

hikikomori!

a chamber opera by
Zygmund de Somogyi

synopsis and libretto

zdscomposer.co.uk

hikikomori

(ひきこもり or 引きこもり)

(lit. *pulling inward, being confined*)

noun

1. (in Japan) the abnormal avoidance of social contact, typically by adolescent males.

2. A person who avoids social contact.

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CHARACTERS

HIKIKOMORI (THE BOY) – Dreamer. Shy, aloof, and somewhat melancholic. A teenage schoolboy who, after experiencing a sudden trauma, has retreated into his own head, creating for himself the white room – a veil of safety.

"KEL" – THE BOY's best friend from school. Outgoing, carefree, and optimistic. Clumsy and a bit of a prankster, often resulting in spats with "AUBREY". Incredibly loyal to his friends – and should the time come, will always stand up for them.

"AUBREY" – A childhood friend; the proverbial "girl next door". Friendly and playful but hot-headed, often turning sour when things don't go her way. Both her and THE BOY claim they're just friends, but is there something more lurking beneath...?

"HERO" – "KEL"'s older brother. Charismatic, intelligent, and down-to-earth; someone THE BOY looks up to and considers a role model of sorts. Usually tries to keep the peace between his younger brother and his friends, and isn't afraid to stand up for what's right.

"MARI" – THE BOY's older sister. Passionate, studious, and thoughtful; has an incredibly close relationship with her younger brother. Often found practicing her violin; she is currently preparing for auditions at a conservatory.

THE NARRATOR – Our guide throughout this story. Deeply cares about the motivations of our BOY, and is as eager to help him recover as we are.

THE KEEPER – The guardian of the black room, and close confidant of THE NARRATOR. Has been tasked with guarding a terrible secret – and making sure that only the chosen may discover it...

SOMETHING – A hideous veiled monster. A guardian angel. His worst nightmare.

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STORY SYNOPSIS

ACT I: The boy in the white room

HIKIKOMORI, after experiencing something traumatic, has shut himself away in his own head. Creating a white room and a technicolour dream world, he becomes safe from the memories of his trauma, in the company of his three best friends.

After the four of them struggle with making flower crowns, they have the idea to ask THE BOY's sister – "MARI" – for help. They race to their treehouse, where she is often found practicing violin. "KEL" races ahead of them, reaching the tree to find a hollow stump. However, as the others arrive, he sees something... horrific.

"KEL" snaps out of it and tries to tell THE BOY the truth, but he runs away – back to the safety of the white room. Back to denial.

ACT II: The boy in the black room

HIKIKOMORI, after calming himself down in the safety of his white room, returns to the dream world, greeted by "HERO" and "AUBREY" – but "KEL" is nowhere to be found, and "MARI" has been gone for months.

The three set off on a grand adventure to find "MARI" – and, THE BOY hopes, find out what happened to "KEL" – but are stopped outside a pitch-black door by THE KEEPER. As THE BOY's friends converse, THE KEEPER is begrudgingly convinced to let "HERO" through the black door.

On his return, his tears and anguish turn to rage – he has learned the truth. He tells THE BOY that if "AUBREY" knew what he knew, she would hate THE BOY as much as he hates himself. As he leaves them behind, the world falls apart around them. THE BOY is in the black room.

ACT III: The boy inside his head

HIKIKOMORI, holding the hand of his last partner, "AUBREY", decides to head through the black door, ready to take on the truth. As he stares at the broken violin behind the door, his memories of the night of his sister's death come flooding back.

"AUBREY", realising what has happened, desperately tries to bring THE BOY back to blissful denial – but in this darkest recess, SOMETHING is stirring. In a last ditch effort, "AUBREY" confesses her feelings to THE BOY, but it's too late. He knows the truth. SOMETHING comes out and whispers two devastating words into THE BOY's ear. THE BOY kills "AUBREY" – his last demon now slain.

With the need for his dream world gone, THE NARRATOR can finally wake him up. THE BOY awakes in a hospital bed – is he now ready to accept his sister's death, work through his mental trauma, and move on with his life?

