many times greater than the number of seniors. In the occasional death notices from the medical department, he has begun to see the names of seniors who are close to his age and whom he knows well. Perhaps it is a generation gap, but he has a hard time talking to the young medical staff working at the university hospital. Just as he felt when he was at university, he is now completely treated by his juniors as one of the ``unknown gray-haired seniors."

When he saw their names, many people thought that they were the children of his peers or slightly older colleagues. Until recently, Shohei had hoped that his two daughters would aim for the same specialty, but it seems unlikely that they will go into major fields such as internal medicine, surgery, or obstetrics and gynecology. Unlike his eldest sister who went into a minor field, his second sister has been studying general medicine since her student days, and he hopes she doesn't get the short end of the stick... Shohei was worried about the future as he bitterly imagined the faces of the people in charge of medical policy.

"Thank you for the new novel the other day. I enjoyed reading it. Have you written the next

one yet?"

The professor, who always greets him with a gentle smile, approached Shohei, who was standing there by himself. He was about seven years younger than Shohei, and had a good reputation for being considerate and considerate to everyone.

"Oh, Professor. It's been a while. I've asked the chief of the medical department to send a doctor on an emergency basis. Thank you for always going along with it."

"Another cycling tournament? I'll do my best to help out. But please be careful not to get into an accident."

"Thank you. The novel I'm currently writing is about an elderly private practitioner who can't get used to the new medical style of online consultations and medical DX, which don't perform basic medical examinations like percussion, palpation, or auscultation, and who laments that he tries to stick to the old-fashioned style of medical practice. Well, it's kind of like a complaint about how outdated I am."

"I understand how you feel. . I'm at a university, but I'm in a similar situation. It's certainly a medical novel with a theme that I wish someone would write about properly. It's a world that the bureaucrats and politicians at the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare would never understand. But today's medicine is moving in a strange direction because it's not doctors or medical scientists, but bureaucrats in the humanities and people in the business world who decide policies based mainly on finances. Ideally, doctors themselves should speak out more so that they don't lose to bureaucrats who don't know the reality of medical science and medicine." The professor smiled and shook hands with Shohei, then disappeared back into the crowd. As if waiting for the two to finish their conversation, Associate Professor Nakae Yukio called out to Shohei. Nakae was a junior who looked up to Shohei when he was still at university and a clinical instructor. In particular, Nakae started cycling for the purpose of losing weight, and the two began practicing together and participating in events, and five years ago, the three of them even participated in a competition in France with a professor from another university. The youngest, Nakae, was unfortunately disqualified for time over midway, but poor weight management may have been the main reason.

"Nakae, are you practicing?"

"I haven't been running much. I've been thinking about taking revenge on the Galibier for the past five years, but it's impossible with how fat I am. Professor, where is the next race you're going to? Italy? Or is it the Etape again?"

A man who I'd never met before approached me with a smile, tapped Nakae on the shoulder, and joined their conversation as if to interrupt. The man kept staring at Shohei's face.

"Oh, Professor Yamada, good evening. Did you know Professor Murata too?"

The man called Professor Yamada, with his bold face and dignified figure, was a professor of thoracic surgery at the same university. He was about five years younger than Shohei, and seemed to be in good health both physically and mentally. He seemed like a sincere man whose surgical skills could be trusted.

Since opening my practice, I have referred many patients who may be suitable for surgery to university hospitals, but most patients are first examined by the internal medicine department to see if they are suitable. Since cardiac rehabilitation is basically performed in the internal medicine department after surgery, Shohei, a private practitioner, rarely has face-to-face contact with surgeons, and although he is naturally familiar with the name of Professor Yamada, strangely enough, he had never met him before.

"Dr. Murata, this is Yamada from the surgery department. I have always wanted to talk to you."

"Ah, Professor Yamada. Nice to meet you. I sometimes ask you to take care of patients. Recently, the number of elderly dialysis patients with aortic stenosis has been increasing, so it is very helpful that you can also handle TAVI."

"Thank you. Actually, this is not the first time I have met Dr. Murata. When you were a resident and I was a student, we went to Genkai Island together on Dr. Sugiyama's cruiser from the yacht harbor in Odo, Fukuoka. Do you remember?"

"Eh, I remember that very well. But... I graduated from a national university and no one around me owned a cruiser, so I thought private universities were amazing. I clearly remember being with Dr. Sugiyama, Dr. Ochiai, and Ms. Inada, a female doctor who now specializes in diabetes, but was Dr. Yamada there too? Sorry, I don't remember at all."

I had once been invited by a senior who knew I was in the yacht club to go on a cruise, but to be honest, spending a day on a large cruiser didn't really suit me, as Shohei had only ever ridden two-seaters for competitions.

"I remember it well. After all, Dr. Murata was the only one who had experience in the yacht club that day, and during the cruise, I enjoyed hearing about his bicycle trips from his student days. Do you still ride a bicycle?"

"Professor Yamada, Dr. Murata is amazing."

Nakae, standing in between, began to explain to Yamada with a serious face.

"Before COVID-19, Dr. Murata took me to France once. Before that, he trained me on Mt. Mino and Mt. Sefuri, but even though he's much older than me, I couldn't keep up at all. I was the only one who ran out of time just before the coveted Galibier Pass. I was miserably put on a recovery bus and carried through the tunnel under the pass." "Well, Nakae-kun needs to get in shape. But France is good, isn't it? I haven't ridden overseas yet, but I enjoy cycling with friends in Japan. I'm envious of places like the Galibier Pass. Have you been to other

famous passes?" To Shohei, the two men in front of him were no longer a professor and associate professor at a university hospital, but simply fellow cycling buddies. He told the younger professor, who was meeting him for the first time, about his three cycling experiences in France. Yamada's expression was definitely more enjoyable than talking about medical matters. "I would also love to try riding in Europe at least once. But it'll be difficult until I retire from my professorship. If I could participate in it for a week, I could probably get some time off, but I definitely want to avoid falling and getting hurt."

Shohei hadn't told Yamada about the fracture of his left wrist seven years ago. Nakae, who should have known, must have forgotten, as he didn't say anything unnecessary and brought the topic back to the one he'd stopped before Yamada joined.

"Murata-sensei is going to Europe in July too, isn't he? You're in pretty good shape, aren't you?"

When asked by Nakae, Shohei turned his face to Yamada and answered. "I'm going to participate in the Étape in Nice. This is my second time, but next year I'm thinking of participating in a competition in the Dolomites. Before COVID, there was an age limit, but it seems that there will be no restrictions from now on and I can participate. I want to challenge the best passes in Italy, like the Gavia Pass and the Serra Pass, before I get too old to ride. It's not on the course of this competition, but I'd like to challenge the Stelvio Pass, which I've always admired."

"Talking with you makes me want to try my best too. Let's join you next time. But let's both be careful not to get injured. Ah, I'm glad I was able to talk about cycling with Dr. Murata today and participate in the internal medicine alumni association."

"Right? Professor, I'm going to lose weight too, so please invite me."

Nakae's serious words were lightly laughed off by Yamada and Murata, who were much older than him.

## Chapter 6 Survivor

At the end of May, about 40 days before the Etap, in the bright, clear streets of London, a woman with great anxiety visits the RCC clubhouse near Piccadilly Circus. Contrary to the classical exterior facing the narrow cobblestone street, the inside of the building is decorated with colorful, brightly colored cycling wear and large photographs, exuding the pop and multicultural atmosphere of the British capital. A lively Adele song with a good beat has been playing in the clubhouse.

Tall and with short hair, Christine has been a member of the RCC since its founding, and on weekends she cycles with her clubmates through the leafy suburbs of London, and on the way out for errands, she stops by the clubhouse and enjoys casual conversation with like-minded friends.

Except for a period of the pandemic that darkly covered the world, there were men and women there who, like her, enjoyed conversations and travel plans with fellow fun-loving friends, spending their time in their own way until closing time every night.

She is almost 50 years old and works as a business consultant at a small company she started with a friend. Having prioritized her hobbies and work, she has become comfortable with single life. Until eight years ago, she lived in an area convenient for work, but after realizing that the time she spent with her hobby friends was irreplaceable to her, she began to live quietly alone in a room in Soho, less than a five-minute walk from the clubhouse.

The central figure at the clubhouse, which also serves as the RCC headquarters in London, who cheerfully mediates between the members and always keeps things lively and lively, was the manager, Aleda. She is of Irish descent, has large, clear eyes, is attentive to her surroundings, and sometimes shows a shy smile like a girl. Although she is still in her mid-thirties, she also loves cycling so much that she seems to have dedicated her single life to the club.

She is very popular among overseas RCC members, having graduated from an art university in Edinburgh, and has a unique aesthetic in her heart. Despite her feminine, elegant and gentle appearance, the strength of her white legs is so strong that even the young men are astonished. Perhaps because of her kind and caring personality, many older members come to her for advice or gather in hopes of receiving it. It is not always about cycling. And Christine is one of those older female members.

On a Friday just after noon, the only people in the shop were a few customers who had come to look for new cycling wear to be the first to buy, and a few young staff members. The regular members of the club had not yet shown up, but in a few hours the clubhouse would surely be bustling with cyclists as usual.

As Aleda came out of the back room and approached the area where the members could freely enjoy coffee and snacks, Christine, wearing a light blue jacket and a loose navy blue skirt, was sitting by the window with a thoughtful expression on her face, with a cake made with plenty of chocolate and steaming coffee on the table.

"Christine, where is your usual smile? You're not in the mood today."

Hearing the voice of Aleda, who could be called a longtime friend, Christine's expression became somewhat stiff. Then, her two blue eyes met the manager's dark brown eyes.

"Yeah, maybe. Today is my day of judgment."

"That's not peaceful."

"I'm going to the Imperial Medical Center after this."

Muttering this, Christine brought her coffee cup to her lips with her long white fingers, and turned to Aleda again, her smile forgotten.

"You're still undergoing radiation therapy, aren't you? How's it going?"

"Last Friday, exactly one week ago, was the last day of radiation therapy for the lung lesion. The test to assess the effectiveness of the treatment was on Wednesday the day before yesterday, and today they're going to explain the results."

As she spoke, Christine's usual smile returned, as if something had just let go.

Now that Aleda knew the reason for her worried expression, she also felt a little relieved, sat down in the chair next to her, and looked into the older woman's eyes with a sense of reassurance that everything would be okay.

"You're worried. I've never experienced it, but I know how you feel. Depending on the results, you might not be able to participate in Etape in July."

"Yes. Not only Etape, but you might not be able to participate in One More City in the fall either."

"This year, you went from Venice to Rome, right? I can't imagine One More City without you. I'm sure you'll be fine. Be confident."

"Thank you. I have a lot of confidence in the medical team that's taking care of me. Whether I can participate in Etape or not depends on the results today, but if I'm not allowed to participate, I'll have to give up, unfortunately. I'm already prepared for that."

Kristin left about half her coffee and quietly got up from her seat as if she had made up her mind. She opened the door and walked slowly out to the street, with Aleda seeing her off.

"I'll be waiting for good news. Please stop by again later..."

In the examination room at the Imperial Medical Center, where she was used to going, Christine sat facing the doctor who had been treating her so intently.

After a cheerful greeting, her doctor, Catherine, gave her some good news.

"That's good to hear. It appears that the lesions on your lungs have been completely cured with radiation therapy, and the small pneumothorax caused by temporary damage to the alveoli no longer appears to be a problem. The signs of inflammation have disappeared, and there does not appear to be any active lesions in your lungs. There are no new lesions in your brain, and the lesions in your bones are clearly shrinking. We will continue the current amount of molecular targeted therapy."

The expression on her face, which had been tense as she listened to this, suddenly brightened up. If she hadn't been in the examination room, she would have burst out laughing.

"So that means I can participate in the Étape to be held in July, right?"

"Just to be sure, I had a pulmonary function test, a cardiac echo, and an exercise stress test using an ergometer the other day, and it turns out that my lung and heart functions are much younger than those of women my age. The test results showed that I was about ten years younger than my actual age. That's probably thanks to my daily training. But how tough will this year's Étape be?"

"This will be my fifth time participating in the Étape, and although the distance itself is short, with an elevation gain of 4,600 meters, it will be the toughest course yet. Although, last year's intense heat was a challenge. And the year before that, I hope she doesn't get discouraged on the way, because the scenery doesn't seem to be as good as the Col du Galibier in 2011. That's why I think she'll want to quit if she's not feeling well. "I'm a beginner, but I think it's important to keep a steady pace and think about breathing as the most important thing on a course with so many hills. There may be a time limit, but please be careful when climbing so as not to put sudden strain on your lungs. It's a big competition, so you'll be influenced by those around you, but please make maintaining your own pace your top priority." "Thank you. No matter how late I am, I'll try to keep my own pace." The young doctor in charge only started road biking last year. He seemed interested in the challenge of a 50-year-old cancer survivor. "You had breast cancer surgery ten years ago, and have been undergoing treatment for metastatic lesions for the past six years, but why are you so passionate about participating in the Étape? Excuse me, but the courses are all very tough for women your age." The doctor's question was a natural one for the patient. Those who don't know her would never imagine that the woman who is climbing the steep hills with her and challenging the Étape has been fighting breast cancer for ten years. However, she does not hide her true identity, and has been constantly publishing on Instagram and other platforms about her balance between her battle with cancer and her cycling life. She also continues to actively volunteer to support people fighting breast cancer and basic researchers of breast cancer. One More City, which she has been doing for seven years, is becoming her life's work.

OMC, which started with four people, has now grown into a large ride event with nearly 40 people. Two years ago, we went from Strasbourg in France to Munich in Germany. Last year, we rode from Munich, Germany, over several passes in the Dolomites in Italy to Venice with 37 other female cyclists. This fall, she plans to head from Venice to Rome, and she hopes to continue as long as her health allows. In recent years, the media has become interested and has started to report on her, and the number of participants and donations has been increasing year by year.

"When I had surgery after my breast cancer spread to my brain, I decided to live my life to the fullest, and to be close to people who suffer from the same breast cancer, and to be of some

help if possible. So I decided to continue doing two big things every year related to my favorite cycling. One is the challenge of Étape. This is a challenge to make sure that I am alive and well. The other is One More City, which you may know. I want many people to know about cancer patients who are struggling and living as survivors, and I think I want to financially support young doctoral researchers who are challenging breast cancer research." "I know about it from watching TV and reading newspapers. If I could take time off work, I would like to ride One More City with them." "I'm glad to hear you say that. I can't let cancer defeat me."

Christine first participated in Étape in 2018. It was not easy to complete the first Étape. There were many mixed opinions about her taking on the challenge about five months after brain tumor surgery, but her determination was firm. By the time she resumed training and gradually improved her condition, her short hair had grown out, and she rode in Annecy, France, she had transformed into a more fearless cyclist than she had been before the surgery. Of course, she had many anxieties, and her leg strength had only actually recovered to about 70%, but she ran through the tough course with a calm and beautiful run. Needless to say, the support of her friends, including Areda, was a big factor.

Since then, completing the Etape has become her standard, and the race has become a kind of milestone to make sure she is alive and well. With the exception of two races that were canceled due to the pandemic, she has challenged and completed every Etape every year, but last fall, before her fifth race this year, she was diagnosed with lung metastasis from breast cancer, and until now she has been undergoing weekly radiation therapy and rehabilitation treatment to wait for her damaged lungs to recover.

She was truly grateful that her trusted medical team had allowed her to stand at the starting line of the Etape again this year. Her breast cancer had metastasized to her brain, bones, and lungs, and she knew very well that she didn't know how long she would be able to continue the challenge, which is why she really wanted to participate in this year's Etape. Her doctor, Catherine, understood her feelings very well and had been running alongside her treatment until today.

"Thank you so much. I'll let you know from Nice whether I was able to complete the race. If you have time, please stop by the RCC clubhouse. You'll have a great cycling life there."

She wanted to share this happy news with her friends who support Areda and One More City as soon as possible.

It's a joy that a healthy person can't imagine that there is no active cancer anywhere in her body, and she was so happy that she wanted to jump for joy that she could move forward with her big plans for the summer and fall. Her doctor praised and encouraged her for her young body, and she even received valuable advice on completing the Etape from her, who is a



beginner on road bikes. Of course, it was common sense, but she had mixed feelings about being at an age where young people would cherish her. She secretly hopes to continue praying that a new groundbreaking treatment will be developed before breast cancer becomes active again.

In the evening, Christine went out to the RCC London clubhouse again. She had changed into a bright, feminine dress decorated with lots of flowers, which matched her smiling face.

She hadn't said a word about when she was going, but many of her friends were waiting for her arrival there with Areda.

"When I see your face, I know the answer without even asking. Christine, I'm glad for you."

Arede opened her arms and welcomed her friends, whose hearts were trembling with joy and tears, into the clubhouse. The nearly ten women gathered there also called out to her warmly. Christine's body danced as the hem of her floral dress spread out, as if she was about to share her joy with her friends.

## Chapter 7 [Sudden Dark Clouds]

Training continued smoothly after that, and there were about three weeks left until the day of the competition in France, where Shohei was to compete.

He plans to stay in Yufuin next weekend with his wife, who cannot go to France with him because she has to look after his sick father-in-law. He plans to have her follow him in a support car and run a route that imitates the Etape around Mt. Yufu and the Kokonoe Plateau to his heart's content. He wants to avoid injuries such as falls just before the competition, but the rainy season is expected to be delayed and the weather is looking sunny for now.

Saturday afternoon was refreshingly sunny, making it the perfect day for training.

Shohei, who had been working nervously since morning, plans to run his usual training course around the mountains from 2pm. He often encounters wild boars, snakes, and hornets, but this is a quiet, favorite route that connects forest roads where cars rarely go unless it's mandarin orange harvest season. The summer solstice is approaching and the sun sets later, so it looks like we'll be able to enjoy running to our heart's content for the next five hours or more.

Tomorrow, Sunday, Sano Motoharu's concert will be held in Fukuoka, but since it's a precious practice day before the competition, he wants to run as much as he did today. Shohei's training menu for today and tomorrow combined is 200 kilometers in distance and 2,600 meters in elevation gain.

However, his wife, who was going to go with him to the concert, had an urgent matter to attend to, so she had one extra ticket. She said she was going to Kyoto with her daughters to visit Shohei's father's grave. It seems that the daughters are busy with work, making rounds at the hospital on weekends, and it seems that they have finally had a free Sunday. At times like this, his wife wants to spend time with the daughters rather than Shohei. If he had known a little earlier, he could have resold the tickets, but since it was a visit to his father's grave, he couldn't force his wife and children to do so.

Shohei just couldn't bring himself to want anyone to join him. But he also couldn't bring himself to leave the seat empty. After all, I was in the second row from the front, almost in the center.

While he was wondering what to do, he remembered Ayaka Uematsu from the TV station, with whom he would occasionally exchange messages about training for the tournament. However, Shohei had never spoken to her about music. He didn't even know if she was single or had a boyfriend, but he sent her a message from his examination room.

[Three weeks until the tournament, practice is going well. Depending on the start of the rainy season, this weekend may be my last practice. If possible, I'd like to lose another kilo of belly fat (lol). By the way, Uematsu-san, do you know Motoharu Sano? There's a live show tomorrow night next to the dome. Actually, I have a seat in the second row, so would you like to come with me? My wife couldn't go suddenly, so I have one extra ticket. It's an electronic ticket, so if you can go, I'll send it to your email address as an email attachment. We'll meet at the venue. I look forward to hearing from you.]

He is aware that he is slowly losing the modesty he had when he was younger. This wasn't an affair, but rather he didn't want to show Sano, whom he worships as a god, that there was an empty seat right in front of him... Shohei was searching for a selfish excuse.

Anyway, he set off on the road bike he would use on the day of the competition, riding out under the sky that looked like summer was fast approaching.

This time's Etape course was a series of four long and difficult mountain passes with an elevation difference of over 1,000 meters, so he would have liked to include Mt. Sefuri and Mt. Unzen in his training, where he could practice climbing 1,000 meters in one go, but he had been unable to find the time to do so due to the rapid increase in COVID-19 patients.

Feeling the fresh breeze, Shohei was gaining distance and elevation almost as planned. If he could reach the top of this pass, all that was left were two low mountain passes of 300 meters each. Shohei was not even breaking a sweat, and was feeling pleased with how well he was getting ready for the competition.

At that moment, the smartphone hidden on Shohei's back briefly rang with a high-pitched sound, indicating that a message had been received. If he was called in for an emergency

regarding a patient, he couldn't do much outside of business hours, but he could just take the shortest route to the clinic without climbing the remaining mountain pass. Shohei picked up his pace a little and reached the top of the mountain pass, then checked the message he had just received.

The sender of the message was Uematsu Ayaka.

[Oh, doctor, I'm so happy you invited me. I haven't listened to his music much, but I'm sure Sano Motoharu is very famous. I'm scheduled to record in Fukuoka City tomorrow afternoon, so I might be a little late for the start of the show, but if you don't mind, I'd love to join you. I'd like to hear about the latest information on Etap directly.]

Their early hits, such as *Someday*, were all songs that were released before Ayaka was born, so it's not surprising that she doesn't know much about them. They met last October, and although they exchange words on social media a few times a month, they've only met twice in person. He never expected that she would accept his invitation so soon, so he read the message over and over with a smile.

The peak and ridge of the mountain that I just climbed to the top of are vividly visible in the strong sunlight from the west. The yellow sandstorm that was terrible until the other day seems to be forecast for today and tomorrow.

[Good. I'm sorry for making you spend your precious Sunday night with me, who is old enough to be your father. I'm happy. I'll send you the e-ticket by email later, so I don't mind if you're late, so please wait for me at the venue. It's a seat in the second row, slightly left of the center, next to the aisle, so you should be able to find it easily. See you tomorrow.]

As soon as the transmission was finished, Shohei started down the slope where there were almost no cars.

"Let's go down this mountain first, and then conquer the remaining two slopes."

It was a pleasant downhill ride, with joy and motivation pushing him from behind. Although it was winding, he even remembered the location and number of curves on the downhill slope that he had been training on repeatedly. The pavement was not too rough, and the road was not troubled by loose dead leaves or gravel.

"A dangerous blind curve appears a little further down..."

Just as Shohei was reading ahead, he was going at about 50 kilometers per hour.

On the left side of the slope was a cliff overgrown with vegetation, and on the right was a deep valley. It was a fairly straight road with good visibility, and he must have been going at about 50 kilometers per hour.

Just about five meters ahead of Shohei, who was flying down the left side of the slope, something like a large mass suddenly rolled down from the cliff on the left.

The mass, covered in dark brown fur, was probably also extremely surprised by Shohei's rapid

attack. Perhaps it had forgotten its wild animal instincts in the shock, but the living mass made no sign of quickly fleeing, and literally froze in place, locking eyes with Shohei. It was an unlucky raccoon dog that had a habit of freezing in fear.

Shohei was already three meters away from the raccoon dog. Many thoughts came to Shohei's mind, then were denied, then came to him again, then disappeared. At this speed, they would collide in the blink of an eye.

"Why won't you run away? Just run away like a wild animal."

If he braked suddenly, the front wheel would lock and he would jackknife forward and break his neck. If he turned the steering wheel suddenly, he might crash into the cliff on the left or fall into the valley on the right. Either way was foolish and too dangerous. So what should he do...?

Time was up. Shohei had no choice but to make a decision.

"If the raccoon doesn't run away, I'll just go straight. I'll pull up on the handlebars as hard as I can, lift the front wheel off the ground, and jump over the raccoon's body."

The plan worked, and Shohei felt the rough texture of the raccoon's belly with both hands on the handlebars directly below the front wheel.

