

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER



Before
we
say
goodbye

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BEFORE WE SAY GOODBYE

Translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot

PICADOR

If you could go back, who would you want to meet?

Relationship map of characters

Woman in the White Dress

A ghost who occupies the seat that returns you to the past. She leaves to use the toilet once a day. Usually she is found quietly reading her novel. But she curses anyone who disturbs her.

Mieko Kadokura

Wife of Monji Kadokura. Two and a half years ago she had an accident and fell into a vegetative state.

Monji Kadokura

An archaeologist and traveller. He has not spent much time at home with his wife and children.

Fumiko Kiyokawa

Cafe regular whose boyfriend is in America.

Nana Kohtake

A nurse and a regular of the cafe.

Miki Tokita

Baby daughter of Nagare

Nagare Tokita

Cousin of Kazu Tokita and owner of the cafe. He is a giant of a man, almost two metres tall. He has a baby daughter, Miki.

Kazu Tokita

Waitress of the cafe Funiculi Funicula. She serves the coffee during the ceremony that returns people to the past.

Hikari Ishimori

Her boyfriend said he would wait for her when she turned down his proposal a year ago but then he met someone else and left her.

Yoji Sakita

He proposed to Hikari Ishimori in the cafe a year ago.

Apollo

Golden retriever owned by Mutsuo and Sunao Hikita. He died last week, aged thirteen.

Mutsuo Hikita

He sometimes brought his dog Apollo into the cafe.

Sunao Hikita

Wife of Mutsuo Hikita and owner of Apollo. She regrets not staying awake with the dog when he died.

Michiko Kijimoto

Six years ago she left home in Yuriage and went to university in Tokyo, partly to get away from her father.

Yusuke Mori

Fiancé of Michiko.

Kengo Kijimoto

Father of Michiko. He died in the Great East Japan Earthquake six years ago.

returned to the past

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I

The Husband

‘So, there’s nothing one could do to change the present?’

Monji Kadokura inquisitively tilted his head of grey-speckled hair, dislodging a cherry-blossom petal that fluttered to the ground. Under the dim sepia light of the shaded lamps – the cafe’s only illumination – he was squinting so closely at the jottings in his notebook that his face was almost pressed against the page.

‘What does that mean, specifically?’

‘Well, maybe I could explain it like this ...’

Replying to Kadokura’s question, with long narrow eyes, was Nagare Tokita, a huge man more than two metres tall. He was the owner of the cafe and always wore a white cook’s uniform.

‘Take this cash register, for example. You’d be hard-pressed to find one in Japan that is older. I’ve been told it’s very rare. By the way, even empty, it weighs forty kilograms, to stop people stealing it. Anyway, let’s say that one day, this cash register *was* stolen.’

Nagare slapped his hand on the cash register on the counter.

‘If that happened, then naturally you would want to return to the past and hide it away somewhere or get someone to stand guard to stop anyone from entering the cafe to steal it, right?’

‘Sure, that makes sense.’ Kadokura nodded in agreement.

‘But you see, that can’t happen. No matter how hard you tried to prevent the cash register from getting stolen, the thief would still make their way into the cafe and steal the cash register, even if it was well hidden.’

‘Gosh, that is so fascinating. What could be the science behind that? I would be interested to know the causal relationship – if you know what I mean. A kind of butterfly effect, perhaps?’ Kadokura looked up at Nagare

with excited eyes.

‘Butterfly effect?’

Now it was Nagare’s turn to tilt his head, in confusion.

‘It’s a theory that the meteorologist Edward Lorenz proposed at a lecture given at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1972. There is a Japanese saying along the same lines. *If the wind blows, the barrel-makers prosper.*’

‘Oh, er, OK.’

‘But then, this idea of the present not changing – that’s not an effect. More like a correction, don’t you think? If so, that would rule out the butterfly effect. This is getting more and more fascinating,’ he mumbled enthusiastically as he wrote something down in his notebook.