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libretto by

Zygmund de Somogyi

*adapted from the story of "OMORI",
dev. Omocat (2020)*

*with special thanks to the developers of OMORI (2020)
omocat (and team), Pedro Silva, and bo en*

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Character list

HIKIKOMORI (THE BOY) - silent role

"AUBREY" - soprano

"MARI" / SOMETHING / THE NARRATOR - mezzo soprano

"KEL" / THE KEEPER - tenor

"HERO" - bass

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ACT ONE

Overture: Scene opens up to a furnitureless white room (projected), containing an abstracted laptop, box of tissues, and lightbulb. THE NARRATOR appears in a black hooded cloak and walks to the pulpit (stage left). THE NARRATOR stays at the pulpit until the end of the overture, and slightly lifts the hood of her cloak at the start of the **introduction**.

INTRODUCTION: the white room

Aria

NARRATOR: A mind is a fickle thing.
Faced with grief and trauma
It can retreat into itself
Creating a patchwork
Over wounds it cannot heal.

THE BOY appears stage right, and walks to the centre of the stage.

NARRATOR: In this darkness we see a boy.
For as long as he can remember
He has lived here
In his caged mind's embrace:

THE BOY sits down, cross-legged.

NARRATOR: Hikikomori.
The boy inside his head
Breathes life into his creation
A constructed stark-white room
Within which his traumas cannot reach him.

A place of safety and security,
But also of loneliness.

Projection changes to a white door on top of the white background.

NARRATOR: So THE BOY creates for himself a doorway.
 A blinding light gives way
 To a technicolour world
 Within which live his childhood friends.

"KEL", "AUBREY", and "HERO" appear from stage left and stand circling THE BOY. Once they reach him THE BOY stands up.

NARRATOR: This is where the story begins.
 Four best friends playing
 Together in blissful ignorance
 Surrounded by the playground
 Of THE BOY's dreams.
 Nothing can hurt him here.

SCENE I: the playground

Projection changes to the playground. "KEL", "AUBREY", and "HERO" mime out talking to THE BOY excitedly as the scene shifts. The three friends are holding flower crowns. "KEL" holds one in his hands and flexes his arms ironically.

Recitative

"KEL": *(incredibly overdramatically)*
 When I flex...

"AUBREY": Oh, no, here we go again.

"HERO": Be careful with those!
 We all spent a lot of time making them-

"KEL": *(shouting, ecstatic)*
 I FEEL MY BEST!

"KEL" pulls on the flower crown so hard it breaks.

"AUBREY": Hey! What gives?

(*pointing to THE BOY*)
 He worked so hard on that!

"HERO": Don't you know how to take care
 Of things that are not yours?

"KEL": (*sarcastic*)
 Well, "AUBREY",
 At least he knows how to make one!
 You can't even tie a knot-

"HERO": Let's not point fingers-

"KEL": (*over "HERO"*)
 Maybe loverboy can make you one!

"AUBREY": (*flustered*)
 Gah! It's not like that-

As "KEL" and "AUBREY" fight, THE BOY stands still watching, and "HERO" steps in to break them up. THE NARRATOR watches on, cautiously.

"HERO": Please, you two, calm down.
 Let's not fight in front
 Of our dear BOY.

"KEL": (*calming down and picking up his broken flower crown*)
 Okay, okay.
 "AUBREY", have you tried
 Making a flower crown of your own?

"AUBREY": Yes, but it's too hard.
 I can't make heads or tails of this.

"KEL": Have we thought to ask "MARI"?

Ensemble

"KEL": (*turns to THE BOY*)
 Your sister.
 Your sister will know how to help.

"HERO": His sister?
We will need to find her first.

"AUBREY": Think...
Where could she be right now?

"HERO": Have we tried our favourite tree?
She's always playing her violin
In our treehouse.

"AUBREY": That's a great idea-

"KEL": *(dramatically throwing aside the broken
flower crown)*
We're going on an adventure?
Okay. I'll race you there!

"KEL" *runs offstage (stage right) before anyone can do
anything.*

"HERO": *(to THE BOY)*
Come. Let us find your sister.
She will know what to do.

