

Kitchen



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BANANA YOSHIMOTO

Yoshimoto was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan, in a progressive, left-wing family. Her father is Takaai Yoshimoto, a radical poet, philosopher, and literary critic. Yoshimoto was inspired by her older sister Haruno's love of art, which prompted Yoshimoto to find her own creative outlet in writing at a young age. Yoshimoto experienced much more freedom in her adolescence than was typical for Japanese youth in the 1980s. She even moved in with her then-boyfriend while still in high school. Yoshimoto studied literature at Nihon University, where she wrote *Midnight Shadow*, which is often published alongside *Kitchen*. Both novellas address grieving and loss. Yoshimoto wrote *Kitchen* while working as a waitress in her first job out of college in 1987. Her vivid descriptions of kitchens and food in *Kitchen* were inspired by her exposure to restaurant life at the time. *Kitchen* became an instant sensation in Japan, and Yoshimoto was lauded by critics for her fresh and contemporary perspective as well as her clean, immersive, and deeply emotive prose. The novella received international acclaim when the English translation was published in 1993. Yoshimoto has published approximately one book a year since the early 1990s. Her writing is earmarked by her focus on surviving loss, urban angst, and existential hope, as well as her use of metaphors using dreams. Yoshimoto describes her stories as fables that are grounded in reality but contain subtle elements of magic realism. Yoshimoto is considered one of Japan's most popular modern novelists and has won many prizes in Japan for her writing, including the 6th Kaien Newcomers' Literary Prize, the 39th Recommendation by the Minister of Education for Best Newcomer Artist Prize, the 2nd Yamamoto Shugori Prize, and the Murasaki-Shikibu Prize.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Japan experienced a substantive period of economic boom and internationalization in the 1980s, which is reflected in *Kitchen*'s pop culture references as well as the obsession with buying home and kitchen gadgets that two of the central characters, Eiko and Yuichi Tanaba, exhibit throughout the novel. Around the same time, a new generation of modern Japanese writers emerged who focused on the urban youth culture of their time. Banana Yoshimoto, like her contemporary Hariku Murikami, is considered a front-runner of this movement. Yoshimoto is also often considered a central influence on the "shojo" genre of Japanese manga comics, which focuses on storylines involving women. Like Yoshimoto, "shojo" authors of the 1990s emphasized fictional landscapes that questioned traditional

patriarchal values and centered on the female protagonist's quest for self-fulfillment.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kitchen is often published alongside Yoshimoto's *Midnight Shadow*, another novella about grief that Yoshimoto wrote in 1986, based on a short story she wrote while at her university. Yoshimoto has published many novels that similarly deal with loss, hope, and urban alienation, including her prize-winning novels *Goodbye Tsugumi* (1989) and *Amrita* (1994). Yoshimoto cites Steven King's non-horror fiction as a major influence. Examples include the novellas *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* and *The Body*, both published in King's 1982 collection *Different Seasons*. Yoshimoto was also influenced by Truman Capote's writing, which includes [Breakfast at Tiffany's](#), a novella about love and loneliness in an urban environment. Yoshimoto's writing centers around the themes of surviving loss or trauma, loneliness, youth, and urban alienation. Yoshimoto is often grouped with other Japanese writers of her time that address urban Japanese youth culture, including Hariku Murakami, whose 1987 novel [Norwegian Wood](#) similarly centers on young love in the context of loss, and Japanese-Korean author Yu Miri, whose 1998 novel *Family Cinema*, like *Kitchen*, addresses family dynamics.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Kitchen*
- **When Written:** 1987
- **Where Written:** Tokyo, Japan
- **When Published:** 1988 (Japanese), 1993 (English)
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Novella
- **Setting:** Urban Tokyo in the 1980s, primarily at an apartment near Chuo Park.
- **Climax:** Yuichi calls Mikage at the inn she is staying at to say he's returned to Tokyo instead of running away and will pick Mikage up when she gets back to Tokyo tomorrow.
- **Antagonist:** Okuno; Eiko's Murderer
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Bananas. *Kitchen* caused such a sensation in Japan that the press dubbed the public's obsession with Yoshimoto's writing "bananamania." Yoshimoto chose the quirky pen name "Banana" because she likes banana flowers and thought it was cute and androgynous. In a subtle allusion to Yoshimoto's pen name,

Kitchen's protagonist Mikage is gifted a cute glass with a banana motif part way through the story.

Pop Culture. Yoshimoto often references Japanese and American pop culture in her writing, giving her stories a young, cosmopolitan feel. *Kitchen's* pop culture references include the Charlie Brown comics, the American television show *Bewitched*, and a 1980s Japanese pop song.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mikage's grandmother has just died, and Mikage is in a haze of grief, unable to sleep. Mikage's mother and father died when Mikage was very young, so Mikage's grandmother raised her. Now that her grandmother is dead, Mikage has nobody in the world and feels utterly alone in the **dark** universe. The only place Mikage can sleep is in the kitchen, which is where she's been for days when Yuichi Tanabe knocks on her door. Yuichi goes to Mikage's university but she doesn't know him well, although Yuichi was close with Mikage's grandmother. Yuichi suggests that Mikage come to stay with him and his mother Eriko for a while. Yuichi seems to glow with **light** and Mikage is compelled to accept the invitation.

When Mikage enters Yuichi's apartment, she is drawn to the kitchen full of plates, pots, and pans, and sinks into the massive, soft sofa. Mikage is dazzled by Eriko's beauty and amazed when Yuichi explains that "[Eriko] is a man." Eriko was actually Yuichi's biological father, but after Yuichi's biological mother died of cancer when Yuichi was a baby, Eriko decided to become a woman, open a nightclub, and raise Yuichi as his mother. It seems perfectly natural to Yuichi to see Eriko as his mother as she's so feminine. Mikage feels strangely comfortable in their apartment and agrees to stay, sleeping on the giant sofa in the kitchen, next to a window framing a dark sky dotted with stars. Mikage stays with Yuichi and Eriko for several months, falling into an easy rhythm of working part-time and tending to the house. She cooks for Eriko and Yuichi often and they enjoy sharing meals together. Eriko is very motherly towards Mikage, which warms Mikage's heart.

One day, as Mikage is cleaning out her grandmother's apartment, her ex-boyfriend, Sotaro, calls to check in. They meet for a friendly catch up, and Sotaro tells Mikage that Yuichi's girlfriend slapped Yuichi in the cafeteria when she heard about Mikage living with Yuichi. Mikage laughs and explains that Yuichi and Eriko more or less adopted her and there's no romance going on. Mikage dated Sotaro because she was drawn to his perpetually upbeat outlook, but now she feels more at home among the "strange cheerfulness" of the Tanabes. That night, Mikage tries to subtly broach the topic of the cafeteria incident with Yuichi but, to Mikage's irritation, he's completely dense and doesn't pick up on her cues. Eventually, Mikage has to ask Yuichi about it directly and he smiles bitterly,

saying it couldn't be helped. Mikage can tell Yuichi is touched by her concern and they warm to each other in a different way.

Soon after, Mikage goes to her grandmother's apartment to finish cleaning it out. It's dark and chilly as she catches the bus home. On the bus, she watches a grandmother soothe her grandchild. Mikage gets off the bus and sobs violently, crying for the first time over her grandmother's death. That night, Mikage sleeps soundly. Mikage wakes in the middle of the night after having a strange dream about cleaning her grandmother's kitchen with Yuichi and singing a song with Yuichi about a lighthouse in the dark ocean. Yuichi is also awake and is hungry for ramen—which he also asked for in his dream. They are both shocked to realize they had the same dream. Mikage feels as if they are standing in a brightly lit room that pierces the vast darkness of the world around them.

One day, Eriko is gracefully watering the plants and telling Mikage about the time when Yuichi's biological mother died. Eriko tells Mikage that life can be very hard, but those who never suffer can never understand joy. Mikage is comforted by Eriko's words and thinks to herself that she'll experience many moments of pain in her life but knows that she'll keep going and won't let her spirit be broken.

That autumn, Eriko is murdered by a stalker who couldn't get over the fact that he was attracted to a transgender woman. He attacked Eriko one night with a knife, and, in her dying moments, Eriko beat him to death with a barbell. Mikage doesn't find out until several months later, when Yuichi is finally able to call and break the news. Mikage feels blank and disoriented but hurriedly packs an overnight bag and rushes to Yuichi's place, feeling like she can't see or breathe. Yuichi is thin, downtrodden, and terrified that Mikage is angry at him for taking so long to call, but Mikage dismisses the thought.

That night, Mikage reads Eriko's will. Even in death, Eriko is empowered. Her will is a cheerful letter assuring Yuichi that if she's dead now, he should remember that she was—in body and soul—a beautiful woman and mother who loved her life, no matter what end she met. Eriko also writes that she thinks of Mikage like a daughter. Mikage misses Eriko so much that she feels she'll go mad and cries herself to sleep.

The next day, she offers to cook a feast for Yuichi to cheer him up. Yuichi is enlivened by the idea and rushes out to get the ingredients. Suddenly, Mikage feels heavy as visions of Eriko's face torment her. Not knowing what to do, Mikage starts to clean the kitchen. As she cleans, she starts to feel better.

Yuichi's excited to eat Mikage's food because she's a professional now. Mikage became obsessed with cooking over the summer when living with Eriko and Yuichi, and poured her heart and soul into it, feeling utterly blissful. She now works for a famous cooking teacher. Mikage feels that although the students in the cooking school seem happy in their comfortable lives, their happiness falls short of her own joy. Mikage cooks

with a profound joy that she can only appreciate because of the suffering she's experienced.

That night, Yuichi drunkenly asks Mikage to stay for a while, and she asks him to explain if he needs her as a friend or a lover. Yuichi becomes despondent, saying he can't think straight. Mikage discovers that Yuichi has been drinking himself to sleep every night and is in a dark place. Mikage imagines her and Yuichi climbing down a ladder to hell and realizes they can't create a life together in this place of pain.

The next morning, Mikage rushes to work, not knowing what to do about Yuichi. Luckily, Mikage's boss says she needs Mikage to come on a work trip to the Izu Peninsula. Mikage jumps at the chance to get some distance and perspective. While Mikage is chopping vegetables at work with her colleagues Kuri and Nori, a girl named Okuno storms in. Okuno accuses Mikage of leading Yuichi on and emasculating him, before storming out. That evening, Mikage feels drawn to Yuichi while they go out for tea. She buries her head into Yuichi's arm as he walks her home and he says they'll go for tea again when Mikage is back from her trip. That night, as Mikage is packing, Eriko's dramatic friend Chika calls with urgent news for Mikage. When they meet, Chika explains that Yuichi came to the club feeling lost and alone. Chika says she knows Yuichi and Mikage are in love and gives Mikage the address of the inn she sent Yuichi to, urging Mikage to chase her lover.

It's evening at the Izu Peninsula and Mikage walks around town looking for food. She walks into a brightly lit cafeteria and orders fried pork. Impulsively, she calls Yuichi, who sounds faraway. He jokes that there's no food where he is except tofu. Suddenly, Mikage has an intuition that her and Yuichi are negotiating a turning point and things could go either way for their relationship. Yuichi lies that he's coming back soon and they say goodbye. Mikage feels exhausted. The pork is served and it's mind-blowingly delicious. Mikage inhales it and it brings her back to life. Suddenly, she's seized by an impulse and grabs another order to go. Before she can think about it, she's in a taxi headed far away to Yuichi's inn.

Yuichi's inn is locked up tight and nobody is answering the phone. Mikage decides to scale the wall and somehow manages to haul herself onto the roof. As she lies in a puddle, clutching the pork and her arm (which is now bleeding), Mikage stares up at the moon with a profound sensation that she was destined to wind up in this predicament.

Mikage knocks on Yuichi's window and he is shocked to see her standing there with takeout food and a bleeding arm. Yuichi's eyes look cold and Mikage is suddenly frightened, feeling like she's trapped in Yuichi's pain. Mikage confronts Yuichi about running away to start a new life and tells him to eat the pork first, which he guiltily takes. As Yuichi opens the container, happy memories of Mikage's good times with Eriko and Yuichi come flooding back to Mikage like a dazzling crystal. Mikage is no longer afraid. Mikage tells Yuichi that she doesn't want to

lose him. Yuichi, who has been devouring the delicious pork, looks Mikage in the eye. He explains that he was running away because he didn't want Mikage to see him in his weak and unmanly state. Mikage thinks he's being ridiculous and cracks a joke about Yuichi tearing a telephone book in half to reclaim his manliness. Yuichi is enlivened and they joke about increasingly absurd shows of manliness. Glad to see some light coming back into Yuichi's face, Mikage leaves him to think about what she said and they goodbye.

