



Before the coffee gets cold

Tales from
the Cafe

T O S H I K A Z U K A W A G U C H I

Toshikazu Kawaguchi

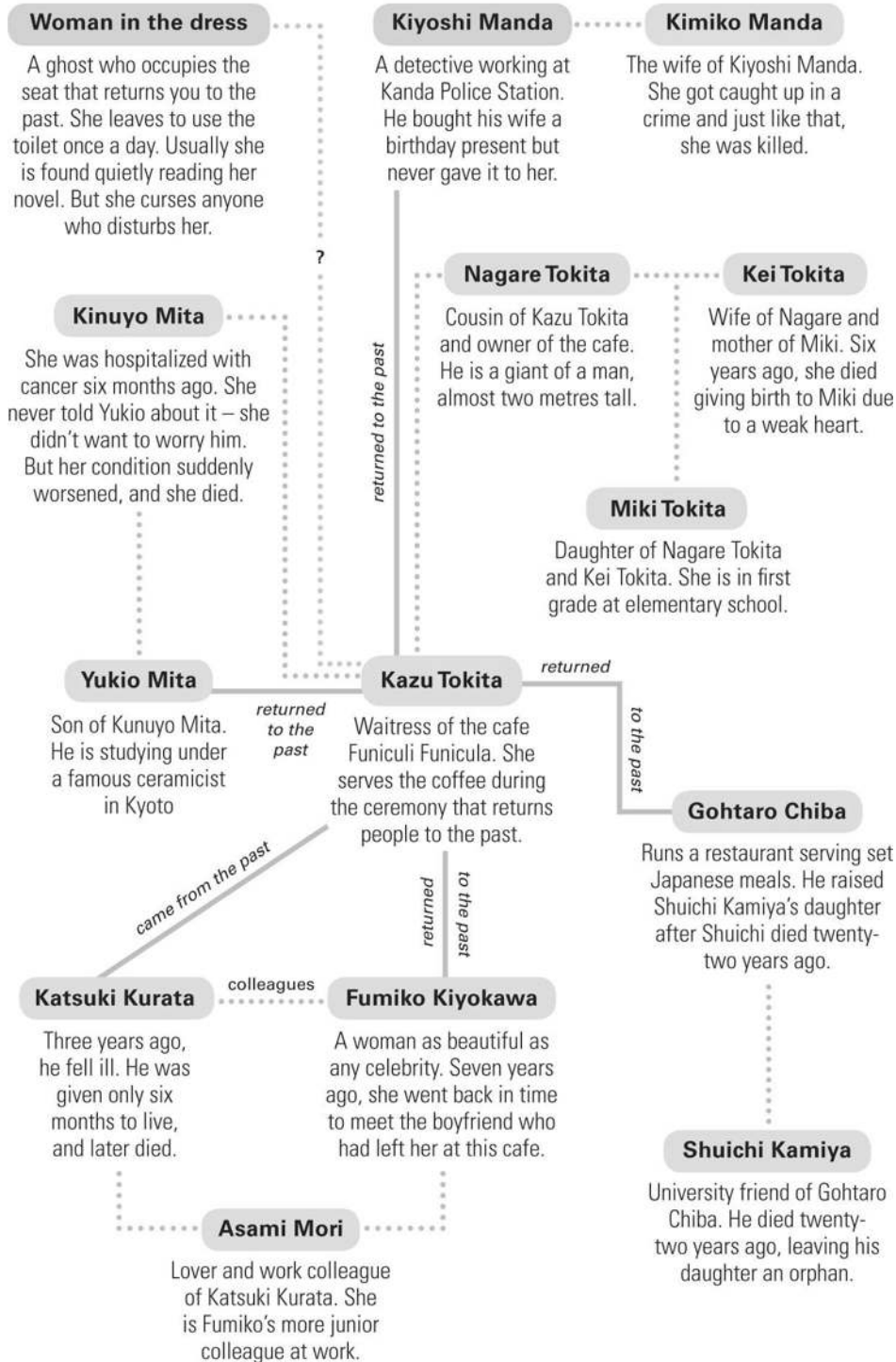
BEFORE THE COFFEE GETS COLD
TALES FROM THE CAFE

Translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot

PICADOR

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

Relationship map of characters



Contents

I 6
II..... 48
III..... 84
IV 111
About the Author..... 141

*The Best
Friend*

Gohtaro Chiba had been lying to his daughter for twenty-two years.

The novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky once wrote, ‘The most difficult thing in life is to live and not lie.’

People lie for different reasons. Some lies are told in order to present yourself in a more interesting or more favourable light; others are told to deceive people. Lies can hurt, but they can also save your skin. Regardless of why they are told, however, lies most often lead to regret.

Gohtaro’s predicament was of that kind. The lie he had told plagued him. Muttering things to himself, such as ‘I never wanted to lie about it,’ he was walking back and forth outside the cafe that offered its customers the chance to travel back in time.

The cafe was a few minutes’ walk from Jimbocho Station in central Tokyo. Located on a narrow back street in an area of mostly office buildings, it displayed a small sign bearing its name, ‘Funiculi Funicula’. The cafe was at basement level, so without this sign, people would walk by without noticing it.

Descending the stairs, Gohtaro arrived at a door decorated with engravings. Still muttering to himself, he shook his head, swung round and began walking back up the stairs. But then he suddenly stopped with a thoughtful expression on his face. He went back and forth for a while, climbing the stairs and descending them.

‘Why not stew over it after you come in?’ said a voice abruptly.

Turning around, startled, Gohtaro saw a petite woman standing there. Over her white shirt she was wearing a black waistcoat and a sommelier’s apron. He could tell instantly she was the cafe’s waitress.

‘Ah yes, well . . .’

As Gohtaro began to struggle with his response, the woman slipped past him and briskly descended the stairs.

CLANG-DONG

The ring of a cowbell hung in the air as she entered the cafe. She hadn't exactly twisted his arm, but Gohtaro descended once again. He felt a weird calmness sweep over him, as if the contents of his heart had been laid bare.

He had been stuck walking back and forth because he had no way of being certain that this cafe was actually *the* cafe 'where you could return to the past'. He'd come there believing the story, but if the rumour his old friend had told him was completely made up, he would soon be one very embarrassed customer.

If travelling back to the past was indeed real, he had heard there were some annoying conditions that you had to follow. One was that there was nothing you could do while in the past that would change the present, no matter how hard you tried.

When Gohtaro first heard that, he wondered, *If you can't change anything, why would anyone want to go back?*

Yet he was now standing at the front door of the cafe thinking, *Even so, I want to go back.*

Had the woman read his mind just now? Surely a more conventional thing to say in that situation would be, *Would you like to come in? Please feel welcome.*

But she had said, *Why not stew over it after you come in?*

Perhaps she meant: yes, you can return to the past, but why not come inside first before deciding whether to go or not.

The bigger mystery was how the woman could possibly know why he had come. Yet he felt a flicker of hope. The woman's offhand comment was the trigger for him to make up his mind. He reached out, turned the doorknob, and opened the door.

CLANG-DONG

He stepped into the cafe where, supposedly, you could travel back in time.



Gohtaro Chiba, aged fifty-one, was of stocky build, which was perhaps not unrelated to him having belonged to the rugby club in high school and at university. Even today, he wore an XXL-sized suit.

He lived with his daughter Haruka, who would be twenty-three this year. Struggling as a single parent, he had raised her alone. She had grown up being told, *Your mother died of an illness when you were little*. Gohtaro ran the Kamiya Diner, a modest eatery in the city of Hachioji in the Greater Tokyo Area. It served meals with rice, soup and side dishes, and Haruka lent a hand.

Entering the cafe through the two-metre-high wooden door, he still had to pass through a small corridor. Straight ahead was the door to the toilet, in the centre of the wall to the right was the entrance to the cafe. As he stepped into the cafe itself, he saw a woman sitting at one of the counter chairs. She instantly called out, ‘Kazu . . . customer!’

Sitting beside her was a boy who looked about elementary school age. At the far table sat a woman in a white short-sleeved dress. With a pale complexion and a complete lack of interest in the world around her, she was quietly reading a book.

‘The waitress just got back from shopping, so why don’t you take a seat. She’ll be out soon.’