All leave stage right.

SCENE II: "MARI"s tree

*Scene changes to a forest. THE BOY, "AUBREY" and "HERO"
are trying to catch up to "KEL", who is staring at
something offstage (stage left).*

Recitative

"AUBREY": *(offstage)*
Why does he run so fast?

"HERO": *(offstage, quizzically)*
Are we that unfit?
Come on. Our favourite tree

Is up ahead.

"AUBREY" runs onstage from stage right first, holding THE BOY's hand as he trails behind. She catches notice of "KEL".

"AUBREY": "KEL", don't run off on us like that!

"HERO" runs on stage behind the others, panting heavily. He is exhausted.

"HERO": Oh, I can't keep up...

"AUBREY": (at "KEL")
 What's going on?
 Where's "MARI"? Where is our treehouse?
 All I can see is a hollow stump...

There are a few seconds of silence. "KEL" continues to stare offstage, a terrified look on his face.

"KEL": This isn't real.

"KEL" starts to cry.

"KEL": (shouting, crying)
 None of this is real!
 None of this is right!

Aria

"KEL" turns to the audience, away from what he was staring at offstage. He is wide-eyed and looks scared. "AUBREY", "HERO" and THE BOY are still.

"KEL": Decrepit, decrepit. For too long
 We've kept the wool over our eyes
 Too scared to open our wounds.

Decrepit, decrepit. I can see
 Remnants of ghosts on walls
 A shattered violin, a broken home

Shadows of a long forgotten past.

Decrepit, decrepit. To break
The illusion, the lies we feed ourselves
And answer the call to acceptance...

*(THE NARRATOR softly speaks the words from
the pulpit as "KEL" sings them)*
This must not go on
Or he will destroy himself.

*"KEL" walks to THE BOY and puts both hands on his
shoulders. He is in tears.*

"KEL": I am so sorry,
 For I know how deep in your dreams
 You have tried to hide.
 But please wake up. You must know.
 Your sister... your sister is-

*Cut! Before "KEL" can finish his sentence, THE BOY runs
away from his friends in a frenzy, encircling the stage
twice before re-entering and coming to the front of the
stage. "AUBREY", "KEL" and "HERO" exit quietly. The
projected scene changes to the white room as he runs.*

NARRATOR: Scared, overwhelmed and desperate
 THE BOY runs back to the safety
 Of the white room.

 Nothing can hurt him here.

THE BOY falls to his knees, out of breath.

NARRATOR: Nothing can hurt him here.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Projected screen is of the white room. THE BOY sits cross-legged in the middle of the stage, staring blankly. He is in the white room.

Preamble

NARRATOR: Hikikomori
 The boy in the white room
 Empty, unfeeling, vacant.
 A blank canvas, empty bliss,
 Protected from intrusive thought.

In this void he breathes heavily
 Once, twice, three times.
 Calming down his pulsating heart
 Until he is, at last,
 Ready to dream again.

Letting the bright contours
 Of his technicolour world
 Breathe life into the white room
 THE BOY proceeds through the doorway,
 To live another day carefree
 In joyous denial.

SCENE III: the playground

Projection changes to the playground. "HERO" and "AUBREY" enter stage right and sit down cross-legged next to THE BOY. Notably, "KEL" is absent from the group. THE NARRATOR looks around concerningly.

Recitative

NARRATOR: But something is off.

THE BOY appears somewhat vacant, as if searching for something. "AUBREY" takes his hand.

"AUBREY": What's the matter? You seem distant...
Is something wrong?

"HERO": There is nothing wrong.
We are all here together,
Three best friends.
Is this not harmony?

NARRATOR: *(cutting off "HERO"'s last line)*
But something is off.

There is a brief period of silence as the friends try to understand THE BOY's concerns.

"HERO": Who do you mean?
There were only ever four of us.

"AUBREY": Only ever four of us.
Us three best friends
And "MARI"-

"HERO": *(interrupting)*
Where is "MARI"?

