

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER



Before we forget kindness

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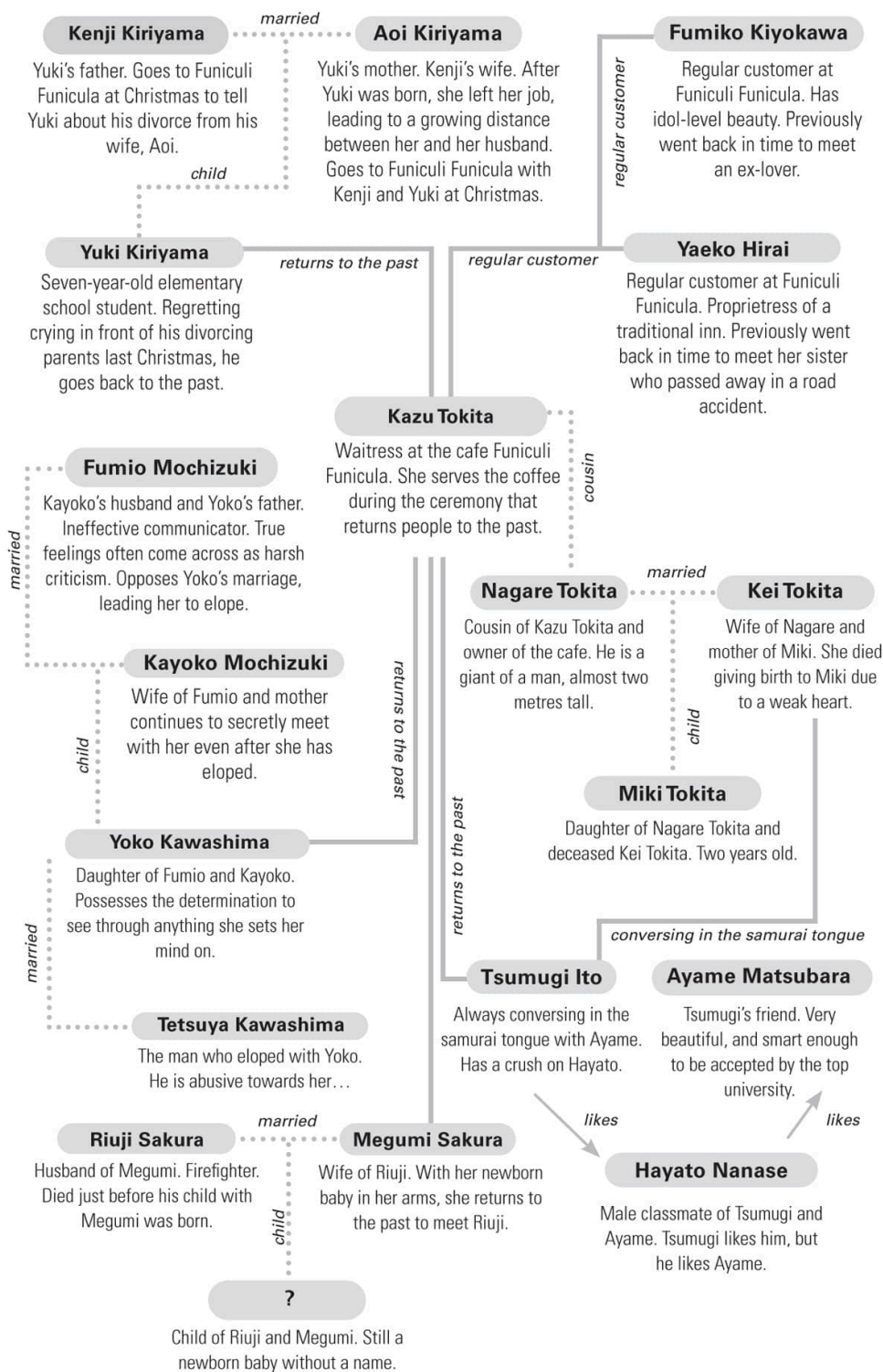
BEFORE WE FORGET KINDNESS

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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I

The Son

The cafe that could take you back in time was in Jimbocho, a district of the Kanda area in Chiyoda City, Tokyo. It was a little away from the nearest station, and its sign was placed outside in one corner of a quiet narrow alleyway.

