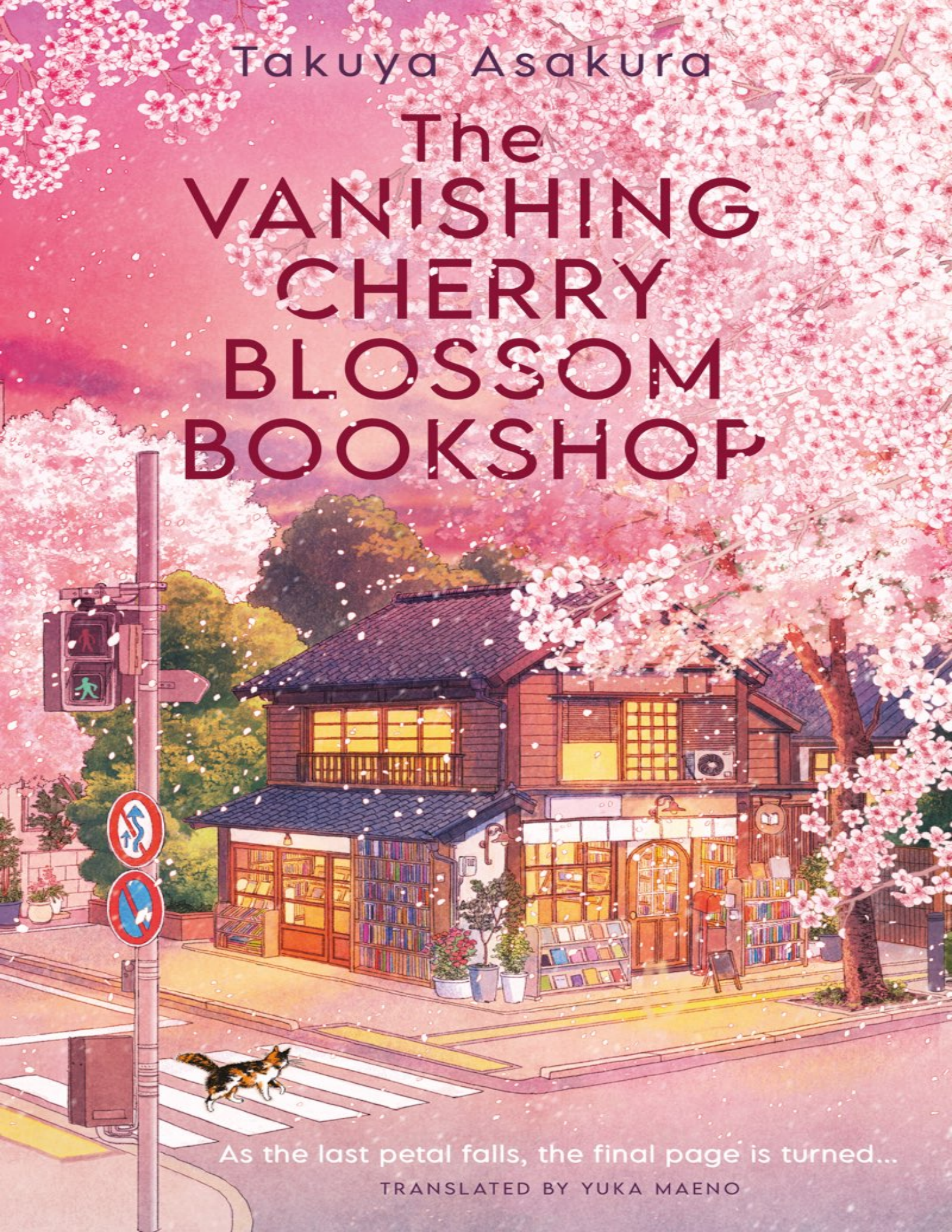
Takuya Asakura

The VANISHING CHERRY BLOSSOM BOOKSHOP



As the last petal falls, the final page is turned...

TRANSLATED BY YUKA MAENO

THE VANISHING CHERRY BLOSSOM BOOKSHOP

TAKUYA ASAKURA

Translated from the Japanese by

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PROLOGUE

THE SHOP WAS TUCKED AWAY in a place beyond anyone's understanding.

There, a thick fog, neither white nor grey, hung heavily in the air. But oddly, the space surrounding the shop, which was enclosed by neatly trimmed hedges, was as clear as crystal. It was almost as though the fog was parting for something, as if it had no choice but to keep its distance.

In the centre of this enclosure was an old wooden building. Atop its green, triangular roof, a bronze weathercock stood proudly with its chest puffed out. Its beak stretched wide towards the sky, but its voice, meant for announcing the hour, would never be heard.

In the front garden, which led to the entrance of the shop, was a weeping cherry tree. Its great age was evident in its height. Rising above the ridge of the roof, its branches hung over the weathercock, arching all the way down to the ground. In full bloom, the branches were bursting with blossom. What made the tree unusual were the strange colours of these flowers. The nearer they were to the tips of the branches, the deeper they were in shade, gradually transitioning from the white and pale tones of a *somei-yoshino*, or Yoshino cherry, tree to the vibrant hues of a bell-flowered cherry. It seemed as though this single tree was painted in every imaginable shade of pink and red.

From time to time, a gust of wind swept through the branches, creating marble-like swirls of white, scarlet and light coral on the ground.

Suddenly, a bell chimed and the door to the shop swung open, disarranging the mound of petals that had gathered by the entrance. A girl appeared in the doorway. Wearing a burgundy pinafore dress over a starched white blouse, she heaved a sign outside. Written in double-lined lettering in red and white chalk, it was a simple sign with just the name of the shop on it: 咲良 – *Sakura*.

Sakura. Had the shop been named after the cherry blossoms in the garden? Or perhaps it was somehow linked to a person who went by the same name. It's possible that the girl was named Sakura, but she certainly didn't look old enough to be the owner or the manager.

Once she had finished putting the sign out, the girl gave herself a quick stretch, disappeared inside the shop, and re-emerged with a broom and a dustpan.

She began carefully sweeping the petals scattered on the pathway between the sign and the hedges. Then, all of a sudden, three small branches wreathed in blossoms quietly landed in front of her.

Looking up at the tree in surprise, the girl said, 'Three? You're feeling generous today, aren't you?'

The cherry tree did not reply, of course. But the girl wore a knowing expression on her face as she tucked the broom under her arm and picked up the branches. She made her way back inside.

The scent of coffee lingered in the air as the girl headed straight to the kitchen. Using a pair of floral shears, she swiftly trimmed the branches before wrapping the snipped ends with tissue soaked in plenty of water as well as a thin sheet of paper, holding them in place with a rubber band. Then, one by one, she put them into three individual vases.

'Done,' the girl said out loud.

Stepping out of the kitchen, she scanned around, apparently looking for a good spot to arrange the branches. As you would expect from the exterior, most of the shop's basic features were made of wood. The distinctive grain pattern on the walls and the tables gave the atmosphere that cosy feeling you can only get in a traditional coffee shop. Using a stepladder, the girl began placing the branches along the walls as well as on the pillar. There were more branches all around the room, adorning the shop with further splashes of pink. Decorating the shop with cherry blossoms was apparently an essential part of her daily routine.

Satisfied with her work, the girl climbed down the stepladder and cleared the petals that had fallen on the floor. Then, using a damp rag, she wiped the place down. It seemed that she was preparing to open the shop. Once she had made some progress, the girl took a short break. Standing with one hand on her hip, she rubbed at her forehead with her wrist.

'You know, I could really do with an extra pair of hands right now,' the girl muttered as she glanced down at the table next to her.

On the table was a calico cat. Unlike typical Japanese cats, this one was long-haired. The cat, which had been sitting comfortably in a loaf pose, gazed sleepily at the girl. Pushing its front legs forward, it lifted its bottom, stretching out its

whole body before lowering its left shoulder and rolling onto its back. As if to say, *Is this what you mean?* the cat extended its front paws towards the girl.

'Kobako, that is absolutely *not* what I mean,' the girl said dismissively.

For a brief moment, the cat stayed in the same position, but soon got to its feet and returned to its original pose. On the nametag sewn on to its brown leather collar were the kanji characters for incense box: 香箱 – *Kobako.*

Shifting her gaze from the cat, the girl walked towards the wall to a set of speakers and a record player. Even the audio equipment featured wooden frames. A record had been left on the turntable – the bright red label at the centre of the disc stood out against the black. Crouching down, the girl switched on the amplifier, setting off a faint electrical hissing.

Pointing her finger, the girl checked that the dial on the turntable was in the correct position before gently pressing the start button. The record began to spin, and the tonearm lifted automatically. The vinyl crackled briefly before the distant, hypnotic beat of a snare drum began to play. The unusual drumming – a triplet-infused rhythm in three-four time – slowly intensified, as though the beat was drawing nearer and nearer.

A flute entered with the first melody, adding a sense of courtly elegance and exoticism to this distinctive rhythm. *Bolĭro* by Ravel. A composition of simple structure featuring two repeating melodies passed between different instruments, the piece maintains a steady, rhythmic drumbeat as it gradually builds towards a climax.

The girl, who had been listening contentedly to the opening flute solo with her hands on her hips, suddenly turned away from the record player, and began spinning around the shop as though she was dancing to the music. The cat, on the other hand, didn't so much as move a whisker.

Aside from the kitchen, there were bookcases along all the walls. Some of them were even set on top of tables. Although they varied in height and width, they featured the same grain pattern, similar to that of the tables and audio equipment. Still, the place seemed to be lacking in a sense of consistency, thanks to its eclectic collection of books.

The girl eventually stopped in front of one of the shelves. Using her index finger as a guide but taking care not to touch the books, she scanned the spines

one by one, going from right to left, then left to right: *The Neverending Story*; *In the Forest, Under the Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom*; *Rashomon*; *The Glass Menagerie*; *The Parent Trap*; *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; *The Sound and the Fury*; *Ten Nights of Dreams*.

They were all works of fiction, but that was the only thing they had in common. The books came in various sizes, and there seemed to be a book for every age – even large format picture books could be spotted here and there.

Out of nowhere, the girl's lips started to move.

'More intensely than the wind-instrument of noon,
When traces of amber are poured,
The bitterness of anger, the blue of anger.'

She muttered the words – seemingly lines of poetry she had memorised – almost hypnotically, as though she wasn't aware that she was reciting them.

The melody of *Bolšro* was now being played by a trombone. Outside, white rays of the sun glinted off the cherry-blossom petals dancing silently in the air.

'Hey Kobako, which one should I pick today?'

From time to time, the girl paused her hand and turned towards her companion as she gently placed her fingertip on one of the spines. But the cat, apparently uninterested, remained completely still. This exchange went on for a while until the girl, seemingly giving up, moved on to the next shelf, then to the one after that.

Then, just as her finger glided over one of the larger books, the cat opened one eye and let out a short meow.

'This one?'

The girl turned to find that the cat had lifted its head, its eyes wide open. Its golden pupils had dilated as if to say: *That's the one*.

Removing the book from the shelf, the girl brought it to eye level, then opened it in a reverential manner.

'*Ahem*,' she said exaggeratedly, pretending to clear her throat.

The book was *The Little Prince*. Putting on a slightly affected tone, the girl began to read, her resonant voice echoing through the shop.

“‘My star will be just one of the stars, for you. And so you will love to watch all the stars in the heavens They will all be your friends ’”

As she continued to read, the girl and the calico cat – now in a loaf pose again – faced towards each other. Every time the girl turned the page, the cat twitched its whiskers and slowly blinked its eyes as though it was nodding along. Outside the square of the largest window, the petals continued their graceful dance. *Bolĭro* played on, reorchestrating the same melodies, over and over again.

ONE



'What is essential is invisible to the eye.'

JUST LIKE THAT, the cremation was over.

Less than two hours after the door to the incinerator was closed, sixty-seven years of her mother's life had been reduced to nothing but bones and ashes.

Mio carried her mother's urn in her arms the whole way from the crematorium. Although it was placed inside a box, wrapped in thick cloth and a *furoshiki*, she could feel its warmth on her lap. It was as though her mother was trying to tell her that she was still there.

Arriving at the place where her mother had lived, Mio found that it was a tired, two-storey building of wooden structure. Her mother's studio flat was at the north-facing corner on the first floor. Its window looked out onto the bank of a river. Gazing at the neat row of winter-bare trees under the thick, grey sky, Mio felt overwhelmed with guilt that she had let her mother die all alone in such a place. *I should have done more for her,* she thought.

Until then, Mio had never even set foot in the flat. Two years earlier, her mother had suddenly told Mio and her younger brother that she would be moving out of their family home. Although Mio had to admit that they hardly had any good memories of the house, she was dismayed by the thought of her childhood home being passed on to a stranger. For once, her brother agreed with her. The two teamed up to try and dissuade their mother, but she told them that the topic was not up for discussion. *It's not like you two come back very often*, she had said. *Do as you please,* thought Mio. After her mother moved to her new flat, Mio used her busy work schedule as an excuse to avoid checking in on her. Now, she deeply regretted this.

The flat was modestly furnished with just the bare essentials. There wasn't even a television, though Mio knew that the family house had sold for a decent amount of money; she never imagined that her mother had been living so frugally. It seemed that the futon that was removed along with her mother's body was the only set of bedding she owned. Thinking that she would need to stay in the business hotel across the street, Mio wondered if it would be all right to leave her mother's ashes alone in the flat.

On the floor lay a pale green carpet. Although it was worn out, it looked reasonably clean. There was a small round table which appeared to have been used as a dining table. Mio set her mother's urn on it, creating a makeshift altar. Then,

suddenly feeling a wave of exhaustion, she dropped down on the floor. Still, wanting to give her brother an update, she summoned up the energy to pull out her phone from her bag. Checking that it would be early morning in his time zone, she hit the call button. After two rings, her brother picked up.