"I managed to get over it..."

However, the rear wheel had not yet safely got over the poor raccoon, who was as stiff as a rock with fear. Without a moment's hesitation, the saddle thrust violently up from directly below Shohei's seat bones.

Immediately afterwards, Shohei's hips, having crashed into an invisible wall, floated upwards, and as if watching a super slow motion video, his right side fell to the ground.

After that, a moment of silence came over him, where he didn't even feel any pain. Like the bindings on skis, if you make a hasty movement they should come off by themselves, but Shohei noticed the strangeness of lying on the ground with both feet still connected to the pedals by cleats.

"What's wrong? Is something dangerous happening?"

Lying on the ground, Shohei slowly tries to move his body away from the bike, but he doesn't feel much pain. He carefully stands up and checks his whole body for injuries.

It looked like he had hit his right elbow and right hip on the hard asphalt ground. There was no damage to his clothing, and it didn't look like he had been scraped against the road surface. Although blood was oozing faintly from a modest abrasion on his exposed right elbow, there was not even a small scratch on his exposed right knee. Fortunately, there doesn't appear to be any fractures to his femur, but it's unlikely that anything would happen after such an impact. Perhaps he was high from extreme tension, but a vague sense of confusion enveloped Shohei. His forward speed of over 40 kilometers per hour had suddenly and inexplicably changed

direction when he collided with the raccoon, and Shohei's body hadn't advanced more than five meters from the point of impact. If it had simply been a fall, he would have slid downhill for more than ten meters, his body and bike being scraped away. There were small cracks in the helmet that had protected Shohei's head, but there were still no scratches to be found. Physically, it was his seat bones, above the saddle, that had absorbed the most of the impact, not his knees, ankles, or femurs.

Shohei picked up his road bike from where it was lying and inspected it. There were some scratches on the bar tape on the handlebars, and some damage to the delicate gear shifter on the rear wheel. The handlebars were not bent, and the front and rear brakes and gear shifter all seemed to work normally. Even though he had run over something hard, he hadn't suffered a rim strike or puncture, and Shohei had a strange feeling that he couldn't explain logically.

``Was that really a raccoon frozen in fear? Or was it actually a falling rock?"

Shohei looked around for the raccoon or the falling rock that should have been left behind, but strangely there was nothing nearby.

``I definitely met the eye of a frightened raccoon."

Shohei stood there, stunned, completely forgetting the pain he should have felt.

``The raccoon's whole body must have received the same impact. The rear wheel may have gone over the hard skull. If that's the case..."

As he slowly made his way back to his fallen bike, Shohei noticed pain in his right hip joint and the greater trochanter of his femur. The water bottle had flew out of the cage attached to the frame and was lying lonely on the ground about ten meters away. As expected, the road bike itself had been prevented from moving forward by an intense force.

Shohei got back on the bike and started slowly down the slope, but he immediately felt something was wrong. It seemed that the saddle itself was tilted quite forward, causing Shohei's body to lean forward strangely. He could pedal without any problems, but sometimes he felt a sharp pain. His hip joint hurt when he pulled up on his right foot, and if he turned the crank quickly, he felt a pain resonating in his right ischium. If this was the case even when going downhill, which doesn't require much force, the pain would surely increase on an uphill slope. Shohei stopped his road bike and got off.

As expected, the saddle was tilted forward about 15 degrees. He put all his strength into his arms and tried several times to bring the saddle back to a horizontal position, but the saddle wouldn't budge. It seemed best to give up on the remaining two mountain passes and return to the clinic. If it was downhill and on flat ground, he would be able to ride in this condition. After a 15-kilometer journey back to the clinic in about 40 minutes, Shohei immediately called the manager of the sports bike shop.

"Hello, Sugimoto-san. It looks like it's almost closing time, but can I hurry and bring the bike

to the shop now?"

"Yes, but is there something wrong?"

"It looks like it needs some repairs. I hope we can get the parts and other things in time for Etape."

"Okay. I'll be here until 7, but I'll wait even if I'm a little late, so please be careful when you get there."

It was already 5:30 in the evening. It was Saturday, so all the staff had gone home. Even if he wanted to change his sweaty clothes, he wouldn't have time to take a shower. Considering the evening traffic jam, he wanted to load his bike into the car in about 30 minutes and leave for Chikushi City. Shohei was completely naked, without any hesitation. The wound on his right elbow was still stinging even after he quickly washed it off with water. There seemed to be a slight problem lurking in the greater trochanter of his right hip, where there was tenderness. He was wearing thin pants inside the bib shorts that wrapped tightly around his waist, but they were stained red with blood. There was not a single scratch on the fabric of the bib or pants. The surface of the skin was swollen and had a round abrasion about seven centimeters in diameter, but there was no heat in the area at the moment.

Shohei gathered the necessary items for treatment at the hospital, disinfected them, and firmly covered the bleeding bruises on his hip and elbow with sterile gauze. He then put on dry underwear and clothes, loaded his bicycle into the car, and tried to sit in the seat.

"Oh, my goodness. This looks a bit dangerous."

The pain was clearly worse than before. There was no time to test the rotation, but he couldn't move his right foot to the correct place unless he placed his hands on it to hold it. There is no problem sitting in the driver's seat and stepping on the accelerator or brake pedal, but the pain makes it impossible to lift my right knee or adduct my right leg. Until just now I had been pedaling my bike with almost no problem, but it seems that the problem is lifting and adducting or internal rotation. Naturally, the pain is less with the car seat than with the bike saddle.

"No matter what's wrong with my hip joint, I have to get my bike fixed first."

At that time, Shohei still felt that he could inspect and repair his own body.

It took a while because of the evening rush hour, but he managed to arrive at the sports bike shop where Manager Sugimoto was waiting for him just before closing time.

"We've been waiting for you. Oh, your walking style looks like it's really painful. What happened?"

"I hit a raccoon hard while descending from the mountain. It must have frozen in fear, because it couldn't run away and I couldn't avoid it. I had no choice but to try to jump over it, but when my rear wheel hit it hard, I got a strong shove up my butt from below and fell to the right."

Shohei told Sugimoto, who was quickly starting to visually inspect the bike, with a wry smile. "The saddle is tilted a lot. There doesn't seem to be much damage to the frame. The gears seem fine, but the end parts that connect to the frame need to be replaced. I think there are parts in stock in Japan, so it should be fine in a week even if we inspect and repair the whole thing." "It looks like we'll make it to France in time, that's good." "But when the saddle is bent this much, it must be pushing up against the ischial bones and pubic bone with a considerable amount of force. Doctor, are your balls crushed?" The young store manager was relieved that the damage to the bike was minor, and mocked the older Shohei. "It's okay. I'm a doctor, so I know. Besides, you're no longer a man, so no woman will be sad if you crush one or two of your balls." "It's too early to give up on men and become old, doctor." Shohei couldn't forget the story he had told his friends on the night of his high school reunion last year. Even though they were over 60, there were several classmates who had multiple mistresses and lovers in their twenties, and several who were secretly having affairs. Moreover, it seemed that these people were the ones who continued to work energetically and were active, and at the same time, they seemed to value their lives with their families. Shohei had never actually had an affair before, but he was also a weak-willed, serious workaholic who sometimes secretly harbored forgotten feelings of love and longings for dangerous affairs.

At 8 o'clock in the evening, Shohei returned home without any problems after driving his car, but as soon as he got out of the car, he was shocked to find that the pain in his right leg and hip joint had actually increased to the point that he could not stand or walk properly. His wife and children had gone to Kyoto to visit the graves, and his mother had been hospitalized since last week, and the only person left in the dark house was his beloved dog, who was silently waiting on the second floor for Shohei to feed him. However, he no longer felt like he could move a single step without a cane, let alone go upstairs to where his beloved dog was waiting. After dropping his bike off for repairs, Shohei had thought about going back to the doctor early next week if the condition did not improve, but he could no longer afford to put it off.

"But how?"

It was clearly getting worse, and with this level of pain it was possible that he had damage to his femur or hip joint, or even a pelvic fracture. There could be internal bleeding that would damage a large blood vessel near the hip joint and lead to shock. If there was damage to important nerves, it would be impossible for him to pursue sports as a hobby in the future. The worries that came into his mind one after another were endless.

"Sorry to bother you on a Saturday night, this is the director. Can I call you now? Actually, I just had a collision with a raccoon and can't walk."

The person Shohei had called was one of the five office staff, Erika Matsuda. She didn't have small children and was the one who seemed most physically capable of supporting Shohei.

When she mentioned the raccoon, she thought it was a joke, but when she heard the details she couldn't hide her surprise on the other end of the phone. "That's a big deal. However, I've invited friends over tonight to drink and have a good time, so I can't help you. I'll look for someone to help. First, I'll go to your house and help you feed your dog, then I'll take you to an emergency hospital tonight where an orthopedic surgeon can examine you, and then I'll take you home."

"That's right. It's Saturday night, so there aren't many emergency rooms with orthopedic surgeons. I'll probably have to go to Chikushi City. If there's a fracture, I might not be able to get home today."

"Okay. We'll split up and find a hospital that can examine you tonight. I'll contact you, so please wait a little."

Despite being interrupted by his tipsy mood, Matsuda seemed to understand everything.

After hanging up the phone, Shohei used a wooden stick lying in front of the house as a walking stick to enter the house, looked for the walking stick his mother used, and somehow managed to climb up to the second floor by himself. In the pitch black room on the second floor, his beloved dog was waiting alone for food and for his owner, who was late coming home. Less than two minutes after he had safely finished feeding them and was relieved, Shohei received a call from the office worker, Irie Yumi, on his smartphone. She said she would be there in about five minutes and asked him to be in front of her house. Since her child is a university student, it would probably be okay if she was a little late at night.

Shohei used a cane and carefully went down the stairs, holding tightly to the banister. His right leg was in severe pain, so he tried not to bend either his hip or knee, and as long as he used the cane well, he could somehow walk, but even simply standing was gradually becoming painful.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. That must have been tough. It would be easier to sit in the back seat."

When Irie arrived, she anxiously opened the sliding door to the back seat, grabbed Shohei's waist belt and pulled him up, helping him struggle to get in.

"It's a hospital, but none of the nearby ones have an orthopedic specialist at this time of day, so only St. Paul's Hospital in Chikushi City has a specialist in the emergency room. Even if it's far away, you'll go to a hospital with a specialist."

The pain has gotten worse. Unless a CT scan can accurately diagnose the location and extent of the fracture, Shohei won't be able to determine whether he will be able to work from the



beginning of the next week. Since he can't walk, he may be strongly recommended to be hospitalized. It was fortunate that Irie and Matsuda, the office staff, could share the current situation with us so that we could discuss various points in advance in that case.

When we arrived at St. Paul's Hospital just after 9 p.m., there were about 15 groups of people waiting in the emergency room as far as the eye could see. Seventy percent were infants and young children, and there were only a handful of adult patients. Three examination rooms were in use, and there were as many staff as there were during the day, but there was a notice that "it will take about 90 minutes for the orthopedics department to open."

"There are only a few groups in the orthopedic department, so it probably won't be a real-time display."

Shohei, who had become wheelchair-bound as soon as he arrived, and Irie, who was shyly forced to play the role of the director's wife, watched the movements and attitudes of the receptionists and medical interviewers with a sense of learning as fellow professionals, which helped them stave off boredom.

After about fifty minutes had passed, Shohei's name was finally called and the nurse began the interview. The nurse, who had noticed that Shohei was a doctor when she looked at the occupation column, seemed to mistakenly think that her interview would be graded, and while smiling more shyly than necessary, took her time, repeatedly prefaced with "As you probably know...". Perhaps realizing his true intentions after it was past ten o'clock at night, she added, "I hope there are no fractures," and shortened the overly polite interview.

Shohei was instructed to take an X-ray before the examination, so Irie pushed his wheelchair and, lying on an X-ray table in a radiography room at the back of the emergency room building, took several photos, mainly of his hip joints. The series of movements from lying on his back to sitting up and transferring to a wheelchair was so painful that it was hard to believe.

The first step in moving from lying on his back to sitting up is to hang his affected leg off the platform, but he couldn't move his right leg up or to the side at all because of the pain. He had no choice but to grab just above his right knee with his right hand and rotate it so that his knee was hanging off the platform.

Then he just had to do the movements of getting up from the bed, but no matter how hard he strained his abdominal muscles, his neck was so painful that he couldn't lift his head at all. The young male and female radiologists just looked at Shohei from a distance with puzzled eyes and didn't seem to want to help him move at all. Maybe they thought it wasn't their job, or maybe that was the rule. When he went to the hospital, he never expected that he would have to struggle for nearly a minute to transfer from the radiography platform to the wheelchair on his own.

Irie greeted Shohei outside the studio, with an anxious look on his face and a little sweat on his forehead. "I had a hard time getting up from the stand. It's not just my bones, it's my muscles and nerves that may have been damaged. I might not be able to make it."

Irie remained silent, not knowing how to respond to the director.

The next time Shohei's name was called was just after 10:30 p.m., 90 minutes after the reception. As Irie was leaving the examination room, leaving Shohei behind, the doctor in charge called her back.

"Please bring your wife along to listen to the explanation."

When Shohei explained to the young orthopedic surgeon that his wife was not there and that Irie was a staff member, the doctor, who introduced himself as Kusaba, said with a smile, "Since you've come all this way, please come along." Shohei was impressed by the doctor's attitude rather than the results of the examination, thinking that despite being very tired at this busy time of night, his smile somehow put the patient at ease.

Dr. Kusaba kept his eyes on the interview and the plain X-ray findings that he had been told earlier, and asked Shohei, who was also staring at the photos, to confirm the circumstances of the accident, and how the pain, swelling, and movement had changed since the accident occurred until now. Since Shohei is a doctor who is passionate about sports, it would be more accurate to say that rather than asking him questions, he was trying to get him to talk about how he perceived his condition. Indeed, about five hours after the accident, Shohei had been thinking about various possibilities that may have arisen deep inside his body.

"The situation strongly suggests that there is a fracture. It must be the pelvis. Tomorrow's live performance will be impossible. I'll have to give up participating in the Etape."

As he was thinking about various things, Dr. Kusaba turned to Shohei and began to speak.

"It must be a tough competition to run the same course as the Tour. Is it three weeks from now?"

Like many orthopedic surgeons, he was also a sportsman.

"The plain photograph shows no obvious signs of fracture in either the femur or pelvis."

Shohei was relieved, and Irie, who was listening to the explanation from the perspective of a staff member, also seemed relieved. "But, you know. No matter how I think about it, with the pain you're feeling right now, I think you probably have a fracture around your pubic bone or ischium that wouldn't show up on a simple X-ray. It's not an unstable fracture, in other words, a serious fracture that's already shifted, but I think there's a fracture that could shift and become unstable in the future due to intense training. Regardless of whether you're going to participate in the tournament or not, we should do a CT scan now. If you don't, you'll probably just start training again tomorrow, won't you?"

The young orthopedic surgeon explained this with a smile to the internist who was about the

same age as his father. Shohei couldn't disagree. Once again, Shohei had to endure the lonely pain of getting up from a supine position in the CT room, and wait for the second verdict in front of Kusaba's examination room.

As the date was about to change, Shohei was called in again along with Irie. Dr. Kusaba carefully looked at the CT image on the monitor screen, repeatedly scrolling and enlarging it. About five minutes had passed in silence since he was called into the examination room, and then, with a sympathetic look on his face, he began to explain to Shohei.

"Here, here, and it's hard to tell, but here too, and probably here too... With just a quick look, there are at least four small fractures. There may be more."

Following the arrows on the monitor screen, Shohei could only see small scratches rather than fractures. However, even a pelvic or pubic fracture can cause considerable pain and difficulty walking. If it was an unstable pelvic fracture with a displacement, hospitalization and rehabilitation would be required for a considerable period of time, making it difficult to continue practicing medicine. It could even be life-threatening. No matter how you look at it, it was a blessing in disguise.

"I'm glad that the CT scan gave us a clear diagnosis. If the impact was strong enough to tilt the saddle and push up the ischial bone from below, it makes sense that a fracture like this would occur. If we had diagnosed him without an examination and found no fracture, he would have resumed training early, and if he was unlucky, it would have left a lasting legacy for his future."

The young doctor even seemed to diagnose the patient's personality. Irie, who knows Shohei's personality well, was laughing quietly behind him.

"Doctor, will you be able to make it to the tournament in three weeks?"

Shohei was a little embarrassed to ask, but it was a necessary question to make him give up once and for all.

"I think you only made it this far because you train regularly, but if you were to complete that tough tournament with this body, it would surely be the subject of a movie or a novel. Even if you do participate, you will probably have to retire midway. You shouldn't ride a bike for a while. That being said, I think you'll start riding as soon as the pain subsides."

It was enough to make Shohei give up. "A private practice probably won't be able to admit him so easily, so from now on, please see a doctor in your neighborhood to help with his rehabilitation."

Dr. Kusaba wrote him a prescription for crutches, and Shohei received a referral letter to an orthopedic surgeon he knew in the same city of Mikawa.

After the Saturday night after-hours clinic finished, Shohei left St. Paul's Hospital in Irie's car with his shoulders slumped, just after one o'clock in the morning, four hours after they had

arrived.

After taking him home, where no one was waiting for him except for his silent dog, Irie probably returned home to his worried family after two o'clock. He couldn't find the words to express his gratitude to Irie, who had stayed with him for six hours late at night on the weekend, even though he said he had no one else to rely on, and to the many other staff members who must have listened to him and worried about him.

He had many thoughts in the car on the way home, but once he was alone after parting ways with Irie, Shohei began to feel strongly that many of his fates had changed dramatically since the accident.

He knows how to use crutches to support his weight, but this was the first time he had used them on himself. Sleeping with his dog in a room on the second floor, he didn't find it easy to climb the narrow stairs to the second floor using crutches, so he left one of his canes at the bottom of the stairs and clumsily climbed up to the bedroom.

## Chapter 8      Don't cry, old doctor

The bright sunlight filled the bedroom, and Shohei woke up early, even though it was only a little after five o'clock. There was no wind, and it wasn't too hot, so it looked like a great day for training. However, when he got home at two in the morning, he hadn't slept very well. This was because of the pain he had never experienced all over his body, and also because he felt sorry for himself. Even though he was awake, he had no desire to move his body, and he didn't feel like he could go back to sleep.

"I'm going to sleep a little longer today. You sleep too."

Shohei asked his dog out loud to wait a little longer for the food. Unable to sleep in the bright room, Shohei, feeling dazed, stayed still in bed for several hours.

When he tried to turn over timidly, the pain got worse. It was impossible to turn his right side down, but even if he tried to turn his left side down and lift his right side up, he was hit with a sharp pain. He tried to raise his right knee, but the pain in his hip joint made it impossible. When he tried to sit up, a strange pain made it impossible for him to lift his head or back. The heavy feeling in his chest, as if his right rib had been broken, was even worse than last night. It was late at night, and he returned home without consulting the hospital about the matter, but even after a night had passed, Shohei's anxiety about what had happened to his body only increased.

He had hardly taken in any fluids since yesterday evening, so the only good thing was that he

had not had to go to the bathroom. He had reduced his food intake in preparation for the competition in order to lose weight, but for better or worse, he had no appetite this morning. "This will be a good diet," he thought, lying on his back in bed with a wry smile, and Shohei felt a little sad.

He looked at the clock and saw that it was almost noon. He could feel his beloved dog rustling in the corner of the room. He probably wanted food soon.

Shohei, who had suddenly lost his goal, had nothing in particular to do on Sunday, but his biggest problem today was what to do about the live concert that was being held in Fukuoka City in the evening. He could probably drive the car as long as he got in it, and it would be easier than taking a train or a taxi, but the walking distance from the parking lot to the venue was a big worry for him. Especially today, a professional baseball game was being held at the dome stadium next door, so it was unlikely that a nearby parking lot would be available.

If it was just him, he could have stayed home and stayed in bed, but just yesterday he had asked a woman who was not even close enough to be called a friend to go with him. She said she would even leave work a little early to accompany Shohei. Shohei realized that he might have started to have a faint affection for her, despite his age.

``If I told her that I had broken my leg and was using crutches, she would surely strongly persuade me to stop participating in the live show and focus on my treatment. However..."

If possible, he would like to participate in the live show even if he was sitting down, and he would like to meet her for the first time in a while and talk to her in person. Shohei decided to choose to live without going against his true feelings.

``I will not tell my hospitalized mother until the day she is discharged. I won't tell my wife or daughters either.'

Shohei thought as he struggled to get out of bed.

His wife and daughters seemed to be more excited about going to Kyoto than the concert, so they probably splurged and stayed at a nice hotel since yesterday. If he had been hospitalized, it would be a different story, but if they were to be informed of his injury, it would only confuse them from afar. I'm always worried that he might get into an accident. At the very least, I don't want to show them the sight of him walking with a cane. He'll probably be seeing patients as usual from tomorrow anyway, and he'll be able to get through his work without having to find a substitute doctor. Shohei was thinking of such a faint dream alone at home.

He took two tablets of Calonal that he was prescribed last night, but the painkilling effect was negligible. He thought about the future, thinking that even preparing food for the dog was so difficult. Shohei, a doctor, was reminded once again that the best thing to do was to stay still and do nothing.

The dog, who cannot speak, looks up at his master curiously, but is afraid of the long stick and

keeps a greater distance than usual, not even wagging his tail. He must have been waiting since morning, but the man, who is acting differently than usual, is reluctant to approach the food he has placed on the floor.

After a struggle to get down the stairs to the first floor, Shohei tries walking on crutches in the quiet house where no one is around. The living room and veranda are perfect for practicing with a cane, but when he stands and prays at the Buddhist altar, he feels sorry for himself for making such an unsightly appearance. Not only has his immediate goal disappeared, but he is also filled with a gloomy feeling as he thinks about the days of rehabilitation with no end in sight that await him in the hot summer.

Since he has some time before leaving for the live performance, Shohei decides to go to the clinic to simulate how he will handle his work from tomorrow.

He has almost no problem driving a car, but the crutches are too big and difficult to handle. It's too difficult to use indoors, and the look is too exaggerated to begin with. There must have been lightweight hiking poles somewhere in the clinic, and they would be useful in the hospital or at home.

The chairs in the examination room are fine for simply sitting, but if I use my feet to approach a patient while sitting, a sharp pain runs through my sitting bones and hip joints. I don't think I'll be able to open the door and call in patients like I used to. It will be extra work, but I'll have to get the staff to help me out.

The problem is what to do about the fever clinic. There has been an increase in COVID-19 patients recently. It must be the eleventh wave. Most of the symptoms are mild, but the infection seems to be more infectious than ever. If patients come to the clinic directly, we can't refuse them a consultation, and we can't treat them in the normal waiting room or examination room without separating the flow of people. We should continue to treat them as before, in an isolated examination room near the back entrance or in the parking lot. However, we should inform them in advance that the examination will be done while standing, not sitting.

Fortunately, there is no problem in using the Western-style toilet. The entire hospital is barrier-free, so it seems that he will be able to work somehow. Rather, the problem may be mental.

"It's only natural that he should be hospitalized..."

On a Sunday, while he was alone at work, he heard someone say something as if it were an auditory hallucination.

"What exactly are you exchanging this irreplaceable work for? Money? A sense of fulfillment? Social fame? If I could have free time, I wouldn't need anything else."

Shohei suddenly felt the urge to scream.

"Hey, don't cry, old doctor."

He had been looking forward to the concert since the dates were announced, but the walk from the parking lot to the venue was long enough to torment Shohei.