"AUBREY": Were we not to wait for her?
Here in this playground?
THE BOY's sister has not returned
For months already.
Perhaps longer.

"HERO": Then let us wait no longer.
We must find THE BOY's sister
And bring her home.

The projected scene switches to a variety of different environments. As THE NARRATOR sings, THE BOY, "AUBREY", and "HERO" circle the stage in almost an adventure-like manner.

Aria

NARRATOR: And wait no longer they did.
Embarking on an adventure

To find THE BOY's long lost sister.

THE BOY dreamed
Like he had never dreamed before
Of exotic, far-flung places
Escapist refuge within his troubled mind.

They traversed vast forests in foreign lands
Fought space pirates in moonlit skies
Saved lovers from a truly awful fate
In a hungry whale deep, deep
Down an underwater well:

But no boy can dream forever.
For at the end of the road
Lies dormant a death-black door
And its keeper beside.

SCENE IV: THE KEEPER's room

Projected scene shows a pitch-black door over a dark grey background. THE BOY, "AUBREY" and "HERO" enter THE KEEPER's room stage right, as THE KEEPER lies dormant centre stage. THE KEEPER stirs.

Recitative

THE KEEPER: Halt! Who goes there?
For what reason is my slumber disturbed?

THE BOY, "AUBREY" and "HERO" approach THE KEEPER as he slowly gets up. THE KEEPER looks up as he stands. He seems to recognise THE BOY. His face falls.

THE KEEPER: Oh, no, oh no...
My dear dreamer - what has happened?
Who has brought you to this darkest recess?

"HERO": *(Interrupting THE KEEPER's last line)*
Oh, dear KEEPER, sir!
We come seeking answers.

"AUBREY": Could such a divine creature as yourself
 Be the key we are looking for?

THE KEEPER pauses before continuing. Ignoring "HERO" and
"AUBREY"'s questions and speaking directly to *THE BOY*.

THE KEEPER: And these, your friends, dreamer-
 They still guide you, even now?

(to "HERO" and "AUBREY", almost accusingly)
What knowledge do you seek?

"HERO": We have come to find "MARI".
 Our adventure has been long
 But this seems to be the end of our path.
 Is she here? Do you guard her?

THE KEEPER ponders "HERO"'s request for a moment.

THE KEEPER: Ah... it is the sister that you seek.

(Hesitantly)
The answers you are looking for
I have guarded behind this black door.
But I must warn you-

"AUBREY": *(Over THE KEEPER)*
 Shall we go?

THE KEEPER: -to not take this decision lightly-

"HERO": *(Over THE KEEPER)*
 I think I shall-

THE KEEPER: -perhaps it is best for the dreamer
 To go alone.
 That is all I have to say.

THE KEEPER leaves stage left. *THE NARRATOR* and *THE KEEPER*
share a concerning glance as he passes the pulpit. The
three are left to talk amongst themselves.

Duet

"AUBREY": *{Turning to THE BOY}*
 I know you're scared, I know it's hard.
 Perhaps we should go first...

"HERO": I feel your angst, but we know best.
 If "MARI" is truly there,
 Let me return her to us.

"AUBREY": But surely we must both go-

"HERO": THE BOY cannot be left alone
 Keep him safe, away from harm
 I'll be back with "MARI" in tow.

I promise you won't even recognise
 I'm gone.

Before "AUBREY" can protest, "HERO" walks behind the black door. "AUBREY" takes THE BOY's hand in hers as they watch "HERO" leave.

Recit + Aria

After a few moments, "HERO" returns from behind the door. He is clearly in distress; he has tears in his eyes.

"HERO": *(shouting)*
 Get away from him!
 "AUBREY"!
 That boy is dangerous!

"HERO" tries to grab "AUBREY" and move her away from THE BOY, but she hides behind him instead, her hands on THE BOY's shoulders, watching over his right shoulder fearfully.

"HERO" sings half to the audience, half to THE BOY.

"HERO": If only she knew what I knew,
 She would recoil from you in disgust.

"MARI" is dead.
You killed her.
Her blood is on your hands.

"HERO" slowly approaches the boy, his grief and sadness turning to sheer anger and rage.

