



The
Japanese
Bestseller

THE
Kamogawa Food
Detectives

Hisashi Kashiwai

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Chapter 1: Nabeyaki-Udon

1

Walking away from Higashi Honganji temple, Hideji Kuboyama instinctively turned up the collar on his trench coat.

Dead leaves swirled in the chilly air. That must be the famous Mount Hiei wind, he thought to himself, knitting his brows as he waited for the signal to change.

It was just like people said: in Kyoto, the cold cuts to the bone. In midwinter, freezing air rushes down from the mountains that surround the city on three sides. In Kobe, where Hideji had been born and raised, the winds that blew down from Mount Rokko were formidable too. But here, the quality of the cold was somehow different. As he made his way down Shomen-dori, he cast his gaze towards the snow-capped peaks of the Higashiyama mountains in the distance.

Hideji stopped a postman sitting astride a red scooter and asked for directions. 'Excuse me. I'm looking for a restaurant round here. The Kamogawa Diner, I think it's called.'

'If it's Mr Kamogawa you're after, his is the second building after that corner,' replied the postman in an extremely matter-of-fact tone, pointing down the right-hand side of the street.

Hideji crossed the street and stood in front of the two-storey structure. It didn't look much like a restaurant, though traces of a former sign and a display window remained. Two squares of white paint had been scruffily

applied to the exterior wall. However, it had none of the gloominess of a vacant building, instead radiating a human warmth that suggested it was still very much a working restaurant. While its appearance might have been off-putting to the average tourist, the smells drifting out were enticing, and from inside came the sound of cheerful banter.

‘This place has Nagare written all over it,’ muttered Hideji, casting his mind back to the days he’d spent with Nagare Kamogawa, his former colleague. The two of them had both moved on to other things now. Despite being Hideji’s junior, Nagare had been the first to quit the police.

He looked up at the restaurant, then opened the sliding aluminium door.

‘Welcome to – oh! If it isn’t Hideji!’ Koishi Kamogawa, a round tray in her hands, froze with surprise. Koishi was Nagare’s only daughter, and Hideji had known her since she was a baby.

‘Koishi! Well, aren’t you all grown up,’ said Hideji, removing his coat.

‘Hideji? Is that you?’ called Nagare as he emerged from the kitchen in his white apron.

‘So this is your place, after all,’ said Hideji, grinning broadly at Nagare.

‘I can’t believe you found us. Please, take a seat. Sorry the place isn’t much to look at.’ Nagare wiped down the red cushion of one of the chairs.

‘I guess I haven’t lost my intuition yet,’ said Hideji, blowing into his numb hands to warm them as he sat down.

‘How many years has it been, you reckon?’ asked Nagare as he removed his chef’s hat.

‘I suppose the last time was your wife’s funeral.’

‘You were a real help that day,’ said Nagare, bowing in gratitude. Koishi followed suit.

‘I don’t suppose you could rustle something up for me? I’m ravenous,’ said Hideji, glancing sideways at a young man who was shovelling down a bowl of katsudon.

‘I usually ask first-time customers to leave it up to the chef,’ said Nagare.

‘Sounds good to me,’ said Hideji, meeting Nagare’s gaze.

‘Coming right up, then. Just give me a moment,’ said Nagare, donning his hat again as he turned away.

‘Oh – and no mackerel, please!’ said Hideji, before taking a sip of his tea.

‘Don’t worry – I remember. We’ve known each other long enough!’ replied Nagare over his shoulder.

Hideji looked around the restaurant. Apart from the young man, the five counter seats by the kitchen were unoccupied. There was no one else sitting at the four tables either, and nothing resembling a menu in sight. The clock on the wall showed ten past one.

‘Koishi, can I get some tea?’ said the man eating katsudon, setting his now-empty bowl down on the counter.

‘You shouldn’t wolf your food down like that, Hiroshi. It’s bad for your digestion,’ said Koishi, pouring tea from a small Kiyomizu-ware teapot. Meanwhile, Nagare brought out Hideji’s food on a tray.

‘Looks like quite the feast!’ said Hideji, his eyes widening.

‘Not really. They call it “Kyoto comfort food” these days, but in the past no one would have dreamed of charging people money for simple fare like this. Still, I thought it might be the sort of thing you’d enjoy.’ Nagare was unloading various dishes and small bowls from the tray, arranging them one by one on the table.