Fortunately, it wasn't too hot and there was no need to worry about rain, but a professional baseball game had just finished, and so many people were walking towards Shohei that there was no space on the sidewalk. Parents and children and young people heading to the subway station. Wearing matching team uniforms, with megaphones and towels in hand, carefree smiles and voices of conversation. The local Hawks must have won.

Shohei, walking on unfamiliar crutches, had to walk slowly, taking up a little space. For people coming in the opposite direction, the man on crutches, suddenly standing in front of them without any way to avoid them, must have been nothing but a nuisance.

When he finally arrived at the concert venue, Shohei felt as tired as if he had cycled 100 kilometers. He thought he had come with plenty of time, but there were only about ten minutes left until the doors opened. The long line to the entrance stretched far into the distance, and the end of the line continued down the stairs to an invisible place. Unable to walk any further, he decided to wait by the entrance until the long line shortened and he no longer had to stand in line.

No one in the audience paid any attention to the man on crutches. Gray hair was common. Men with swollen bellies and women who make no attempt to hide their wrinkles and loose skin pass in front of him with smiles. Many of the fans, like him, have aged together with the artist for over forty years.

An announcement was made that there were five minutes until the start of the show.

The audience, who were in the merchandise sales area on the second floor where the entrance was, all went down the stairs to the main hall on the first floor. Shohei asked a staff member where the elevator was, but there was only the stairs. A male staff member felt sorry for him and offered to help him, but he didn't know how to help him easily. Shohei handed his crutches to the staff member and took half steps at a time, holding onto the handrail on the wall and being careful not to bend his right leg, he arrived at his seat as almost the last audience member.

In the large venue, it seemed that the only empty seat was next to Shohei. He had arranged to meet Ayaka Uematsu, who he had given him an electronic ticket by email, in her seat after the show started.

"Will she really come? "I wonder what kind of expression they'll make when they see me on crutches like this."

The entire audience was on their feet from the opening. If he had been sitting at the back,

Shohei would have been unable to see anything on the stage, but he was lucky to be in the second row, so he had a good view of the entire stage even while sitting.

He has been to Sano Motoharu's live shows over 100 times since 1982, and even though he couldn't sing and dance like he usually does, it was enough for him to be in the same space as God, surrounded by wonderful music.

Guided by the venue staff, Ayaka sat down in an empty seat next to Shohei. The first thing she looked at was the crutches he was holding.

With a surprised look on her face, she gently placed her left hand on his right shoulder. Then she brought her gentle lips close to Shohei's ear. Along with the refreshing citrus soap scent of her glossy semi-long hair, she heard a sweet whisper that she hadn't heard in a long time. Even though our skin wasn't touching, I could clearly feel the temperature. "What happened to these crutches?"

She slowly pulled away from his face and looked at him with a worried look, narrowing her eyes as if to show him sympathy. What kind of answer was he waiting for...?

"I'll tell you more later."

In the middle of playing at a loud volume, he gave Ayaka a shy smile.

She tilted her head slightly, smiled, and turned to face the band members playing on stage. Ayaka's face, illuminated by the lights, shone even more beautifully from the side.

When she appeared at the venue, the concert was already about halfway through. Although Shohei was familiar with all the songs, those who were not used to listening to his music would probably have heard only a few of them. Many of the songs were new, and many of them were a bit plain. To her, tonight's concert was probably not interesting.

Shohei felt a little guilty and slowly got up from his seat.

The sight of Shohei, who had left his crutches with a staff member and was climbing the long staircase while holding on to the banister, seemed to be a shock to Ayaka, who still didn't know the truth.

She walked next to him with a little space between them so as not to get in the way of his crutches.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to have a light coffee."

Ayaka, who wanted to hear the secret behind the crutches, immediately agreed, but she made one condition.

"Murata-san, why don't we go for a drive through the city at night? Listening to Sano-san's song, I feel like spending some time relaxing while looking at the night view. How about a takeout coffee...?"

It was unexpected for Shohei, but he didn't want to be seen with a depressed expression in a bright place, so it was a welcome suggestion.



They left the large shopping mall next to the live music venue, and the middle-aged man on crutches and the woman with a coffee in her hand walked slowly side by side.

The two got into a car with red leather seats and sat down. The aroma of coffee began to waft through the interior of the car. As he pressed the button to start the engine, Billy Joel's song "Piano Man" began to play.

Shohei slowly drove onto the main road, passing by the dome stadium and heading for the ramp to the urban expressway. He continued east and joined the outer loop line. The band of taillights made the seaside expressway look like a bright river ahead. On the right were a row of high-rise hotels, dome stadiums, and apartment complexes, and on the left were the lights of several ships and, beyond them, the lights of the houses scattered along the middle of the sea, floating and sparkling.

"How would you like it, teacher?"

Ayaka handed Shohei the warm coffee and their skins lightly touched. The image of her long, slender, beautiful fingers came to Shohei's mind.

"It's a beautiful night view. Billy Joel's song is great, but I'd like to listen to Sano's song next to Murata's. It's fine like this, but..."

Shohei stared ahead and told Ayaka about yesterday's accident and his visit to the hospital last night in as easy-to-understand words as possible.

"I didn't realize that something like this had happened when we exchanged emails yesterday afternoon."

She was surprised not only by the accident itself, but also by the story of his struggles at the hospital that night. But what surprised her the most was that Shohei had participated in the live show on crutches.

"Was it okay for you to participate in the live show even though you have several fractures?"

She seemed to have a lot of questions.

"It's fine, you just have to sit still. And driving a car is strangely fine. It's only painful and difficult when getting in and out."

Even when I told her honestly, she never seemed to believe me.

"If you don't mind, I can take you home. Where is it?"

Ayaka seemed a little troubled as to how to respond to Shohei who was laughing.

"That's a blessing in disguise. But you really love Sano-san, don't you?"

"If Uematsu-san hadn't been with me, I probably would have stayed home and slept. I came here because I wanted to see you."

Ayaka, who hadn't expected Shohei's sudden and straightforward expression of emotion, looked down shyly and took a sip of the coffee she was holding. Even without seeing her directly, Shohei could imagine every little gesture she made.

It was a nostalgic yet fresh sensation. Shohei remembered a feeling similar to the excitement of first love that he had forgotten long ago.

"It's really unfortunate that this happened right before the tournament. What are you going to do about Nice? Are you going to go as planned?"

Everyone thought it was natural that she would withdraw from the tournament.

"It's a shame because practice was going well. But I really want to go... If you don't mind, would you like to come with me?"

Shohei wanted to change the mood in the car, which tended to be gloomy, all at once.

"Eh? Are you sure? I'll really apply for leave from work."

Even Ayaka could only laugh at this question. Shohei loved her witty comeback.

"It's been five years since we last met. I know it's rude to say this, but at your age, you want to finish what you've left undone as soon as possible. I'm not young anymore, so I understand your feelings all too well."

Until yesterday evening, I had never thought I'd end up having such a gloomy conversation with her.

To the left, the airport at night spread out, and planes were taking off and landing busily from the runway parallel to the highway. The song had changed to "New York State of Mind."

"You've been making thorough preparations despite being so busy."

Just as Ayaka said, Shohei was making steady progress in his preparations for the trip to the south of France. Compared to past preparations, he certainly had less time to practice, but that was because he had far more time to devote to work than before COVID-19. Despite his limited experience, he fully understood the menu he needed to prepare, and by combining his experience and good sense, he was already able to issue a prescription for completing the race this time as well. However, now that he had already given up on participating, it didn't matter.

"Why do Etape and other famous European cycling competitions attract your heart so much? Is there something special about them that is unthinkable in Japan?"

Although Ayaka was worried that her question would add to Shohei's sadness, she really wanted to ask. Fortunately, her tone did not provoke him, and instead brightened up the depressed Shohei.

"You can't talk about Etape in the same breath as other races. The Etape course is different every year, so you can experience the feeling of traveling while also taking on a challenge, such as what famous mountain passes you cross and what scenery you can see. You can also enjoy it by comparing it with the live broadcast of the professional Tour de France."

"I guess Etape is the best race for you, teacher?"

"It's the most famous in the world, so it's definitely the most popular. It feels like a festival, and it's fun. But if it's full of less famous mountain passes, it's also a race that you regret

because your expectations are so high. People spend a lot of money and take time off work to participate from all over the world. "

"What is the biggest difference from other competitions?"

"Other than Etape, I have participated in the Marmot Alps Granfondo in France, and for the past five years I have been considering the competition in the Italian Dolomites as the one I would most like to participate in. The road closures are the same, and the start and finish points are the same. It is a fixed course that goes around famous mountain passes one after another, so it is a great course that everyone wants to participate in at least once."

"What will you do next year? Will you try again?"

When you turn 65, you can't hide the fact that you are getting weaker little by little each year.

"Well, I wonder. If my mother gets sick or I have to take care of her, I won't be able to do it. My wife's parents have health problems, and I'm at an age where I have a lot of responsibilities."

"That's just how it is in life."

"I've been thinking lately that it's difficult to take on a big challenge, not just with Etape, unless a number of conditions are met. I think that any young person with good stamina can complete the course with a little training. I'm sure you'll be fine if you practice for a few years, Ayaka."

"I wouldn't be able to do it."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. But young people have financial issues and raising children can be difficult. There may be many other things they want to do, and it may be difficult to take time off. I've come to think that for various reasons, it's not so easy to do what you want when you want in life."

"That may be true."

"Before that happens, you'll get older, fifty or sixty, and your body won't be able to keep up, but when you're young, it's hard to realize that. I was late in realizing that."

The song changed, and "Uptown Girl" began to play. "Let's change the topic a bit. Ayaka-san, you're always doing interviews and you don't appear on TV programs."

Shohei glanced at Ayaka and said.

"Since you're busy, you probably don't watch local programs in the afternoon or evening, right? I sometimes appear on as a reporter or a host of a small segment. I'm quite popular with male viewers."

"Oh, I didn't know that. I guess it's a shame to waste your beauty. Do you ever get fan mail?"

"I do sometimes. People ask me if I'm single, or ask me to marry them. It's so sudden that it makes me laugh."

"I know exactly how men feel. But you do have a boyfriend, don't you?"

"Let's keep that a secret. By the way, your nosy sister should be in your room tonight, So please drop me off a little further away. And..."

"And what is it?"

"Whenever a man comes to visit, my cat has a bad habit of clinging to his feet, climbing onto his lap, and licking his hands and face. It's a young female black cat, and it seems that the more beautiful the person is, the more likely she is to be victimized, and she will never come to my room again."

"That's a problem. My feet hurt anyway, so I can't take her to my room. But I'm sure your sister is pretty, too."

"Well, it seems she's definitely more popular than me."

Forgetting all the bad things, the two of them looked at each other and laughed for the first time in the night in the car.

"Ayaka-san. I can't back down like this. I just can't give up hope."

"Murata-san..."

"When I talk to you, I feel positive for some reason. I'm worried about how my feelings will fluctuate over the next three weeks, but could you be my confidant from time to time?"

Shohei realized that he was starting to calm down a little after taking the plunge and talking. Something in her heart, where she had always been crying, was slowly beginning to change.

"If you don't mind, you can always tell me what's on your mind. I'll worry with you."

Ayaka said this and smiled brightly at Shohei again.

## Chapter 9 [A Faint Hope]

On Monday morning, the staff saw the director trudging into the clinic on crutches. They had imagined it through the group LINE that Irie Yumi had started circulating, but when they saw his painful appearance, they could not hide their shock.

Shohei explained to the administrative and nursing staff the difficulties he expected to face in the near future and the measures to be taken as detailed and specific as possible. He then solemnly added, "I'm sorry..."

"I will not use crutches in the clinic, because of the patients."

Shohei said this to no one in particular, and adjusted the length of the lightweight aluminum hiking poles he had brought with him, walking around the clinic at his own speed and stride. The staff were relieved to see that Shohei was moving surprisingly well, but the hidden anxiety in their hearts was not small.

The role of calling patients into the examination room was replaced by a nurse. About ten

years ago, he was fat and spent the whole day not wanting to get up from the examination chair, but from today, he was forced to return to that situation.

On Sunday and Monday, he lived hoping for some kind of improvement, but he only got a little better at using a cane. However, depending on how he moved his legs, there were times when the pain didn't feel real, and the desire to cling to a faint hope continued to smolder in his heart.

It was almost five-thirty on a Tuesday evening.

When the outpatients finally stopped coming, he called the nearby orthopedic clinic. It was the clinic of Dr. Hoshino, whose referral letter from St. Paul's Hospital was addressed to.

"This is Murata from Mikawa Heart Clinic. I'm a little late for the six-o'clock opening, but could you please ask the director if you could examine me about my fracture?"

At first, he didn't feel like there was any good way to treat him other than resting, and he had no intention of seeing Shohei, but last night, after consulting with Ayaka Uematsu over email, he had started to feel a little more positive. "Please come in, the director will examine you. Please be careful when you come in."

Before his appointment, Shohei, whose anxiety was not subsiding at all, looked over the optical disk containing the CT scan results from St. Paul's Hospital.

"I wonder if such a small injury can continue to cause this much pain day and night? Surely it has become unstable."

He arrived at Hoshino Orthopedic Clinic at around 6:07 and handed the referral letter and test data that the hospital had prepared to the receptionist. In front of the rehabilitation room, a high school girl was talking to a physical therapist about something. It seemed like a member of some sports club had stopped by for treatment on her way home from school.

"Dr. Murata, please come into the examination room."

When Shohei was called into the examination room, Hoshino, who had been looking closely at the CT scan results on the computer screen, seemed surprised to see Shohei walking smoothly with hiking poles in his hands.

"It's only been three days since you were injured. Based on the CT scan and the referral letter, it doesn't seem like you're in a condition where you can let go of your crutches, so you should be hospitalized. I'm sure you're five years older than me, Dr. Murata. I'm sure it's the result of your regular training, but wow, that's amazing."

Shohei felt embarrassed, not knowing whether he was praising him or amazed.

"It's a fresh fracture of the pubic bone, isn't it? Let me take a look."

Standing with the stocks in both hands, Shohei tried to move his leg as Hoshino instructed.

"There's no problem with flexion in a standing position passively, but it's a bit difficult to do it automatically. Extension is okay, I guess. Internal rotation seems more difficult than external

rotation."

Shohei had tried it himself a few times, so this result wasn't surprising.

"Next, please lie on your back on the bed. It will hurt, so take it slowly."

As expected, it took a very long time to transfer to the examination bed. The pain in his neck and right ribs was also getting worse day by day. Above all, if he tried to lift his right leg even a little while sitting or lying down, he would be hit with a very severe pain around his hip joint, and he couldn't even lift it a few centimeters. Even if he was finally able to lie down with help, it would take forever to get up again. There was no sign of improvement, and it was getting worse day by day, which was what worried him the most.

"Internal rotation seems to be quite painful, but external rotation is manageable... Yes, that's okay. Please get up slowly."

The results were almost the same as when he had self-diagnosed himself in bed at home, but it seemed like he was being confronted with a serious result once again.

"There are at least five fractures. Two in the ischium, two in the pubic bone, and one in the acetabulum."

"I see. I thought there were four."

His faint hope of finding some light seemed to have been dashed.

"I think they told you at St. Paul's Hospital, but it will take a long time before you can no longer feel pain in your daily life. Fortunately, there is no displacement in the fracture so there is no need for surgery, but it is the pubic bone and ischium after all. When riding a bicycle, you sit on the saddle and move your legs, so it is a rather fatal fracture."

Hoshino looked at Shohei with a sympathetic look on his face and continued to explain.

"If you resume training too early, it will be more likely to dissociate or shift, and it will be difficult to fully heal. If the fracture shifts significantly and becomes unstable, surgery may be required. Fortunately, your current condition is stable considering the number of fractures, so the pain will disappear in a few months, and you will be able to resume training at that time. You will probably be able to participate in next year's tournament."

Shohei listened to the explanation in silence, but it was a sad timeline for recovery that exceeded his expectations.

"So it will be a few months before he can resume training? There are only three weeks until the tournament."

"Considering the extent of the fractures, there must have been a considerable impact from the saddle. Did he run over a big rock or something? What? A raccoon?"

Probably no one would not be surprised to hear that it was a raccoon.

"If it's really painful, I think it would be better to use Loxonin rather than Calonal, which would have an anti-inflammatory effect as well. What do you think? It would be painful and

difficult to treat patients while sitting in a chair."

Hoshino's guess was almost spot on.

"Doctor, I'm heading to a cycling event in France in just over two weeks. Is there anything I can do for you, any treatment methods worth trying? If there's even the slightest bit of good method, I'd like to try it, even if it's a long shot. Otherwise, I'm sure I'll regret it."

"That's right. The biggest problem is that I won't be able to sit in the saddle for long. Also, the fractured part of the acetabulum, that is, the hip joint on the hipbone side, is touching the head of the femur, so the intense pain caused by that means I can't expect to pull my right leg at all. On flat ground, you don't necessarily need to pull your leg, but on a steep slope, if you can't pull your leg, you'll be extremely tired. How much elevation will we gain this time?"

"It's 135 kilometers, and we'll climb 4,600 meters. There are almost no flat sections."

Hoshino, with his tanned, manly face, was quite unsure how to respond. As a team doctor for professional sports and a triathlete, he seemed to know a lot about foot movements on road bikes. Shohei felt that he should follow Hoshino's advice. If he had been an ordinary patient, not a fellow practicing physician like Murata, Hoshino would have said sternly, from a purely medical standpoint, "It's impossible to participate, there's no way."

"This is a tough course that appears in the Tour de France. Do you have the option of not participating? Or are you prepared to withdraw midway? It's difficult even for a professional to finish within three weeks of breaking a bone."

Hoshino said this with a stern expression. Shohei took a deep breath and answered with a serious look on his face.

"This is an important event that I've been carefully preparing for since October last year, no, since five years ago. I understand that the fracture is serious, but at this point, I have no choice but to start. If the pain on the morning of the day means I can't participate, I'll give up, but I want to carry my bike to the site and stand at the starting line."

Hoshino looked a little troubled, but he was also positive like an athlete. "Do you want to try self-injecting a genetically modified drug called Forteo? It acts on the parathyroid gland to stimulate bone regeneration, and insurance only covers elderly women with osteoporosis who are considered to be at high risk of fracture. This is actually what is being used now to treat fractures in professional athletes like Beckham. Would you like to try using it in combination with something like Alphalor? The blood calcium level is monitored and the patient self-injects once a day, like insulin."

"Is there such a thing? Is the risk low?"

"Because they're a professional team, I'm sure they've tested the effectiveness and side effects. They want to return to the game as soon as possible, and they want to avoid serious side effects. Why don't you try self-injecting every day for three weeks from today until you leave? It's

probably the most effective treatment for fractures. Unfortunately, it will be at your own expense, but the cost of the raw materials alone will be about 30,000 yen for a month's supply. Nakao-san, do you have it in stock?"

The nurse next to him, who was called Nakao, nodded vigorously. "Okay, I'd love to try that. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Crutches would be better for reducing the load, but it's a hassle to use them when you're with a patient. Use walking sticks to avoid putting too much weight on your body. When you sleep, put a pillow under your knees to keep your knee and hip joints at a natural angle, which will reduce the strain on your muscles."

"Oh, I've already started that."

"I see. Even if you calm yourself down with painkillers, you still shouldn't start training. Also, in the case of a pelvic fracture, a lot of internal bleeding can be discovered later."

"If you push yourself too hard and the fracture becomes dislocated and unstable, will it affect your daily life in the future or force you to give up cycling?"

The younger Hoshino laughs as he answers Shohei's amateurish questions, which are hardly those of a doctor. "Even if it becomes unstable, surgery can do something about it, but after surgery, you won't be able to return to your normal life for about six months. You should be patient for a while. Even if you do go, it will be on the condition that the pain is almost gone by the time of the competition in three weeks. Well, it would be a miracle if you can run in Nice with this injury, but you know me, you can definitely make a miracle happen."

Described as a man who brings miracles, Shohei was at a loss for words and evaded with a wry smile.

The advice from the sports-loving specialist convinced Shohei that it was true. Leaving Hoshino's clinic, he resolved to do everything he could and wait for a miracle.

From then on, Shohei was desperate. He suppressed his impatience, kept himself at rest, and made reducing the load on the fractured area his top priority. Before going to bed at night, he hoped that a miracle would happen the next morning, but instead the swelling around the greater trochanter became more noticeable each day, and the dark area of internal bleeding spread widely from there to above the knee. The amount of internal bleeding on the day of the injury was more than initially thought, but fortunately there did not seem to be any nerve paralysis.

The pain-relieving effect of Loxonin was tremendous compared to Calonal, and Shohei no longer had to grimacing in pain in front of patients during consultation hours. He was able to walk slowly with only one stick.

[Today I was able to walk a little with just one cane. Going to the toilet became a little easier.



lol]

He was happy whenever he saw any signs of improvement, and each time he sent an email to Ayaka to let her know.

[Murata-san should be able to do it. But don't rush and be careful.]

Shohei was encouraged by the reply from Ayaka that arrived not long after the wait. After finishing his consultation for the day, Shohei saw Uematsu Ayaka on TV for the first time on a local information program. She looked a little more glamorous than her usual refreshing expression, but Shohei thought both Ayakas were lovely. Shohei was encouraged by every email she sent him.

Since visiting Hoshino Orthopedic Clinic, Shohei felt that he was getting a little better each day. The slight stinging pain he felt every morning when he took Forteo out of the refrigerator and pinched his abdomen with an alcohol swab to inject himself had now turned into a small pleasure that made him want to wait until the next day to inject himself again.

When Shohei returned home from work on Thursday evening, his mother, who had just been discharged from the university hospital that day, was preparing dinner at home.

Shohei had not yet told his wife and child, who lived far away, or his mother, who was hospitalized, about the bicycle accident and the fact that he had difficulty walking due to a pelvic fracture. Even though she was a generous person, as a mother, it was impossible for her to remain calm when her son was seriously injured. Rather than telling him by phone or email, she wanted to see him in person and explain in a way that would reassure him.

"Hi, welcome back. I've been released from the hospital safely. I even took my dog for a walk after a long time. ... Oh, Shohei, your leg is..."

When Shohei returned home using his walking stick as a cane, his mother was speechless, her eyes widening.

"There's no need to worry. He just had a small fall. He can walk just fine, and he can drive to work and work normally, so there's nothing to worry about. I kept quiet until now because I knew you'd worry if I told you while you were in hospital."

His mother was staring intently at Shohei from head to toe. "You're on a bike, right? If you're not careful, if you end up paralyzed, it will be a problem for me, Mamiko, the dog, and everyone else. You have to be careful... I've made sure to let Mamiko know."

"I haven't told her yet. I'll explain when I see her this weekend. After that, I'm going to Yufuin with Mamiko this weekend."

"Be careful. I don't know what to do about France, but it would be a problem if you push yourself too hard and end up not being able to walk. Talk to Mamiko and if you're going, go, but don't push yourself."

Shohei felt sad to see his mother's sad expression for the first time in a while.

"I wonder if Dad's okay. You're worried too, aren't you..."

His mother spoke to his dog in baby talk, and carried him to her chest as she returned to the kitchen.

His mother, who had given him the freedom to do whatever he wanted, was now nearly 90 years old, and Shohei became solemn, wanting to avoid making her sad because of him.

The subcutaneous bleeding had stopped spreading, and the swelling in his trochanter had gradually begun to subside. By using my walking sticks skillfully instead of holding onto the handrail, I was able to slowly climb the stairs without feeling much pain. Right now, my right leg is still extended, but I feel like I will be able to bend it and move symmetrically next week. It is natural that my wife and children will find out that I have been injured and am forced to walk with a cane, but I have been putting off contacting them so that I can meet them when I have improved even a little. If I had told them earlier, it would only cause them unnecessary worry.

