

A FOUNDER'S STORY

Small Madam

High-Spec and Wonderfully Human

The Life of Ramu Goto

by Mr. Potato Head · supervised by Ramu Goto · Yasuramu Publishing

Small Madam

High-Spec and Wonderfully Human

The Life of Ramu Goto

MR. POTATO HEAD · SUPERVISED BY RAMU GOTO

ENGLISH EDITION

Introduction

Welcome to *Small Madam: High-Spec and Wonderfully Human*.

There is a clear real-life model for this story. Even so, this book is fiction. Put plainly, it is a "made-up story." That said, a good deal of it is built on things that actually happened.

And yet I want to say it outright: this book is a "made-up story." I mean that in two ways. First, although it is grounded in fact, some characters are several people condensed into one, some experiences have been combined, and some events have been shifted slightly in time. In that sense, it is a "made-up story." As for the second meaning . . . for now, I would like to keep that to myself, for your enjoyment.

Contents

Introduction

Prologue: Starting from Rock Bottom WITH MANGA

Chapter 1: Childhood and Family

Chapter 2: Going as Far as I Can

Chapter 3: The Power to Create, the Power to Notice

Chapter 4: Digging In, Even Where I Feel Weak WITH MANGA

Chapter 5: Rats Auto Body and Meeting Mr. Nagayama

Chapter 6: An Unexpected Farewell

Chapter 7: Supporting Company Presidents

Chapter 8: The High-Spec Ponkotsu

Chapter 9: Founding Haguruma

Chapter 10: Meeting Mr. Sakurai WITH MANGA

Chapter 11: To Dubai

Chapter 12: Meeting RENKETSU

Chapter 13: Meeting "Small Madam" WITH MANGA

Chapter 14: Tying the Knot with Yusuke

Epilogue: Together with All of You

Afterword

About the Author and Supervisor

PROLOGUE

Starting from Rock Bottom


Her son Rio, six months old, had only just learned to sit up.
Um... let's see...
Her daughter Miyu, two, played quietly on her own.
One 50-yen coin...
Phew... Yeah, figures. There's nothing.
しーん
silence...


うーん
Hmmm...
...Guess I have no choice but to ask someone.
Huh? What's wrong, all of a sudden?
Sorry, could you lend me some money? Just 10,000 yen.
あはは
Ahaha
I've got a job interview, but I don't even have a suit. Ha ha ha.
I'll pay you back as soon as I get paid, promise.


パアアッ
Sparkle!
Really? Thank you!!!
Sure. I'll give it to you tomorrow.
Yes, of course! I'll do my best!
The next day: off to the interview in a suit bought with the borrowed money.
Then can you start tomorrow? It's food sampling at a grocery store.

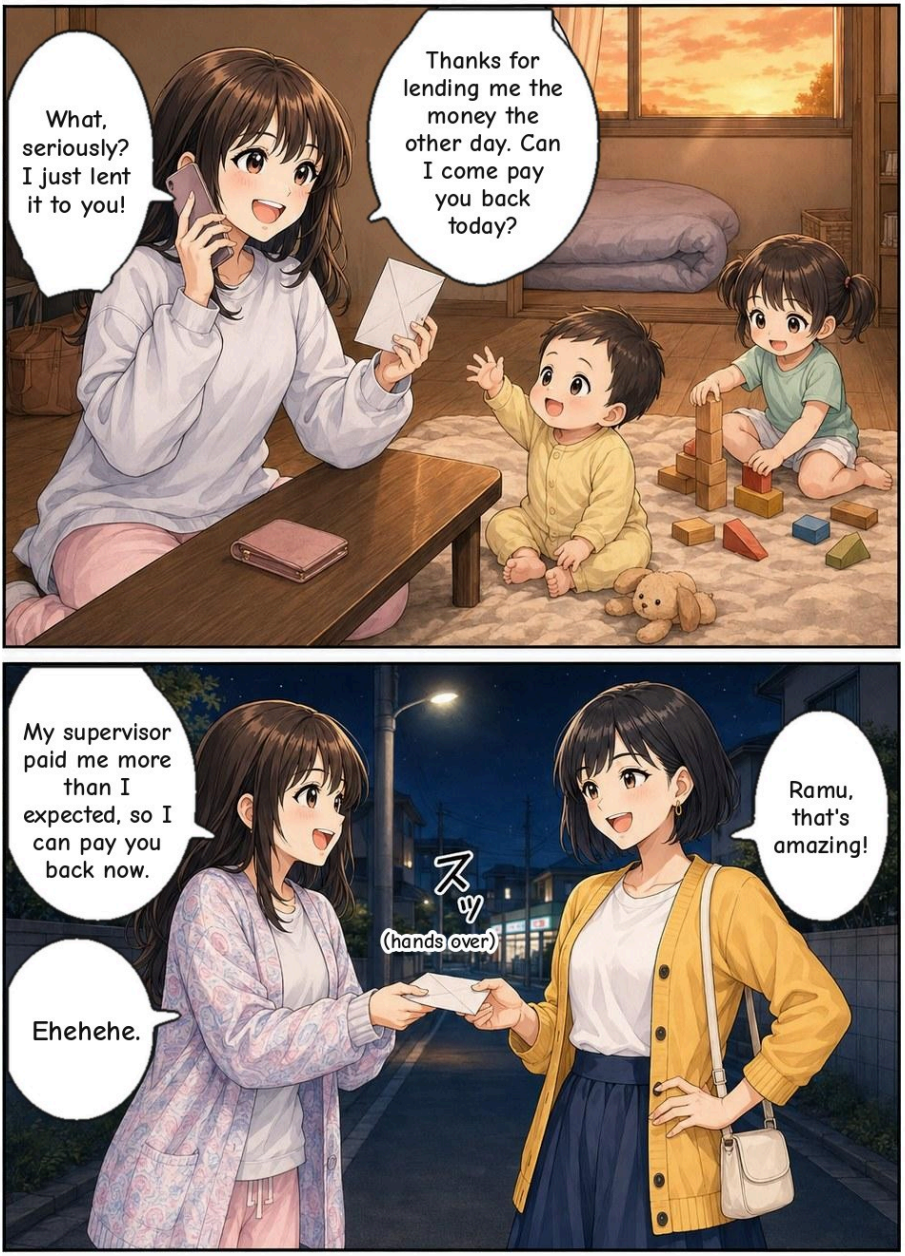

Hmmm...
うーん…
Is that a lot or a little? I have no idea...
Here's today's stock. It's a lot for a newbie, but do your best.
毎日の食卓に
試食実施中!
Chatter chatter
わいわい
お買得!
It's really, really delicious!
Hello! Would you like to try some?
Oh, then I'll take one.
野菜・果物
試食実施中!


Still morning.
Thank you very much!
ぐんぐん
Brisk sales!
毎日の食卓に
野菜たっぷり
試食実施中!
What, really? Seriously? You sold ALL of it?
ハッ
Huh!
Excuse me, sir.
Everything I was supposed to sell today is gone already... I've got nothing left to do.
Well then... could you sell these for me?
Is there anything else I can sell?
こってり醤油ラーメン


Before noon, she had sold more than the day's target stock.
試食コーナー こちら！
It's still morning...
Yes, got it! I'll go sell them!
おすすめ！ 試食実施中
本日も お買得！
タタタッ
Tap-tap-tap


ガーン
Shock!
Wha—!? Seriously?
Sorry to bother you again, sir. These are all sold out too.
だし入味噌
750g×12
しょうゆ
1L×12本


Um, what should I do now...
Wow... that's really amazing.
パアアッ
Sparkle!
Really?!
That's enough for today. You can go home. I'll add a little extra to your pay.
Thank you so much! I'd love to!
Please come back again anytime.



The story of a woman who rose from rock bottom, building connections and sweeping everyone along with her. It starts here.

"Phew. Yeah, I figured . . . there's nothing."

Ramu murmured this as she stared into her open wallet.

Inside, there was a single dull, glinting 50-yen coin, and nothing else.

On her back, her six-month-old son, little Rio, was asleep. At her feet, her daughter, now two, was peering into the wallet too.

One 50-yen coin in the wallet.

How had it come to this? Her husband at the time had withdrawn from the world and shut himself away at home. He seems to have been caught up in some kind of incident, and it is the author's view that the shock of it may have lingered.

What is certain is that their source of income was cut off, and she found herself having to support two small children and her husband.

After thinking for a while, Ramu quietly picked up the phone.

"Sorry, could you lend me a little money? Just 10,000 yen."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I have to go to a job interview, but I don't even have a suit for it, ha ha ha. Yeah, I'll definitely pay you back once I get paid."

"Wait, really? Thank you!!!"

The heroine of this story is Ramu Goto. This is the story of half a life so far: a woman who, starting from rock bottom, keeps building connections and charging ahead, sweeping everyone around her along with her.

"So, could you start tomorrow? It's in-store sampling sales at a supermarket."

The interview went more smoothly than she had expected.

"Yes, of course. I'll do my best!"

The next day, she headed to the supermarket she had been told about.

"Today's sales target might be a bit much for a newcomer, but give it your best."

But Ramu, being new, couldn't even tell whether that was a lot or a little.

"Hello! Would you like to try this? It's seriously delicious!"