'Hi, Yoshihiro,' Mio said. 'I just wanted to let you know that the cremation went smoothly.'

There was an awkward pause before her brother replied with a thank you. Oddly, it sounded like his voice was doubling. Mio couldn't tell if this was because the line was unstable, or because *she* was.

'I'm sorry that all of this has fallen on your shoulders, Sis.'

'Hey, it's not your fault. She wasn't sick or anything, so it wasn't like we could have prepared for it – emotionally or logistically.'

The previous year, Yoshihiro, who worked for a major electronics manufacturer, had moved to South Africa after being put in charge of setting up and running a new plant there. Mio had not seen her brother in quite some time, as he rarely had the time to return to Japan. Their mother had been right – neither of them had visited her.

'Anyway, Sis, where are you at the moment?'

'I'm at Mum's place. I've just brought her ashes here. I wanted to let you know that the funeral side of things is all done now. There's still a lot to do in terms of paperwork, but I'll manage.'

Yoshihiro apologised again. It seemed to Mio that there should have been more to talk about, but she didn't know what to say. She was fairly certain that her brother also felt the same way.

'I don't fully understand why she sold the house,' Mio said.

'Me neither.'

'Have you seen Mum's flat?'

Yoshihiro told Mio that he hadn't.

'I didn't think so. It's my first time here. This place feels pretty empty.'

There was another uncomfortable pause. Then, Mio said, 'We're terrible children, aren't we? She raised us all on her own, and yet we let her die alone in a place like this.'

Mio hadn't thought that they would need to worry about something like that, not for a long time anyway.

'Yeah I didn't even go to the funeral.'

'Well, like I said, it's not your fault. You have your work and your family to look after. Mum wouldn't have wanted you to prioritise her over your own life – I mean, I don't think she would have.'

As soon as she said those words, Mio's heart tightened in her chest. There was no way of knowing now. Suddenly, she was confronted by the brutal truth that she would never speak to her mother again.

Her brother said nothing in reply, and the two fell silent for a moment.

Somehow managing to switch the conversation, they went through the checklist of things to do. It was agreed that Mio would handle the time-sensitive tasks, such as cancelling their mother's health insurance and her pension payments. Everything else, including the sorting out of her belongings, would be discussed once Yoshihiro had confirmed the timing of his next trip to Japan. Mio told him that she wanted to keep the flat until after the 49th-day memorial. Although Mio had intended on covering the rent for that period, Yoshihiro insisted that the least he could do was to contribute financially, and so it was decided that they would split the cost.

After hanging up, Mio took another look at the box containing her mother's ashes. She had learned that the cloth wrapped around the box was called *kotsu-ooi* – a cover for the bones. She had never even heard of the word before. It was made of thick, white fabric adorned with a pattern woven in a lustrous thread of the same colour. The pattern, which looked like bellflowers, was so intricate that it was not immediately noticeable. *I'd like to draw something similar,* Mio suddenly thought. *I would spend a whole day – maybe even two days – carefully drawing them out in pen.*

Why am I thinking about this now? Mio asked herself, even though she already knew the answer: *I can't bear to face the fact that Mum is gone*.

Mio had received the news while working. Ever since taking that call, she had felt detached from reality, as though she was living in a bubble. There were even times when she felt disconnected from her own mind and actions.

When her thoughts drifted back to the ashes, she belatedly remembered to light some incense. Then, she pushed her palms together and bowed in prayer. Yet even as she did so, Mio found herself wondering: *Why am I doing this, and for whom?*

It had all begun in the afternoon four days before, when, out of the blue, the office phone rang. She found it unusual, as people rarely called her on the landline these days. Looking back, there was something ominous about the way the old-fashioned ringtone echoed through the room.

At the time, Mio had been speaking to her editor on her mobile about a certain issue – an amateur manga artist had accused her on social media of plagiarising the composition of their work. Mio had a series in a manga magazine, and the illustration in question had appeared in a chapter published two issues earlier. The rumour gradually spread online, escalating to the point where complaints were being made to the publisher. From Mio's perspective, however, it was nothing more than a false accusation.

'The only part that is similar is the sloping street winding through a residential area, and that it leads down towards the sea. It's a simple composition – why would I need to trace over someone else's work?'

'I couldn't agree with you more, *Kisanuki-sensei*. It's just that – err, proving something like this is, well it's not very easy.'

Mio's editor, who had recently been assigned to her, was rather inarticulate. Younger than Mio, it seemed that she was still learning the ropes.

Trying her best to manage her tone of voice, Mio continued, 'You'll see the difference straightaway if you put my illustration over theirs and align them at the horizon. The positions of the train tracks and the people don't match. Plus, I really wish I didn't have to say this, but the perspective in *their* drawing is off.'

'Apparently they're claiming that you changed the positioning slightly on purpose – that you copied them despite being a professional, and that you were trying to cover it up.'

'That is ridiculous.'

What is this world coming to? Mio thought to herself.

'Indeed. But the thing is, the accuser is gaining more and more supporters online. People are starting to spot more similarities, like the boy in the school uniform pushing a bike, and the girl in the sailor-style uniform holding her bag in front of her.'

'It's illustrating the everyday lives of high-school students. There are only so many ways you can depict that.'

As she said so, Mio compared the two illustrations on her computer screen. Having taken another good look, she couldn't deny the fact that there were similarities, but this was probably because they were both trying to portray the same thing.

And for Mio, that was not the sea or the houses; it wasn't the clothing of the two high-school students, nor the plush bag-charm hanging from the girl's bag. What she wanted to express was not visible. As she drew the everyday scene of two teenagers walking to school, she tried to capture that intangible something – that warmth – that lingered between the students. That was something she clearly remembered.

'Anyway, I'm in discussion with the higher-ups about how to handle it. To be honest, we haven't been able to reach a consensus within the department. Some say there's no need to do anything, and others say that if an apology is going to be issued, the sooner the better—'

'Apology?' Mio broke in.

Exactly who did they expect would apologise, and for what?

'What I mean, is that some people feel hurt by the whole incident. If we acknowledge our company's responsibility in the matter, even loosely, then it would be less damaging—'

'You're not being serious?'

It was right then that the landline rang. While the rest of them fell silent, one of her assistants got up from her seat and picked up. She made a series of responses that gave nothing away, like 'Yes' and 'No', before bringing the cordless phone over to Mio.

'Umm, it's the police,' she said to Mio. 'They're calling from—'

As soon as her assistant mentioned the name of her hometown, Mio's heart froze. When was the last time she'd spoken to her mother? she frantically tried to

remember. After telling her editor that she would call her back, Mio took a deep breath. Then, nervously, she picked up the receiver.

'Are you Mio Kisanuki?' a male voice asked.

Struggling to control her trembling voice, Mio answered yes.

She had died alone – *kodokushi*, as they call it. It was likely a heart attack, the police officer told Mio. Was her mother so set on never relying on others that she didn't call for help? Or was she simply unable to? No one would know the answer to these questions.

The fortunate part was that her mother's next-door neighbour thought to inform her landlord after noticing that she had not left her flat for a couple of days. The landlord reported it to the police, who found her body upon entering her flat. Initially, a crime had been suspected, but it was determined that she had died of natural causes, and so an autopsy was not necessary. A death certificate had already been issued.

'Thank you for taking our call. There's not much more to be done from our side now, so we would appreciate it if you could come and collect her as soon as possible.'

The call ended with those words. But even after the line disconnected, Mio stood frozen to the spot, the indifferent beeping from the receiver still ringing in her ear.

'Oh, sorry—' Mio said, barely noticing that her team had been staring at her with concerned expressions. But in that moment, that was all she managed to say.

She couldn't cry – not a single tear would come. *I'm still in shock,* Mio tried to reason with herself. Suddenly, her mother's voice echoed through her mind:

'To live my life with my head held high – I've always stuck with this motto, because I want to make you kids proud.'

What had made her remember this? Mio was utterly perplexed by her own thought. She couldn't even recall when it was that her mother had said those words.

After Mio finally set the receiver down, she immediately thought of calling her brother. Checking the clock, though, she quickly worked out that it would be long past midnight where he was. She hesitated for a moment before sending him an

email. Letting him know about their mother's death in this way felt so mechanical, it left Mio feeling terribly unsettled.

She decided that she would stop by at her home to pick up her mourning clothes and other essentials. Then, she would get the next available bullet train. Takahashi, her chief assistant, offered to accompany her, but Mio softly told her that it would not be necessary, as it was a personal matter. In fact, knowing how reliable she was, Mio asked her to stay behind and take charge in her absence. *Leave it with me,* Takahashi said, her voice tinged with sadness.

Mio managed to arrive at her hometown before dusk. First, she visited the police station, where she was given the name of a funeral home.

The man who introduced himself as the funeral director gave Mio a rundown of the different funeral options, such as the size of the venue and ceremony style.

'Please make a decision now.'

Urged by the man to make up her mind, she opted for a *kazokuso* – an intimate, private funeral – in the ceremony hall. Then, there was the task of choosing the coffin, the altar, the candle stands, the urn and the box, as well as the *kotsu-ooi*. She couldn't quite grasp what she felt when she learned that there was a catalogue for such items – she was taken aback, yet she found it quite useful.

When the crematorium was confirmed, the man had said to her: 'You must be pleased to hear that they had availability. Things don't usually move so quickly in the big cities.' Indeed, it meant that Mio would not need to take too much time off work, though she knew this was not the right time to worry about such things. As the wake, the funeral, and the cremation proceeded like clockwork, it seemed as though Mio was just going through the motions.

Sitting by the altar on the round table, Mio offered another incense. As she gazed into the drifting smoke, a memory surfaced. From time to time, the funeral director had looked at her with a puzzled expression on his face. *That was probably because I seemed indifferent,* Mio thought. *Despite being her daughter, I didn't appear to be very sad.*

'Don't you ever worry about me. You two live your lives to the fullest. Promise me you won't let anything take away your freedom.'

Her mother had said those words at Yoshihiro's wedding. Although Mio couldn't quite remember what had led to that conversation, she clearly recalled thinking, *how dare you*. Mio had looked after all the housework while her brother was still young, and she had taken a sense of pride in having done so. If anything, she felt relied upon; she had believed that her mother had depended on her.

She wouldn't go as far as to say that it was a *burden*. Still, hearing her mother speak as though none of it ever happened, Mio couldn't help but feel overlooked. *Back then, all my household tasks had done just that – take away my freedom. And it was because of Mum.* Mio silently protested, though she also knew well that it would be unfair to blame everything on her mother.

Mio's relationship with her mother was never strained or conflicted, but it was more emotionally distant than what you would expect from a typical mother-and-child relationship. It was the same for her brother. Thinking about it now, perhaps this was because, given her position, she felt like she had to treat all children equally. *But how could I have known that? I was still a child.* Mio never confronted her mother. Although she'd longed for the kind of relationship where she could talk to her about anything, Mio suppressed herself, pushing her honest feelings aside.

There was no denying that their lives were turned upside down when her father died. They even had to change their surname from Oda to her mother's maiden name, Kisanuki. But the truth was, even before his death, her family was a little broken. It seemed that her mother was always accusing her father of something and driving him into a corner. Often, Mio would lie in bed, pretending to be asleep while her parents argued for what felt like hours. Although she could not make out what they were saying, she could hear her mother's tone growing harsher and angrier. In the morning, Mio would ask her father if he was okay, and he would always respond with a weak smile.

Her father took his own life when Mio was thirteen. No one told her why. She remembered thinking he must have wanted to escape from something. But whatever it was, she didn't want to know – if the only answer she could find was

that he was trying to get away from her mother, or the three of them, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

From then on, her mother, a teacher at a junior high school, became the sole provider of the family. Not only did Mio have to take over the housework, but she also bore most of the responsibility for Yoshihiro, who was six years younger than her. Every day, as soon as she finished school, she would head to her brother's elementary school, take his hand and walk home. She would then do the cleaning, the cooking and the laundry. She hardly ever had the time to hang out with friends, let alone participate in extracurricular activities.

Their mother only allowed the necessities – she never took them on holiday, or bought them video games, books or manga. Although there was one thing her mother did for her that Mio never forgot. Whenever she had the chance, Mio would find space in her notebook or flip over a flyer, and draw. Noticing Mio's love for drawing, one day, her mother started to bring home second-hand copies of a monthly girls' manga magazine. Mio read them over and over, copying the illustrations obsessively.

Mio always wondered why her mother was so strict with money. Of course, she understood that being a single mother was tough, but she'd been that way even before her father's death. It seemed that her mother was often berating her father about money. All he did in response was lower his head weakly.

Her mother was not the type of person to admit her shortcomings in front of others. If she had said to Mio that she appreciated all the things Mio had done for the family, even just once, perhaps their relationship would have turned out differently. But by the time Mio realised it, a wall had already formed between them.

Then, there was the incident that happened towards the end of Mio's high-school years. During their first meeting with Mio's homeroom teacher to discuss her career path, her mother bluntly announced that, if Mio was to choose to go to university, she would not cover her tuition fees, and that if she were to move out, she would not support her financially. After that, the rift between Mio and her mother grew wider. Since there were no universities within commuting distance of her home, Mio felt as if she were trapped. This ignited her rebellion against her mother.

Fortunately, Mio had maintained good grades, and so her teacher encouraged her to go to university. Although she was a little worried about leaving Yoshihiro, he was now in his sixth year of elementary school and didn't need as much looking after as before. A part of her felt as though she was slowly suffocating at home, and she longed to escape. In the end, Mio chose to go to university on a scholarship. Her mother didn't oppose her decision.

