



Before your memory fades

TOSHIKAZU KAWAGUCHI
Bestselling author of *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*

Toshikazu Kawaguchi

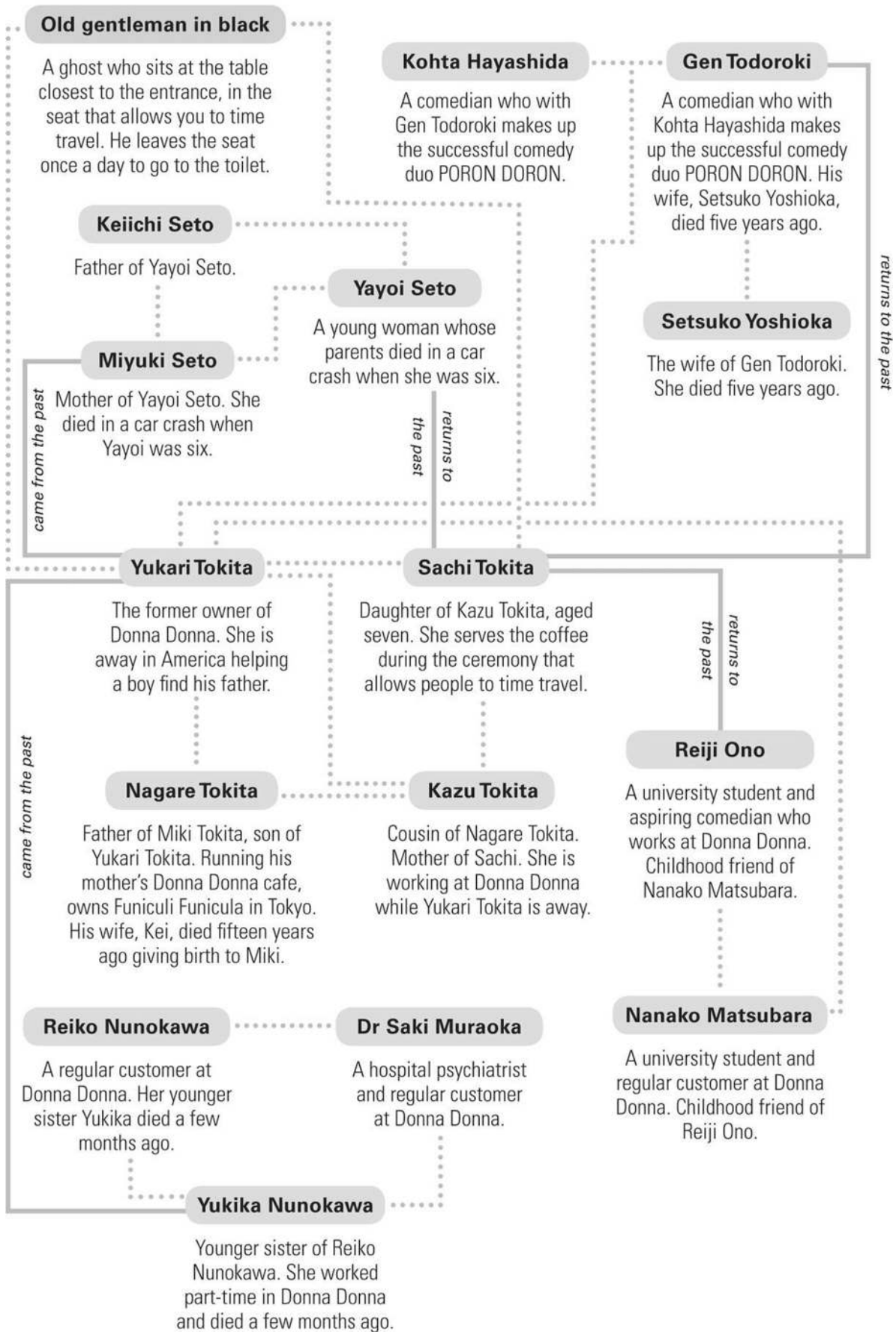
BEFORE YOUR MEMORY FADES

Translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot

PICADOR

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

Relationship map of characters



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The Daughter

‘Why are you in Hokkaido?’

Kei Tokita’s voice sounded tinny coming from the handset.