Her smile, a gift from her parents and her ancestors before them, the kind that never puts anyone on guard, drew people in at once. And her lively, expressive way of talking, while it could hardly be called polished, was more than enough to make customers want what she was selling.

"Excuse me, boss."

"Oh, what's up?"

"Sorry. Everything I was supposed to sell today is already sold out, so I've got nothing left to do."

"Huh, really? Seriously? You actually sold all of it?"

"Yeah, I did . . ."

"That's amazing."

"Is there anything else I can sell?"

"Well then, could you sell these for me?"

In fact, Ramu had sold out the entire stock, more than the full day's sales target, all before noon. Am I the only one who sees a glimpse of today's Ramu Goto in this?

"Yes, got it! I'll go sell them."

As Ramu headed back out, happy to have been given a new job, the supervisor watched her go, half stunned.

"Boss, sorry to bother you again."

"Oh, what is it?"

"I sold all the items you asked me to sell, too. Is there anything else?"

"What!? Really?" "No, really, that's incredible . . ."

"Hmm . . . what should I do?"

"Um, you're done for today. You can go home. And about today's pay, I'll make sure you get a little extra."

"Wait, really!?"

"Yes, I'll tell them to pay you more. So please, do come back again."

"Thank you so much! I'd love to!"

"Thanks for lending me the money the other day. Can I come pay you back today?"

"What, seriously? I only just lent it to you."

"Yeah, but the supervisor gave me a lot more pay than I expected, so I can already pay you back."

"Ramu, that's amazing!"

"Hehehehe."

CHAPTER 1

Childhood and Family

Ramu Goto's maiden name (before her first marriage) was Inoue. Her father came originally from Hokkaido, and his family line, so the story goes, were woodcutters. In the rich natural surroundings of Hokkaido, they worked in forestry and raised sheep. He was the eldest of nine children. Even in an era when big families were the norm, nine is a lot. Being the eldest son, he started delivering newspapers in fifth grade to help support the household.

Her mother had originally been a nursery school teacher. After that, she worked in accounting administration at a securities firm, and then became a homemaker. The two married in Hokkaido, and the family later moved to Sagamihara in Kanagawa. That is where Ramu was born.

At a year and a half, she moved with her family to Oami in Chiba, and that is where her younger sister, Ika-chan, was born.

According to Ramu, she herself is "a nicely balanced blend of Dad and Mom." Ika-chan, incidentally, is said to take after their father.

When it comes to inheriting traits through the bloodline, Japanese has a word, *kakusei iden*, for heredity that skips a generation, and English has the saying "Talent skips a generation." The relationship between Ramu and her maternal grandmother (whom I will sometimes call "Grandma" from here on) is a textbook example of it.

Her maternal grandfather spent many years as a civil servant at the town hall. He also worked as an administrative scrivener, a licensed preparer of official documents. During the war he was sent to Siberia, and even after the war ended he was held there as a detainee for some time; he went through great hardship before finally returning home. Her grandmother, as I wrote, worked at the post office. To be precise, she lived there: her home was inside the post office building.

The era was the war years and the period just after. There was nothing to eat. Food was still rationed in those days, and what people received was millet: foxtail millet and barnyard millet.

This grandmother, however, was a picky eater.

"You know, back then, Grandma had nothing to eat. So I was always eating sweet potatoes, nothing but sweet potatoes. Millet and that kind of stuff just don't taste good, do they? So I didn't want to eat it."

But there were days when no sweet potatoes came in. On those days, naturally, she went hungry.

Since it was a post office, delivery was part of the job, and along her route there was an area where American soldiers lived. She would apparently tell the soldiers, without the slightest hesitation, "I'm so hungry." And then, more often than not, they would give her caramels or chocolate.

"When there were no sweet potatoes, I'd go over to the American soldiers' houses, chat with them a little, and say something like, 'I'm sooo hungry!' And they'd almost always bring me something. It always worked out."

"When I first heard that, I thought, no way! Seriously? Way to go, Grandma!"

"Meanwhile, Grandpa was stuck as a detainee in Siberia for a while even after the war ended, going through terrible things, and Grandma's off telling American soldiers, 'I'm hungry!' (laughs)"

"When I want to fix something, I don't hold back. When I think, 'I want to do this,' I just go ahead and do it. I think that comes from Grandma's blood."

Even at seventy and eighty, she reportedly still wore shoes with fairly high heels. She did whatever she wanted to do, no matter what, and that side of her was sometimes taken as selfish and self-centered. "But you know, it's not so much selfish as she just hated to lose. And we were about the same height, too. We're really alike."

To close, let me share a boast (?) that Ramu always heard from her grandmother. This is Grandma's story, as told by Ramu.

"She always told me this story: 'You know, Grandma never wanted to lose to anyone, so I was a fast runner. I really never lost to anybody. But at sports day, there was just one thing I could never win: the bread-eating race. That one I never

won. Grandma's short, right? So I couldn't reach it. I just couldn't reach it. It was so frustrating . . .' She said that all the time."

(In a Japanese bread-eating race, buns hang from a line overhead and runners must grab one with their mouths, hands behind their backs.)

It seems that behind Ramu's smile, her grandmother's true strength and fierce, never-say-die spirit are built right into her DNA . . .

By the way, her eldest daughter, Miyu, is also the generation-skipping type and takes after Ramu's mother: very kind-hearted, with a deep understanding of people and a real ability to put herself in their shoes. Her eldest son, Rio, used to say when he was little, "I'm going to build a giant shopping mall full of 100-yen shops and 1,000-yen shops!" He also said he would be a company president someday . . . a natural-born entrepreneur. Needless to say, we all know whom he takes after.

CHAPTER 2

Going as Far as I Can

Let me turn the clock back a little.

The story at the beginning took place when Ramu was twenty-one. At eighteen, shortly after graduating from high school, she married. She had her daughter at nineteen and her son at twenty-one.

Even back then, I believe, she combined a composure you would never expect from a teenager with the kind of ideas ordinary people simply don't come up with.

So why did she marry so young? She had worked backward from the shape of her life, calculating at what point she would become a grandmother. "If I'm in my forties, I should still be healthy enough to look after my grandkids. That's why I got married at eighteen!"

I can't imagine anyone else working backward from caring for grandchildren to decide when to marry, but when you talk with her, things like this just slip out: how she wants her grandchildren to think of her.

"Wouldn't it be fun if they said, 'Our company went overseas back when Grandma was running it'?" She said this to me with her eyes truly sparkling. This was in Dubai.

There is one more formative experience for Ramu, and it took place at school sports days. For the time, her parents had her relatively late. On top of that, there was a twelve-year age gap between her father and mother. "It kind of felt like my grandpa had come, and I didn't like it. So I always thought, kids with young moms and dads are so lucky."

With these early experiences and this vision of her life, she married young.

Unfortunately, though, her first marriage took a sudden turn for the worse through an unexpected twist of fate. As I mentioned briefly at the start, her husband was caught up in a certain incident, and, perhaps from the shock of it, he shut himself away and stopped going outside.

The family's breadwinner had stopped working altogether.

The episode in the prologue, in which she was driven to the point of having nothing left but a single 50-yen coin, comes from this period. After keeping up the sampling-sales job for about half a year, she moved from one part-time job to another: receptionist at an ear, nose, and throat clinic, data entry for automobile catalogs, and more.

As it turned out, that data-entry job would later prove useful in her work at a paint supplier and in auto body repair. She typed in car catalogs all day long: models, model codes, trim levels, part names. The strings of numbers she keyed in without understanding what they meant would, it seems, come in handy in ways she never expected.

Then, at twenty-four, Ramu walked through the doors of an insurance company.

Training lasted three months. During those three months, Ramu recruited two colleagues.

"Hey, why don't we do this together?"

"What, me? No way, I could never do that."

"Sure you could. Until just recently, I didn't know anything either."

Then one of those two brought in two more.

Within six months, Ramu had four people under her, and by the time she quit, she had seven.

During this period she obtained her non-life insurance license. How can fire insurance and auto insurance be used to actually help people? She absorbed this not just as knowledge but in her bones, learning through hands-on work how to help her customers. This knowledge would later be put to use on the floor of an auto body shop, and in some quite unexpected situations as well.

"When you have seven people, you have to go along with one of them to see their clients every single day. And of course I have my own clients too, right? So whenever something comes up, I have to go there.

"I was working every day from seven in the morning until eleven at night."

There is no other word for it but brutal.

At the same time, it wasn't that the work didn't suit her. If anything, the work was going well. Her client base was steadily growing.

And yet, between the sheer busyness and the endless emergency calls, a question had begun to take root: is this really all right, carrying on like this?

One day, her children said:

"Please, we want to go to Disney!"

The children knew how hard their mom was working, and asked anyway . . . "Okay, hang on a second."

Ramu opened her planner.

She hadn't taken a day off in six months.

"All right, let's go."

"Really!?"

"Yes. I'll take that day off."

"Yay!" "Yay!"

Ramu herself was really looking forward to spending some unhurried time with her children for the first time in so long.

Disneyland, which they had all been looking forward to. On the day itself:

Brrring, brrring. Brrring, brrring.

The phone showed no mercy . . .

"Ugh, I can't do this anymore." Something inside her snapped.