So began her first experience living on her own. She moved into a room in a female-only hall of residence designated for students on scholarships. The fees were affordable, and the meals were included. At last, Mio could make time for herself – a luxury she had never known before.

Aside from the minimal hours she spent working at her part-time job, Mio dedicated most of her time outside of class to drawing. She was grateful to have found like-minded friends, both at university and in her hall of residence. Her friends were far more experienced than her when it came to drawing manga. They taught her all sorts of specialised skills and knowledge, such as how to use screentones and G-pens, as well as other techniques that were new to her. Eventually, they became friendly rivals, making submissions and entering the same competitions together.

In the summer of her fourth and final year at university, Mio's debut as a professional manga artist was confirmed. The days that followed flew by. The first person she wanted to share the news with was her mother. When she called her, her mother said congratulations, then promptly proceeded to say that while it was up to Mio if she wanted to find a job or pursue a career as a manga artist, she absolutely had to make sure that she finished university first. *Did you have to say that now?* thought Mio. Still, she could tell that her mother cared about her in her own way, and that was one of the reasons she continued to work so hard to earn her degree.

When her serialised manga took off, her friends from university and her publisher introduced her to some aspiring artists around the same age as her, and they became her assistants. Whenever a deadline was imminent, Mio and her assistants would work round the clock together. With three or four of them staying in her studio, it felt as though they were on a school trip. After pulling an all-nighter, the team would often get caught in that tired and wired state. They

would make each other try out all sorts of silly poses that they couldn't achieve with an artist's mannequin, like lying on their stomachs and pulling their legs up from the knees down. One of them would say something like 'Let me study the angle of the nose and the chin during a kiss,' and the room would fill with giddy laughter. Sipping on energy drinks, they would joke around and crack each other up until, suddenly, they'd fall asleep as though their batteries had run out.

But now, some of Mio's comrades had begun to drop out. One of them said that she had run out of things she wanted to portray, and another had effectively retired after having a child, choosing to prioritise her family. Perhaps it wasn't entirely accurate to say that they had dropped out, but Mio couldn't bring herself to think that they had moved on. The latter made her feel like she had been left behind, and that thought filled her with sadness.

Before she knew it, Mio had grown distant with her mother and her brother. Years – decades – slipped by, with Mio visiting home just once a year, if not less. When she was a student, she never imagined Yoshihiro would get married ahead of her. Yet in reality, her nephew was born long before Mio ever thought about kids. She had to admit she felt a little uncomfortable when she was introduced to him as his 'aunt', but thinking about it now, she felt ever so grateful to her brother and his wife for giving her mother a grandchild. Mio had heard from Yoshihiro that her nephew was now attending a local school in Africa, and that he was already fluent in English.

Somehow managing to finish the necessary paperwork, Mio temporarily returned to Tokyo to work on the next chapter of her serialised manga. But no matter what she did, she couldn't get the narrative rolling. It was as though her mind had stalled, like there was an invisible wall blocking her way. The next thing she knew, the once winter-barren streets were dotted with bursts of green, reminding her that the change of season arrived earlier in the city. She had heard that there was a time when Tokyo was referred to as a desert or concrete jungle, but in reality, finding greenery in the city was never that difficult. Now, if only she could free the story in her mind from the wintry fog it seemed to be caught in.

It was around this time that Mio received a call – again, on her landline – from a man. Judging from his surname, which he said was Oda, she guessed that he was related to her father. Indeed, he introduced himself as her cousin. His name was Fumiaki, and he was the son of her father's older brother.

'I only found out about your mother – Hiroko-san – just the other day. I wasn't sure if I should get in touch, but I decided to try giving you a call.'

Her cousin had the voice of an elderly man, likely closer to her mother's generation. As they spoke, she learned that he had attended her father's funeral. He told her that Mio was in her junior-high-school uniform at the time, but she had no recollection of meeting him. After her father's death, Mio had no contact with his side of the family, and besides, she had so many household responsibilities that she wouldn't have had the time to see them even if she'd wanted to.

Fumiaki insisted that they meet, saying that there was something he wanted to talk to her about. Since Mio had already planned on returning to her hometown around the 49th-day memorial to sort out her mother's belongings and handle her tenancy contract, she suggested that they meet then. When he gave her his contact details, Mio learned that he lived in a neighbouring city, right next to her hometown. For all those years, he had lived so close to her family, yet she had never even heard of him. Why was that? In fact, now that she thought about it, her mother had not received so much as a New Year's greeting card from anyone with the surname Oda.

After a great deal of hesitation, Mio finally asked her publisher if she could take a two-month break from her manga series. *Take all the time you need,* her editor said, *you just lost your mother.* During this conversation, Mio was updated on the plagiarism saga – it seemed that the accuser was showing no signs of backing down. Insisting that she hadn't done anything wrong, Mio tried to reassure her editor that there was nothing to worry about. But deep down, a sense of unease lingered, one she couldn't seem to shake.

Mio was determined to put everything in order during this trip to her hometown. She would sort through her mother's flat, make arrangements for her grave, and terminate the tenancy contract. At the same time, she couldn't help but feel that once she had completed these tasks, whatever remained of her mother would be completely erased from this world. But if this were true, there was no

one more suited for the job than Mio – after all, she was her daughter. Naturally, she would have liked Yoshihiro to join her, but she understood that it was difficult for him to fly back. She had been giving him updates over email instead. They'd agreed that Mio would decide what to discard, and if there were any items she couldn't make up her mind about, she would hold on to those.

So here she was, back in her hometown again. This time, she had brought along a sleeping bag – she had come prepared to spend several nights.

Having arrived late in the evening, Mio decided to spend her first night at a hotel near the station. The next morning, she took a taxi straight to her mother's flat.

The flat, which had been vacant for a month and a half, had grown damp and musty. In the limited time she had, Mio would need to get it into a condition good enough to be handed back to the landlord. Initially, she did think about asking for help, perhaps from Takahashi, or a male member of staff at the publisher. But considering the small size of the flat and how little her mother had, she decided that it would not be necessary. Besides, deep down, she knew this was something she needed to do on her own.

Right, she said silently before rolling up her sleeves and opening the window. A pleasant spring breeze swept inside, and that alone made her feel a little bit lighter. As she was expecting her cousin in the afternoon, Mio planned on finishing the cleaning before then. She also hoped to at least get started on sorting out the general waste.

There were so few items in the flat, the cleaning was even easier than she'd expected. And since there wasn't much floor space, the vacuuming didn't take long at all. As for the vacuum cleaner itself, she planned on eventually disposing of it as bulk waste. When she had made some progress, she glanced at the hands on the clock, which showed that she had a bit of time before her cousin would arrive. She might as well start tackling the kitchen, since it was going to be the toughest to clean.

First, she cleared the refrigerator, separating the rubbish as she went. She double-bagged the food waste, tightly tying it to prevent any odour from leaking. Then, she opened the cabinet under the sink. Just like the refrigerator, it was packed with various things – each item a reminder to Mio that her mother was

here, that she had lived her everyday life in this flat. There was a half-used bottle of vegetable oil, sugar, salt, and miso paste. Her mother had stocked up on a few items, and Mio noticed that they were all from the same brand. There was also a large polyester container filled with plum wine – probably homemade. *I'll take this back to Tokyo and share it with Takahashi and the others,* Mio thought to herself. Everything else would have to be thrown out.

At the back of the cabinet, Mio discovered a small object wrapped up in newspaper. When she opened it, she saw that it was a glass soy sauce dispenser, chipped and no longer usable. It was the one they used when Mio was a child. Why would she keep such a thing? Mio tilted her head in wonder. Then, a wave of sadness washed over her as she realised she would never know the answer. *Perhaps life was just an accumulation of such strange and trivial mysteries,* Mio thought.

Just then, her phone rang. It was her cousin telling her that he was almost there. Realising that she had completely lost track of time, Mio hurried downstairs to meet him. As she did so, she briefly thought to herself that she had missed lunch.

'Is that you, Mio-chan? You look just like Hiroko-san.'

Oda told Mio that he had come by car, and that he had parked at the nearby supermarket. As soon as he entered the flat, he sat down by the altar, facing her mother's urn, as well as the photo of her that Mio had placed next to it. Lighting an incense, he pressed his palms together, taking his time as he offered his respects. Thoughtfully, he had also prepared condolence money.

Once he had finished, he turned around to face Mio.

'So Mio-chan, do you know anything about our family and Hiroko-san?'

Mio could sense a hint of hesitation in his voice. Shaking her head, she told him that she had not heard anything. Oda quietly scratched the back of his head.

'Like I said on the phone, Toshiyuki-san is my father's younger brother – that makes me your cousin.'

Toshiyuki was Mio's father's first name.

'There was quite an age gap between my old man and Toshiyuki-san. Maybe because of that, my grandmother really doted on him – her youngest son. That might be why he was so naïve about the world.'

It occurred to Mio that she should have offered him some tea, but the moment had passed. Apologising, she explained that she didn't know the way round her mother's kitchen, and that she had thrown away the tea leaves earlier. Her cousin waved his hand in response, saying that she didn't need to worry. Then, seemingly at a loss for words, the two of them fell silent. Only the smoke from the incense wove through the air and slowly vanished.

'The thing is, my grandmother and Hiroko-san were never on good terms, right from the outset,' her cousin finally said, slightly lowering his eyes.

Then he continued, 'First of all, my gran didn't like that Hiroko-san was older than her son. The fact that she held a degree, and that she worked as a teacher, was a source of great resentment for Gran, who saw her as self-important. Hiroko-san became the recipient of her irrational hatred. I heard that she even blamed her work for Uncle's inability to hold a job. I suppose it's normal for mothers to want to look away from their children's flaws, but Gran was extreme, or rather, a bit abnormal. There was a time when, because of her, he and Hiroko-san lived apart. They must have loved each other, though, as they eventually got back together. Their temporary separation is the reason there's such a big age gap between you and your brother.'

Mio couldn't even begin to fathom what he was saying. It felt as though she was listening to a fictional story where the characters just happened to have names that were familiar to her.

'Then, just when we all thought that the drama was over, that incident happened.'

'Incident?'

At first, Mio assumed that he was referring to her father's suicide. But then, the word 'incident' didn't seem quite right to describe something like that.

Her cousin lifted his head and gave an awkward nod.

'Uncle got into debt – an enormous amount.'

Biting his lip nervously, he continued, 'There's no way of knowing the truth now, but apparently, one of his friends from high school or junior high asked him to act as their guarantor. But because Uncle didn't have a stable job, he didn't qualify. He turned to Hiroko-san, begging her to help. Since teachers are public servants, it was probably easy for her to pass the approval process. Although

Hiroko-san was reluctant at first, Uncle was so persistent that she eventually relented. After that, the so-called friend quickly disappeared. Typical, isn't it?'

It was something Mio was hearing for the first time. If this were true, it would explain why Mum was always so angry with him. Mio silently waited for her cousin to continue. Her mind was in such a state of shock, she was at a loss for words.

'Our family ended up lending your parents a lot of money. I heard that the house you lived in was gifted to Toshiyuki-san before it was mortgaged. Toshiyuki-san and Hiroko-san promised my grandparents that they'd work hard to pay them back together. But then, Toshiyuki-san couldn't cope and ended up doing what he did Grandma completely lost it after that. It was awful. She had it in her head that Hiroko-san had driven him to suicide. But of course, none of that would have happened if Uncle hadn't been so daft in the first place. If anything, Hiroko-san was a victim in the situation. There was no way the relationship between Grandma and Hiroko-san could be repaired. You and your brother were the children of her much beloved son, yet she announced that she'd cut ties with you. "They carry that woman's blood" was what she said.'

Mio learned that even after that, her mother regularly visited Fumiaki's father behind her mother-in-law's back in order to repay him. He had told her that this was not necessary, and that she should save the money for her children, but Mio's mother insisted on keeping her promise.

'My old man used to say that your mother was a strong-minded woman.'

Something else Oda remembered was that her mother had asked his sister if she would give her the manga magazines that she'd finished reading.

'One time, Father asked Hiroko-san what it was that kept her going. Apparently, she'd replied, "Well, a long time ago, my daughter scolded me. She told me I needed to pull myself together." You know, when you started the job you do now, Hiroko-san was over the moon. She told us all about it during one of her visits. Every time she mentioned you and your brother, you could hear the pride in her voice. She always said how proud she was of you two.'

Unable to imagine her mother acting this way, Mio found herself staring into her cousin's face. Looking somewhat uncomfortable, he exhaled through his nose.

'A little while after your brother got married, Hiroko-san sold the house and finally paid off all the debts. Father had already passed away by then, so she gave the last instalment to me. There was something she said to me then that I think you should know. That's the reason I'm here today.'

Putting his knees together, Oda straightened his posture before continuing.

'She said, "Although I have no assets to leave to my children, at least they won't be left with any burden now." Then, she bowed deeply to me.'

Right. Maybe I never actually understood anything about my mother. Feeling as though she had fallen into a deep swamp of regret, Mio was once again lost for words.

'I probably wouldn't have remembered if it weren't for an occasion like this. I wanted to make sure that you and your brother knew.

'That marks the end of my story,' Fumiaki said, and left the flat a little while later. After seeing him off, Mio dragged herself back to sorting out the belongings, but she couldn't seem to muster any strength in her arms and legs. Compared to the morning, she had slowed down considerably.

The guilt and bitterness she felt for knowing so little gradually turned into frustration with herself. Based on what she'd just learned, there was supposedly a period in her life when she lived with only her mother, before Yoshihiro was born. *Why can't I remember this? How did Mum cope with all of that?* But the most perplexing part of it all was that according to her mother, Mio had scolded her. There was no way that could have happened. While her mother may have given *them* a scolding from time to time, neither Mio nor Yoshihiro had the kind of relationship where they could confront her head-on.