‘Hey, relax, it’s OK.’

Nagare Tokita was hearing his wife’s voice for the first time in fourteen years. He was in Hokkaido – Hakodate, to be exact.

The city of Hakodate is full of Western-style houses, dating from the early twentieth century. Those houses, dotted throughout the city, have a unique architectural style, characterized by Japanese ground floors and Western upper floors. The Motomachi area (whose name means ‘original town’), located at the very base of Mount Hakodate, is a popular tourist destination. Its old-town charm is enhanced by such popular historic sites as the former public hall, a rectangular concrete electricity pole – the first ever erected in Japan – and the red-brick warehouses in its historical Bay Area.

Kei, on the other end of the phone line, was far away in Tokyo, at a certain cafe that offered its customers the chance to travel through time. It was called Funiculi Funicula. She had travelled fifteen years into the future from the past in order to meet her daughter. In that Tokyo cafe, she only had a brief time before she had to drink her cooling coffee. As he was far away in Hokkaido, in northern Japan, Nagare had no idea how far her coffee had cooled already. He was therefore careful to stick to the matter at hand.

‘There’s no time to explain why I’m in Hokkaido. Please, just listen.’ Of course, Kei was well aware that there was no time.

‘What’s that? There’s no time? I’m the one with no time!’ She sounded upset.

But Nagare paid no attention. ‘A girl is there, right? Who looks like she might be in middle school.’

‘What? A schoolgirl? Yes, she’s here. The same one who visited the cafe about two weeks ago; she came from the future to get a photo with me.’

It had been two weeks ago for Kei, but she was referring to something that for Nagare happened a whole fifteen years ago.

‘She’s got big round eyes . . . and she’s wearing a turtle-neck?’

‘Yes, yes. What about her?’

‘OK, just calm down and listen. You’ve accidentally travelled fifteen years into the future.’

‘Like I told you, I can hardly hear what you’re saying.’

A howling gust of wind had struck Nagare just as he was about to tell her something crucial. It was blowing a gale down his phone, making it next to impossible to communicate. Pressed by the lack of time, Nagare hurried.

‘Anyway, that girl you’re looking at,’ he said, louder.

‘Eh? What? That girl?’

‘She’s our daughter!’

‘What?’

The phone in Nagare’s hands fell completely silent. Then instead of Kei’s voice, he heard the middle pendulum clock in Funiculi Funicula begin chiming a familiar *dong, dong*. Letting out a small sigh, he began explaining calmly.

‘You agreed to travel ten years into the future, so you think that your child will be about ten, but there was some kind of mistake and you travelled fifteen years. It seems ten years fifteen hours and fifteen years ten hours got mixed up. Just look at the time of the middle pendulum clock. It says ten o’clock, right?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘We heard about it when you got back. But right now, we are in Hokkaido for unavoidable reasons that I won’t go into because there’s no time.’

Nagare had rattled through this explanation. But now he paused.

‘Anyway, you don’t have much time left, so just have a good look at our all-grown-up, fit-and-well daughter and return to your present,’ he said gently and hung up.

From where he was standing, Nagare could see all the way down the straight, sloping street to the sprawling blueness of the ocean, and the sky beyond which seemed to crown Hakodate Port. He swung back on his heel and walked into the cafe.

DA-DING-DONG

Hakodate boasts many sloping streets. Nineteen of them have been given names, including Twenty Astride Rise, which stretches up from Japan’s oldest electricity pole, and Eight Banner Rise, which starts near the redbrick

warehouses of Hakodate's touristy Bay Area. Others include Fish View Rise and Ship View Rise, which climb from the Hakodate waterfront. Further over the hillside are Cockle Rise and Green Willow Rise, which climb towards Yachigashiracho, meaning head of the valley. But there is one sloping street that the tourist maps don't show. Locals refer to it as No Name Rise. The cafe where Nagare was working was halfway up No Name Rise.

Its name was Cafe Donna Donna, and a peculiar urban legend was attached to a particular seat in that cafe.

Apparently, if you sat on that seat, it would take you back in time to whenever you wanted.