Back in Izu, Mikage walks along the icy beach at night, looking at the dark waves. A lighthouse in the distance casts its beam of light towards Mikage and she makes peace with all the pain and joy that is yet to come. When Mikage gets back to the inn, Yuichi calls. They joke a little and Yuichi says he'll pick up Mikage at the station when she gets back to Tokyo tomorrow.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mikage Sakurai – The protagonist and narrator of *Kitchen*, whose mother and father died when she was very young. Mikage was raised by her grandmother, who died a few days before the story begins. The story thus revolves around Mikage's visceral experiences of grief—in the first half of the story, she grieves her grandmother, and in the second half of the story, Mikage grieves Eriko, who forms a motherly bond with Mikage when she and her son Yuichi take Mikage in. Mikage has lived in the shadow of death her whole life and battles a deep sense of loneliness and isolation throughout the story, though she knows the only thing she can do is keep on going. Yoshimoto symbolizes Mikage's pain with metaphors of **darkness** throughout the novel, while **light** represents Mikage's joy. Mikage is obsessed with **kitchens** and finds them extremely comforting in her darkest moments. Just as Eriko once advised her, Mikage finds that her experiences with suffering enable her to have a profound understanding of the joy that cooking fills her with. Over the course of the story, Mikage develops a bond with Yuichi that evolves into romantic love. They understand each other because they have both experienced profound loss in their lives. Nonetheless, Mikage is afraid to pursue a relationship with Yuichi because she doesn't know if they can build a life together from the dark place of their collective experiences with bereavement. At the story's climax, Mikage impulsively tracks Yuichi down by breaking into an inn he is hiding away in to bring him some delicious fried pork, which revives him and pulls him out of his dark state of mind. Heartened by Mikage's visit, Yuichi returns to Tokyo instead of running away, while Mikage makes peace with the necessity of suffering and joy in life and is finally able to embrace her love for Yuichi.

Yuichi Tanabe – Eriko's son and Mikage's love interest in

Kitchen. He developed a deep bond with Mikage's grandmother when she was alive, which prompts him to offer Mikage a place to stay while she grieves her grandmother's death. When Yuichi's biological mother died when he was a baby, Yuichi's biological father made the decision to become a woman, open a nightclub, and raise Yuichi as the boy's mother. Yuichi has a calm and sweet life with Eriko and—despite his emotional obtuseness—forms a bond of friendship with Mikage that evolves into a romantic connection over the course of the story. Yuichi is torn apart with grief after Eriko dies, feeling that he lost both his mother and his father in one fell swoop. He eventually reaches out to Mikage for support. However, Yuichi fears appearing unmanly in front of Mikage so he runs away to begin a new life but Mikage tracks him down and feeds him a meal to lift his spirits. Mikage essentially saves Yuichi from being broken by grief, which enables him to embrace his feelings for Mikage.

Eriko Tanabe – The central maternal figure in *Kitchen*. Eriko is an empowered transgender woman who runs a nightclub, raises her son Yuichi, and takes on a motherly role with Mikage after Mikage's grandmother dies. Yoshimoto leverages Eriko's character to emphasize that transgender womanhood is just as valid as cisgender womanhood, in particular through descriptions of Eriko's feminine beauty and through Eriko's own assertions about identifying as a woman. Yoshimoto also voices the guiding philosophies of the plot through Eriko. For example, Eriko urges Mikage to see that a person cannot really understand joy without experiencing suffering. Suffering, therefore, is both insightful and necessary and it cannot be eradicated but must be embraced. Eriko also becomes a mother to Mikage, which underscores Yoshimoto's view that family is not bound up with biology. Eriko is tragically murdered by a stalker halfway through the story, and her death motivates part of Yoshimoto's exploration of grieving, as well as the complicated path that Mikage and Yuichi walk while trying to navigate love in the midst of bereavement.

Mikage's Grandmother – Mikage's only living relative, who dies a few days before the story begins. Mikage's mother and father died when Mikage was a baby, so Mikage's grandmother raised her. Yoshimoto leverages Mikage's grandmother's death to motivate her exploration of bereavement in the first half of the story. Yoshimoto also shows, through Mikage's grandmother's loving bond with Yuichi, that family is not restricted to relatives.

Yuichi's Biological Mother – Eriko's late wife, who was Eriko's foster sister. Yuichi's biological mother ran off with Eriko when they were teenagers, and she gave birth to Yuichi soon after. Yuichi's biological mother died of cancer when Yuichi was a baby, which accounts for Eriko's profound understanding of bereavement. Eriko begins her transition to a woman after Yuichi's biological mother dies.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sotaro – Mikage's pragmatic ex-boyfriend. Mikage has an easy friendship with Sotaro, though she does not connect with him as well as she does with Yuichi because Sotaro has not experienced much suffering in his life.

Chika – Eriko's dramatic colleague who runs Eriko's club after Eriko dies.

Okuno – A girl who becomes involved with Yuichi after Eriko dies. She is threatened by Yuichi's bond with Mikage.

Yuichi's Girlfriend – A girl who is involved with Yuichi early on in the story. She slaps Yuichi in the cafeteria when she hears that Mikage has moved in with Eriko and Yuichi.

Eriko's Stalker / Eriko's Murderer – A man who becomes obsessed with Eriko and murders her because she is transgender.

Nori – Mikage's colleague at the cooking school.

Kuri – Mikage's colleague at the cooking school.

Mikage's Boss / Cooking Teacher – Mikage's employer at the cooking school.

Mikage's Mother – Mikage's biological mother, who died when Mikage was a baby.

Mikage's Father – Mikage's biological father, who died when Mikage was a baby.

The Landlord – Mikage's grandmother's landlord.

Taxi driver A man who drives Mikage to Isehara, where she is going to see Yuichi.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DEATH AND GRIEF

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is a moving exploration of the processes of grieving. The story, which is divided into two parts, begins with death and explores how people survive painful losses and are able to move on without breaking. At the start of the novel, the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, is grieving her grandmother, who raised her. The second part opens with Mikage learning that Eriko Tanabe, the woman who took her in after her grandmother died, has been murdered. In describing the aftermath of these two deaths, Yoshimoto captures the physical and emotional sensations of grieving, particularly the feelings of disassociation from the body, uncontrollable crying, loneliness, and, finally, finding the strength to make peace with death and find joy in living once again. Yoshimoto's ultimate

message is an uplifting one: though each of the grieving characters feels lost and sometimes even feels like they want to die, they know that survival is the only option. Yoshimoto argues that the simple act of surviving—of putting one foot in front of the other to keep going—is nothing short of heroic, and, at the same time, the only option a person really has. It's what leads people through the grieving process and enables them to connect, once again, with life.

Yoshimoto often describes the physical experience of grief to underscore that grieving is as physical as it is emotional. After Mikage clears out her grandmother's apartment, Yoshimoto shows how physically overwhelming the experience of grief can be. Mikage feels as if she's "falling down drunk" and her body is acting "independently" of her as tears pour down her face, and she wonders if she's losing her mind. Similarly, when Mikage learns that Eriko is dead, she can't see or breathe properly in her grief. The street around her feels "warped," she feels as if she's "choking," and she feels as if she's lost control of her body. For Yoshimoto, surviving grief entails allowing space for physical processes to happen and requires taking care of the body as well as the mind. For example, when Mikage allows herself to have a proper cry over her grandmother for the first time—a physical expression of grief—she is finally able to sleep soundly. Similarly, when Eriko and her son Yuichi take Mikage in, the soft sofa that they turn into Mikage's bed is as comforting to Mikage as the emotional support they provide. Throughout the story, eating is depicted as a healing force for those who are grieving. For example, Mikage saves Yuichi from a **dark** place by feeding him fried pork, which revives his body, and by extension, his spirits.

Though many of the novel's characters experience grief so painful that they want to die, each of these characters come to the conclusion that the only thing they really can do is press on and keep surviving. For Yoshimoto, pain is a part of life, and enduring pain is part of what it means to live. For example, Mikage wants to die when she learns about Eriko's death, but she acknowledges that "tomorrow" and "the day after tomorrow" will come, and as hard as it seems, she will still be alive. Mikage concludes that "despite the tempest raging inside me, I walked calmly." She puts one foot in front of the other and—literally and metaphorically—keeps going.

Yoshimoto describes the feeling of grief as painfully lonely, isolating, and hopelessly full of "despair." For Yoshimoto, the only way to get through it is with simple, everyday actions that ground people and bring them back into connection with the rhythms of living—something that, in the novella, is often symbolized by **kitchens**. When Mikage is forced to confront the reality of her grandmother's death, she says that "there was only one thing to do—humming a tune, I began to scrub a refrigerator." Similarly, when Mikage is grieving Eriko's death, she pushes through her despair by cleaning Eriko's kitchen. The more she scrubs, the calmer and more collected she becomes.

Yoshimoto thus shows that sometimes the only thing a person can do in the face of deep pain is complete the immediate task in front of them. Yet somehow, that's exactly the thing that will get them through. After cleaning her grandmother's refrigerator, and making plans to meet her ex-boyfriend, Sotaro, Mikage concludes that "In this world there is no place for sadness." Yoshimoto means that in times of pain, it's best for a person to focus on something simple and act, rather than letting their emotions break them. As painful as death is for the novel's characters, their grief doesn't kill them. They choose to press on, because that's the only thing they really can do. With this, Yoshimoto sends the heartening message that for those grappling with intense grief, days will come and go, and the bereaved will get through it as time passes.



GENDER

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, which was written in Japan in the 1980s, questions gender conventions in Yoshimoto's time through the story's central characters. Towards the end of the story, the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, and her love interest, Yuichi Tanabe, poke fun at traditional notions of masculinity by showing that Yuichi's desire to be "manly" when grieving his mother is damaging. Yuichi's mother, Eriko Tanabe, is transgender. Her backstory reveals that she was Yuichi's biological father, but now lives as a woman and as Yuichi's mother. Yoshimoto emphasizes that Eriko is a woman through and through, highlighting her beauty, femininity, and empowerment throughout. Yoshimoto thus questions cisgender bias by offering a positive representation of transgender womanhood and exposes patriarchal values as banal clichés.

Yoshimoto consistently emphasizes Eriko's womanhood to show that womanhood is not limited to cisgender people but includes Eriko and, by extension, transgender women in general. All the characters refer to Eriko with feminine pronouns throughout *Kitchen*. Yuichi always describes Eriko as "she" when referring to a post-transition Eriko. Yuichi even occasionally refers to a pre-transition Eriko by the pronoun "she" as well, to emphasize that this is Eriko's dominant gender designation. For example, Yuichi says "Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked herself, 'What do I want to do now?' What she decided was 'Become a woman.'" Eriko herself explicitly asserts her womanhood at several points in the story, for example, when she exclaims "it's not easy being a woman" to Mikage while watering the plants. Similarly, Eriko writes "I'm body and soul a woman" in her will. Yuichi also refers to Eriko as his mother rather than his father as does Eriko herself. Yuichi says to Mikage, "Could you call someone who looked like that 'Dad?'" Similarly, in her will, Eriko writes, "I am a mother in name and in fact." Yoshimoto thus asserts that there is no ambiguity in Eriko's gender designation: she is—in life and in death—a woman.

Yoshimoto reinforces Eriko's status as a woman by emphasizing her beauty and femininity throughout the plot. Mikage often reflects on how dazzled she is by Eriko's beauty. For example, Mikage is "stunned" by Eriko's beauty when she first meets Eriko, and later refers to Eriko as "the beautiful Eriko."

Yoshimoto also emphasizes Eriko's femininity through Mikage's frequent descriptions of Eriko's feminine body. For example, when Eriko is watering the plants, Mikage describes Eriko's "slender, graceful hands." In fact, Eriko is so feminine that Mikage often has to remind herself that Eriko used to be a man.

Yoshimoto depicts Eriko as the most empowered character in the story, while depicting Yuichi—the central male character—as somewhat weak, especially in his grief. Through this juxtaposition, Yoshimoto questions patriarchal values that associate masculinity with strength and power. Mikage describes Eriko as a "powerful mother" when they have a heart-to-heart while Eriko waters the plants. Even when Eriko is murdered, her strength is emphasized: she goes down fighting and beats her murderer to death. Yuichi, on the other hand, avoids Mikage after Eriko dies because he doesn't want Mikage to see his weakness. It's Mikage, the female protagonist, who springs into action and saves a passive Yuichi when he is at his weakest, which reinforces the association of femininity with power. Simultaneously, Yoshimoto undermines masculine power when Mikage and Yuichi joke about the "tough guy" trope, exposing its absurdity. For example, Yuichi jokes that he should "pick up a car and throw it" to re-establish his masculinity after being saved by Mikage. Through her depictions of the story's three central characters, Yoshimoto thus questions conventional gender dynamics that privilege patriarchal values and cisgender biases, and offers a potent counter-narrative in which women are the empowered characters, and the transgender woman is the most empowered character of all.