‘Well, truth be told, the only explanation we have ever been given is, *because that’s the rule*, isn’t that right, Kazu?’ Nagare looked to Kazu Tokita, standing next to him, for agreement.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Kazu replied without bothering to look up.

Kazu was Nagare’s cousin and a waitress at the cafe. She wore a white shirt, black waistcoat, and sommelier’s apron. She was pretty with fair complexion and long, narrow almond-shaped eyes, but not one other feature stood out. If you glanced at her and closed your eyes, you’d find it difficult to describe her face. Even Kadokura had to follow Nagare’s gaze to be reminded that there was one more person here. She cast a faint shadow, and her presence lacked impact.

Her expression remained neutral as she polished a glass.

Fumiko Kiyokawa cut into the conversation. ‘So anyway, Professor Kadokura, who did you come to the cafe to meet?’

‘Please drop the professor, Ms Kiyokawa. I’m out of academia now.’ He smiled awkwardly and scratched his head.

Fumiko had already experienced a return to the past in the cafe: she went to meet a lover from whom she had parted ways. Now she was a regular and visited the cafe almost daily after work.

‘Oh, do you two know each other?’ Nagare asked.

‘Professor Kadokura taught my archaeology class at university. But he’s not just an archaeology professor. He has travelled around the world as an adventurer. As a result, his classes covered so much! I found them to be of great value,’ Fumiko replied.

‘You might be the only one who would say that. And I must say, you were

an excellent student, always top of the class.'

'Don't talk me up so much ... I simply didn't like losing to anyone.'
Fumiko waved her hand modestly.

Notwithstanding how true that statement was, while still in high school Fumiko had mastered six languages through self-study, and she had graduated as the top student at her university. Her brilliance remained in Kadokura's memory even though he was no longer teaching. It simply wasn't true that she just hated losing.

'Professor, you never answered.'

'Oh yes, of course, you want to hear my story, right? Well actually ...'
Kadokura turned his gaze away from Fumiko, sitting next to him at the counter, and stared at his clasped hands. 'I want to see my wife ... just to talk with her one more time,' he said in a small voice.

'With your wife? Oh, don't tell me she's ...' Fumiko didn't need to finish the question. Her alarm told Kadokura what she meant.

'Oh, no, she's still alive.'

Kadokura's reply had softened Fumiko's expression. But his face stayed grim.

Sensing something was amiss, Fumiko and Nagare waited with bated breath for his next words.

'She's alive, but she suffered brain damage in an accident, which left her in a vegetative state. It's been nearly two and a half years. Patients in a vegetative state normally survive three to five years at the most. I've been told that she is likely to die soon, considering her age.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Then perhaps you were hoping to return to the past to prevent your wife's accident? If that was your plan, I'm sorry, but as I explained before ...'

Shaking his head a little, he replied, 'No, I understand. I admit to a little wishful thinking, but now, to tell you the truth ...' He scratched above his eyebrow. 'You've really piqued my interest,' he said and laughed nervously.

'What do you mean?' Fumiko asked, puzzled.

'I mean, the idea of not being able to change the present even though you can return to the past – how intriguing is that?'

His eyes shone like a child's, then darkened in an instant. 'That must have sounded rather inappropriate when my wife is in a vegetative state.'

'Oh, not at all.' Fumiko's attempt at a smile came off awkwardly. In truth, she had indeed thought, *How inappropriate.*

‘That side of my personality caused my wife much distress. I’ve been in love with archaeology since my youth and I’ve lived a life focused on my interests alone. I trotted the globe as an adventurer and I did not return home for months on end. My wife never voiced any complaints about how I was. She tended to our home and raised our children. Then they left the nest, one by one, and before we knew it, it was just the two of us. Yet I continued to leave my wife alone and travel around the world. But waiting for me when I returned home one day was my wife – in a vegetative state.’