Obviously caring little for formalities with strangers, she spoke to Gohtaro casually, as if he was a familiar face. She appeared to be a regular at the cafe. Rather than replying, he just gave a little nod of thanks. He felt the woman was looking at him with an expression that seemed to say, *You can ask me anything you like about this cafe*. But he chose to pretend he hadn’t noticed and sat down at the table closest to the entrance. He looked around. There were very large antique wall clocks that stretched from floor to ceiling. A gently rotating fan hung from where two natural wooden beams intersected. The earthen plaster walls were a subdued tan colour, much like *kinako*, roasted soya flour, with a hazy patina of age – this place looked very old – spread across every surface. The windowless basement, lit only by shaded

lamps hanging from the ceiling, was quite dim. The entire lighting was noticeably tainted with a sepia hue.

‘Hello, welcome!’

The woman who had spoken to him on the stairs appeared from the back room and placed a glass of water in front of him.

Her name was Kazu Tokita. Her mid-length hair was tied back, and over her white shirt with black bow tie she wore a black waistcoat and a sommelier’s apron. Kazu was Funiculi Funicula’s waitress. Her face was pretty with thin almond eyes, but there was nothing striking about it that might leave an impression. If you were to close your eyes upon meeting her and try to remember what you saw, nothing would come to mind. She was one of those people who found it easy to blend in with the crowd. This year she would be twenty-nine.

‘Ah . . . um . . . Is this the place . . . that er . . .’

Gohtaro was completely lost as to how to broach the subject of returning to the past. Kazu calmly looked at him fluster. She turned towards the kitchen and asked, ‘When do you want to return to?’ The sound of coffee gurgling in the siphon came from the kitchen.

That waitress must be a mind-reader . . .

The faint aroma of coffee beginning to drift through the room sparked his memory of *that day*.



It was right in front of this cafe that Gohtaro met Shuichi Kamiya for the first time in seven years. The two had been teammates who played rugby together at university.

At the time Gohtaro was homeless and penniless, having been forced to surrender all his assets – he had been the cosigner on a loan obligation for a friend’s company that had gone bankrupt. His clothes were dirty, and he reeked.

Nevertheless, instead of being disgusted by his appearance, Shuichi looked genuinely pleased to have met him again. He invited Gohtaro into the cafe, and after hearing what happened, proposed:

‘Come and work at my diner.’

After graduation Shuichi had been scouted for his rugby talent by a company in a corporate league in Osaka, but he hadn't played even one year before an injury cut short his career. He then joined a company that ran a restaurant chain. Shuichi, the eternal optimist that he was, saw this setback as a chance, and by working two or three times as hard as everyone else he rose to become an area manager in charge of seven outlets. When he got married, he decided to strike out on his own. He started a small Japanese restaurant and worked there with his wife. Now he told Gohtaro that the restaurant was busy and that some extra help would be welcome.

'If you accepted my offer, it would be helping me out too.'

Run down by poverty and having lost all hope, Gohtaro broke down in tears of gratitude. He nodded. 'OK! I'll do it.'

The chair screeched as Shuichi stood up abruptly. Grinning cheerfully, he added, 'Oh, and wait till you see my daughter!'

Gohtaro still wasn't married and he was a little surprised to hear that Shuichi had a child.

'Daughter?' he responded with his eyes widening.

'Yeah! She's just been born. She is so – cute!'

Shuichi seemed pleased with Gohtaro's response. He took the bill and strolled over to the cash register. 'Excuse me, I'd like to pay.'

Standing at the register was a fellow about high-school age. He was very tall, close to two metres in height, and had distant, thin almond eyes.

'Comes to seven hundred and sixty yen.'

'Here, from this please.'

Gohtaro and Shuichi were rugby players and bigger than most, but they both looked up at the young fellow, then looked at each other, and laughed, probably because they were thinking the same thing, *This guy is built for rugby.*

'And here's your change.'

Shuichi took the change and headed for the exit.

Before he was homeless, Gohtaro was quite well-off, having inherited his father's company that made over one hundred million yen a year. Gohtaro was a sincere kind of guy, but money changes people. It put him in a good mood, and he started squandering it. There was a time in his life when he thought that if you had money, you could do anything. But his friend's

company to which he had cosigned as guarantor folded, and after being hit with this huge debt obligation his own company went under too. As soon as his money was gone, everyone around him suddenly started treating him like an outcast. He had thought those close to him were his friends, but they deserted him, one even saying openly to his face, *What use are you without money?*

But Shuichi was different; he treated Gohtaro, who had lost everything, as important. People willing to help someone struggling, without expecting anything in return, are rare indeed. But Shuichi Kamiya was one such person. As he followed Shuichi out of the cafe, Gohtaro was adamant in his resolve: *I'll repay this favour!*

CLANG-DONG



‘That was twenty-two years ago.’