But the rules were extremely annoying and a terrible nuisance:

1. The only people you can meet in the past are those who have visited the cafe.
2. There is nothing you can do while in the past that will change the present.
3. In order to return to the past, you have to sit in that seat and that seat alone. If the seat is occupied, you must wait until it is vacated.
4. While back in the past, you must stay in the seat and never move from it.
5. Your journey begins when the coffee is poured and must end before the coffee gets cold.

The annoying rules don't end there either. Be that as it may, today once again, a customer who has heard this rumour will visit the cafe.

When Nagare returned from his phone call, Nanako Matsubara, sitting at one of the counter stools, came straight out and asked, 'Nagare, why didn't you stay in Tokyo? Do you still think it was a good idea to come here?'

Nanako was a student at Hakodate University. Wearing her light beige top tucked into her baggy trousers, she looked kind of trendy. Her make-up was lightly applied, her hair, loosely permed and tied back with a scrunchie.

Nanako had heard that Nagare's deceased wife would be visiting from the past to meet her daughter at the Tokyo cafe. Considering it was a onetime-only chance to meet the wife he had not seen for fourteen years, Nanako thought it was strange Nagare decided to greet her over the phone rather than see her in person.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Nagare replied vaguely as he walked past her and went behind the counter. On the stool next to Nanako sat a sleepy-looking Dr Saki Muraoka with a book in her hand. Saki worked in the psychiatric department at one of Hakodate’s hospitals. Both she and Nanako were cafe regulars.

‘Didn’t you want to see her again?’

Nanako’s inquisitive eyes stayed focused on Nagare, a giant of a man nearly two metres tall.

‘Sure, but I had to respect the facts.’

‘Which were?’

‘She came to see her daughter, not me.’

‘But still.’

‘It’s fine. I admit it has been a while, but my memories are still very much alive . . .’

Nagare meant he would do anything he could to make the time between mother and daughter more precious.

‘You are so kind, Nagare,’ Nanako said admiringly.

‘Jesus!’ he retorted, as his ears flushed red.

‘No need to get embarrassed.’

‘I’m nothing of the sort,’ he replied, promptly disappearing into the kitchen to escape her.

Taking his place, Kazu Tokita, the waitress, appeared from the kitchen. Over her white shirt and beige frilly skirt she wore an aqua-blue apron. She was thirty-seven but her free-spirited and happy-go-lucky demeanour gave her the air of a younger person.

‘What number question are you up to?’

Now that Kazu was behind the counter again, the subject of the conversation changed.

‘Um, question twenty-four.’ It was Saki, sitting next to Nanako, who replied. Showing a complete lack of interest in Nanako’s conversation with Nagare, Saki had instead been reading her book attentively.

‘Oh, yes . . .’ Nanako chimed in, as if suddenly remembering. She cast a furtive eye at the book in Saki’s hands. Saki flicked back several pages and read aloud.

What If The World Were Ending Tomorrow? One Hundred Questions

Question Twenty-Four

There is a man or woman with whom you are very much in love.

If the world were to end tomorrow, which would you do?

1. You propose to them.

2. You don't propose because there is no point.

'So, which is it?' Saki had pulled her gaze from the book and was looking at Nanako.

'Um, I'm not sure which I would do.'

'Come on, which?'

'Well, which would you do, Saki?'

'Me? I think I would propose.'

'Why?'

'I don't like the idea of dying with regrets.'

'Oh, I guess that's a fair point.'

'Eh? Nanako, are you saying you wouldn't propose?'

Pressed to answer, Nanako tilted her head. 'Oh, I don't know,' she said softly. 'Well, maybe if I knew for certain that he loved me, I would. But if I wasn't sure how he felt, I probably wouldn't.'

'Really? Why not?'

Saki seemed unable to accept what Nanako was saying.

'Well, if I knew he loved me, I wouldn't be presenting him with a dilemma, would I?'

'No, I guess not.'

'But if he had never thought about me in that way before, then proposing would force him to think about me differently, and I would hate to add to his worries.'

'Oh, and that does actually happen, with men, particularly. Like on Valentine's Day when some guy gets chocolate from a woman he has never thought about before. Suddenly he becomes all conscious of her.'

'I'd feel pretty rotten if I caused someone extra worries just at the time the world is about to end. I also wouldn't like it if I didn't get a reply. So, although proposing to someone might be meaningful, I don't think I would do it.'