Kadokura took a small photo from his notebook. It showed a young couple. Nagare and Fumiko could see immediately they were Kadokura and his wife. After a longer look, it became plain that a large pendulum wall clock, looking just like one of the three in this cafe, was in the background.

‘This photo was taken of us in this cafe, I want to say twenty-four, maybe twenty-five years ago. You’ve heard of an instant camera, right?’

‘You mean an instax?’ asked Fumiko in reply.

‘People today call them that, yes. Cameras that could take photos and then allow you to print them on the spot were a hit back in the day. The lady in charge of the cafe back then had one. She took this photo for us, saying we should have a memento.’

‘That was my mother. Mum loved having the latest in trendy gadgets. I imagine she said it was a memento, but I bet she just wanted to show it off,’ said Nagare dismissively with a wry smile.

‘My wife told me to carry this always. She said it was an amulet to protect me. Of course, there is no scientific basis for a photo to become a lucky charm,’ said Kadokura as he waved the photo around.

‘You want to go back to the day that photo was taken?’

‘No. I haven’t visited this cafe since that day, but I think my wife came here every now and then to meet our children. If I return, I would like to go back about two or three years before she fell into her vegetative state.’

‘OK then,’ Nagare replied, and momentarily glanced over to the woman in the white dress with long black hair and pale skin that appeared almost translucent, sitting in the furthest corner of the cafe. She was silently reading a book.

‘Do you have any other questions?’

‘Let’s see.’ Kadokura put the photo back into his notebook and opened the page on which he had just jotted down the rules. Once again he brought his face close to the page as he peered at it.

‘I think this is related to the rule that the present won’t change, which we just discussed, but ...’

‘What is it?’

‘How do words conveyed from someone from the future remain in the memories of the people they visit?’

‘Eh? Well, that’s, er ...’ Nagare could not grasp what Kadokura was asking. He knitted his brows and tilted his head. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Sorry, I’m not explaining this very well.’ Kadokura scratched his forehead.

‘I understand that there is some kind of force, which you call a rule, that works to prevent the present from changing. What I want to know is whether the rule has an effect not only on the present, but also on memory?’

A question mark still was hanging over Nagare’s head.

‘In other words, if people were told that the cash register would get stolen, I want to know whether or not their memories would be erased or altered by the rule.’

‘Ah, OK, I get you now,’ said Nagare, folding his arms.

‘And? What would happen?’ butted in Fumiko instead of Kadokura.

‘Well, let me think.’ Nagare didn’t have an answer straight away. That was because his mind went from, *I’ve never even thought about it*, to: *More to the point, what’s on Kadokura’s mind? Why does it concern him?* To the best of his knowledge, no one else had been bothered with such a thing before.

Now, siding with Kadokura, Fumiko stared inquisitively into Nagare’s face as if she too was concerned about it.

Fumiko had once returned to the past to meet her boyfriend, from whom she parted at this cafe. Yet one other rule of this cafe was that after people have returned to the past once, they can never do so again. So this particular conversation shouldn’t have interested her. Yet, here she was, coming at him as if she was Kadokura’s sidekick.

New creases were appearing between his eyebrows, and Nagare wiped sweat from his forehead as his long thin eyes narrowed further. ‘Um, let me think,’ was all he could groan.

‘Memories are unaffected by the rule.’

This snappy clarification was delivered not by Nagare, but by Kazu, who was next to him. She had finished wiping the glasses and was on to folding the paper napkins. Without the slightest pause, she imparted this crucial reply in a piercingly clear voice.

‘There are cases where people know the truth, but in conversations with others, act as though they don’t know. They might learn that the cash register is going to be stolen. They might *know* it is going to be stolen, but still, they will approach that day pretending otherwise. The rule intervenes in that way. It operates through such pretence. It does not, however, interfere with people’s memory. There is no case where a person forgets the experience. On the contrary, with the knowledge that the cash register will be stolen, that person spends every day worrying until the theft occurs. But how they perceive and live with that information is up to them. It all depends on how they take it. The memory and the emotions that arise from it belong to them. Those are outside the scope of the rule’s interference.’