"It really had been so long. Truly. And it was my first day off in ages. I'm not even saying a whole day. But I wasn't allowed to rest, not even for a moment."

She decided to leave the insurance business.

Ramu was twenty-eight at the time.

CHAPTER 3

The Power to Create, the Power to Notice

Ramu once told me something about this. Her strength in sales, she said, was built on two things: life insurance sales, and route sales at a paint supplier. Those two experiences made her who she is as a salesperson.

First, life insurance sales. Insurance is something you are truly grateful for if, heaven forbid, something should ever happen, but on an ordinary day you have no need for it. So, as a rule, most people don't believe they need insurance at all.

But with people like that, you ask them to imagine their future. You invite them to picture the stages of their own life: around what age they might marry, around what age they might have children, what might happen along the way.

And then you talk it through: at that point, this could happen, that could happen; so if things turned out like this, what would you do?

Through those conversations, people come to understand that they genuinely need insurance. You are selling something invisible. You are asking people to pay every month for something they cannot hold in their hands. That was the difficulty, and the painful part, but it is not hard to imagine that it laid the foundation for her communication skills.

She would help customers paint a concrete picture in their minds, let them feel for themselves why the product was necessary, and in doing so they became her customers. What she learned was how to build trust.

The second was route sales at a paint supplier (more on this later). It might look like the easier of the two, but earning trust there came with an entirely different kind of hurdle. At first she had no knowledge, nothing at all; she didn't understand a thing. The job was basically going around taking orders.

But the owners, prickly craftsmen to the bone, would not teach you anything if you simply asked. In that world, being told "Figure it out yourself" was par for the course.

Take paint, or masking tape: there were all sorts of product numbers, each one slightly different. Masking tape alone was divided into several uses, and on top of

that came in all sorts of widths.

If she asked, "Why this width?" she'd be told, "Go study it yourself." But she didn't even know how to study it. Half-hearted studying got her nowhere.

Then one day, she realized something. People love to critique others. Nobody talks about themselves, but they watch other people closely, and they will tell you all about them.

So whenever there was something she didn't understand, she would ask at her next stop, or when she visited a president who was on good terms with the one who wouldn't teach her, and more often than not they would tell her.

She'd ask, "So-and-so over there uses this kind of masking tape. Why is that?" And the answer would come: "Well, here's the thing. He uses it like this, see, and when you do that, a slightly wider type works better than a narrow one, so that's why he uses that size." They would never talk about themselves, but they had been watching everyone else quite carefully, and they would tell her about it at great length, as if to say, "And there's more!"

So whenever she didn't understand something, she would go to someone who knew the tight-lipped body shop well and ask, "Why does he use that?" and they would tell her everything.

Repeat this enough, and gradually you begin to understand. When she visited and said, "Looks like you're running low on this and this, so I'll leave some here for you," their expressions would change. It would be, "Oh, this one knows what she's doing." Little by little, they came to accept her. Then they would start placing other orders, and even come to her for advice. That was how she built trust.

Route sales at its most cerebral.

Noticing the things customers don't say, and taking care of exactly what they need before they have to ask.

This approach, she says, is precisely what she learned in route sales.

These two experiences are what support her today.

And it was this route sales job that would lead to a new encounter.

CHAPTER 4

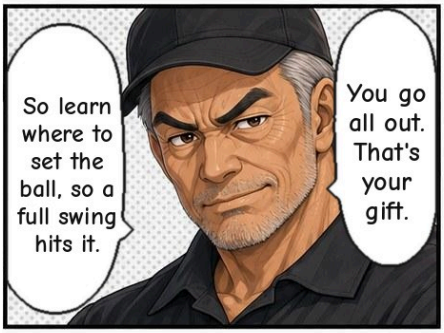
Digging In, Even Where I Feel Weak


Back when she worked at the insurance company.
Could you help out with a golf tournament for our clients?
取引先ゴルフコンペ
参加者募集！
楽しく交流を深めましょう！
Huh? But I've never played golf...
Golf is played in fours. They were short of players.
Could you help me make up a full group?
Clients, people I know, childhood friends... I'll ask them all!
Someone brought along three people. One of them was—
ギロッ
Glare
Nice to meet you!
Hah?


What a seriously scary guy...
ずーん
Looming
... Yeah.
Hello!
. . .
Good morning!
Well, he IS a neighbor...
板金工場
Some days later, she went to thank him, bringing his participation prize.


Huh.
I see.
Oh, this...
You don't
play golf?
I've
never
played.
Thank
you for
the other
day.
Hah...?
...Sure.
ズイッ Lean in
Really?
Teach
me,
then!


Swing hard!
Huh?
ブンッ
Whoosh


So learn where to set the ball, so a full swing hits it.
You go all out. That's your gift.

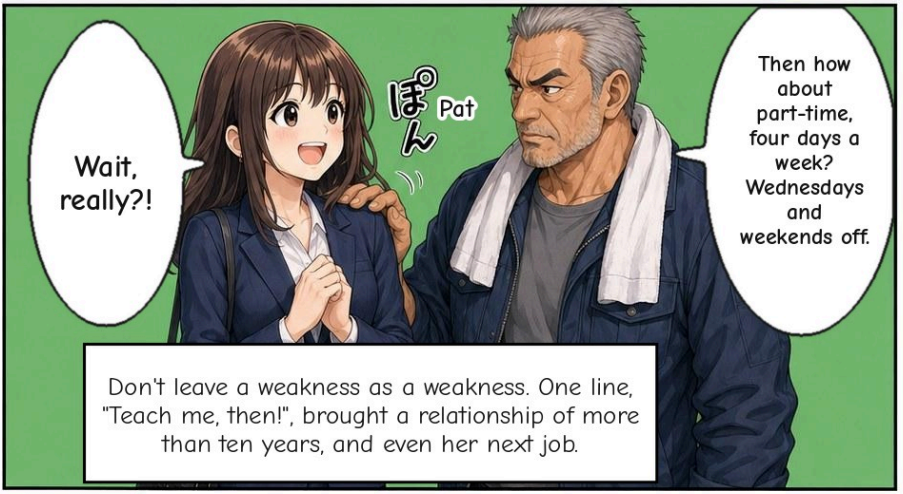

I did it!
カキーン
Crack!


Living nearby, she went to the driving range about five times a week, like a school sports club.
See you!
Yep.


Gasp!
Really?! Then teach me properly!
He meant insurance.
Break 130, and I'll sign up.
Huh?
At last, he agreed to take out a policy.
I broke 130!
Sparkle!
...Can't be helped, then.
That connection has now lasted more than ten years.


I've decided to quit the insurance job.
...I see.


Hehehe~ That's right. I don't want to work anymore. I'd like a little break.
The paint supplier that delivers to my shop is short-handed. You don't really want to work much anyway, right?


Wait, really?!
ぽん Pat
Then how about part-time, four days a week? Wednesdays and weekends off.
Don't leave a weakness as a weakness. One line, "Teach me, then!", brought a relationship of more than ten years, and even her next job.

In the previous chapter I talked about Ramu's route sales for the paint supplier, but how did Ramu come to be working at a paint supplier in the first place? That goes back to an episode from her life insurance days.

One day, her boss asked her to help out with a golf tournament hosted by one of their business clients.

In golf, you play in groups of four. They were short of players. Ramu had never played golf herself, but she reached out to customers, acquaintances, and childhood friends.

"I asked people to help me fill out a group, and one person brought along three others."

One of those three ran a body shop in Mobara.

What's more, his shop was on the main road, very close to Ramu's house.

Her first impression of him was, well, I can't put it plainly in writing, but it was terrible.

When she met him and said hello, all she got back was:

"Huh?"

"I thought, wow, this guy is seriously scary."

Still, he was a neighbor. She couldn't just ignore him. So she would say hello, and get no reply, or if she did, it was a curt one. That was the kind of presence he was.

Some days later, Ramu went to see him with his participation prize and to thank him.

"Thank you so much for the other day."

"Oh, this, huh..."

"You don't play golf?"

"I've never played."

"Oh, really."

At the time, Ramu truly had never played golf.

Then she took the plunge and said:

"Teach me, then."

"Huh...?"

"Sure."

"Really?"

And that was how Ramu's golf began.

They lived close by. He was the picture of an old-school, jock-type guy. She went almost every day. She went to the driving range something like five days a week.

Go, hit balls, go home, say "See ya!" and part ways. Over and over.

Do that, and you end up becoming friends whether you like it or not.

One day, he told her:

"Break 130, and I'll sign up."

He meant insurance.

"Really?! Then you'd better teach me properly!"

In the end, he did sign up for insurance.

That connection has now lasted more than ten years.

A while later, Ramu told the body shop owner that she was leaving the insurance business.

That's when the conversation turned to something else.

As it happened, the paint supplier that delivered materials to his body shop was short-handed and in a bind.

And this is what he said to her:

"You don't really want to work that much anyway, right?"

"Hehehe, you got me. I don't want to work anymore. I kind of want a break."

She answered honestly. This was someone who had worked from seven in the morning to eleven at night for years.

A few days later, he told her, "How about part-time, four days a week? Wednesdays and weekends off."

And so Ramu went to work at the paint supplier.