'I think you're taking it too seriously, Nanako.'

'Oh, really?'

'Definitely! It's not as though the world is ending tomorrow, anyway.'

'Yeah, I guess so.'

This chatter had been shuttling back and forth since before Nagare had gone outside to take the phone call.

‘What about you, Kazu, which would you do?’ Nanako leaned forward on the counter. Saki also looked towards Kazu with much interest. ‘Well, I’d . . .’

DA-DING-DONG

‘Hello! Welcome,’ Kazu called out automatically in the direction of the entrance upon hearing the bell. In an instant, she put on her waitress face. On seeing that, Nanako and Saki were no longer pressing her to answer the question. But rather than a customer entering the cafe, in walked a girl wearing a light pink dress.

‘I’m back!’ she called out energetically.

Her name was Sachi Tokita, Kazu’s seven-year-old daughter. She was lugging a heavy looking bag on her shoulder and gripping a postcard in her hand. The postcard was from Koku Shintani, her father and Kazu’s husband, who was a world-renowned photographer. He had married into and hence taken the surname of the Tokita family but worked under his own name. His job involved constantly zipping around the world photographing landscapes, and he only spent a few days each year in Japan. Shintani therefore made postcards of the photos he took and frequently sent them to Sachi.

‘Welcome back!’ greeted Nanako. Kazu was looking behind Sachi at the young man following her in.

‘Good morning,’ said one Reiji Ono, a part-time employee at the cafe.

Wearing casual attire of denim jeans and white T-shirt, Reiji was a little out of breath. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead, a clear sign he had climbed the hill in a hurry.

‘We just happened to arrive at the same time,’ Reiji said to explain why he had entered with Sachi, not that anyone had asked.

Reiji disappeared into the kitchen from where he could be heard greeting Nagare. They were about to begin preparing for the busy lunchtime period, which would start in two hours.

Sachi took a seat at the table next to the large window that commanded a stunning view across Hakodate Port. She appeared to be treating it as her own private study booth.

There were other customers in the cafe besides Nanako and Saki. An old gentleman in a formal black suit was seated at the table closest to the entrance, and a woman roughly the same age as Nanako was at a fourseater

table. She had been there since opening time, doing nothing but gazing dreamily out of the window. The cafe opened rather early at seven a.m., to catch the tourists visiting the morning market.

Sachi heaved her bag onto the table. Based on the unexpectedly loud thump, something heavy was obviously inside.

‘What’s in there? Have you been to the library again?’

‘Uh-huh.’

Nanako sat down at the seat opposite her as she talked to Sachi.

‘You certainly like books.’

‘Uh-huh.’

Nanako knew that on every day Sachi didn’t have school, her routine was to visit the library first thing in the morning to borrow books. Today, her elementary school had a special holiday to commemorate its foundation. Sachi gleefully began arranging her newly borrowed books on the table.

‘So, what kind of books do you read?’

‘Hey, I want to know too! Which books do you like, Sachi?’ Dr Saki Muraoka got off her stool and came over.

‘What did you get? What did you get?’

Nanako reached out and picked up one of the books.

‘*Imaginary Number and Integer Challenge.*’ Saki did likewise.

‘*Apocalypse in a Finite Universe.*’

‘*Modern Quantum Mechanics and the Non-Miss Diet.*’ Nanako and Saki took turns reading the titles aloud.

‘*Problems of Classical Art Learned from Picasso.*’

‘*The Spiritual World of African Textiles.*’

As they picked up each book, the expression vanished from their faces. They were more than a little stunned by the titles. There were still some books whose titles they had not read left on the table, but neither felt like going for them.

‘Well, er, they’re certainly all very difficult-looking books!’ remarked Nanako, wincing.

‘Difficult? Are they really?’ Sachi tilted her head with uncertainty.

‘Sachi darling, if you can understand these books, I think we are going to have to start calling you Dr Sachi!’ Saki sighed, staring at *The Spiritual World of African Textiles*. The book was similar to the medical literature that someone like Saki, working in psychiatry, would read.

‘She’s not interested in understanding them. She just likes looking at all the interesting writing,’ said Kazu from behind the counter, as if to console the two adults.