FAMILY

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is a love letter to the non-traditional family. None of the story's central characters are raised in a conventional family environment by two biological parents. The protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, was raised by her grandmother, who has just died when the story begins. Mikage's love interest, Yuichi Tanabe, is raised by his transgender parent Eriko (who was Yuichi's biological father but now identifies as his mother). The most central family dynamic in the plot is Mikage's found family. Mikage is taken in by Yuichi and Eriko when her grandmother dies, despite barely knowing them at all. Through Eriko's relationship with Mikage, Yoshimoto emphasizes that consistent nurturing and emotional support are what really make people family, regardless of their biological relationship to each other.

Eriko's relationship with Mikage, as well as other relationships in the story, show that Yoshimoto considers day-to-day nurturing as an essential component of what creates a bond of family between people. Eriko, who runs a nightclub, pops home every night just to check in and say hello to her son Yuichi and Mikage, and make sure they're alright. Eriko also imparts frequent advice to Mikage, even after Mikage has moved out, showing that Eriko continues to care for Mikage from a distance. Eriko's son Yuichi similarly forms a bond with Mikage's grandmother before she dies. Yoshimoto underscores that their day-to-day companionship was what fostered a bond of love between Yuichi and Mikage's grandmother. Mikage's memories of her grandmother also center on the day-to-day moments they shared, such as Mikage's grandmother's daily greeting of "Welcome home," their chats over tea and coffee, and watching TV together.

Yoshimoto also believes that the people who take time to provide emotional support, especially about difficult topics like coping with pain and finding meaning in life, are essentially taking on a parental role in those actions. Mikage often reflects on her deep conversations with Eriko, which make Mikage feel seen, understood, and supported as a person. For example, Eriko, who grieved her spouse, tells Mikage that deep joy cannot be felt without the experience of deep pain, which enlivens Mikage and makes her feel more hopeful about navigating the path through her grief. Yoshimoto shows that people can love each other like family even if they are not biologically related. Eriko refers to Mikage as her "daughter" and "precious child" even though they are not related. When Mikage's grandmother dies, Mikage describes Yuichi's grieving as so intense that it seems his love surpasses her own, even though Yuichi and Mikage's grandmother are not related. Mikage reflects, "When he saw my grandmother's picture on the altar, again his tears fell like rain. My first thought when I saw that was my love for my own grandmother was nothing compared to this boy's, whoever he was."

While none of the family relationships emphasized in the story fit the conventional picture of family, the relationships nonetheless epitomize its true meaning. Yoshimoto thus portrays family as a bond that emerges from day-to-day interaction, nurturing, and emotional support, rather than from biology.



JOY AND SUFFERING

Banana Yoshimoto infuses *Kitchen* with frequent references to "light" and "dark" to impart her philosophy about the balance of joy and suffering in life. Throughout the story, the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, struggles to connect with joy while grieving, and worries that life is really just about enduring pain, or dwelling in darkness. Yoshimoto, however, speaking through the voice of Eriko Tanabe—the woman who takes Mikage in at the start of the

story—believes that no person can eradicate pain. In fact, suffering is needed to truly understand joy. Yoshimoto argues that a person will only experience true happiness when they accept the presence of suffering, just as Mikage does towards the end of the story.

Yoshimoto argues—through Eriko’s voice—that people who have not experienced true suffering cannot understand real joy, implying that both are necessary in the world. When Mikage is grieving her grandmother, Eriko consoles Mikage by saying, “if a person hasn’t ever experienced true despair, she grows old never knowing how to evaluate where she is in life; never understanding what joy really is. I’m grateful for it.” Mikage struggles throughout the story with the worry that she will dwell in darkness and never be happy because of her encounters with death. It’s only when Mikage accepts that her painful experiences are part of life that she is able to experience a joy that surpasses the happiness of those of who have never experienced pain. For example, Mikage describes the women in her cooking class, like her competitors for the cooking assistant job, as limited in their happiness because they’ve known no suffering. Mikage, in contrast, is able to experience “bliss” through her cooking, because of her experiences with grief.

Yoshimoto uses the symbols of light and dark to capture the balance of joy and pain respectively, illustrating that true peace of mind emerges when the darkness of pain is infused with (rather than replaced by) light. Yoshimoto captures Mikage’s happy moments with metaphors about light emanating from the places and people she loves, such as kitchens, Eriko, and Yuichi. Mikage describes her most painful moments as a feeling of pervasive darkness. For example, when grieving her grandmother, Mikage dwells on the “blackness of the cosmos.” Yoshimoto captures Mikage’s acceptance of the necessity of both pain and joy with the metaphor of dark spaces that are punctuated with sources of light. For example, when Mikage finally makes peace with the idea that life is a perpetual balance of pain and joy, she describes a lighthouse that casts its light beam on the dark ocean waves. Similarly, when Mikage realizes that she can build a happy life with Eriko’s son, Yuichi, even though both of their lives have been marked by loss, she describes a “glittering crystal” that pierces the darkness of her mind with light.

Through Eriko’s voice and Mikage’s experiences, Yoshimoto asserts that suffering is a necessary part of life that cannot be erased. However, this fact is no tragedy, for the experience of suffering is what allows people to experience true joy. In other words, those who have endured suffering are the ones who can truly appreciate something that glitters in the dark.

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LIGHT

In *Kitchen*, light symbolizes joy or happiness. Every time Mikage Sakurai, the protagonist, experiences a person, place, or time when she feels warm and happy, Yoshimoto uses the symbol of light to represent Mikage’s joy. Yoshimoto establishes that light stands for joy by consistently describing Mikage’s moments of happiness as encounters with light that emanates from a character, a lamp, or the sky. Mikage always describes kitchens—which she loves, and feels happy in—by emphasizing the way the light falls in those spaces. Similarly, Mikage describes people who make her happy—typically, Eriko and Yuichi Tanabe—as “glowing” with light that draws her towards them. For example, Mikage says her love interest Yuichi “seemed to glow with white light.” Soon after, Mikage says Yuichi and his mother Eriko “shone like buddhas” when she reflects on her gratitude for finding a safe and supportive home with them. Similarly, when Mikage is able to see a glimmer of hope in a **dark** moment, she often imagines she sees something that lights up in the dark. For example, after crying in an alley over her grandmother’s death, Mikage looks up and sees light pouring out of a kitchen window from a building that’s near her. Mikage worries that her life will always be sad and painful because of her experiences with death and loneliness in her life. However, when Mikage accepts that suffering is necessary to understand joy, and that there is always a balance of both in life, she finds peace, which is symbolized by a dark space that’s dotted with light. For example, towards the end of the story, when Mikage accepts that she will be alright despite her suffering, she sees a lighthouse that casts its light beam over a dark ocean. Yoshimoto thus argues that nobody can run from darkness, because it will always be there, but they can infuse darkness with light, and that’s when they’ll find peace of mind.



DARK

While **light** symbolizes joy in the novella, dark represents pain or suffering. Throughout the story, the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, battles to connect with joy while grieving, and worries that life is really just about enduring pain, or dwelling in darkness. Yoshimoto establishes that darkness stands for pain by consistently describing Mikage’s most painful moments as shrouded in darkness. For example, when Mikage and Yuichi are grieving Eriko’s death, Mikage describes their pain as a sensation of floating in “cosmic darkness.” Similarly, Mikage reflects on the “blackness of the cosmos” when she is in despair about her grandmother’s death. In addition, when Mikage is suffering, the sky or the atmosphere in a room is often described as “dark.” When Mikage tracks down her love interest, Yuichi Tanabe, down at



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

the inn and is scared by the depths of his grief, she feels like the atmosphere in the room is dark and tomblike. Combining the two symbols of light for joy and dark for pain, Yoshimoto imparts her philosophy about the necessary balance of both in life. Yoshimoto believes that no person can eliminate suffering in the world, but only those who experience pain and can accept it are able to truly appreciate joy. The balance of joy and pain, or light and dark, thus, is represented by dark spaces that are dotted with light. For example, after feeling the tomblike atmosphere of the inn where she finds Yuichi, Mikage realizes that she can feel the pain of loss, but also the joy of happy memories, which Yoshimoto describes as a “glittering crystal” that lights up the darkness of Mikage’s mind.



KITCHENS

In Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen*, kitchens symbolize the natural, repetitious rhythms of life, which is often what pulls the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, out of a moment where she feels overwhelmed by the presence of death in her life and feels she might break. For example, when Mikage is overcome with grief after Eriko Tanabe dies, she starts cleaning Eriko’s kitchen. The more she scrubs, the better she feels. Eventually, Mikage feels as if she is turning a corner and knows she will get through her pain. Kitchens are active spaces, full of tasks that must be repeated over and over again, such as cleaning, chopping, scrubbing, boiling, and so on. For Yoshimoto, the actions that are repeated endlessly in kitchens are the stuff of life itself: the cycle of living that goes on day after day. Once a person reconnects with this rhythm, they are able to push past the suffering that throttles them and keep going.

Explanation and Analysis

When the story begins, Mikage Sakurai is bereft with grief and unable to function as she grieves her grandmother’s recent passing. It turns out that Yuichi Tanabe, a boy from her university, is grieving the old woman’s death too. In this passage, Mikage recalls how heartbroken Yuichi was when Mikage’s grandmother died. It turns out that Yuichi worked in a flower shop in the neighborhood that Mikage’s grandmother frequented several times a week. Eventually, they became close and, as Mikage notes here, Yuichi clearly loved her grandmother deeply, even though they were not related.

In writing that it seems Yuichi’s love surpasses Mikage’s own, Yoshimoto shows how a bond of love can form between people who take on the significance of family, despite the absence of a biological relationship. As evidenced by Yuichi and Mikage’s grandmother’s day-to-day interaction, the bond typically forms in the presence of consistent nurturing. For Yoshimoto, this nurturing and care is what makes people family, rather than biology.

☞ Usually, the first time I go to a house, face to face with people I barely know, I feel an immense loneliness.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Eriko Tanabe, Yuichi Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Early in the story, Mikage, who is grieving her grandmother, arrives at Yuichi and Eriko Tanabe’s house for dinner. Despite barely knowing them, they have offered to take her in while she grieves her grandmother so that she won’t be alone. Yoshimoto alludes here to a theme that many of her contemporaries address in their writing. In the 1980s, a new generation of Japanese writers emerged that looked specifically at the lives of urban youths in their cultural environment. Many, like Yoshimoto does in this passage and throughout *Kitchen*, address alienation in urban environments. Despite living side by side with millions of people, many people in large cities like Tokyo feel isolated and lonely. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Yoshimoto’s answer is to lean into the bonds that are forged by happenstance, because such connections are precious and can become a person’s chosen family.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Kitchen* published in 2006.

Part 1: Kitchen Quotes

☞ When he saw my grandmother’s picture on the altar, again his tears fell like rain. My first thought when I saw that was that my love for my own grandmother was nothing compared to this boy’s, whoever he was. He looked that sad.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage’s Grandmother, Yuichi Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

☝ This was his mother? Dumbfounded I couldn't take my eyes off her. Hair that rustled like silk to her shoulders; the deep sparkle of her long, narrow eyes; well-formed lips, a nose with a high, straight bridge—the whole of her face gave off a marvelous light that seemed to vibrate with life force.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Eriko Tanabe

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage has just arrived for dinner at the Tanabes' apartment, and Yuichi's mother comes breezing in on a break from work. As Yoshimoto's detailed description shows, Mikage is mesmerized because Eriko is so beautiful. At this stage in the story, the reader does not yet know that Eriko is a transgender woman. Yoshimoto thus immediately introduces the character of Eriko as a mother, as a woman, and as a beautiful, deeply feminine woman before anything else is known about her. In this way, Yoshimoto clearly establishes Eriko's status as a woman upfront, asserting a claim that will be reiterated throughout the story: transgender womanhood is as legitimate as cisgender womanhood.

Yoshimoto also uses the symbol of light here, as she does throughout the body, to capture people, places, and experiences that manifest happiness for Mikage, as Eriko soon will when she takes Mikage in and loves her as a daughter.

☝ Yes, but. Could *you* call someone who looked like that 'Dad?'

Related Characters: Yuichi Tanabe (speaker), Mikage Sakurai, Eriko Tanabe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Eriko has just breezed in and out of the apartment after being described as a dazzlingly beautiful woman. Here, Yoshimoto informs the reader that Eriko is a transgender

woman through the voice of Yuichi, who explains that Eriko was Yuichi's biological father, though she has since transitioned gender. As this quote shows, Yuichi is clearly much more comfortable calling Eriko his mother than his father, reinforcing Yoshimoto's view that transgender womanhood is legitimate and worthy of recognition and respect. Mikage responds to Yuichi's question by saying that he makes perfect sense, which is another moment that allows Yoshimoto to normalize this non-traditional arrangement as just as valid as a more conventional one—in which a child is raised by cisgender biological parents—as she will continue to do throughout the story.

