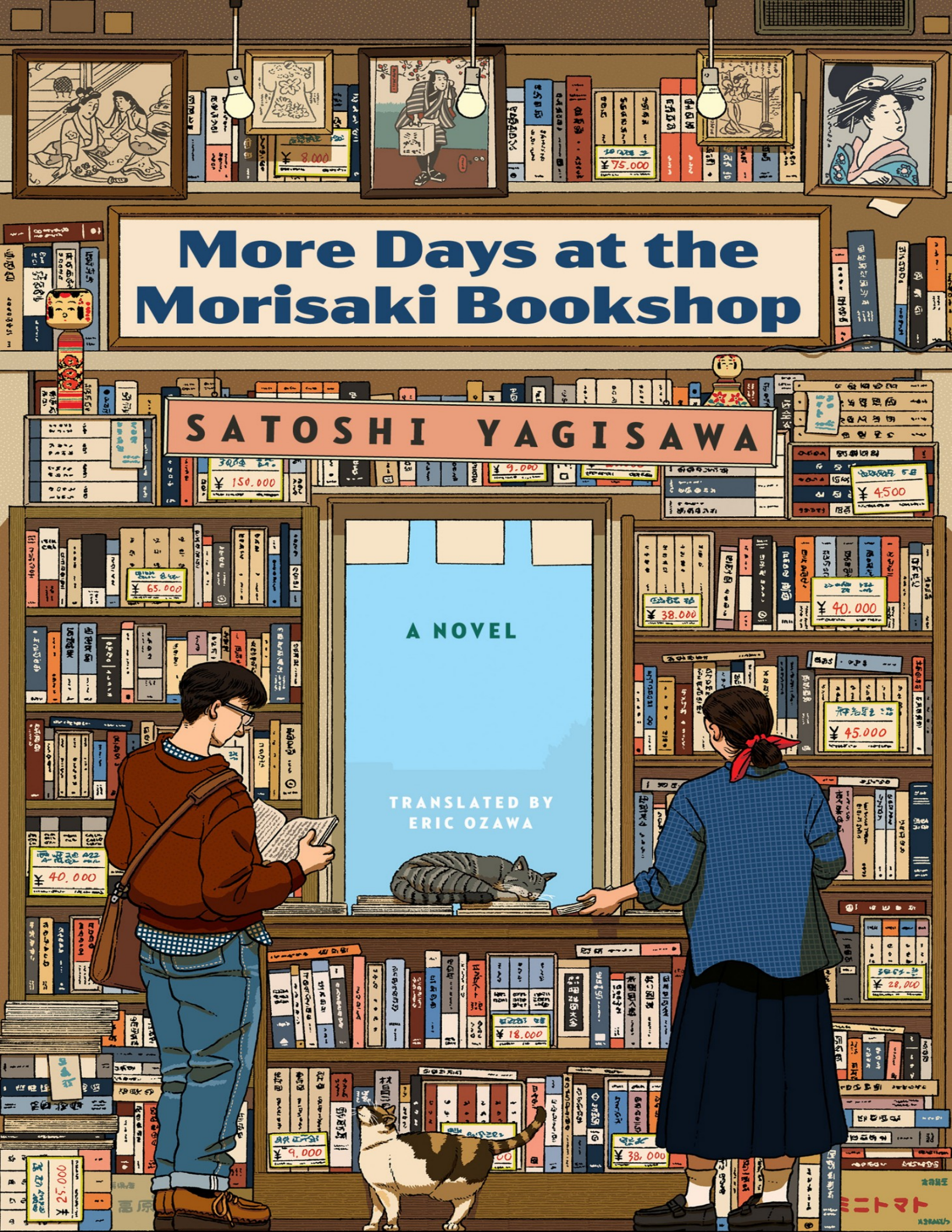


More Days at the Morisaki Bookshop

SATOSHI YAGISAWA

A NOVEL

TRANSLATED BY
ERIC OZAWA



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Translator's Note

Also by Satoshi Yagisawa

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About the Publisher

1

It's my day off from work, and I'm walking down the same familiar street. There's a feeling of calm in the air, like everything is at peace on this warm October afternoon. With a thin scarf loosely wrapped around my neck, I feel myself starting to sweat a little bit.

