

KLARA AND THE SUN

A NOVEL



KAZUO
ISHIGURO

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Klara and the Sun

KAZUO ISHIGURO



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In memory of my mother

Shizuko Ishiguro

(1926–2019)

PART ONE

W

hen we were new, Rosa and I were mid-store, on the magazines table side, and could see through more than half of the window. So we were able to watch the outside – the office workers hurrying by, the taxis, the runners, the tourists, Beggar Man and his dog, the lower part of the RPO Building. Once we were more settled, Manager allowed us to walk up to the front until we were right behind the window display, and then we could see how tall the RPO Building was. And if we were there at just the right time, we would see the Sun on his journey, crossing between the building tops from our side over to the RPO Building side.

When I was lucky enough to see him like that, I'd lean my face forward to take in as much of his nourishment as I could, and if Rosa was with me, I'd tell her to do the same. After a minute or two, we'd have to return to our positions, and when we were new, we used to worry that because we often couldn't see the Sun from mid-store, we'd grow weaker and weaker. Boy AF Rex, who was alongside us then, told us there was nothing to worry about, that the Sun had ways of reaching us wherever we were. He pointed to the floorboards and said, 'That's the Sun's pattern right there. If you're worried, you can just touch it and get strong again.'

There were no customers when he said this, and Manager was busy arranging something up on the Red Shelves, and I didn't want to disturb her by asking permission. So I gave Rosa a glance, and when she looked back blankly, I took two steps forward, crouched down and reached out both hands to the Sun's pattern on the floor. But as soon as my fingers touched it, the pattern faded, and though I tried all I could – I patted the spot where it had been, and when that didn't work, rubbed my hands over the floorboards – it wouldn't come back. When I stood up again Boy AF Rex said:

‘Klara, that was greedy. You girl AFs are always so greedy.’

Even though I was new then, it occurred to me straight away it might not have been my fault; that the Sun had withdrawn his pattern by chance just when I’d been touching it. But Boy AF Rex’s face remained serious.

‘You took all the nourishment for yourself, Klara. Look, it’s gone almost dark.’

Sure enough the light inside the store had become very gloomy. Even outside on the sidewalk, the Tow-Away Zone sign on the lamp post looked gray and faint.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said to Rex, then turning to Rosa: ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take it all myself.’

‘Because of you,’ Boy AF Rex said, ‘I’m going to become weak by evening.’

‘You’re making a joke,’ I said to him. ‘I know you are.’

‘I’m not making a joke. I could get sick right now. And what about those AFs rear-store? There’s already something not right with them. They’re bound to get worse now. You were greedy, Klara.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ I said, but I was no longer so sure. I looked at Rosa, but her expression was still blank.

‘I’m feeling sick already,’ Boy AF Rex said. And he sagged forward.

‘But you just said yourself. The Sun always has ways to reach us. You’re making a joke, I know you are.’

I managed in the end to convince myself Boy AF Rex was teasing me. But what I sensed that day was that I had, without meaning to, made Rex bring up something uncomfortable, something most AFs in the store preferred not to talk about. Then not long afterwards that thing happened to Boy AF Rex, which made me think that even if he had been joking that day, a part of him had been serious too.

It was a bright morning, and Rex was no longer beside us because Manager had moved him to the front alcove. Manager always said that every position was carefully conceived, and that we were as likely to be chosen when standing at one as at another. Even so, we all knew the gaze of a customer entering the store would fall first on the front alcove, and Rex was naturally pleased to get his turn there. We watched him from mid-store,

standing with his chin raised, the Sun's pattern all over him, and Rosa leaned over to me once to say, 'Oh, he does look wonderful! He's bound to find a home soon!'

On Rex's third day in the front alcove, a girl came in with her mother. I wasn't so good then at telling ages, but I remember estimating thirteen and a half for the girl, and I think now that was correct. The mother was an office worker, and from her shoes and suit we could tell she was high-ranking. The girl went straight to Rex and stood in front of him, while the mother came wandering our way, glanced at us, then went on towards the rear, where two AFs were sitting on the Glass Table, swinging their legs freely as Manager had told them to do. At one point the mother called, but the girl ignored her and went on staring up at Rex's face. Then the child reached out and ran a hand down Rex's arm. Rex said nothing, of course, just smiled down at her and remained still, exactly as we'd been told to do when a customer showed special interest.

'Look!' Rosa whispered. 'She's going to choose him! She loves him. He's so lucky!' I nudged Rosa sharply to silence her, because we could easily be heard.