☝ You're a good kid, too.

Related Characters: Eriko Tanabe (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Mikage Sakurai

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Eriko has just been discussing her son Yuichi's emotional reticence but concludes that Yuichi is a "good kid." Turning to Mikage—who has since moved in with the Tanabes and is having one of her regular heart-to-heart talks with Eriko—Eriko tells her that she, too, is a "good kid." The repetition of this phrase aligns Mikage with Yuichi in Eriko's eyes, and renders explicit Eriko's view that Mikage is like a daughter to her, even though they are not related by blood or marriage. The evolving emotional bond between Eriko and Mikage—nurtured by frequent chats like this and genuine care and compassion—is what makes them family. Yoshimoto thus argues, as she does throughout the story, that biology has much less to do with being family than emotional nurturing does.

☝ We would spend a little time together before bed, sometimes drinking coffee, sometimes green tea, eating cake and watching TV.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage's Grandmother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 20**Explanation and Analysis**

Early in the story, Mikage fondly recalls typical evenings with her grandmother who raised her. Mikage's poignant recollection of a deceptively simple daily ritual shows that the bond of family between two people evolves by such means: daily nurturing and day-to-day care. For Yoshimoto, Mikage's grandmother's simple act of welcoming Mikage home every evening and having a cup of tea or coffee with Mikage illustrates the kind of companionship that, over time, fosters a bond of parental love. This is indeed how the bond between Mikage, Eriko, and Yuichi grows so strong, as they talk, cook, and live like family, caring for one another each and every day.

☝ Little by little, light and air came into my heart.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Eriko Tanabe, Mikage's Grandmother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 21**Explanation and Analysis**

Mikage has been living with the Tanabes for a few months and she has fallen into an easy rhythm of simple daily activities: working, cooking, cleaning, watching TV. As time passes, Mikage finds that her spirits are beginning to lift, her grief is becoming more bearable, and she is gradually growing happier. This rhythm of living day to day by doing ordinary things is what Yoshimoto argues will help a person overcome their grief. Bereavement feels insurmountable, yet often, just managing to get by and doing simple things every day—be it eating a meal or cleaning the kitchen—is what will pull a person out of their despair and reconnect them with the rhythm of living.

☝ I loved the Tanabes' sofa as much as I loved their kitchen. I came to crave sleeping on it [...] I slept like a baby. There wasn't anything more I wanted: I was happy.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage's Grandmother, Yuichi Tanabe, Eriko Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22**Explanation and Analysis**

Mikage has been living with the Tanabes for a few months and reflects on the sofa she sleeps on, which, fittingly, is in the kitchen—a space she feels uniquely connected to and comforted by. Beyond that, the sofa itself is large, soft, and comforting. When she first arrived at the Tanabes it proved a welcome break from the hard kitchen floor she'd been sleeping on at her grandmother's place in an attempt to cure her insomnia. Yoshimoto alludes here to another central claim in her exploration of grief. For Yoshimoto, grief is as physical an experience as it is a mental one. In many cases, providing some physical comfort—such as a good meal or a comfortable place to sleep—will alleviate someone's suffering to a great degree. Even the simple act of sleeping on a plush sofa has profound effects on Mikage's ability to lift her mood and push past the depths of her grief.

☝ When I opened the door, I shuddered. It was like coming back to a stranger's house. Cold and dark, not a sigh to be heard. Everything there, which should have been so familiar, seemed to be turning away from me [...] there was only one thing to do—humming a tune, I began to scrub the refrigerator.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22**Explanation and Analysis**

After a few months away, Mikage returns to her grandmother's apartment to start clearing it out. In this passage, Yoshimoto uses the metaphor of darkness to represent Mikage's suffering. The disorienting pain of Mikage's grandmother's death is symbolized by the cold, dark, unfamiliar feeling apartment. This passage exemplifies a central feature of Yoshimoto's advice for coping with grief: very often, the best thing to do when grappling with profound grief is to complete the immediate task ahead. Mikage knows she must clean the apartment, so that's exactly what she does. The act of cleaning the kitchen—a space that, for Yoshimoto symbolizes the rhythm of living—reconnects Mikage with a feeling of life and the cold unfamiliarity of the death-laden apartment starts to

dissipate.

☝ It was like watching *Bewitched*.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Eriko Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage is living with the Tanabes and marvels here at their ability to just plug along as normal, despite Mikage's strange interjection into their lives as the grieving young woman living on their sofa. Yoshimoto uses the metaphor of the American television show *Bewitched*—which centers on the life of a witch who's attempting to live as a suburban housewife—to capture the juxtaposition of the strange and the everyday that the Tanabes take on the chin without a second thought. The metaphor is also a trademark of sorts for Yoshimoto, who often uses metaphors from pop culture in her writing, giving her prose a distinctively young, fresh, cosmopolitan feel.

☝ It was like being falling-down-drunk. My body was independent of me. Before I knew it, tears were flooding out.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage's Grandmother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage has just finished clearing out her grandmother's apartment and is feeling a bit worn down. As she trundles back to the Tanabes on a crowded bus, she sees a grandmother soothing her grandchild and is shocked to realize she's crying. Unable to stop, Mikage stumbles off the bus and finds herself sobbing uncontrollably. Yoshimoto's exploration of the processes of grief focuses here on the sensation of disassociation from the body. Several times in the story, when a character is grieving, they experience a sensation of disconnection in which the body takes over to

process—or perhaps even release—some of the mental anguish. In the story, this feeling is typically accompanied by disorientation, sensory deprivation, and uncontrollable crying, which Yoshimoto vividly describes as a core physical experience in the process of grieving.

☝ Looking up, I saw white steam rising, in the dark, out of a brightly lit window overhead. I listened. From inside came the sound of happy voices at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging. It was a kitchen. I was puzzled, smiling about how I had just gone from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful. I stood up, smoothed down my skirt, and started back for the Tanabes'.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Eriko Tanabe, Mikage's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34-35

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage has just stumbled off a bus after clearing out her grandmother's apartment because she realizes she's crying and can't stop. Bent over in an alley, she succumbs to the experience and lets herself have a long, full cry over her grandmother's death for the first time. Immediately after, she sees a kitchen window and starts to feel better. Yoshimoto here uses two of her central symbols in the story to capture Mikage's feelings: light in the dark, and kitchens.

Mikage is distraught with grief. Unsurprisingly, once she lets it out and has a proper cry, she starts to feel better. Mikage's lifted spirits in the midst of her grief are represented by the beam of light from the kitchen window that shines in the darkness. Yoshimoto often uses the metaphor of a light that penetrates the darkness—as she does here—to capture moments of hope in the midst of pain. Elsewhere, the same metaphor alludes to making peace with the presence of both joy and pain in life.

It's also important that the light comes from a kitchen. Just as Mikage is feeling broken by the pain of death, she hears the sounds of living—food cooking, people talking, pots and pans clanging. Kitchens symbolize the rhythm of day-to-day life for Yoshimoto. The familiar sound of life continuing on as normal in this kitchen revives Mikage, warms her spirit, and gives her the strength to keep going.

☝ Yes. But if a person hasn't ever experienced true despair, she grows old never knowing how to evaluate where she is in life; never understanding what joy really is.

Related Characters: Eriko Tanabe (speaker), Mikage Sakurai

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mikage is having one of her regular heart-to-hearts with Eriko, which comprise the regular emotional nurturing that helps Eriko and Mikage develop a bond of family. Through Eriko's voice, Yoshimoto imparts one of her central philosophies and guiding motifs of the story. Eriko explains that some people have easy, happy, comfortable lives. Other people, however are almost broken by the suffering they experience. Eriko, who is comforting Mikage in her grief, tells her not to despair for enduring the pain of death and suffering, because her pain—as difficult as it is—is also a gift. It will give Mikage a profound understanding and appreciation of joy that perpetually happy people will never have.

highlights the very real threat of violence that the transgender community faces in Yoshimoto's society and elsewhere. Lastly, it shows that although Eriko is murdered, her death does nothing to disempower her. She won't go down without a fight, and though she dies, she is not defeated. Yoshimoto's description reinforces Eriko—as a transgender woman—as the dominant empowered figure in the story, even at the moment of her death.

☝ She, too, is a very precious child of mine.

Related Characters: Eriko Tanabe (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe, Mikage Sakurai

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after learning that Eriko was murdered several months ago, Mikage is at Yuichi's place reading Eriko's will. In it, Eriko advises Yuichi to lean on Mikage for support, and describes Mikage as her "precious child." The will—which reads as a manifesto of sorts for several of the story's core arguments—asserts that Eriko loved Mikage as a daughter. Yoshimoto here legitimizes Mikage's status as Eriko's family. Despite the fact that they were not related by blood or marriage, Eriko and Mikage formed a parent-child bond through Eriko's consistent nurturing, emotional support, and day-to-day contact with Mikage. It's these things, for Yoshimoto, that make somebody a parent, rather than their biological relationship with a child.

Part 2: Full Moon Quotes

☝ One night, screaming that he had been made a fool of he lunged at her with a knife. Eriko, wounded, grabbed a barbell off the bar—it was part of the club's decor—with both hands and beat him to death. "There!" she said. "Self-defense, that makes us even." Those were her last words.

Related Characters: Eriko Tanabe (speaker), Eriko's Stalker / Eriko's Murderer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

The second part of *Kitchen* opens with Mikage learning—several months after the fact—that Eriko has been murdered by a stalker. The description of the murder, captured here, reflects how strong and empowered Eriko is. Even in the moment of her death, Eriko fights back.

Eriko's death functions in several ways. It drives forward Yoshimoto's exploration of grief, which will shift to center here on Mikage and Yuichi's grief over Eriko. It also

☝ For an instant I had a vision of Eriko's smiling face, and my heart turned over. I felt an urge to get moving. It looked to me like the kitchen had not been used in quite a while. It was somewhat dirty and dark. I began to clean. I scrubbed the sink with scouring powder, wiped off the burners, washed the dishes, sharpened the knives. I washed and bleached all the dish towels and while watching them go round and round in the dryer I realized that I had become calmer.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Eriko Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: **Page Number:** 56**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Mikage is on the sofa at Yuichi's apartment, feeling distraught after learning about Eriko's tragic death. The pain of Eriko's memory is crippling, but once again, Mikage gets up and decides to do something—anything—so she sets out to clean the kitchen, which looks a little dingy. As Mikage methodically cleans the kitchen, her mood begins to lift. Kitchens, which symbolize the daily rhythm of living, are exactly what Mikage needs at this juncture. Yoshimoto asserts throughout the story that very often when a person feels suffocated by their grief, the best thing to do is to complete a small, regular task. The rhythm of performing a simple task—such as washing or scrubbing—reconnects the griever with a feeling of living, and the halting force of death begins to lift.

☹️ They had been taught, probably by caring parents, not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness regardless of what they were doing. [...] What I mean by “their happiness” is living a life untouched as much as possible by the knowledge that we are really, all of us, alone. That's not a bad thing. [...] But—that one summer of bliss. In that kitchen [...] Having known such joy, there was no going back.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Mikage's Boss / Cooking Teacher , Mikage's Grandmother**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 59**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Mikage has moved out of the Tanabes' and is working as a cooking teacher's assistant, having discovered a passion for cooking while she lived with the Tanabes, using it as a way to process her grief over her grandmother's death. Reflecting on why she got the job despite having such little experience, Mikage acknowledges that it's because her encounters with pain have enabled her to latch on to her encounters with joy with a fierceness that no complacently happy person can. Mikage cooks as if she's cooking for her life, and it shows. Mikage has manifested Eriko's prediction. Eriko once told Mikage that people who experience suffering are able to truly appreciate joy because they don't take it for granted, and both Eriko and Mikage are proof of

that.

☹️ Nothing, nothing at all has any flavor for me know.

Related Characters: Yuichi Tanabe (speaker), Eriko Tanabe , Mikage Sakurai**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 76**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Mikage is having tea with Yuichi shortly after they reconnected over Eriko's death. Mikage is attempting to comfort Yuichi and bring him back to life a bit. Yuichi, struggling in his deep grief, exclaims with despair that nothing tastes of anything. Yoshimoto rounds out her exploration of the physical effects of grief with Yuichi's statement here. Elsewhere in the story, Mikage's experiences of grief make her feel disconnected from her senses. At times she feels like she can't see and other times she's blank, unable to process any sensory input. Yuichi, too, feels as if he has lost connection with his senses, here lamenting the loss of his sense of taste. Yoshimoto thus—through consistent descriptions of sensory deprivation—captures this aspect of the long-lasting physical effects of bereavement.

☹️ I realized that the world did not exist for my benefit. It followed that the ratio of pleasant to unpleasant things around me would not change. It wasn't up to me. It was clear that the best thing to do was to adopt a sort of muddled cheerfulness.