‘You’re not wrong. Looks like *your* intuition hasn’t faded either.’

As Hideji’s gaze skipped between the various dishes, Nagare went on:

‘Stewed arame and deep-fried tofu. Okara croquettes. Kikuna leaves dressed with sesame and miso. Kurama-style sardine. Hiroso tofu ball in broth. Pork belly simmered in Kyobancha tea. Fresh tofu curd with sour plum paste. Oh, and Koishi’s rice-bran-pickled cucumbers. Nothing too extravagant. If anything, the highlights are probably the firmly cooked Goshu rice and the miso soup with ebi-imo taro. Anyway, enjoy the meal. Oh, and make sure you put a good sprinkle of sansho pepper on the soup – it’ll warm you right up.’

His eyes gleaming, Hideji nodded along to Nagare’s every word.

‘Tuck in while it’s hot!’ urged Koishi. Hideji sprinkled the sansho pepper and picked up the bowl of miso soup. When he sipped it one of the chunks of taro tumbled into his mouth. Chewing on it slowly, he nodded once, twice, and then a third time.

‘This miso soup’s fantastic. What rich flavours!’

With the thin-rimmed rice bowl in his left hand, his chopsticks danced back and forth between the dishes, reaching towards each in turn. He took a piece of the pork belly, dripping with sauce, and set it on top of the white rice before transporting it to his mouth. As he carefully bit into the meat, a smile began to spread across his face. Next he crunched through the coating of the okara croquette, savouring the soy pulp filling. When he placed the hirosu tofu ball on his tongue, the delicately flavoured broth oozed out, some of it spilling from his mouth. Hideji wiped his chin with the hand holding his chopsticks.

‘More rice?’ asked Koishi, offering him her tray.

‘You know, I haven’t eaten this well in quite a while,’ said Hideji, placing his depleted rice bowl on the tray.

‘Well then, better eat your fill!’ said Koishi, hurrying off to the kitchen with the tray.

‘Is the food alright?’ said Nagare, coming over to the table just as Koishi was leaving.

‘More than alright. I’m struggling to believe a mere mortal acquaintance of mine could have put this kind of meal together.’

‘Oh, no need for that kind of talk. I’m just an old codger who happens to run a restaurant,’ said Nagare, looking humbly at the floor.

‘So, Hideji, what are you up to these days?’ said Koishi, appearing again with the bowl, now piled high with rice.

‘I retired from the force last year. I’m on the board of a security company in Osaka now,’ said Hideji, gazing eagerly at the glistening white rice before getting to work with his chopsticks.

‘Sounds like they’ve sorted you out with a nice position. I have to say though – you haven’t changed a bit. Still got that sharp look in your eyes!’

said Nagare, meeting Hideji's gaze.

'The bitterness of these kikuna leaves works very nicely. A real Kyoto flavour, isn't it.' Hideji positioned the rest of the salad on top of his rice before polishing it off. Then he crunched on one of the pickled cucumbers.

'How about steeping your rice in tea? You could mix it with some of the sardine. Koishi, why don't you pour him some hojicha?'

Taking her cue, Koishi poured the hot tea from a Banko teapot.

'So you call it Kurama-style in Kyoto. Where I'm from, if you simmer something with sansho pepper, that's Arima-style.'

'Must be a case of local pride then. Kurama and Arima are both famous for their sansho, aren't they?'

'You learn something new every day!' said Koishi.

When he had finished the steeped rice, Hideji picked his teeth, then settled back in his chair.

To the right of the counter seating, an indigo curtain hung over the entrance to the kitchen. Whenever Nagare passed through the curtain, Hideji caught a glimpse of a tatami-matted living room alongside the kitchen space, where a grand-looking Buddhist altar was set into the wall.

'Mind if I pay my respects?' asked Hideji, peering past the curtain. Koishi led him to the altar.

'You're looking younger, Hideji!' said Koishi, putting her hands on Hideji's shoulders and taking in his features.

'I hope you're not making fun of me. I've passed the sixty mark, you know.' Hideji kneeled and positioned a stick of incense in front of the altar, then set the cushion to one side.

'Thanks for doing this,' said Nagare, glancing over at the portrait on the altar and lowering his head.