‘Even so . . . Right?’

‘Yeah . . . Wow.’

The two women wanted to say those weren’t books that a seven-year-old girl chooses.

Nanako returned to the counter, picked up the book Saki had been reading and started flicking through the pages. ‘A book like this is just right for me.’

She meant that rather than having small text tightly crammed together, this book’s text only had a few lines per page.

‘What’s that you’re reading?’

The book seemed to have piqued Sachi’s interest as well.

‘Do you want to read a little?’ Nanako passed the book to Sachi.

‘*What If The World Were Ending Tomorrow? One Hundred Questions.*’

Sachi read the title aloud with her eyes ablaze in excitement.

‘That sounds so interesting!’

‘Do you want to try it?’

Nanako had brought the book to the cafe, and she was happy that Sachi was showing an interest in it.

‘Sure!’ Sachi replied with a smile.

‘Well, where better to start reading than the first question. Let’s say we do that.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ said Nanako. Turning back to the first page, she read out the question.

‘“Question One.

“Right now, in front of you is a room that only one person can enter. If you enter it, you will be saved from the end of the world.

“If the world were to end tomorrow, which action do you take?

“1. You enter the room.

“2. You don’t enter the room.”

‘So, which do you choose?’ Nanako’s resonant voice carried well.

‘Hmmm.’

Sachi knitted her brows. Both Nanako and Saki smiled while they watched Sachi as she seemed to ponder the question seriously. Their smiles

were probably born from relief that she was just a seven-year-old girl after all.

‘Was that question too hard for you, Sachi?’ Nanako asked, studying Sachi’s face.

‘I wouldn’t enter the room,’ Sachi declared confidently.

‘Oh?’ Nanako sounded taken aback by Sachi’s unwavering certainty. Nanako had chosen to enter the room, as had Saki beside her. Kazu, still behind the counter, listened to the conversation with a cool expression.

‘Why not enter?’ Nanako asked. Her voice sounded amazed that a seven-year-old girl would choose to not enter the room.

Seemingly oblivious to how puzzled Nanako and Saki appeared, Sachi sat up straight and stated a reason that for them was unthinkable.

‘Well, surviving alone is much the same as dying alone, don’t you think?’

‘...’

The two women were lost for words. With her mouth agape, Nanako looked stunned.

‘Sachi, your answer is better than mine!’ said Saki, bowing. She had to admit her deference to that answer, which she never would have considered. Nanako and Saki looked at each other with the same thought: *Perhaps that girl actually understands those difficult books she reads!*

‘Ah, back doing that again, I see,’ remarked Reiji, who had emerged from the kitchen. He was now wearing an apron. ‘That book is really popular right now.’

‘Well it must be popular if even Reiji has heard of it!’ exclaimed Saki.

‘What do you mean by “even”?’

‘You don’t strike me as a big book-reader, that’s all.’

‘Humph! I’ll have you know, I lent it to that woman in the first place.’ Normally it would be impolite to say ‘that woman’, especially when Nanako was right there beside them. But Reiji had grown up with Nanako and they were both studying at the same university, so he was sometimes a little cheeky when it came to her.

‘Oh, really?’

‘Yeah, Reiji said it was interesting and lent it to me. The book is really popular around campus.’

‘It sounds very popular.’

Dr Saki Muraoka held out her hand as if to say *give me another look*, and Nanako passed it to her.

‘Everyone is getting into it.’

‘Yes, hmm, I sort of understand why.’

Hearing that it was all the rage made sense to Saki. She too had been engrossed in it until Nagare had gone outside to make his phone call. And just now, it had drawn in seven-year-old Sachi. She thought it would probably become a hit across the country as she took another look through the pages.

‘Interesting,’ she said admiringly.

‘Thank you, that was delicious,’ said the young woman who had been there since opening as she stood up from her table. Reiji took little running steps over to the register.

‘Iced tea and cake set, right? Seven hundred and eighty yen, please,’ he announced after examining the bill.

Without replying, the woman took her purse from her shoulder bag. As she did, unbeknownst to her or anyone else, a single photo fell to the floor.

‘OK, here . . .’ She handed him a one-thousand-yen note.