The cafe's name was Funiculi Funicula. It was named after the popular Italian folk song from the Naples region, which had been commissioned to commemorate the opening of a cable-driven railway.

‘Toward the fiery flames of Mt. Vesuvius

Let's go up the slope . . .’

That's what the Japanese lyrics say in this song, whose melody most people have heard at least once. Children in Japan recognize the melody as that of ‘The Imps’ Trousers’, a ‘Funiculi Funicula’ parody song. The reason why this time-travelling cafe was named after an Italian folk song was unknown, even to its owner.

The name of the owner, who always wore his cook's uniform, was Nagare Tokita. A towering figure more than two metres tall, Nagare was a quiet man with intense, almost thread-like narrow eyes. He was standing stoically with the composure of a powerful temple guardian statue. His wife, Kei Tokita, had worked at the cafe as a waitress. Always smiling with her big, bright eyes, she had been carefree and innocent, with a friendly and welcoming

personality. Tragically, a heart-related illness claimed her life two years ago, leaving behind their daughter, Miki, who had big, bright eyes, just like her mother.

Kazu Tokita, the waitress, was Nagare's cousin. She had a fair complexion and narrow, almond-shaped eyes, with a straight nose and light-pink lips. Anyone would agree she was pretty if it was pointed out to them, but there was nothing that left a lasting impression. If they closed their eyes, they would struggle to remember what she looked like – she could be seen as both a young girl and a calm, mature woman. She was taciturn by nature and some customers said it was almost impossible to strike up a conversation with her.

A rumour was even floating around that she seemed *to be without presence, like a ghost*.

Presently, however, it was only Kazu who could pour the coffee that took you back in time.

Nagare shared the Tokita family name, but as a man, he was unable to pour the coffee. That ability was something only the women of the Tokita lineage possessed.

Often a customer would say, 'Then please pour the coffee,' as soon as they learned from Kazu they could go to the past if she did so.

But for that to happen . . . for a customer to be able to return to the past in this cafe, there were other annoying – as in *extremely* annoying – rules.

First and foremost: the Limited Time.

You see, the time you can spend in the past begins the moment Kazu has poured your coffee, and it ends just before the coffee gets cold.

Learning this tends to dismay everyone: 'What? Is it really that short?'

What could anyone accomplish in the time it takes for one cup of coffee to get cold? You would have about ten minutes at most. Enough, perhaps, to eat a cup of instant noodles. It might take five minutes to boil the water, plus another three-minute wait after pouring it, leaving you just two minutes to eat. If you're having a night out, ten minutes would unlikely be enough time to receive any dish you ordered.

You would think that would dissuade everyone. But no, some will say, ‘Oh well . . . but still, if I have a chance to go back to the past . . .’

On hearing the next rule, however, nearly all customers will conclude, ‘If that’s the case, then I can’t see any point going back.’

The reason they give up is the rule that nothing you do while in the past will change the present.

Regret comes in two flavours: actions taken and opportunities missed.

The regret from doing something stems from either not being able to undo it, or the awful outcome, such as hurting someone with an insensitive comment, or feeling wretched after declaring one’s love.

The regret of not doing something, in contrast, relates to things left unsaid, or love never declared.

The most common reason for wanting to return to the past is to do something again. But as nothing you do while in the past will change the present, anyone would just want to say, ‘Then what’s the point of going back?’

Mind you, those aren’t the only rules for going back to the past.

To make that journey, you must be sitting on a certain chair in the cafe. That chair, however, will be occupied by a certain other customer. And you will need to wait for that customer to vacate the chair to go to the toilet.