On hearing Kazu’s explanation, Kadokura’s expression brightened considerably. He stood up.

‘If that’s the case, then I’m glad to hear it. That’s taken a load off my mind. I would now like to make a request. May I please return to before my wife fell into a vegetative state?’ Then he bowed deeply.

‘As you wish,’ Kazu replied coolly.

Fumiko looked at Kazu and clapped loudly in applause, while Nagare looked utterly confounded. This was not a new rule, but a fact. It was hidden in the shadow of the second rule and brought to light by Kadokura’s questioning. If you return to the past, the present will not change no matter how much you try. But there was a proviso: although the rule had power over any circumstances to prevent the present from changing, it did not interfere with people’s memories.

Rather than concentrating his attention on the rule that the present would not change, Kadokura was concerned with the effect on memory. *Perhaps that’s an important consideration.*

Glimpsing the profound implications of the rule, Nagare narrowed his long thin eyes still further as he looked up at the ceiling.

‘Now, about the other rules ...’ Kazu said, resuming her explanation. But the other rules did not seem nearly as important to Kadokura. To the rules that you must not get up from the chair while in the past and that there is a time limit, he replied with a simple, ‘Understood.’

However, when Kazu broached the topic of the woman in the white dress, mentioning that she was a ghost and that if you forcefully tried to move her you would be cursed, he devoured this information with a glow of childlike fascination in his eyes.

‘Well, I still don’t believe she is a ghost. But I must say, I do have a fascination with curses. In the world of archaeology, some uncanny stories are spread around as if they are true. And I have read many books on the supernatural. All of them, however, lacked scientific rigour. In fact, I’ve never met someone who has been cursed. I’d actually like to experience what it feels like.’

‘What?’ Fumiko shrieked. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes, of course. I’m very eager to try. Didn’t you mention before, Ms Kiyokawa, that you had been cursed by her? I’m curious, how did it feel? Perhaps I too would get cursed if I tried to move her forcefully?’

Unsure what to make of Kadokura’s conduct, Nagare and Fumiko looked at each other and shrugged. At the same time, Nagare thought, *He reminds me of Mum.*

Nagare’s mother was also free-spirited and consumed by wanderlust. There was even a time when she called herself an adventurer. She pursued her interests voraciously, and as a result she had no regard for family. She was completely disengaged. Consequently, she and his father had divorced before Nagare was born.

After he was born, she left him in the care of her younger sister, Kazu’s mother, while she moved overseas. He had heard that she was in Hokkaido, but as she just did as she pleased without letting anyone know her contact details, he couldn’t be sure.

Mrs Kadokura had to put up with the same, no doubt.

Looking at Kadokura, who appeared to be as eccentric as his mother, Nagare couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for his wife and children.

‘Well, I think you would be able to experience getting cursed, but I definitely advise against it,’ stated Nagare coldly.

Kadokura was unperturbed. ‘But still, if possible ...’ he implored with an unnerving clarity of purpose in his eyes.

Oh no. There’s no stopping him. I can’t see him changing his mind whatever I say.

Nagare gave a mental sigh. ‘Just this once, OK?’

‘Thank you very much!’

As bizarre as he thought the situation was, Nagare still reluctantly ushered Kadokura over to the woman in the white dress. Kadokura nervously took out a handkerchief from his pocket. He stood next to the woman in the white dress while wiping the sweat from his forehead and hands.

‘Excuse me, do you mind?’

Kadokura peered into the face of the woman in the white dress. The woman continued reading her book without responding or changing her expression in any way. Today she was reading a novel called *The Dog that Wanted to Be a Cat and the Cat that Wanted to Be a Dog*.