[I'll meet you there tomorrow. I can get there by 3:30. If you get there first, check in.]

After returning to the house where he and his mother live late at night, Shohei sent his wife an email about the next day and went to sleep.

The weather was a bit bad on Saturday, probably a precursor to the rainy season, and it was a rainy weekend. There was no longer any reason to bring his bike for practice, so Shohei finished his medical appointment at 2pm and headed to the inn where he was staying with his wife.

Mamiko had arrived at the Kamenoi Besso in Yufuin first. After relaxing in the indoor bath of the detached room, she put on a yukata and relaxed while looking at the well-maintained garden.

"Oh, Shohei, what's wrong?"

When Mamiko saw her husband's painful appearance when he arrived late, she asked in surprise. He was holding two walking sticks that she had never seen before that day.

"Yeah, I had a traffic accident with a raccoon a week ago."

"What, a raccoon? On my bike?"

"Yeah, I collided with a stupid raccoon. I hurt my pelvis, but it's getting better."

She couldn't help but notice that her husband was clearly lying. She was watching his every move with a worried gaze, not wanting to miss anything.

"Isn't it really serious? Isn't it broken?"

"Yeah, just a little. But it's fine. It's gotten a lot better."

Shohei was originally bad at lying. Mamiko would easily find out his lies, so he had never gone out in secret, much less tried to cheat on her. Even if he tried to hide this time, Mamiko would find out.

"You can't go to Nice in that condition. What are you going to do?"

"There are still two weeks left. I think you'll be fine. I'll take a bath first."

"There's no way you can go in just two weeks."

Mamiko looked worried, casting her uneasy feelings on Shohei's back as he headed to the bath, using his stockings. But he pretended not to notice and didn't look back. The presence of Ayaka, who always spoke positive words to him, grew within him.

Struggling with the pain, Shohei soaked his injured body in the luxurious hot spring water.

As he looked at his naked body, he bitterly remembered that day. Fortunately, the abrasions on his trochanter were healing, and the swelling was definitely decreasing. However, while the color of the internal bleeding that had spread over a wide area on the outside of his thigh was starting to fade a little, Shohei noticed that two new lemon-sized internal bleeding spots had appeared in his groin area, a little closer to the toes. They had not appeared when he had hit the road after falling, but had definitely been caused by deep internal bleeding caused by the saddle pushing up against him.

Although there was a tendency to improve, he still needed to be careful and not get too confident. But Shohei didn't want to let Mamiko know about his anxiety. Even if he couldn't participate, he had decided to go to the competition venue in Nice, and he wanted to take her, who loves France, to the south of France with him.

The air in the Yufu Basin in early summer, when it was still too early for the cicadas to sing, was even more refreshing after being washed by the short shower that had just started. Mamiko was delighted to find a mother and child frog that looked like young green leaves on a large stone floating in the garden that was completely devoid of weeds. Normally, this would have been a time when her husband would have gone off to train alone and been left alone in the room, but perhaps she was happy in her own way that they were spending this rare quiet time together on the veranda of the inn. Perhaps she was hoping that her husband would forget about his dangerous hobbies for a while and awaken to the pleasures of a peaceful retirement, Shohei thought as he gazed upon Mamiko's profile in her yukata robes.

"If your legs weren't sore, I'd like to go for a walk with you, but why don't you prepare a bed for us early and let's have a nice, relaxing nap?"

It had been a while since he'd seen Mamiko's soft smile. The sunlight streaming in through the window was weak, and the breeze coming in through the open window was pleasant. Unfortunately, if he moved his body, it would hurt, but it was the perfect afternoon for a quiet nap.

After a while, Shohei woke up from his happy nap, feeling Mamiko's soft lips against his. The early summer days were starting to fade. "It was a nice time. Dinner will be served soon. Shall we take another bath until then?"

"Ah, yes. Let's take a bath together for the first time in a while."

"Well, I guess you're trying to stimulate my maternal instinct with my weakened body. ... I'll decline. Please stay by yourself. If you ever need nursing care, I'll put you in a high-class facility."

Although they live apart due to work, Shohei still likes Mamiko, who never forgets to joke around. Although he has had the opportunity to talk to many wonderful women, he has never felt the urge to betray his wife. However, as a man, Shohei has long felt the frustration of not being able to show his true, weakened self to her.

In another ten years, his current job will become difficult, and in twenty years, his thoughts and actions will become precarious. Even in the past four years, when the coronavirus has hit, the real world, Shohei's world, and everyone's world have changed dramatically in ways that were once unimaginable. Shohei gradually began to wish that from now on he would cherish living in the present with the people he cares about.

"Shohei, dinner's ready," Mamiko called out gently, hesitantly opening the bathroom door.

Shohei pulled her hand towards him and kissed her silently. Then he slowly slid his wet hand into the chest of her yukata, and for a while he just felt her bulge in silence.

"Oh my, what's happened all of a sudden? You're really not going to be able to walk anymore..."

She stared at his face and slowly opened her mouth.

As Mamiko left the bathroom, her feet, peeking out from under her yukata, were shining beautifully in the setting sun streaming in through the window.

Shohei visited Hoshino Orthopedic Clinic again on Tuesday. He hadn't noticed any discomfort in the past week that suggested any worsening, and he felt that things were improving somewhat.

"You're walking quite smoothly. You're using only one walking stick, and the lift and flexion of your right leg seem to be good for walking. Have you taken your Loxonin today?"

Hoshino commented as he entered the examination room. Several X-rays of internal and external rotation taken in the supine position before the examination were also displayed on the electronic medical record, and Hoshino commented on his findings as he watched the images, quickly typing them into the chart.

"There's no dislocation. You've been self-injecting Forteo every day, but there are signs of the joint advancing, such as the appearance of a thick white line, but there's still a long way to go. Normally, it'll be a few weeks at the earliest, so as long as there's no signs of deterioration such as dislocation, then you're fine."

Hoshino turned to Shohei with a calm expression. He also expressed the feeling that "It's going

well, but there's nothing more I can do to help you."

Even though we're both practicing physicians and sports lovers, unfortunately there are things we can and can't do. Of course, Shohei knew all about it when he came to see him. Next Tuesday was two days before the scheduled departure, so this might be his last visit.

"It seems to be going better than I expected, but I haven't even gotten on the saddle once, or been able to move my legs on the exercise bike. I'm very anxious every day, wondering if the pain will really be under control and I'll be able to start riding on the day of the competition." Shohei was lying to Hoshino a little. Last night, I placed a few more towels on top of the soft saddle of the exercise bike and slowly started pedaling. Normally, I could exercise for more than 30 minutes every night at about 80 revolutions per minute with weight on my body, but last night I couldn't stay on the saddle for more than five minutes, and I was so scared to move my legs that I stopped after about 20 seconds.

"Including the time difference, it's 12 days later to be exact. Nice, right? I'll probably be transiting through London or Paris, but overseas airports are so big that it's quite a burden. Please be careful when walking around. You'll have time to relax the day after you arrive, right? You'll arrive on Friday, and the race is on Sunday, right?"

Hoshino had also participated in triathlons and other events, so he was familiar with the situation overseas.

"The problem is that the race has been moved up from Sunday to Saturday. The president suddenly said that the general election will be held on Sunday, and it was decided that it would be unacceptable to hold a roadblock race on the day of the election, which would prevent the race organizers and local residents from voting."

"Oh, so that's how it is."

"So, I'll arrive on Friday afternoon, receive my bib number and buy a souvenir at the race venue, and then I have to be at the starting point at seven the next morning. I'll wake up at five, make final preparations, eat... I usually do detailed checks and preparations on site the day before, but this time it doesn't look like I'll be able to do that, and in any case, it will be difficult to rest my injured leg during the trip, so I'm a bit worried about that."

"Because now it's too late to start a day earlier."

"Dr. Hoshino, if I participate despite the pain on the day, is there a possibility that I won't be able to return to Japan?"

Shohei asked Hoshino his last question. He was smiling, but his voice was tense.

"Well, knowing Dr. Murata, he will probably run, but I believe he won't push himself too hard. He must know that you have many important people around you, waiting for your safe return." It was an obvious answer, without any need to ask.

Shohei thanked Hoshino and the staff, and slowly left the clinic, taking his supplies with him.

He thought that unless there was a special change, he would not come to see me again.

The next morning, a letter pack arrived from Uematsu Ayaka addressed to Mikawa Heart Clinic. Inside was a DVD of a movie and a beautifully handwritten letter.

[Dr. Murata, I was very happy when you invited me to Sano's concert the other day. I was surprised by the great seat, but I was also very surprised by your appearance. It had been a long time, so I wanted to talk to you a little more, but it was the day after your accident with Tanuki-san, and you seemed to have been at the hospital until late the night before, so I think we will talk another time. I also had my sister at home (laughs). Well, I'm sure you've already seen it, knowing you, but I'd like to present you with my favorite movie as a thank you for the concert. It's called Great Days and is about the Ironman race in Nice, where the Etape event that you're planning to participate in will be held. It was made nearly ten years ago, and it's the story of an unemployed father who, at the insistence of his physically disabled son, challenges the grueling Ironman race with his son. I don't know if it's a true story, but I think the feelings of a father and son who take on a grueling competition that exceeds their own limits after more than half a year of careful preparation, and struggle to reach the finish line, are universally touching. However, it's not important whether you can reach the finish line within the time limit or receive a completion medal. I think what's important is the strong desire to make your innermost wish come true, to prepare desperately in the environment you're given, to make the effort that you can, and to stand at the starting line of the challenge. I think that a pelvic fracture is more serious than I thought, but I will challenge together with you and support you from behind the scenes until the competition. If you ever feel weak, please feel free to email me. Ayaka] Shohei had seen that movie at the cinema once before. The scenery of the Annecy region, the sea of the Cote d'Azur where the race is held, and the colorful scenery of the mountain course of road bikes in Provence were firmly burned into his memory along with the emotional movements of the father and son. When he saw the video again in his hands, the memories of the Etape held in Annecy and the RCC Summit, which ran the same course in Provence, came back vividly along with the scenery. The father is around fifty years old, but because of his great handicap, it was a story that Shohei now feels more familiar with. The face of Ayaka, who chose such a movie for him and gave it to him at such a time, came to his mind with joy.

The day to leave for the competition was approaching in a week. After finishing his morning work in the outpatient department and dialysis, Shohei went on a house call with a nurse to a nursing home. It was a short journey of just five minutes by car each way. The nurse accompanying him today was the young Hagio Natsumi.

"You've started walking more and more without using your cane. Has the pain gone away?"

"Of course it hurts. But I want to try it. There's only one week left until we leave."

"Doctor, you seem to be a bit of a masochist. You're strict when examining patients, but when you're not, you like to moan in pain."

"What stupid things are you saying to tease the director? I'm neither sadistic nor masochistic." Natsumi was laughing quietly.

"I asked Irie to repair my pants recently, didn't I? I hate washing my pants or my husband's, but Irie repairs my pants. I'm impressed."

"That's a misunderstanding, Natsumi-chan. They're not underwear pants, but pants made specifically for cycling. Rather than repairing them, I cut out the highly cushioned padding from another pair of pants and modified them into a double pad. During the competition, I have to sit on the saddle of the bike for about ten hours, so I asked him to reduce the pain as much as possible so that I can continue the race."

"Is that so? It seems that some staff members are suspicious because I asked Irie to repair my pants, which I don't even ask my wife to do."

"Irie-san is good at sewing. The staff members who are suspicious are Natsumi-chan, right?"

"Ah, I guess they found out."

Following his rounds at the nursing home, Shohei finished a 90-minute cardiovascular class at the nursing school and headed to a sports bike shop in Chikushi City to pick up the road bike he had asked to be repaired.

After next week's class he will head straight to the airport, and the following week he will continue as normal as if nothing had happened. The only thing different from before is that Shohei has no idea what will happen to his body after he finishes running.

"You seem to be a little better than last time, will you be okay for the competition?"

The store manager, Sugimoto Eiichi, approached Shohei with a concerned look on his face.

"The repairs are complete, and God Hand Koide has given it another thorough maintenance. There are about ten days left. I looked it up online, and it seems like the course has some pretty tough ups and downs."

"That's right, I'm even more worried now that you were injured."

"It would be great if you could make good use of your past experience and relax, but there aren't many flat areas, it's all ups and downs. If you don't get injured, you should be able to finish the course, but please don't push yourself too hard. We are encouraged when we see people like you taking on tough competitions like the Etape after turning 60. If it were just running, we could probably finish it, but we can't even get to the starting point without

financial means. I'm going to save up money so I can participate someday."

The young manager's words were not at all sarcastic. It was a cheer for Shohei, with the hope that he would one day ride the famous mountain passes of Europe.

"As you get older, it gets harder to take on challenges. I'm reaching my limit, so I want to push myself and participate, but you have plenty of time in the future, and I envy your youth and stamina." "When you return to Japan, please let me know how the event goes." "Okay, but if I retire, I'll keep it a secret." Shohei doesn't think he can finish the race, and to be honest, he doesn't have the confidence to start. But he secretly feels that giving young people hope is one of his small duties, having been coming to this bicycle shop for nearly fifty years since he was 16.

## Chapter 10      The Deep Blue Coast

There was only one week left until the day of the competition in Nice.

The road bike that Shohei received the other day was perfectly serviced, and new tires and tubes had been installed, so there was no longer any worry about his equipment.

Although his recovery was slower than he had initially hoped and he still had some pain, Shohei began to have a strange confidence that could be called medically unreasonable. Perhaps it was not the intuition of a doctor, but the intuition of someone who had been riding a bike since he was three years old.

Unfortunately, it was the rainy season on his last weekend in Japan, but Shohei made recovery from his injury his top priority and used the time to rest his body as much as possible except for necessary work.

The racing pants that he had asked Irie to repair were finished unexpectedly quickly. He had intended to say that it would be easy, but the result was as beautiful as if they had been repaired by a professional. The shock-absorbing padding was twice as thick as normal, so it should help him in the competition, but he was too scared to try them out for practice.

That same evening, Shohei pulled out a special bike bag from the warehouse to carry his road bike onto the plane, removed the front and rear wheels, and packed it in. He had completely forgotten what had happened five years ago, so at first he had trouble, but after he managed to pack it away, the reality of his trip gradually began to take hold.

On the last Saturday of June, this year's Tour de France kicked off in Florence, Italy.

This was the first time in the Tour's more than 100-year history that the event had opened in Italy. Due to the Paris Olympics, the final stage on the Champs-Élysées, which is customary



on the final day, was changed, and it was also the first time that the race would end with an individual time trial from Monaco to Nice. The Etape that Shohei would ride a week later was on the same course as the 20th stage, the day before the final day of the Tour.

The digest program of the Tour de France, which used to be broadcast daily on NHK, had disappeared without a trace, and he began to enjoy it through pay-per-view broadcasts and digest programs on the Internet. However, Shohei had completely lost interest in watching those programs. Not only that, the accident had damaged his body and mind so badly that he was indifferent to everything except the treatment of his broken bone.

The article he was going to submit to a medical journal to be published in early August had been arranged with the publisher, and all that remained was to make minor changes in the proofreading. There were some minor points that were pointed out, which was a bit troubling, but he didn't expect to be asked to do so again in the future. Shohei tried to make as much time as possible to make the article better so that the young staff and his daughters, who had become doctors, could see what their father was doing. Ironically, the fact that his training time had been greatly reduced due to his injury was useful.

The fifth class at nursing school was on the day he left, and the last class would be the week after he returned home. Since it was possible that his condition would worsen when he returned home, he had emailed the questions and model answers for the final exam scheduled for the following week to the principal of the nursing school yesterday.

However, there was an enormous amount of work that needed to be done before the trip.

Until recently, school checkups were also a big part of the busy schedule, but this is also the most tedious time of the year, when we have to fill out a number of nursing care insurance application forms and fill out troublesome survey forms from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. In addition, this year, we have to write on our pay slips the tax cuts proposed by tax-raising glasses for salaried workers, and we have to submit a number of unusually tedious government documents, making this a difficult time for private practice doctors who do all of their own paperwork. However, for the workaholic Shohei, completing and processing a number of tasks that seem like unreasonable government harassment one after another was strangely enjoyable.

On Monday evening, while watching Ayaka appear on a local TV program, Shohei sent her a message.

Ayaka, today was the first time I've ever gone up and down the stairs without using a walking stick. It was probably because I took a painkiller in the morning, but strangely, there was almost no pain, and since it's been a while, I savored the climb. It's funny, like a child. Tonight I'm going to break my promise with my doctor and try out the exercise bike in the director's

office. The saddle is soft, so I think it will hold up on my sit bones, but the saddle for the real thing is harder. I had the staff make me some special pants with two layers of shock-absorbing padding, so I'm going to wear those for the real thing.]

Since they attended Sano Motoharu's live performance together, Shohei has been sending her updates two or three times a week, and each time he receives a reply with an encouraging message. The reply is often several hours later, and she seems to write it when she is alone at home. Perhaps because she has early morning work, when Shohei sends a message after 9:30 p.m., the reply, which begins with "Good morning," is delivered to Shohei the next morning before his alarm goes off.

After dinner, Shohei timidly pedaled the exercise bike in the director's office for the first time in a while, watching the video of Etap that he participated in last time on the TV monitor in front of him. Perhaps because he had slacked off from training for a while and the muscle mass in his buttocks had drastically decreased, he vaguely felt an uncomfortable sensation, as if the saddle was touching his sit bones directly.

Nevertheless, he ran a 30-minute workout for the first time since his injury, burning about 200 calories. If he gave up at this rate, finishing the race would be a dream, but if he increased the intensity of his workout and damaged the bones and nerves around his sit bones, it would be counterproductive. As he had promised Dr. Hoshino at the beginning, he should rest his body until the day of the race, but the feeling of washing off the sweat even with a short workout and then showering right after is indescribable.

As he was drying his body after the shower with a towel, a high-pitched ding rang, indicating an incoming message. It was the reply from Ayaka, who he had been waiting for.

【You did it. It makes me happy when it's good news. But don't push yourself. Just as you would treat a precious woman with care, be careful to listen for the subtle signals your body is sending you. It might be better to increase the load on the exercise bike just a little at a time, watching the reaction of your legs and hips, and get used to it. You'll be on the plane in three days. I know you're nervous, but let's do our best.】

Ayaka must have been very happy, as her words were lively. Shohei, who had decided to rest after hearing her advice, was also filled with hope.

Shohei had to decide whether to respect his doctor's restraining opinion or gladly follow Ayaka's positive encouragement. Although they didn't have many opportunities to meet in person, Ayaka understood Shohei's personality well.

[Ayaka is my excellent personal coach. I'd like to take you to Nice so that you can finish the race. I wonder if I can take a week off from TV work lol]

When Shohei sent his joking message to Ayaka, it was already past 9:30 p.m.

In the early morning of the day before the race, London Heathrow Airport, which he visited for the first time in 32 years, was shrouded in fog. Shohei and Mamiko had fled to England from the scorching heat of Venice on their honeymoon, but London that summer was just as hot and humid as Japan, and they remember being surprised by the British summer when neither the rental car nor the hotel room had air conditioning.

Among the luggage being unloaded from the plane one after another, Shohei saw the large black bicycle bag that he had checked in at Fukuoka. Shohei hoped that it would be transferred to British Airways and arrive safely to Nice. However, there was no cover for the light rain falling from the gloomy sky, and he was worried about the clothes he had enclosed inside. The competition had been brought forward by a day at the last minute, so he needed to be at the starting line early tomorrow morning, and he didn't want to imagine lost baggage or soaked clothes.

Perhaps due to the weak yen, there were only a few Japanese people in JAL's business class, and more than 90% of the passengers were Western. Shohei was surprised at how different the plane looked after his first flight in five years.

The British Airways took off with only one Asian on board, and blew through the thick clouds into the bright southern sky.

The two-hour flight took off to the glittering blue coastal towns of the Cote d'Azur, which he had not seen in eight years.

The plane flew from the plains of western France to the Mediterranean Sea, over Marseilles, with the black, huge, washboard-like central mountain range below, and gradually lowered its altitude, arriving at the seaside airport of Nice, with the city of Cannes and the dry mountains of Provence on the left.

The previous flight to Nice had taken us from Frankfurt, Germany, through Switzerland, over the mountains on the border between Italy and France, and then west from Monaco to Nice airport. Even though the plane landed backwards, Shohei still fondly remembers the snow-capped Alps and the glittering sea of the Riviera coast from Italy to France. That day, he was traveling with his bicycle as the only Japanese passenger.

Despite the small airport, there were far more private jets lined up in the vast parking lot than regular commercial flights. The terminal, where he arrived after threading his way between the colorful small jets, looked the same as it did eight years ago.

As it is a mecca for cyclists, bicycles are transported on the special large luggage line at the very end. Many people who will be participating in tomorrow's competition are carefully carrying their bicycle bags that have been safely transported to the city of Nice. Most of the participants were a generation or two younger than Shohei. It was difficult to find participants who looked to be in their sixties. And, as expected, there were no Asians to be found at this

airport. There is increasing information that the economies of not only Japan but also South Korea and the People's Republic of China are worsening, but he never imagined that the situation would be so different from before.

The biggest difference in the past eight years is that the second terminal and the city tram were newly built, and the airport and the city of Nice are directly connected by the city tram. The Hotel Royal, which Shohei had booked last October through S Company, a company based in the UK that plans and operates tours for famous sporting events, faces the Promenade des Anglais, a wide main road that runs along the coast of Nice.

With its stylish contrast between its pale beige walls and white lines, it stands overlooking the blue Mediterranean Sea that spreads out to the south, beyond the tall palm trees lining the street. Far beyond the Cote d'Azur, beyond the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, the African continent faces Tunisia and Algeria. Many of the cars traveling on the road are covered in dust several times thicker than the yellow sand experienced in Fukuoka, which has been blown in from the African desert and has accumulated there.

Located exactly halfway between the Negresco, with its impressive brick-colored dome on its roof, and the Hyatt Regency, another five-star hotel with a casino on the first floor, this slightly old hotel is a stylish six-story building that exudes French elegance despite being a three-star hotel. In a corner of the shrubbery next to the entrance, where the Euro flag, the French flag, and the Nice city flag are proudly flying, stand life-sized objects of a man and woman in formal attire, emphasizing their large red lips. They are humorous figures that are very French. From the balcony of the slightly pricey sea-facing room, I could see the same scenery that I have seen and sighed many times on TV, in magazines, and in movies.

A small electronic beep rang. I wondered if it was from Mamiko, who I couldn't bring with me, but when I looked at the screen of my smartphone, it was a message from Ayaka.

[Murata-san, have you arrived at the hotel in Nice yet? How is it? Is that beautiful beach from the movie stretching out before you? The sparkling sea stretching out endlessly, the beautiful blue sky, I'm sure. I wish I could have gone with you. I wish I could have cheered Shohei-san on with my eyes. I'm sure you'll be fine tomorrow. Sleep well tonight. When you wake up in the morning, the pain will surely be gone. I'll send you telekinesis from Japan. Alley]

The world's most famous Ironman race will start with a swim from the beach directly in front of you, and will reach the final goal at the end of the full marathon. The scene of the swim starting at dawn and the final finisher being greeted in pitch black must be incredibly moving. Shohei was remembering a scene from the movie that Ayaka had given him as a gift.