‘Accepting one thousand yen . . .’ The *bip-bip* of the cash register rang out as Reiji tapped its keys. The drawer popped out with a quiet *kerchunk*, and he deftly pulled out the change in a manner that showed he had done it many times before. ‘Returning two hundred and twenty change.’

After silently accepting the change from Reiji’s outstretched hand, she walked towards the door while muttering, as if to herself, ‘What that girl said is right. I’d be better off dead than to live life alone.’

DA-DING-DONG

‘Thank you . . . for . . . coming . . .’

Reiji did not deliver his send-off as clearly and brightly as he normally did.

‘What’s up?’ asked Saki to Reiji as he was returning from the cash register with his head cocked to the side. ‘Er, just now . . . I’d be better off dead!’ ‘What?’ shrieked Nanako in surprise.

‘Er, no, no! It was that woman; she said she’d be better off dead than to live life alone,’ Reiji added hastily.

‘Don’t scare me like that!’ Nanako said, smacking Reiji on the back as he walked past.

‘But still . . .’ said a puzzled-looking Saki, appealing to Kazu. The comment was, after all, not something to ignore.

Kazu’s eyes were fixed on the entrance. ‘Yes . . . quite strange,’ she responded.

For a moment, time itself seemed to stop.

‘What’s the next one?’ Sachi asked, bringing everyone back to earth. Her eyes were pleading for them all to continue with *One Hundred Questions*. But Saki looked at the pendulum clock and stood up saying, ‘Oh, would you look at the time . . .’ It was ten thirty.

The cafe had three large pendulum clocks, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. One was near the entrance, one in the middle of the cafe, and one next to the large window overlooking Hakodate Port. The clock that Saki used to check the time was the middle one. The clock near the entrance ran fast, and the one next to the window ran slow.

‘Time for work?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Saki as she pulled out coins from her purse, showing

no signs of being in a hurry. She lived just a stone’s throw away from the cafe. It had become a daily routine to pop in to drink a coffee before work.

‘What about the next question, Dr Saki?’

‘Let’s do it later, OK?’ Saki said with a smile and placed three hundred and eighty yen on the counter.

Reacting to Sachi’s somewhat glum face, Kazu said, ‘Why don’t you start reading those books you borrowed?’

‘OK.’

Sachi’s expression brightened instantly. Her style of book-reading was to open many at once and read them side by side. She probably looked glum because it was the first time that she had ever shared reading with everyone like that. It had been fun. She snapped out of her glumness as soon as Kazu suggested she read her new books. After all, it was a new chance to enjoy her favourite pastime.

She picked up one of the books spread out at the table seat, plonked herself down on a chair and instantly began reading in silence.

‘She does love books,’ remarked Nanako a little enviously. She had always struggled to read difficult works.

‘Later then. Bye.’ Saki waved to everyone.

‘Thank you!’ called Reiji. His usual buoyant voice rang out – a far cry from how he sounded when the woman had left with those unsettling words.

Saki suddenly turned around at the doorway and spoke to Kazu.

‘If Reiko comes by, could you check how she’s doing?’

‘Sure,’ said Kazu with a nod, and began clearing away Saki’s cup.

‘What’s the story with Reiko?’ enquired Nanako.

‘Oh, this and that,’ replied Saki hurriedly, as she rushed out of the door.

DA-DING-DONG

‘Saki! Hold on!’ Nanako called after her, noticing the photo on the floor by the door. But Saki didn’t hear and trotted off briskly. Intending to chase after her to deliver it, she ran over to the register and picked up the photo from the floor. But then, she just stared at it, tilting her head in confusion.

‘Huh? . . . Kazu. This . . .’ Rather than chase after Saki, she held out the photo for Kazu to see. ‘I thought Saki must have dropped it, but I don’t think it’s hers . . .’

The photo was not of Saki but of a young woman, a man of similar age and a new-born baby. The baby was cradled in the woman’s arms. And there was one more person in the photo: it was Yukari Tokita.

Yukari owned the cafe. Nagare, who worked there, was her son, and Kazu’s mother, Kaname Tokita, was her younger sister. Yukari was a freespirted woman who spontaneously did whatever she wanted. She had the complete opposite personality to Nagare, whose staidness and strong sense of responsibility made him put others first. Two months ago, Yukari had gone to America with an American boy who had visited the cafe. They had gone in search of the boy’s father, who had vanished.