‘Huh? She really ...’ Kadokura muttered as he stared at the woman’s face.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Er, no. Everything’s fine. So, is it OK to force her to move?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right then, I’ll get her to move.’

Kadokura took a deep breath and stepped up to the woman in the white dress.

‘Excuse me, madam. Could I get you to move, please?’ he said while shaking her shoulder.

The woman did not respond, so he looked to Nagare for advice.

‘Try with a little more force.’

‘Er, OK.’

With a sudden burst of decisiveness, Kadokura grabbed the woman’s shoulder and yanked it firmly as he said, ‘Excuse me! Please move!’

Suddenly, the woman in the white dress opened her eyes wide and glared at him.

‘Ugh.’

Instantly, he buckled at the knees. The lights in the cafe flickered like candle flames, and from out of nowhere an eerie voice like a moaning ghost echoed throughout the cafe. The woman’s pale white face transformed. Leaning over the table, she glared at Kadokura creepily with horrible round eyes.

‘So, this is a curse! My body is so heavy, and ... argh ... it hurts too. I feel like my bones are being twisted. This is what a curse feels like! It’s the first time I’ve experienced it! I feel so heavy, I can’t move as I want. It feels like I am being covered by a blanket of lead. Ooh the heaviness!’

Kadokura was crawling on the floor with a look of pleasure.

‘Is that enough?’ Nagare asked.

Waiting there beside him was Kazu, holding a silver kettle.

Kadokura panted, ‘Not yet, a little longer. I’m currently feeling what it’s like to be cursed. An experience as precious as this doesn’t occur every day ...’

‘If you say so.’ Nagare sighed heavily.

From her counter seat, Fumiko looked down at Kadokura crawling on the floor and chuckled.

‘Uh!’

It wasn’t long before Kadokura’s body was flat on the floor with his arms and legs splayed out. Strange indiscernible sounds, rasping from his throat, suggested he was struggling to breathe. He might have lost the ability to talk.

‘Kazu,’ said Nagare as a signal; he thought it dangerous to leave it any longer.

Kazu stepped up to the woman in the white dress, who was grimacing at Kadokura with wildly tousled hair. ‘How about a fresh cup of coffee,’ she suggested quietly.

In an instant, the woman in the white dress went from being on the verge of climbing over the table and attacking Kadokura, to saying, ‘Yes, please,’ docilely, as she sat down in her chair.

At the same time the cafe’s lighting returned to normal and the ghost-like moaning vanished.

‘Whew.’

The curse had been lifted. Kadokura recovered his ability to breathe. He was puffing hard, but he lifted his head to reveal an expression of childlike exhilaration.

The woman in the white dress sipped her coffee and quietly read her book.

‘I see. I see. So that is a curse. How very interesting.’

In no time, Kadokura had picked himself up and returned to his counter seat, where he opened his notebook. He began writing something with remarkable speed.

Nagare was completely dumbfounded, while Fumiko was giggling like an amused bystander.

Kazu alone kept cool as if nothing had happened.

While Kadokura was engrossed in his notetaking, Fumiko suddenly said, ‘Oh, Nagare, I was forgetting, how’s little Miki? I came to peek at her face.’

Miki was the baby girl born to Nagare and his wife, Kei Tokita.

‘What are you talking about? You saw her just yesterday.’

‘Yes, I know, but ...’

‘How many times do you need to look at her?’

‘What does that matter? She’s so cute! I could look at her all day and not get tired.’

‘That’s a bit weird.’

Though his words didn’t say it, his long almond-shaped eyes arched beamingly. He was happy.

‘Is she asleep?’

‘In the back room.’

‘Can I see her?’

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you.’

Fumiko sprang up from the counter stool and grabbed her phone from her shoulder bag.

‘Don’t you think you’ve taken enough photos?’

‘I want to take a video today.’

Grinning wickedly, she walked off into the back room.