[Thank you, Ayaka-san. Actually, I'm still in pain, but thanks to your support, I feel like the pain will be gone when I wake up in the morning. We plan to line up at the starting line after 7:00 tomorrow morning. It will be around 3:00 in the afternoon in Japan. Please cheer us on

if you can.]

The cityscape that looks hazy in the distance on the right must be Cannes, famous for its film festival. It was a memorable beach where Shohei enjoyed dinner on his last night with RCC members from various countries when he first came to the Cote d'Azur.

Shohei sent a message back with a picture of the coastline taken from the balcony of his room. Soon after, a big heart mark arrived from Ayaka.

Without even a moment to rest in his room, Shohei opened his bike bag and started assembling his road bike. He didn't have much time to relax. If there was any trouble with the equipment, he would have to hurry up and ask the mechanic to take care of it.

The number tag to be attached to the handlebars of the bike and the back of the clothing was given to him by the tour company representative on his behalf, and he had just received it in the hotel lobby along with other souvenirs.

Before the competition, Shohei always remembers his days of practice up to that point. It's difficult to find enough time to practice because of his busy job, and he's also getting to an age where he can't push himself too hard. He's especially worried because he's had a serious, unexpected injury this time and hasn't been able to ride his road bike even once in the last three weeks.

Although he's made it this far, whether he can start and whether he can finish it all depends on what signs Shohei's body will give him tomorrow morning.

He was a little forgetful of the pain because of the tension, but during the long journey through Haneda, Heathrow, and Nice airports, Shohei was forced to face the reality that he had not yet recovered from his injury. His steps were clearly slow and narrow to avoid the pain. He had brought his walking poles from Japan just in case, but he felt like stopping and taking a break every 50 meters. With the day of the competition tomorrow approaching, he was haunted by the thought that he didn't want to increase the damage even a little. However, it seemed difficult to keep escaping the temptation to take a step forward into the picturesque view from the hotel balcony forever.

About 500 meters east of the hotel, there is a large park area like the Champs-Élysées that stretches from the beautiful Albert I Garden to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, and one corner of it serves as the Etape event venue. After wondering whether to follow his curiosity or rest for the next day, Shohei went out with his walking sticks in hand to look for some commemorative goods.

The village of Etape is lively with the day before the main event, but strangely, there are hardly any Asians, including Japanese, to be seen this time, even though it is a famous tourist destination in Nice. I remember seeing many Japanese people at the venue at the last Etape, even though it is in the regional city of Annecy. However, the situation seems to have changed

completely due to COVID-19 and the weak yen.

Even though he had come all the way to Nice, his long-awaited city, despite his sore feet, Shohei's heart does not flutter like it did last time. This is because he is still worried about whether he will be able to start, but perhaps the four years of the pandemic have changed him. It was when Shohei passed in front of the bib number tent.

The short brunette woman who looked at him in surprise was undoubtedly Aleda, whom he had met twice in France. The first time was at the RCC summit held near Nice, and the second time was at the Etape venue in Annecy. It was she who recommended the Marmotte Granfondo Alps, which he participated in the following year, saying, "It's tough, but it's the most popular in Europe."

"Oh, aren't you Shohei? You're participating too?"

Aleda, who serves as manager of the RCC UK headquarters, called out to Shohei with a bright smile. The long blonde woman next to her was a woman Shohei followed on Instagram.

"This is Caroline. You and Shohei were together at the RCC summit and the Annecy Étape, do you remember each other?"

"Hi, Caroline. I've remembered you well since the summit, but I'm sure we've never spoken. But I follow your Instagram, so I've always felt like we're friends."

"I remember you, Shohei. There's something painful about the way you walk. Maybe your hip joint, or maybe your pubic bone."

Caroline, a physician in London, suddenly pointed out something wrong with Shohei. Aleda, who had been smiling broadly, suddenly looked worried.

"Yes. I fell during practice just three weeks ago, and I broke five small bones in my hip bone and pubic bone."

"Oh dear. Isn't the pelvis an important part of a cyclist's body? I don't think it's possible for a cyclist to participate in the Étape within a month."

"It hurts to walk, but I didn't want to give up and regret not participating, so I came to Nice with a cane out of spite. Since the accident, I haven't been able to practice on my bike even once. I probably won't be able to finish the race, but I'm looking forward to enjoying the first French race in five years. Are you the only two participants from RCC London?"

They were supposed to participate in the Étape together with at least four or five other female members every year.

"This year's finish line is quite far from the starting line. Unlike the pros, it probably takes almost ten hours for amateurs to get back to Nice by bus, so the course was unpopular with the London members." "Yeah, I wonder why they chose that place as the finish line. Apparently the place where everyone gathers after finishing is another seven kilometers from the finish line. I thought about canceling when the official course details were revealed." They

all nodded bitterly, as if they were feeling the same way. "Do you remember Christine? She's the woman with short blonde hair and is taller than me. She was with Shohei at the summit and the Annecy Étape." Hearing Christine's name, Shohei immediately remembered her friendly smile. He had once had a photo taken with Aleda at a restaurant in Cannes. He remembered the woman with a quiet expression, but she was also a woman who interested him very much for another reason. "Yes, I remember her. She's a woman who is working to support young breast cancer researchers with research funds, right? In fact, I follow her Instagram. I thought she was quiet in Nice and Annecy, but she's strong, or rather, very great. Is Christine here with you at the venue? Where is she now?" "We're planning to run together tomorrow, but she's currently resting in her hotel room in preparation for tomorrow. She hasn't written anything on Instagram, but she actually got sick a few weeks ago. Like Shohei, she's been completely off training recently, and has been carefully preparing for the competition while getting in shape." It's been 11 years since she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. Shortly after meeting Shohei for the first time at the summit, she was found to have metastasized breast cancer in her brain, and underwent surgery to remove it. Shohei was moved when he found out from her Instagram that she had participated in Étape for the first time immediately after recovering from her illness. He said it was a challenge to himself, as he never gave up. He had hoped to talk to her about the support activities she is leading the next time they met, but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented this from happening. He remembered that she, a cancer patient, had commented with a humorous photo that she was enjoying cycling alone outdoors while taking strict precautions against COVID-19 infection.

"If that's the case, we'll probably meet somewhere tomorrow. But because my legs are like this, I might be left behind and won't be able to talk. This time, Aleda will also be riding."

"Unfortunately, I'm in charge of taking care of the RCC members who will be participating again this time. I'll be waiting for everyone at the finish line ahead of time. Also, this time I'm in Provence to scout out the location of the RCC summit, which will be held again in September for the first time in five years. This time, the summit will be held on Mont Ventoux. Do you want to join us, Shohei?"

"Wow, that's nice. But it's very difficult to take time off twice a year because of work."

The bib number that Caroline told me was in the same time slot as Christine was a number that started 15 minutes later than Shohei.

"I'll be wearing the Summit blue jersey, so you'll know me right away. Can you tell her to call out to me when she passes me?"

"Okay, Shohei. The weather looks good tomorrow, so let's enjoy the race to the fullest, and then let's celebrate together at the finish line by making as much noise as we can."

The two of them cheered up Shohei, who had hurt his legs, with playful expressions on their faces. He knew that it would be a miracle to complete the grueling course in this condition, but he promised with anticipation that they would meet again at the finish line, as they might never see each other again.

Although they hadn't walked that far, Shohei's hip joints were starting to give out as time went on. Since arriving at Heathrow Airport early in the morning, he had been forced to walk a considerable distance, and he couldn't walk long at a normal speed. Even if he looked at it favorably, his gait was the same as that of an old man with bad knees and hips. As a doctor, I knew better than anyone that if he continued walking any more, it would be a major hindrance to his race tomorrow. The bright expression he had when he left the hotel had already disappeared from Shohei's face.

Although it's past 1am in Japan and people start to feel sleepy, it's only just after 5pm in Nice, so it's too early to go back to the hotel and go to sleep. Shohei carefully places his poles on the cobblestone road as he slowly makes his way through the old town and back towards the hotel. A colour-coded cycling path runs along the wide promenade between the road and the beach, where participants in the next day's race are warming up their bikes in the setting sun. The sight of the many cyclists in bright jerseys cycling from east to west, in the warm sea breeze, echoing the deep blue sea in the background, is like a beautiful painting.

Shohei, who had been looking out to sea from the promenade, is drawn carefully down the stone steps that smell of dog urine, and for the first time, he sets foot on the beach in Nice, which he has long admired.

To his surprise, it was not a sandy beach like Cannes, but a hard coast made of colorful marble the size of grapes, soybeans, or red beans, in colors such as red, green, white, and black. He took off his shoes and walked carefully barefoot on the pebble beach, and a strong stimulation like that of an acupressure board pushed up against Shohei's soles. It was as if the stones, whose corners had disappeared, were trying to make Shohei's feet bury themselves deeper and deeper under them.

"Hey, are you still awake? Knowing you, I thought you might still be reading a novel. And I wanted to hear your cute voice."

As he dipped his tired feet in the cold, surging waves and gazed into the distance, Shohei had an irresistible urge to call his wife, Mamiko, who was in Japan.

"I was still awake. I was watching a YouTube show from the south of France. I was thinking about you. It's finally tomorrow. How's the pain? Are you ready to start?"

Shohei felt bad for Mamiko that he couldn't bring her to Nice with him.

"I was just staring blankly at the ocean. I really wanted to come with you."

"What's wrong? You're sounding a bit sentimental. Are you losing your nerve?"



"Maybe it was reckless after all. The more I walk, the more my feet hurt. It feels like I've gone back to what it was a week ago. It would be different if I had at least some friends to run with." Shohei was relying on Mamiko, who was far away in Japan.

"That's not like you. It's okay if you can't finish the race. Your family and staff all know how hard you've tried, and it's important to be brave and withdraw or quit halfway through. There's nothing to be ashamed of. If you push yourself too hard and really damage your body, it will be a big problem and sadden the patients and staff who come to you, and of course your family. It's amazing that you even want to participate in Étape at that age."

"Well, I suppose that's true. But I have no confidence that I can finish the race."

"I'll pray that the pain will be gone by tomorrow morning. Get plenty of sleep tonight. Don't forget to set your alarm."

"Yeah, I'm going to enjoy Étape without pushing myself too hard. This might be my last time, physically."

"Don't be so timid, take me with you next year."

Mamiko had no way of encouraging her any more, even though they were far away on the phone. Shohei picked up some colorful pebbles that caught his eye at his feet and put them in his pocket as souvenirs for Mamiko, Ayaka, and the staff.

He had an early dinner at a cheap restaurant along the promenade, then got some water for the race and returned to his hotel room where he took a hot shower. As he laid out on the table the blue jersey he would wear tomorrow, his bib shorts whose padding had been repaired by the staff, and his favorite socks, he felt a quiet awakening of the fact that tomorrow was finally here.

He wondered what would happen to this pain when he woke up.

It was past eight-thirty in the evening and the sun had sunk behind the rocky mountains in the west, but it was still bright outside the window and some young people were still swimming on the shore. Someone was playing loud, lively music that could be heard from inside the room, stirring his anxious heart.

He planned to set his alarm for 5:30 a.m., have a hearty breakfast, and leave the hotel by seven to head to the starting line, but even after he turned off the lights and lay in bed, excitement and anxiety continued to mix in his mind.

## Chapter 11      On the Saddle

The morning of the competition arrived. Although he had almost given up after the accident

just before the race, Shohei had never forgotten this day in the nine months since he officially applied last October.

Perhaps because of the fatigue from the long journey, he didn't wake up on the way, but he woke up naturally just before the alarm clock told him it was half past five. It was already past one in the afternoon in Japan, so it was probably due to the time difference rather than the excitement before the competition.

A hint of morning was leaking through the gaps in the blackout curtains of the south-facing window. Waking up from a deep sleep, he opened the large white-framed glass door all the way. A surprisingly cool and refreshing sea breeze brushed his face through the balcony decorated with iron railings painted in green and gold geometric patterns.

The faint sound of the waves and the smell of the sea from the Mediterranean Sea spreading out before his eyes told him that he was not in a dream. It was beginning to lighten in the direction of Monaco to the left, but the sun had not yet risen over Italy beyond.

Traffic had already been restricted on the wide street in front of the hotel. Many people, who were clearly staff, were busy preparing, setting up fences, setting up flags at the front of each section where participants were lined up, and stretching ropes to control lines.

Many cyclists were already riding along the road, where cars had completely disappeared, as if they were warming up their legs. In less than two hours, several thousand participants would fill the four-lane road directly below this balcony. Shohei imagined himself lined up in that spectacular view, but in fact, that was not yet decided.

At that moment, he finally realized that he did not feel any pain in his legs or hips.

He tentatively squatted down and pulled up his knees, making large movements as if testing them. But for some reason, he felt almost no pain. Yesterday he'd been in such unbearable pain and his chest had been crushed with anxiety, but suddenly, he had a strange sensation, as if he'd returned to the person he was before the accident.

He walked around the room, doubting himself again that he was still in a deep sleep and dreaming, but the alarm clock rang, shaking him out of his fantasy. It was five-thirty in the morning, telling Shohei that it was time to start getting ready.

At the same time, the video phone on the smartphone next to his pillow began to ring.

"Good morning. I thought you might get tired and oversleep, so I'm giving you a special wake-up call from my beloved wife. Oh, you seem to be in a good mood, don't you?"

Mamiko, sensing Shohei's good health from his expression, also smiled brightly. "But when I woke up this morning, the pain in my hip joints and legs was gone like magic. It's not perfect, but I feel like I can ride. The start is in two hours, so I'm going to get ready now and then get on the bike to see how it feels." "Wow, that's good." "Don't be too excited. After all, it's my seat bone and pubic bone that are broken, so I can't start riding unless I can actually straddle

the saddle and move my legs around and still tolerate the pain. I won't know the effect of the bib shorts that Irie repaired and doubled the cushioning until I actually start riding." "Well, it's still a good sign. I'm looking forward to it. I don't want to disturb the morning of the race, so I'm going to hang up now, but don't push yourself too hard, but do your best so that you don't have any regrets." Both of them smiled and the video call faded away. At six in the morning, Shohei wondered why his legs were no longer hurting, and went down to the restaurant next to the lobby. There, more than twenty participants were enjoying breakfast alone or with a few friends in a bright hall facing south, thinking about the upcoming race. They were all white people with impressive physiques, and all looked fast.

On the other side of the terrace seats, a large number of cyclists were already gathering. The first 1,000 cyclists to start would gather by 6:30 in the morning and start at 7:00 sharp with a ceremony signal, but Shohei and the other 1,000 with bib numbers in the 10,000s were at the starting line by 7:30, but didn't actually start until 8:15. They were already 75 minutes behind the leaders. This was probably a necessary time difference to allow about 16,000 participants to start smoothly, but since the time limit at the checkpoints along the way was the same, it was a troublesome system that made it extremely difficult for elderly people, women, and participants in poor health who lined up later to finish the race, as they were all the same. If they had a flat tire, it would be extremely difficult to finish the race.

Although there was plenty of time before the meeting time, Shohei was worried that the pain would return and could not bring himself to enjoy breakfast.

Returning to his room, he dressed and filled his water bottle with water containing a lot of citric acid. Just to be on the safe side, he downed a packet of Shakuyaku-kanzo-to and took a tablet of Loxonin with a prayerful feeling.

He felt a sense of tension and anxiety like he had never experienced in any other competition. Without being able to fully regain his composure, he completed the final inspection, got into the narrow elevator with his road bike and went down to the lobby floor. Then, he slowly stepped out of the hotel on his injured foot.

On the bright streets of the south of France, thousands of participants in colorful jerseys were already waiting for their respective start times. The wind was in a good direction and calm, and it looked like the fine weather would continue for a while. The temperature would probably gradually rise from now on, but the dry air with a faint scent of the sea was pleasant on the skin.

Carefully pushing his road bike across a wide road, he arrived at the promenade that stretched between the road bike and the shining sea. Shohei took a deep, quiet breath. Fortunately, he hadn't felt any discomfort after walking this far.

"My fate will be decided in just a little while."

He turned west along the coastline toward Cannes and clicked the cleat on his right foot into the pedal. Taking another deep breath, he carefully placed his hips on the saddle for the first time in three weeks and started to ride slowly.

He cautiously placed his weight on the pedals, alternating between his right and left feet. He continued to carefully turn the crank, checking the feel with each step.

He still felt almost no pain in his sit bones on the saddle. Shohei himself was most surprised that he was able to ride naturally, perhaps because the special double padding had worked. Even though he had taken painkillers for the first time in ten days, he was surprised that he felt almost no pain. After running 500 meters with the utmost care, Shohei turned east at the Negresco Hotel and continued running, this time facing the bright morning sun. He tried to speed up a little, but the pain from the previous day seemed to be a lie.

He felt a trembling joy, and tears suddenly flowed from his eyes, and the surrounding scenery began to blur and shake. Shohei slowly stopped and took a deep breath of the smell of the sea into the depths of both lungs.

"I think I can start now."

The man who had believed in this moment and had endured until today shouted in his heart.

"I'll give my legs a little rest. I want to get at least half way, at least two mountain passes."

Shohei decided to line up at the starting line early and wait for the time to come, calming his mind. It would be his turn to start in less than an hour. He could only pray that the smooth run he had just had was not a dream.

The participants waiting in the section to the north started running one after another toward the finish line 135 kilometers away at their scheduled starting times. Bright smiles, serious expressions. Among the fast-looking participants, there were also some overweight participants who looked out of place. They were mostly cheerful middle-aged men. Young people and women under 25 years old were probably less than 10% of the total.

Suddenly, as if to break the tension, Shohei's phone, which he had hidden in his back pocket, started ringing. Seeing the name of the caller displayed on his smartphone screen, Shohei hurriedly answered the phone. It was from Y, a dialysis patient who sometimes gets sick.

"Hey, doctor. After today's dialysis, I got my regular prescription and got home, but it seems like the pink stomach medicine is missing. I called the clinic but no one answered, so I'm calling your emergency contact, but I don't know what to do."

Since the beginning of the clinic, Shohei had given all his patients a phone number that could be forwarded to his mobile phone. Y had not told the patient that Shohei was overseas, and of course Y had no way of knowing that the cycling event was about to start. Since she had lied and said he was on a business trip to a conference and asked a substitute doctor to see him, she must have thought he was somewhere in Japan and called casually. It was now around

4pm on a Saturday afternoon in Japan, so she was all the more worried about not having any medicine.

"That's a problem. I will immediately contact the staff and the pharmacy, and have the staff call you directly. But just to be sure, could you please check the contents of the medicine bag again?"

The music that was playing up the event may have made the person on the phone think he was playing around.

[I just received a message from Y, who is on dialysis, that the pink stomach medicine was not in the medicine bag she received today. Please consult with the pharmacy and call Y before delivering the medicine. I'm starting in 40 minutes.]

Shohei quickly sent an email to the head nurse. And he received a reply immediately.

[Okay. I'll call the pharmacy and Y-san first.]

After about 20 minutes, he received another email.

[It's been resolved. It seems that the stomach medicine was in Y-san's bag. I wish she had looked for it a bit more before calling. Good luck in the race and don't push yourself too hard.]

It was a disappointing reply, but the problem was resolved quickly and Shohei felt relieved. All thoughts of the pain had already vanished from his mind.

The thousand cyclists in the group in front of Shohei and his friends started off together amidst cheers. In fifteen minutes, Shohei's excitement would reach its climax. Looking at the faces of the participants around him, it was clear that the tension was rising considerably.

Amid the gradually filling noise, he heard a high-pitched electronic sound.

Shohei wondered if it was his smartphone, so he took it out of his back pocket, and it was a message from Uematsu Ayaka. It seemed that she had not forgotten her promise to Shohei.

[Allez! Allez!]

Perhaps she had done an internet search, but there was a cheer written in French.

[Thank you, I'll do my best. I've forgotten the pain. We'll start in ten minutes. Whether I finish or drop out, I'll let you know later. Please pray for me.]

After sending a short message back to Ayaka, Shohei looks back. Thousands of cyclists wearing helmets and sunglasses are looking towards him. Few are talking anymore, and he can sense that they are catching their breath.

As soon as we start, we will say goodbye to this beautiful sea. After five kilometers out of the city, a gentle uphill climb will begin, and it will gradually turn into a more difficult uphill climb. Facing such difficulties is the joy of cycling, but today it may turn into unbearable pain. He desperately shakes off that unnecessary imagination.

The group of a thousand people from Shohei's area began to be guided forward. As soon as they were stopped again at the real starting point, the final countdown began. Numbers,

photos, and letters were displayed in a flashy manner on the electronic scoreboard. Thirty seconds became ten before he knew it, and the chants of nine, eight, seven gradually grew louder. Shohei secured the right pedal firmly in place with the cleat on the sole of his shoe, locked the brake lever with his fingers, and waited with a clear mind for the starting signal.

Five, four, three, two, one... "Dang!" a loud starting gun rang out nearby.

Shohei reflexively released the brake lever, carefully leaned his weight on the saddle, and started riding cautiously at first to avoid contact with the surroundings. The group immediately woke up and tried to take their position, and they flew along the cobblestone road, passing the side of the old town at a speed completely different from the practice on the promenade. Immediately after the start, there were two sharp turns to the left and right, and in the crowded area, he turned his legs while looking back and forth and left and right. Shohei was so nervous that he had no time to worry about pain, and he ran through the narrow cobblestone streets of the old town of Nice, constantly adjusting his position in the large group. After about two kilometers, the road widened out of the city, and the group turned into a long and thin formation. The cruising speed gradually increased from 30 to 35 kilometers. The gray-white rocky mountain range that was typical of Provence in the distance gradually came closer, and they started to climb up the first pass, weaving through hidden valleys. Shohei passed more people than he was passed, and he continued to move forward with a look of possessiveness on his face. I still barely feel any pain. It's strange that I felt that pain yesterday.

The first rest area was in the village of Moulinet on the way to Col de Turini at an altitude of 1,607 meters. It was at an altitude of 773 meters, and Shohei had safely crossed Col de Braus at an altitude of 1,002 meters, which was his first goal, and had already climbed 400 meters of the second mountain section. The place was a square about the size of three tennis courts, surrounded by several buildings and a curving road, and looked like a small park next to a church where the villagers usually enjoy playing pétanque. When the top professional athletes pass through this village during the Tour de France in two weeks, they will surely go uphill at incredible speeds like the wind without taking a break.

He had been able to cross the first beautiful pass surprisingly smoothly, but he still had to climb 834 meters to the second pass, so it would be important for him to refuel here.

There were about 200 participants and about 30 volunteers in matching yellow T-shirts in the square. The village elders and children were also cheering on the already exhausted amateur athletes by shouting, honking trumpets and ringing bells. Several tents were overflowing with people, trying to avoid the strong sunlight as much as possible.

Shohei parked his road bike on the side of the road nearby, and with his nearly empty water bottle in hand, he hurried to the center of the square in search of water and food. He was so

excited by the first long descent of 630 meters in altitude and the long climb that immediately followed, that he didn't even seem to notice the pain in his legs and buttocks.

He drank the water given to him by the volunteer without any hesitation. Then, in a hurry, he quickly put the pound cake and thin, dry flatbread he had picked up in his mouth. However, as a Japanese person, they were not tasty at all. The donut-shaped fruit was probably a peach, but it was completely different from the fresh Japanese peaches. Shohei had prepared minimal food such as jelly and yokan, but he felt a little uneasy about not being able to eat enough at the first rest area.

Shohei filled up two water bottles with water and headed to the open-air toilet, which had no walls to block the passage, because the time limit was to be measured after the descent from the second mountain pass. He pulled out his penis, which had shrunk to an embarrassing degree and was hidden, with his gloved fingerless hands, and released everything with a sigh of satisfaction.