And at almost the same time, she opened her own shop: a self-whitening salon. Four days a week part-time at the paint supplier, plus her own shop. This two-track life began here.

Without those words, "Teach me, then," she would never have ended up working at the paint supplier.

None of what comes next would have happened. She would surely have gone down a completely different road.

"Teach me, then."

I think of it as the power to step forward.

She doesn't leave the things she's uncomfortable with as they are. That step became a friendship of more than ten years, and it even brought her next job along with it.

"Teach me, then."

The bond born of those bold words would go on to change the course of her life in a big way. Once again, I can't help but feel how precious such connections are, and a deep respect for Ramu's courage to step in.

CHAPTER 5

Rats Auto Body and Meeting Mr. Nagayama

The paint supplier had about fifty businesses on its route sales list, and Rats Auto Body was one of them.

"Hello-o!"

Whenever she walked in calling that out, one of two men was usually there.

Katsuhisa Nagayama, and Yusuke Goto.

"Where's Katsuhisa?"

"Out shopping right now."

"Oh, okay." If Katsuhisa wasn't there, she would talk with Yusuke.

"Mr. Goto, what are you up to today?" "Hm? Nothing much."

Whether Katsuhisa was there or not, nothing changed.

"How are you on materials right now?"

"Eh, we're probably fine."

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

"Ask him when he gets back, why don't you." "Fair enough."

Some days both of them were there, some days only one. The atmosphere never changed a bit.

Yusuke was a different type from Katsuhisa. He seemed quiet, but once he started talking he was surprisingly chatty. And he liked to argue a point. But Ramu talked to both of them just the same.

Then the pandemic struck: the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020.

Everything in society came to a halt. In Japan, too, a state of emergency was declared and movement was restricted.

The paint supplier was no exception. It was temporarily unable to keep operating and had no choice but to close. You couldn't even go outside. A whole week off.

Ramu had never had a week off before in her life. This was someone who, in her insurance days, had worked seventeen-hour days without a single day off, for six months straight.

She had no idea what to do with herself. With nothing to do, she went out and bought a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle and got started. She sat alone, absorbed in that puzzle, piece after piece.

Then her phone rang.

"Is the paint shop closed?"

"Yes, it's closed."

"So what are you doing?"

"Doing a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle."

"A puzzle? That's hilarious!"

And that was how the back-and-forth began.

Katsuhisa, it seemed, had some bitter memories from past relationships with women. He was uneasy about having a woman in his home.

"Marriage just isn't for me anymore." He said it at every opportunity.

"I've had enough of marriage too. It's not for me either."

"Huh, that's funny. Our interests line up, then. If neither of us plans to get married, why don't we try going out for a bit?"

That was how it started.

Katsuhisa was well loved by the people around him. He always had friends with him. His catchphrase was "Let's all do our best together."

And also, apparently, "I'll go on ahead."

"Actually, you know, I'm the one who set things up to get Katsuhisa and Ramu-chan together," Yusuke says. Ramu's response was "Wha-at? No way!", but I'll leave it to the reader to imagine what really happened. (Ha!)

It was not long after they had started dating.

There was going to be a ground-breaking ceremony, a Shinto blessing for a new house. Mr. Goto's house, apparently.

"Huh? What? What's going on?"

"He's building a house while he's still single. I told him, 'If you're going to get a wife, build the house first,' and he took it seriously. He's actually building a

house." "What? Seriously? How much is he spending?" "Forty million yen, he says." "Forty million? That's hilarious!"

"Want to go?" "Yes, yes!"

And that is how he got the nickname "the Forty-Million-Yen Man." And no, that is not the title of a song.

The conversation got lively, and they were even shown the floor plans.

"What's this? No, no, if it's going to be like this, you'd be better off doing it this way."

She even handed out some, shall we say, rather irresponsible advice... This was back in the days when she never dreamed, not even for a moment, that she would one day end up living there herself.

Incidentally, according to Yusuke, building the house was "my own decision." In the interest of fairness, and for Yusuke's sake, I'm noting that here just to be safe.

Before long, Ramu introduced Katsuhisa to her children.

The children said they wanted to go to the pool. She felt uneasy about going with a man she had no intention of marrying, and besides, Katsuhisa wasn't very fond of children; to put it bluntly, he said he disliked them. Still, their schedules rarely lined up, and Katsuhisa said he was fine with it, so they decided to go.

But then there was Katsuhisa, playing with the children and looking like he was having a wonderful time. In the end, he grew genuinely fond of them.

The children, for their part, took to Katsuhisa. They were having fun.

As I mentioned, Katsuhisa had always been someone who disliked children. That was why Ramu had doubts about introducing them at all. It wasn't as if they were getting married. Well, maybe there's no need for them to meet, she had thought.

And yet, the moment they met, they hit it off.

A few days later, Katsuhisa said he wanted to see her, that he had something to talk about. Wondering what it could be, she went, and he said, "I'd like us to date with marriage in mind."

"What? No, no, that's not what we agreed!"

"Hold on, hold on," she said. "Let's sort this out for a second. What exactly do you mean?"

In the end, they registered their marriage six months after they started dating. And on their anniversary, exactly one year after they began going out, they held their wedding. She was thirty years old.

And so Ramu came to leave the paint supplier.

For the paint supplier, Rats Auto Body was one of its clients. The salesperson in charge of that client marrying the client himself would be a conflict of interest.

So she decided to step away, at least for the time being.

"You can just stay home and be a full-time housewife, you know."

That's what Katsuhisa said. You've had it tough all this time, so stay home, he told her.

"Okay."

For the first time, she said "okay." She became an ordinary housewife.

Except, of course, she couldn't stay an ordinary housewife. As the wife of a body shop owner, she helped wherever she could, sorting the slips, preparing the invoices and so on. The children started school too, and before she knew it she was also serving as vice president of the PTA. She may have been a housewife, but she was pretty busy.

Then a call came from a customer from her insurance sales days. The preventive medicine center at a certain university was looking for help. Just twice a month would be fine, they said. That way, she could commute there and still remain a full-time housewife, within the income limit for a dependent spouse.

"Sure, I'd be glad to."

That was how her connection with the university began.

There, she got to know a female professor. The professor would drop by out of nowhere and look out for her. This professor would later be the one who set the gears of Ramu's life turning, the first turn of her "Haguruma" (Japanese for "gears").

CHAPTER 6

An Unexpected Farewell

When she married, Ramu was living in Mobara, near her parents' home, where her children went to school. Weekends were spent at Katsuhisa's house in Yotsukaido; weekdays, back in Mobara. That was their life. On Sunday, she headed back to Mobara with the children so they would be ready for school.

That night, Katsuhisa went out drinking with Yusuke and the rest of their friends.

At around two in the morning, Yusuke Goto, who didn't drink, drove Katsuhisa home as usual.

The call from the fire department came at six a.m.

She called Yusuke right away. No matter how fast she drove, it would take her at least an hour. She told him there had been a fire and asked him to go and see.

It was past seven by the time Ramu reached the scene. The house had burned to the ground. The police had a number of questions for her about whether there had been any foul play. There had not.

He was found lying on his back, almost perfectly straight, she was told. Later, she learned there were no signs that he had tried to fight the fire or escape; most likely, he never even realized the house was burning. When the funeral director showed her his face, there were no lines around his eyes, no trace of suffering.

They had registered their marriage six months after they started dating.

A year later, they held the wedding.

Six months after that came the fire.

And he was gone.

"In a single year, I went through every one of life's big ceremonies — the wedding and the funeral and everything in between."

"I can only talk about it like this now, looking back."

"What do I do...?"

"What was it he really wanted to do with his life?"

"But there's one thing I can say for sure. When it comes to the two of us, there was nothing left undone. I gave him everything he wanted to do — that's how much we did together. We had the wedding. He said he wanted a honeymoon, so we went, right in the middle of COVID. We really were together. All the time. So I have no regrets. Maybe it's something I can only say now, but I can say it clearly... that much I know."

She said it without a shred of hesitation.

Even so, what remained was a house burned to the ground. With the house, with the business, there was a mountain of things that had to be dealt with. One thing after another still needed to be sorted out.

For about two months after his death, someone came to help clear things up every single day. Business clients who ran their own companies, friends from the auto body trade, Katsuhisa's own friends. Twenty-five, perhaps thirty people in all... They helped with the cleanup and found almost everything that mattered.

Something strange happened. The invoices and billing statements, which should have been in the house — he usually did the paperwork at home — had been left in the workshop next door. His registered seal and the bankbooks turned up in the workshop, too. The bare minimum needed to keep the business running had been left behind, safe and sound.

There was something else she came to understand later. From the time they started dating until his death — a short time, certainly not a long one — he had introduced her to every single person who mattered to him.

Even now, if she reaches out, they all come right away, ready to help.

Back then, too, everyone pitched in. But there was no longer a house in Yotsukaido. And commuting from Mobara every day was a bit too much.

And so Ramu began staying at Yusuke's house. Yes — that 40-million-yen house.

CHAPTER 7

Supporting Company Presidents

Should she close Rats Auto Body, or keep it going? The answer did not come quickly.

At the very least, she did not feel any immediate urge to carry on.

Still, she asked around. Almost everyone said the same thing.