Now, if you are lucky, and you do get to sit in the chair and go back in time, you must never get off it while in the past. Who you can go back to meet is also limited to people who have previously visited the cafe.

After hearing so many troublesome rules, some sceptical customers exclaim, ‘It seems like you’re just hiding the truth that it’s impossible to go back in time.’

At times like these, rather than engaging in an argument, Kazu remains composed and responds, ‘If you say so.’ After all, the decision to go back to the past is ultimately up to each customer, and she finds it too tedious to argue.



Yuki Kiriya was seven years old. He was carrying a shiny black-leather school bag on his back.

‘Excuse me, may I ask you something?’ Such polite and respectful phrasing was not normally heard from a child of that age.

The short-sleeved shirt of the prestigious private elementary school’s uniform revealed his pale arms. His upright posture and taut spine bespoke a good upbringing. It was late June and too early for chirping cicadas, but outside was as hot as a midsummer day. In contrast to his composed expression, the sweat trickling down his face better encapsulated the childish charm of an elementary school student.

‘Certainly, what is it?’ responded Kuzu Tokita. She had paused from her task and approached the boy. Whether she was conversing with adults or children, Kuzu used the same manner of speaking.

‘I heard a rumour that if I visit this cafe, I can go back to the past. Is that true?’

Without wiping away the sweat trickling down his face, Yuki looked up at Kuzu.

Fumiko Kiyokawa, a cafe regular who had gone back in time three years earlier, couldn’t help but interject, ‘You’re an elementary school student, right? Where did you hear that rumour?’ Her tone was very much how an adult would speak to a child. It sounded as if she was asking, *Surely you’re not thinking of travelling back to the past?*

Never before had a boy come to the cafe wishing to do such a thing: if that really was why he had come, he would be the youngest to do so. But he would have to drink the entire cup of coffee poured for him by Kuzu, and Fumiko thought an elementary school student was too young to be drinking coffee.

‘When Mum and Dad were still living together, I heard tales of this cafe from my grandfather.’

‘Gosh.’

Fumiko’s expression darkened and she looked at Kazu. *Are his parents divorced?*

Kazu ignored this tacit enquiry, and without changing her complexion in the slightest, she replied, ‘Yes, you can go back.’



Irreconcilable differences.

This is by far the most common reason for getting divorced nowadays. Other common reasons are financial difficulties, domestic violence, and infidelity. In a typical divorce, it would be reasonable to assume that several reasons are at play. Similarly, ‘irreconcilable differences’ does not refer to a single reason for incompatibility: it’s used to describe a combination of various unacceptable behaviours or persistent feelings of discontent that are difficult to move past or overcome in a relationship.

According to statistics, one or two people per thousand of the population are divorced in Japan. The hurdle for getting a divorce is lower now, so that is one reason.

Values are changing with regard to family and the community. These days, fewer families make the effort to introduce themselves to the people they live next to when they move in. In fact, it is not uncommon for residents of apartment buildings in urban areas not to even know their neighbours’ faces.

Also, with the popularity of smartphones and webcams we can now communicate face-to-face with friends and loved ones, even far away. As a result people can manage perfectly well without building new relationships in their neighbourhood or on their block, and that might be one reason for the growing number of nuclear families. However, the nuclear unit is being broken up further, and nowadays emphasis is placed more on the individual. In fact, this is a growing trend within the household, and husbands and wives are more and more often living as individuals.

Much of the stress people experience in their lives arises from their relationships with those immediately around them, such as a mother or father, child, sibling, friend, colleague, or, of course, spouse.

When two individuals who have been living their own lives based on their unique lifestyles and routines get married and start co-habiting, they will inevitably spend a significant amount of time together, sharing their lives.