Even on a weekday around noon, the people I pass on the street walk at a leisurely pace and so do I. And from time to time, we come to a stop and disappear silently into one of the many bookshops along the way like we've been swallowed up.

The Jimbocho neighborhood is a little unusual for Tokyo because most of the stores there are bookshops. Each of the used bookshops has its own particular specialty: some carry art books, or play scripts, or philosophy texts; others handle rare items like old maps and traditionally bound Japanese books. Altogether, there are more than a hundred seventy stores. It's impressive to see all those bookshops lined up one after the other down the street.

If you cross the avenue, you'll find yourself in an area of offices, surrounded by tall buildings, but within its borders the neighborhood has done a good job keeping the rest of the city at bay. Only here are there rows of picturesque buildings. It's like the neighborhood exists in a different time, enveloped in its own quiet little world. Which may be why when you're walking around here, going wherever your fancy takes you, you look up and suddenly realize how much time has passed.

The place where I'm headed is on this corner. If you pass the street with the row of secondhand bookshops and turn onto the side street a little ahead, you'll be able to see it.

It's a used bookstore called the Morisaki Bookshop and it specializes in modern Japanese literature.

Once I turn the corner, I hear someone eagerly calling my name.

"Hey, Takako, come here!"

I look over and see a small middle-aged man looking my way, waving me over enthusiastically.

I hurry over to him and whisper my objection. "Didn't I tell you on the phone that you didn't need to wait for me? I'm not a little kid."

He's always like this, treating me like a child even though I'm a twenty-eight-year-old woman. It's obviously embarrassing, as you can imagine, to have someone shouting my name like that in the middle of the street.

"Well, it was taking you so long to get here. I got to worrying that you might've gotten lost."

"That's why I told you, you didn't need to wait for me in front of the shop. I've been here dozens of times. How could I possibly get lost?"

"Sure, I guess, but you know you can be a little bit absent-minded sometimes."

"You mean *you* can, don't you? Take a good look in the mirror sometime. You'll find a very absent-minded man staring back at you."

This is Satoru Morisaki, my uncle on my mother's side, and the third-generation proprietor of the Morisaki Bookshop. The original store, started by my great-grandfather back in the Taishō era, no longer exists. The current store was built almost forty years ago.

At first glance, my uncle Satoru might seem a little sketchy. He's always dressed in threadbare clothes, with slip-on sandals on his feet, and his shaggy hair makes you wonder if he's ever had a proper haircut in his life. And on top of all that, he's always saying off-the-wall things, and he ends up blurting out whatever he's thinking like a child. He is, in short, a tough man to figure out.

And yet, in this peculiar neighborhood, his odd personality and unusual appearance strangely seem to work in his favor: he's surprisingly well liked.

It would be difficult to find someone around here who doesn't know my uncle.

His Morisaki Bookshop is an old-fashioned store, in a two-floor wooden building untouched by time, every bit the image of a vintage bookshop. The inside is cramped. You could get five people in there, but just barely. There's never enough space on the shelves; the books are piled on top, and along the walls, and even behind the counter where the cash register is. And the intense, musty smell particular to old bookshops penetrates everything. For the most part, the books on the shelves are cheap, running from around a hundred to five hundred yen, but the store also sells rarer things like first editions of famous writers.

The number of people looking for secondhand books like these has dropped since my grandfather's generation. From what I've heard, there were some extremely difficult times. It's only thanks to the customers who love the shop and have kept coming back over the years that it's still in business.

I first came to the shop more than three years ago.

Back then, my uncle let me come live on the second floor, and told me I could stay as long as I liked.

I can still vividly recall the days I lived here. At that time in my life, I was feeling desperate although the cause now seems insignificant when I look back on it. At first, I often lashed out at my uncle and locked myself in my room like some tragic heroine, crying all alone. Yet he patiently endured it all and offered me kind words and caring instead. As time went on, he taught me how thrilling reading can be, and how crucial in life it is to not hide from your emotions but to face them.

Naturally, my uncle was the one who introduced me to Jimbocho. At first, I was confused to look down the street and see just one bookstore after another.

"The great writers have always loved this place too," my uncle said, sounding like he was boasting about himself. "It's the best neighborhood of

bookshops in the whole world.” To be honest, I didn’t get what he was talking about then. I couldn’t see what there was to boast about.

But as time passed, I came to understand what he meant.