"If you can manage it, we'd love for you to keep it going. But we don't want to be a burden on you, Ramu-chan, so it's your call."

Being told "it's your call" made it impossible to decide. She put it on hold.

She withdrew into herself.

If she was going to take over the auto body shop, she would have to go out and sell.

But she didn't even know what she was capable of in the first place. Before she knew it, nearly a year had passed, and she still couldn't bring herself to do anything.

It was about three months before the first anniversary of his death. Out of the blue, someone asked her:

"What are you doing for the anniversary?"

"It's coming up soon, isn't it? Is it all right if we come over?"

The question came from friends who lived far away. One friend wanted to come all the way from Niigata. She could have them over to the house, but there would be a lot of people.

Even if she held a first-anniversary memorial, she didn't want it to be a gloomy affair. If she was going to do it, she wanted something that felt like Katsuhisa — something fun, something everyone could do together. What could that be?

An event?

Then it came to her. Katsuhisa had loved the racing circuit. What if they rented out the whole circuit?

She contacted the circuit. As luck would have it, that day was open. She asked everyone, too.

"If we all chip in, we can cover it, right? Let's do it!" they said.

If she was going to do this, she decided, she would make one more move.

Katsuhisa had loved bayfm, the local radio station. She sent a message through the bayfm website: We're holding this kind of event. My husband loved bayfm. I'd like to do something he would remember. Is there any way you could help?

A reply came.

bayfm would come and cover the event — and, incredibly, they even announced it on air.

As she kept moving, her spirits began to lift.

It was decided.

Ramu was thirty-two. And from here, Rats Auto Body made a fresh start.

The circuit brought about one more connection.

Among those who came that day was a business owner, a friend of her younger sister Ika-chan. This person wanted to join a certain business owners' association, but membership was by screening and required a sponsor to vouch for the applicant. Would Ramu be that sponsor? Of course, she agreed.

She was then asked to come along to the association's networking event, too, in her role as sponsor.

It was around the time she had begun thinking, All right, maybe I'll start up the auto body shop. She didn't really understand what it was all about, but she decided to go.

At her first business owners' networking event, she wasn't sure how to conduct herself. But it showed her that this was how business owners met one another, found customers, and referred each other.

If she was taking over the auto body shop, she ought to be out selling — yet at the time, she didn't even know what form that should take. For someone like her, it certainly opened up a sense of new possibilities.

One of the women business owners there invited her along.

"There's another business owners' group meeting soon. Want to come with me?"

When she went, it turned out to be a networking group just for women business owners. The atmosphere was completely different again. She told them honestly:

"Um, everyone here is such an amazing business owner... I'm sorry, I can't really do anything yet."

"All I know how to do is insurance sales. That's the only thing I've ever done."

That was when the woman business owner said this to her:

"Insurance is something company presidents don't really understand either, and it's a hard thing to bring up. They don't know who to ask. And you need a certain amount of knowledge, so there's no one to go to for advice."

"So why not turn it around and use your career as a former insurance salesperson?"

"Listen to the presidents, hear all about what's going on with them, and lend an ear to those kinds of worries."

"You're not selling insurance anymore, right? Then turn that into an advantage — be a neutral insurance advisor for them." "If it's something like that, I can introduce you to some presidents."

That is how her work supporting company presidents began. She received introductions and went to meet people. The sales support work that grew out of the women business owners' networking group — helped along by many kind business owners — took off as one referral led to the next.

She threw herself into networking events, too.

Before she knew it, she was meeting as many as 150 business owners a month. In six months, the number passed 1,200.

As she talked with president after president, she began to understand something.

Company presidents are busy. They have no time to spend with their families.

And no one knows what tomorrow will bring.

She herself had experienced that up close.

At the same time, she had this feeling:

"I have no regrets about the time I spent with Katsuhisa. We got to be together the whole time. But these presidents don't have that."

So — by lending a hand, could she help the presidents make time to spend with their families? That was the real motivation behind her work as an advisor. The way in was, "I can help with insurance and sales support."

But her true aim was to solve the presidents' problems and give them back their time.

CHAPTER 8

The High-Spec Ponkotsu

A "High-Spec Ponkotsu"?

I doubt many people will get what that means right off the bat. It was a nickname Ramu was given back in her days doing route sales for a paint supplier — pinned on her by an auto body shop near one of the stops on her route.

"You're crazy good at everything — so how come you can't do *that*?"

She could do all sorts of things, and she was thoughtful and quick to anticipate what people needed. And yet there were places, where you'd least expect it, where she just couldn't pull it off. *That's* the ponkotsu part, they said. Top-of-the-line specs, hopelessly clumsy in the strangest places. Hence the nickname: the High-Spec Ponkotsu. (*Ponkotsu* is Japanese for a clunker, a beat-up machine that keeps breaking down, and is used jokingly for someone who is a bit of a klutz.)

Most people would have laughed and forgotten about it. Ramu held on to it, and let it simmer.

Thanks to the connections she made through the women business owners' group, her roster of client presidents kept growing.

Every one of them was distinctive and full of charm. She wanted to help their companies grow, too. She wanted to introduce these people to the world through the media — was there a way to do it? That was what she was thinking.

Everyone, to a greater or lesser degree, has a high-spec side and a ponkotsu side. That was how she saw people. In her own case, admittedly, the gap seems a bit extreme...

And so she ended up actually hosting a radio show of her own.

Here is how the show works.

In the first half, the president gets to brag about the company — the business, the track record, the things they refuse to compromise on. In other words, the high-spec side. They are invited to boast to their heart's content about everything that makes their company, and themselves, great.

In the second half, they talk about their ponkotsu side.

"And suddenly, you feel close to them."

"Even when it's an amazing president, you feel this huge sense of connection. That's what makes it so fun."

Here's the kind of story that comes out.

There was the president of a real estate company — a real go-getter, and a very likable person, too. Attentive, careful service; hand-picked, trustworthy business partners; a sharp operator handling everything from big office buildings to small family homes.

This president had a girlfriend. Over the New Year holidays, he planned to take time off and go on a relaxing trip with her.

But here's the thing: she dumped him right before. On December 28. The trip was supposed to start on the 30th.

Everything was already booked. So what did he do?

Heartbroken, he went to Hokkaido — alone. It's a painful story. But, sorry to say, it's also funny. Add Ramu's back-and-forth banter, and it becomes a story that's almost "too funny."

The moment you make people think "Wow, amazing!", that "amazing person" quietly becomes someone distant to them.

Hear nothing but impressive stories about an impressive president, and people won't draw any closer. People gather around those who are willing to show their weaknesses.

The show was Ramu's idea — born of someone who understood that subtle truth through and through.

CHAPTER 9

Founding Haguruma

Twice a month, Ramu still went in to the university's Center for Preventive Medicine.

One day, a professor she had worked with at the center wandered over and spoke to her. This was the same professor who, after Ramu's husband passed away, had told her, "It'll do you good to have a change of scene, so come in whenever you like," and had kept her on.

"Are you eating properly? Are you doing all right?"

She was worried about her. Ramu had lost her husband and was working only two days a month; it was only natural that people worried.

Ramu replied.

"Thank you so much for your concern. Actually, quite a lot has happened... These days I've been talking with all sorts of company presidents, and I've started getting advisory contracts and the like."

"Well! That's wonderful! So you're the one company presidents come to for advice, Ramu-chan?"

The professor gazed at Ramu as if something had just occurred to her.

"I wonder if you could bring those company presidents to the university."

"What do you mean?"

"The university has a great many patents just lying dormant. They aren't being put to use at all."

"These are technologies we went to the trouble of patenting, and they're not being used. That's a loss for the university, and you could say it's a huge missed opportunity for society, too. Obtaining a patent and keeping it costs a fair amount of money. So we need to turn them into real money, make them create value, but there's no system for doing that."

"If you could bring presidents like that to the university, and ideally put those patents into a form where they can come to life..."

Things moved along swiftly from there.

Talks began with the university's administrative office about exactly how the introductions would work.

"The university cannot enter into formal business with an individual."

"For business transactions, it has to be with a corporation, so please set one up."

In other words, she was told to start a company.

Rats Auto Body was also a sole proprietorship; founding a company had never been anywhere on her horizon.

She made a phone call. On the other end was Yuya Shintani. Anyone who attended the wedding party will know him: he was the man who served as emcee that day.

Ramu's first encounter with Shintani goes back a little further. At the time, Shintani was at an up-and-coming mega-venture, single-handedly launching a new business: a regenerative medicine service for business owners. While looking for partners who could help spread the service, he was introduced to Ramu by a friend. The way that friend introduced her was intriguing.

"Mr. Shintani, there's someone I'd really love you to meet. She's held all kinds of advisory roles, and she sits at the center of all sorts of connections."

He accepted the introduction. At the time, his feeling was simply that it would be nice if she knew some good people to introduce him to.

One day, Shintani was walking through the entrance of the company's Roppongi headquarters on his way out. Just then, his phone rang.

"Shintani-kun, are you interested in patents?" It was Ramu.

"I am, yes."

"Want to help me bring all those patents sleeping at the university out into the world? What do you say? Sounds fun, doesn't it?"

"That does sound fun!"

"I thought you'd be the one who'd love this most, Shintani-kun."

"I absolutely love it. Let's do it!"