'So, Kikuko watches over you while you work?' Still kneeling on the tatami mat, Hideji relaxed into a less formal pose and looked up at Nagare.

'More like keeps an eye on me,' replied Nagare with a chuckle.

'I never would have thought you'd end up running a restaurant, you know.'

‘Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask since you walked in here. How *did* you find us?’ asked Nagare, coming over and sitting by him on the tatami.

‘Well, my boss is a bit of a foodie. He likes to read *Gourmet Monthly*, and keeps a stack of back issues in the boardroom. When I saw your advert in the magazine, I put two and two together.’

‘Now see, that’s why we called you Hideji the Hawk. I can’t believe you knew it was my restaurant from a one-line advert like that. There weren’t even any contact details! And yet here you are.’ Nagare was shaking his head in admiration.

‘Knowing you, I’m sure there’s a reason, but couldn’t you make that advert a little less mysterious? The way it reads at the moment, I’ll probably be the only one to ever find you!’

‘Oh, that’s alright by me. I’d rather not be swamped with customers.’

‘You always were a funny one, Nagare.’

‘So, hoping we can track down a dish from your past, by any chance?’ asked Koishi, studying Hideji as she stood at Nagare’s side.

‘Yes, I think I might be,’ said Hideji, a smile playing about his lips.

‘You still living over in Teramachi?’ asked Nagare, getting up and walking over to the sink.

‘The same old place by Junenji temple. Every morning I walk along the Kamogawa river to Demachiyanagi, then jump on the Keihan line for my commute to the Osaka office. Phew, all this kneeling is tough. At this age, my legs just can’t take it!’

Frowning, Hideji slowly raised himself from the tatami and returned to his seat in the restaurant.

‘Oh, tell me about it. It’s always a struggle when the priest comes over for Kikuko’s death day.’

‘Good on you for getting a priest in though,’ said Hideji. ‘I haven’t had one over to pray for my wife for years. Bet she’s furious.’ He took a cigarette from his breast pocket, then glanced at Koishi as if to gauge her reaction.

‘Oh, go ahead,’ said Koishi, setting an aluminium ashtray on the table.

‘Excuse me,’ said Hideji, waving his cigarette in the direction of Hiroshi. ‘Mind if I have a quick puff?’

‘Be my guest,’ replied Hiroshi with a grin, before retrieving a cigarette of his own from his bag.

‘Don’t you think it’s time you gave up? It’s one thing smoking when you’re young, but at our age . . .’ said Nagare across the counter.

‘I’ve been hearing that a lot recently,’ said Hideji, then took a long drag on his cigarette.

‘You have? Wait – don’t tell me you’ve remarried?’

‘Actually, that’s what brings me here. See, I need your help recreating a certain . . . flavour,’ said Hideji, smiling as he stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

‘Thanks for the katsudon – it was delicious,’ said Hiroshi, slapping a five-hundred-yen coin on the counter and walking out of the restaurant with his cigarette dangling from his mouth. Hideji, following him with his gaze, turned to Koishi.

‘That some sweetheart of yours?’

‘Oh, Hideji, shush!’ said Koishi, blushing as she thumped Hideji on the back. ‘He’s just one of our regulars. Runs a sushi place around the corner.’

‘Hideji, sorry to be so formal, but it’s Koishi who runs the detective agency. Could you fill her in on what it is you’re looking for? Our office – if you can call it that – is in the back.’

‘Got it. Alright then, Koishi, ready when you are,’ said Hideji, making as if to get up.

‘I’ll just be a moment,’ said Koishi, removing her apron and hurrying to the back of the kitchen.

‘So, Nagare, how long are *you* going to keep this widower thing up?’ said Hideji, settling back into his chair.

‘Well, it’s only been five years, hasn’t it? If I marry someone else too soon, Kikuko will come back and haunt me, I just know it,’ said Nagare, pouring them some tea.

‘Still too early for you, eh? It’ll be fifteen years ago this year for me. I figure Chieko will be just about ready to forgive me by now.’

‘Has it really been that long? Goes quickly, doesn’t it. Feels like just the other the day that she was inviting me around for dinner.’

‘She had her foibles, but one thing’s for sure – no one could cook like her,’ said Hideji with a sigh. There was a moment’s silence.