Related Characters: Eriko Tanabe (speaker), Yuichi's Biological Mother , Mikage Sakurai**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 81**Explanation and Analysis**

Yoshimoto often speaks through Eriko—the central matriarch of the story—to impart her core philosophies in the story. Here, Mikage is poignantly recalling a conversation she had with Eriko when Eriko was still alive. Eriko has just been describing her wife's death. When Yuichi's biological mother was dying of cancer, she asked

Eriko to take away the plant in her room to save it from the atmosphere of death, but the plant—a pineapple—withered anyway.

Eriko uses this example to explain an important realization to Mikage, which is captured in this quote. Life is full of both pain and joy. Nobody can erase pain from the world, or cause suffering to go away; it will always be there. The best thing a person can do is to embrace the presence of pain and make peace with it, knowing that there will also be joy. The acceptance of both suffering and joy is what enables peace of mind, which Yoshimoto describes as a “muddled cheerfulness.” At this stage in the story, Mikage is still seeking peace of mind, but she has not quite yet been able to embody Eriko’s words of wisdom.

☝ But right now there’s this *katsudon*. Go ahead, eat it.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage has just traveled through the night in a taxi with some delicious takeout food which she bought for Yuichi on a whim. Yuichi is struggling in his grief and ran away to an inn with the intention of leaving Tokyo forever. Mikage, sensing that their relationship is at a critical juncture, impulsively sprang into action, managed to break into the inn, and convinces Yuichi to eat something, hoping it will ease his troubled mind and knock some sense into him.

Here, Yoshimoto subverts a traditional patriarchal narrative by inverting it. Whereas a conventional story might have a damsel in distress who’s saved by a dashing young hero, Yoshimoto situates Yuichi—the central male figure in the story—as the passive person in distress, while Mikage, the female protagonist, springs into action as the hero. Her actions effectively save Yuichi and draw him back from the brink of despair.

☝ Will you tear a telephone book in half for me?

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Yuichi Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Mikage, having tracked a grieving Yuichi down, has just confronted Yuichi about her feelings for him. Mikage thinks Yuichi shouldn’t run away, but embrace a relationship with her as she wants to go through life with him, whatever it throws at them. Yuichi sheepishly admits that he was running away because he felt emasculated by his grief, and was afraid of Mikage seeing him as unmanly. Mikage immediately dismisses this by quipping back with this question, suggesting a comically absurd show of masculinity might put Yuichi more at ease.

Continuing her subversion of patriarchal values, Yoshimoto shows, through Mikage and Yuichi’s jokes about absurd shows of manliness, that the categorial association of masculinity with physical power is both damaging and ridiculous. There are times when a man does need to be vulnerable and accept help. In such times, the “tough guy” trope is inapplicable, and really has no more substance than a banal cliché.

☝ The endless sea was shrouded in darkness. I could see the shadowy forms of gigantic, rugged crags against which the waves were crashing. While watching them I felt a strange, sweet sadness. In the biting air I told myself, there will be so much pleasure, so much suffering. With or without Yuichi. The beacon of a faraway lighthouse revolved. It turned its light toward me, then turned away, forming a pathway of light on the waves. Nodding to myself, my nose dripping, I returned to my room.

Related Characters: Mikage Sakurai (speaker), Eriko Tanabe, Yuichi Tanabe

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

The story is drawing to a close, and Mikage has just returned to Izu after reviving Yuichi with some delicious takeout pork. Mikage is walking along the seashore at night and realizes that she is somehow at peace. Throughout the story, Mikage has been struggling with the thought that adulthood is really just the acknowledgment that life is full of pain and all a person can do is endure it. Earlier in the

story, Eriko advised Mikage that life contains a balance of joy and pain, and it was Eriko's acceptance of both that allowed her to make peace with life, and find happiness. As the story draws to a close, Mikage finally makes peace with the presence of suffering and is able to connect with both

the pain and the joy of her life's memories to date, which is captured as a "strange, sweet sadness." Mikage's realization is symbolized by the lighthouse that casts a beam of light across the dark ocean waves, infusing the darkness with light.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: KITCHEN

Mikage Sakurai's favorite place is the **kitchen**. She thinks lived-in kitchens, with "vegetable droppings," tea towels, and fully stocked fridges are the best ones. She even hopes that when it's time to die, she'll draw her last breath in a kitchen.

Mikage was raised by her grandmother, as her own mother and father died young. Her grandfather died when she was a teenager. Mikage's grandmother died the other day, which took Mikage by surprise. The idea that she's now alone in the world feels **dark** and unreal, like the "blackness of the cosmos." When it happened, she couldn't sleep. After a few days she dragged her futon into the "deathly silent" **kitchen**, curled up by the refrigerator, and lulled herself to sleep as it hummed beside her. Even though she feels listless, she knows that "Reality is wonderful" and thinks about pulling herself together, packing, and moving to a new place, but it all seems overwhelming, so she does nothing.

One day, the doorbell rings. It's Yuichi Tanabe, who goes to Mikage's university. Mikage doesn't know Yuichi well, though it seems he knew her grandmother, as he came to the house in tears when Mikage's grandmother died and helped Mikage organize the funeral. Yuichi suggests that Mikage come to stay with him and his mother for a while. Mikage is dazed, but she blankly agrees. She doesn't understand why, but she feels as if she's bewitched. She hears a "spirit call [her] name." Yuichi seems to "glow with white **light**" that draws her towards him.

Later, Mikage walks in to Yuichi's place, noticing an enormous sofa in the middle of the **kitchen**. Yuichi makes tea while Mikage explores the kitchen, mesmerized by **light** bouncing off plates, sparkling glasses, appliances, and serving dishes of all sizes. Mikage usually feels painfully lonely when she's at the homes of people she doesn't know. She thinks about how she has no blood ties to anybody in this world, as the **dark** night stretches into the "unbounded loneliness" of the infinite cosmos beyond the window around her. Mikage wonders why Yuichi invited her over, and he responds matter of factly that he figures she's having a hard time. Just as casually, Yuichi suggests that Mikage move in, and Mikage is deeply moved.

Mikage loves kitchens because they are places where living happens: people cook, clean, chop, and repeat day in and day out. The reader will soon learn that kitchens are an important healing tool for Mikage as she navigates grief.



Mikage comes from a non-traditional family environment, as she was raised by her grandmother for most of her life. Yoshimoto uses the metaphor of darkness to capture Mikage's suffering. The world feels dark because Mikage has lost the last person she was related to in the world and feels alone in the vastness of the universe. Yoshimoto shows that sleeplessness and lethargy physical aspects of the grieving process. Mikage is able to sleep by the refrigerator because it's the most lifelike thing in the apartment, chugging away as usual.



Yuichi's relationship with Mikage's grandmother shows that a familial or loving bond can form between two unrelated people, a theme Yoshimoto will explore further throughout the story. Just as darkness represents suffering, light represents joy or happiness. Yuichi has extended an opportunity for support to an isolated, grieving Mikage, which is why she senses light around him.



The Tanabes' kitchen feels mesmerizingly full of life to Mikage, which is why she notices the way the dishes sparkle with light. When Mikage's thoughts shift to her bereavement and sense of isolation, the atmosphere feels like a vast darkness. Mikage's loneliness in unfamiliar spaces is a function of two things: first, Mikage didn't have much family and always felt relatively alone in the world. Second, Yoshimoto alludes to the disconnected feeling of urban life, where millions of people live side by side but don't know each other at all.



All of a sudden, a woman bursts in who is so beautiful that Mikage gasps. Her name is Eriko, and she's Yuichi's mother. Eriko has silky hair, long legs, and sparkling eyes, and she radiates with **light** that "vibrate[s] with life force." Eriko welcomes Mikage warmly, explains that she'll be stuck at work tonight but will be around in the morning, and dashes out the door. Yuichi runs after her to drive her, and yells back at Mikage to stay put and watch TV. When Yuichi returns, he teases Mikage about Eriko's beauty, and confides to Mikage that "Eriko was a man a long time ago." Yuichi calls Eriko "mother" because "Could *you* call someone who looked like that 'Dad?'" Mikage agrees that Yuichi makes an excellent point.

Yuichi explains that Eriko eloped with Yuichi's biological mother—a strange-looking woman with short hair—when they were young. Before that, they had grown up together as foster siblings. When Yuichi's biological mother died when Yuichi was a baby, Eriko quit her job, thought about what to do next, and decided to "become a woman." Eriko had surgery, bought a nightclub, and raised Yuichi by herself. Mikage is amazed at the story. Mikage feels like she can trust their kitchen, and she likes the way their faces shine **light** "like buddhas when they smiled."

Yuichi goes to bed. Mikage showers and settles into the "delectable" sofa, surrounded by plants, knowing that she'll sleep well. She peeks at the **kitchen** one more time, and smiles to herself, thinking it's funny that even here she sleeps next to the kitchen. Outside the window, the rain has stopped, and the sky has filled with the **light** of twinkling stars. Somehow, Mikage doesn't feel lonely, and her mind is eased from the painful sadness that has enveloped her since her grandmother died. She feels peaceful and sleeps soundly.

Mikage wakes to the sound of Eriko bustling around cheerfully in the **kitchen** as **light** streams through the window and shines on the plant leaves. Eriko is hungry and Mikage offers to cook. Mikage's "head clear[s]" as she steps into Eriko's delightful kitchen, marveling at the thought that "[Eriko] was a man." Eriko inhales the eggs, soupy rice, and cucumber salad that Mikage makes. The apartment is bathed in sunlight, and Mikage couldn't have imagined yesterday that today she'd be eating with strangers, feeling strangely at home, with sunlight shining through her tea glass.

Yoshimoto emphasizes Eriko's beauty and femininity—and points out Yuichi's preference of calling Eriko "mother"—to assert that, as a transgender woman, Eriko is indeed a true woman and every bit as womanly as a cisgender woman. The light that seems to radiate from Eriko clues the reader in to the fact that Eriko will be a potent loving force in Mikage's life. Once again, the story illustrates a non-traditional family dynamic, this time between Yuichi and his transgender mother.



Yuichi's non-traditional family is exposed as even more non-traditional because Yuichi's parents were foster siblings. The reader learns that Eriko has experienced bereavement in her life, which will become important later in the story. The pragmatic, practical way in which Yuichi describes Eriko's decision to transition, run a business, and raise her child all at the same time normalizes Eriko's story and establishes Eriko as an empowered figure. Yoshimoto shows that this non-traditional family environment is going to be a good, healthy one for Mikage because both Eriko and Yuichi radiate light.



Mikage needs to be in a comfortable physical environment to sleep—here, on a comfortable sofa that relaxes her body, and in a kitchen, which to her represents life and makes her feel insulated from the pain of grief—which shows that processing grief requires physical as well as mental comforting. The dark sky has been punctuated with glittering stars, showing the lift in Mikage's state of mind.



Yoshimoto reinforces Eriko's womanhood by showing that Mikage has to remind herself that Eriko once "was a man"—the implication here is that Eriko is so thoroughly a woman, that it's baffling to Mikage that Eriko ever lived, identified, or presented as a man. When Mikage cooks, she engages in an everyday activity that reconnects her with the rhythm of living, which boosts Mikage's mood. Even though she is not related to Eriko and Yuichi, Mikage is starting to feel like part of the family, and her happiness is represented by the light that floods the apartment.



Eriko says that Mikage reminds her of Yuichi's old dog, which is probably why Yuichi feels close to Mikage. Eriko thinks Yuichi is a "good kid," though he's often emotionally distant. Eriko says that Mikage is a "good kid" too, and earnestly asks Mikage to move in, explaining that she knows what it's like to have nobody. Mikage's heart swells, and she accepts Eriko's offer with gratitude. Mikage thinks to herself that she, like Yuichi, knows how life can be "**dark** and solitary" when you grow up with only one family member because you're aware early on that one day they'll die, then you'll be alone, and then you—like everyone—will also die. Mikage wonders if that's why she understands Yuichi's emotional reticence.

Months pass, and Mikage slips into an easy rhythm of working at her part-time job, cooking for Eriko and Yuichi, watching TV, and sleeping on the enormous sofa. She sleeps soundly each night, and wants for nothing more. "**Light** and air" starts to come back into Mikage's heart, and she is grateful for finding herself in such a warm and happy place after being in such a **dark** one. One day, Mikage goes back to her old apartment to finish cleaning it out. It feels cold, dark, and unfamiliar, as if time stopped when her grandmother died. Deciding to get on with it, Mikage starts humming and scrubbing the fridge.

All of a sudden, the telephone rings. It's Mikage's ex-boyfriend, Sotaro, who's called to check in as he just heard about Mikage's grandmother. They converse easily and decide to meet. The wind blows clouds around outside the window, and Mikage decides there's no place for "sadness" in this world. Mikage meets Sotaro at a coffee shop, happy to be in his easy company. Sotaro says that that everyone in school is talking about Mikage moving in with Yuichi, because Yuichi's girlfriend slapped him in the cafeteria. Mikage is so surprised that she spills her tea. She protests that it's not like that: Yuichi lives with his mother, Eriko, and they more or less took her in like a pet.