So many questions flooded Mio's head. Still, she somehow ploughed through the task of clearing out her mother's things. Eventually, at the back of the wardrobe, she found an old tangerine box made of wood. Although it didn't look like it would contain anything valuable, Mio's intuition told her that whatever was inside were things that her mother cherished for a long time. Sure enough, upon opening it, she discovered hers and Yoshihiro's umbilical cords stored inside a box made of paulownia wood. She also found all of her mother's graduation certificates – elementary school, junior high school, high school and university – as well as

her teaching license, and around twenty graduation yearbooks containing essays written by her students.

Seemingly hidden at the edge of the box was an envelope. Inside it was a promissory note with her mother's signature next to the word 'Guarantor'. Mio's hand stopped short as a sigh escaped her. Her mother had kept this piece of paper alongside items that marked important milestones of her life. That realisation made her feel an emotion that she couldn't quite describe – it wasn't necessarily surprising, but it didn't sit well with her either. *Why didn't she tell me?* Mio asked the same futile question again. Although, at the same time, she also felt it was only natural that she didn't. Perhaps it was something Mio would never fully understand, as she was not a mother herself. She hated having to admit that.

At the very back of the wooden box, Mio found a paper bag containing something hard. Reaching into the bag, she found that it was a book. *The Little Prince*. Mio owned the copy of the same book, though she hadn't opened it in quite a while. As such thoughts went through her mind, she turned the cover. The first thing that caught her eye was the illustration of the three baobab trees next to the title page.

It was at that moment that Mio's memories came flooding back to her with such clarity, it was almost strange that she had ever forgotten them. *That's right, Mum used to read this book to me when I was little,* she recalled.

The pages that followed the illustration had a different texture. The main story began, and she immediately saw the famous drawing of 'a boa constrictor digesting an elephant'. The one where, in the story, the grown-ups would always say, 'That is a hat.' But the mysterious prince who appears in the desert understands the drawing straightaway. And from then on, the prince becomes someone very special, not only to the pilot, who is the narrator, but also to the reader.

This is a rather challenging book to read to a child who hadn't even started elementary school, Mio thought.

But then, out of nowhere, Mio's stomach rumbled pitifully. Remembering that she had skipped lunch, she wondered what to do. Obviously, there was nothing she could eat in the flat. As Mio contemplated her options, her eyes landed on the north-facing window. She gasped at the view before her. She hadn't noticed them in the morning, but now, she could see that the bare trees she'd spotted seven

weeks ago were somei-yoshino cherries. With their blossoms in full bloom, they had transformed into a breathtakingly beautiful sight.

It was almost three o'clock. The sun had lowered quite a bit, but as far as she could see, the air was calm, perfect for a picnic under the cherry blossoms. She decided to head over to the trees. She would pick up some food on the way.

Feeling quite overwhelmed after everything she had heard, Mio had to admit that she wouldn't mind stepping out from her mother's flat for a while. But something else had made her want to go – a kind of inexplicable pull, like someone was calling her. Whatever it was, it was urging her to come immediately.

Mio glanced around the room. The cleaning could wait; she had come prepared to stay for several nights. Persuading herself that she had plenty of time, she locked the windows and got ready to leave, not forgetting to slip the copy of *The Little Prince* into her bag.

There was a convenience store along the single main road that led to the river. Imagining her mother walking the same path, Mio thought: *Maybe this time last year, Mum stopped here to buy something before she went to the riverside, too.*

The steep slope of the embankment was scattered with patches of green sprouting among the brown earth and dried grass, bright yellow flowers of rapeseed and dandelion poking their heads out here and there. A paved cycling path cut across diagonally, heading upwards along the slope. Following it with her eyes, Mio could see just the tips of the cherry trees above the crest of the embankment. It looked almost as though the blossoms were idly floating in the sky, and she found herself smiling at the sight. Returning her gaze to the slope, she realised just how steep it was. She glanced down at her flat mules, which she had specifically chosen for the clear-out knowing she would be going in and out of the flat frequently. *Thank God I'm not wearing heels,* she thought to herself as she took a step forward.

Partly because of the warm weather, by the time she reached the top, Mio was sweating a little. But she quickly forgot about it and simply stood in awe. The view was even more beautiful than she imagined. Petals tinged with a pale, nearly

white shade of pink filled the scenery, drifting through the air like confetti against the azure of the cloudless sky. The petals fell so softly, everything around her seemed to move in slow motion. For a moment, Mio wondered if time flowed differently here, then realised how foolish that thought was.

The path on the embankment was wider than Mio expected. Despite the cherry blossoms being in peak bloom, there weren't many people around. An elderly gentleman wearing a hat strolled along, slowly leading his wife by the hand. A woman carefully kept her two dogs on a short leash, making sure to give the couple plenty of room as she walked past them.

Halfway along the tree-lined path, Mio found a bench and sat down. From the plastic bag containing her purchases from the convenience store, she pulled out a salmon-filled onigiri and a can of coffee. Peeling off the plastic from her onigiri, she brought it to her mouth. In the brief moment it took her to swallow that small bite, a single petal floated down and landed on her partially eaten onigiri. She ate, quietly taking in the scenery.

Even after she'd finished, Mio couldn't bring herself to return to the flat and resume cleaning. Gathering her now empty can of coffee and other pieces of rubbish into the plastic bag, she narrowed her eyes and turned her gaze towards the sky. Although she was now directly facing the sun, its light wasn't blinding. That soft glow of spring caressed her warmly as the blossoms floated nonchalantly in the air, each petal giving off a gentle shimmer. The sight was indescribably stunning.

Lifting her bag, she reached into it to check her phone. There were no new messages or calls. Then, glancing down at her bag again, she caught sight of *The Little Prince*. She had forgotten that she had brought it along. Placing her mother's book on her lap, she flipped it open. How many years had it been since she'd last read the story? She was sure she would have read it as an adult – she had a copy of it somewhere in her studio – although it was likely buried under one of her messy piles of books.

As she leafed through the pages, the story she had long forgotten started to come back to her. It was essentially the tale of a young prince's adventures told through the narrator, a pilot – the author's alter ego – who is left stranded after his plane crashes. The inhabitants of various planets that the prince encounters in

the first half of the book do not resemble typical fairy-tale characters; they are caricatures of narrow-minded grown-ups. Despite this, the story does not appear overly satirical, perhaps owing to the illustrations created by Antoine de Saint-Exupйry himself. The synergy between the art and the writing made the narrative of the two main characters truly unique. The beauty of the story only deepened as it moved towards its conclusion.

Mio turned the pages fondly, savouring the feel of the paper beneath her fingertips as she searched for her favourite part of the book: the prince's words as he bids farewell to his friend.

'My star will be just one of the stars, for you. And so you will love to watch all the stars in the heavens They will all be your friends—'

Before she knew it, a voice had begun to resonate inside her mind. At first, she thought that a memory of her mother reading to her had resurfaced, but it didn't quite sound like her. *Mum spoke in a slightly lower tone, didn't she?* The realisation that she could no longer remember her mother's voice clearly brought a sharp ache to Mio's heart. *I guess my memories of Mum will fade over time.* She felt another twinge of pain at the thought.

Mio found herself gazing vacantly at the sky. *How am I supposed to accept that I can't talk to you anymore? You could have warned me at least.* She knew well that she was being irrational, but she couldn't stop herself from having these thoughts. The realisation that she had taken her mother for granted filled her with regret. She remembered the heat from the urn on her lap that day. The warmth had made her feel her mother. Little by little, that warmth quietly faded away, never to return.

Without realising, Mio closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. *I wish that I could hear her voice reading this book again. I can't imagine how she must have felt, raising us while being unfairly burdened with debt. How did she stay so strong after losing her husband in such a way?* Mio longed to know, even just a little. There was so much that she wanted to ask her.

Not only that – I wish that I could talk to you about me. The truth is, there are so many things that I'm still unsure and afraid of. I don't know how long my job or my manga series will last. I try to avoid social media, but I can sense from the people around me that there has been a lot of backlash against me after the

whole 'plagiarism' scandal. To be honest, I'm terrified. Unlike Yoshihiro, I don't have a family, and there are times when that makes me lonely and anxious about the future. I long to talk to you about such things. There's so much more I want to say to you

It was at that moment. Feeling as though someone had called her name, she opened her eyes. Looking around, she found that the path was now completely deserted. Sitting alone beneath the cherry trees, it was as if Mio had been left behind on her own. Even the light seemed to have changed, perhaps because it was nearly sunset. Although the sky was still blue, she could see that the sun had slightly shifted.

Still holding *The Little Prince*, Mio found herself standing up. She was pretty sure that she had heard a cat meow in the distance. Perhaps this was why she thought that someone was calling her. Thinking that it could be a kitten crying for its mother, Mio turned to the direction of the sound. At the far end of her view, she could make out an impressive, solitary weeping cherry tree standing high above the ground. It looked quite different from the somei-yoshino trees next to her. What was most astonishing, however, was that she was certain it hadn't been there just a moment ago.

For some reason, Mio began walking towards the tree, her feet carrying her as though they had a mind of their own.

It was quite a mysterious tree. Although it had the branches of an ordinary weeping cherry, its colours were extraordinarily unusual. At the top of the tree, the blossoms were white, blending almost seamlessly into the fog surrounding it. But the nearer they were to the tips of the branches which hung low to the ground, the flowers deepened into a reddish hue. Every now and then, a gust of wind sent the petals scattering, creating an otherworldly ombrй of red, white and pink. Although Mio had seen plum trees with blossoms of varying shades, she had never encountered a cherry tree like this one.

Another meow sounded. This time, it was slightly longer than before. It was undoubtedly a cat. The voice had come from behind the weeping cherry tree. As Mio drew herself closer to it, suddenly, the silhouette of a building came into view. It emerged out of nowhere, like a film abruptly cutting from one shot to another. She wouldn't go so far as to say she recognised it, but something about the

wooden building evoked nostalgia. From somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint melody of classical music playing.

A sign standing in front of the door had the word 'Sakura' written on it. It was one of those foldable chalkboard signs that cafйs normally used to write their specials, or even an inspiring quote by the manager. But this one was rather plain; the double-lined lettering in white and red seemed to be its only attempt to draw any attention.

Even before she had the chance to think about what kind of shop it might be, Mio felt a strong urge to open the door and found herself reaching for the doorknob. It was almost as if she didn't have a choice in the matter.

Thinking about it properly, it seemed impossible for such a shop to exist at the top of an embankment. Yet, the moment she touched the doorknob, it turned silently on its own as though it had been anticipating her. Music drifted through the gap of the opening door. Now that she could hear it clearly, she recognised the melody. If she remembered correctly, the piece was called *Bolйro*. A sense of dignified calm emanated from inside.

Mio heard a female voice reading out loud in time with the rhythm of the music. No, she wasn't simply reading out loud, it was something different, though Mio couldn't put a finger on it. She wasn't singing, either. It was almost as though she was saying a prayer. As Mio peered inside, everything that filled the room – the sounds, the atmosphere and the smell of coffee – hit her all at once.

'"In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing."'

Standing in front of the door was a young lady who appeared to be in her late teens. Her hair was neatly cut to the same length at her shoulders. She was dressed in a white blouse and a burgundy pinafore dress, and Mio could tell by the way she carried herself that she was an attentive server. To Mio's surprise, the book the girl was reading from was *The Little Prince*.

'"And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night "'

With that, she closed the book and turned to face Mio.

'Welcome,' she said. 'We've been expecting you, Ms Mio Kisanuki.'

Mio furrowed her eyebrows in surprise. *How does she know my name?* she thought. Then, the girl proceeded to direct her to a table which had a 'Reserved'

sign on it. Taken aback, Mio quickly scanned the room again. Was it a bookshop with a coffee shop attached to it? Or a coffee shop with a big collection of books? It had to be one or the other. It did seem to have the atmosphere of a traditional coffee shop, but there were books everywhere she looked. There were bookcases arranged along the walls, and on top of the larger tables were mini bookcases holding small paperbacks and manga-sized books. There were even books on the edge of the counter, wedged between bookends. In short, the whole place was brimming with books.

It was only then that Mio noticed the book in her hand. She was still holding her mother's copy of *The Little Prince*. What had she done with her bag? She must have left it on the bench. Oh no, I've left my phone and my purse

'Don't worry, they won't go anywhere,' the girl said, politely prompting her to take a seat.

Not knowing what else to do, Mio lowered herself into the chair. There was so much to take in, she didn't have enough space in her mind to question how the girl had seemingly read her mind. With her book tucked under her arm, the girl laid down a coaster and napkin in front of Mio.

Without hesitation, the girl continued, 'I love *The Little Prince*, too. It's such a wonderful book, isn't it? It's one of the most widely read works of fiction in history – I'd say it ranks about the fifth in the world, which is unbelievable, of course, as it's been less than a century since it was first published. According to records, it's been translated into several hundred languages.

'It's probably the most well-known children's book of all time,' the girl went on in a cheerful tone. 'Of course, whether this is a book for children or grown-ups is a debatable question. It's certainly not as simple as a picture book. But one thing most people will agree on is that the author's splendid drawings make this piece of work truly unforgettable. Apparently, to achieve these illustrations, Saint-Exupйry often asked his friends to pose for him, even getting them to lie down at times. He was also very particular about how his artwork was laid out in the book.'

The girl was wearing a broad smile on her face. Mio, on the other hand, was still struggling to gather her thoughts.

'Um Where exactly am I? How did you know my name?'

'This is my shop. It's a bookshop, but a rather unusual one. We only recommend one book per customer. What we really offer is a cup of coffee and a very special experience. Oh, and I learned your name from my companion.'