Of course, since both partners have recognized each other as lifetime companions and begun married life together, it becomes necessary to adjust their lifestyles and routines to better accommodate each other. As long as love exists between them, these adjustments can be viewed as a source of happiness and freshness in their relationship. But if the love begins to fade and emphasis is placed on individualism, problems may arise and things that were tolerated due to love may become unbearable, and that kind of breakdown is not necessarily due to easily identifiable reasons such as money, domestic violence, or infidelity.

Things that were forgivable among friends may become intolerable later on. Such a turning point could be when the relationship evolves into a romantic one, when the couple begin living together, or when they get married.

Irreconcilable differences cannot be boiled down to clear reasons. Things just don't seem to work out, and the situation becomes unbearable and uncomfortable. Despite this, it's not that the parties involved hate each other.

If only we weren't married, we could get along just fine.

The idea of returning to an earlier, more amicable relationship is seen as one way to escape the tension of always walking on eggshells.

We got on better before we were married. Let's return to that.

There seems to be only one option to alleviate the stress and avoid disliking one's family.

Let's start anew and give ourselves a second chance.

And divorce is chosen.

That is, of course, only one example and not applicable to all couples who

divorce.

But there was a boy who, caught in the middle of a crisis of individualism between his parents, agonized over the situation.



Yuki was regretting the time he had burst into tears at this cafe.

It all started at breakfast on Christmas morning last year. Out of the blue, his father Kenji suggested, 'Yuki, how about we go to Disneyland?'

Yuki was confused: Kenji often claimed to be busy with work, and was seldom at home.

'Don't you have work?'

'What? Don't you like the idea?'

'No. It's not that.'

Yuki glanced across the table at his mother Aoi, who was eating toast. Whenever Aoi consulted with Kenji, he would always say, 'I'm busy with work, so I'll leave the household matters to you,' so Yuki thought he should check with his mother before replying to his father's invitation.

'That sounds like a nice thing to do. It's Christmas, after all, right?' Aoi said.

'Absolutely,' Kenji agreed.

It had been a while since Yuki had seen Aoi smiling in front of Kenji, so he exclaimed with joy, 'All right, let's go!'

They headed to Disneyland by car. Aoi drove, with Yuki in the front passenger's seat. It was smooth driving at first, taking just under twenty minutes from their home in Kanda, central Tokyo, via the Metropolitan Expressway Route 4 to the Kasai Interchange, their planned exit on the Bayshore Route. Being Christmas, however, it was heavily congested.

'I told you we should have exited at Urayasu Interchange.'

'Well, you should have driven, then.'

'What? You offered to drive.'

‘Only because you said you wanted to do some work in the car. You’ve got a nerve backseat driving now.’

Kenji and Aoi had been bickering like this since they left home, and that day was no different from most days. The two had begun to quarrel over trivial matters a few years ago: the cause was their different values and beliefs about work and parenting.

After Yuki was born, Aoi was thinking that she could put him in childcare and return to her job at an advertising agency. However, Kenji insisted, ‘I want you to devote your energies to being a mum for Yuki, because his early years until he turns three will have a huge impact on shaping his personality.’

‘Yes, that’s a good point. All right, I think I can endure putting my career on hold until Yuki turns three,’ said Aoi, understanding Kenji’s perspective.

Kenji made no reply, but he didn’t like Aoi’s word ‘endure’. *Why does she make it sound like I’m asking too much? Shouldn’t a mother’s first instinct be to prioritize her child?*

There was nothing negative about Aoi’s thoughts. She was simply expressing how she would have to endure a wait before she could return to the job she loved. Although she was actually thinking, *Raising Yuki is far more important to me than my work*, she did not convey that to Kenji.

Since that conversation, Kenji said, ‘I’ll leave the household matters to you,’ about everything they discussed. Subconsciously embedded in his answer was his belief that *Motherhood is a full-time job*.