‘Well, shall we?’ said Nagare, getting to his feet. Hideji followed his lead.

At the other end of the counter to the kitchen entrance was a small door. Nagare opened it to reveal a long, narrow corridor which, it seemed, led to the detective agency’s office.

‘Are these all your creations?’ said Hideji, looking at the photos of food plastered along the walls as he followed Nagare down the corridor.

‘Not quite all of them, but yes,’ replied Nagare over his shoulder.

‘And this . . . ?’ Hideji had come to a halt.

‘I’ve been drying red chilli peppers in the back garden. Trying to do it the way Kikuko used to. Haven’t had much luck, though . . .’

‘I remember Chieko drying something or other that way too. It all seemed like a bit of a fuff to me, mind . . .’ said Hideji, walking again.

‘Koishi, your client’s here,’ said Nagare, opening the door at the end of the corridor.



‘Sorry to be a pain, but could you write a few things down for me?’

Koishi was sitting on a sofa opposite Hideji, on the other side of a low table.

‘Name, age, date of birth, address, occupation . . . Sheesh, feels like I’m taking out an insurance policy!’ chuckled Hideji, opening up the folding clipboard Koishi handed him.

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about the details, seeing as it’s you.’

‘Oh, but I’m a former bureaucrat. You won’t catch *me* cutting corners!’ said Hideji, returning the clipboard.

‘Diligent as ever, aren’t you,’ said Koishi, scanning Hideji’s rows of carefully printed characters and sitting up. ‘So, what dish are you looking for?’

‘Nabeyaki-udon. You know, vegetables and chicken simmered with udon noodles.’

‘Any other details?’ said Koishi, flipping open her notebook.

‘Well, it’s the kind my wife used to make.’

‘I see. It’s been a while since she passed away, hasn’t it?’

‘Fifteen long years.’

‘And you still remember the taste?’

Hideji nodded, then tilted his head to one side as if he’d changed his mind.

‘Well, I have a rough idea of the flavour, and the kinds of ingredients she used, but . . .’

‘No matter how you try, it never quite tastes the same?’

‘Exactly. I see you’ve got your father’s intuition!’

‘Hideji, please don’t tell me you’ve remarried and now you’re asking your new wife to cook this for you?’

‘Would that be so bad?’

‘Of course it would. It’s a total no-no! Trying to get her to recreate a flavour bound up with memories of your previous wife . . . I mean, really!’

‘You jump to conclusions just like Nagare too! I wouldn’t have the nerve to try something like that. No, all I did was ask if she could try cooking us a nice nabeyaki-udon. Anyway, she’s not my wife yet. She works in my office, and she’s been married once already, just like me. The two of us get along like a house on fire. She comes over to my place from time to time, cooks us a bite to eat.’

‘I see you’ve really rediscovered your youth. All loved up, are we?’ said Koishi, glancing up as she teased him.

‘At my age, it’s not quite the whirlwind romance you’re imagining. It’s more about companionship – you know, someone I can share a cup of tea

with.’ Smiling bashfully, Hideji went on. ‘Nami Sugiyama, her name is, but everyone just calls her Nami-chan. She’s a little younger than me, but she ranks way above me at the office. She handles all the accounts, and the boss really trusts her. We’re a real duo. Trips to the movies, strolls around the temples – just having *fun*, you know.’

‘A new lease of life,’ said Koishi with a grin.

‘She’s living on her own over in Yamashina right now, but her family home is up north. Takasaki, in Gunma prefecture. Her mother passed away a couple of months ago, leaving her father on his own. She says she’s going to move back there to look after him.’

‘On her own, you mean?’

‘Well, actually, she asked if I’d go with her,’ said Hideji, his face turning a bright shade of red.

‘Congratulations! I mean, that’s basically a proposal, isn’t it?’ said Koishi, clapping her hands in gentle applause.

‘My son has given the okay too, so it looks like it’s going ahead. The only problem is food. You know, with her being from up north and all . . .’ said Hideji, his expression clouding over.

‘And that’s where the nabeyaki-udon comes in?’