As if on cue, a cat leapt onto Mio's table. It must have been resting by the girl's feet. Stepping gracefully between the coaster and napkin, the cat stopped in front of Mio and sat upright with its front paws neatly aligned. There was no doubt that it was a calico cat, but its hair was much longer than typical Japanese cats. The snow-white fur on its chest lent the cat an air of elegance. It must have been this cat that she had heard earlier. But to Mio's disappointment, it didn't offer a meow in greeting, so she could not be certain.

'Her name is Kobako. It's actually supposed to be "Kōbako" with an elongated "kō". You know, as in incense box. But I call her Kobako because it's easier.'

As the girl explained, Kobako crouched down and folded its paws away. The cat probably had no intention of doing so, but it was almost as though she was introducing herself. Just like her name, she had settled into a *kobako-zuwari* – catloaf pose. Then, with a single sigh, the calico cat quietly closed her eyes.

'We've known each other for quite a while now, so these days, I've gotten into the habit of dropping the "ko" at the end. Looks like that theory about cats' names getting shorter over time is true, after all. They don't seem to mind – isn't that right, Koba?'

But the calico cat didn't even open her eyes. Mio couldn't tell if this was a sign of disapproval, or if it was simply asleep.

'Oh, you don't like it? Have I gone too far?'

Again, the cat ignored her. The girl crossed her arms in response. It was her turn to sigh.

'I guess cats will always be cats,' the girl said to Mio. 'Anyway, to get back to what I was saying, the fact that you're here right now, well, it's not something that happens all the time, but it's also not entirely out of the ordinary. I'm not sure if this makes sense to you in any way, but this place is sort of like a temporary sanctuary, and those in need of a little miracle are invited.'

The cat opened one eye slightly then closed it again.

'Also, this place isn't directly connected to your world. I suppose the closest way to describe it is that it's firmly attached to the other side of it.'

Bringing her fist to her mouth, the girl pretended to clear her throat with an *ahem*. Her movements reminded Mio of a scene she once drew in a manga.

Raising her index finger, the girl continued, 'Now, in order for the two worlds to connect, several conditions need to be met. First, it needs to be in cherry-blossom season. This is because that tree in the front garden plays a vital role in opening the passage. But to be honest, I'm not exactly sure how it all works. What I do know is that there have always been things that have secretly taken on this role, like the back of a wardrobe, a desk drawer, or even a taxidermy of a reindeer head. The cherry tree is just one of those things.'

The girl now held up two fingers.

'The second condition is that I need to be reading a passage from a book to Kobako, and you must be reading that same passage at the exact same moment as me. That's when the door connects to your world. But, to let you in on another secret, the fact that I was reading that passage wasn't purely coincidental. Kobako told me to do so. After all, time doesn't really exist in this world, not in the true sense. Instead, we adjust our timing to match yours.'

Meow. Kobako finally let out a single cry, as if in agreement. Mio couldn't be sure if it was the same voice she had heard on the bench, but it did sound familiar. She alternated her gaze between the girl and the cat, but of course, the answer was nowhere to be found. That same smile returned to the girl's face, and the cat, now wide-eyed, wore a look of such supreme confidence, it reminded Mio of the famous phrase – *Above the heavens and below the heavens, I am the only one who is worthy*.

Letting out yet another *ahem*, the girl continued, 'Anyway, *The Little Prince*, originally planned as a Christmas title, was first published during the Second World War in April 1943. Since Saint-Exupйry was based in America at the time, the English and French editions were published there almost simultaneously. At the time of its publication, P. L. Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*, wrote a praise-filled review of the book. She wrote that it "certainly has the three essentials required by children's books." These essentials, according to Travers, were "true in the most inward sense, it offers no explanations, and it has a moral."'

'I'm sorry,' Mio cut in. She felt like she had no choice but to interrupt her. 'This is all very interesting, but I'm actually in the middle of dealing with

something. I need to find my bag as well. I should really get going '

The girl and the cat looked at each other. Keeping one eye closed, the cat turned its head while the girl nodded in response. Watching their peculiar exchange, Mio couldn't help but wonder: *Which one is the real owner?*

'Right Kobako is saying that books have always been referred to as "a door to another, unknown world", and that this expression captures a fundamental truth. She is saying that at times, such frequently repeated phrases can pinpoint the essence of things in surprising ways. What you're experiencing is one such example.'

'How should I put it? We may not realise it, but miracles happen all the time, much more frequently than we think. But the ways in which these miracles occur, and to whom, are decided randomly. I say "decide", but really, the source responsible for them is rather unpredictable. To tell you the truth, we are almost like victims of this source's capricious nature. Lately, though, I've come to think that whether we consider this fortunate or not is up to ourselves. But, setting aside the question of whether time flows here or not, it's taken me a really long time to be able to reach this way of thinking.'

Although her lips were pursed, the girl maintained a cheerful tone.

'What I'm trying to say is it's like winning a lottery with a ticket you never bought. Just think of it that way.'

'I don't think you can win a lottery without buying a ticket,' Mio retorted.

'But you can – that's why it's a *miracle*.'

Gently exhaling through her nose, the girl's expression softened. A different kind of smile rose to her lips, one that was tender and compassionate.

'It wasn't me who invited you here, you know,' the girl said. 'You're probably here for the same reason I am. Maybe that "reason" is Kobako, but that's something even I don't know. Anyway, Kobako and I were thinking of fulfilling the wish you had while reading this book earlier.'

'What wish?'

'You said that you wanted to hear your mother's voice, didn't you? That there were things you wanted to ask her. Things you wanted to talk to her about.'

Mio did think about those things, but she never said them out loud.

'On a fundamental level, it doesn't matter so much if you had said them out loud or not. After all, words are already there before you say them out loud. Just because they haven't taken form yet, it doesn't mean they're not there.'

'What exactly *are* you two?'

'What are we Well, I suppose I am the owner of an unusual bookshop, and I guess you could say that Kobako is my cat. Although, we're kind of inseparable, so it's almost like we're one being. In fact, you can just combine Kobako and me, as well as the shop together. Think of us as, well – "us".'

Then, the girl stretched her arm out and petted the calico cat on the head. As the cat lifted its chin, Mio caught a glimpse of the name written on the tag of its collar. Kobako purred, closing her eyes contentedly. The girl broke into the brightest smile. It was as though nothing had ever made her so happy.

Finally, the girl said, 'What is about to happen to you will give you the strength you need to move forward. That is why Kobako invited you here.'

With that, the girl turned around and faced the cat. The cat let out another meow, as if to say she was ready. For a moment, the air in the shop seemed to stiffen. Soon, Mio found herself in the middle of what felt like a house, as images of the girl and the cat started to warp all around her.

'Oh, you might feel a little bit dizzy, but there's no need to worry. You will be fine.'

Although it was cracked and distorted, she could tell that the voice echoing through the room was coming from the girl. *What do you mean, 'a little'? This is a lot more than a little!* Mio silently objected inside her dizzying head. She would have liked to protest, but by then, she had lost control of her voice and her limbs. It was as though she had been disconnected from her own body.

The next moment, Mio found herself peering into the pages of *The Little Prince*. At first, she thought that she had returned to the bench, but then she heard a voice, neither hers nor that of the girl, reading a passage from the book, and understood that this was not the case.

'"And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."'

Her mother's voice. She was sure of it. Mio could see a tiny finger diligently following the text on the page as her mother read out loud. It took her a moment

to realise that the finger belonged to none other than herself.

'Fox.'

The voice ringing in her ears belonged to herself, her younger self. What was happening? Although Mio wasn't entirely sure, she somehow understood that she was now inside her past self and was reliving an experience from her childhood. This was probably why the text and the layout of the pages appeared larger than before.

Just then, a hand ruffled her hair. She turned her head to find her mother's arm stretching towards her. There she was, her mother in her younger years. A face that had long faded from her memory.

'You understand, Mio? I'm so proud of you! You love the fox, don't you?'

Mio couldn't help staring into her mother's smiling eyes, into the reflection of herself laughing like she didn't have a care in the world. Then, her mother gently cupped her cheeks with both her hands and drew her face closer to Mio's.

'You're such a clever girl. Did you know that this is Mummy's favourite book? When I first read it, I thought, "Wow, I didn't know words could be so beautiful." It was this book that made me want to become a Japanese teacher. It feels like such a long time ago now.'

Mio giggled at the ticklish sensation of her mother's cheek against hers. Just as clearly, a profound joy washed over her, telling her once again that she was truly present in that moment. The same voice that had said 'fox' followed with more words. She could no longer tell if it was her or her younger self that was speaking.

'I love this book, too. But I don't like snake. Snake is scary.'

Her own words reminded Mio of just how much she had adored this book at the time. She refused to go anywhere without it. Every night, and every chance she got, she would ask her mother to read it to her. Her mother always said yes. Although she couldn't really understand the story, she loved gazing at the illustrations. That, and listening to the sound of her mother's voice, made her the happiest girl in the world.

It was all coming back to her now. *This was why I had started drawing,* she remembered. *I had wanted to create a world like this myself.* A world like no other, woven from freely intertwining words and pictures. With the help of her dip

pen, she would bring it to life on paper. Long before she could put it into words, she'd already been captivated by the universe unfolding in front of her.

'Kisanuki-sensei, there are certain scenes in your early work where, unexpectedly, you take a step away from reality, just for a fleeting moment. I love those moments. Nothing could make me happier than to be able to help you create such works. That is the reason I applied for this position.'

It was Takahashi who had said those kind words during her interview for the assistant position. That must have been a lifetime ago, she thought. But now she remembered: *The Little Prince* was where it all began.

Just as this thought entered her mind, she felt the same dizzying sensation as before, and her view shifted.

The next moment, Mio found herself in another scene. This time, an elderly woman was speaking angrily to her mother. She was likely her grandmother. Despite the barrage of harsh words, her mother held her head high and stood with an air of unwavering resolve. Next to her, her father simply slumped his shoulders.

'What makes you think that you can go out and work, when you're neglecting all your responsibilities at home? Toshiyuki can't find a stable job because of you.'

In the next room, Mio listened as her grandmother grew louder and louder. She tried to focus on a book, but was unable to grasp a single word. Even though the shouting was not directed at her, she found it unbearable.

'Your duty as a woman is to support your husband at home. You're a bad influence on Mio. Because of you, she locks herself up at home, reading books all the time. She hardly ever goes out to play – she's turned into a miserable little child. And just like you, she has no charm. Don't you know that there's only one way a woman can find happiness? You should teach her to be more ladylike and get her married off—'

'Please stop,' Mio's mother, who had been listening silently, interjected sharply. She kept her back straight as she continued, 'Mio will find happiness for herself. She has her own future, her own life. None of it is your business.'

For a moment, her grandmother was speechless. But soon, she became even more enraged and started shouting again. While Mio's father watched helplessly, her mother remained unfazed, her eyes pinned on her mother-in-law.

Still in the next room, Mio quietly moved to a spot where she could see her mother. Her mother kept her back straight, just as she always had.

After that, Mio continued to experience her forgotten past. Holding her mother's hand, she turned around to look at her father, wondering why he wasn't chasing after them. She saw her mother's pale face as she confronted her father. As her father sat with his head hung, she watched her mother hold back her tears.

I was there the whole time, watching Mum's life unfold before me.

There was also a scene where Mio had started to doze off while being read to, and her mother was speaking to her under her breath.

'To live a life with my head held high – I've always stuck with this motto, because I want to make you kids proud—'

They were the words that rose to Mio's mind after her mother passed away. But she now learned that her words hadn't stopped there.

'So, Mio, I'm sure you'll go through many things from now on. But I hope from the bottom of my heart that you will live your life with your head held high.'

After saying this, she stroked Mio's hair fondly. *To live a life with my head held high.* She repeated the words silently, letting them resonate within her.

In the next scene, Mio was wearing her junior-high-school uniform. She was fast asleep in the living room, leaning against the wall with her brother's head resting on her lap. It looked like she had fallen asleep while trying to put Yoshihiro to bed. *The Little Prince* was left open, placed face down beside her. *I could have at least gotten changed. Was I so tired that I had forgotten?* Just as Mio had started to feel a little ashamed of her laziness, she realised what she was looking at. It was the day of her father's funeral. Indeed, her mother was in her mourning clothes as she emerged from the kitchen.

Opening her eyes, Mio slowly sat upright, taking care not to wake her brother. As she did so, she searched her mind for the right words to say to her mother. However, her mother, seemingly oblivious to this, began to clear the teacup and ashtray that were left on the round table next to Mio. Her hands were so shaky, just watching her made Mio anxious. It was obvious that her mother was trying to stop herself from trembling.

Pulling a floor cushion towards her, she placed her brother's head on it. Her quivering mother finally rose to her feet and shuffled into the kitchen with unsteady steps. Thinking back, Mio recalled that a group of rather intimidating-looking people had come to the house straight after the funeral. They had spoken in quite a heated manner. Mio couldn't tell if it was her present self or her teenage self that was having the recollection.

Worried, Mio got up to check in on her mother, trying her best not to make a sound. At that moment, a loud, high-pitched noise rang out from the kitchen. Mio rushed over to find her mother crouching down in front of a chipped soy-sauce dispenser.

'Mum, are you okay? Are you hurt?'

Grabbing a rag, Mio hurriedly wiped the soy sauce that had spilled all over the wooden floor. The fabric of the already overused rag quickly changed the colour as it soaked up the liquid.

Her mother was seemingly paralysed. 'I'm sorry,' she muttered under her breath before staring off into space. 'I can't do it anymore,' she said. 'How could he abandon me like this? There is no way I can do this on my own. Mio, maybe the three of us should join your father '

As she listened to her mother's barely audible voice, Mio felt blood rushing to her head.

No. This isn't the Mum I know.

