

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER



Before
we
say
goodbye

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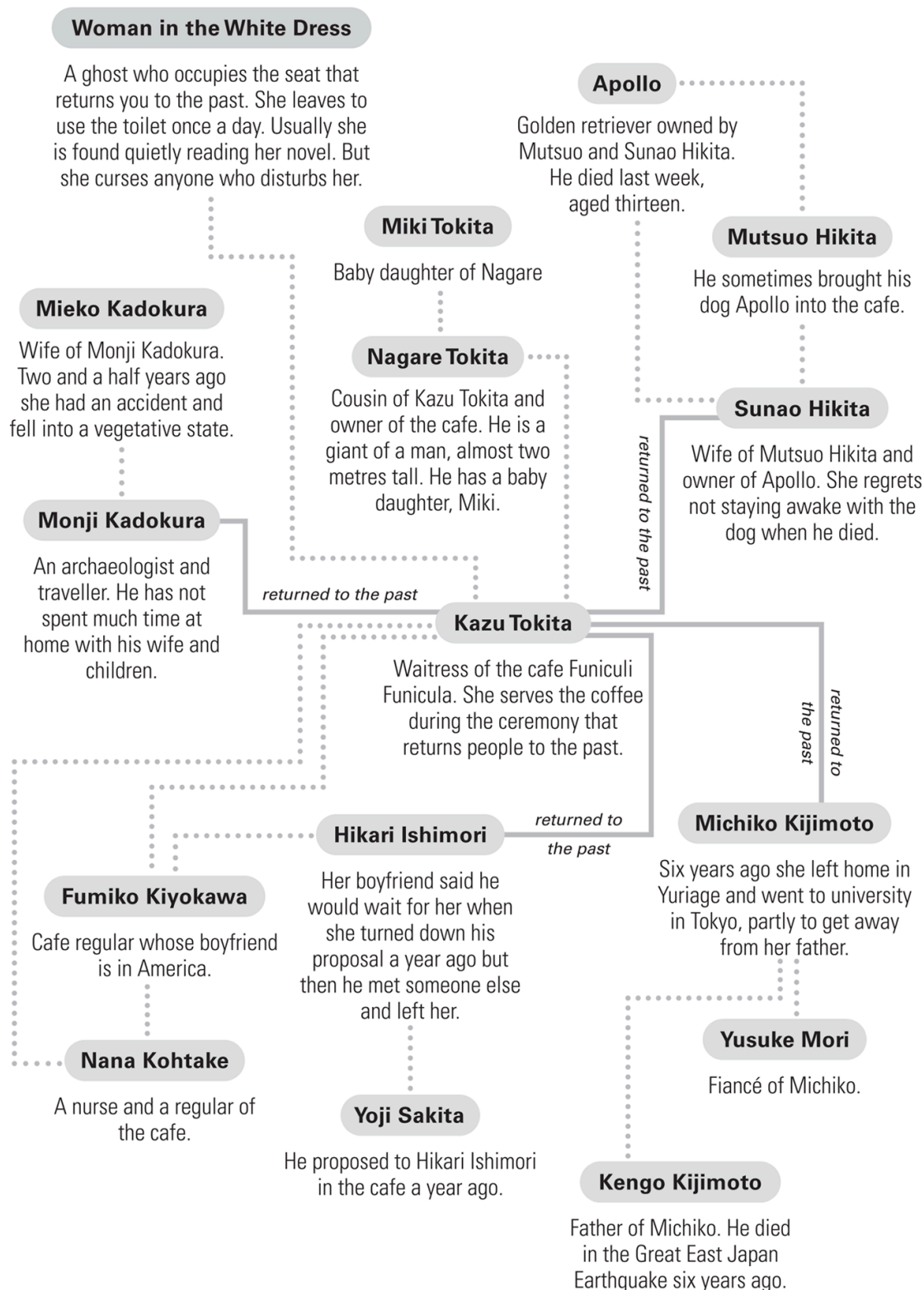
BEFORE WE SAY GOODBYE

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 Husband

'So, there's nothing one could do to change the present?'