"HERO": Why? How could you?
 We loved her and you killed her.
 How could you betray
 Everyone that you love?

 You murderer.
 She loved you and you killed her.
 Is this what this journey was for?
 So you could show us yourself?
 Lead us, too, to the macabre slaughter?

 You monster!
 She loved you and you killed her!
 She loved you and you killed her!

"HERO" turns to leave stage right, as the world collapses around THE BOY and "AUBREY".

"HERO": I hope you find
 What it is you're looking for
 For if she knew the truth
 She would hate you as much
 As you hate yourself.

"HERO" exits stage right, and an immense darkness surrounds THE BOY. Lights turn off; the stage turns pitch-black (or as dark as it can be). A lone black lightbulb is projected onto the scene. Consumed by depression - THE BOY is in the black room.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

Projection is of a black screen with a black door in the centre; the stage has minimal lighting. THE BOY and "AUBREY" are kneeling centre stage in the collapsed world, holding hands and facing each other.

Preamble

NARRATOR: Hikikomori
 The boy in the black room
 Consumed by fear and loathing
 His eternal self-hatred.

 Having led himself to this wretched place
 He rests his hands in that
 Of his last partner...

(turns to "AUBREY")

"AUBREY".
 She knows that behind this door
 Lies that truth from which
 This dreamer has created refuge.
 She knows what she must do.

(turns to the audience)
 Denouement. Denouement.
 The decisions that lie ahead
 Here, in the deepest reaches
 Of THE BOY's mind.
 These darkest of memories,
 Are what we must face.

(whispers)
 Where I was so afraid.

SCENE V: the black room

THE BOY slowly stands up, still holding the hand of "AUBREY". She follows suit. They both stare upwards, at the black door in front of them.

Recitative

"AUBREY": I'm scared.
Must we do this? Are you sure?

THE BOY starts to take a few steps forward, "AUBREY" reluctantly following, holding his hand.

"AUBREY": But what about "MARI"?
Are you sure we shall find her here?
Do you really think the answers lie
In this awful place?

With conviction, THE BOY takes another step forward, reaching out a hand. THE NARRATOR looks on, cautiously.

"AUBREY": There are only two of us.
Are you certain we must go ahead?
I just want to keep you safe.

Keep you safe, away from harm.
That is all I want...

NARRATOR: And with conviction,

(almost shaky)
THE BOY reaches out
And opens the door.

Duet

Projection changes to a black and white photo of an old, broken violin, shattering the dreamlike nature of the other projections. "AUBREY" gasps, letting go of THE BOY's hand. THE NARRATOR fully removes her hood to reveal the long, flowing hair of "MARI".

"MARI": Denouement, denouement.
A stark image struck into the mind
Of a child unable to grasp
What has happened to his family.

"AUBREY": *(singing over "MARI")*
 You don't have to do this.
 You can always stay here.
 I can keep you safe.

"MARI": *(singing over "AUBREY")*
 A phone call at midnight.
 The screams of someone told
 Their worst nightmare over
 The course of seconds.

"AUBREY": *(singing over "MARI")*
 I can bring them back.
 I know it's not just us.
 We'll be four best friends again...

SOMETHING slowly takes off her cloak.

"MARI": *(singing over "AUBREY")*
 The sound of sirens,
 Wailing, sobbing. A stretcher
 And men in strange uniforms.
 A figure veiled under blankets.
 What has happened to my sister?
 What has happened to my sister?

"AUBREY": *(singing over "MARI")*
 Can't you remember?
 We would always play together
 You asked me out in school
 We had so many big plans!

SOMETHING has had enough of "AUBREY"'s incessant denial.

"MARI": *(singing over "AUBREY")*
 This is not happening.
 This is not real, says THE BOY,
 As he breathes life into his creation,
 A constructed stark-white room...

"AUBREY": *(singing over "MARI")*
 So many adventures in life,
 For just the two of us...

"MARI": *(singing over "AUBREY")*
 A constructed stark-white room
 Where his traumas cannot reach him.