Mikage and Sotaro walk home through the park. Mikage points out Yuichi's apartment and Sotaro teases Mikage about not having a plan for getting her own apartment. Mikage imagines that if she were still with Sotaro, he would shake her into action, make her get an apartment, and get back to school. Mikage loves his sunny, frank, and energetic attitude but recalls that when they were together, she felt sad being herself. Now she feels more drawn to Yuichi and Eriko's "strange cheerfulness." Mikage looks up at Sotaro and wonders if he still has feelings for her, but Sotaro is cheerfully oblivious and they say a friendly goodbye.

Eriko refers to Mikage with parental warmth as a "good kid," just as she does with her own son, Yuichi. Describing them both in the same way reinforces the idea that Mikage is starting to become part of the family, and that chosen family can be just as significant and life-giving as biological family. Eriko also takes on a parental role when she provides emotional support for Mikage over the fact that they have both experienced the pain of living in the shadow of loss—something that's again described through the metaphor of darkness. Yuichi's emotional distance suggests that bereavement can have lasting effects on the psyche.



Mikage has reconnected with a rhythm of living by doing very ordinary things like cooking and watching TV as days pass. Although these actions seem small and insignificant, they help her to process her grief, and her environment begins to feel light and happy instead of dark and painful. Mikage's life-filled world at the Tanabes is contrasted with the deathly stillness of her grandmother's apartment. The only way for Mikage to push past the feeling of death is to do the same thing as she does at the Tanabes. Mikage starts cleaning the kitchen, which represents the everyday actions that bring life back into a place.



Mikage's symbolic act of cleaning the kitchen reconnects her with the rhythms of daily life and prompts her to think that life will always continue to chug along, which helps her feel she can push past the "sadness" of grief. Yoshimoto thus gestures to the idea that everyday actions can push a person past the feeling of being crippled beneath the weight of their grief by reconnecting them with the feeling of living. Sotaro's interjection shows that it's hard for the outside world to see Mikage's newly formed non-traditional family as a family. Yoshimoto infuses a bit of comedy into the cafeteria incident in order to show that such narrow-minded views about non-traditional families are silly and immature.



Yoshimoto juxtaposes Sotaro's easy, pragmatic, sunny outlook with Mikage, Eriko, and Yuichi's more unusual sense of peace and cheer. Unlike Eriko, Yuichi, and Mikage, Sotaro hasn't experienced loss in his life. Yoshimoto implies here that the kind of happiness a person feels after experiencing loss is different from the kind of happiness a person feels when they are comfortable and haven't known suffering.



That evening, Yuichi walks in carrying a new word processor and suggests Mikage send out change-of-address cards. Mikage asks if her living there is causing problems but Yuichi just looks at her blankly. Mikage wants to slap him for being so dense. They work quietly. Mikage asks (more directly) if Yuichi worries the cards will get him slapped. Yuichi smiles bitterly, deflecting with a nonsense crack about a “postcard game.” They both laugh. Mikage thinks she understands why Yuichi deflects: he’s painfully sad. Yuichi’s girlfriend gets angry because she can’t understand why Yuichi’s so closed off. Mikage understands, though. Yuichi says the incident couldn’t be helped, and it wasn’t Mikage’s fault. Mikage sees that he’s touched by her concern, and wonders if she’ll fall in love with Yuichi.

Just as Mikage is thinking she should move out soon, Eriko bursts in with a new juicer. Mikage chuckles at the Tanabes’ frequent electronics purchases. Yuichi jokes that he doesn’t think a juicer will do much for Eriko’s skin at her age, and Mikage marvels at their cheerfulness “in the midst of such abnormality.” Eriko pulls out another package: a moving-in present for Mikage. It’s a glass with little bananas all over it. Yuichi jokes about drinking banana juice and Mikage is deeply moved. She imagines herself saying she’ll keep it as a memory of her time with the Tanabes and come back often to cook for them, but isn’t able to voice the words.

The next day, Mikage sluggishly visits her old apartment to wrap things up. She drinks tea with the landlord in his office, and notices how old he’s become. It doesn’t feel right, sitting here and chatting so casually. Mikage feels as if an “irresistible shift” has “put the past behind [her],” and she’s in a daze. The shift itself had been “agony.” Mikage thinks about the **light**-filled empty apartment, which no longer contains the smells of her life there, her warm bed, or the sound of her grandmother’s slippers on the floor. Everything that was once there is gone.

Mikage leaves the apartment at dusk with the last of her things. It’s chilly and her coat flutters in the wind. She notices blue-lit windows in the building across the street and imagines the people behind those windows sparkling and melting into the twilight. Mikage realizes that her life won’t be split between two places anymore and is shaken, feeling strangely on the verge of tears. A packed bus arrives, and Mikage climbs on, feeling tired and irritable as the bus jerks in traffic. She looks at a blimp sailing across the sky beyond the bus window and feels happy.

Yoshimoto alludes, through Yuichi’s deflection, to some of the coping mechanisms that can develop when a person grows up in the shadow of death. Yuichi’s experience of life is tinged with sadness, which prompts him to be emotionally closed off. Once again, Yoshimoto implies that the dissonance between people who have grown up with death in the background (like Yuichi and Mikage) and people who haven’t (like Sotaro and Yuichi’s girlfriend) is tangible. Although Yoshimoto has established that Mikage and Yuichi’s bond is a familial one, this passage introduces the idea that it might evolve into something different.



Eriko’s gift for Mikage shows that Eriko is embracing Mikage as a bonafide member of the family: she even has her own glass, which will live among the others in the kitchen now. The Tanabes’ frequent electronic purchases place the story historically because they allude to the economic boom that Japan experienced in the 1980s. Similarly, the mention of bananas is a subtle nod to Yoshimoto’s pen name, “Banana.”



The apartment is full of light now because Mikage’s grandmother’s death has been literally and metaphorically cleared out: the apartment is ready to accept new life. The metaphor of the light-filled apartment alludes to Yoshimoto’s optimistic view that even in the painful face of grieving, eventually time will pass, people will heal, and life will continue to go on.



Mikage is beginning move on from her grandmother’s death but the grieving process is long, confusing, and disorienting, as Yoshimoto shows through Mikage’s feelings on the bus. Even though Mikage thinks she feels happy, she is also simultaneously on the verge of tears, showing that she is not really in control of her emotions or her body.



A grandmother on the bus cheerfully points out the blimp to soothe her sulking granddaughter. Mikage is jealous: she'll never see her grandmother again. Mikage concentrates on the blimp, and is surprised to notice she's crying. Heavy tears pour uncontrollably down Mikage's face, and she feels as if she's having an out-of-body experience. She runs off the bus and into an alley, sobbing like she's never sobbed before, over her grandmother's death, and also, somehow, over many things. Looking up, Mikage notices steam and **light** pouring out of a window in the **dark**, and hears voices, soup boiling, and pans clanking. It's a **kitchen**. Puzzled that she's able to suddenly feel "wonderful," Mikage stands up, smooths her clothes, and starts walking, willing the gods to let her live.

Mikage walks into the apartment, climbs into the sofa, and sleeps soundly after her cry. She dreams about scrubbing the yellow-green **kitchen** floor in her grandmother's apartment. Yuichi's there, also scrubbing, and they stop to drink tea in the empty, echoing space. Still in the dream, Yuichi implores Mikage to stay with them longer, knowing she's not well enough to leave yet, and jokes that Eriko's money isn't just for juicers. Yuichi starts mopping and sings about two people seeing a lighthouse's rotating **light**. Mikage joins in and they sing loudly and cheerfully. Suddenly, Mikage blurts out that they'll wake her grandmother. Yuichi looks up with worried eyes and Mikage's embarrassed. Yuichi says he's craving a bowl of ramen, and Mikage feels much better.

Suddenly, Mikage wakes up. She goes into the **kitchen** thinking about her strange dream, which is fresh in her mind. In the chilled silence she hears the stars moving across the sky. Yuichi comes up behind her, mumbling sleepily that he's hungry and wants some ramen. As they sit under the kitchen **light** in the little room suspended in the **dark** night, Mikage suddenly thinks: "ramen! What a coincidence!" She playfully mentions that Yuichi also wanted ramen in her dream. Yuichi gapes, astonished, and realizes they had the same dream. Without missing a beat, Mikage thanks Yuichi for mopping the floor. Yuichi is wide awake now, and starts juicing grapefruits loudly, as Mikage slides noodles into boiling water.

Mikage is amazed, and feels that the shared dream is a miracle and utterly natural all at the same time. She dwells on the specialness of the moment, but feels no urge to discuss it. They have all the time in the world. Mikage muses that in the endless cycle of nights and mornings, this moment might also become a dream.

Yoshimoto continues her exploration of the sensations and processes of grief. From Mikage's out-of-body sensation, the story highlights how grief can cause feelings of disassociation. Mikage has a physical need to cry, and once she finally lets herself do that, she starts to feel better, pointing to how grief is both physical and mental. The lift in Mikage's mood is represented by the steam-filled beam of light (representing hope) that punctuates the dark (representing Mikage's pain). The light comes from a kitchen, which is filled with sounds of life going on. Connecting with these sounds enables Mikage to feel that she, too, can go on.



Mikage's ability to sleep soundly after crying implies that the release of emotions is a necessary part of the grieving process. It's only after Mikage has a proper cry over her grandmother's death that she can sleep soundly. Mikage's dream represents the place that Mikage is at with her grief: she has reconnected with a feeling of living (captured by the scrubbing kitchen) and with people (represented by Yuichi), which brings joy into the empty, painful space (represented by the lighthouse in the song). Part of the grieving process entails those moments where a person almost forgets that the person they grieve has died and has to remind themselves, which can be emotionally disconcerting.



The experience of a shared dream shows that Yuichi and Mikage are developing a special bond. Since kitchens represent life in this story, this passage indicates the possibility of a new life blossoming between Yuichi and Mikage. In addition, given the symbolic significance of light in the story—representative of happiness and joy—the kitchen light represents Mikage's feeling that a bond of love and happiness is growing between her and Yuichi, which stands in sharp contrast to the dark expanse of pain and sadness that Mikage's life has been recently.



Mikage's thoughts about the cyclical nature of time reflect the endless passage of time in which all good and bad things come to pass. Yoshimoto is about to explore this idea more fully through the voice of Eriko



One evening, as Eriko waters the plants, she imparts her outlook on life to Mikage. Eriko thinks that taking care of someone helps you understand your own shortcomings, and even though life is hard, it's only after experiencing hopelessness that a person can truly understand joy. Mikage is moved, and notices the **light** around Eriko's "slender, graceful hands" forming a rainbow in the water she pours. Mikage thinks she understands, and Eriko smiles. Though Mikage can't fathom it now, she knows that one day she'll have to move out. But she's here now, and that's all that matters. And though Mikage knows she'll experience pain many times over, she also knows that each time she'll keep going. There will be many "Dream **kitchens**" in her "heart" or "reality," in all the places she'll live.

Through Eriko's voice, Yoshimoto imparts one of the story's key messages. The pain of grief is formidable, but it comes with a silver lining: only those who experience deep pain are able to fully appreciate joy. This is why Eriko's strange sort of cheerfulness feels different to the sunny outlook of people like Sotaro who have an easy happiness but no pain to contrast it with. Eriko watering her plants is symbolic of her motherly nurturing. Yoshimoto also emphasizes Eriko's femininity through the description of Eriko's "graceful" hands. The light around Eriko's hands represents Mikage's growing bond of love with Eriko, and the "dream kitchens" represents all the life experiences that are yet to come for Mikage, now that she feels more hopeful about the future.



PART 2: FULL MOON

A few months ago, Eriko was murdered by a stalker who had grown obsessed with her but then was "Shocked to find out that this beautiful woman was a man." As he was stabbing her in the nightclub, Eriko beat him to death with a barbell. Mikage, who had already moved out, doesn't hear the news until months later when Yuichi finally calls to tell her. He couldn't bring himself to do it sooner. The first thing Yuichi says is "She died fighting," and Mikage is stunned as she pieces together the news. Mikage feels her insides drop as she realizes Eriko is gone. Yuichi keeps asking Mikage to forgive him and Mikage interrupts, saying she's coming over. Without betraying a shred of emotion, Yuichi says he'll drive Mikage home after.

The second half of the story explores bereavement through characters grieving Eriko's death. The murderer attacked Eriko because she was transgender, underscoring the horrific violence that people in this community often face. However, Yoshimoto makes it clear that Eriko is no less empowered in death. She fights back and kills her attacker, remaining a strong figure—and the central matriarch—in the story, even after death.