Gohtaro Chiba reached for the glass in front of him. Wetting his parched throat, he sighed. He looked young for fifty-one, but a scattering of grey hairs had begun to show.

‘And so, I started to work for Shuichi. I put my head down and tried to learn the job as fast as I could. But after a year, there was a traffic accident. Shuichi and his wife . . .’

It had happened more than twenty years ago, but the shock of it had never left him. His eyes reddened and he began choking on his words.

Shuurrp!

The boy sitting at the counter began noisily sucking the final drops of his orange juice through his straw.

‘And what happened then?’ Kazu asked matter-of-factly, not pausing in her work. She never changed her tone no matter how serious the conversation. That was her stance – her way of keeping herself at a distance from people, perhaps.

‘Shuichi’s daughter survived, and I decided to bring her up.’

Gohtaro spoke with his eyes cast down as if muttering to himself. Then he stood up slowly.

‘I beg of you. Please let me go back to that day twenty-two years ago.’

He bowed long and deep, bringing his hips to a near right angle and dropping his head lower.

This was the cafe Funiculi Funicula. The cafe that became the subject of an urban legend some ten years ago as being the one where you could go back in time. Urban legends are made up, but it was said that at this cafe, you could really return to the past.

All sorts of tales are told about it, even today, like the one about the woman who went back to see the boyfriend she had split up from, or the sister who returned to see her younger sister who had been killed in a car crash, and the wife who travelled to see her husband who had lost his memory.

In order to go back to the past, however, you had to obey some very frustrating rules.

The first rule: the only people who you can meet while in the past are those who have visited the cafe. If the person you want to meet has never visited the cafe, you can return to the past, but you cannot meet them. In other words, if visitors came from far and wide across Japan, it would turn out to be a wasted journey for practically all of them.

The second rule: there is nothing you can do while in the past that will change the present. Hearing this one is a real let-down for most people and normally they leave in disappointment. That is because most customers who want to return to the past are wishing to fix past deeds. Very few customers still want to travel back after they realize they can't change reality.

The third rule: there is only one seat that allows you to go back in time. But another customer is sitting on it. The only time you can sit there is when the customer goes to the toilet. That customer always goes once a day, but no one can predict when that will be.

The fourth rule: while in the past, you cannot move from your seat. If you do, you will be pulled back to the present by force. That means that while you are in the past, there is no way to leave the cafe.

The fifth rule: your stay in the past begins when the coffee is poured and must end before the coffee gets cold. Moreover, the coffee cannot be poured by just anybody; it must be poured by Kazu Tokita.

Regardless of these frustrating rules, there were customers who heard the legend and came to the cafe asking to go back in time. Gohtaro was one such person.



‘Let’s say that you do travel back to the past, what are you planning to do?’ asked the woman who had told him to take a seat when he had entered. Her name was Kyoko Kijima. She was a full-time wife and mother, and a regular. It was just coincidence that she was in the cafe then, but she stared at Gohtaro with intense curiosity – perhaps he was the first customer she had met who wanted to return

to the past. ‘Forgive me for asking, but how old are you?’

‘I’m fifty-one.’

Gohtaro seemed to have taken the question as a criticism, as in, *Why are you, a man of your age, blathering on about going back in time?* He sat hunched over the table staring fixedly down at his clasped hands.

‘. . . I’m sorry. But don’t you think it would be a little freaky? Totally unprepared, Shuichi, or whatever his name is, suddenly finds himself face-to-face with a twenty-two-year-old version of you?’ Gohtaro didn’t lift his head.

Kyoko continued, ‘Don’t you think that would be a bit weird?’ She looked over the counter to Kazu for agreement.

‘Well, maybe,’ Kazu answered, in a manner that suggested she did not fully agree.

‘Hey, Mum, isn’t your coffee going to get cold?’ muttered the boy, who was starting to fidget now his glass of orange juice was empty. His name was Yohsuke Kijima. He was Kyoko’s son, and beginning this spring, he would be in grade four. His hair was mid-length and arranged untidily, he had a sunburnt face and he was wearing a sports strip that read ‘MEITOKU FC’ with the number 9 printed on the back. He was a football nut.