This rubbed Aoi up the wrong way. *Why do you push me so hard to concentrate all my time on Yuki? You just seem to avoid your responsibilities as a father by using your work as an excuse. But if I say anything, we will just end up quarrelling.*

Just as Kenji felt dissatisfaction with her, Aoi was suppressing her resentment towards him. She quietly kept her feelings bottled up until Yuki was three, but then she found herself so occupied with looking after him that her desire to resume her career gradually diminished.

‘Weren’t you planning to go back to the agency?’

‘Well, perhaps if you helped more with Yuki and the housework.’

‘I don’t have time for that. You know how busy I am. I’m even having to work at weekends.’

‘If I start working again, it’ll be the same for me. Then who will take care of Yuki?’

‘We can put him in childcare.’

‘Don’t say it so casually.’

‘What do you mean? We agreed from the beginning that it would be until Yuki turns three.’

‘You were the one who said that, weren’t you?’

‘Didn’t you agree, though?’

‘So, what are you saying? You want me to balance work and household chores?’

‘You said you wanted to return to work knowing that.’

‘That was three years ago. I didn’t know raising a child would be this hard, and also . . .’

‘What?’

‘I didn’t expect you to be this uninterested in child-rearing.’

‘It’s not that I’m uninterested. I’ve been working hard to support our family. Now it’s your turn to return to work and give me a break.’

‘What? You make it sound like I’ve been playing around for the past three years.’

‘Oh, come on, looking after a kid is bit different from work.’

‘Then I think you should try it yourself. You’ll see how difficult it is.’

‘But how can I do that? I’m working.’

Their bickering was a tit-for-tat exchange fuelled by intense emotions, and as a result what they truly meant was distorted, and they were not understanding each other.

By the time Yuki was old enough to understand what was happening around him, his parents were quarrelling every day, and he always stepped in to mediate.

Even in the car on the way to Disneyland that Christmas morning, he

interjected, 'I wish I could have taken over the driving. Sorry, Mum.' Yuki's words were not a lie: he earnestly wished he could have changed places and driven. Aoi fully understood his sentiment, and Kenji was proud of his son's unparalleled kindness.

'It's OK, Yuki. It was Mum and Dad's fault. Today is Disneyland, so let's be nice to each other. Right, Dad?' Aoi looked intently at Kenji in the rear-view mirror.

'Oh, right.' Kenji's expression changed as if he had just remembered something. He closed his laptop and stowed it away in his bag.

'Sorry, Yuki. Dad won't be doing any more work today.' Kenji bowed his head apologetically to Yuki from the back seat.

'OK,' replied Yuki, revealing a big smile.

Since they arrived at Disneyland late, they had to park some distance away. Then at the park entry gates, after passing through baggage inspection, they joined the end of a long queue to the ticket counter. By now, two and a half hours had passed since they left home.

Disneyland sometimes imposes entry restrictions at weekends, holidays, and Christmas Day. Even when they were finally able to enter the park, they would have to wait several more hours to ride the popular attractions.

Some time ago, there was an urban legend: *couples who go to Disneyland break up*. Perhaps it was mischievously spread by rival amusement parks, but if there was some sliver of truth to this statement, it most surely would be due to the long waiting times.

Waiting times were much longer before the introduction of the Standby Pass, sometimes exceeding an hour and a half. If a couple who owned annual passes had a favourite attraction or one in mind they wanted to ride, the waiting time would not be so bad. However, for couples who weren't avid fans of Disneyland and didn't possess one, the wait could be far longer than expected, exhausting conversation topics and leading to awkward silences, or even quarrels. Then, as tales of couples splitting up after going to Disneyland accumulated, an urban legend was born.

Whether or not Yuki had ever heard of it, his reasons for wanting to go to

Disneyland were different. For there are also lucky superstitions attached to Disneyland, such as *If you go, you will become happy*. For example, *If you hold hands with Micky or Minnie, you will find love* and *If you go to Disneyland, you will conceive a child*. Such lucky superstitions are groundless. But as Disneyland is known as the kingdom of dreams, it's the perfect place for visitors seeking happiness through good-luck omens. One lucky superstition is that *If you make a wish at the last gate of 'It's a Small World', it will come true*.