Monji Kadokura inquisitively tilted his head of grey-speckled hair, dislodging a cherry-blossom petal that fluttered to the ground. Under the dim sepia light of the shaded lamps – the cafe's only illumination – he was squinting so closely at the jottings in his notebook that his face was almost pressed against the page.

'What does that mean, specifically?'

'Well, maybe I could explain it like this ...'

Replying to Kadokura's question, with long narrow eyes, was Nagare Tokita, a huge man more than two metres tall. He was the owner of the cafe and always wore a white cook's uniform.

'Take this cash register, for example. You'd be hard-pressed to find one in Japan that is older. I've been told it's very rare. By the way, even empty, it weighs forty kilograms, to stop people stealing it. Anyway, let's say that one day, this cash register *was* stolen.'

Nagare slapped his hand on the cash register on the counter.

'If that happened, then naturally you would want to return to the past and hide it away somewhere or get someone to stand guard to stop anyone from entering the cafe to steal it, right?'

'Sure, that makes sense.' Kadokura nodded in agreement.

'But you see, that can't happen. No matter how hard you tried to prevent the cash register from getting stolen, the thief would still make their way into the cafe and steal the cash register, even if it was well hidden.'

'Gosh, that is so fascinating. What could be the science behind that? I would be interested to know the causal relationship – if you know what I mean. A kind of butterfly effect, perhaps?' Kadokura looked up at Nagare with excited eyes.

'Butterfly effect?'

Now it was Nagare's turn to tilt his head, in confusion.

'It's a theory that the meteorologist Edward Lorenz proposed at a lecture given at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1972. There is a Japanese saying along the same lines. *If the wind blows, the barrel-makers prosper.*'

'Oh, er, OK.'

'But then, this idea of the present not changing – that's not an effect. More like a correction, don't you think? If so, that would rule out the butterfly effect. This is getting more and more fascinating,' he mumbled enthusiastically as he wrote something down in his notebook.

'Well, truth be told, the only explanation we have ever been given is, *because that's the rule*, isn't that right, Kazu?' Nagare looked to Kazu Tokita, standing next to him, for agreement.

'Yes, that's right,' Kazu replied without bothering to look up.

Kazu was Nagare's cousin and a waitress at the cafe. She wore a white shirt, black waistcoat, and sommelier's apron. She was pretty with fair complexion and long, narrow almond-shaped eyes, but not one other feature stood out. If you glanced at her and closed your eyes, you'd find it difficult to describe her face. Even Kadokura had to follow Nagare's gaze to be reminded that there was one more person here. She cast a faint shadow, and her presence lacked impact.

Her expression remained neutral as she polished a glass.

Fumiko Kiyokawa cut into the conversation. 'So anyway, Professor Kadokura, who did you come to the cafe to meet?'

'Please drop the professor, Ms Kiyokawa. I'm out of academia now.' He smiled awkwardly and scratched his head.

Fumiko had already experienced a return to the past in the cafe: she went to meet a lover from whom she had parted ways. Now she was a regular and visited the cafe almost daily after work.

'Oh, do you two know each other?' Nagare asked.

'Professor Kadokura taught my archaeology class at university. But he's not just an archaeology professor. He has travelled around the world as an adventurer. As a result, his classes covered so much! I found them to be of great value,' Fumiko replied.

'You might be the only one who would say that. And I must say, you were an excellent student, always top of the class.'

'Don't talk me up so much ... I simply didn't like losing to anyone.' Fumiko waved her hand modestly.

Notwithstanding how true that statement was, while still in high school Fumiko had mastered six languages through self-study, and she had graduated as the top student at her university. Her brilliance remained in Kadokura's memory even though he was no longer teaching. It simply wasn't true that she just hated losing.