‘Are babies really that cute?’ muttered Kadokura. He had finished writing in his notebook and was now looking towards the back room to where Fumiko had disappeared.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon. I wasn’t implying that your baby wasn’t cute. I myself have two daughters and one son. They’re all grown up now, and I even have grandchildren.’

‘They weren’t cute?’ Nagare asked in disbelief.

‘Well, I don’t know. When my children were born, I was mostly overseas, you see. When I returned home each time they had always got bigger. My second daughter even said to me once, “Come and visit again sometime,”’ replied Kadokura with a wry smile.

‘Looking back now, I don’t think I ever should have started a family. Before I knew it, they had grown up. By the time they were in middle school and high school, I didn’t know how to interact with them. Even so, my wife did not say anything to me. She always sent me off with a smile.’

‘Do you regret it?’

After pondering Nagare’s question silently, Kadokura replied, ‘Not having any regrets might actually be my biggest regret. I wish I was capable of feeling regret.’

Then he added, ‘So what do I do now?’

‘Huh?’ Nagare’s almond-shaped eyes widened momentarily. ‘Er, that’s not really something I can ...’

‘No, I mean to return to the past.’

‘Oh, that.’

‘Sorry, I confused you.’

‘No, it’s OK,’ said Nagare, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead.

‘First, to travel back in time, you need to sit in the chair she is in, which means you must wait for her to vacate it. She always does once every day, when she goes to the toilet.’

‘Are you saying she goes to the toilet even though she’s a ghost? It just keeps getting more fascinating.’

‘However, we don’t know when she will go.’

‘So what does that mean?’

‘The only thing you can do is wait. If you try to force her to move, the same thing will happen as before.’

‘She’ll curse me.’

‘Yes.’

‘OK, I understand. May I order something to eat?’

‘Yes, of course. If there’s something not on the menu that you would like, I think I can make it for you providing we have the ingredients.’

‘Oh, sounds good, may I have chicken and egg on rice?’

‘You would like *oyakodon*?’

‘Yes, long ago, my wife often made it for me. I would like to have that, please.’

‘Sure, I’ll go and make it,’ Nagare replied and went to the kitchen.

That left Kazu, the woman in the white dress, and Kadokura.

Kadokura opened his notebook again and started writing.

It feels quiet now.

It is normal for cafes to play classical or jazz music in the background. Customers can enjoy a cup of coffee while immersed in relaxing music. That is one of the pleasures of a cafe. Music was not played in this cafe, however. The only sounds were the three large, floor-to-ceiling pendulum clocks ticking away the time.

The time shown by each of the three clocks, though, was different. Checking his watch, Kadokura was able to confirm that the middle clock was the only one keeping the correct time. The times displayed by each of the three clocks, however, were completely different.

When some customers first visit the cafe, their sense of time goes a little haywire while sitting in the room with no windows or sunlight. Re-immersing himself in this space now, Kadokura found his memory of his first visit to this cafe flooding back as if it was only yesterday.

‘Actually, I’ve seen that woman before,’ he said suddenly to Kazu, catching her unawares. ‘It was when that photo I showed earlier was taken. I thought I was most likely mistaken. After all, it was twenty-four or twenty-five years ago.’

Kadokura looked at the woman in the white dress. Kazu was listening quietly to his story.

‘But I’m not mistaken. It is her. She served me and my wife coffee here in this cafe that day. Her hair was a different length back then, but her sorrowful eyes are just the same. Why did she end up sitting in that chair? What on earth happened to her?’

Flap.

The sound of a book closing suddenly interrupted Kadokura’s story. It was the woman in the white dress. She stood up slowly, then she moved silently past Kadokura’s back where he was sitting at the counter and disappeared to the toilet.

Once she had gone, Kadokura turned round and looked at the empty seat.

‘The seat is vacant now, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘If I sit on that chair, I can go back to the past?’

‘That’s right. Would you like to sit there?’

‘Yes, of course.’