‘Now, I don’t mean to harp on about Nami, but she really does know how to cook. Not just Japanese food – though you should see the nikujaga stew or the seasoned rice she cooks up! No, when it comes to non-Japanese stuff – curry, say, or hamburger steaks, she puts the pros to shame. Makes her own gyoza and steamed buns, too. I have nothing at all to complain about. It’s much better than you’d get in some lousy restaurant! The thing is, though, her nabeyaki-udon just doesn’t quite hit the spot. She really tries to make it tasty, you know. But there’s a world of difference between hers and the one Chieko used to make. And nabeyaki-udon is my absolute favourite. So you see . . .’

‘Got it. Dad’ll think of something. You can count on us!’ said Koishi, patting her chest confidently.

‘Sounds like I’m mainly counting on your dad!’ chuckled Hideji.

‘Could you give me a few more details? Do you know what dashi stock Chieko used, or what ingredients she added?’ asked Koishi, pen at the ready.

‘The dashi tasted like something you’d get at an udon place in Kyoto. I don’t think the ingredients were unusual. Chicken, negi onion, sliced kamaboko, dried wheat cake, shiitake mushrooms, prawn tempura and egg. That was all.’

‘What about the udon?’

‘They weren’t those thick Sanuki noodles you see everywhere these days. They were softer than that. You know, sort of . . . squishy.’

‘Sounds like she used proper Kyoto udon. Well, I’ve got a decent idea of the dish now. But, Hideji, you’ve tried telling Nami all this, haven’t you? And yet it still ended up tasting different. This could be a tricky one to solve . . .’ Koishi was frowning.

‘Maybe it *was* the ingredients that were different. Or the seasoning. I just don’t know . . .’

‘Didn’t Chieko ever say anything? You know – about where she bought the udon, or the other ingredients?’

‘Well, I’ve never been that interested in cooking myself, you see. But . . . there was this one phrase she used to mumble. *Masu, suzu, fuji*. Something like that . . .’

‘*Masu, suzu, fuji*. That was it?’

‘Yes. Just before she set off to do the shopping, she’d always chant it, like some Buddhist mantra. I can still hear her now.’

‘Was there anything else? Something you remember about the flavour, for example?’

‘I remember thinking it always tasted a little bitter at the end.’

‘Bitter? You mean the dish as a whole?’

‘Not exactly. It was more the aftertaste . . . But I might be wrong. I’m probably getting mixed up with something else she used to make.’

‘Hard to imagine nabeyaki-udon tasting bitter . . .’ said Koishi, thumbing through her notebook.

‘If I could just eat it one more time, I’d feel a lot better about going off to live in Takasaki. I’m sure I’ll get used to Nami’s version once I’m there. When in Rome, and all that . . .’

‘Alright then. We’re on the case!’ said Koishi, snapping her notebook shut.

When Hideji and Koishi returned to the restaurant, Nagare turned the television off with the remote.

‘Did the interview go alright?’

‘I wish I could say it went swimmingly, but . . .’ replied Koishi in an uncertain voice.

‘Looks like I’ve landed you with a tough one. Don’t let this case go cold, you hear?’ said Hideji, slapping Nagare on the shoulder.

‘After all, this is Hideji’s chance to enjoy a new lease of life!’ chimed in Koishi. Following Hideji’s lead, she thumped Nagare on the back.

‘I’ll do my absolute best,’ said Nagare, his nose wrinkling slightly.

‘So, how much do I owe you?’ said Hideji, putting on his coat and taking out his wallet.

‘Oh, please! You left such a kind offering for my wife, and I haven’t given you anything in return. Treating you to a meal is the least I can do . . .’

‘Ah, you found that, did you? I thought I hid it under the incense holder.’

‘Oh, don’t go thinking you can slip something like that past me!’ The two men caught each other’s eye and laughed.

‘Hideji, about your next visit – would two weeks today work?’ asked Koishi.

‘Two weeks today . . . Yes, that’ll be perfect. I’m off work that day.’ Hideji opened his diary, licked his pencil, and scribbled down the date.

‘You look just like you used to when we went around questioning people,’ said Nagare with a smile.

‘Old habits die hard, eh?’ Hideji slid his diary back into his inner pocket and stepped out into the street. As he did so, a tabby cat scarpered away from the door.

‘What’s wrong, Drowsy? He won’t hurt you!’ called Koishi.

‘Is that your cat? It wasn’t here a moment ago . . .’

‘He started hanging around here about five years ago. He’s always half asleep, so we call him Drowsy. He has it rough, though – Dad never stops bullying the poor thing!’