'It's a Small World' is an attraction that takes visitors around the countries of the world on a gondola floating on water. Yuki was planning to make a wish at that gate.

Fortunately, after their argument in the car, Kenji and Aoi never lost their smiles during the long wait. They were only able to experience one popular attraction, but Yuki felt satisfied: he had been able to make a wish as their gondola passed the last gate in 'It's a Small World'.

Kenji drove them home. Yuki slept in the back seat, his head in Aoi's lap. For the first time in years, all three members of the family had spent a holiday together. Yuki was exhausted from the pure excitement of that alone.

'Yuki, we've arrived. Wake up,' said Aoi.

The destination ended up being a cafe located close to their home.

They had parked in front of Jimbocho Station with the plan of eating dinner, but it was Christmas Day and all the restaurants were fully booked. Heading away from the station, they walked down a quiet alleyway where they found a cafe sign. Kenji went inside to see if there was a table. In spite of its being Christmas, there was just one customer. The waitress told him that they also served light meals and cakes.

Yuki was thrilled that the three of them could celebrate Christmas in a way that was very Christmaslike.

When Kenji had popped in, each of the tables had only two chairs, but the taciturn waitress Kazu Tokita had already prepared a chair for Yuki.

'Hello. Welcome. What would you like to drink?'

'We came by car, so I'll have a non-alcoholic beer. My wife will have a glass

of champagne, and an orange juice for my son.'

'Coming right up,' called out Nagare Tokita, wearing his cook's uniform. Nestled in his arms was a little girl of about two years old with big round eyes. Her name was Miki. Nagare was so big, he made Miki look as small as a squirrel as she snuggled up against his chest.

There was a decorated Christmas tree in the cafe, but no Christmas songs were playing. All that could be heard was a soft, spell-like mumbling of 'Jingle bells, jingle bells' from Miki in the kitchen.

A Christmas evening without music would surely feel unsatisfying and strange for the ordinary customer, but neither Kenji nor Aoi seemed bothered. The three of them were enjoying reminiscing over their day at Disneyland while eating the meal Kazu had quietly brought them.

Although it was Christmas night, no more customers came. The only other customer was the woman in the very unwintery, short-sleeved white dress seated in the furthest corner of the cafe.

It was truly an intimate moment between a child and his parents. For Yuki, it was supposed to be a memorable happy time that he hadn't experienced in years. But a sad reality was waiting for him.

When Yuki took the first bite of Christmas cake, Kenji spoke up.

'Yuki.'

'What?'

A big thing about Christmas is the presents. But that was far from Yuki's mind. Spending the day with his family at Disneyland, and then eating delicious food and Christmas cake were the greatest gifts for him. Even at the last gate of 'It's a Small World', he didn't want any of the games or toys that an ordinary elementary school student might want.

Yuki felt that this was the happiest time of his life.

DONG

One of the large clocks in the coffee shop struck its bell, indicating that it was 7.30 p.m. Aoi reached out and placed her hand on Yuki's small head.

‘We have something important to say, Yuki. Your father and I have decided not to live together any more.’

‘What?’

‘Tonight will be the last night the three of us spend together,’ Kenji added.

Yuki’s mind went blank upon hearing Aoi and Kenji’s sudden confession.

The last Christmas.

All Yuki remembered was that his crying had upset Kenji and made Aoi cry, and hearing Miki singing the full chorus of ‘Jingle Bells’ from the back of the kitchen. He couldn’t remember how he got home.

However, he could never forget the next morning when he woke up. He saw two gift boxes placed next to his pillow, and he cried silently.



‘You know,’ Fumiko said, after listening to Yuki’s story with teary eyes, ‘I really understand how you feel. I do. But how should I put it . . . Even if you go back to the past, you know about the rules, right?’