The Mum I know wouldn't—

The words spiralled. Before she knew it, Mio had gotten to her feet. Her brother was still sleeping in the living room. After returning the soy sauce dispenser to the table, Mio looked down at her mother who was still crouching down on the floor. She had no idea if it was her present or past self acting, but whichever it was, she found herself squeezing out her voice.

'Don't be so stupid! This isn't you, Mum. You were stingy, extremely strict, made me do all the housework, never paid attention to me. You didn't show any affection, and you were always thinking about other people's children. But you were always strong. You never showed any weakness. You're the one who said that you wanted to keep your head high in life. If that's so important to you, stop being like this and start acting like the Mum I know!'

‘Huh? Mio? Is that really you?’ her mother said weakly as she looked up at her. At that moment, something inside Mio broke free.

‘I I I want ’

Before she knew it, Mio was in tears. She burst into loud sobs and wailed like a child throwing a tantrum. Flabbergasted, her mother improved her posture slightly. By the time Mio noticed this, she was already clinging on to her mother’s delicate body like her life depended on it. Her cries continued, growing more and more audible. Did this really happen? Maybe it did. Somewhere in the corner of her mind, Mio’s present self wondered.

Soon, her mother was gently patting her back. Her crying must have woken her brother, as he suddenly emerged from the living room, rubbing his eyes with both hands and crying as loudly as Mio. Walking towards his mother, Yoshihiro, too, clung to her. Their mother wrapped her arms around the two of them, bringing them closer together. Then, her expression stiffened.

‘You’re right. I have to march on, don’t I? I have you two to protect.’

Her mother’s voice sounded nothing like before. Clear and resolute, it was the voice Mio had always known.

‘We won’t be defeated,’ she said as she tightly embraced Mio and her brother.

Mio felt as though her mother’s feelings were flowing into her body. She was certain that she had connected with her at that moment.

‘I’ll keep fighting so that you two can live your lives with your heads held high.’

Mio echoed her mother’s words. As she did so, she remembered what the girl had told her: the words are there, even before you give them form. *Perhaps this is what she meant,* thought Mio.

All this time, I had been receiving so much love.

Just as this thought drifted into her mind, Mio felt as though a cat’s meow sounded from somewhere. As if this were a signal, the sensation of her mother’s embrace suddenly faded. Still, the warmth lingered, quietly settling on her back and shoulders.

‘So, what did you think? If we were to give your little adventure a title, I think it would be something like *A Fleeting Dream of Twilight*. Not bad, huh?

You could draw a manga with that title someday, Kisanuki-sensei. I would love to see that on my shelves.'

The girl in the burgundy pinafore dress and the calico cat had reappeared. Tilting her head mischievously, the girl wore the exact same smile she had when they first met.

I guess there's nothing that this girl doesn't know, Mio thought to herself. Or perhaps it was the cat who knew everything. But there was probably no point in thinking about that, as she would never know the answer.

'Well, I believe it is time for you to return to the place you came from. It's still chilly in the mornings and evenings. Please look after yourself and take care not to catch a cold. Oh, and of course, I will not be accepting a payment. What I would like to ask you is to remember us and the shop. That will be enough. The name of the shop is Sakura.'

With those words, the girl bowed deeply. At the same time, the calico cat, who had been sitting in a loaf pose on the table, let out a single meow.

Suddenly waking up, Mio found herself sitting on the bench under the cherry trees. Not the enigmatic weeping cherry tree with the unusual colours, but the ordinary somei-yoshino trees in full bloom. It was that familiar spot on the embankment. Her bag was sitting on her lap, with *The Little Prince* peeking out from it. The plastic bag containing the empty coffee can and onigiri wrapper was beside her, exactly where she had left it.

Was I dreaming?

But she remembered it so vividly, it was hard to believe that it was not real. Drawn by a strange cherry tree, she had come across a mysterious bookshop. There, she turned around to the sound of a cat, and discovered the door to the entrance. She had stepped into a shop filled with the aroma of coffee and quiet music. A girl had told her the story of Saint-Exupйry. Then, she had an unusual experience where she felt like she was reliving scenes from her and her mother's past.

Her phone vibrated inside her bag. It was a message from Takahashi.

I hope that you are okay. If there's anything I can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask. We all miss you, and we can't wait to get started

on the next chapter. Also, the editorial team at the publisher got in touch again to offer their condolences. Our previous editor, Tachibana, gave us a call about that issue, too. She asked me to pass on the message that you have nothing to worry about.

'Thank you,' Mio muttered to herself. Then sent the same two words in reply.

That's right. I need to hold my head high, she reminded herself.

Maybe it was all just a dream. But even so, it didn't matter to Mio. If she closed her eyes, she could hear her mother's voice in her ears, and feel the warmth of her touch on her back. That was more than enough.

Before she knew it, dusk was settling in. Behind the cherry trees, the evening sky adorned with the brightest stars spread across the horizon. Could her mother be living in one of those stars? If so, then she would be laughing. Mio dearly hoped that this was the case.

'I hope from the bottom of my heart that you will live your life with your head held high.'

It felt as though her mother was telling her once again, but this time, her voice had come from the stars.

She's really gone, isn't she?

Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes, but she didn't wipe them away. She didn't want to. For a while, Mio stood still, her shoulders quietly shaking under the cascading petals of pale pink. The tears had come, at last.



INTERLUDE

THE NEXT CUSTOMER

THE COFFEE BREWED, its billows of steam swaying to the triplet-infused rhythm in three-four time.

As though guided by the beat of the music, the girl spun around floatily with *The Little Prince* clutched in her hands and turned away from the cat sitting on the table.

'Hey, Kobako—'

Now standing in front of the bookcase, the girl began to speak as she slid the book back into its original spot. She handled it with the utmost care, apparently determined to keep its corners unscathed.

'You know, every time I read this book, I always wonder – did I tame you, or did you tame me?'

The cat, sitting in a loaf pose, didn't bother to respond, not even offering a yawn.

'Not that it matters.'

Having replaced the book, the girl pointed her index finger towards the spines of the books, again taking care not to touch them. But just as she was about to run her finger across, the cat gave a cry. This time, it was a long, protesting meow.

'What?'

Putting one hand on her hip, the girl twisted around. Then, stepping closer to the table, she leaned forward, bringing her face near the cat. In response, the cat

raised its nose.

'Huh? You want me to move the table first?'

The cat gave a short, approving meow as if to say: *Exactly*.

'Are you saying that we need to make space in the middle of the shop? That's going to take some effort, you know.'

Letting out a half-sigh, the girl set to work on the task that the cat had assigned her. As she shuffled the chairs aside and moved the tables, the cherry-blossom branches decorating the shop swayed in their vases.

Soon, an empty space the size of a small stage emerged in front of the kitchen counter. Petals were scattered across the now spacious floor.

'Must be nice to be you,' the girl grumbled as she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. 'All you ever do is give out instructions.'

By now, the cat had tucked its head back into its body, forming a perfectly shaped loaf. Its eyes were firmly closed.

'I guess I'm the one who's been tamed.'

The girl made this remark, which was neither a complaint nor self-mockery, before finally going back to her book-picking ritual.

Her finger hovered just in front of the bookshelf where *The Little Prince* sat. She moved her finger across, gliding from top to bottom, transitioning from one shelf to the next. From time to time, a book would catch her attention, and she would pause momentarily, casting a hopeful glance at her companion. But Kobako the calico cat wasn't so easily satisfied.

The ritual eventually progressed to the large-format books held between bookends on the four-seater table. Just when the girl's fingertip was about to move past a certain book, the cat gave a sharp meow. Though the book was large in dimension, it wasn't particularly thick.

The girl turned around to find the cat sitting up, its gleaming eyes wide open. A satisfied grin rose to the girl's lips.

'Right. Is this is going to be our next read, then? I like this one, too.'

Pulling the book off the shelf, the girl held it out with both her hands, then drew it towards her face. The cover read *Ten Nights of Dreams*. It was also marked with the words 'Large Print'. Switching the book to one hand, the girl let out her usual *ahem* before opening it in a reverent manner.

“‘The sun will rise, and the sun will set. It will rise again, and it will set again. As the red sun moves from east to west, then slips away from west to east – will you have the patience to wait for me?’”

All around the shop, the cherry-blossom branches dangled from the vases, their delicate limbs swaying softly as they listened to the girl’s voice. Every so often, the petals left the branches, one by one, spiralling through the air as they slowly descended to the floor. Out of nowhere, a flickering shadow filled the seat at the rear of the room. It was almost as though the shadow was indecisive about fully appearing. Nevertheless, it did seem to be enjoying the girl’s reading, as it alternated between expanding its body and narrowing it again, keeping time with the rhythm of her voice.

The calico cat kept its eyes shut. *Bolŭro* played on.

TWO



'A hundred years had passed.'

A SUDDEN FLARE of light poured from the trees and shot through the glass, the brightness making him squint for a moment. To say that he was dazzled would be an understatement. The sun had caught him completely off-guard. The thought of his vision going white, even for a split second, struck him with a surge of overwhelming fear. He could have overlooked anything – a monkey, a deer, a rock or a fallen tree – and that alone was enough to send a chill down his spine. Instinctively, he blinked rapidly, clenched his teeth under his chinstrap, and pointed forward. This safety procedure had become second nature to him.

As the train cut through the mountains, it occasionally passed beneath an arcade of trees. Every time it did so, his grip on the controls tightened, ready to react should he need it to. The responsibility he bore for the vehicle, which weighed tons on its own, was an immense pressure on his shoulders, not to mention the lives of the passengers it carried. Moreover, he knew that averting would be impossible. Looking well ahead was about the only thing he could do to avoid a potential collision. Even so, Shingo preferred the alertness required to navigate the route through the mountain range.

From early spring to early summer, the vivid green of young leaves reigned over the landscape until they were eventually overthrown by the relentless midsummer sun. Soon, shades of yellow and orange would emerge here and there before swiftly surrendering to deep crimson and dazzling gold. But only a short while later, the entire landscape would be blanketed in silvery white. Such were the distinct changes that marked the transition of seasons, which Shingo believed to be one of the greatest joys of this country.

The train eventually approached a station at the foot of a mountain. Across the tracks from the station building, atop an elevated stretch of land, stood a cluster of Yamazakura – wild cherry trees – that, during the spring season, adorned the landscape with beautiful blossoms. At one point, the station even became a bustling tourist spot after news of the stunning trees spread through word of mouth.

Under Shingo's control, the train glided smoothly into the platform. As usual, he brought the train to a flawless stop, the hand on the speedometer resting on zero at precisely the designated position. The train would be held at the platform for exactly five minutes.

Confirming the safety of the platform, Shingo conducted another check on the brakes before finally exiting the train, then immediately stretched out his arms to loosen his shoulders. Perhaps because it was early morning, a veil of fog hung over the station, the cherry trees dissolving into white. *What a shame*, Shingo thought, as he turned around to the station building and the ticket barriers on the other side of the tracks. In that instant, a gust of wind swept away the fog entirely, suddenly uncovering a building that Shingo had never seen before. A traditional Japanese structure with wooden walls and many windows, a bronze weathercock stood atop its green-tiled triangular roof.

Blimey, where has that come from? He was certain that no such station existed on his train line. In fact, the building looked nothing like a station. Doubts filling his head, Shingo noticed a figure sitting on a bench right next to the ticket barriers. He didn't need to strain his eyes to see that it was his wife, Yuriko.

'Yuriko, what on earth are you doing here?'

When Shingo called out to her in surprise, his wife stood up, opening her mouth to say something, but her voice did not reach him. Just then, the fog returned, thickening rapidly. His arm, which he had extended towards his wife, had vanished from the wrist down. For a moment, he stood in utter confusion. Then, an intense feeling of urgency crashed through him as the alarm bell signalling the train's departure began to ring. *What is Yuriko saying? I need to hurry, or else the train will be delayed*

This was the dream Shingo Kikukawa was having just before he woke up that morning. Memories were curious things. Though merely a dream – a world without physical form – it was the most vivid, faithful recreation of the routine he'd repeated countless times for more than forty years, down to the smallest detail. The speed at which the rails passed beneath the train, the steady vibrations and rhythmic sounds, the order in which the trees appeared, the colour of their leaves, the angle of the signals and the curve of the track, all but that strange station he witnessed at the end of the journey was exactly as Shingo had seen and heard throughout his life as a train driver.

Yet by the time Shingo awoke, he didn't recall any of it; he didn't even realise that he had been dreaming. Moreover, he didn't fully understand that he had long

retired from his work as a train driver. There was no reason, then, that he would know why tears had gathered at the corner of his eyes as he stirred from sleep.

The room Shingo lived in had one large west-facing window. On some summer evenings, the smothering heat of the westering sun was so intense, it drained Shingo of the energy to speak, but he was still grateful that he had such a generous view of the outdoors. Plus, his room was on the side that overlooked the mountains.

The way nature changed its attire as the seasons passed by filled Shingo's heart with deep appreciation. It gave him the reassurance that time was still flowing.

Pulling himself up, Shingo carefully laid his feet on the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. He placed both hands on his knees and exhaled. Aware that his heart and lungs were still functioning properly, he silently expressed his gratitude. Then, he opened and closed his right hand repeatedly, around five times. All good. Next, he tried the same with his left hand. Although a few of his fingers seemed to lack strength, he was doing much better than before.

Shingo tried to stand up but wasn't able to, not straightaway. Just as he expected, his left leg was unstable. His cane, which he was certain he'd put by his pillow, seemed to have disappeared – until he realised that it had fallen over and was lying on the floor. Frowning, Shingo leaned forward and stretched out his hand, somehow managing to pull it towards him. He found it frustrating that a task so simple had taken him such a long time to accomplish.