Now it was the girl who called to the mother, and then soon they were both standing in front of Boy AF Rex, looking him up and down, the girl sometimes reaching forward and touching him. The two conferred in soft voices, and I heard the girl say at one point, 'But he's perfect, Mom. He's beautiful.' Then a moment later, the child said, 'Oh, but Mom, come on.'

Manager by this time had brought herself quietly behind them. Eventually the mother turned to Manager and asked:

'Which model is this one?'

'He's a B2,' Manager said. 'Third series. For the right child, Rex will make a perfect companion. In particular, I feel he'll encourage a conscientious and studious attitude in a young person.'

'Well this young lady here could certainly do with that.'

'Oh, Mother, he's perfect.'

Then the mother said: 'B2, third series. The ones with the solar absorption problems, right?'

She said it just like that, in front of Rex, her smile still on her face. Rex kept smiling too, but the child looked baffled and glanced from Rex to her mother.

‘It’s true,’ Manager said, ‘that the third series had a few minor issues at the start. But those reports were greatly exaggerated. In environments with normal levels of light, there’s no problem whatsoever.’

‘I’ve heard solar malabsorption can lead to further problems,’ the mother said. ‘Even behavioral ones.’

‘With respect, ma’am, series three models have brought immense happiness to many children. Unless you live in Alaska or down a mineshaft, you don’t need to worry.’

The mother went on looking at Rex. Then finally she shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, Caroline. I can see why you like him. But he’s not for us. We’ll find one for you that’s perfect.’

Rex went on smiling until after the customers had left, and even after that, showed no sign of being sad. But that’s when I remembered about him making that joke, and I was sure then that those questions about the Sun, about how much of his nourishment we could have, had been in Rex’s mind for some time.

Today, of course, I realize Rex wouldn’t have been the only one. But officially, it wasn’t an issue at all – every one of us had specifications that guaranteed we couldn’t be affected by factors such as our positioning within a room. Even so, an AF would feel himself growing lethargic after a few hours away from the Sun, and start to worry there was something wrong with him – that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he’d never find a home.

That was one reason why we always thought so much about being in the window. Each of us had been promised our turn, and each of us longed for it to come. That was partly to do with what Manager called the ‘special honor’ of representing the store to the outside. Also, of course, whatever Manager said, we all knew we were more likely to be chosen while in the window. But the big thing, silently understood by us all, was the Sun and his nourishment. Rosa did once bring it up with me, in a whisper, a little while before our turn came around.

‘Klara, do you think once we’re in the window, we’ll receive so much goodness we’ll never get short again?’

I was still quite new then, so didn’t know how to answer, even though the same question had been in my mind.

Then our turn finally came, and Rosa and I stepped into the window one morning, making sure not to knock over any of the display the way the pair before us had done the previous week. The store, of course, had yet to open, and I thought the grid would be fully down. But once we’d seated ourselves on the Striped Sofa, I saw there was a narrow gap running along the bottom of the grid – Manager must have raised it a little when checking everything was ready for us – and the Sun’s light was making a bright rectangle that came up onto the platform and finished in a straight line just in front of us. We only needed to stretch our feet a little to place them within its warmth. I knew then that whatever the answer to Rosa’s question, we were about to get all the nourishment we would need for some time to come. And once Manager touched the switch and the grid climbed up all the way, we became covered in dazzling light.

I should confess here that for me, there’d always been another reason for wanting to be in the window which had nothing to do with the Sun’s nourishment or being chosen. Unlike most AFs, unlike Rosa, I’d always longed to see more of the outside – and to see it in all its detail. So once the grid went up, the realization that there was now only the glass between me and the sidewalk, that I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I’d seen before only as corners and edges, made me so excited that for a moment I nearly forgot about the Sun and his kindness to us.

I could see for the first time that the RPO Building was in fact made of separate bricks, and that it wasn’t white, as I’d always thought, but a pale yellow. I could now see too that it was even taller than I’d imagined – twenty-two stories – and that each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge. I saw how the Sun had drawn a diagonal line right across the face of the RPO Building, so that on one side of it there was a triangle that looked almost white, while on the other was one that looked very dark, even though I now knew it was all the pale yellow color. And not only could I see every window right up to the rooftop, I could sometimes see the people inside, standing, sitting, moving around. Then down on the street, I

could see the passers-by, their different kinds of shoes, paper cups, shoulder bags, little dogs, and if I wanted, I could follow with my eyes any one of them all the way past the pedestrian crossing and beyond the second Tow-Away Zone sign, to where two overhaul men were standing beside a drain and pointing. I could see right inside the taxis as they slowed to let the crowd go over the crossing – a driver's hand tapping on his steering wheel, a cap worn by a passenger.