Fumiko turned to Kazu, who was listening to the conversation, and appealed to her for support. Fumiko believed that Yuki was attempting to travel back in time to prevent his parents’ divorce. She knew that there was a cruel rule operating in this cafe that would shatter the young boy’s innocent wish.

I wonder if he’ll cry again when he learns about the rule.

As Fumiko was hesitating, Kazu stepped in front of Yuki and without changing her expression told him, ‘If you go back to the past, there is nothing you can do that will change the reality of your father and mother separating.’

What?! He’s only seven! You could have sugar-coated it a bit!

Contrary to Fumiko’s expectations, however, Kazu’s explanation did not upset Yuki. Instead, he replied with a determined look in his eyes that seemed beyond his years, ‘Yes, that’s all right.’

‘Eh? So why do you want to go back to the past?’

Fumiko leaned forward, studying Yuki’s expression.

‘I shouldn’t have cried that day.’

‘What do you mean?’

There was more to Yuki’s story.



Since the day at Disneyland, Yuki had been living with his mother. His parents’ divorce was finalized after the new year. Yuki thought that he would continue to live with Aoi.

One day, Aoi mentioned to Yuki that there was someone she wanted him to meet, so they planned a dinner at a city restaurant. When they arrived, they were greeted by a man who seemed older than Kenji. He had a kind demeanour and an average build.

‘Good evening, Yuki. Nice to meet you. My name is Makoto Nishigaki.’

As Nishigaki removed his coat, he bowed politely to Yuki, standing next to Aoi.

‘Good evening. I’m Yuki Kiriya. Nice to meet you.’

Yuki returned the greeting just as politely, drawing a nod of approval from Nishigaki.

‘You’re quite well mannered when it comes to greetings. That’s impressive. I’m sure you’ll accomplish great things in the future.’

‘Thank you.’

A waiter showed them to their table. The meal went smoothly. Yuki’s eyes sparkled when he heard about Nishigaki catching a giant trevally weighing over thirty kilograms while fishing in Okinawa and Miyako Island.

‘I’ll take you with me next time.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

‘Yay!’ Yuki exclaimed spontaneously.

‘Actually, Yuki,’ interjected Aoi, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, ‘your mum is dating Mr Nishigaki.’

Nishigaki straightened his back in response to Aoi’s announcement. Yuki, unable to fully grasp the meaning of what she had said, looked back and forth between them.

‘Does that mean . . .’ First, Yuki’s mind conjured the image of his father. In his imagination, Kenji, standing next to Aoi, was replaced by Nishigaki. He voiced the conclusion he drew from there. ‘You are getting married?’

‘Well, we want to live together.’

In Yuki’s mind, he, Aoi, and Nishigaki entered a single house, while Kenji was left standing alone outside.

‘What will happen to Dad?’

‘About that . . .’ Aoi proceeded to inform Yuki. The reasons Kenji and Aoi separated was not only because their personalities clashed, but also because they each had someone else they were interested in. After talking it over thoroughly, they decided to part ways for their own sakes. However, they both wanted to live with Yuki, so, after living with his new father for a month, they wanted him to live with his new mother for a month. After that, he should decide whether to live with Kenji or Aoi.

‘OK, I understand,’ said Yuki, agreeing to spend a month living with Aoi and Nishigaki.

The following day, it was arranged that Yuki would meet Kenji’s partner, a woman he didn’t know. It was a Sunday, and Kenji picked him up in his new car. They headed to a small cake shop, where all sorts of colourful cakes were displayed in the window. Kenji introduced Yuki to the woman who made them, explaining that she was his current girlfriend.

Her name was Kaede Kimura. She was a head shorter than Aoi, and though she was the same age as Kenji, she still radiated the youthfulness of a teenager. Kenji laughed, saying that if Yuki walked with her, they might be mistaken for siblings.