Jimbocho is brimming with charm and excitement. There’s no other place like it in the world.

My uncle and I are still bickering back and forth in front of the shop when I hear a loud voice shout from inside, “Hey, what are you two doing?” When I peek in, I see a woman with a short, stylish haircut sitting at the counter, staring at us, with an irritated look on her face. That’s Momoko.

“Quit dawdling out there and come in already, will you?”

She waved us in impatiently. She didn’t seem to enjoy waiting in the shop for us by herself.

Momoko is Uncle Satoru’s wife. You’d think she wouldn’t be so different in age and appearance from my uncle, but she has such a straightforward and candid way about her that she seems much younger. My uncle is no match for her. Whenever she’s around, he’s always on his best behavior, like a little lapdog. It’s only when she’s there that you ever see that side of him.

Actually, Momoko lived apart from my uncle for almost five years, as a result of some unfortunate circumstances, but about a month ago she returned home safe and sound. Since then, she and my uncle have been running the shop together.

“So, Takako, what’s new with you?” Momoko asks with a smile. She has such fine, straight posture that she somehow looks elegant even wearing just a sweater and a long skirt. I don’t think I ever want to become someone who fills a room the way she does, but I do wish a little bit that I could have some of her grace.

“Things are good. Peaceful and calm. Work’s going well. How are you?”

“I’m doing great,” she says, flexing her arms to show off her biceps, like she’s doing her Popeye impersonation.

“That’s good to hear,” I say, feeling a sense of relief. Years ago, Momoko had had a serious illness, and we’re still watching her prognosis. My uncle is

always very careful about Momoko's health, but it seems like his constant concern ends up irritating her.

"I've got some sweet daifuku mochi with me. Shall we have some?"

"Oh, maybe we should."

My uncle checks that Momoko has gone to the back and then complains to me in a whisper. "It's awfully cramped with Momoko here with me at the shop, but that's how it goes, I guess. It's just so much easier to work alone."

"But weren't you lonely when you were actually left all by yourself?" I'm only trying to tease him, but he gets all worked up and argues with me like a little kid.

"That's nonsense! I mean when she's back behind the counter, where am I supposed to go? These days, I'm just pacing back and forth by the entrance like a guard dog."

"Is that by any chance why you were standing out in front today?"

"Take a guess." He confesses this pitiful fact with a straight face, then leans forward like he's going to whisper in my ear. "But I've got more important things to tell you, Takako," he says.

"Like what?"

"The other day I got some pretty good stuff at auction. I haven't put it on sale yet at the shop, but for you I'll make an exception and let you have a little look."

He might've tried to sound reluctant, but I know there is no way he isn't going to show me those books. Yet I've been so thoroughly converted that I'm excited to see them. I almost wonder if this love of books is hereditary. I sometimes think that might be why I'm still coming so often to the shop on my days off from work.

"Show me!" I shout without meaning to. "I've got to see them!"

"Hey, I just made tea for you two." Momoko looks at us dumbfounded, with the teapot in her hands.

"This is a bookshop," my uncle says bluntly. "How are we not going to look at books? Right, Takako?"

"Right," I agree with a laugh.

My aunt gives us an annoyed look and grumbles, “You two are the worst.”

This is my beloved Morisaki Bookshop. It’s been an inseparable part of my life since the days I lived here.

In its own modest way, it’s a place that holds so many little stories within its walls. Maybe that’s the reason I keep coming back.

2

The Morisaki Bookshop bills itself as a store specializing in modern Japanese literature. The shop does stock some contemporary novels, but those are kept on the hundred-yen cart at the entrance. Inside the shop, there are basically only novels that date from the Meiji era to early Showa. (Which is why the interior is permeated by such a damp and musty smell, but that comes with the territory.)

Maybe it's because the shop deals with a special type of book that it tends to attract a lot of customers who are a bit *eccentric*.

Now I'm perfectly accustomed to them, but at first, they threw me off. It's not that they're hard to deal with. In fact, for the most part, they're perfectly harmless. They're just a little unusual, that's all. They come in now and then, hardly saying a word, lost in their single-minded search for a book. These customers, who are overwhelmingly elderly men, are, without fail, solitary figures. There's something about them that makes it impossible to imagine their everyday lives—so much so that if someone told me they were harmless ghosts, or some kind of otherworldly creature, I might actually be persuaded to believe it.