"Oh, good! So, by the way, how do you start a company? The university told me that if I want to do business with them, I have to set up a corporation."

"I see. Well, setting up a company is just a matter of going through the procedures; you can get one up and running right away. But what kind of setup do you want?"

"That's exactly why I'm asking you, Shintani-kun!"

"Got it. To form a company, you draw up the articles of incorporation and file the application properly. Let's work out the concept and the structure too."

Shintani saw that there was only so much he could do to help on his own. He called in people he trusted. One was Kurata, a man with a real knack for the practical work of driving things forward. The other was Kamitsuru, a comrade from the company Shintani had started as a student, who still works at a tax accountant's office. Both remain members of Haguruma to this day.

At the founding, Shintani mainly took charge of the company's concept and its initial grand design. He took Ramu's thick, heartfelt hopes and pressed them firmly into words. He gave them visual form.

They held a kickoff event, too. They invited acquaintances and friends and declared what they were setting out to do. It was the day the company first took a shape people could see.

On February 2, 2024, the university's technology transfer organization was officially launched.

The company was named "Haguruma," the Japanese word for "gear." The name carried the meaning of meshing university technology with the growth of companies' businesses, and driving both forward faster. And so the company for spreading the university's technology was born.

Introducing university patents to company presidents.

Patent documents, however, are hard to understand and hard to read; they are written in the language of securing an "exclusive right" (the patent right). A president reading one won't understand it, and even if they did, whether its potential would come across is another matter entirely. So the first thing Ramu did was ask

the university to pick out, from its enormous stock of patents, the ones it most wanted to recommend. Next, she needed a tool that could explain those patents in an easy-to-grasp way.

The university prepared explanatory booklets full of illustrations.

Armed with that information, she went out to see company presidents.

She brought so many presidents to the university that even the professors were astonished.

CHAPTER 10

Meeting Mr. Sakurai


Nagatacho, Tokyo. The House of Councillors Members' Office Building.
Just an ex-housewife like me... what am I supposed to do?
...I just have to go.
ゴクリ
Gulp
参議院議員会館


Two weeks earlier. A sake bar in Shimbashi.
Actually, I'm starting a business spreading university patent technology to companies.
I'd love to!
Pop!
Now that's interesting. There's a sushi gathering for business owners coming up. Want to come?
A sushi gathering for business owners... I wonder who'll be there.
Well then, this calls for a toast.


A few days later. The business owners' sushi gathering.
Hey, tell me more about that!
Sure!
I want to spread university technology. If you could help, I'd be so grateful!
That idea is genius! Amazing, so interesting!
I'd love to help.
Bam!
バン
A chance like this doesn't come often.
I know a member of the House of Councillors. I think he'd love this kind of thing.


A venture-company event organized by Mr. Sakurai.
Very pleased to meet you.
Can you come to the office building sometime?
That's quite something you're doing. Bring me what kinds of technology you have.
I can!
ビシッ
Snap!
...The House of Councillors!?


Steeling herself, she went in. Destination: the Budget Committee Chairman's office, at the very back of the building.
To the Budget Committee Chairman's office... please.
Reception
受付
Ministry officials, one after another...
ざわ…
murmur...
予算委員長室
Budget Committee Chairman's Office
ざわ…
murmur...
I want to bring patents sleeping in universities to company presidents.
Oh?
予算委員長室


Mr. Sakurai called in the person in charge on the spot.
予算委員長室
ハッ
Gasp!
Huh...
Get me the person in charge. Right now.


参議院議員会館
ふう…
Phew...
That might be the biggest thrill of my life...
Her relationship with Mr. Sakurai began here.

Nagatacho, the heart of Japanese politics. In front of the House of Councillors Members' Office Building, across from the National Diet Building, a petite woman holding a sheaf of documents stood looking anxious.

Her destination: the Members' Office Building, the office of the Chair of the Budget Committee. And the woman was, of course, none other than Ramu.

It all began about two weeks earlier.

In Shimbashi there is a certain counter bar that serves carefully selected sake.

Its owner was also a company president who had been Ramu's client ever since she started offering sales support.

She went to tell him that she had started a company.

"Actually, I've started work on spreading university patent technologies to ordinary companies."

"Now that's interesting. As it happens, there's a networking event coming up, a sort of sushi gathering. It's mostly business owners, but people from all kinds of backgrounds come. Want to join?"

"I'd love to." She answered on the spot.

On the day of the event, she met a woman named Mayuko.

After hearing her story, Mayuko said:

"That idea is genius! Amazing, how fun!" "I'd really love to help."

"I want to spread the university's technology. It would be incredibly helpful to have your help."

Mayuko went on:

"I know a member of the House of Councillors, and I think he'd love this kind of thing."

"He organizes gatherings for venture companies, a place to learn what kinds of businesses are out there. Would you like to come?"

"A chance like that doesn't come along often." She answered on the spot.

The day came.

She got to meet him.

He said:

"That's quite something you're doing. Bring me what technologies you have."

That man was none other than Mitsuru Sakurai, member of the House of Councillors and, at the time, Chair of its Budget Committee.

"I can come!"

That was her answer.

She had answered, yes, but...

The House of Councillors Members' Office Building.

Mr. Mitsuru Sakurai.

Until not long ago she had been a full-time housewife. To put it bluntly, just a former housewife, walking into the House of Councillors Members' Office Building? What on earth was she supposed to do?

That is the scene this chapter opened with.

"I think that was the most electrifying experience of all," Ramu herself says.

Steeling herself, she went inside the Members' Office Building and checked in at reception. Her destination was the office of the Budget Committee Chair, at the very back of the building. She entered the Chair's office and waited for a while. People from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, along with what appeared to be officials from several other ministries, came in one after another to pay their respects or take care of business. She watched it all, half dazed, not really seeing.

After the officials had left, she was given the chance to talk, showing him her materials. He immediately called in the staff member in charge.

Her relationship with Mr. Sakurai began from there.

She meets him nearly every month. He is always thinking about where Japan is headed.

Later, when he published a book, he featured her in it (*Nihon Retto Saisei-ron* [On Revitalizing the Japanese Archipelago], December 2024).

What follows is pure fancy on the author's part. I am sure this is how she thinks:

I'm still nowhere near Mr. Sakurai's perspective or the scale of his vision, but I want to become able to contribute, even a little, to Japan's revitalization. It may still take a long time, but I'll keep working hard so that Mr. Sakurai can feel it was worth introducing me. I hope for your continued support!

I repeat: this is the author's imagination.

CHAPTER 11

To Dubai

She wanted to take on some new challenge.

Work was going well. Not that there had been no trouble. Plenty of things had gone unexpectedly, but she was clearing them one by one and moving steadily forward. She could feel it was working.

And yet, something was snagging somewhere in her heart. It was just as she was thinking this that it happened.

At a networking event, she met Shimizu, a woman who ran her own business as a tour coordinator. Shimizu said to her:

"Why don't you come to Dubai?"

Something stirred inside her.

A few days later, the real estate company president introduced in the "High-Spec Ponkotsu" chapter announced that he, of all people, was going to be "Mama" for a day (yes, he is a man). In Japan, the "Mama" is the proprietress who runs a bar, and Ramu was asked to back him up as "Chii-Mama," the assistant hostess.

She wasn't there to do any selling; she took it on simply as a favor to help the president out.

Then a business owner who was a mutual friend dropped by. He was also a client who was exploring the university's patent technologies. Something clicked.

After some small talk, she brought it up.

"About where that patent technology ends up being used... don't you think if it were processed further, you could sell it for more?"

"Well, sure... that's true."

"Why don't you come to Dubai? I have a feeling there's potential there."

"Huh? Dubai? Why?"

"Well, the other day, this and that happened..."

In no time at all, she had secured one travel companion.

In less than a week, she had gotten the go-ahead from the heads of three companies.

Shimizu, who had invited her, was surprised, but even more surprised was the president of the host company, the travel agency in Dubai.

That president had come to Japan many times himself, telling people about Dubai's appeal and its potential. The response was good: "Sounds great." "I'm interested." "Let's go sometime."

But business owners who actually made the trip were extremely rare.

He even had a name for it: the "I'll-come, I'll-come scam." That was how few presidents actually showed up, in the host president's experience.

And yet here was a woman entrepreneur named Ramu who, in under three months, had brought three business owners.

He was astonished. Astonished, and he came to trust Ramu, who had actually brought them. This president had deep ties to Dubai's royal family and oversaw more than 100 agencies. Over ten years he had built his own network in the Middle East, centered on the royal family, and had come to run four companies. His core business was the travel agency, but his tours had become so popular that he had taken on many agencies. Or rather, he had become someone whom even his own agents could rarely get to see.

Yet for the four days Ramu's party spent on their inspection tour, he stayed with them almost the entire time.

The man was extremely busy. Indeed, there were days when he spent nearly half the time he was with them giving instructions over his phone. Even so, he chose to spend day and night with the group.

On the day before the last, the president himself held a seminar.

The main topic was Japan Culture Con, an event introducing Japanese culture that he had held two years earlier at the government's request.

The project had struggled to get going; even six months before the event, the exhibitor slots and programs were still mostly unfilled. He steeled himself and, with tremendous leadership, led it to success (in the end, it reportedly drew the largest paid attendance of any Dubai event that year). The participants hung on his every word. "I want to take part," she thought.