'Professor, you never answered.'

'Oh yes, of course, you want to hear my story, right? Well actually ...' Kadokura turned his gaze away from Fumiko, sitting next to him at the counter, and stared at his clasped hands. 'I want to see my wife ... just to talk with her one more time,' he said in a small voice.

'With your wife? Oh, don't tell me she's ...' Fumiko didn't need to finish the question. Her alarm told Kadokura what she meant.

'Oh, no, she's still alive.'

Kadokura's reply had softened Fumiko's expression. But his face stayed grim.

Sensing something was amiss, Fumiko and Nagare waited with bated breath for his next words.

'She's alive, but she suffered brain damage in an accident, which left her in a vegetative state. It's been nearly two and a half years. Patients in a vegetative state normally survive three to five years at the most. I've been told that she is likely to die soon, considering her age.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Then perhaps you were hoping to return to the past to prevent your wife's accident? If that was your plan, I'm sorry, but as I explained before ...'

Shaking his head a little, he replied, 'No, I understand. I admit to a little wishful thinking, but now, to tell you the truth ...' He

scratched above his eyebrow. 'You've really piqued my interest,' he said and laughed nervously.

'What do you mean?' Fumiko asked, puzzled.

'I mean, the idea of not being able to change the present even though you can return to the past – how intriguing is that?'

His eyes shone like a child's, then darkened in an instant. 'That must have sounded rather inappropriate when my wife is in a vegetative state.'

'Oh, not at all.' Fumiko's attempt at a smile came off awkwardly. In truth, she had indeed thought, *How inappropriate*.

'That side of my personality caused my wife much distress. I've been in love with archaeology since my youth and I've lived a life focused on my interests alone. I trotted the globe as an adventurer and I did not return home for months on end. My wife never voiced any complaints about how I was. She tended to our home and raised our children. Then they left the nest, one by one, and before we knew it, it was just the two of us. Yet I continued to leave my wife alone and travel around the world. But waiting for me when I returned home one day was my wife – in a vegetative state.'

Kadokura took a small photo from his notebook. It showed a young couple. Nagare and Fumiko could see immediately they were Kadokura and his wife. After a longer look, it became plain that a large pendulum wall clock, looking just like one of the three in this cafe, was in the background.

'This photo was taken of us in this cafe, I want to say twenty-four, maybe twenty-five years ago. You've heard of an instant camera, right?'

'You mean an instax?' asked Fumiko in reply.

'People today call them that, yes. Cameras that could take photos and then allow you to print them on the spot were a hit back in the day. The lady in charge of the cafe back then had one. She took this photo for us, saying we should have a memento.'

'That was my mother. Mum loved having the latest in trendy gadgets. I imagine she said it was a memento, but I bet she just wanted to show it off,' said Nagare dismissively with a wry smile.

'My wife told me to carry this always. She said it was an amulet to protect me. Of course, there is no scientific basis for a photo to become a lucky charm,' said Kadokura as he waved the photo around.

'You want to go back to the day that photo was taken?'

'No. I haven't visited this cafe since that day, but I think my wife came here every now and then to meet our children. If I return, I would like to go back about two or three years before she fell into her vegetative state.'

'OK then,' Nagare replied, and momentarily glanced over to the woman in the white dress with long black hair and pale skin that appeared almost translucent, sitting in the furthest corner of the cafe. She was silently reading a book.

'Do you have any other questions?'

'Let's see.' Kadokura put the photo back into his notebook and opened the page on which he had just jotted down the rules. Once again he brought his face close to the page as he peered at it.

'I think this is related to the rule that the present won't change, which we just discussed, but ...'

'What is it?'

'How do words conveyed from someone from the future remain in the memories of the people they visit?'

'Eh? Well, that's, er ...' Nagare could not grasp what Kadokura was asking. He knitted his brows and tilted his head. 'What do you mean?'