‘It’s hardly bullying. You just can’t have a cat running around when you’re making food for people.’ Nagare whistled, but Drowsy, stretched out on the other side of the road, seemed to be pretending not to hear him.

‘Well, I’m counting on you!’ said Hideji, and walked off down the street, making his way west.



‘Another tough case, then?’ said Nagare, glancing at Koishi by his side.

‘Shouldn’t be too tricky. Hideji knows exactly the dish he’s after – he just hasn’t managed to recreate it,’ replied Koishi, sliding open the door.

‘What dish would that be, then?’ said Nagare, walking back into the restaurant and taking a seat.

‘Nabeyaki-udon,’ said Koishi, sitting down opposite him.

‘From a particular restaurant?’

‘No, the way his wife used to make it,’ said Koishi, opening up her notebook on the table.

‘Oh. Then it *will* be tricky, trust me. Chieko really knew her way round the kitchen. It sounds like nostalgia might be the secret ingredient here . . .’ said Nagare, flicking through Koishi’s notes.

‘The ingredients are all pretty standard, right? But Hideji says he just can’t get it to taste the same . . .’

‘Chieko was a proper Kyoto lady. I can imagine the sort of seasoning she used. And if they lived in Teramachi . . .’ Nagare crossed his arms as he racked his brains.

‘Did you know Chieko, then?’

‘Know her? We were good friends. She even cooked for me a few times.’

‘In that case, shouldn’t this be an easy one to solve?’

‘But I don’t remember ever trying her nabeyaki-udon . . .’ Nagare scanned Koishi’s notes carefully.

‘This new girlfriend of his – apparently she’s a good ten years or so younger than him! Bet you’re jealous.’

‘Don’t be silly. How many times do I have to tell you: your mother is the only one for me. Anyway, this Nami – she’s from Gunma prefecture up north, is that right?’ asked Nagare, looking up.

‘Yes, I think so. He said her family was from Takasaki.’

‘Takasaki, eh . . .’ said Nagare pensively.

‘Dad, I feel like nabeyaki-udon all of a sudden. How about having it for dinner?’

‘Oh yes. And not just tonight, either. It’s nabeyaki every night until we crack this one,’ said Nagare, without looking up from the notebook.

2

In Kyoto they say the real cold of winter only strikes after Setsubun – the day in early February when, traditionally, people scatter beans out of their front door to ward off evil spirits. As Hideji made his way down Shomen-dori in the dusk, he couldn’t help thinking they were right.

From somewhere came the sound of an itinerant tofu seller’s horn. Groups of schoolchildren, all shouldering identical leather backpacks, cut right past him as they hurried home. It was as though he’d slipped back in time to another era. Hideji came to a halt in front of the Kamogawa Diner, his long shadow stretching across the pavement.

Drowsy the cat must have remembered him, because he came over and began curling himself around his legs.

‘Nagare been bullying you again?’ he said, leaning over and stroking the tabby’s head, eliciting a soft *miaow*.

‘You’re early! Hurry on in. It’s chilly out there!’ said Koishi, sliding open the door and bowing.

‘You better let this cat in, or he’ll catch cold.’

‘I’m pretty sure cats don’t catch colds. Anyway, Dad’ll flip if he sees him.’

‘Koishi! Don’t let that cat in here!’ shouted Nagare from the kitchen.

‘See what I mean?’ said Koishi with a wink.

‘Still do it every year, do you?’ muttered Hideji as he removed his coat.

‘Do what?’ said Koishi, bringing over a pot of tea.

‘The bean-scattering ceremony. Oh, I can just picture it: Nagare out in front, chucking the beans and shouting ‘Devils *out!* Fortune *in!*’, and you chiming in from behind. Sticking to the old traditions – you two are real Kyotoites, aren’t you?’

‘But . . . how did you know?’ Koishi seemed bewildered.

‘There are beans stuck in the sill of your door,’ said Hideji, glancing sharply at the entrance.

‘Really haven’t changed a bit, have you?’ said Nagare, looking out from the kitchen in his white apron.

‘Sorry I’m early. Just couldn’t wait. And at this age I can’t stand being in a rush.’

‘Thanks for making the time,’ said Nagare, bowing slightly from behind the counter.