Mikage frantically tries to recall the last time she saw Eriko. Was it the day Mikage moved out, when Eriko cried a little? No. It was late one night when they bumped into each other in a supermarket. Mikage jokingly teased Eriko about looking masculine, and Eriko quipped back that she had "a smart-ass for a daughter."

Through Mikage's memory of the supermarket, Yoshimoto shows that Eriko really does think of Mikage as a daughter. Even though they are not related, they are still family. Eriko continues to care for Mikage from a distance, showing that their bond is not diminished when Mikage moves out. Eriko is also comfortable enough in her womanhood that she is not threatened by Mikage's teasing.



Mikage tries to throw together an overnight bag, but all she does is run around opening and closing drawers. Eventually she manages to grab a toothbrush and a towel and runs out in a daze. When Mikage comes to, she finds herself walking in the street with tears flowing down her face. She feels like she's choking and can't see. Everything is distorted, but in a beautiful way. She feels powerless as energy rushes out of her body and dissipates into the **dark** night. Even though she lost her parents and grandmother, Mikage has never felt more alone than in this moment. She wants to die. She knows she won't though, and will live in sadness forever, but she focuses on Yuichi and keeps walking.

Yoshimoto captures here the immediate sensations that arise in the first stages of grief, focusing on the moment when a person first hears the news of a death. Physically, Mikage is in shock, manic, and feels disoriented. She also doesn't seem to have control of her body, which is functioning almost independently of her. Emotionally, Mikage feels lost and alone. Mikage's pain is represented by the dark night, which, at this point, has no symbolic points of light within it, suggesting that Mikage can't connect with any joy right now.



Mikage rings Yuichi's doorbell, feeling hopeless. When he answers the door, she can't help but smile. She's genuinely glad to see him. Yuichi was afraid Mikage would be angry, but she laughs the thought away and he relaxes. Yuichi explains that he felt functional for the first time today. When Eriko died, everything went **dark** and he went blank. Eriko was everything to him—"She was my mother, my father." The funeral was chaos because the murderer's family showed up and it caused a brawl. Yuichi explains that Mikage was on his mind the whole time, but he just couldn't bring himself to call her. He was out of his mind.

Mikage looks Yuichi deep in the eyes and finds herself saying that for some reason the two of them always have death around them. It's funny that in the expanse of the universe, this pair became friends. Yuichi jokes that perhaps they should start a "destruction worker" business and move in with people whom their clients want dead. His sad, cheerful face radiates a "dim glow." Outside the window, tiny points of **light** flicker through the **dark**. Yuichi reflects that he's an orphan now, as tears stream down his face. Yuichi says he desperately needed Mikage, to make him laugh. Mikage takes Yuichi's face in her hands, and softly thanks him for calling her.

Yuichi hands Eriko's will to Mikage, and goes to bed. It's a cheerful letter joking about the silliness of a will but acknowledging its necessity, just in case some crazy person who doesn't understand Eriko's "dazzling" body kills her. Eriko says she's trying to write like a man, but is a woman "body and soul" and a mother "in name and in fact." Eriko warns Yuichi not to contact his grandparents, but to lean on Mikage instead. Eriko says she's loved her life as a man, as a woman, and as a parent to Yuichi and Mikage. Eriko asks Yuichi to tell Mikage not to bleach her leg hair in front of boys because it's indecent. Finally, Eriko jokes that it's great being an only child because she's leaving everything to Yuichi except the nightclub.

Mikage is wearing Eriko's sweater and her heart lurches as she thinks of the smell of Eriko's perfume fading. Mikage lays on the sofa, thinking of the sound of Eriko's slippers clattering about the **kitchen**. Mikage misses Eriko so much that she feels she'll go mad. She wonders if she woke Yuichi up with her crying, or if he woke up from a bad dream. Mikage reflects that a "door to the grave" opened that night.

Yoshimoto shows, through Yuichi's actions, that grief can be self-destructive. Yuichi avoided Mikage even though she could have helped him through the funeral, as he did for her. Yoshimoto also shows that grief can make people feel blank, numb, and silenced by pain, as represented by the metaphor of everything going dark. Yuichi's reflections about Eriko show that she was the encapsulation of a whole family in one person.



Yoshimoto shows that Mikage is able to bring Yuichi down to earth a bit by making him laugh and making him feel like they are connected so that Yuichi feels less alone. These two things help lift Yuichi (and Mikage) out of abject despair, which is metaphorically reflected by the sky which is no longer completely dark but punctuated with the tiniest flickers of light. Yoshimoto re-emphasizes that uncontrollable crying is a visceral part of the grieving process.



Eriko explicitly states that she is in every sense a woman despite having lived part of her life as a man. Yoshimoto legitimizes transgender womanhood through Eriko's confident assertions about her gender, her beauty, and her status as a mother. Yoshimoto asserts that family bonds are formed through consistent nurturing, which is shown by Eriko's continued motherly nurturing of Mikage in her will with the joke about personal grooming. Finally, Eriko's confident assertions show that not even her death can undo her empowerment, which establishes a link between womanhood and power.



In this passage, Yoshimoto describes sensory components of memory to show that grieving someone is very much wrapped up in missing their smell and their sound. The kitchen symbolizes Eriko's vitality in life, which is reduced to a memory now that she has died.



Mikage and Yuichi sleep into the afternoon. As they sit next to each other watching TV, Mikage has the “strange sensation” that they’re orphans. Yuichi wonders if Mikage will go home, and Mikage thinks perhaps after dinner. Yuichi is suddenly excited, and urges Mikage to make a feast. Mikage leaps into enthusiastic action, rattling off a shopping list for Yuichi, who jokes about her bossiness. Yuichi leaves, and the apartment feels silent, as if time has stopped, the way it always does when someone dies. Mikage stares out of the window at the grey fog outside. Mikage misses the “**light**” that Eriko emitted, which has been replaced with a **dark** “heavy shadow of despair.”

Mikage looks up at the ceiling. When Mikage’s grandmother died, she thought things couldn’t get worse. Now Eriko’s dead, and things are worse. Mikage wonders if adulthood is just understanding that pain won’t kill you and you can still go on. Mikage feels hollow. Eriko’s face flashes in front of her eyes, and her heart twists. Mikage starts cleaning the **kitchen**, which is dirty and **dark**. As Mikage scrubs every surface, she starts to calm down, and she wonders why she connects with kitchens so much. Standing in the kitchen, she feels as if she’s turning a corner, and starting anew.

Over the summer, Mikage had learned to cook. Mikage cooked so much that Eriko and Yuichi had thought Mikage had gone crazy. The more she cooked, the more she tempered her initial chaotic enthusiasm with calm control. Then Mikage landed a job as a cooking teacher’s assistant. She thinks she got the job because she attacks cooking with intense joy. Many people live within their comfort zone, shielded from the knowledge that everyone is really alone. But Mikage cooks with a fierce knowledge that she will die, which makes her feel truly alive. Inching her way through the **dark** at the brink of despair, the moon’s **light** appears and a special kind of beauty permeates the heart.

Yuichi arrives with the car full of shopping bags and cajoles Mikage into helping him carry up all the things he’s bought. To distract Mikage, Yuichi points at the moon, which is shining brightly, and asks if she thinks it affects her cooking. It must, because for her, cooking is an art. Mikage thinks Yuichi speaks as if he understands her deeply. Suddenly, Mikage feels that all she needs is Yuichi, and she’ll be alright. The feeling passes in a flash, and Mikage is confused. She’s dazzled by the **light** from his eyes.

Yoshimoto shows that in times of tremendous grief, and particularly when faced with the disorienting strangeness of making sense of somebody’s death, sometimes the only thing that will bring a person back down to earth is a simple, everyday task, because that action is grounding. The idea of shopping for and eating a meal seems to revive Yuichi, reconnecting him with the rhythms of daily life. Mikage, however, still feels lost and painfully sad, which is symbolized by the absence of Eriko’s “light” and the dark hopelessness that surrounds Mikage.



Yoshimoto makes it explicit that sometimes the only way to push through pain is to do a simple, immediate task, no matter how small. The action of doing something that’s part of their regular routine—be it eating a meal or cleaning the kitchen—reconnects a grieving person with the feeling of living, one moment after another, until they push past the darkness. Yoshimoto symbolizes this idea with Mikage cleaning Eriko’s kitchen, which calms her. It focuses Mikage’s mind on something tangible and gives her the strength to keep going.



Through her cooking, Mikage is able to achieve a true connection with joy. Just as Eriko said earlier in the story, Mikage’s experiences with pain and suffering allow her to experience bliss, which brings her cooking alive in a way that people who have always just been comfortably happy cannot understand. Mikage’s knowledge of death was once a source of existential angst, but here, it enables her to experience a fiery happiness. Yoshimoto thus explains that moonlight (or joy) is most beautiful against a dark sky (which represents the presence of suffering).



Yoshimoto continues the moonlight metaphor to show that Yuichi also understands Mikage’s passion for cooking. Yuichi also knows loss, so he understands the way that joy and suffering can exist alongside one another. Mikage feels a deep connection—and perhaps even a jolt of romantic love—with Yuichi, which is once again symbolized by the light shining from Yuichi’s eyes.



As Mikage cooks an enormous feast of stew, salad, pie, vegetables, and all sorts of things, she avoids the topic of Eriko's death. It feels unreal, and she needs to approach it gently and slowly. For now, she thinks just of her and Yuichi and the present moment, and she feels safe. They eat over wine, and Mikage notices that Yuichi is very drunk. He's been drinking every night and having nightmares about Mikage yelling at him. He felt all he needed was Mikage to come over, but he was afraid she wouldn't be able to stand the pain of Eriko's absence in the apartment. Mikage feels she deeply understands Yuichi.

Yuichi asks Mikage to move back in. Mikage asks if Yuichi means as a lover or a friend. Yuichi can't think straight and doesn't know. Even though they both know death well, Yuichi doesn't want to get Mikage entrenched in his grief. Mikage, who's about to cry, tells Yuichi to stop talking like that. The apartment feels silent, heavy, and lost without Eriko. Mikage imagines her and Yuichi standing side by side, staring into the depths of hell. Mikage doesn't know if they can build a life from that "dreadful" place. Suddenly, realizing how melodramatic her daydream is, Mikage starts laughing. Yuichi has fallen asleep, and Mikage cries and cries as she does the dishes, feeling lonely and left behind in the **dark**.

Mikage wakes up to the telephone ringing. She answers and the other person hangs up. It must be a girl. Mikage gets dressed and slips out to go to work without waking Yuichi, agonizing about whether she should come back and stay the night. Luckily, a well-timed distraction arises: Mikage's boss wants Mikage to join her on a three-day research trip to the Izu Peninsula. Mikage immediately agrees, thinking a break is just what she needs right now.

Mikage starts work with her coworkers Nori and Kuri, who are sweet, affluent, well-trained, polite young ladies. Mikage enjoys prepping food with them in the **light**-flooded **kitchen**. Suddenly, a girl named Okuno walks in asking for Mikage. Okuno tells Mikage to stay out of Yuichi's life, because their half-relationship is making him stuck in his life. Mikage is deeply hurt and pushes back, firmly telling Okuno she knows nothing of Mikage's history with Eriko and Yuichi. Okuno turns around curtly and leaves. Nori and Kuri comfort Mikage, saying she's done nothing wrong with Yuichi. Mikage suddenly feels tired.

Yoshimoto subverts patriarchal gender dynamics by showing that Yuichi, despite being the dominant male character in the story, is in distress, and it's Mikage's presence that is, in a sense, saving him. Now that Eriko, the most empowered figure in the story, has died, it's Mikage who starts to embody the empowered role in her dynamic with Yuichi, while Yuichi is relatively weak and struggling to cope with his grief.



Yoshimoto shows that grief can have profound and long-lasting effects on the way a person thinks and makes emotional decisions. Mikage wants to embrace a relationship with Yuichi but is afraid that their shared experiences of grief means that they won't be able to connect with joy.



Mikage is afraid of getting dragged down into the same dark state of mind that Yuichi is in as he processes his grief, so she agrees to a change of air, which might be just what she needs to reconnect with some normalcy. Yoshimoto implies that Mikage might have a rival for Yuichi's affection with the cryptic phone call.



Mikage enjoys her work in the kitchen, which is captured by the way it's bathed in light. Okuno's sudden intervention shows that Mikage's bond with Yuichi is something that most people cannot understand. They've mostly lived as siblings and as friends, but Mikage's anger at Okuno informs the reader that Mikage is developing stronger feelings for Yuichi, even if the situation is complicated due to their shared grief over Eriko.



That evening, Mikage is cooking curry at Yuichi's when he walks in. Somehow, she can't meet his eyes. Mikage tells Yuichi she's leaving for a work trip and he offers to drive her home. On the way, Mikage suddenly decides she wants to get tea with Yuichi. Unquestioningly, he takes her to a café. All their past tea-drinking moments seem to mingle in the air. Yuichi admits that nothing tastes of anything to him and recalls how Mikage was the same when grieving her grandmother. Mikage hopes that the glow of **light** surrounding them in the warm coffee shop warms his soul.