Whenever I visit the shop, I find myself weirdly concerned about whether they're still healthy enough to come in. I've never been close to them, but I can't help but hope they're well. I feel a kind of sympathy for them since we all love the same shop. And given the advanced age of most of these customers, I worry about them.

So, if they happen to come in when I'm helping out at the shop, I feel a secret relief when I see they're doing well.

Back when I was living on the second floor and working at the shop every day, the “paper bag man” was the one I worried about most of all. As his name suggests, he always came in carrying a tattered paper bag in both hands. Sometimes it was a bag from a department store, but occasionally it was a bag from one of the larger bookstores, like Sanseidō. He must have been going from store to store before he came to us, because the bag was often already full when he showed up. It looked quite heavy for his skinny arms. He invariably wore a dress shirt under a mouse-colored sweater.

If that was all, there wouldn't be anything so peculiar about him. The problem was that mouse-colored sweater. It wasn't simply frayed, no, it went far beyond that to the point where this article of clothing was so ragged that it was a miracle he was even able to wear it. Now, there was nothing about the old man that seemed unhygienic. In fact, he seemed neat and clean, aside from the absurd condition of his sweater, which looked like it had been dug up from some archaeological site.

The first time I saw him I was quite shocked. I snuck glimpses of him as he silently selected his books, and several times I felt the urge to shout, “Sir, you should be buying clothes, not books!” But he didn't seem to notice. He bought ten books, stuffed them into his paper bag, and left the shop without saying a word.

Ever since that day, I haven't been able to take my eyes off him when he comes in. Some weeks he comes in multiple times, but he's also gone a month without coming. He wears the same clothes every time. He's always gripping his paper bag of books in both hands. At the Morisaki Bookshop alone, on occasion he's bought books that cost ten thousand yen apiece. And yet his sweater only becomes more and more ragged. I couldn't help wondering who on earth this old man was. I was unable to muster the courage to talk to him, so I always ended up silently staring at his back as he walked out.

I tried asking my uncle about him once. “He's buying so many books—what if he has his own used bookstore in another neighborhood?”

“Nope. He's buying them to read them himself,” he replied with certainty.

“Really? I guess you can tell the difference.”

“That much I can tell whether I want to or not.”

I guess that’s how it goes. I could hardly distinguish one type of customer from another. But when a new customer walked into the shop, my uncle seemed to be able to tell at a glance whether they’d come to buy a book or if they had just wandered in on a stroll. He said his intuition was the result of years of experience.

“So,” I said, letting my curiosity get the better of me. “What does that old man do for a living? Can you tell that too just by looking at him? It’s not like he spends all his money on books and can’t afford new clothes, right?”

“Hey.” He spoke in the tone of voice you use to reprimand a child. “Your job isn’t to start getting so nosy about the customers. The purpose of a bookshop is to sell books to people who need them. It’s not right for us to start wondering what kind of job people have or what sort of life they lead. It’s not going to make these older customers feel very good if they know the salespeople have been prying into their lives.”

When I thought about it, my uncle’s view seemed like a perfectly legitimate way of thinking about a business that caters to its customers. Even though he was usually making little jokes and chuckling to himself, after running a used bookshop for so many years, when something needed saying he came right out and said it. In moments like that, he could be kind of cool.

Anyway, that’s the reason why the paper bag man’s origins remain a mystery to us.

These eccentric customers each have their own distinct reasons for searching for books. It’s truly fascinating. I’m always impressed by the wide range of circumstances that lead people to seek out secondhand books.

Take, for example, people who set out to collect rare books, without regard to genre, era, or region. They simply accumulate unusual volumes. When a well-known collector came into the shop, he seemed dissatisfied with what we had in stock. On his way out of the store, he said something

that left me dumbfounded. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a masterpiece. If the volume isn’t rare, it’s worthless to me.”

And then there are what we call the brokers. They acquire valuable books at as low a price as possible and then sell them to another bookshop, pocketing the difference in price. Basically, their trade is buying books. For these customers, the quality of the work is secondary. They probably never even read them. There are others too, people who aren’t interested in novels, but instead seek out the work of the obscure artists whose illustrations appear alongside a text. Some of those collectors will rely on the barest of leads in their single-minded pursuit of those pictures. And then there are the people who won’t put anything that isn’t a first edition on their bookshelves. Even if they want a book, they won’t buy it until they can find a first edition of it.