And he said a second Japan Culture Con was planned for December. Did she have any choice but to take part?

After returning to Japan, she thought it over. EVs are rapidly increasing these days. That goes for auto body repair, too, but the work of car maintenance is changing. And there is less and less of it. Her friends at Rats Auto Body. She could no longer picture a future for these kids. Couldn't she become a place for them to land?

Back in Japan, she shared what she had experienced. There was a president whose schedule hadn't worked out the first time. And once back, there were presidents who heard her report and expressed fresh interest in going. She sensed all kinds of possibilities. She went ahead with preparations on the assumption that she would exhibit at Japan Culture Con.

She also registered herself as an agent of the Dubai president's company.

In September, she was in a meeting with one of the business owners who had gone to Dubai. He was a client who had been considering a collaboration with the university but had ultimately had to abandon it. Out of the blue, he said, "The other day I went to a certain exhibition, and there I found work by a Living National Treasure. I asked, 'Aren't you going to show this overseas?' and they said, 'We'd like to, but, well...' So I asked, 'Would it be all right if I showed it?' and they said, 'Well, you're the one buying it, so go right ahead.' So I'm thinking of taking it abroad."

"Really? I'm thinking of exhibiting too. Why don't we exhibit together?"

"Let's do it!"

In December, they exhibited.

The theme was "Artist & Artisan."

It was a booth introducing Japan's artistic culture and its culture of craftsmanship.

A space of 3 meters by 3 meters.

In that space, works by a Living National Treasure shared the stage with amenity goods from Rats Auto Body.

And handling interpretation and guest service was Mr. Ohata, a man who also produces hospitality and state banquets for the Imperial Family and members of the imperial household, as well as for top foreign politicians. He stayed at the booth for all three days, an extraordinary lineup by any standard.

She was surprised at how many people there were who loved Japan, far more than she had imagined. She even met a young man in Dubai who wanted to open an auto repair shop. They exchanged Instagram accounts.

She left Dubai with an irreplaceable experience and new connections.

CHAPTER 12

Meeting RENKETSU

While Ramu was weighing a trip to Dubai, Potato Head, a fellow business owner, introduced her to someone: Mr. Ueda, president of Kireicom. She invited him to Japan Culture Con as well. In the end he decided not to exhibit, but the two kept exchanging information.

When Mr. Ueda launched a new organization, Ramu went along with Potato Head to take part. That organization was RENKETSU (International Business Connectivity Organization). There, Mr. Ueda introduced the two of them to its representative director, Mr. Matsuura. Ramu and Potato Head each discovered that they had a deep connection to him.

Like Ramu, Mr. Matsuura looked up to Mr. Sakurai and was a regular at Mr. Sakurai's gatherings. Yes, that Mr. Sakurai, the member of the House of Councillors.

Looking at the materials Mr. Matsuura used for his talk as representative director, Ramu was certain he was quoting from Mr. Sakurai's materials. When they exchanged greetings, she brought it up. That was how they learned they were both members of the Sakurai circle.

Potato Head, meanwhile, discovered over small talk that he and Mr. Matsuura had a mutual acquaintance. I will reproduce Mr. Matsuura's words as faithfully as I can.

"Oh, so you were at that big retail company. Sorry, but honestly, I don't get along with the people there. There's only one I click with: Terawaki. Just that one person."

Potato Head was taken aback by how bluntly Mr. Matsuura spoke his mind, even though they had only just met. But what surprised him even more was that Terawaki, the one person Mr. Matsuura trusted, was also practically the only friend inside that huge retail company with whom Potato Head could speak his own mind.

Many readers may not quite grasp what this means, but that company employed more than 500,000 people. At networking events, when you exchange business cards and someone says, "Oh, I know someone at your company. Do you know so-and-so?", you almost never actually do. And yet here, not only did they both know the same person, but that person was the one they each trusted most.

Each of them had their own threads of connection, yet those threads had not fully joined up. What would happen if these threads, these many separate lines, were woven together into a single fabric?

It was a little exciting. The idea took hold: create a place to bring all these separate connections together.

A dinner was held, with everyone invited. Something was kindled. And it was not only Potato Head who felt it.

Everyone must have been thinking the same thing: "I want to do something with this group. We could change something."

As an aside, from that day on Terawaki and Ramu got along so famously that they started calling each other "Tera-chan" and "Ramu-chan."

That night, the five of them talked until dawn.

I haven't yet explained what RENKETSU actually is.

It is an organization that Mr. Matsuura and Mr. Ueda founded to help Japanese companies expand overseas. It is an incorporated association, and it does not exist to turn a profit. Japan has so many wonderful products, yet they are not being introduced to the world nearly enough. Inbound tourism is in the spotlight, but Japanese products deserve far more recognition than they get. That conviction is what led Mr. Matsuura and Mr. Ueda to found it.

It is not hard to imagine that, naturally, this slotted into Ramu's mind as one more piece of the puzzle.

CHAPTER 13

Meeting "Small Madam"


Hi, Small Madam!
Whoosh!
Dubai. Between exhibition preparations, she visited the market.
It's like a treasure hunt...
Oh, this might be nice.
What's that? "Small Madam"?


A bit big...? Oh well, it'll do.
Then I'll take this one.
No! M is no good. It has to be S!
ビシッ
Whap!
No! Small Madam, that size is too big for you.
Come on, you don't even have my size.
Wait a moment, I'll look, Small Madam.


You don't have to say "Small Madam" every single time...
ガサガサ
Rummage rummage
Found it, found it! Size S. Try it on.
Okay, Small Madam! It fits you perfectly!
Thanks. I'll take this one, then.
Thank you, Small Madam.


Small Madam... Small Madam.....
ピカッ Flash!
Small, not enough, can't reach. But add "Madam"... and it becomes a strength.
Couldn't I use this "Small Madam"?


That was exactly how her beloved grandma lived.
Even if you're small, live strong with your own individuality.
In that case, I know a company president who handles interesting products. I'll introduce you.
Back in Japan, she told a business owner she knew.
So this happened in Dubai...
Really?!
パァアアッ
Sparkle!


Gold. Akoya pearls. Diamonds. The product lineup was complete.
It all came together...
キラッ
Glint
A brand that backs people who live strong, even if they're small.
スモールマダム
小さいを、個性に。
Small Madam: turning "small" into individuality.

This happened when Ramu slipped away from preparations for the Dubai exhibition to visit a market there.

Someone showed her around. It had the feel of a flea market, with all sorts of things for sale, exactly the kind of place where you might stumble on a hidden gem or a real treasure. At a shop selling clothing, someone called out to her: "Hi, Small Madam."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'Small Madam'?"

Smiling wryly, she decided that since she was there anyway, she might as well look at the merchandise.

"Oh, this might be nice." She found something she liked. She thought it might be a little big, but figured it would do and picked it up.

Then the shopkeeper's voice came flying at her.

"NO! Small Madam, that size is too big for you."

Well then, this one will do.

"NO! Small Madam, M is no good for you. It has to be S!"

"Come on, but you don't have that size."

"Wait a moment, I'll look for it, Small Madam."

"You don't have to say 'Small Madam' every single time." (She laughed in spite of herself.)

"Here, here, I found it, size S. Try it on."

"OK, Small Madam. This one is OK! It's perfect for you."

"Thanks, I'll take this one, then."

"Thank you, Small Madam."

Somehow, the words "Small Madam" stuck in her head.

"Couldn't I do something with this 'Small Madam'?"

That was where the Small Madam concept was born.

The word "small" is rarely taken in a good sense. More often it is seen as a shortcoming. I think there are quite a few people, women and men alike, who feel

self-conscious about being small.

Not enough. Can't reach. Small.

But put it together with the word "Madam," and it changes.

It becomes a strength. It becomes individuality.

Even if you are small, even if you have a few hang-ups, you turn them around into your individuality and live with strength.

"That's exactly how I live, after all."

What if I created a brand that could give a push to that kind of feeling?

That was what she thought.

And it was exactly how her beloved grandmother had lived. She wanted to try creating a brand that would embody a new way of living, through the way she herself and her grandmother had lived. That desire came bubbling up inside her.

Some time after returning to Japan, Ramu consulted a business owner she knew.

She explained how it had all come about.

And this is what she was told:

"How interesting!

In that case, I'll introduce you to the president of an Akoya pearl company, and to a diamond company."

The connection to gold was already there.

Now Akoya pearls and diamonds joined it.

The products were in place.

She felt that her connection with RENKETSU had come together. She got in touch with Mr. Ueda.

On another day, Ramu met with Terawaki. Since the gathering of five, they had been introducing each other to people in their networks, meeting often and trading information.