He was talking about the takeaway coffee in the paper bag on the counter beside Kyoko.

‘Oh, it doesn’t matter. Grandma hates hot drinks anyway,’ Kyoko said as she moved her face up to Yohsuke’s ear and whispered, ‘Just wait a little longer and we’ll go, OK?’

She glanced over at Gohtaro, anticipating a response of some kind.

Gohtaro was sitting up again, looking recomposed.

‘Yeah, I guess it would freak him out,’ he admitted.

‘Uh huh,’ responded Kyoko, nodding knowingly. While listening to this exchange, Kazu handed Yohsuke a new orange juice, which he silently accepted, with a quick nod of thanks.

‘If it is the honest truth that you can go back in time, then there is something I really want to tell Shuichi.’

Though Kyoko had asked him the question, Gohtaro had answered looking at Kazu. His words had no effect on her expression.

Looking as nonchalant as always, she came out from behind the counter and stood in front of him.

Every now and then, a customer like Gohtaro would come to the cafe after hearing the rumour that you could travel back in time, and the way Kazu responded to each of them never changed.

‘Are you familiar with the rules?’ she asked briefly – there were customers who rolled up at the cafe with no idea of them.

‘More or less . . .’ he replied hesitantly.

‘More or less?’ Kyoko shouted. Of everyone in the cafe right now, she alone was a little excited. Kazu glanced at Kyoko without comment and then looked back at Gohtaro and stared. *Answer the question.*

Gohtaro shrugged apologetically. ‘You sit in a chair, someone makes you a coffee, and you return to the past . . . that’s all I’ve heard,’ he replied awkwardly. His nervousness must have left him dry-mouthed as he reached for the glass in front of him.

‘That’s a bit simplistic . . . Who’d you hear that from?’ Kyoko quizzed him.

‘From Shuichi.’

‘If you heard it from Shuichi . . . eh? You mean you heard about it twenty-two years ago?’

‘Yes, when we first came to this cafe, I heard it from Shuichi. He must have known of the legend.’

‘I see . . .’

‘So, even if a much-older version of me were to suddenly appear, apart from giving Shuichi a fright, I think it would be OK,’ he said, returning to Kyoko’s question.

‘What do you think, Kazu?’

Kyoko spoke as if the right to decide for returning to the past belonged to her and Kazu alone. But Kazu did not comment.

Instead, she spoke in a cool, stern manner.

‘You know that even if you return to the past, reality won’t change, right?’

What she meant was, *You know you can’t stop your friend from dying!*

So many customers had come to the cafe hoping to go back and prevent someone from dying. Each time, Kazu explained this rule.

It wasn’t that she was impervious to the grief that people felt from losing someone precious to them. There was just no getting around this rule – no matter who you were, regardless of your reason.

Having heard Kazu’s words, Gohtaro showed no sign of agitation.

‘I am aware of that,’ he replied in an even-tempered, soft voice.

CLANG-DONG

The doorbell rang. A girl. When Kazu saw her, instead of saying, *Hello, welcome*, she said, ‘Welcome home!’

The girl’s name was Miki Tokita, daughter of the cafe’s owner, Nagare Tokita. She was proudly bearing a bright red *randoseru* elementary-school backpack.

‘*Moi* is back, darlings!’ Miki announced in a voice that reverberated loudly throughout the cafe.

‘Hello, Miki darling! Where did you get that wonderful *randoseru*?’ Kyoko asked.

‘She bought it for *moi*!’ Miki said smiling broadly, pointing at Kazu.

‘Wow! It looks fantastic!’ complimented Kyoko.

Kyoko looked at Kazu. ‘Doesn’t school start tomorrow?’ she asked in a quiet whisper.

She didn’t mean to criticize Miki’s conduct, nor did she mean to poke fun at her. In fact, it genuinely brought a smile to her face that Miki was so happy to have received a brand-new *randoseru* that she had been parading around the neighbourhood with it on her back.

‘Yes, it’s tomorrow,’ Kazu said, also pursing the beginnings of a smile in the corners of her lips.

‘How is Madame Kinuyo? Is she well?’ Miki asked, still carrying on the conversation in a voice loud enough to reverberate through the cafe.

‘Mrs Kinuyo is well! We’ve come into the cafe again today to pick her up another coffee and sandwich made by your daddy,’ Kyoko said while holding up the paper bag holding the takeaway beside her. Sitting on the next stool along, Yohsuke kept his back to Miki, and slowly sipped his second glass of orange juice.