The day went on, the Sun kept us warm, and I could see Rosa was very happy. But I noticed too that she hardly looked at anything, fixing her eyes constantly on the first Tow-Away Zone sign just in front of us. Only when I pointed out something to her would she turn her head, but then she'd lose interest and go back to looking at the sidewalk outside and the sign.

Rosa only looked elsewhere for any length of time when a passer-by paused in front of the window. In those circumstances, we both did as Manager had taught us: we put on 'neutral' smiles and fixed our gazes across the street, on a spot midway up the RPO Building. It was very tempting to look more closely at a passer-by who came up, but Manager had explained that it was highly vulgar to make eye contact at such a moment. Only when a passer-by specifically signaled to us, or spoke to us through the glass, were we to respond, but never before.

Some of the people who paused turned out not to be interested in us at all. They'd just wanted to take off their sports shoe and do something to it, or to press their oblongs. Some though came right up to the glass and gazed in. Many of these would be children, of around the age for which we were most suitable, and they seemed happy to see us. A child would come up excitedly, alone or with their adult, then point, laugh, pull a strange face, tap the glass, wave.

Once in a while – and I soon got better at watching those at the window while appearing to gaze at the RPO Building – a child would come to stare at us, and there would be a sadness there, or sometimes an anger, as though we'd done something wrong. A child like this could easily change the next moment and begin laughing or waving like the rest of them, but after our second day in the window, I learned quickly to tell the difference.

I tried to talk to Rosa about this, the third or fourth time a child like that had come, but she smiled and said: 'Klara, you worry too much. I'm sure

that child was perfectly happy. How could she not be on a day like this? The whole city's so happy today.'

But I brought it up with Manager, at the end of our third day. She had been praising us, saying we'd been 'beautiful and dignified' in the window. The lights in the store had been dimmed by then, and we were rear-store, leaning against the wall, some of us browsing through the interesting magazines before our sleep. Rosa was next to me, and I could see from her shoulders that she was already half asleep. So when Manager asked if I'd enjoyed the day, I took the chance to tell her about the sad children who'd come to the window.

'Klara, you're quite remarkable,' Manager said, keeping her voice soft so as not to disturb Rosa and the others. 'You notice and absorb so much.' She shook her head as though in wonder. Then she said: 'What you must understand is that we're a very special store. There are many children out there who would love to be able to choose you, choose Rosa, any one of you here. But it's not possible for them. You're beyond their reach. That's why they come to the window, to dream about having you. But then they get sad.'

'Manager, a child like that. Would a child like that have an AF at home?'

'Perhaps not. Certainly not one like you. So if sometimes a child looks at you in an odd way, with bitterness or sadness, says something unpleasant through the glass, don't think anything of it. Just remember. A child like that is most likely frustrated.'

'A child like that, with no AF, would surely be lonely.'

'Yes, that too,' Manager said quietly. 'Lonely. Yes.'

She lowered her eyes and was quiet, so I waited. Then suddenly she smiled and, reaching out, removed gently from my grasp the interesting magazine I'd been observing.

'Goodnight, Klara. Be as wonderful tomorrow as you were today. And don't forget. You and Rosa are representing us to the whole street.'

It was almost midway through our fourth morning in the window when I saw the taxi slowing down, its driver leaning right out so the other taxis would let him come across the traffic lanes to the curb in front of our store. Josie's eyes were on me as she got out onto the sidewalk. She was pale and thin, and as she came towards us, I could see her walk wasn't like that of other passers-by. She wasn't slow exactly, but she seemed to take stock after each step to make sure she was still safe and wouldn't fall. I estimated her age as fourteen and a half.

Once she was close enough so all the pedestrians were passing behind her, she stopped and smiled at me.

'Hi,' she said through the glass. 'Hey, can you hear me?'

Rosa kept staring ahead at the RPO Building as she was supposed to do. But now I'd been addressed, I was able to look directly at the child, return her smile and nod encouragingly.

'Really?' Josie said – though of course I didn't yet know that was her name. 'I can hardly hear *me* myself. You can really hear me?'

I nodded again, and she shook her head as if very impressed.

'Wow.' She glanced over her shoulder – even this movement she made with caution – to the taxi from which she'd just emerged. Its door was as she'd left it, hanging open across the sidewalk, and there were two figures still in the back seat, talking and pointing to something beyond the pedestrian crossing. Josie seemed pleased her adults weren't about to get out, and took one more step forward till her face was almost touching the window.

'I saw you yesterday,' she said.

I recalled our previous day, but finding no memory of Josie, looked at her with surprise.