No sooner had Kadokura replied than he left the stool and stood in front of the chair that the woman in the white dress had been occupying – the chair that would take him back to the past.

Rather than immediately sitting down in the vacant chair before him, however, he stood staring at it.

It was a balloon-back chair with beautifully curved cabriole legs and a seat upholstered in a pale moss-green fabric. It was a replica, but still obviously worth a considerable sum.

Kadokura was no expert, but even he could tell that each of the chairs in this cafe was a high-class item worth several times the price of a normal chair.

However, it wasn’t that which he was fixated on.

‘It doesn’t seem particularly different from the other chairs.’

Kadokura crouched down and stroked the seat cushion. He wanted to know whether this chair that took you back to the past was special in any way from the others.

‘It’s cold. More specifically, the space around the chair feels chilly. Why on earth would that be, I wonder? Perhaps it is this space that is special, and the chair is just the same as the others? I wonder if you could still go back if you switched it with another chair?’

He turned to see that Kazu was not there. He had been talking to himself. However, seemingly unperturbed, he carefully slid between the chair and the table.

‘Yes. There’s no mistaking it. It is obvious once you sit down. It’s not the chair that is cool; it’s this entire space that is chilly.’

Kadokura slowly moved his palm away from his body. He was using it to search for subtle temperature boundaries.

‘From here ... to here ... to here ... to here, the temperature is clearly different. It’s just this space of about eighty centimetres long and wide that is special in some way; it begins from the middle of the table and includes the chair.’

Unbeknownst to Kadokura, Kazu had returned from the kitchen. Placed upon the tray she was holding were a silver kettle and a pure white coffee cup.

He spoke regardless. His tone remained the same whether Kazu was there or not.

‘I am thinking perhaps it is actually this space of about eighty centimetres square that makes it possible to return to the past.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘I see. I see. How fascinating.’

Even now, Kadokura once again began to jot down something in his notebook.

While Kazu was clearing away the cup that the woman in the white dress had used, Nagare came out from the kitchen. He was holding a wooden ladle.

‘Er ...’

‘Yes?’

‘What do you want to do about the meal?’

‘Oh, yes, I forgot.’

Kadokura had stopped writing and was looking up. He hadn’t expected the woman in the white dress to vacate the chair so fast.

‘Oh, what shall I do? Is it OK to wait until after I return?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘OK, then when I get back.’

‘Sure. No problem.’

Kadokura took a whiff of the air around him.

‘That smells good, though. I’m looking forward to returning,’ he said to Nagare.

‘It will be waiting for you.’

Nagare’s narrow almond-shaped eyes once again beamed with pleasure as he retreated to the kitchen.

‘Right then ...’

Kadokura sat up straight and gave Kazu a little nod. It was his way of indicating he was ready. Kazu stood silently at the side of the chair. When he looked at her face, a chill ran down his spine.

What a resemblance! She looks exactly like the ghost who was just sitting here.

He noticed it in her translucent complexion, her narrow eyes and pensive expression, and more than that, her bone structure – or rather, her silhouette. Perhaps it required the discerning capabilities of someone like Kadokura to notice it, but he felt certain.

They are mother and daughter.

Obviously, the woman in the white dress must be the mother and the waitress standing before him, the daughter.

I must know the story behind this.

But he held his tongue. Clearly aware of the immensity of having one’s own mother become a ghost and permanently sit there, not ageing, he knew it was not a subject to be broached out of personal curiosity.

Nevertheless, I still want to know.

‘I was wondering ...’

No, I can’t.

Mentally, he was vigorously shaking his head as if to sweep away the question crossing his mind.

Let’s stick to going back to the past right now.

‘Er, never mind. Please continue.’

When Kadokura looked up to Kazu, she placed the empty coffee cup before him immediately, as if she had been waiting for him to look at her.

‘I will now pour the coffee.’

‘Your time in the past will commence once your coffee has been fully poured and it will last until your coffee gets cold.’

‘Yes. I know.’