

ACCIDENTALLY BECOME A FATHER

Chapter 7: The Distance Between Two People

She stepped closer.

"What if we sleep side by side?"

I stopped.

Slowly turned my head.

"We?"

"Yes."

"You're nine."

"Yes."

"I'm twenty-one."

"Yes."

"If the neighbors hear about that, I'll be the main topic at tomorrow's neighborhood association meeting."

She thought for a moment.

"What if there's a one-pillow gap?"

"Physical distance isn't the issue."

"Oh."

I looked back at the futon.

Technically, it was doable.

Socially, it was like inviting trouble with a megaphone.

"I can sleep sitting up," she said suddenly.

I looked at her again.

"Sitting up?"

"Yes. Against the wall. Like on a bus."

"That's not a solution. That's ergonomic torture."

"I'm tough."

"I'm not waking up tomorrow to find you shaped like an L."

She tilted her head.

"An L?"

"Your spine."

"Oh."

I stood up.

Gauged the empty floor space to the left of the futon.

Mathematically speaking... there might be just enough room for one extra futon.

"Why not just buy it tomorrow?" Yuna asked.

"Because if I put it off, I'll get lazy."

"Laziness is human."

"I'm trying to be slightly better than human."

She offered a small smile.

I rolled my futon back up.

"We're heading out."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"It's late."

"It's never truly night in Tokyo."

She looked like she was weighing something in her mind.

Then asked quietly,

"If we go out together... will people think I'm really Papa's daughter?"

I grabbed my wallet from the small shelf.

"Isn't that the point?"

She fell silent.

Not an awkward silence.

But the silence of someone affirming something deep within themselves.

I opened the apartment door.

The night air crept in.

Colder than before.

The hallway light was still flickering.

Unit 204 was dead quiet.

"Let's go," I said.

She quickly slipped on her shoes.

Then, without realizing it, stood very close to my side.

Not touching.

But close enough.

As if she was afraid of falling a single step behind.

I locked the door.

The click sounded louder than usual.

We walked down the narrow corridor toward the stairs.

Her small footsteps matched my rhythm.

Halfway down the hall, she spoke softly.

"Papa."

I glanced down.

"Yeah?"

"Can the futon be pink?"

I stared at her for two seconds.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I still have to live here too."

She looked straight ahead.

"So, a neutral color?"

"I'm allergic to loud colors."

She nodded seriously.

As if this were a life-altering decision.

We reached the stairs.

The exterior building light cast our shadows against the concrete wall.

Two silhouettes.

One tall.

One small.

And for some reason,

it looked entirely too natural.

I maintained my usual pace. I didn't slow down. I didn't speed up.

After five steps, she automatically adjusted her rhythm to match mine.

This kid was a fast learner.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The home goods store. It's still open."

"Does Papa often shop at night?"

"Fewer humans, fewer conversations."

"That sounds like a survival strategy."

"It is a survival strategy."

We walked past a 24-hour convenience store. The automatic doors slid open for another customer, letting out a brief puff of warm air. Yuna peeked inside.

"Are we buying ice cream?"

"We just ate."

"Ice cream doesn't count as a meal."

"That is a dangerous sentence."

She stared straight ahead again, but the corners of her mouth tipped upward.

The pedestrian light turned red.

We stopped.

A few people stood around us.

An office worker in a wrinkled suit.

Two Young adult laughing quietly.

No one paid us any mind.

Suddenly, I felt a slight tug on the hem of my jacket.

Not a strong one.

Just two small fingers gripping the fabric.

I glanced down.

Yuna was pretending to look at the traffic light.

"Afraid of getting lost?" I asked.

"No."

"Then what?"

"It would be a hassle if we got separated."

"Ah... You really are a fast learner."

The light turned green.

We crossed.

She didn't let go of my jacket until we reached the opposite sidewalk.

The home goods store was excessively bright.

Its signboard was uninspired.

The automatic doors let out a cheerful electronic chime as we stepped inside.

The air inside smelled like brand-new plastic.

Tall aisles were stocked with pillows, bedsheets, cheap kitchenware, coat hangers, and buckets.

Yuna stopped right at the futon section.

"Didn't think you were the type to get straight to the point," I said.

"I don't want to change my mind."

"You mean you think I will change my mind."

She didn't answer.

Her eyes swept over the rows of thin, plastic-wrapped futons.

There were floral patterns.

Cartoon characters.

Solid colors.

She turned to me.

"Papa, you pick."