'Oh, don't feel bad or anything, there's no way you'd have seen me. I was like in a taxi, going by, not even that slow. But I saw you in your window, and that's why I got Mom to stop today right here.' She glanced back, again with that carefulness. 'Wow. She's *still* talking with Mrs Jeffries. Expensive way to talk, right? That taxi meter just keeps turning over.'

I could then see how, when she laughed, her face filled with kindness. But strangely, it was at that same moment I first wondered if Josie might be one of those lonely children Manager and I had talked about.

She glanced over to Rosa – who was still gazing dutifully at the RPO Building – then said: ‘Your friend’s really cute.’ Even as she said this, Josie’s eyes were already back on me. She went on looking at me quietly for several seconds, and I became worried her adults would get out before she could say anything more. But she then said:

‘Know what? Your friend will make a perfect friend for someone out there. But yesterday, we were driving by and I saw *you*, and I thought that’s her, the AF I’ve been looking for!’ She laughed again. ‘Sorry. Maybe that sounds disrespectful.’ She turned once more to the taxi, but the figures in the back showed no signs of getting out. ‘Are you French?’ she asked. ‘You look kind of French.’

I smiled and shook my head.

‘There were these two French girls,’ Josie said, ‘came to our last meeting. Both had their hair that way, neat and short like you. Looked cute.’ She regarded me silently for another moment, and I thought I saw another small sign of sadness, but I was still quite new then and couldn’t be sure. Then she brightened, saying:

‘Hey, don’t you guys get hot sitting there like that? Do you need a drink or something?’

I shook my head and raised my hands, palms up, to indicate the loveliness of the Sun’s nourishment falling over us.

‘Oh yeah. Wasn’t thinking. You love being in the sunshine, right?’

She turned again, this time to look up at the building tops. At that moment the Sun was in the gap of sky, and Josie screwed up her eyes immediately and turned back to me.

‘Don’t know how you do that. I mean keep looking that way without being dazzled. I can’t do it even for a second.’

She put a hand to her forehead then turned away once more, this time looking not at the Sun, but to somewhere near the top of the RPO Building. After five seconds, she turned back to me again.

‘I guess for you guys, where you are, the Sun must go down behind that big building, right? That must mean you never get to see where he *really* goes down. That building must always get in the way.’ She looked over quickly to check the adults were still inside the taxi, then went on: ‘Where we live, there’s nothing in the way. From up in my room you can see exactly where the Sun goes down. The exact place he goes to at night.’

I must have looked surprised. And at the edge of my vision I could see that Rosa, forgetting herself, was now staring at Josie in astonishment.

‘Can’t see where he comes up in the morning though,’ Josie said. ‘The hills and the trees get in the way of that. Kind of like here, I guess. Things always in the way. But the evening’s something else. Over that side, where my room looks out, it’s just wide and empty. If you came and lived with us, you’d see.’

One adult, then another, climbed from the taxi out onto the sidewalk. Josie had not seen them, but perhaps she’d heard something for she began to talk more quickly.

‘Cross my heart. You can see the exact place he goes down.’

The adults were women, both dressed in high-rank office clothes. The taller one I guessed to be the mother Josie had mentioned because she kept watching Josie even as she exchanged cheek kisses with her companion. Then the companion was gone, mixing with the other passers-by, and the Mother turned fully our way. And for just one second, her piercing stare was no longer on Josie’s back, but on me, and I immediately looked away, up at the RPO Building. But Josie was speaking again through the glass, her voice lowered but still audible.

‘Have to go now. But I’ll come back soon. We’ll talk more.’ Then she said, in a near-whisper which I could only just hear, ‘You won’t go away, right?’

I shook my head and smiled.

‘That’s good. Okay. So now it’s goodbye. But only for now.’

The Mother by this time was standing right behind Josie. She was black-haired and thin, though not as thin as Josie, or some of the runners. Now she was closer and I could see her face better, I raised my estimate of her age to forty-five. As I’ve said, I wasn’t so accurate with ages then, but this

was to prove more or less correct. From a distance, I'd first thought her a younger woman, but when she was closer I could see the deep etches around her mouth, and also a kind of angry exhaustion in her eyes. I noticed too that when the Mother reached out to Josie from behind, the outstretched arm hesitated in the air, almost retracting, before coming forward to rest on her daughter's shoulder.

They entered the flow of passers-by, going in the direction of the second Tow-Away Zone sign, Josie with her cautious walk, her mother's arm around her as they went. Once, before they left my view, Josie looked back, and even though she had to disturb the rhythm of their walk, gave me one last wave.