The next rest area was 28 kilometers away. I hope my body would hold out, but I had no choice but to refocus my energy and move forward. At the current pace, it looked like I could make the time limit.

Sent off by the energetic cheers of the children who shouted "Alley!", Shohei started running again.

As soon as he left the small village, a straight and endless uphill road appeared before him. Long, straight slopes like this are the worst thing for cyclists, but it was even worse for him because of his injury. According to the information he had received beforehand, there was a 11-kilometer slope with an average of over 7% ahead.

Shohei's strange behavior, which was somewhat expected, began shortly thereafter.

It was as if he had suddenly woken up from a pleasant dream, and his physical condition had clearly changed since the break. The relaxation at the rest area had probably caused his pain threshold, which he had luckily forgotten, to suddenly drop. There were some early signs of this at the first pass, but perhaps he had simply been looking away.

In an attempt to circumvent the strain on his sit bones and pubic bone, Shohei lifted his hips off the saddle and tried to pedal standing up in a position as if he was leaning forward up the stairs, but at that moment he realized that the chain was about to come off. It seems that this phenomenon occurs when his feet rotate even slightly in the opposite direction. He was so afraid of falling that he had given up on standing up.

Just before leaving Japan, I had gone to a sports bike shop for repairs and adjustments. I remembered that the mechanic, Mr. Koide, had said something like, "When you rotate backwards when the lightest gear is set...". "Please check it out. It's possible..." The words "Please check it out. It's possible..." didn't interest Shohei at the time. At that time, all he

wanted was to be free from the pain of his fracture, so he may not have had the time to worry about the condition of his road bike. Mr. Koide, known as the God Hand, must have worked hard to get his bike ready in time for Shohei's departure, but it appeared before him at the worst possible time and as a clear problem. He began to feel a little impatient, thinking that the malfunction of his equipment at a critical moment might also be the curse of the missing raccoon dog.

## Chapter 12      Her Choice

By the time they reached the beautiful, winding slope halfway up the first Braus Pass, the number of cyclists who had started at the same time as Christine had already decreased significantly.

"I'm not in good enough shape, so I want everyone to just aim to finish the race and go ahead. I won't be upset if I leave you behind."

As Christine said with a laugh at the starting point, Caroline and other RCC London friends who were participating with her also moved ahead one by one, leaving Christine behind at their own pace. It seemed unlikely that she would be able to see her friends again.

"It's a beautiful hill. I'd like to take a picture of it."

While muttering to herself, she continued to climb the hill, trying not to lose her steady pedaling pace. The white cycling wear was the same as she wore for her second *étape*.

In the four previous *étapes* she had participated in, she had been running in a hurry to get ahead of the crowded group, where our shoulders were touching, but this time her top priority was to aim to finish the race while avoiding as much damage as possible to her lungs, which had been treated about a month ago.

She was also starting very late, and she began to worry whether she would be able to clear the time limit and reach the finish line. In the time allocation simulation, which was based on the condition of running at a constant pace, if she could keep her rest time as short as possible and muster her courage to smoothly descend the long descent, she would be able to clear the checkpoints and make it in time for the finish line. It was absolutely necessary to avoid a flat tire and to endure the heat of southern France, but she had a vague confidence that the goddess would not abandon her as she had done in the past.

She didn't like being overtaken one after another by runners whose bib numbers showed that they had started fifteen or thirty minutes later, but she had made up her mind before the start to calmly overcome each mountain pass at her own pace.



The undulating mountain massif was a beautiful and impressive sight, with huge white rocks peeking out from between the green trees. However, she didn't have the mental capacity to enjoy the scenery of Provence at the moment.

Before she knew it, she had climbed to an altitude of 940 meters. The blue sky suddenly spread out and it became bright. We only had to climb another 60 meters to reach the first Col de Brause.

As we approached the top of the pass, the scenery opened up a little, but it was completely different from the majestic rocky mountains of Savoie, where Col de d'Iseran and Col de la Galibier are located, which cyclists from all over the world admire. It was the delicate and dazzling mountain scenery unique to southern France, and she felt that she had returned to southern France for it after seven years.

Since she was not pushing herself too hard without worrying about the delay, her legs did not seem to be a problem. Perhaps because her doctor Catherine had encouraged her with advice, she was not feeling any difficulty breathing at the moment. She was controlling her pace while keeping it under control, but what she was worried about were the time limits set at several places along the way.

There was still more than 100 kilometers to the goal, and three first-class passes to go. If she continued at this slow speed, would she be able to make it in time for the final time limit, which was set at 7:45 p.m.? In fact, even the first checkpoint, after crossing the second Col de Turini, was not to be underestimated.

When she reached Col de Brause, it was surrounded by scrub forest on all sides, which was a bit of a disappointment. There was no fresh breeze and black clouds had suddenly gathered, so she didn't feel like stopping to take a break. Instead, she wanted to hurry on.

A light rain had started to fall for a while, and parts of the road were wet and slippery. There was no sign of rain before the start, and she didn't want it to rain any more. Although there were only a few cyclists around her, she had to be careful on the long downhill stretch.

Christine relaxed her fingers on the brake levers and let herself go as she descended the slope that led to a deep, green valley.

As we passed the first supply station for the second Col de Turini, the number of participants taking a rest in the shade of the trees suddenly increased. There was barely any wind, and the southern French sun must have been quite tough on the participants from the UK and Germany. She climbed up beside them with an apologetic look on her face.

As we approached the top of the pass, we saw many participants trying to push their road bikes forward, their bodies at their limit.

If they were to be overtaken by Christine, who was about to make the time limit, they would

have almost no chance of finishing the race. They must have sat listlessly on the side of the road, frustrated and thinking back on the days of training they had put in up until yesterday. Or perhaps some participants were suffering from heatstroke, their thinking ability beginning to fade.

Just as I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the endless uphill climb, a woman on a motorbike from the event passed by, loudly encouraging me. "It's only one kilometer to the pass... Just one kilometer. Do your best..."

Most of the participants had already gone over the pass, but Christine was still sweating and struggling just before the 1,607m pass.

She could somehow endure the heat and her legs were still moving, but her pace just wouldn't pick up. As she had decided at the beginning, she was climbing at a constant pace, thinking about her lungs, but she must have miscalculated a little. It seemed like she wouldn't make the time limit set on the other side of the pass.

Motorbikes of the event officials, with medical staff in the back seat, rushed to the participants who had collapsed one after another. The participants who were climbing at a speed that seemed to stop them from stopping, watching the participants who looked painfully waiting for first aid, must be scared as if it were their own problem.

With these thoughts in her mind, Christine finally reached the top of Col de Turini, lightly braked, and carefully put her feet down. Wiping the sweat that was pouring out of her forehead with the back of her gloved hand, she took several deep breaths, as if to test the remaining strength of her lungs.

There were only about ten minutes left until the time limit for the checkpoint, which was set at the end of the 1,000-meter descent from this second pass. A steep 6.6% average slope of 1,000 meters down in 15 kilometers, a dangerous descent that could lead to death if she was not very careful, was waiting for her. No matter how she thought and recalculated, she would not be able to make it in time.

Prepared to give up midway, she carefully began to descend toward the north side of the pass. The steeper descent continued endlessly than she had expected. Unlike the southern climbing section that went through forests and woods, the view was wonderful with no obstructions to the view from the trees. On the right was a rough cliff, and on the left was a deep valley with no bottom visible. There was only a low stone wall about 50 cm high at the boundary between the road and the valley, and if she couldn't make the curve and crashed into it, her body would fly through the air and fall to the bottom of the valley.

Everywhere, the high-pitched sounds of disc brakes squeaked loudly. After rounding a curve or going through a dark tunnel, she often saw participants who had crashed into cliffs and collapsed, and people from the event providing aid. At this time of day, there seemed to be a

considerable number of injuries in this area alone. Perhaps they had rushed too much because they were worried about the time limit, or perhaps they had become slack because of fatigue or the heat. She once again steeled herself.

With such scenes of devastation on her side, Christine carefully descended the long, steep slope and turned right around the last sharp curve, when she saw more than 200 cyclists in a small village at the bottom of the valley, in a riverside square. That place was the first hurdle before the time limit.

She stopped a little before the group and looked at her sweaty watch. It was already about 15 minutes past the time limit. She sighed deeply, took off her sunglasses, and looked up at the sky. Soft-looking white clouds were slowly flowing in the bright light blue sky.

The course is closed off to the community roads, and is reserved for the event only, so the roads are opened as the last participant passes by. According to the rules of the event, all participants who pass the time limit are put on a waiting bus, and their road bikes are loaded onto a large truck that follows and transported to the final goal. If they wished, they could return to Nice by themselves, but most of the delayed participants were exhausted and would no doubt choose the bus. Many participants left their clothes and other belongings at the goal. After being transported by bus from the retirement point to the goal, they were transported again by another bus to the starting point in Nice with over 10,000 other finishers. It was a very ambitious transportation operation, but due to the convenience of the organizers, there was no option to return directly from the retirement point to the starting point.

In the square, the loading of road bikes onto the truck had already begun. The retired participants who were gathering at the truck in a hurry must have wanted to get as light as possible and sit on the bus that would take them to the goal. They were participants who had exceeded their limits and were exhausted. Fewer than 10% of the participants were women, but about 30% of those who dropped out were women.

The late participants must have practiced hard in their spare time at work, gathered here from all over the world with the dream of completing the race, and stood at the starting line this morning with joy. Christine, who had been unlucky enough to drop out midway through her fifth Étape, realized for the first time how trivial this was.

Among them, Christine's eyes caught a small man wearing unusual cycling clothing that looked familiar. She was a little far away and couldn't see his face, as his back was turned, but she still treasured the same bright blue clothing with a white horizontal line on the chest at home. It was a special clothing that was distributed only to participants at the RCC summit held in the south of France seven years ago.

"He was a doctor who had come alone from Japan, and I think his name is..."

She couldn't get close to him because of the crowds, but she remembered that he had posted

a photo on Instagram the year after the summit, looking happy after completing the Étape. Just ahead of her, standing dumbfounded at the police line blocking her path, were several men and women negotiating in German-accented English with tournament officials.

"Do we really have to get on the recovery bus? It's still early afternoon. Can't we just keep going? Is that okay? We came all the way from Germany..."

The young attendant, speaking English with a French accent, greeted the sturdy-looking German girl with a smile.

"You can go, but the road closures will be lifted soon, so please be careful of cars. There will no longer be any patrols of the course by staff or support from medical teams in the event of an accident."

"If it's at your own risk, that means you can go ahead, right?"

"The food and water service at the rest stations may have ended. Do you have enough food?"

"No problem. If we don't have enough, we can share it."

"There are two more first-class mountain passes. We still have to climb more than 2,000 meters. Are you physically strong enough?"

The staff would be worried if they got exhausted and couldn't move again on the way.

"I think you can make it to the end. Right, everyone else is going, right?"

"We're retiring here."

The two men and women who looked the most tired out of the five said this, but the two women and one man said they would continue on without support.

"The recovery bus will arrive before us, so wait for us at the finish line."

With the most energetic woman at the front, the three of them pass under the police tape and head towards the lush green mountains they can see to the north. Twenty kilometers away lies the third pass, the Col de Colmiane, at an altitude of 1,500 meters.

There's probably still some food left at the rest station set up two kilometers from here, but the next rest station is at the top of the pass. Everyone around them wondered if they would have the stamina to make it that far, but Christine, who was listening to the conversation from the back of the crowd, thought differently. She also really wanted to keep going.

"It's just before three in the afternoon. If we run for five hours, we'll make it to the finish line, 60 kilometers away. "Twenty kilometers of that distance is downhill, so if I average 12 kilometers per hour, I should be able to make it."

That was her calculation, having completed the past four Étapes, but perhaps because of the fatigue of having already completed 80 kilometers, she forgot that there were still 40 kilometers of steep, 2,000-meter uphill climbs to go.

"I'll never be able to run such a course in such beautiful weather again, and yet I'm sitting silently in the recovery bus to be taken to the finish line..."

Such words kept coming into her head. For her, who had been battling lung metastasis of breast cancer until a month ago, today, not the next time or next year, had a heavy meaning.

"Let's go..."

With nothing to hinder her resolve anymore, she started running alone towards the mountain. When she turned toward the recovery bus parked on the side of the road, the man in the blue uniform was looking at her with a surprised look in his eye as he ran beyond the police line from the other side of the window. As he watched her running alone, he regained his smile and lightly waved his hand.

Christine passed the second checkpoint at the 100km mark just in time for the 4:30pm cut-off, and was still running silently even at nearly 8pm. The expected arrival time for the final runner at the finish line was 7:45pm, but even if they were a little late, they would be considered a finisher if they could climb the pass on their own and cross the finish line.

After a light rain shower on the descent from the first pass, the weather remained clear, but when they had climbed about 80% of the way to the last pass, light rain began to fall from gray clouds again. The Col de Couillon, which was the finish line, is 1,678m above sea level. The rain clouds were blown away by the wind in about 15 minutes and disappeared, and the Provencal summer sun reappeared, quietly hiding behind the edge of the northwest mountain. A red sign indicating that she was one kilometer from the finish line suddenly appeared in front of her, but she didn't notice it until the last moment, as she was silently climbing the hill, looking down and catching her breath. Previous Etape races had been marked by the presence and cheers of many spectators and people involved in the race a few kilometers before the finish line, but this time the finish line was at a remote mountain pass, and it was quiet with almost no one there other than those involved in the race.

There was almost no one in front of or behind her, and she had been traveling alone for the past few kilometers. She was clearly falling behind, but if she could run just another 500 meters the finish line, Col de Couillon, would be waiting for her.

After passing the first checkpoint late, the 60km journey was painful and lonely. It was tougher than any of the Etape courses she had participated in in the past, but the beautiful nature and wonderful roads, different from the striking mountain passes of the French Alps, pulled her forward and upwards, having just healed the wounds in her lungs.

Perhaps the finish line was approaching, as lively music began to be heard. This was the signal that light rain began to fall again. The weather today was very unpredictable all day, with sunny and rainy days.

When the slope became a little gentler, she glanced back. About 40 meters behind, several men and women were climbing up with painfully distorted faces. There were no more people

to be seen beyond them. They would be the last people to finish the race.

"I must have the same expression on my face. And when I cross the finish line, tears will overflow before I smile."

Her heart began to fill with a joy many times greater than the joy she had felt when she had finished the race in the past. About 70 meters ahead of her, there was a man, and a little further ahead, what seemed to be a woman, running towards the finish line, swaying from side to side. Soon they would have a moment of rest and receive their heavy finisher's medals.

The man in front of her raised his right hand high, and the sound of cheers from the microphone praising the finisher grew louder. The next finisher seemed to have a sigh of relief, planted his feet on the ground, hunched his back, and leaned deeply into the handlebars. Christine gradually approached him, who was still motionless.

The strain on her legs disappeared all at once, and she moved smoothly without having to pedal. At last she had reached the top of the mountain. A number of people involved in the event sent her loud cheers and applause. She planted both feet, straightened her back, and looked up to the sky. Someone's hand touched her head, and she felt a weight on her neck, and she realized it was a finisher's medal. It felt like the heaviest and most satisfying finisher's medal she had ever received.

Less than a minute after her beautiful finish, the final finisher slowly crossed the finish line. He was a small man of about 65 years old with a big smile and some gray hair. His right knee and right elbow were bleeding, his blue clothing was stained with dirt and sand, and his helmet had a fresh wound. He must have had a spectacular fall somewhere, but he never gave up and kept climbing the long slope.

Behind his glasses, drops of water that were not sure if they were rain, sweat, or tears were running down his cheeks. The gold finisher's medal that he proudly wore around his neck was shining beautifully in the intense light that illuminated the finish line.

When she looked at the clock, it was already a little past eight o'clock in the evening. It had been a long and painful solo journey of more than twelve hours. She looked for him again to congratulate the last finisher on their good fight, but she never saw him again.

## Chapter 13      A Summer Night's Dream

For Shohei, flying to the south of France without getting in the saddle once in the three weeks since that day was a reckless adventure. However, if he had given up on participating and stayed in Japan until today, he would have been haunted by great regret for a long time to

come.

The pain he experienced before crossing the second big pass was a first for him. There was no doubt that the pain of the fracture, and of course the lack of training just before the race, had played a part.

The constant cramps in his right calf as he climbed the hills, fearing them, ended up costing him a lot of extra time. He was so focused on whether he could ride that he neglected to study his nutrition and the course.

He had overcome the first pass, feeling amazed at the joy of being able to run, in a daze, but as he was overtaken one after another on his way up the long and tough second pass, various unnecessary thoughts came to his mind and wouldn't go away. With two kilometers to go until the pass, he was finally forced to admit that it would be difficult to continue to the end.

He got off his road bike at the top of the pass and took a long rest in the shade of a tree to rest his trembling leg muscles, and decided to retire halfway. He could no longer find any possibility of clearing the time limit.

The painful symptoms, similar to heat stroke, which he had never experienced before, were relieved the moment he accepted that he had retired, and he felt relieved. He almost forgot about the pain and the finisher's medal. All that remained was to descend the long and beautiful downhill slope, boldly and carefully, to the checkpoint waiting 1,000 meters below. He ran, imprinting the hidden scenery deep in the mountains of Provence, which he would never see again, into his eyes, brain and heart.

He arrived at the first time checkpoint about 15 minutes late... His sense of freedom was as if he had grown small wings.

The recovery bus with Shohei on it was heading for the finish line on a narrow mountain road, with no idea when he would arrive due to the massive traffic jam that was far beyond his imagination.

Even though he had given up on the race at 2:30pm and was relieved to have his tired body resting on the bus seat at 3pm, Shohei was still sitting in the packed bus even at nearly 8pm. The French driver, who didn't speak English, was getting annoyed without explaining the situation or prospects to the passengers. None of the dropouts who had been in the bus with him would have thought that they would continue to entrust themselves to rough driving without question for such a long time without knowing when they would arrive.

[I tried my best, but it was impossible. I was forced to retire at the halfway point because I didn't make it in time, and was picked up by the bus and headed for the finish line. From there, I plan to take the bus back to Nice. However, there is a huge traffic jam and I don't know when

I will be able to return to the hotel. The pain in my legs and back has not worsened for now. Well, that's how it feels, unfortunately. I'll buy some souvenirs and go back.] Shohei emailed his wife Mamiko to report the results. It would be around four in the morning in Japan. I don't think she will be awake, but I can't delay the results report too much. [Thank you for your hard work. You've done well. I'm sorry. Whatever the result, the best souvenir is that you return home safely. Please rest up and heal your fracture properly. For the sake of your daughters and your patients, please make safety your number one priority from now on.] Contrary to his expectations, Mamiko replied right away. It seems that she was worried about the results and had been unable to sleep while waiting for the message. The family's true feelings are probably that she wants him to refrain from dangerous sports where there is a possibility of a serious fall. The plea embedded in her words of appreciation resonated in Shohei's heart. Before long, a light rain began to fall, and the temperature began to drop rapidly near the high-altitude finish line. The participants had been patiently holding in their urge to urinate after being stuck in a jammed bus for over five hours without food or drink, but the urge to urinate was something they could no longer hold in. Several participants used gestures in English to communicate with the driver, and lined up next to the bus, which was temporarily stopped, to relieve themselves. The female participants were especially unfortunate. Shohei, who was slightly dehydrated, was fortunate enough not to feel the urge to urinate, and instead gazed out the window at the happy faces of the finishers near the finish line in the distance.

The finish time limit had already passed a little, but when he retired, he had never imagined that the arrival of the collection bus and the arrival of the last finisher would coincide at dusk. If that was how it was, it would have been much better to have continued running past the checkpoint where the time limit was exceeded, but the screams in his pelvis would have prevented him from completing the race. Thinking about it calmly, he felt that it was almost a miracle that he had completed half the race, as he got off the bus at the finish line.

The sun had set and it was completely dark in the square near the finish line, where many of the finishers were having fun. Some of them looked drenched in the rain and freezing cold, but the shine of the finisher medals around their necks brightened up the surroundings.

"I wanted to spend this time here, holding my medal."

It must have been obvious from the start that it would be difficult to make his wish come true, but he had been preparing carefully for more than six months and getting in shape, so his regret was still greater.


At the finish line, it was completely dark, and another two hours had passed meaninglessly. About seven hours after his forced retirement, Shohei finally boarded the bus home, but for some reason there was no sign of him moving. He fiddled with his smartphone, but since he



was in the middle of a remote mountain, the signal was poor.

After his wife and the clinic staff, the first thing that came to Shohei's mind was Ayaka. Fighting sleepiness, he sent her an email from the bus, which showed no signs of movement. [Sorry for this so early in the morning. Despite your encouragement, I was forced to retire about halfway because I didn't make the time limit. Until that accident, I was in perfect health and confident that I could finish the race, but with the pain from my pelvic fracture and insufficient training before the race, there was no way I could finish the race. But now, for some reason, I feel satisfied and calm. I'm going back to Nice by bus, but it seems we'll arrive after midnight. I'm actually exhausted because I spent more time on the bus. It was an incredibly long day. I'll continue the story when we meet again.]

It was around six o'clock on a Sunday morning in Japan. Ayaka's reply reached Shohei, who was dozing off in his seat on the bus about 30 minutes later.

[Thank you for your hard work, doctor. After that accident, I think it's amazing that you were able to get over one obstacle. If you push yourself too hard and your injury gets worse, it will be a problem for the patient. I sent you a supportive email just before the start, but I continued to cheer you on in my heart after that. When you return to Japan, please share your photos and fun stories with me. I'll be waiting ]

Shohei's heart pounded despite his age when he saw the last heart emoji.

Your cheers reached my heart all the way through the second tough pass. But this time, I really felt my age. I'm a complete old doctor now lol]

After the light rain stopped, the bus carrying Shohei finally started moving towards the starting point after 10:30 at night. Forty minutes had already passed since they got on, but it seemed that they were waiting for the other two buses to fill up. At the same time, a truck bigger than the bus started running in the darkness, but it was said that it was loaded with the road bikes of the many participants who had boarded the three buses. There were still several other buses waiting, but the next bus scheduled to depart at 11 o'clock was the last shuttle to Nice. From here to Nice, it's more than 100 kilometers, including several dozen kilometers of narrow mountain roads.

The participants, whose seats are about 80% full, are all exhausted, and few are still talking to the people next to them. Around half of the participants, finisher medals are proudly shining around their necks. Some of them probably keep them in their pockets. I wonder how many of the passengers are looking at their medals with envy like Shohei.

Shohei, who is sitting on the aisle seat, exchanges a few greetings with the young British man sitting next to him and comforts each other, but after a long, hard day, his body and his mouth feel very heavy. He surrenders his body to the rocking bus, feeling almost exhausted, and finds himself falling asleep without even knowing the expected time of arrival in Nice.

A high-pitched electronic sound rings, pulling him back from his slumber. A message has arrived on the smartphone Shohei is holding in his hand. He had already sent messages to Mamiko, Ayaka, and the clinic staff informing them of his retirement and thanking them for their support from Japan, so he opened the screen of his smartphone, expecting it to be from his mother or daughters.

[Good morning, Murata-kun. I wonder if I woke you up on this lovely Sunday morning. It's already past eight o'clock, so it doesn't matter. After what happened with my mother, I didn't have the energy to do anything for a while, and it was hard to look at my friends' fun Instagrams... So, yesterday I finally read Murata-kun's new novel that he sent me a while ago. It was pretty interesting and I finished it in one day. I wonder if I was that good at writing essays when I was in elementary school. But I'm not just saying this to flatter you, I'm getting better with each work. Could it be that I was the model for Keiko, who remained single until the end? As you probably know, I married a man from a major trading company. But I got divorced in my later years because of his affair lol]

It was a message from Kawazoe Rina, Shohei's elementary school classmate.