SOMETHING walks onstage from the pulpit.

"AUBREY": *(singing over "MARI")*
 Please remember!
 We can build a future together.
 I'll always be here to protect you...

"MARI": *(singing over "AUBREY")*
 A place where the tragedy
 Of my death will not follow.

SOMETHING (as "MARI") and "AUBREY" repeat their lines until SOMETHING reaches THE BOY. All then falls silent.

"AUBREY": Wait...
 There's something behind you

SOMETHING stands behind THE BOY, arms outstretched.
"AUBREY" cowers.

"AUBREY": There's something behind you

 There's something behind you

 There's something behind you

As "AUBREY" wails in anguish, SOMETHING whispers two devastating words into THE BOY's ear. There is silence for a few moments. THE BOY rushes "AUBREY" and stabs her in the stomach. The scene freezes as "AUBREY" dies in the boy's arms, and the world falls apart around them.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

After holding position for a long time, THE BOY lets go of "AUBREY", who exits stage right. THE BOY slowly turns to face the audience. As this scene plays out, the following subtitles are projected onto the screen (line by line):

TEXT: This person is breathing steadily.
 This person feels a weight on her shoulders.
 This person doesn't know if she can get out
 of bed.
 This person scrolls through Instagram and
 cries.
 This person is breathing steadily.
 This person doesn't understand why her
 parents put her under so much pressure.
 This person wonders why she can't be like
 other girls.
 This person feels like she's broken.
 This person is breathing steadily.
 This person can't deal with this anymore.
 This person wishes the pain would just end.
 This person prays her brother will forgive
 her.
 This person is not breathing.

EPILOGUE/POSTLUDE**Aria**

THE NARRATOR walks to the front of the stage. THE BOY also faces front.

NARRATOR: And with all his demons slain
 The boy can finally wake

THE NARRATOR turns to face THE BOY, who remains facing frontwards. THE NARRATOR slowly walks towards THE BOY until she is a few feet from him.

NARRATOR: Hikikomori
 The boy inside his head
 For the first time, opens his eyes.
 Wrists in white bandages
 And empty cartoons
 Playing above a hospital bed.

Projector shows image of a sterile hospital. THE NARRATOR turns to face the audience. "AUBREY", "KEL" and "HERO" enter stage right, and stand level at the back of the stage.

NARRATOR: For a truth is only tangible
 Once one accepts it
 There is no need for escape,
 No white rooms or playgrounds
 Or false friends.

THE NARRATOR moves stage left by a few feet. "AUBREY", "KEL" and "HERO" walk towards THE BOY, until they are standing alongside him.

Ensemble

NARRATOR: And so now we face a choice.

"KEL": A stairwell.

"HERO": A chance of redemption.

"AUBREY": Prospects of a better life.

"AUBREY", "KEL" and "HERO" whisper the phrase "oyasumi" quietly over each other. THE NARRATOR continues singing.

NARRATOR: As we pass hordes of masked nurses
 Lining the hallways
 With stress and uncertainty on their faces

"AUBREY", "KEL", and "HERO" stop whispering.

NARRATOR: THE BOY faces his ultimate test.

"KEL": Is he ready...

"HERO": Can he ever be ready...

"AUBREY": To move on?

THE BOY slowly starts to extend an outstretched hand to the audience.

NARRATOR: This is where the story ends.
Will acknowledgement of the truth
Lie bare a stairway to acceptance ahead?

Whether the path we perceive
Ascends to the hospital roof
Or descends to the world below
Remains our choice to decide.

But rarely does the veil of trauma
Resolve to such a satisfying note.
The road to recovery is not
An empty motorway, devoid of obstacle.

While these constructed worlds
Can function as denial and escapism
They can also open a path
To process, to heal, and to accept.

A year of living in our own minds
We are more prepared than ever
To step out into the light.

A brief period of silence. THE BOY's hand is fully outstretched. "KEL", "AUBREY" and "HERO" stand alongside him. THE NARRATOR moves to join their side.

ALL: (repeated asynchronous, then together)
Oyasumi. Oyasumi.

Blackout.

END