The one who takes the cake is the old man who only showed up once during the period when I was living above the shop.

He wandered in at dusk and went straight to the shelf in the back where we keep the most expensive books. As he pulled each volume off the shelf, he looked only at the colophon (that’s the last page of the book) and then put it back on the shelf. He repeated the same action again and again. Occasionally, his hand would pause, and he would stare intently at some spot on the colophon, nod a few times, and then chuckle to himself with an evil grin. To be honest, I found it pretty creepy.

After the old man had finally finished inspecting every book on the shelf, he suddenly walked out. I turned to my uncle, who was sitting next to me, grabbed him by the sleeve, and asked him what in the world that man was up to.

“Oh, he’s looking for the author’s seal,” he said without looking up from the account books, as if there were nothing particularly unusual about this.

“He’s a seal collector. They rarely come to the shop, but there are some pretty famous ones around here. I’m sure I told you about Nosaki, didn’t I?”

“A seal collector?” I was puzzled by this unfamiliar term.

“Yeah, the seals are stamped on the colophon.”

My uncle pulled a book with a rather old-looking binding from the shelf and showed me the last page. It was Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*. Near the left edge of the colophon, I could see "Dazai" had been stamped in red. My uncle explained that back when bookbinding was still generally done by hand, the author would verify the number of copies and give his approval to the printing by stamping the books with his own seal. He said that in general they were just stamped with the author's name, but there were some that incorporated elaborate, elegantly designed patterns.

All of which is to say that the old man was after the seals. I had never known about the existence of these seals until my uncle explained it all to me. But still, what was the point? Was he going to cut out all of these seals and paste them like stamps into an album so that every night he could stare at them with that big smirk?

"Yeah, something along those lines," my uncle said nonchalantly. "Well, I think some of them would hate to cut them out of the books so they just collect the volumes."

"That's totally insane."

There are people in this world whose hobby is astronomy and who find the vastness of the universe thrilling. And then, on the other hand, there are people whose hobby leads them to go to great lengths to collect these insignificant little seals. It's kind of hard to fathom.

"Uh-oh, Takako. You might be getting a little too worked up about this," my uncle said at the end, giving me a sideways glance. When he saw the perplexed look on my face, he burst out laughing.

"*Hey, I'm back.*" And with this cheery greeting, Sabu appeared. He closed the door behind him with a loud noise and said something I didn't quite understand. "Ah, great weather, isn't it today? It makes me feel like reading Kōsaku Takii." Then he plopped himself down on the chair in front of the counter like it was his. My uncle, who was accustomed to this, said, "I'll put on the kettle," and started to make tea.

Of all the regular customers of the Morisaki Bookshop, Sabu was probably the most regular of them all. Although that didn't necessarily mean he was making all that much of a contribution to our sales figures. Only that he was the one who came in more than anyone else. More of a regular browser. A short and stout man with a friendly face who loved to talk. I didn't know exactly how old he was, but I'd say somewhere in his midfifties. Except for the area around his ears, he's spectacularly bald. He'll sometimes joke about it himself.

"Oh, where's Momoko today?" he asked my uncle, while he looked all over the shop for her. Of course, Momoko was wildly popular with the men who were our regular customers. She was such a good listener and a straight talker that she seemed to have stolen their hearts. The result has been a curious phenomenon: a sharp increase in the number of customers who come to see her. Sabu, of course, is one of the many she has in the palm of her hand.

"If you're looking for her, she's over at the other place," my uncle said, gesturing toward the doorway with his chin. Sabu immediately looked disappointed.

"What? That's a shame."

Momoko recently started helping out in the evenings at the little restaurant less than ten steps from the shop. After the head chef suddenly quit, the owner turned to Momoko, who was both a good cook and good at handling the customers. I don't know if this is true or not, but I heard that the restaurant was doing amazingly well, far better than before. When we said we were concerned that a hectic job like that might be too much for her health, she said, "I can handle this. It's my choice. You and Satoru worry too much."

Sabu wasn't paying any attention to me, so I had no choice but to say hello.

"Oh, Takako, you're here."