‘I did exactly as you told me. I haven’t eaten anything since my usual cafe breakfast, early this morning.’ Hideji downed his tea in one gulp, perhaps in an attempt to stave off his hunger.

‘Just give me ten minutes,’ called Nagare.

‘So, things going smoothly with Nami?’ asked Koishi as she laid the table. Alongside an indigo-dyed place mat, she set a pair of cedar chopsticks on a holly-shaped chopstick rest. Then she placed a Karatsu-ware bowl in the middle of the table, with a celadon-green spoon on the right.

‘Handed in her resignation last week. She’s back in Takasaki now. The boss was sad to see her go,’ said Hideji, fishing out an evening paper from the magazine rack.

‘Bet you’ve been having to eat out every night.’

‘Yes – that or ready meals from the convenience store. Getting a little sick of it, to be honest!’ said Hideji, lowering the open newspaper as he laughed.

‘Hang in there. You’ll be in Takasaki with your sweetheart before you know it,’ said Koishi, her eyes sparkling.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that. Getting a new father-in-law at my age won’t be a very sweet experience, I can tell you.’

‘I guess that’s life, eh?’ said Nagare, setting a woven straw pot stand by Hideji’s place mat. ‘Sometimes you have to take the bitter with the sweet.’

‘Ah, here it comes. The moment of truth!’ said Hideji, folding up the newspaper and sitting up in his chair.

‘Oh, leave the newspaper open. Just like back in the day,’ said Nagare as he headed back to the kitchen.

‘How did you know I used to do that?’ asked Hideji, blinking in surprise.

‘I haven’t shaken my old habits either,’ said Nagare, flashing a grin over his shoulder.

‘You know, this feels like a scene from a movie,’ said Koishi, glancing at the two of them. ‘Two ageing detectives – partners from back in the day, reunited at last!’

‘Hey!’ scowled Hideji. ‘You could have left out the “ageing” part . . .’

‘Koishi, could you come here a moment?’ called Nagare from the kitchen.

‘Looks like I’m doing the finishing touches,’ said Koishi.

‘Better do a good job!’ teased Hideji as she walked off.

Nagare murmured some instructions to Koishi as she entered the kitchen. Meanwhile, Hideji did as Nagare had told him and began to scan the newspaper’s pages, though his attention was really elsewhere. Soon the fragrant aroma of the soup stock wafted through the air. Hideji’s nose twitched involuntarily.

‘It would have been a slightly different time of day, but I imagine something like this was on the television.’ Taking a seat opposite Hideji, Nagare pressed a button on the remote control. Up on the wall, next to the

miniature shrine on the shelf, the television began showing the evening news.

‘You get home from work. You’re too tired to change your clothes, so you just slip off your jacket, loosen your tie and sit yourself down at the low table. You unfold the newspaper, flick on the television, and that’s when you notice that special smell coming from the kitchen.’ As Nagare painted this scene, Hideji closed his eyes, his face turned up towards the ceiling. ‘It was the same for me back then. I’d be so exhausted from work I’d be unable to lift a finger, so hungry I could barely speak. I’d call out to Kikuko, asking when dinner would be ready . . .’

‘Oh, it was Chieko who used to scold me,’ said Hideji. ‘Why put the television on if you’re not even going to watch it, she’d say.’

‘I imagine you protested that watching it was part of your job.’

‘Must have been the same scene in every detective’s house.’

After this back-and-forth had continued for a while, Koishi called from the kitchen.

‘Dad, I think it might be time to put the egg in!’

‘Before you do that, could you sprinkle that stuff in the little ceramic jar into the pot?’

‘All of it?’

‘All of it. Scatter it all over, then give the soup a good mix with the ladle. Then whack the heat up. Simmer everything for a bit, crack the egg in, then turn the heat off and pop the lid on right away. Not tightly, though – leave it a little askew,’ instructed Nagare.

‘Timing’s everything with nabeyaki-udon, isn’t it? When Chieko brought it out, I’d be so absorbed in my newspaper that she’d shout at me.’

‘Oh, I can imagine. “Your noodles will turn to mush!” That kind of thing?’ said Nagare.

‘Here we are!’ exclaimed Koishi, bringing over the steaming earthenware pot with a pair of oven gloves.

‘What do you reckon? Smells just like back in the day, I’ll bet.’