



## NADEKO PAST

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“Somehow, I can’t get rid of the feeling that I’m constantly in battle with my past self. Like a ghost that’s long dead, which I can’t touch and don’t even want to touch... A past self that’s completely see-through.”

That was what Sengoku Nadeko said, lying face-up on a sofa with her hands clasped at her stomach—it was not that she had laid herself across the sofa in a discourteous manner, but that the sofa was designed with the assumption that it would be used in that position. I, Ononoki Yotsugi, was beside that sofa, or perhaps beside that Sengoku Nadeko, sitting in a swivel chair and taking notes on a chart held in a clipboard.

In other words, we were playing by having a pretend therapy session. Since Sengoku Nadeko was a target of observation, I could say that it was natural as a specialist for me to conduct an interview with her, but if it was indeed natural, then there was no need for me to say it.

“Your past self. Could you be referring to the episodes of when you were an idiot?”

“Don’t call me an idiot. And besides, it’s not like I’m all that smart right now, either. If anything, I feel like I’ve been getting dumber ever since I stopped going to school.”

“School isn’t a place to make your intelligence better, you know.”

“Hearing that makes me feel...”

“School is a place to make your life better.”

“Absolutely terrible.”

Thinking about it, I was an aberration without any emotions. There was no work in this world that was more unsuited for me than therapy. And perhaps even in the next world.

The hearts of humans were shrouded in darkness for me.

Though that might be true for anyone.

“Basically, you’re saying that you feel like you’re being compared to the version of you with long bangs, who was cute and pampered, and that’s become a complex for you?”

“So you do get it, after all!”

“No matter how hard you work, no matter how much you devote yourself, no matter how much you strive to change yourself, you feel like you’ll never be able to surpass the version of you that was completely spoiled just by being there, without having to do anything. That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“No, I didn’t want to go that far, and after hearing you go that far, it actually makes me want to protect my fleeting past self, instead. I’m fully aware that that version of myself was desperate in her own way, you know?”

“This was back when you didn’t refer to yourself pretentiously with ‘I’, and instead went around constantly crying out your given name, right?”

“I didn’t constantly cry out.”

Mm, ngh, moaned Sengoku Nadeko on top of the sofa—as though groaning in her sleep from a nightmare.<sup>262</sup> Could she perhaps be trying to

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<sup>262</sup> While both 唸る (*unaru*) and 嘆される (*unasareru*) mean “to moan/groan”, the latter is generally only used in the context of crying out in one’s sleep.

confront the hard memories of her past, as though undergoing regression hypnosis?

Rather than hard, they were painful memories.

Not that I knew pain.

“Though I may easily get influenced by my surroundings, I’m ultimately a corpse that fundamentally does not experience change, so your feelings are hard to understand. But it’s not really a bad thing to confront your own past like that, right?”

“It’s not confronting my own past, but confronting my past self that’s so tiresome.”<sup>263</sup>

“What kind of rhetoric is that?”

“Calling her a ghost might’ve been going too far, but basically, no part of my past self exists within me anymore. And yet from the perspective of those around me, it’s like that version of me is still firmly in place. It’s like I’m the one that’s see-through, and they’re seeing through me and looking at the version of me from early on.”

A mental image of her that had become fixed in place.

That was essentially the unchangeability of monstrous apparitions—I’d never heard of a vampire whose status would change depending on what day it was.

Or, I suppose, depending on what night it was.

Though I suppose their condition could change if it was the full moon or the new moon. Then again, if they were weak to the sun, it made more sense for the full moon to be more difficult for them than the new moon.

“However, it is human nature to seek constancy in a subject. The act of detaching your past self from your present self, when viewed from outside, is often called, ‘going out of character’.”

“Are you telling me that I shouldn’t grow up?”

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<sup>263</sup> A bit tricky to word this naturally in English. Nadeko compares 自分の過去 (*jibun no kako*, “the past of myself”) to 過去の自分 (*kako no jibun*, “myself of the past”).

“Of course not. From my point of view, aging is something to be envied.”

I hadn't meant to lie, but that wasn't exactly the truth. Because “envy” was an emotion that I didn't possess. “Envy” could be connected to the feeling of, “I want to be like this”, and thus was close to a desire for change.

There was no way I could have something like that.

I wasn't a magical girl, after all.

“Even so, wouldn't you say that you wanted your beloved Koyomi-onii-chan to stay as he was in the past? That you wanted him to always remain the same person?”

Though I could say that that wish had come true, ironically enough. After having turned partway into a vampire, that guy was able to maintain a constancy unbecoming of humanity—in fact, it is my opinion as a specialist that that is directly linked to his incomprehensible obstinacy, and it has produced the troublesome side effect of him being unable to change his point of view.

“I dunno. At the very least, when we met again, I might have had the feeling that I wanted him to see how much I'd grown.”