‘Isn’t Mrs Kinuyo tired of eating Daddy’s sandwiches yet? That’s all she’s been eating every day.’

‘Mrs Kinuyo says she loves your daddy’s sandwiches and coffee.’

‘I don’t know why. Daddy’s sandwiches are not that tasty,’ remarked Miki, still in a loud voice.

Overhearing the conversation, a towering figure appeared from the kitchen.

‘Hey, hey! Whose sandwiches did you say were yucky?’ It was Nagare, the cafe’s owner and Miki’s father. Miki’s mother Kei was no longer with them. She had a weak heart and passed away after giving birth to Miki six years ago.

‘Oops-a-daisy, well, darlings, I think *moi* will go now,’ said Miki in her camp way. She bowed her head to Kyoko and scampered off to the back room.

‘*Moi* . . . ?’

Kyoko looked at Nagare as if to ask, *Where did she learn that?*

Nagare shrugged. ‘Beats me.’

Giving a sideways glance at Kyoko and Nagare, Yohsuke started poking at Kyoko’s upper arm.

‘Can we go now?’ he asked, sounding like he was fed up with waiting around.

‘Oh, we were about to go, weren’t we,’ Kyoko said, acknowledging that they should get a move on, and got up from the counter stool.

‘Well, it’s time for *moi* to go too, darlings,’ Kyoko said, mimicking Miki.

She gave the paper bag to Yohsuke and without looking at a bill, she placed the money for the sandwich and coffee and for Yohsuke’s drink on the counter, including the second orange juice that Kazu poured him.

‘The second orange juice is on the house,’ said Kazu as she took the money from the counter minus the price of the second orange juice and started to press the cash register keys loudly.

‘No, no. I’ll pay.’

‘You don’t pay for what you don’t order. I just gave it to him.’

Kyoko didn’t want to pick up the money remaining on the counter, but Kazu had already put the rest in the till and handed Kyoko a receipt.

‘Oh . . . OK.’

Kyoko wasn’t comfortable not paying for the drink, but she knew there was no way Kazu was going to accept payment.

‘Well, if you say so,’ she said as she picked up the money for one orange juice from the counter. ‘Thank you.’ She returned the money to her purse.

‘Send my regards to Kinuyo sensei,’ said Kazu, politely bowing to Kyoko.

Kinuyo had taught Kazu painting since she was seven. It was Kinuyo who had encouraged her to study to get into a fine arts university. After graduating, Kazu had begun working part-time at Kinuyo’s painting school. Now Kinuyo was hospitalized, Kazu was teaching all the classes.

‘I know you’re busy here too, so thank you so much for taking the art classes again this week.’

‘Of course, not a problem,’ Kazu replied.

‘Thank you for the orange juice,’ Yohsuke said nodding towards Kazu and Nagare, who were both standing behind the counter.

Yohsuke left the cafe first.

CLANG-DONG

‘OK, I’ll be off.’

Kyoko waved goodbye and followed Yohsuke out of the door.

CLANG-DONG

When the two left the cafe, so did the lively atmosphere, leaving the room silent. The cafe did not play background music, which meant when no one was talking, you could hear the woman in the white dress turning the pages of her novel.

‘How did they say Kinuyo was getting along?’ Nagare asked Kazu as he stood polishing a glass – his tone no different than if he had been talking to himself. Kazu slowly nodded her head once but she didn’t answer his question.

‘I see,’ Nagare said softly and then disappeared off into the back room.

Left in the cafe were Gohtaro, Kazu and the woman in the white dress.

Kazu was behind the counter tidying up in her usual way.

‘I’d like to hear more now, if it’s all right with you?’

Kazu was ready to listen to Gohtaro’s reason for returning to the past.

He looked up at her for an instant then immediately averted his eyes. He took a slow deep breath.

‘. . . Actually,’ he began, suggesting that perhaps earlier he had been purposely holding back about his reasons. Maybe because Kyoko was just a bystander, and it was none of her business.

But now, apart from the woman in the white dress, it was just Gohtaro and Kazu. He began explaining hesitantly.

‘My daughter is getting married.’

‘Married?’