Relying on his cane, Shingo walked over to his in-room sink and washed his face. Then, looking in the mirror, he carefully ran the electric shaver over his skin. He would clean his teeth after breakfast. And if he didn't want anyone telling him off, he mustn't forget to take his medicine. *What a nuisance,* Shingo thought to himself. He didn't even know what they were for.

After combing his hair, he sat back down on the bed for a moment to steady his breathing before standing up again to get dressed. He removed his pyjamas and threw them on the bed. He would leave them there for the time being. Then, slipping his arms through the sleeves of his collared shirt, he fastened his tie. Everything had gone smoothly up to that point, but putting his trousers on was going to be a different story. First, he had to sit down, then, taking his time, he pulled them on one leg at a time. The same went for his socks.

The final step was his uniform. Removing his gold-buttoned jacket from the hanger, he put it on. Then, he fixed his cap on his head. As soon as he did so, he felt his body straighten up. By then, the fact that he had needed his cane to lift himself out of bed had been erased from his mind. It was now time for breakfast, and that was the only thought that filled Shingo's head.

The canteen was on the ground floor. Shingo took the lift down. When he got off, he turned right. He was quite confident that this was the correct way, and his chest lightened as the smell of cooking came wafting over. Glancing at the serving counter, he saw that a queue had already formed. Everyone's head looked white from behind, except the one person who had dyed her hair purple. Why anyone would do such thing was beyond him. Her name was Hmm What was it again? Not that it mattered, as he wasn't even sure if he knew her. While he recognised the hair colour, he couldn't remember what her face looked like.

Soon, it was Shingo's turn. Everyone had the same meal, that morning's dishes being rice porridge, rolled omelette, grilled salmon, simmered kombu seaweed, and pickled nozawana leaves.

'Oh, Grandpa. That outfit again. Isn't it about time that you had it dry-cleaned?'

One of the female cooks spoke to him as she ladled out the rice porridge. On her name badge was the surname 'Matsumoto'. She was tall, and although her hair was neatly tucked into her hat, he could tell that it was very long. A friendly, vibrant smile lit her face, giving off a cheerful impression.

Yet Shingo's mood began to sour as he watched her behaviour. He found her lively energy rather irritating, and besides, she had called him 'Grandpa'. Who did think she was, lumping all older men together like that? She obviously didn't bother learning each person's name. As he stared at the young lady before him, his annoyance only grew.

Sometimes such emotions became so intense, Shingo was unable to suppress them. On more than one occasion, he found himself throwing a tantrum in front of other people. But then, the next moment, he would forget why he was so angry. And that was what infuriated him the most. As each day passed, his memory only became worse, never improving. What's more, he knew that his memories were there. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say that he wanted to believe that they

were still there. In any case, no matter how hard he tugged at them, he couldn't seem to bring them to the surface of his mind. And right now, a rush of this familiar frustration was coursing through him.

As usual, Shingo silently bowed to the young lady whose name was apparently Matsumoto as she handed him the tray of food. He turned around to look for a table. Behind him, a male worker came out from the back of the kitchen. 'Are you okay, Mai?' he asked the young lady, to which she replied, 'I'm fine.' Then, she added, 'It happens all the time.' Naturally, Shingo had no idea that this conversation was taking place.

The canteen was noisy with chattering voices and laughter. Shingo, however, seated himself at an empty table, and began working through the dishes in silence. Once he was finished, he joined his hands together over the empty bowls and plates, giving a bow as he quietly expressed his appreciation for the meal. Returning his tray to the counter, he made his way to the washstand at the corner of the canteen and scrutinised himself in the mirror. All clear. His beard was well groomed, and his cap looked clean. He would brush his teeth after eating. Oh, but I mustn't forget to take my medicine, he reminded himself.

But now, Shingo was confused. Had he eaten his breakfast? He could ask someone. But who? No, he thought to himself. Surely there was a way he could check. Then, his eyes landed on the serving counter, as well as a board stating that breakfast time had finished.

Right. Breakfast was over. I would have eaten, then. I must have.

At that moment, the same young lady from before stepped out of the counter. Noticing Shingo, she waved at him. Maybe because of her youth, her smile was blindingly radiant. Shingo felt inclined to pull up the corners of his lips in response. It was a weak, reserved smile he'd never show in front of the mirror, but of course, he had no way of knowing that.

Finished with their meals, about half of the residents stayed on the ground floor and headed to the lounge, where there was a large television. While they appreciated that the volume of this television was set to a comfortable level, what the residents enjoyed the most was that the on-screen text was big enough to be easily legible, even for their aged eyes. They usually watched travel shows, music programmes featuring classic hits, or shows about strategies for playing Go or

Shogi. When a sumo tournament was taking place, the television was tuned to that channel for the entire duration of the matches, which ran from the afternoon to 6 p.m.

On that day, however, the programme being shown on this big screen was a documentary from abroad, the US, to be exact. It was about the iconic Highway 66, or Route 66. Noticing this, Shingo scanned around for an empty seat at the front and made his way over to claim it.

Route 66 was the first national highway connecting the Midwest and the West Coast. It was also famously depicted in Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was later adapted into a film. According to the documentary, around the time the novel was published, a pair of giraffes from Africa were transported across the continent, travelling from New York Harbour to Los Angeles along this route. The first half of the programme focused on such stories about the road. But as it progressed into the second half, it illustrated how Route 66 began to decline and lose its purpose around 1990, following the completion of the new Interstate Highway System.

It's the same everywhere, thought Shingo. As highway systems and bullet trains continued to develop, he began hearing the phrase 'unprofitable local rail lines' more and more. And with the privatisation of the national railway, lines jointly managed by private and public sectors known as the 'third-sector railway' emerged, driving many routes to closure. Such changes were probably closely related to an inevitable force like government policies, or the way the times were headed, but Shingo couldn't put a finger on how to describe it.

After Japan's first steam locomotive began operating between Shimbashi and Yokohama in 1872, rail transport quickly became a part of everyday life. But maintaining something that people have come to take for granted was not as easy as it seemed. If only the world knew that certain things were not meant to be measured by metrics like efficiency and profitability. As these thoughts crossed Shingo's mind, he found himself clenching his fists on his lap.

The programme was coming to an end. The song playing over the credits was the perfect choice: 'Route 66' by Nat King Cole. No other option could have been conceivable. *This is what I've been waiting for*, Shingo thought, and once again squeezed his fists.

'Route 66' was a song he would never forget. It was filled with memories of Yuriko. The hope of hearing this song was what kept him glued to the television instead of returning to his room. Back in their youth, the two of them would listen to artists like Nat King Cole, Bobby Darin, Frank Sinatra and Paul Anka. This was a time when terms such as 'dance hall' were still in fashion.

Shingo reminisced – about taking Yuriko's hand in his right hand and placing his left hand on her waist. As they swayed to the rhythm of the music, Shingo began to think that now was the only time to say it. Even Nat King Cole seemed to be urging him on as he sang, 'Won't you get hip to this timely tip?'

'I want to marry you.'

Without any hesitation, Yuriko said okay. For a while, she buried her face in Shingo's chest as though she was trying to hide her expression from him. Then, she suddenly pulled away and lifted her head.

'Promise me one thing.'

Yuriko's lips moved slowly and assuredly. Shingo nodded at her words.

What did she say to him?

That feeling of urgency started to build in his chest again. He needed to find out. He needed to find out now, before it was too late. Something was telling him that he was running out of time, as though he was counting down to a fast-approaching departure time.

But Shingo didn't know any more than that. If anything, it felt like his anxiety was pushing the few remnants of his memories out of his mind. Eventually, he found himself unable to remember what it was that he was trying to remember. He didn't even know what he'd been thinking about.

Shingo wished that somebody would help him. He wished that his wife would hold his hand. But looking around, there wasn't a familiar face in sight. Everyone in the room wore a blank expression as they gazed mindlessly at the screen.

Why am I not at home?

What is this place?

Where is Yuriko? Who is minding our daughter?

The train I'm driving what time is it departing?

Before he knew it, Shingo was sitting with his body leaned forward and his hands cradling his head. He could feel his heart beating faster. Opening his

mouth, he noticed how dry his throat had become. It even made him wonder if he might just end up turning into a withered corpse, right there on the spot. Thinking this, Shingo was suddenly overcome with fear. Unable to bear it any longer, he let out a scream. He kept crying into his knees, squeezing out noises that were incomprehensible even to himself.

Everyone's eyes turned on Shingo, but he would not have noticed. Then, he heard hurried footsteps approaching. Judging from the sound, it was clear that this wasn't the pace of an elderly person. Words like 'What's happening?' and 'Well, it's this gentleman ' were exchanged.

When he realised that someone's hand was patting his back, Shingo finally came back to his senses.

'What's wrong, Grandpa? Are you all right?'

Shingo looked up to find a name in front of him. It said 'Matsumoto'. As his eyes skimmed over the name, he thought: *This surname only has a small number of strokes.* As he wrote out the kanji characters in his head, mentally confirming the stroke order, a bit of clarity returned to him.

'My name is Kikukawa. You have no right calling me "Grandpa".'

He hadn't meant to say them out loud, but the words had already escaped him. This wiped the smile off the face of the worker named Matsumoto. It somehow made Shingo feel a pang of guilt, and he instinctively said, 'Sorry,' although he didn't really know what he was apologising for.

The group of elderly people who had been watching from a distance gradually started to turn away. Some sat back down in front of the television, others disappeared down the corridor, and a few gathered together and opened the glass door to head out to the courtyard.

What is this place? Shingo wondered again as the female worker helped him up from his seat. He guessed that it was some kind of care centre for older people. If this was the case, how long had he been there? Had he quit his job? He didn't know the answer to any of these simple questions. Then, thinking about his wife again, he considered the possibility that she could also be here. But if she was, surely he would have seen her. It would be too strange for him not to have.

After the incident, Shingo spent most of his time inside his room, leaving only for meals. His heart was completely crushed. Still, on days when he was feeling better enough, he was able to acknowledge that there was something important that he had forgotten, and that he was desperate to know what it was. But holding onto that feeling for a day or two wasn't easy. Only the dregs of an inexplicable sense of urgency kept accumulating inside of him.

About a week of such misery had passed when he was told that someone who claimed to be his daughter had come to see him. But the moment his visitor entered his room, he was truly surprised. She looked just like his wife.

'I've come to check in on you,' the person said as she set her bags down. 'I heard that you seemed to be feeling low, so I was worried.'

Shingo was dumbstruck as his eyes followed the figure moving towards the west-facing window.

'Yuriko. I've been looking for you. Where have you been all this time? Please, I beg you. Don't keep me locked up in a place like this. I want to go home. I've got to go to work. At this rate, I'll end up forgetting how to drive a train.'

The woman turned to face him and shook her head solemnly.

'I guess we're doing this again, then. I suppose I've gotten used to it by now, and I know in my head that it can't be helped, but my God, this can get tough. Listen, Dad. I'm going to tell you once more. I am your *daughter*, Sanae. I've gotten married and my surname is now Yasuhara. I live with my husband in a town that's not close to here. That's why I can't see you so often. I know it may not seem like it, but I am sorry about that. Also, you retired from your job as a train driver a long time ago.'

Right. We did have a daughter with that name.

'Ah, Sanae. I remember now. You're Sanae. But where is What has happened to Yuriko? Is she not with you?'

'Mum passed away five years ago. After that, you were living on your own for a while. But three years ago, you had a stroke while you were out. Fortunately, there were people around you, and you got help immediately, so it didn't turn into anything life-threatening. But as your daughter, I was too worried to let you keep living on your own, and so I got you to come live here, at Mai's workplace.

It took some effort to convince you to say yes, you know. I guess you don't remember any of that.'

Is that so? But who is Mai? Who does she mean by 'you', anyway?

'By the way, I have something for you,' the person who was supposedly his daughter said.

Without paying any attention to Shingo's puzzlement, she pulled out a large item from her bag.

'You asked me to bring this.'

From the brown envelope emerged a single book. The text on it read: *Ten Nights of Dreams*.

'The book that Mom loved. Last time, you said that you wanted to read it.'

'I would never say such a thing.'

'But you *did*. I even had to put in a special order for it because you wanted the large-print edition.'

Had he really asked for this book? He certainly had no recollection of it, but perhaps it was one of those memories that had slipped away from him. That was the most plausible explanation. After all, he couldn't even trust his own judgement about whether the person opposite him was really his daughter.

As he was thinking this, there was another knock on the door. Before Shingo could respond, Sanae answered with a 'Come in' and the door opened.

'I asked for a little break so that I could come and see you. How's it going, Mum? Has Grandpa cheered up a bit after seeing your face?'

The person poking her head through the door was that young lady with 'Matsumoto' written on her name badge. Without her hat, the hair on this tall woman was unbelievably long.

'I'm not sure, Mai. Although, so far, he doesn't seem to be feeling as down as you made it out to be.'

'Really? Well, that's good news.'

'He does seem to be in doubt about who I am.'

'I see. He never forgets his mealtimes, though.'

As she said so, the young lady dragged a chair over and settled down next to Sanae. She was even more smiley than usual.

'Now listen, Dad. This is Mai. She is my daughter, which makes her your granddaughter.'

Shingo gazed at Sanae in bewilderment.

'But her surname is not the same as mine.'

'That's because she married Matsumoto-san.'

Now who in the world was Matsumoto-san?

Seemingly ignoring the look of confusion on Shingo's face, Sanae placed her hand on the book she'd brought and exhaled through her nose.

'Mai has always been a grandma-and-grandpa girl, ever since she was little. You often looked after her at your house, didn't you? You probably don't remember, but Mai was in her third year of high school when Mum first became ill. That must have been why she trained to become a registered dietician, saying that it would come in handy in the future. After she passed her test, she found a job here, close to your home. She even has a qualification in providing nursing-care food now. She's always said that if it ever came to it, she would look after whoever ended up alone, and, well, that became a reality. I don't mean to boast about my own daughter, but she's really something, this one.'