Yuichi opens the door for Mikage and they joke about how Eriko insisted on having the car door opened for her, even though she "was a man." Suddenly a heavy silence falls on them. It occurs to Mikage that Yuichi must have opened the door for Okuno too, and she suddenly becomes jealous. She feels like they are two streams of **light** floating towards a "critical juncture" in the **dark**. As they walk toward the station in the cold, Mikage buries her face into Yuichi's arm and smells his sweater. He stays still, allowing Mikage to linger, and smiles, saying they'll go for tea again when Mikage's back. They say goodbye, and Mikage wonders if she or Okuno is winning.

Mikage recalls a bittersweet memory. Eriko was watering the plants, looking "thrillingly beautiful" in the **light**. She talked about the time when Yuichi's biological mother was dying of cancer and wanted a plant to connect her with light and the sun. Eriko was "A typical male, at that time." A few days later, Yuichi's biological mother asked Eriko to take the plant—a pineapple—away, so that it wouldn't be colored with death. When Yuichi's biological mother died, the pineapple died too. Eriko realized that the balance of "pleasant" and "unpleasant" things in the world would always remain the same. Eriko decided to "embrace a muddled cheerfulness" about life and become a woman. Mikage wonders why everyone dies, and wonders if happiness is just getting through it all.

Mikage is packing. Suddenly Chika—Eriko's coworker at the club (who wears drag but isn't explicitly female)—calls, saying they need to talk. They meet for ramen and Chika explains, in her colorful and dramatic way, that Yuichi came in last night in despair and looked miserable when Chika suggested he find Mikage. Suddenly, Chika realized that Yuichi and Mikage are in love. Chika gives Mikage the address of the inn she sent Yuichi to, and tells Mikage to go get her man, teasing Mikage about being a virgin. Mikage thinks about how much sadder her connection with Yuichi is than Chika thinks. Chika talks about Eriko's murder and sobs loudly. Mikage is moved and walks Chika back to the club, wondering what on earth to do about Yuichi.

Yoshimoto shows that grief can also stunt sensory experiences, as both Yuichi and Mikage experience an inability to taste things when grieving. Similarly, Mikage felt like she couldn't see when she learned of Eriko's death, emphasizing how the mental anguish of grief is wrapped up in physical sensations and experiences. The loving bond between Yuichi and Mikage is represented by the glow in the coffeeshop.



Mikage's flash of jealousy shows that she is starting to experience romantic feelings for Yuichi and feel more hopeful about building a positive bond with him despite their experiences with suffering. Yoshimoto symbolizes Mikage's realization with the imagery of two streams of light in the dark.



Mikage's memory expands on Yoshimoto's philosophy about the balance of joy and suffering in the world (which Yoshimoto imparts through the voice of Eriko). Eriko understands that it is impossible to eradicate pain—suffering is ever-present in the world, and even if a person tries to ignore it, they will eventually feel its effects, just as the pineapple still withers even though Eriko takes it away. Eriko's ability to accept the presence of pain is what allows her to make peace with life, connect with her path to joy, and transition to life as a woman. Yoshimoto thus shows that peace of mind and lasting happiness arise when pain is not avoided but embraced as part of life.



That Chika wears drag—but doesn't necessarily identify as female—highlights the fluidity of gender identity. Through Chika's sobbing, Yoshimoto once again shows that unexpected crying is a central component of the grieving process.



The next day, Mikage goes to Izu with her colleagues, feeling relieved but guilty about a break from the complicated highs and lows of her relationship with Yuichi and her grief about Eriko, who was the “dazzling sun” whose **light** illuminated them both. Mikage yearns for peace. Mikage wanders through the town in the evening, looking for food, feeling light and elated at the adventure of being in a new place. She wonders if she should just travel forever, untethered to anybody, but she knows she’s not free: she’s connected to Yuichi’s soul.

Spotting a **light**, Mikage enters a near-empty eatery with relief, and orders a hearty meal of fried pork in broth. Spotting a telephone, Mikage calls Yuichi, who chuckles when he realizes Chika’s meddling. Yuichi’s voice feels faraway, and Mikage misses him terribly. Yuichi jokes about how tofu is the only food near his inn. Mikage jokes about how Chika is obsessed with tofu and they both laugh. Mikage muses about how they’re both hungry under the same night sky and it hits her that she and Yuichi are approaching a soft turning point amidst all the death that surrounds them: either they will remain friends, or they will shift into something else, but this is the moment.

Mikage asks Yuichi when he’ll be back, and he lies, saying soon. Mikage knows he will try to hide away and shield his depression from her as long as possible. They joke a little more and say goodbye, just as Mikage’s pork is ready. Suddenly, she feels exhausted and utterly lonely as the **dark** night falls hard and fast. Mikage feels something is ending and she wants to fight for it, but she doesn’t know if she has the strength, and feels hopeless. She digs into the pork and is suddenly exhilarated because it’s insanely good. In fact, she realizes, it’s perfection. Mikage thinks to herself, “if only Yuichi were here.” Without thinking, she orders another order, to go.

Mikage finds herself in the street, holding a steaming box of fried pork, wondering what to do now. A taxi approaches so she gets in, deciding to go with it, and speeds far away to Isehara, where Yuichi is staying. The taxi driver jokes that it must be a matter of love, and Mikage smiles sheepishly. She dozes off under the **light** of the full moon, and wakes when they arrive, feeling more awake than her body. The taxi driver advises Mikage to try some tofu while she’s here and she laughs. Mikage gets out in the bone-chilling cold, with the pork in her backpack.

Yoshimoto represents the fierce happiness that Eriko brought to Yuichi and Mikage as the light of the sun, whose force is truly missed. Mikage’s musings about traveling capture another element of the grieving process: the desire to run away from a place of pain. In acknowledging her connection to Yuichi, Mikage realizes that although she often feels alienated and alone in the world, she really isn’t.



Once again, the metaphor of light as a source of joy directs Mikage toward something that will make her happy: here, a good meal. Mikage drives the action with Yuichi by calling him, indicating a shift from a more traditional patriarchal picture in which men are actively driving the plot while women are more passive. Mikage recognizes that she is at a crucial juncture with Yuichi: either she needs to spring into action, or the moment will pass, and their connection will fade away.



Yoshimoto sets up the approaching climax of the story as an inversion of the traditional patriarchal narrative: there is no damsel in distress in this story, but rather a man in distress. Mikage wants to help Yuichi, but the pain of his loss permeates her and she feels low (represented by the dark night falling around her). As before, Yoshimoto shows that taking care of the body is often what is needed in times of pain, seen through the way that the pork revives Mikage and lifts her mood.



As Mikage springs into action, her mood is more hopeful, represented by the full moon, whose moonlight now shines in the dark night that fell around Mikage a moment ago. Yoshimoto’s approaching climax mirrors the start of her story. Mikage, bereft with grief and unable to act for herself, was revived by Yuichi and Eriko. Now, Mikage is taking action to comfort Yuichi who is the one struggling this time.



Mikage approaches the inn, which is locked. She finds a payphone and calls, but there's no answer. She looks at the waterfall next to the inn, which is illuminated with green lamps, and ponders the dark windows. Somehow, she just knows that the window in the corner reflecting the green **light** is Yuichi's. Mikage climbs up onto the ledge, and keeps climbing towards the window, until she finds herself somehow dangling off the side of the building, fingers numb, and backpack sliding slowly down her back. With no other option, she wills herself to pull up her upper body, despite a jolt of pain that shoots through her arm, which is now bleeding.

Laying in a puddle on the roof, Mikage looks up at the glowing moon and realizes everyone's in the same position: we all think that we have choices but really, we act unconsciously. She decides this isn't "fatalistic"—it's more like we decide through "instinct," and that's how we sometimes end up rolling in a puddle on a rooftop with pork takeout in a backpack, looking up at the moon. She decides the moon is beautiful, gets up, and knocks on Yuichi's window.

Yuichi is stunned as he opens the window, and rubs his eyes. Mikage says she came to deliver some pork, because she had some and it didn't seem fair that he didn't. Yuichi says this feels like the dream they shared and Mikage laughs, asking if she should sing the song. Yuichi's eyes have a distant look and Mikage is afraid. He seems different. The atmosphere is like a **dark** tomb and she wants to leave, afraid of being dragged into his pain and being extinguished. Mikage calmly finds herself saying she knows Yuichi is trying start a new life, away from the pain, and it's no use lying to her, but he should eat some pork first.

Mikage's chest is heavy in the "tomblake" atmosphere, and she wants to cry. Suddenly Yuichi notices Mikage's bleeding arm and but she tells him not to worry and he starts eating the pork, which is delicious. As he eats, Mikage's spirits start to lift, and the "glittering crystal" of their warm and happy memories together **lights** up and she knows it will keep them going. She thinks about the swish of Eriko's skirt, the color of a dragonfly, the sharp tug of Eriko tightening her *obi*, a comic book that Yuichi gave her, the meals they ate, and many other things. Mikage thinks, "Truly happy memories always live on, shining."

Once again, the light reflecting on Yuichi's window guides Mikage towards the people that make her happy. Yoshimoto continues her inversion of a patriarchal narrative: Mikage, taking on the role of the hero, climbs the building to rescue the person in distress (in this case, Yuichi). The reader realizes the strength of Mikage's feelings for Yuichi through her determination to reach him.



Yoshimoto, speaking through Mikage this time, deepens her philosophy about times when people feel stuck: they just have to act. Even without knowing exactly what to do, the best thing to do is press forward and focus on the immediate task ahead, and things will get better, even if it seems they won't. So, even though Mikage is bleeding on a rooftop, she's able to smile about it because she's doing something instead of letting the situation (and, by extension, life) pass her by.



The dark, tomblake atmosphere reflects the way Yuichi's pain scares Mikage. She worries it will be too strong for her to bring some joy into it, and it might even drown out her own joy. Reflecting the philosophy Yoshimoto just articulated, Mikage finds herself acting without really thinking about it and focusing on the immediate task ahead: getting Yuichi to eat some pork. Yuichi, as before, is struggling and lost, while Mikage takes the lead.



The food—which nourishes Yuichi's body—lifts his spirits, and by extension, Mikage's. As before, Yoshimoto shows that basic physical comfort can ease a troubled mind, even if for a moment. The light of the glittering crystal represents the happy memories between Yuichi, Eriko, and Mikage. Mikage finds a way to connect with them through her pain, and they shine a light on the darkness. Mikage is starting to understand what Eriko said: that accepting pain while making room for joy (or, accepting a balance of dark and light) is the key to peace and lasting happiness.



Yuichi and Mikage joke around and the mood feels easier. Mikage tells Yuichi that she doesn't want to lose him. They've seen the heaviness of death together, but who knows if things will get easier or harder. Mikage wants to experience it all with Yuichi, when he's feeling better. Yuichi explains that he was cold with Mikage because he wanted her to see him when he's more "manly." Mikage quips that Yuichi should "smash a truck against the wall with [his] bare hands" and they joke about increasingly absurd shows of manliness. Yuichi's eyes start to sparkle, and they say goodbye.

Mikage wakes up at her inn to a raging, windy snowstorm outside the window. Looking out, Mikage truly feels that "Eriko is no more." She gets up to start another day. That evening, after a feast with her colleagues, Mikage walks in the icy town toward the beach. She's freezing as she watches the **dark**, "jet black" waves glittering with dots of **light** from the lighthouse far away, which forms a path of light towards Mikage. She feels a "sweet sadness" and thinks to herself about how much pain and joy there will be to come, with or without Yuichi. When Mikage gets back to her room, Yuichi calls, sounding happy. They joke about food. He explains that he's back in Tokyo and he'll pick her up at the station when she comes back.

Yoshimoto makes her gender inversion of a patriarchal narrative explicit. Mikage is the one saving Yuichi, and not the other way around. Yuichi's fear of seeming unmanly exposes how damaging it can be for men to deny their vulnerability. Yuichi and Mikage subvert the association of masculinity and power with absurd clichés. Mikage, the female protagonist, in the end, is the empowered figure who saves Yuichi.



The last moments of the story show that Mikage finally understands and is able to embody Eriko's philosophy about life: pain and joy will both always exist in the world, and the best thing to do is accept the pain in order to celebrate the joy. Mikage is symbolically able to let go of Eriko and embody this philosophy of "sweet sadness" herself. Whatever pain lies ahead, Mikage knows it will not break her. She will be alright because there will also always be joy. Mikage's ability to make peace with the balance of both is symbolized by the lighthouse's beam cast across the dark ocean waves. The story ends on an uplifting note, as Yuichi is also able to push past his grief and keep going, ready to move forward with a future with Mikage.





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