‘Yeah, I mean . . . really, she’s Shuichi’s daughter,’ he mumbled. ‘I want to show my daughter who her real father was.’ He brought out a very slim digital camera from his suit pocket. ‘I thought if I could record a message from Shuichi . . .’ He sounded lonely and small.

Kazu stared at him in this state. ‘What happens afterwards?’ she asked quietly. She wanted to know what would happen after he revealed that he was not her true father.

Gohtaro felt a jolt in his heart.

This waitress won’t be fooled by lies.

He spoke while staring into space, as if he had prepared his answer. ‘I can only see it being the end of my role,’ he said with quiet resignation.



Gohtaro and Shuichi were in the same rugby team at university, but they had known each other since they began rugby training back in elementary school. They played in different teams, but occasionally they would meet at a match. That isn’t to say they noticed one another right from the start. Through junior high and high school, they were playing for their respective schools, competing in opposing teams in official matches, and so gradually became aware of each other’s existence as a result.

By chance, they entered the same university and became teammates. Gohtaro was a fullback while Shuichi was a fly-half.

The fly-half, identified by the number 10 on his back, is the star player in rugby. He is like the fourth player in the batting order or a pitcher in baseball, or the striker in football. Shuichi was amazing as a fly-half, and he earned the nickname Shuichi the Seer because his plays during matches were like miracles – players even remarked that it was as if he could see into the future.

A rugby team has fifteen players, and there are ten positions. Shuichi took note of the other players' strengths and shortcomings, and he had a talent for knowing how to utilize or exploit any player in any position. This earned him the absolute trust of the senior players of the university rugby club, and they began to see him as a candidate for team captain early on.

Gohtaro, on the other hand, had tried various positions since he first began playing rugby in elementary school. He was not the type of person who could easily say no to people's requests, and would often fill in when the team was short of a player. The person who finally decided that fullback was the best position for the versatile Gohtaro was Shuichi. The fullback was the last bastion of defence, and thus very important. If any of the opposition breached his team's line of defence, his job was stop them with an effective tackle and prevent them scoring a try. Shuichi wanted Gohtaro for fullback because of his superior tackling ability. When he played against Gohtaro in official matches in junior high and high school, he was never once able to slip past him. If the team had Gohtaro's formidable tackling, there would be absolutely nothing to worry about. It was his steel-wall defence that enabled Shuichi's daring offensive plays.

When I leave the back to you, I know I've got someone I can count on, Shuichi often said before a match.

Then, seven years after they graduated from university, the two met again by chance.

After leaving the cafe, they headed off to Shuichi's apartment. There to greet them were Yoko and their newborn daughter, Haruka. Shuichi must have contacted Yoko on the way, as she had run a bath for Gohtaro.

Yoko greeted him – still unwashed and reeking – with a warm smile. 'So you are Gohtaro the Fullback? Shuichi has spoken of you countless times.'

Osaka-born Yoko was even more accommodating than Shuichi. It was quite normal for her to spend every waking hour chatting, and she enjoyed making people laugh with her jokes. She was also quick-thinking and proactive. In less than a day she had found Gohtaro a place to live and clothes to wear.

After losing his company, Gohtaro had lost his ability to trust people, but just two months after starting at Shuichi's restaurant, he was back to his bright and cheerful self.

When the restaurant was filled with regular customers, Yoko would talk Gohtaro up: 'Back at university, he was my husband's most trusted player.'

While he found that embarrassing, it also brought a smile to his face. 'My next task is to earn the same reputation working here,' he once added, his newly brightened outlook on the future on display.

Everything seemed to be going well.

One afternoon, Yoko complained of a screaming headache, so it was decided that Shuichi would drive her to the hospital. They didn't want to close the restaurant, so Gohtaro stayed while minding Haruka. That day, petals from the cherry blossoms were scattering across the cloudless blue sky, silently, like a flurry of snow.

'Look after Haruka for me,' Shuichi said, waving thanks while hurrying out.

That was the last time Gohtaro saw him.

Shuichi's and Yoko's parents and grandparents were all dead, so at the age of one, Haruka was left all alone in this world.

When he looked at Haruka's smiling face at Shuichi's funeral – too young to comprehend that both her parents had died – he decided there and then to raise her himself.



Dong, dong, dong . . .

A wall clock chimed eight times.

Startled by the sound, Gohtaro looked up. His eyelids were heavy, and his vision was blurry.

'Where . . . ?'