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It was later that same afternoon, Rosa said: 'Klara, isn't it funny? I always thought we'd see so many AFs out there once we got in the window. All the ones who'd found homes already. But there aren't so many. I wonder where they are.'

This was one of the great things about Rosa. She could fail to notice so much, and even when I pointed something out to her, she'd still not see what was special or interesting about it. Yet every now and then she'd make an observation like this one. As soon as she said what she did, I realized that I too had expected to see many more AFs from the window, walking happily with their children, even going about their business by themselves, and that even if I hadn't acknowledged it to myself, I too had been surprised and a little disappointed.

'You're right,' I said, looking from right to left. 'Just now, among all these passers-by, there isn't a single AF.'

'Isn't that one over there? Going past the Fire Escapes Building?'

We both looked carefully, then shook our heads at the same time.

Though she'd been the one to bring up this question about the AFs outside, it was typical that she soon lost all interest in it. By the time I finally spotted a teenage boy and his AF walking past the juice stand on the RPO Building side, she barely looked their way.

But I went on thinking about what Rosa had said, and whenever an AF did go by, I made sure to watch closely. And before long, I noticed a curious thing: there were always more AFs to be seen on the RPO Building side than on ours. And often, if an AF did happen to be coming towards us on our side, walking with a child past the second Tow-Away Zone sign, they would then use the crossing and not come past our store. When AFs did go by us they almost always acted oddly, speeding up their walk and keeping their faces turned away. I wondered then if perhaps we – the whole store – were an embarrassment to them. I wondered if Rosa and I, once we'd found our homes, would feel an awkwardness to be reminded that we hadn't always lived with our children, but in a store. However much I tried, though, I couldn't imagine either Rosa or me ever feeling that way about the store, about Manager and the other AFs.

Then as I continued to watch the outside, another possibility came to me: that the AFs weren't embarrassed, but were afraid. They were afraid because we were new models, and they feared that before long their children would decide it was time to have them thrown away, to be replaced by AFs like us. That was why they shuffled by so awkwardly, refusing to look our way. And that was why so few AFs could be seen from our window. For all we knew, the next street – the one *behind* the RPO Building – was crowded with them. For all we knew, the AFs outside did all they could to take any route other than one that would bring them past our store, because the last thing they wanted was for their children to see us and come to the window.

I shared none of these thoughts with Rosa. Instead, whenever we spotted an AF out there I made a point of wondering aloud if they were happy with their child and with their home, and this always pleased and excited Rosa. She took it up as a kind of game, pointing and saying: 'Look, over there! Do you see, Klara? That boy just loves his AF! Oh, look at the way they're laughing together!'

And sure enough, there were plenty of pairs that looked happy with each other. But Rosa missed so many signals. She would often exclaim delightedly at a pair going by, and I would look and realize that even though a girl was smiling at her AF, she was in fact angry with him, and was perhaps at that very moment thinking cruel thoughts about him. I noticed

such things all the time, but said nothing and let Rosa go on believing what she did.

Once, on the morning of our fifth day in the window, I saw two taxis, over on the RPO Building side, moving slowly and so close together someone new might have supposed they were a single vehicle – a kind of double taxi. Then the one in front became slightly faster and a gap appeared, and I saw through that gap, on the far sidewalk, a girl of fourteen, wearing a cartoon shirt, walking in the direction of the crossing. She was without adults or an AF but seemed confident and a little impatient, and because she was walking at the same speed as the taxis, I was able to keep watching her through the gap for some time. Then the gap between the taxis grew wider still, and I saw she was with an AF after all – a boy AF – who was walking three paces behind. And I could see, even in that small instant, that he hadn't lagged behind by chance; that this was how the girl had decided they would always walk – she in front and he a few steps behind. The boy AF had accepted this, even though other passers-by would see and conclude he wasn't loved by the girl. And I could see the weariness in the boy AF's walk, and wondered what it might be like to have found a home and yet to know that your child didn't want you. Until I saw this pair it hadn't occurred to me an AF could be with a child who despised him and wanted him gone, and that they could nevertheless carry on together. Then the front taxi slowed because of the crossing, and the one behind drew up and I couldn't see them any more. I kept watching to see if they would come over at the crossing, but they weren't in the crossing crowd, and I could no longer see the other side because of all the other taxis.

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I wouldn't have wanted anyone other than Rosa beside me in the window during those days, but our time there did bring out the differences in our attitudes. It wasn't really that I was more eager to learn about the outside than Rosa: she was, in her own way, excited and observant, and as anxious as I was to prepare herself to be as kind and helpful an AF as possible. But the more I watched, the more I wanted to learn, and unlike Rosa, I became puzzled, then increasingly fascinated by the more mysterious emotions