Even though I had been right in the middle of his field of view, he seemed just now to be noticing I was there. Ever since Momoko's return, his

treatment of me had been openly shoddy. Before that, he had taken such a liking to me that it was actually becoming a bit concerning. He'd even been telling me I had to marry his son.

"I'm helping out today," I said.

"Helping out? What's a young person like you idly frittering away a weekday afternoon? Don't you have a real job?"

"That's rude! It's easy to take a day off at my office."

He giggled when I took offense. That's how Sabu was. He was nice, but he had a sharp tongue.

In this neighborhood, however, he had a reputation for being someone who knew everything that was going on. It's something he took pride in. So whenever he came by the shop, he always asked my uncle first about the other regular customers.

"How's Takigawa doing these days?"

"He hasn't been in recently. Before, he'd always come in once every couple of weeks."

"I hope he's not ill."

"It would be a relief if he dropped by sometime."

"How about Professor Kurusu? That guy's figured out how to deduct his book allowance from his research budget. A clever move."

"The professor was here two days ago."

"How about Yamamoto then? The other day, he was so proud that his book collection had hit fifty thousand books that I got a little annoyed. He was definitely boasting."

And so on . . . Inevitably, the conversation came down to this:

"Everyone's getting older, huh. If this shop doesn't find some new customers, it's doomed."

"You said it."

And then Sabu and my uncle would laugh together as if they'd said something funny. Those two went through the same routine every time. It was weird to me that they never got tired of it.

For a long time, I'd had my doubts about Sabu.

Like, who exactly was Sabu?

He always seemed to have free time. I had never once seen him busy. And even if the books he bought were not big-ticket items, he'd been buying books for an awfully long time. Unless he had an extremely large house, where on earth was he keeping all these books? The fact that he had a beautiful wife, who always looked nice in her kimono, was another mystery.

Which naturally brought up another question. What did Sabu do for work?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that Sabu was the most mysterious character around.

At the shop, Sabu was essentially no longer treated like a customer. My uncle probably wouldn't get upset if I tried asking him about it.

So, at some point while the two of them were still sipping their tea and talking about this and that, I interrupted.

"Sabu, may I ask you something?"

"Why so polite all of a sudden?"

"What do you do for work? You talk a lot about people idly frittering away their days, but aren't you the idlest of them all?"

It was as if Sabu had been waiting for me to ask this question.

He slowly turned up the corners of his mouth and smirked at me like a detective in a hard-boiled novel. It was incredibly annoying.

"You want to know?" he said as he leaned forward on the chair in front of me, bringing his face closer to mine.

"I do."

Even though I already regretted bringing up the subject, I nodded just like he wanted me to. Interacting with Sabu often led to these extremely irritating situations.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Actually, I don't really care."

"You won't reel me in like that."

"Ah, come on, enough already. Okay, I've just got to know. I can't take it anymore. If you don't tell me, I won't be able to sleep tonight. There,

satisfied?”

“Really?”

“Sure. I really, really want to know. What on earth do you do for a living?”

I was getting tired of asking, when Sabu nodded with a satisfied look, leaned closer, and whispered, “I’m . . . not . . . telling.”

I stood there with my mouth opening and closing over and over like a goldfish. When he saw my reaction, Sabu doubled over laughing, *mhahahahah*. “Wait . . .” He was truly an infuriating old man. He was totally mocking me.

“No, it was too perfect. A masterpiece.”

“Hey, Uncle Satoru knows, doesn’t he?”

“Ah, um, I do, sure . . .”

“Hey, Satoru! You can’t tell her!” Sabu shook his head fiercely side to side, looking flustered as he tried to command my uncle not to tell me. “It’s too soon to tell Takako.”

“Whoops, my mistake.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A man with more of a mysterious side has more charm, don’t you think? That’s why I’m not going to tell you. Your curiosity will grow and grow until it becomes an obsession, and you’ll end up dreaming about me.”

“Absolutely not. It doesn’t mean anything to me at all anymore.”

“Such a headstrong woman.”

“No, I really don’t care. I’ll never ask you again,” I said indignantly.

“Well, I think I should be going now. I’ve had my fill of teasing you, Takako,” Sabu said. Then he downed the rest of his tea and walked out of the shop, cackling to himself as he went.

“Good grief, that guy,” I said, dumbfounded.

My uncle seemed to agree. “Well, he’s a strange guy.”

This shop really does attract one strange guy after another.