“However, all that blockhead was able to see was, ultimately, the version of you from elementary school. Your romantic feelings were one thing, but he failed to notice your jealousy and fury, your laziness and your cunning, all of those unsightly emotions that are natural to have.”

Well, if there was one small thing that I could sympathize with oni-no-onii-chan on, it would be that it was pretty difficult to change one's first impression of someone. No matter what she did, Sengoku Nadeko could never be more than “his sister's friend” to oni-no-onii-chan—it was hard to change that mental image once it had settled in. Like how ripping open a tamper-evident seal would still leave traces on the label.

“That's true. I'm not trying to take back what I said, but there was a time where I actually played up the part of my past self more than necessary in front of that guy. Or, like, I let it possess me—”

“In that case, if it's a matter of if you would have been able to captivate that blockhead if you'd let your murky inner thoughts come to the

forefront, then it probably wouldn't have been possible. Basically, I think that by allowing the past to possess you, by acting out your younger self, you've actually benefited."

"I see what you mean. But isn't there something wrong about benefiting from my past glory? Doesn't that make it seem like my current self is being provided for by my past self?"

"Feeling possessed is one thing, but feeling supported can be pretty tough. But that sort of inferiority complex comes from the fact that you haven't managed to surpass your past self, right? It's true that the feeling of 'things used to be better back then' is usually just a nostalgia-tinted misapprehension, but it's not necessarily the case that a renewal or an upgrade will always be a vector pointing in a better direction. There's stuff like that for you, too, right? Like manga that you liked in its early days, even before the art got better."

"There is, yeah."

Sengoku Nadeko looked up toward the sky—or so I would have said, except she'd been in a face-up position from the beginning.

"I hate when it's done to me, but I'm doing the same thing to the masters that I highly respect, huh. Thinking about it like that, I'm not very decent, am I? As I am right now. The way my past self read manga was so much cuter. She was able to enjoy manga, just for being manga."

"Also, there are also cases where a seven-year-old novel will get adapted into an anime rather than any of the newest works, right?"

"You shouldn't say that."

"Do you want to go back to the past?"

"What?"

"If you could go back to being your past self, would you? You never know, I could have that sort of power."

I didn't.

A power that could turn back time—the former Heartunderblade had once used it to travel through time, but from what I knew, that was little more than a game to transport one's current self into the past.

“It’s like that psychology test of, if you were to redo your life, what age would you want to start at? Would you say you peaked in your second year of middle school, and choose that period, or would you choose your second year of elementary school? Would you want to go all the way to your past life before you were born? Or would you want to not even be born?”

“That’s a difficult question. How philosophical.”

“It’s just small talk. Besides, most people peaked in their second year of middle school.”

“Instead of going backwards, I do have the desire to skip forwards in time. To around forty years old. An age where there would be nothing new in life.”

“But there are new things. Of course there would be, for someone in their forties. There are new things even for the tsukumogami of a corpse that’s lived for a hundred years. Well, there may not be anything new for a vampire that’s lived for six hundred years.”

“Then, I’d like to skip to being six hundred years old.”

“But once you’re six hundred years old, won’t you just find yourself thinking, ‘Things were better when I was fifteen, I used to shine so bright back then?’”

“Hmm.”

I’d meant it as a joke, but Sengoku moved her hands clasped at her stomach to a crossed-arms position.

“From the perspective of my future self, my present and past selves would seem like one big jumble, huh?”

she said.

“Even though I feel like I’ve changed, I’ll end up being the same. Though I think that I’ve grown from experiencing something big, it’ll end up just getting averaged out with what came before and what comes after, won’t it.”

My past self isn’t an enemy.

It’s more like a mirror, which reflects light but a moment later.

It seemed she’d come to her own conclusions, but it surprisingly wasn’t that far off the mark—after all, a mirror was an indispensable tool for

putting on makeup, for brushing your teeth, or for straightening up your personal appearance.

Without it, you couldn't change your present.

As long as you think about wanting to change the past, you won't be able to grow. What you should be changing is your present self.

If you want to change.

If you're under the impression that you're battling it out, then your goal should not be victory, but reconciliation.

“To put it another way, the fact that you feel that your past self is like a ghost is a sign that your present self has properly managed to change. For better or worse.”

“It wouldn't be any good to have changed for the worse, right?”

“It's fine even if you did change for the worse.”

Even if it's cheaper, even if it's worse.<sup>264</sup>

Instead of processing the past, it's a sign that the present is alive and well.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> A modification of 安かろう悪かろう (*yasukarou warukarou*, lit. “the cheaper it is, the worse it is”). The phrase is used along the lines of “you get what you pay for”.

<sup>265</sup> Puns between 加工 (*kakou*, “processing”) and 過去 (*kako*, “past”), and between 現在 (*genzai*, “present”) and 健在 (*kenzai*, “alive and well”).