With the owner suddenly gone, the only person left to run the cafe was Reiji, who usually only helped out every now and again. Yukari had planned to close the cafe for an extended period until she returned. As she intended to pay Reiji his wages, she couldn’t see how closing it for a while would inconvenience anyone. But Reiji hated the idea of freeloading like that.

At the time, Reiji had just been planning a visit to Tokyo, so he dropped by the Funiculi Funicula cafe, run by Nagare, to ask him if he could somehow help to keep the cafe open. Nagare felt like he had a responsibility to make up for his mother's flighty and capricious behaviour, so he agreed to manage the cafe. That was the background in a nutshell to Nagare coming to Hakodate and leaving his daughter, Miki, alone at the Tokyo cafe.

The details, however, were not so simple. Nagare coming on his own would not have solved every problem. Like Funiculi Funicula, the Donna Donna cafe had a seat that allowed customers to slip through time. It was near the entrance and was occupied by the old gentleman in black.

But no coffee poured by Nagare could send visitors to the past. Time travel was only possible when the coffee was poured by a female member of the Tokita bloodline who was at least seven years of age. Currently, there were four such people: Yukari, Kazu, Nagare's daughter Miki, who he'd left in Tokyo, and Kazu's daughter Sachi. However, when a woman of the Tokita family has a girl, she passes the power to pour the coffee to her daughter and loses it herself.

Yukari had gone to America, Kazu had lost her power to Sachi, and Nagare's daughter Miki had stayed in Tokyo so she would be there when her mother visited from the past. This meant that only Sachi was available to pour the coffee at the Hakodate cafe.

One less than ideal option was for Nagare to go to Hakodate alone and simply run the cafe without anyone to pour the time-travelling coffee. But Sachi, who had just turned seven, announced she wanted to go. Yet at only seven she couldn't exactly live away from her mother. Kazu had told Nagare she didn't mind if just she and Sachi went to Hakodate. But Nagare couldn't rightly agree to that – he felt obliged to step up as it was his mother who had been so cavalier. Miki didn't mind the idea of her father being gone for a while either.

'Fumiko and Goro are offering to help out so it's no problem. It's just until Grandma Yukari returns, right? I'll manage fine on my own.'

Miki's support tipped the scales, and the matter was decided. Sachi was very enthusiastic about going, and as their stay could possibly last a while, Kazu decided she should transfer schools.

So, the Tokyo cafe was entrusted to Fumiko and Goro, who had been regulars for over ten years, and Nagare, Kazu and Sachi made the journey

to Hakodate. The only worry remaining was the question of when Yukari would return.

Now eyes were locked on Yukari in the photo.

‘Yukari is so young. Look how pretty she is! How many decades ago was this photo taken?’ Nanako was obviously picturing Yukari’s face as she looked when she left for America. She couldn’t hide her amazement at seeing a photo of Yukari looking impossibly young. ‘This must have belonged to the young woman who was here all morning.’ Kazu nodded. She clearly thought so too.

‘Kazu, look. There’s some writing on the back.’

‘2030-08-27 20:31 . . . ? That’s today’s date!’

Based on Yukari’s youthful appearance, the photo must have been old.

But the date written on the back was unmistakably that day.

More perplexing than that was what was written after those numbers.

I’m so glad we met.

Nanako tilted her head in confusion. Beside her, Kazu thought, *That’s tonight . . .*



That night . . .

At closing time, there weren’t any customers at Donna Donna – only the old gentleman in black seated at the table closest to the entrance and Sachi, who was sitting at the counter reading her books.

‘Time to bring in the front signboard, I guess,’ suggested Reiji to Kazu after giving all the tables one final wipe.

‘Yes, good idea.’

It was seven thirty and completely dark outside. Reiji stepped out to fetch the signboard, causing the bell to emit a subdued ring.

Closing time was normally at six and customers rarely came in after dark because the street was so steep. But in the summer holiday season the cafe closed at eight as young tourists would occasionally wander in even after night had fallen.

There were thirty minutes until closing. The time for last orders had been and gone so Kazu was already getting ready to close. ‘Sachi . . .’