He was surprised to receive an unexpected message at such a time, but now that he is well past his 60th birthday, his old friend feels more important than ever.

They had drifted apart since they went to different junior high schools, but she was far better at both studies and sports than Shohei. He met her again when he was 30 years old and went to Tokyo for a conference, where she had become a doctor first. At the time, they were still single, and exchanged home phone numbers and would talk from time to time, but that conversation stopped within a few years. This was a time before smartphones and mobile phones.

Five years ago, at the first reunion to commemorate their 60th birthdays after graduating, they met again in their hometown of Fukuoka for the first time in 30 years. They exchanged contact information such as email addresses and phone numbers, and began to talk on social media. She was single and had moved to a part-time position at a hospital in Toranomon, Tokyo, but until then she had been working as a full-time internal medicine specialist while raising two children.

"From now on, I'll be free to enjoy life in the city," she said.

Shohei remembers her smiling face as she said this. Since losing her mother in early spring, her SNS updates had been stagnant for a while.

[I'm sorry about your mother. I remember when you lost your father to COVID-19, and I know how painful it must have been for you, but I couldn't find anything to say to you.]

[That's okay, thank you. I've calmed down now that the 49th day has passed. By the way, Murata-kun's father died just before the vaccine was developed, and I think it must have been

unimaginably painful. Murata-kun was also in a pinch. Are you feeling better now? Are you enjoying life to the fullest?]

Before Shohei could reply, Rina sent another email.

[You've received your nursing care insurance card, and you're of the generation that can receive a pension. If you work like Murata-kun, you won't receive a pension until you die. How much more do you intend to keep paying taxes? It's exactly what the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare and the Ministry of Finance want you to do.]

She had regained her cheerfulness and thought she was spending Sunday mornings chatting with her childhood friend.

[Actually, I'm in the south of France. It's past midnight. I've been participating in a cycling event since 7am. I'm on a bus back to a hotel in Nice, far from the finish line. I'm actually sleepy from jet lag and fatigue, and my smartphone battery is about to die out, but I'm very happy to receive a message from Rina-chan.]

[Wow, so you decided to take a break. I'm jealous of the south of France. It must be beautiful. Is your wife with you? Or maybe a young girlfriend?]

[I don't have a girlfriend. My wife couldn't bring her over because she has to take care of her father.]

[Oh really? My ex-husband used to come home late at night or stay out the night, saying he was busy with work. I think they all cheated. Aren't all men like that?]

[Not me. I live with him in the countryside and take care of his mother. Even when I talk to young women, we don't have anything to talk about. I'm old now, so that's not going to help me.]

[That must be a lie. Looking at your life on Instagram, you still look young and you haven't lost your masculine charm. You probably have money, so aren't you actually popular?]

[Thanks. I'm happy even if it's just flattery. But now I have too many hobbies like cycling, writing novels, music, movies, and I don't have enough time. In the first place, I don't have much free time because I work too much.]

Shohei changed the topic, thinking that if he talked about cheating any more, he would be exposed.

[Practicing doctors like Murata-kun are exploited by the government to take responsibility 24 hours a day, separated from the labor management of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and unreasonably forced by the Ministry of Finance to take wage cuts that go against the times. And even if you pay a lot of taxes, you can't get a pension until you die unless you stop practicing, right? There's no retirement age in the first place. If you don't go on a trip to France with a young girlfriend and go cycling once in a while, it's stupid and you can't do it.] Rina's words were not very gentle, but Shohei, who runs a clinic, may have felt the same way.

[It's a misunderstanding. You really came here alone. There's no girlfriend or mistress or anyone like that anywhere. Also, it's been five years since you last went abroad. In that time, you've only traveled domestically once. You even attended conferences online.] [That's sad. Even though you're over 60, you probably have money and energy, and if you had the time, now would be the best time for a man to be in his prime, right? Women inevitably change after menopause.]

She must also be regretting the four years she lost to COVID. Not only because she lost her beloved mother, but also because she finished raising her children and is living alone in the city, her mind and body must have undergone great changes in the past four years.

Before COVID, I participated in cycling competitions in France for three consecutive years, but since then, competitions have been canceled and I've been busy dealing with the epidemic in Japan, so I haven't been able to participate much. This time, when I turn 65, I was supposed to enjoy a competition in France for the first time in five years. You never know what's going to happen in life, so from now on, I'm going to live my life to the fullest.

Shohei was sending Kawazoe an email, remembering the various things that happened during the four years of COVID and the events of the day. As he was writing this, he completely forgot about the pain in his legs and sciatica.

The bus hadn't even gone halfway to Nice yet. Shohei was saved by chatting with Rina in the boring car, but his smartphone battery was already at 10%.

Is that what you were supposed to do? Didn't you participate in the tournament? Didn't you have fun? 】

Soon, your battery will be completely depleted and you won't be able to chat.

Actually, three weeks ago, I was involved in a collision with a raccoon that suddenly jumped out, and five fractures (including cracks) were found in my pubic and ischium bones. I could barely walk for a few days, and couldn't get by without a cane for two weeks.

You made it to France!

Shohei remembered Rina's surprised face.

Fortunately, there was no displacement in the fracture. I tried every conservative treatment, and miraculously, I was able to walk without a cane while taking painkillers.

I've heard that pubic and ischium fractures heal slowly and the pain tends to last a long time. That seems to be true. It was three weeks before the tournament, so I gave up on participating at first, but some friends encouraged me. I stopped training completely and tried to rest my body.

I was determined to go to France at least. That's typical of Murata. The friend who encouraged me was probably a woman.]

All of her guesses were correct, but he didn't answer them.

[On the day of the race, that is, this morning, I rode my bike for the first time and didn't feel any pain, so I took a gamble and started. I was so happy that I almost cried while I was riding. I was probably high from excitement, and it was probably because of the painkillers. It also helped that the staff had made special cushioning pads for my buttocks to make it less painful.]  
[Wow, that's good.]

[But I couldn't do anything about the fact that I had a complete break of three weeks and a broken leg, and although it was actually a very tough race that involved running 135 km and climbing 4,600 meters, I just missed the time limit at the checkpoint where I had run 80 km and climbed 2,300 meters, so I was disqualified halfway through. Not only was I in pain, but the heat and lack of training caused even the muscles in my lower legs to cramp.]

[That's amazing. But I think it was good that I retired halfway before it got serious. I guess I've got some material for another novel.]

That was right. Not only Kawazoe, but also his wife Mamiko, who had sent an email earlier to inform him of his withdrawal, Ayaka Uematsu, who continued to encourage him, the staff waiting for him at the clinic, and his doctor Hoshino must be thinking the same thing.

[I thought about many things while running, and many people. If my pelvic fracture had been a little more severe and had shifted more unstable, I might not have been able to return to work. My helmet protected my head from hitting the ground when I fell.]

[I'm impressed that he has overcome so many challenges, including being hospitalized for COVID.]

[I feel that God prevented the disqualification from happening, and that the fracture would not have shifted if he had continued to run too hard after that.]

It was almost two in the morning, and the bus was finally about to enter the city of Nice. Looking back on the incredibly long day, it was a race filled with events that I could never have imagined at the start. After the passengers on Shohei's three buses, the participants on a few more buses would return to the city of Nice in the middle of the night.

Now that I think about it, Shohei hadn't had a proper lunch or dinner. He didn't drink much water, and he didn't even need to go to the bathroom. He was hungry and thirsty, but strangely enough, he didn't feel very tired, though he had forgotten about it in the midst of all the tension and excitement. However, once he got to the hotel, Shohei would sleep like a log. His smartphone battery was about to run out

[My smartphone battery is about to run out. Thank you for chatting with me. I'd like to see you again when I get back to Japan.]

[Yeah, I guess so. If you don't mind being an old lady, I'll go on a date with you anytime.]

It was a little after 2am when Shohei arrived in Nice.

The participants who got off the three buses were three and a half hours more tired than they had been since the finish line, but they looked more pleased that they could finally sleep in a hotel bed. At the start of the race, no one would have imagined that they would climb back on their road bikes unloaded from the trucks running alongside them and ride home with the other participants along the wide coastal roads, still filled with cars and people. Fortunately, Shohei's legs and hips were not so sore that he was worried about them, and he would be able to walk safely back to Japan tomorrow.

As soon as the front door of the dimly lit hotel was opened to him and he entered the lobby, Shohei began thinking about next year's race. Would he participate in the Étape again, or would he finally take part in the race in the Italian Dolomites that he had dreamed of every year? Shohei would be turning 65 in about a week, and he didn't have much time left.

On a sofa in the lobby overlooking the seaside promenade, a group of young British-looking men and women wearing finisher medals were relaxing and chatting cheerfully.

One of the women who saw Shohei winked and waved lightly. It seemed to Shohei like a midsummer night's dream or an illusion, as his "British comrade" smiled and praised the elderly cyclist's efforts after a long day in the saddle.

## Chapter 14      Finisher's Medal

Two weeks have passed since the Etape race held in Nice in the south of France, and five weeks have passed since the accident in which he broke his pelvis. Although he still has a dull pain, others no longer think that Shohei's footwork is strange.

"I thought you would participate, but you've recovered incredibly quickly. Normally, the doctor would stop you from even walking without a cane for the first month."

When Shohei called Hoshino, the orthopedic surgeon he had relied on before the race, to report the results, he was surprised and laughed at. Shohei expressed his gratitude to the younger man in a few words and clasped his hands together in his heart.

Last week, at a familiar yakiniku restaurant, Shohei's wife and daughters celebrated his safe return and his 65th birthday. He accepted the small cheers and great concern for his father's reckless challenge, who had joined the ranks of the elderly and obtained a nursing care insurance card and the right to receive a pension, with an honest heart, even as he still felt the pain in his legs and hips.

Apart from refraining from outdoor activities due to the unusual heat, he has returned to his normal life, mainly focusing on medical treatment. Many patients come to the hospital with

heatstroke, and he tells himself that he is happy to be able to work busy in an air-conditioned hospital.

The Tour de France, which started in Florence, reached its final day in Nice on July 21st, with the favorite Pogacar beating out Vingegaard, who had won twice in a row until the previous year, to take his third overall victory by an overwhelming margin. This victory, which also included the Giro d'Italia held in May, was a comfortable one that suggests he will continue to break the records of past champions one after another.

Cavendish, who will retire after the tournament, also won a Tour stage, surpassing the legendary Merckx, showing road racing fans around the world that there is no wall that cannot be overcome.

After the 21 stages, the overall winner was Pogačar from Slovenia, second place was Vingegaard from Denmark, and third place was Evenepoel from Belgium. What surprised Shohei was the way they recovered from serious injuries.

On the Tuesday night two days after the Tour de France, Nakae Yukio, an associate professor of cardiology at Chikushi University, was invited to give a lecture for private practice doctors at the Medical Association Hall.

Shohei, who was waiting for Nakae's arrival in the waiting room, handed him a pink T-shirt he had bought at the Etape venue as a souvenir when Nakae arrived with large beads of sweat on his forehead.

"It's a medium size, so it might be a little small for you, but please take it if you like."

"Thank you. I'll try my best to lose weight so I can wear this. How was this Etape? Was it easier than the Marmot at the Col du Galibier that we went to together?"

Shohei had told Nakae that he was going to try the Etape when his training was going well before his fracture. Judging from his toned body and facial expression at that time, he seemed to think that Shohei had completed the race and brought home a medal.

"He retired midway."

"What? Isn't this the first time you've retired from a competition?"

After breaking his pelvis, Shohei had given up on going to France, let alone completing the race, so he hid not only his retirement midway through the Étape, but even the fact that he had broken his bone from people he didn't meet in person. He was more afraid than anything of telling them the truth and being told out of common sense not to participate.

"I didn't tell you because I thought you'd worry, but shortly after we met at the alumni reunion last month, I fell off my bike while training in the mountains and broke my pelvis in about five places. It was three weeks before the competition."

"A pelvic fracture, seriously? Can you really ride in three weeks? If it's a pelvic fracture, it's painful and you won't be able to ride a bike for about two months."

What the junior said with a shocked look on his face was medically perfectly reasonable.

"Well, normally the doctor would stop me, and it's probably impossible no matter how you look at it."

"And that's on the lower half of my body, after all."

"When I had surgery on my left wrist eight years ago, it took me a month and a half to be able to run uphill. But this time, for better or worse, it wasn't a fracture that required surgery. Luckily, the five fractures didn't shift or become unstable."

Nakae looked dumbfounded, saying he couldn't understand anything, but Shohei himself was also wondering about it.

"Do you know? The top three riders in this year's Tour all had broken bones."

"Like Pogacar or Vingegaard?"

"Yes. Pogacar fell off his bike during a race in April last year, breaking the scaphoid and lunate bones in his left hand and undergoing emergency surgery. Despite this, he came in second in last year's Tour despite insufficient training. This year he made a full recovery, and after winning the Giro d'Italia in May, he also won the Tour."

"He lost last year because of a fracture. But coming in second is amazing."

"He said he'll be careful and ride safely from now on, but I think riders who ride in a group at the speed of a car are always taking a big risk."

"That's true..."

"Vingegaard, who had won the Tour twice in a row, the year before last and last year, fell off his bike during a race in April this year and broke his collarbone and several ribs. It was probably due to a broken rib, but he suffered lung damage and a pneumothorax, which led to emergency surgery. It was such a serious injury that it even raised concerns about his retirement."

"But this year, He came in second. That's amazing."

"He resumed training one month after the accident, aiming for the Tour de France three months later. He and his team must have put in every effort. It's amazing that he came in second overall. He said that being able to ride a road bike every day is a joy... and I understand that feeling all too well."

"No one could do that."

"But, Evenepoel, who came in third, apparently broke his collarbone and scapula in the same race as Vingegaard in April."

"Really?"

"It was his first Tour de France, but he was one of the favorites to win, and he actually won



the seventh stage. He's even said to have a chance of winning the Paris Olympics."

"It's amazing that they both made it onto the podium after three months of having their fractures."

"I stood on the starting line of the Etape three weeks after my fracture."

"That's amazing, Murata-sensei. He's surpassing the Tour de France champion."

Seeing his senior bragging playfully, Nakae couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Speaking of fractures, you know the British sprinter Cavendish, right? He broke his collarbone in last year's Tour and once declared his retirement, but he returned this year and won his 35th stage, finally surpassing Merckx's record for the most stage wins."

Shohei, who likes both Cavendish and Merckx, has mixed feelings about this, but he remembers the touching moment.

"It was really moving to see him and his teammates crying with joy when they avoided disqualification by passing the 20th stage, the same one I was disqualified from, just within the time limit."

"He may be small, but he has guts. He can retire with no regrets. But why do they want to run even if it means breaking their bones?"

"That just shows how great the appeal of road racing is. I've broken my bones twice, but I can't quit."

"I can understand that, but if I break a bone, I can't do catheter treatments, and it would be difficult for Professor Yamada, a thoracic surgeon, to be unable to perform surgery."

Nakae had seen how the busy Shohei managed to participate when he accompanied him to France five years ago, but he was impressed that he couldn't do it himself.

"I'm going to participate in the Shimanami race next time. The one that can be driven on the highway."

"Yeah, that's right. I'm going to participate in the Tour de Saeki. The one where masochistic people run 190km in a sadistic way."

"Participating in the S course at your age, Professor Murata, is proof that you have a masochistic personality, isn't it?"

As they were laughing, a female staff member from the sponsoring company appeared and announced the start of the lecture.

"Now, let's get started, Nakae-kun."

The two stood up to move to the large auditorium.

A few days later, Shohei was surfing the internet during a break from his nighttime dialysis management duties when he came across a blog post that caught his eye. A young man living

in Germany had posted an article about his participation in this year's Etape. It was a very interesting account of his participation, with a vivid and detailed description of the course after Shohei's retirement and the chaotic scene of the bus ride back to Nice, the starting point, in the middle of the night after the final goal. Unlike previous years, he was unable to complete the race this year, so the latter half of the route remained a mystery to Shohei.

"Doctor, why are you grinning while watching a video on the computer? Surely it's not something erotic?"

Shohei's heart was startled when a woman's voice suddenly came from behind him. Of course, such videos are not to be watched in the clinic, but Shohei was so focused that he didn't notice that the nurse, Hagio Natsumi, was behind him.

"Hey, hey, don't make fun of the director."

"I'm sorry."

The young nurse bowed deeply to Shohei, who was surprised by her deliberately exaggerated attitude.

"You went to France the other day, right? There was a YouTube video of someone who participated in that competition. I was like this in the first half too. But I dropped out halfway through, and a lot of unexpected things happened. I was exhausted when I got back to the hotel at 2am."

The thing that everyone felt during this Étape was dissatisfaction with the bus transportation from the finish line to Nice. The same difficult situations and complaints were overflowing in the foreign language videos. Like Shohei, there were more people than he expected who arrived in Nice at around 2am and drove another hour along the dark roads to a hotel in a nearby town. He couldn't help but sympathize with the many participants who said they never wanted to take part in an Etape again, as the management was so poor.

"Wow, the view is pretty good. It's nerve-wracking just watching this hill go down at such high speed. The speed on the screen says 60km, but if you can't make the turn, you'll be blown off the cliff and die. It's good that you stopped halfway through, sir."

"Maybe, but I still wanted to finish and get a medal."

"What's a medal?"

"It's a commemorative medal that only those who finish within the time limit can get. It's a shame because I was training seriously to get my third medal this time."

"How much "You finished the race?"

"Two-thirds of the 16,000 people who registered to participate finished. Apparently less than half of those who started in the back group finished. It was a pretty tough course."

"I don't think there are any other old guys like you, sensei."

"That's terrible of you to be an old guy. But it's true, there aren't even a hundred people older

than me who finished the race. Other big, famous races don't seem to take in people over 65. But I think the number of female participants is definitely increasing. The majority are in their 30s, I think. But it's still less than 10%."

"Were there many Japanese people?"

"About twenty people this year. That's 60% of the number who participated in 2018, and most of them are people living in Europe. The yen is so weak, and it's certainly difficult to come all the way from Japan to participate."

"Of course you need physical strength, but you also need a lot of money and time. But by the time you have money and free time, you'll probably already be out of physical strength. The director may have money, but he doesn't have any free time. It's pretty perverted to participate in a cycling event like this during a four-night, five-day whirlwind trip."

Natsumi said this with a laugh, and quickly returned to her original post before Shohei could get angry.

The videos and blog articles taught Shohei about the scenery after retirement and the state of the participants, but at the same time brought about some complicated emotions. What I felt most of all was envy for the strength of young people who were eager to enjoy life abroad. Shohei, who became interested in the Tour de France at the age of 15, first experienced cycling in Europe at the age of 57. The deadline for giving up on the Étape challenge was fast approaching.

That night, Shohei saw a photo of a familiar landscape posted on Instagram with an English caption. It looked exactly like the scenery of the Étape where he had dropped out two weeks earlier. He also recognized the woman running alone in silence along the road at the bottom of a cliff, reminiscent of Provence.

The post also had several other photos, one of which was a close-up of the gold finisher's medal shining on her chest. Her face was not visible with the medal hanging from her neck, but her familiar shy smile was surely there. It was a post by Christine from RCC London. Shohei was surprised and very happy when he read the long caption that accompanied the photo. It frankly described "that day" that he had never known about.

**Around this time two weeks ago, I was still in the mountains near Nice in southern France, slowly climbing the Col de Couillot, the last col of the Étape.**

**This route was amazing, crossing four steep passes: Col de Praus, Col de Torrini, Col de Colmiane, and Col de Couillot. There were no slopes as steep as Col de Lamas in Etape last year, but the course was constantly rising and falling from start to finish, relentlessly leading to the summit finish line 138km away. There was a light rain on the way, but fortunately the**

weather was good and it wasn't too hot, and it was actually quite cold when it started raining near the finish line at a high altitude.

However, I was quite late along the way. On the climb to the second pass, I kept running at a slow speed, almost parallel to the vehicle that was picking up the last runner who had fallen behind the time limit, but I managed to get over the pass and carefully descended the long slope with a beautiful view that followed.

Unfortunately, I had already exceeded the time limit at the checkpoint, and there were already more than 200 people standing there, either not allowed to go further or having given up. I was supposed to be picked up by a recovery bus and taken to the finish line, but it was still quite early, so I decided to negotiate with the staff at the checkpoint to see if I could continue on.

As a result, I was given the option to continue running on my own responsibility while being very careful, although I would no longer have full support from the race officials. I was probably negotiating in a frenzy, and I was very grateful.

Rather than sitting silently on a crowded bus on such a beautiful day, I chose to continue running alone to the end, no matter how late I was. Luckily, most of the roads were still closed to traffic, and there was a little food left at the supply station. Some support staff were still on the road watching over me, so I was able to continue running with peace of mind to the final finish line, which was more than 50 kilometers away.

Actually, I had received radiation therapy for breast cancer metastases in my lungs just before the race. Thankfully, my latest scan results were all clear. After receiving the results of my post-treatment lung and heart function tests, I was cleared to participate in the Étape, but the doctor recommended that I take great care when participating.

I knew that my lungs had recovered to some extent from the acute damage that was unavoidable during treatment, so unlike the previous four Étapes, I just tried to maintain a steady pace without pushing myself too hard, aiming to finish the race. This probably caused me to fall a little behind the time limit along the way. I continued to ride my road bike alone for hours toward the finish line, most of the way.

I probably should have refrained from participating, or even dropped out, but I am very happy that I was able to complete this Étape's difficult route without giving up halfway through. I hope that my lung function will continue to improve and that I will be able to participate in One More City in September and next year's Étape again.

Thank you to all the organizers of the race for providing various women-specific support at the supply stations. There are many other things that can be done to make it easier for more women to take on the challenge of this race in the future. Thank you very much.

After reading Christine's words, Shohei was deeply moved and even felt a little jealous.

On that day, at that time, in that place, he and she had almost missed each other. She may have noticed him at the checkpoint where he was stopped, wearing the blue jersey he had worn at the summit.

Shohei had no choice but to retire midway for his own sake, and Christine also chose to continue on for her own sake. The two old friends, who had almost missed each other without knowing that they were participating, each finished the race that had been their biggest goal this summer with satisfaction.

After reading the post, Shohei began to feel a strangely strong sense of camaraderie with Christine. He felt as if she was wearing the phantom finisher's medal around his neck instead of his.

He immediately wrote a message to her, who was supposed to be in London.

What on earth influenced his and her choices at that time? What drove her so far forward?

He could imagine a little about what was going through her mind, but he wanted to hear the answer directly from her. However, I also thought that it would probably be difficult for anyone other than a cancer survivor to know her true feelings as she lives with stage 4 breast cancer. The uncertainty of her future must be heavier and closer than he can imagine, as he has no major worries other than aging...