'Sorry, I'm not explaining this very well.' Kadokura scratched his forehead.

'I understand that there is some kind of force, which you call a rule, that works to prevent the present from changing. What I want to know is whether the rule has an effect not only on the present, but also on memory?'

A question mark still was hanging over Nagare's head.

'In other words, if people were told that the cash register would get stolen, I want to know whether or not their memories would be erased or altered by the rule.'

'Ah, OK, I get you now,' said Nagare, folding his arms.

'And? What would happen?' butted in Fumiko instead of Kadokura.

'Well, let me think.' Nagare didn't have an answer straight away. That was because his mind went from, *I've never even thought about it*, to: *More to the point, what's on Kadokura's mind? Why does it concern him?* To the best of his knowledge, no one else had been bothered with such a thing before.

Now, siding with Kadokura, Fumiko stared inquisitively into Nagare's face as if she too was concerned about it.

Fumiko had once returned to the past to meet her boyfriend, from whom she parted at this cafe. Yet one other rule of this cafe was that after people have returned to the past once, they can never do so again. So this particular conversation shouldn't have interested her. Yet, here she was, coming at him as if she was Kadokura's sidekick.

New creases were appearing between his eyebrows, and Nagare wiped sweat from his forehead as his long thin eyes narrowed further. 'Um, let me think,' was all he could groan.

'Memories are unaffected by the rule.'

This snappy clarification was delivered not by Nagare, but by Kazu, who was next to him. She had finished wiping the glasses and was on to folding the paper napkins. Without the slightest pause, she imparted this crucial reply in a piercingly clear voice.

'There are cases where people know the truth, but in conversations with others, act as though they don't know. They might learn that the cash register is going to be stolen. They might *know* it is going to be stolen, but still, they will approach that day pretending otherwise. The rule intervenes in that way. It operates through such pretence. It does not, however, interfere with people's memory. There is no case where a person forgets the experience. On the contrary, with the knowledge that the cash register will be stolen, that person spends every day worrying until the theft occurs. But how they perceive and live with that information is up to them. It all depends on how they take it. The memory and the emotions that arise from it belong to them. Those are outside the scope of the rule's interference.'

On hearing Kazu's explanation, Kadokura's expression brightened considerably. He stood up.

'If that's the case, then I'm glad to hear it. That's taken a load off my mind. I would now like to make a request. May I please return to before my wife fell into a vegetative state?' Then he bowed deeply.

'As you wish,' Kazu replied coolly.

Fumiko looked at Kazu and clapped loudly in applause, while Nagare looked utterly confounded. This was not a new rule, but a fact. It was hidden in the shadow of the second rule and brought to light by Kadokura's questioning. If you return to the past, the present will not change no matter how much you try. But there was a proviso: although the rule had power over any circumstances to prevent the present from changing, it did not interfere with people's memories.

Rather than concentrating his attention on the rule that the present would not change, Kadokura was concerned with the effect on memory. *Perhaps that's an important consideration.*

Glimpsing the profound implications of the rule, Nagare narrowed his long thin eyes still further as he looked up at the ceiling.

'Now, about the other rules ...' Kazu said, resuming her explanation. But the other rules did not seem nearly as important to Kadokura. To the rules that you must not get up from the chair while in the past and that there is a time limit, he replied with a simple, 'Understood.'

However, when Kazu broached the topic of the woman in the white dress, mentioning that she was a ghost and that if you forcefully tried to move her you would be cursed, he devoured this information with a glow of childlike fascination in his eyes.

'Well, I still don't believe she is a ghost. But I must say, I do have a fascination with curses. In the world of archaeology, some uncanny stories are spread around as if they are true. And I have read many books on the supernatural. All of them, however, lacked scientific rigour. In fact, I've never met someone who has been cursed. I'd actually like to experience what it feels like.'

'What?' Fumiko shrieked. 'Are you serious?'