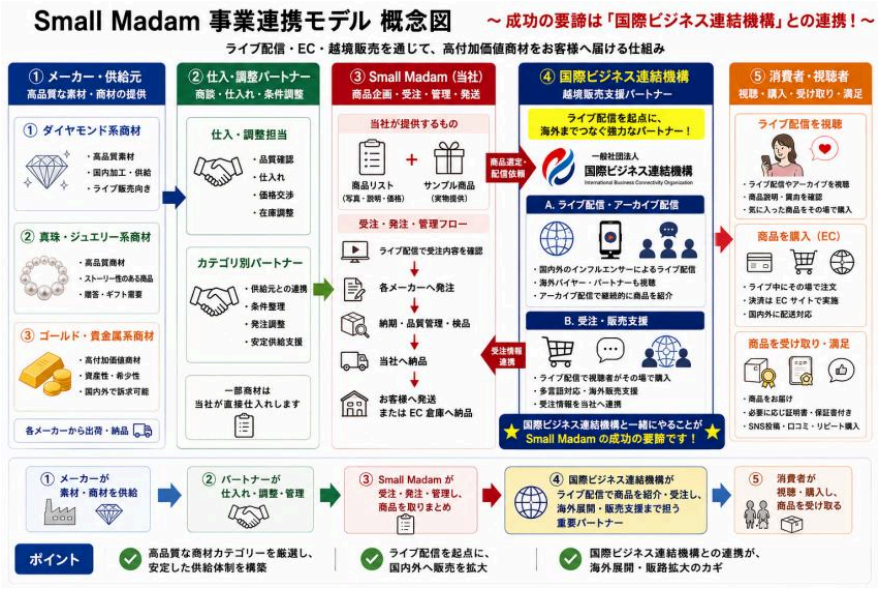
Ramu would share an idea, Terawaki would expand on it, Terawaki would bring up a different topic, and that would prompt Ramu to come out with stories of interesting technologies or people related to it.

They simply never ran out of things to talk about. That day, too, the conversation was lively. Yes, she told Terawaki about getting in touch with Mr. Ueda, about Small Madam, and about the products that were starting to come together.

But that day was a little different. Terawaki stayed in the role of listener the whole time, smoothly summarizing the business model and concept in a notebook. What had been an image in Ramu's head was taking shape.

"Tera-chan, you're amazing! Incredible!"

"We can finally collaborate with everyone at RENKETSU. We'll have to tell Potato Head too, since he's the one who connected me with Tera-chan and Mr. Ueda."



The completed business model diagram

${T.diagram}

CHAPTER 14

Tying the Knot with Yusuke

Let us go back once more to that time.

On the morning of the fire, the first person Ramu turned to was Yusuke Goto.

"Could you go and take a look for me?"

She had no idea what was happening. Yusuke went.

"Be careful on the way."

That was all she said to him, and off he went. He arrived a little after seven. Fire engines and police were everywhere.

As I described earlier, there was a mountain of things to sort out. There was also work still in progress. She juggled it all in every way she could.

Everyone pitched in to help.

I have also already written that after Katsuhisa passed away, getting all the way home to Mobara became hard for Ramu, and she started staying over at Yusuke's place.

Yusuke is a man who adores the Nagayama family. Saying he wanted to help in any way he could, he stayed by her side the whole time.

He was with her so much that she couldn't help asking:

"Isn't there someone special in your life?"

"Not really..."

So Ramu asked:

"Is it all right for me to be here?"

"It's fine. I'm sure you've got a lot to deal with, and I'm happy I can help with it..."

It touched her deeply.

The two of them began seeing each other.

The auto body shop people in the neighborhood had been watching over all of this the whole time.

They had seen everything, from beginning to end. When she was still going by her maiden name and coming in and out of Rats with materials. When she started

dating Katsuhisa. When they married, and when he passed away. And afterward, when she was staying at Yusuke's place, too.

"My friends at the body shops have been watching all along. They've been looking out for me."

They began seeing each other, and before long she started thinking about marriage.

She talked it over with close friends.

"What? Why aren't you marrying a company president?"

"Ramu-chan, I bet there are loads of company presidents who'd want to marry you."

She knew full well they were saying it out of kindness. Business owners she knew told her the same thing.

It didn't shake her feelings, but something still nagged at her heart.

Then one day, she was meeting with a client's president as usual. She told him about the marriage.

The president paused for a moment, then said:

"You know, a president is a president, after all. In the end, he spends his time on work, not on his family or his wife. He just ends up doing it. Even if it isn't like that at first. But that man is different, isn't he? I'm sure he'll make time for you and put you first. People like that are hard to find. Choosing someone who will make time for you, I think that's the best choice you could make, Ramu-chan."

She felt saved. It was the moment the fog that had been hanging over her finally cleared.

There was once a man who built a 40-million-yen house while still single, earned a nickname over it, and even had someone pick holes in his floor plans. And there was a woman who did the picking.

"You've never been married even once. Is your family going to be OK with this?"

That was what she asked.

There was no need to say it.

They registered their marriage.

EPILOGUE

Together with All of You

Well, together with all of you, we have now raced through the first half of Ramu Goto's life.

Why does this book need to exist? Isn't it far too soon for a book about Ramu? I suspect more than a few of you thought so. Now that you have read this far, what do you think?

Why? What for? Five seconds, ten seconds, it doesn't matter. I'd like you to spend even a moment thinking about that.

Since I call this the story of half her life, her story naturally isn't finished. It may even be too soon to tell the story of half a life. And yet there is a reason to tell it. Going further, there is a reason to tell it to you, the people reading it.

It is this: this book is a confirmation, shared with those who want to create the rest of Ramu's story together with her, from Chapter 15 onward.

At the beginning, I wrote that this book is fiction, a "made-up story," and that the phrase carries two meanings. Yes, the second meaning is that this is a story still being "made," made with Ramu's wish to go on creating the story from here together with all of you.

Above all, those of you who gathered at the wedding party are the people Ramu especially and wholeheartedly hopes will walk the rest of her life alongside her.

The same goes for anyone who, for whatever reason, could not be part of today's gathering but has had the chance to read this book.

In that sense, I hope you will make the connections you already have even stronger and deeper, and that you will weave new connections among yourselves as well.

I also hope that, as you introduce this book to others, new people will come to know Ramu and new connections will be born.

Counting the prologue, we have traced sixteen chapters.

Again and again, I have been made to feel that nothing in life is ever wasted.

She married and became a full-time homemaker. There was a story in which she simply devoted herself, happily, to raising her children.

History has no "what ifs." Still, I want to let my thoughts wander for a moment.

At the very least, if any of the events in this story, or any one of these connections, had been missing, I would never have met Ramu. And I imagine that many of those who came to the party and many who have read this book also met her somewhere along the extended line of her remarkable chain of connections.

And I will dare to write this: she has not achieved anything yet. (Please understand that I mean this measured against the size of her own ambitions.)

To put it another way, the preparations for achieving it are finally complete. The wedding party is a gathering to confirm that, together with Yusuke and with all of you.

Let me say it once more: a new drama is beginning.

Together with all of you.

Do you remember Katsuhisa's favorite words?

I will place them at the very end of this book.

"Let's all do our best together."

A new ark, the good ship Ramu, is setting sail.

Hoping that one day I will have the chance to take up my pen again, I now lay it down.

Afterword

"Actually, Yusuke had been telling me, 'Ramu-chan, with everything you've been through, you should write a book or something'... Oh, of course, there was you, Potato Head!"

This was when I was telling her about my plans for a new publishing-production service.

"I want to take the essence of a business, and the hopes of companies and their leaders, things that are hard to get across in words alone, and convey them in an easy-to-understand way, with the help of manga," I had explained.

The words at the top were her very first response. Thrown by a reaction so completely different from what I had expected, I laughed with mixed feelings and replied, "That's right, there was me."

And of course, then and there, my debut work, my first production, was decided.

I would be delighted to hear your impressions, opinions, or anything you would like to discuss, whether you contact Ramu directly or reach out by email.

Let's move forward together.

Read the full book online

${T.qrScan}

smallmadam.jp/story/

Contact

${T.qrMail}

About Small Madam

smallmadam.r@gmail.com

About the book & publishing

yasuramu.press@gmail.com

About the Author and Supervisor

Mr. Potato Head

For more than 20 years at a major retail and distribution company, he worked on policy, strategic planning, and new business development. He served as speechwriter for the company's presidents and chairmen as well as its business heads. He is known for his ability to grasp the essence of even complex subjects and express it clearly, often with the help of a well-chosen metaphor.

Ramu Goto

The real-life model for this book. Representative of Haguruma. While raising two children, she gained experience in life insurance sales, then went independent as a financial planner and sales consultant. She is currently consulting for an auto body repair and painting business and for a national university, while personally conceiving and preparing new ventures, including the "Small Madam" brand.

COLOPHON

Title: Small Madam: High-Spec and Wonderfully Human

Subtitle: The Life of Ramu Goto

Author: Mr. Potato Head

Supervisor: Ramu Goto

Edition: English edition (translated from the 2nd Japanese edition, October 15, 2026)

Publisher: Yasuramu Publishing

Each character in this book is based on a real person, but the book is fundamentally a work of fiction. That said, a considerable part of it is built on things that actually happened. We hope you will enjoy it, including guessing which parts are nonfiction and which parts are fiction.

All rights reserved.



It all began with a single 50-yen coin in a wallet.

From rock bottom, she kept making connections,
drew everyone around her in, and charged ahead —
one woman's life, so far.

Small Madam: High-Spec and Wonderfully Human — The Life of Ramu Goto
by Mr. Potato Head supervised by Ramu Goto
Yasuramu Publishing

NOT FOR SALE