**[Hello, Shohei. Thank you for your nice message. And thank you for following my Instagram. I have also started following Shohei's Instagram. There are many interesting posts. I will read them again later.**

**I remember you well at the summit seven years ago. You were the only and first Japanese person to participate in the summit. We didn't get to talk much, but I have not forgotten how youthful you were, without showing your age. On the bus to the dinner in Cannes, I was sitting right behind you with Areda, and I listened to you and Kent, who was participating from the UK, talking happily.**

**You also participated in the Etape in Annecy the following year and completed the race. There was an Asian person wearing the blue summit jersey, so I noticed you from afar. I'm sure I saw you at the checkpoint after the second pass of this year's Etape. My friend Caroline seemed to recognize you too, because we were wearing the same blue summit jersey.**

**I really admire your determination to go to France and start the Etape even though you broke your pelvis only three weeks before the race. Even though you unfortunately had to retire, it's amazing that you ran more than half of that grueling course.**

**The medical issues I had before the Etape started last November. The breast cancer that was once thought to be cured has now spread to my lungs.**

As I posted on Instagram before, I have been participating in the Etape every year since the Annecy race six years ago. This year, I was recovering from radiation therapy for lung metastases and my lungs were still in bad condition, so I expected it to be a very difficult race. After consulting with a pulmonary and sports medicine specialist, I was cleared to start but was advised to keep a steady pace.

I knew it would be difficult to make the time limit because the start time was late, but I was determined to keep running and finish even if I was late. Stopping was not an option for me, so I think it was good that I continued to run at my own pace without forcing myself. Thanks to that, I was able to receive my fifth finisher's medal around my neck.

Since 2018, I have been publicly announcing on social media, as well as on television and in newspapers where I am occasionally interviewed, that I have stage 4 breast cancer. The media has been supporting me, writing articles about One More City, and so on. Receiving a finisher's medal every year at the tough Etape gives me courage to live for tomorrow, and I hope that I can contribute even a little to encouraging my fellow cancer survivors.

Without the enthusiastic and warm support of the people around me, it would have been difficult for me, a stage 4 breast cancer patient, to continue cycling like this.

I hope to see you again next year at Etape or the Summit. Please join us for One More City someday.]

Shohei had thought that this would be his last Étape challenge due to his serious injury and disqualification midway. However, as it was easy to see that Christine, who is still fighting cancer, would continue to challenge Étape next year and beyond, he wanted to get another one of those elusive finisher medals.

## Final Chapter      One More

More than three months have passed since the sudden accident, and it is the autumn equinox, when the heat is still intense. Just like a year ago, Murata Shohei was leisurely working in the clinic on a holiday.

The pain in his pelvis and hip joints that had driven him to the brink of despair has almost disappeared, and he has forgotten about the restrictive lifestyle he had back then, when he couldn't let go of his cane. This summer was said to be extremely hot with little rain, and even in Fukuoka Prefecture, Dazaifu City has broken various Japanese records for the number of extremely hot days, and the weather has been more unpleasant than ever before.

Shohei tried riding his bike for the first time in a while about two weeks ago, but cycling with the stuffy warm air blowing over his whole body was painful, and he had to leave early after only going three kilometers. Still, it was an unexpected benefit that he didn't feel any pain.

He applied to participate in the Tour de Saeki, which will be held in Oita Prefecture in late October, in August, hoping to make a comeback next year, but he is avoiding training at the risk of rekindling the pain or getting heatstroke. The hospital staff has strictly forbidden him from doing so, as they don't want anything to happen to the director.

It's a tough 190-kilometer race with many ups and downs that takes him to the easternmost cape of Kyushu, so he will of course need to prepare, but considering his age, he will have to start training little by little. Having failed once, it's only natural that he is less willing to blindly train hard.

Late last night, Shohei received an email informing him of the European cycling races this year. There were many fascinating races listed, and if he had the time, he would like to apply for all of them, but he had mixed feelings about the passage of time, which speeds up every year.

``Is it that time already? It's only been less than three months since I returned to Japan, so what should I do next year? How long can I keep trying?"

After thinking about it all night, Shohei couldn't make up his mind.

"I wonder if the fracture was the real reason for my disqualification. Or maybe my physical strength is already at its limit."

Thinking about the future, he felt weaker than ever. The turning point of 65 years old seems to have a significant impact on his feelings. He is invited to join the senior citizens' club, and when he retires, he is faced with the reality that it will be difficult to live on his pension alone. It may feel like a sudden step that appears just at the end of a road that he thought was continuing with gentle ups and downs.

"Is it an uphill climb to perfection, or a downhill climb to the end?"

Whether it is a steep slope or a staircase that he can vaguely see, it gives a sense that it will be more difficult to overcome than ever before.

"I want to try something else from now on."

Shohei sometimes had such thoughts. He was always trapped in the regret of having wasted four years of the pandemic, and as he got older, he became more and more aware of the shorter time he had left.

The RCC Summit, which had been suspended for a long time due to the pandemic, has finally resumed this fall and is currently being held in Provence, southern France. The venue for this summit is Mont Ventoux, a holy place for cyclists. It is an independent mountain with an altitude of 1,912 meters and a white barren peak, and is often featured as a stage for the Tour

de France. Shohei also had a strong desire to climb it, but considering his job, he could not take a break many times a year.

Three Japanese people are participating in the summit this time. Thinking back to that wonderful day seven and a half years ago, he envied the participants.

"I would like to participate in another RCC Summit held somewhere."

The happy expressions of the participants and the friendly face and figure of manager Aleda, which were transmitted one after another on Instagram. It is no exaggeration to say that it was that joy that only those who have experienced it know that made Shohei fall in love with European riding. However, in the reality of being centered around work, no matter how many things on his to-do list he puts together, it's difficult to make them come true, and he had to prioritize his fun things.

"I want to run in another big competition next year."

A third Étape, his first competition in the Dolomites, or a second summit?

He will choose one depending on the location of the Étape, which will be known in a month. If he had been able to complete this year's Étape safely, he would have decided to run in the Dolomites, which he has never experienced, but this year's result was disappointing and left him with a lot of regrets. It has not yet been announced where the next RCC summit will be held, but there are rumors that it will be held in Japan, where it was suddenly canceled four years ago when the pandemic hit.

He just couldn't narrow it down to one, so he made tentative reservations for the two competitions that were available that night.

[Shohei, how are you? This year's OMC journey will start soon. Regarding the inquiry from the other day, can I contact you after I get back to London after this trip?]

After dinner, while Shohei was pedaling the exercise bike in the director's office, he received an email from Christine in the UK. It must be around noon in London now.

[Take your time. You can do it after you've calmed down.]

She has been organizing the charity ride OMC (One More City) event every year from the end of September to October for the past seven years, and now the number of participants who sympathize with the cause has increased significantly.

Since last year, charity rides have been held in California, USA, mainly by members of the RCC who support their activities. This year, a one-day ride with 140 participants is planned in San Francisco in October to raise donations for breast cancer metastasis research support at UCSF (University of California, San Francisco), and she is planning to join in. Shohei had only just found out through her SNS the other day that nine similar OMC rides with a total of 400 participants are already being planned for next year around the world.



[OMC has gained a lot of supporters. It has already grown into a global campaign. But it must be difficult for you to participate in all of them.] [Yes, of course. The growing community of supporters makes me proud, but it's all thanks to my RCC friends, including Aleda and Caroline. Also, after OMC in October, I have to repeat radiation therapy to suppress the cancer cells. That's my current situation. But I want to continue this activity for a long time.] It seems that her metastases still need to be treated repeatedly. Although she seems cheerful and active and travels around the world, she must be hiding the pain of not being sure about her life in six months or a year. [Actually, for me, OMC is very personal. It's a way to find meaning in living with metastatic breast cancer, and it has also turned my experience into a positive one. It's a small thing, but it connects us to the global network of researchers we fund and ignites hope for the future.]

Shohei has many opportunities to interact with stage 4 cancer patients, but he has long felt that there are sufferings that even doctors cannot understand.

If he had no work, he would like to ride around Europe on an OMC with his cycling friends, but it is a wish that cannot be fulfilled for him as he is not yet able to retire from the clinic.

Aleda, who has just held the RCC summit for the first time in a while, will travel directly from Provence in the south of France to Venice in Italy to meet up with Christine and the others. It was a joy for Shohei in Japan, far away, to see that a charity event that grows in scale little by little is being organized by his old cyclists.

[I'm thinking of making a donation for the first time this year, but how do I do it?]

[Really? I'm happy, but you don't have to push yourself. Just a small amount is fine.]

A little later, she sent me an email with a link to the donation site. Unlike hometown tax donations, there is no return, but it is probably a kind of crowdfunding. Shohei has never been the type to donate much, except when requested to do so for local events or conservation activities, but this time he naturally opened the site and wrote down the amount of his donation.

Cancer survivors from other countries who want to support young cancer researchers working at universities and research institutes. It was a little strange for him to find himself feeling a small amount of joy in being able to share his feelings with these women who are fighting cancer, even though it was only a small amount. He felt embarrassed and happy at the same time, as if he had just discovered another joy he had not noticed before.

[It seems that the donation was successfully made on the site, 250 pounds]

[That much? Shohei is very generous]

The English words he was unfamiliar with seemed to have that kind of nuance.

[Think of it as eight times, including the ones you couldn't make before. Be careful and enjoy your run]

[Thank you. If you like, please follow me and Areda on Instagram. We plan to post every day from Italy. Of course, we will continue to run beyond Rome. The spirit of OMC is based on the idea that challenges never end. Compared to the summit seven years ago, it is now much easier to communicate with friends overseas. Before learning about Google Translate, Shohei was confused and hesitant to write letters or emails in English, but now he enjoys emailing. He lived in the United States for more than three years when he was young, and felt that we live in a convenient and grateful age. "If I had lived as a single person in modern times, what kind of interactions and romances would I have had?" Shohei has no complaints about his life with his family, but now that he is 65 years old, he has often dreamed about the existence of such a parallel world. "Another life of mine that may be living in another world." Perhaps the reason he often feels this way at random times is that the old age and end of life that comes to everyone is approaching him.

On a Saturday afternoon when the heat had subsided a little, Shohei, who had not yet cycled since his pelvic fracture, slowly climbed the mountain path, dripping with sweat. It was the slope of the 430-meter-high Mikan Mountain that he had climbed on the day of the accident. The small, dark green fruits were shyly hiding in the shade of the lush leaves. Luckily, there was no fear of a hornet's frightening buzzing, and no snake was lying its long body on the road. Apart from the small insects clinging to his face and hands and the persistent mosquitoes, there was no sign of any living creature anywhere, but today he was more afraid of the appearance of a raccoon dog than he should have been.

Compared to June before the Étap, his physical strength had dropped to about half after skipping training, and he was sure to suffer from muscle pain all over his body tomorrow for the first time in a long time. Even though the autumn equinox has passed, the temperature today is still 32 degrees, and on the steep uphill stretch where we can only go at a walking speed, it's not surprising that we could get heatstroke and leg cramps at any moment.

"Of course, at this age, I haven't ridden my bike for more than three months."

Occasionally, a light work truck passes by right next to us, making a loud engine noise, but no one can hear Shohei's monologue except the insects.

As we reach the pass and catch our breath, a small chime rings, announcing that Christine has posted on Instagram. Another one in quick succession, this time announcing a new post from Areda. It must be around eight in the morning in Italy at this time.

It seems that today is the last day of their four-day One More City ride from Venice to Rome via San Marino. It seems that the two of them posted before setting off from their accommodation in a village not far from Perugia and Assisi. The photo showed about 40 people wearing matching maroon-colored uniforms and with big smiles on their faces.

[Be careful not to get into an accident, and do your best until the end.]

Shohei used the messaging function of Instagram to send this message to his two friends.

Soon after, a small electronic sound rang again.

For a moment, he thought it was a reply from Italy, but the sender was different. It was from Ayaka Uematsu, who works at a TV station in Fukuoka City.

[Dr. Murata, how are you? It will soon be a year since I first met you during the interview for the Nobel Prize. Thank you for introducing me to Dr. K's autobiography the other day. I'd like to read it. It's still hot, but have you started cycling again?]

It was a late reply to the message Shohei had sent the night before.

The two had not met since the concert right after the accident, but they had become friends who exchanged messages from time to time as if they were friends with a common hobby.

Although Shohei sometimes felt a vague feeling similar to love, there was no way that a love between a man and a woman would suit two people with such a large age difference that they were father and son.

[The weather was so nice that I went mountain climbing for the first time since the accident. I've been slacking off on my practice, so I feel like I've gotten old. I'm already 65, so I'm a real old man.]

Work probably wasn't busy today, so the reply came quickly.

[You're still young enough, doctor, and I'm sure you're popular with the ladies. But if you push yourself too hard, you'll get heatstroke, so please don't neglect your health as a doctor.]

Even if she said you're popular, he knew that she wouldn't be interested in him.

[No way. Even Ayaka wouldn't be interested in an old doctor like me.]

Shohei wrote down the feelings that came to his mind and pressed the send button. Damn... he thought, but he couldn't take back the message he had sent so carelessly.

"She must be annoyed. This is the end of our conversation for today."

As he was about to start walking down the hill, filled with self-loathing, Ayaka's reply came.

[I like you, doctor.]

Not knowing how to react to the unexpected words he had received, Shohei changed the topic in a panic.

[Next month there's a cycling competition in Saiki, Oita. It's a 190km course, so I need to start training again soon. I probably won't be able to finish it if I do it all at once.]

[Saiki, huh? I go there sometimes for interviews. I usually stay at a business hotel in front of the station, but it was fully booked the other day, so I stayed at a really old guesthouse. It must be really nice to ride a road bike along that beautiful coastline, even though there are quite a few ups and downs.]

[Oh, this is my first time going to Saiki. Ayaka, do you have any plans for tomorrow? If you'd

like, why don't we train together? The weather is nice and it looks a little cool.]

It took a while for Ayaka's reply to arrive. A small electronic beep sounded.

[That's fine. I think I can get to your clinic by 11 o'clock, is that okay? I don't want you to tease me for having bad posture or being a slow runner. That will make me hate you.]

Shōhei was dancing on the mountain with his smartphone in his hand.

The next day, Uematsu Ayaka arrived at the Mikawa Heart Clinic at the appointed time. She got out of her bright red Alfa Romeo, took off her black sunglasses, and gave a slight bow to Shohei. She was wearing a tight navy blue dress and pumps of the same color. Although her mood was completely different from her interviews and live performances, it suited her very well.

"Doctor, it's been a while. I'm glad the weather is refreshing."

The SUV, named after Italy's most famous mountain pass, the Stelvio, was also a car that Shohei had always wanted to own. He was suddenly engrossed by her aura and couldn't speak smoothly.

"I'll show you to the changing room on the second floor. There's a shower after your ride. I'll wait for you downstairs."

He was worried that Shohei would notice his pounding heartbeat, and all he could say was that.

After about five minutes, Ayaka appeared in front of Shohei, dressed in pale blue cycling wear. As expected, she had a very toned body. Her long, slender legs extended from her knee-length black bib shorts, but the muscles hidden beneath her pale skin looked well-trained. Her long black hair was tied up in a light yellowish brown ribbon, and flowed smoothly from behind her white helmet down her well-postured back. Her slender, beautiful fingers reached out from white, fingerless leather gloves, and she wore simple white socks and well-worn white shoes; she was flawless in every respect.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. It's actually been a while since I've seen you. Please be gentle with me."

With that, she started to unload her road bike from her car, her cleats clicking as she walked towards the Stelvio parked in the parking lot.

"That's a cool car. It's nice to see the elegant and dignified Ayaka driving such a Spartan SUV."

"I was attracted by the name Stelvio Pass. Have you climbed any Italian passes, sensei?"

"No, but I've made a tentative reservation for the Dolomites race next July. It's the most popular race in Italy, and I really wanted to participate in that one."

"That's nice... Will your wife come with you next time? I'm jealous."

He had made a tentative reservation to go with his wife's father if he was in good health, but

he didn't really want to talk to Ayaka about his wife right now.

"There's no Stelvio Pass on that route, but I'd love to cross it on the way to and from Milan Airport. It's a rental car, though. And please don't call me sensei today. Please call me Murata-san or Shohei-san."

"Okay. Then please call me Aya, Shohei-san."

He blushed a little, unable to respond to the unexpected turn of events. Ayaka noticed and chuckled devilishly.

At that moment, Shohei's Instagram notification sounded.

It was a post from Italy reporting the safe completion of One More City and expressing gratitude for reaching the charity fundraising goal. The happy faces of Christine and Areda were overflowing in several photos.

"It's a photo of a fun group ride. Are you from overseas?"

Ayaka muttered as she looked at Shohei's smartphone screen.

"They are acquaintances from London. We first met at a cycling event in the south of France seven years ago. Meeting people is really like a miracle. We only crossed paths at one point that day, but we are still connected like this online."

"That's right. Shohei and I would never have met if K hadn't won the Nobel Prize, and we probably wouldn't have met if the pandemic hadn't happened in the first place. I have to be grateful to the new coronavirus."

As she said this, Ayaka, who was looking at Shohei's face, smiled shyly.

"Every year around this time in the fall, they do a charity ride to donate money to young breast cancer researchers, and they continue to ride from one European city to another. The first year they went from London to Paris. The next year they went from Paris to Amsterdam. Last year they went from Munich to Venice. And this year, the eighth time, about 40 people rode from Venice to Rome over four days."

"That's amazing. Women who are cancer survivors are putting their bodies on the line to continue contributing to society. It really feels like Europe."

"Actually, they finished the ride late last night in Japan, so it looks like a photo they posted the next morning of their joy."

Ayaka bends down to put on the wheels of her road bike and turns on her cycle computer. The pure white frame suits her very well.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Shohei, shall we go?"

"I'll go ahead where there are a lot of cars, but if I'm going too fast, don't hesitate to call out to me. On roads with few cars, we can ride side by side and talk."

Shohei and Ayaka ride briskly on the bank along the river that flows from the eastern

mountains. There is very little traffic until they reach the foot of the mountain, about 15 kilometers away, so they have a lively conversation while looking at the surrounding scenery. They cruise at 25 kilometers per hour so that Ayaka doesn't get out of breath, but it seems that she will be fine even if she goes a little faster. Her beautiful black hair is fluttering in the wind.

"You're riding beautifully, Aya-chan. At this rate, it looks like we can easily go on long rides." Ayaka looks happy when he calls her Aya-chan, and she continues to ride, looking ahead. "I've started to think that one day I'd like to participate in competitions in France or Italy, so I've been secretly practicing so I won't be embarrassed. But I still have a long way to go. I'm sure you're looking forward to next year's competition in the Dolomites, Shohei."

"Actually, there's also the Etape on the same day, so I've made a tentative reservation for that too. The course hasn't been announced yet, but if it's held in an attractive place, I might go for the Etape. The Dolomites have the same fixed route every year, so next year would be fine."

The two of them leave the road by the river and head towards a narrow mountain road.

A quiet forest road with the occasional work vehicle passing by, it's moderately shaded, and the slope continues for about six kilometers to the pass they're heading for, with a view of the mountains rolling like waves in the distance. The average gradient is six to seven percent, but sometimes there are slopes that exceed ten percent. Shohei, concerned about Ayaka's physical strength, listens carefully to the sound of the car as he slowly climbs next to her.

"Aya-chan, you seem fine. Amazing. At this rate, you'll be able to complete the Étape in a few years. Let's join together someday. Before I become a real old man."

"You're kidding... But it'd be nice if we could join together someday."

Ayaka looked relaxed as she climbed the hill, and spoke to Shohei, who was running next to her, with a smile.

"It feels good. Eh, what's that?"

Ayaka saw a large snake slowly crossing the road, and was surprised, and slowed down. She was almost at a stop.

"It's okay. It's not a viper, so it won't bite, and it'll run away. We'll be at the pass soon, so let's do our best."

The sky felt wider and brighter than before. There were no summer clouds to be seen anywhere. No matter how hot it was, it was almost October.

The slope started to get even steeper. If we could just get past this, we'd be close to the pass we were aiming for. If we could make a big turn to the right around that cliff, the slope would ease and the final curve to the left would be waiting for us. Shohei occasionally called out to Ayaka, pushing her back with an invisible hand.

"We've arrived, this is Nozomi Pass. You did well, Ayaka."

"Wow. You can see the ocean over there, it's a beautiful pass. It was pretty tough at the end though."

"It's a nice place, isn't it? It's my favorite pass that I always run through, but actually, I collided with a raccoon dog on the way down here and broke my pelvis."

The big accident 100 days ago was now a laughing matter to him.

"I see. Aren't you scared of going downhill after that?"

"It's fine, but when I think about my family and patients, I'm a little more careful."

That was Shohei's honest feeling. For some reason, he was able to be honest when he was with Ayaka. "Besides, when I think about my dreams for the future, I've started to think about being a bit more careful."

Shohei wipes the sweat that keeps running down his forehead with his sleeve as he gazes out at the glittering shallow sea in the distance and Mount Unzen on the Shimabara Peninsula beyond. Ayaka, who is standing next to him and looking at the distant scenery, is also shyly catching her somewhat rough breath and wiping the sweat from around her thin, white neck with a handkerchief. Rows of red spider lilies bloom all around, and a soft breeze blows through the mountain road, rustling the leaves.

"What are your dreams, Shohei?"

Ayaka asks Shohei in profile.

"There are a lot. Some I can do while working, and some I can't do unless I quit my job. If I miss the timing, my body and mind might not be able to keep up, right? Working as a private practitioner is surprisingly busy."

It's not easy for anyone to list their dreams for the future.

"Do you think about the past and think about doing it again?"

Shohei likes to think about the past, but thinks the answer is a little different.

"I don't want to do something again, but I think I have a stronger desire for one more thing."

"One more thing...?" I see... It's not "once more," but "one more." I can somewhat understand how you feel when you say that."

"Stop it, Aya-chan."

The two of them laughed softly.

"Right now I'm fortunate enough to have money, but sadly I have no free time. It's unfortunate, but old age is fast approaching. But from now on I want to live true to my feelings. I'm already 65, but I think the fun is just beginning."

"That's right."

Shohei thought that the young girl probably wouldn't understand the truth yet.

"The RCC summit will be held in Kyoto in April next year. It was announced last night. I'm

thinking of somehow arranging it so that I can attend for the first time in eight years. Maybe I'll meet Aleda and some familiar faces again. I'll also start studying English again. I also want to write some new novels. I feel like the only time I can really look at myself is when I'm writing a novel. I can reveal my true self to myself. I'd also like to drive a nice Italian convertible that everyone wants. I think I'm finally at an age where I can look at something like that. But I'm sure I'll get old and it won't look good on me in the blink of an eye, which is sad. There are also a lot of other things I want to achieve and try before I become an old man."

Shohei spoke of some of his dreams for the future, but they were all just realistic hopes. Maybe the age when you can imagine really big dreams, shining dreams that you don't know if will come true, is long past.

"That's wonderful. It's not a once more that you miss, but a longed-for one more."

"That may be true. And there isn't much time left. I finally understand now that time is very cruel."

"There's a phrase in the lyrics of Motoharu Sano's song Someday that beautifully describes that emotion. After that, I became a fan of Sano. It's all because of you, Shohei."

Shohei was honestly happy that he had found a good understanding person in life other than his wife, Mamiko.

"Actually, there's one more thing I've been thinking about lately that I hope will come true."

Shohei looked at Ayaka with a bashful look on his face and said to her.

"What is it?"

Shohei looked at Ayaka's face and smiled, remaining silent.

"Please tell me, Shohei."

He smiled happily and turned his face toward the faraway sea and said.

"That's still a secret."

After a moment, Ayaka's face turned a little red. She didn't say anything. Shohei entrusted his face to the gentle breeze blowing up the pass, enjoying the eloquent silence for a while.

"My friend in London told me recently that my challenges are never over. I've been thinking the same thing lately. Now, after we get down from here, let's tackle another pass. Aya, be careful not to run into any raccoons. I'll go first..."

"Yes."

Shohei received her pleasant reply with his back.

The two of them began to descend vigorously, like birds carried by the rising wind, down the road that curved left and right many times towards the distant sea.

« The End »