'He-he, you're making me blush. But please, do keep the compliments coming. I want Grandpa to hear more.'

As this exchange went on, Shingo silently alternated his gaze between the two women in front of him, wondering if the story he was hearing could really be true. It wasn't that he didn't believe them. They weren't lying; he could be sure of that. The problem was, however, that Shingo couldn't remember any of the events that they claimed to have happened.

Then, out of nowhere, an image of an infant playfully clinging to him and Yuriko floated into his mind. It was quite possible that this was a memory of his granddaughter.

'But wait, Mai is only about this big, isn't she?' Shingo ventured, holding out his hand at the height of his knees. The two women looked towards one another. It appeared as though they were pleased about something.

Then, Mai – the one that was apparently his granddaughter – spotted the book sitting on Sanae's lap. 'It's *Ten Nights of Dreams*,' she said.

'Hey, Grandpa, did Grandma ever tell you why she loved this book so much?'

Shingo heard a tinge of hesitancy in her voice as she called him 'Grandpa', but it seemed that she had decided to be her usual self. For some reason, this made him feel relieved. Holding the book in her hand, his granddaughter turned the pages.

She continued, 'This story is about a woman who passes away and comes back as a *yuri* flower – a lily – right? And as you know, the kanji characters for *yuri* are "one hundred" and "come together". In the story, they meet after one hundred years – do you see what I mean? Grandma told me how much she loved that. When I was little, she always said things like "I bet this couple will always be destined to meet, no matter how many times they're reborn," and "I can't believe my name had such a lovely meaning to it."'

'Mum told you that?'

'Uh-huh. She told me lots of things just before she passed away, too. I even know a little bit about the time Grandpa proposed to her.'

Right, so Yuriko really is gone already. This was what Shingo kept thinking as the conversation between the two women flowed through his ears.

Sensing this, Mai said, 'Grandpa, the Kawazu cherry blossoms in the garden are at their peak right now. All the flowers opened over the past few days. Why don't we go there? Just for a bit. Look, you can see them from here.'

Shingo walked over to the west-facing window and looked down. He saw a large cluster of rich pink.

'Come on, let's go. It's really nice out.'

She smiled her usual bubbly smile. Unlike that day in the canteen, Shingo felt his mood lift just a little. At least, it made him want to give it a go. A smile, he mused, was a truly powerful thing.

Leaving Shingo's room, the three of them took the lift down to the lower floor. He managed to walk without a hitch to the end of the corridor, but at the door leading to the courtyard, he suddenly lost his footing and almost fell over. *This is why I need to be wearing my uniform*, Shingo silently said to himself, and his daughter pointed to something, suggesting that they use it. Shifting his gaze, he saw that it was a wheelchair. If this were another day, he would have never agreed to such a proposal. But for some reason, he couldn't refuse. Before he could

make up his mind, the two of them were lowering him into the wheelchair, saying that he was going to be just fine.

The air was still, and the gentle spring sunshine was quite pleasant indeed. The sensation of being transported without physical effort filled him with a strange nostalgia. As they moved along the stone-paved path, the cherry blossoms in full bloom soon came into view. The pink of the flowers was much deeper than that of the somei-yoshino trees. 'Look,' he heard, and nodded in reply.

'I've been assigned to a line that goes through a station where there's a cluster of Yamazakura cherry trees. You can see them right across from the station building. The view is a real feast for the eyes when they're in full bloom.'

'Is that so? I'd love it if you'd take me some time, when you're not working.'

'Well, that's a pretty big request.'

'Oh, why not? Who knows how many more times we'd be able to see the cherry blossoms together?'

Shingo was quite certain that he had exchanged those words with Yuriko. Just as he was having this recollection, his daughter placed something on his lap. It was the book from earlier. She must have brought it along with her.

'If you ever feel like it, please try giving it a read. I went to the trouble of bringing it to you, after all.'

As before, Shingo nodded without saying anything. Just then, that male worker from the canteen kitchen came out to the courtyard. Taking his hat off, he bowed to Shingo's daughter.

'We'll be right back, Dad. We're just going to go and say hello.'

Shingo watched as his daughter and granddaughter headed towards the man.

Then, he glanced up at the cherry blossoms once more before dropping his eyes to his knees. He scanned the words printed on the cover of the book again: *Ten Nights of Dreams.* For some reason, a sense of deep affection started to well up inside of him. Turning the pages, he followed the text with his eyes. The print was large indeed. He would be able to read it with ease, and this realisation put him in a great mood.

'Let's see,' he found himself saying. Although his intention was to simply skim over the book, he found himself reading out loud.

"'This is the dream I dreamt. As I sat by her bed with my arms folded, a woman lying on her back said in a quiet voice that she was about to die.'"

This is a rather ominous way to start a story, isn't it? And maybe this writing is supposed to be beautiful, but it's a bit formal and hard to get into. This is why I've never understood the appeal of novels. Yuriko seemed to be fond of them, though.

"'Her long hair spread over her pillow and all around the soft contours of her —" Huh? What does that say?'

He couldn't work out the next word. There were annotations beside the kanji characters indicating their pronunciation, but they were too small for his eyes. Pulling his head away from the page, he finally managed to make out the letters.

"'M-Melon"? Ah, that's right— "the soft contours of her melon-seed face."'

Exactly what kind of face is that? Based on what he had read, he somehow put together the scene in his mind, picturing the oval-faced woman lying down on her back with her head resting on a pillow. But before he knew it, that face had turned into that of his wife. *Am I remembering something from my own past?* he began to wonder, *or is this something that this writing has awakened in me? If I am reminiscing, does that mean I stayed by Yuriko's side as she passed away?*

Yuriko. Yuriko's words – that was what I've been trying to remember. I had made her a promise. One that I must never forget. Is that right? Why can't I recall something so important?

Just after I proposed to her, Yuriko said something to me. What was the promise that we—

Meow.

All of a sudden, Shingo felt like he heard something. When he looked up, he was instantly mesmerised by the view before him.

Right where the vibrant pink of the Kawazu cherry blossoms had once been, a single weeping cherry tree now stood. And it was no ordinary tree. Its flowers were coloured in every imaginable shade of red and white.

Behind the tree was a two-storey building. At the top of its green roof, he saw a bronze weathercock crowing silently to the heavens. He was sure that there was no such thing on the premises of the care home. Yet something told him that he was not witnessing it for the first time. In fact, he felt like he'd seen it just

recently. And he remembered thinking the same thing at that time: that there was no way that this building existed here. But he didn't have the slightest idea when or where that was.

Shingo was now on his feet. His entire body had moved so effortlessly, he didn't even notice himself standing up. The numbness in the left side of his lower body, which had persisted since the first time he had a stroke, had completely gone away. As though he was being pulled by an invisible force, he walked to the entrance of the building and gently opened the door. Classical music played faintly from within, and the pleasant aroma of coffee crept out through the gap.

Tentatively, he first poked his head in, then slipped the rest of his body inside. A young lady in a burgundy pinafore dress stood directly opposite him. She held an open book to her face with one hand. Stretching her other arm out theatrically, she spoke in a dignified voice. It was as though she was an actor practising her lines.

'"When I die, please bury me. Dig me a grave with a large pearl oyster shell. Take a fragment of a star that had fallen from the heavens and mark my grave with it. Then, wait for me beside my grave. I will come and see you again."'

With that, the girl lifted her gaze. Gracefully closing the book with one hand, she beamed at Shingo.

'Welcome, Mr Shingo Kikukawa. Please take a seat here.'

She gestured to a table that had a 'Reserved' sign on it. Examining his surroundings, Shingo noticed that there were cherry blossom branches arranged in vases all around the shop. Their flowers brightened up the atmosphere with their impressive variation of colours. But what really caught his attention were the shelves packed full with books. They easily outnumbered the vases. On the tables by the walls and along the counter, rows of books stood neatly between bookends. Shingo couldn't figure out if this place was primarily a bookshop or a coffee shop.

Just then, Shingo realised that the large-print edition of *Ten Nights of Dreams* was still in his hand. His copy seemed to be identical to the girl's. As his eyes darted back and forth between the two books in an attempt to confirm this, she watched him contentedly.

'As you might have guessed, that book has opened up the passage. It's not every day that we have such fortunate encounters, so, please, do take a seat.'

Shingo did as he was told. The girl arranged a napkin and coaster on his table. Then, making a fist in front of her face, she let out an *ahem*.

'As you may be aware, generally speaking, there are two ways in which the word "dream" is used. One of them illustrates what we aspire to be in the future. The other is something that only appears in our sleep, a kind of nonsensical virtual space that we create for ourselves. Personally, I find it fascinating that this is true not only for Japanese and English, but for many other languages around the world. But anyway, the subject of this book by Sōseki is of course the dream you have while you're sleeping.'

The girl straightened her back a little before holding up her index finger in an exaggerated manner.

'Which has led me to wonder: are dreams we have during sleep truly individual experiences? Could it be possible that, while we're sleeping, we become so vulnerable that we detach from ourselves, and connect with a different world? I have a feeling that the answers to these questions have something to do with me and my cat. And perhaps this shop as well.'

Unable to make sense of her words, Shingo simply stared at her face.

'In any case, Sōseki was forty-one when he wrote this book, *Ten Nights of Dreams*. The writing flows like silk, and its effects are meticulously calculated. It would be fair to say that the author had reached peak maturity at the time.'

The girl's words wouldn't stop. By now, Shingo had forgotten to question how he had come here, and why this young lady was sitting across from him.

'According to a writer I know – he's an old acquaintance of mine – if you want to write beautifully in Japanese, you must first study Sōseki exhaustively. Once you've achieved that, a casual exploration of Naoya Shiga will be enough to round out the learning. This writer also told me that there's a solid reason why Sōseki is considered so special among Japanese authors. The Meiji Restoration was a time of rapid transformation that led Japan to foster a new national identity. Such changes were happening within Sōseki, as well. He was the first author to take on the challenge of capturing the inner self in writing. In that sense, we can say that Sōseki helped shaped the way interior thoughts are portrayed in Japanese literature. Which is why, for those who love novels, the fact that one of his major works is titled *Kokoro* is more than emotionally moving, it's miraculous.'

Shingo observed the girl with a baffled look on his face. Was she ever going to stop talking? As the saying goes, she must have been one of those people who was 'born from the mouth,' he thought privately.

But then, the girl puffed out her cheeks and said, 'Did you just have a mean thought about me?'

How did she know? As he carried his thought further, Shingo looked directly at the girl without intending to. Her smile was still intact, radiating profound joy.

'Words are already there before you say them out loud. Just because they haven't taken form yet, it doesn't mean they're not there. Accessing something like that takes a bit of skill, but when you're as experienced as I am, it just comes naturally.'

Once again, the girl drew a fist to her mouth and gave a single *ahem*.

'I suppose that's enough introduction from me. Now, it's your turn, Kobako.'

As if on cue, a ball of fur landed on the table. It was an elegant calico cat with an impressive coat and elegant demeanour. Shingo watched the cat's limbs move deftly across the table, effortlessly avoiding the coaster and napkin. Once it had claimed a spot and settled down, it gave a slightly drawn-out meow.

'We invited you to the shop today as we'd like you to confirm for yourself the words you've been searching for. You might feel a little bit dizzy, but there's no need to worry.'

Shingo had barely finished hearing the girl's words when he was thrown off balance, as though the world had suddenly turned upside down. *You said 'a little bit'!* he grumbled inside his head. But the next moment, Shingo was gasping at the sight before him. It was Yuriko. Moreover, she looked very young, around the same age as Mai.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke. On the wooden walls were Art Deco-style posters. Next to him was a young man wearing a waistcoat and a bow tie. He held a young woman in his arms, her ponytail swaying to the voice of Nat King Cole. Shingo realised that, alongside other couples, he was also enjoying a dance with Yuriko.

Is this a dream? If so, how long have I been dreaming? Perhaps it began when I was pushed into a wheelchair and taken through the garden. Or could it be

when those two women claimed that they were my daughter and granddaughter? Surely, it couldn't have been before that.

Is it possible that I'm seeing a replay of my whole life? If this is the case, is something trying to tell me that this was the moment my life truly started?

For the first time in what felt like for ever, Shingo's brain was spinning at full speed. In the meantime, the young Shingo holding Yuriko's hand gazed into her eyes and spoke his words of proposal.

'I want to marry you.'

Yuriko said okay, then pressed her face against his chest. Feeling the heat of her skin seep into him, Shingo found himself almost surrendering to the warmth that flooded his heart.

He didn't know how long they'd been in each other's arms. The song had changed, and the voice of Cole singing 'Unforgettable' echoed through the room.

Finally, his wife pulled away and looked up at him.

'Promise me one thing.'

As soon as she said it, Yuriko's face flushed crimson.

'I'm embarrassed to say it. You won't laugh, will you?'

'You can tell me anything.'

It wasn't clear to Shingo if his past self or his present self had made him say so. The truth was, he didn't even know where he was. But everything – the weight of his wife's body in his arms, the warmth of her cheek on his chest – felt too real for it to be a dream.

Yuriko's voice continued.

'You know that the kanji characters for my name are "one hundred" and "to come together", right? I once read somewhere that this could have another meaning: that two people will still be able to meet, even after a hundred years.'

'I see.'

'You can't count a hundred years on your own, of course. But there are two of us. If we each count fifty years, then together, we can live alongside one another for a hundred years. So please promise me that we'll be together for the next one hundred years. And that we'll celebrate our golden anniversary by having a dance, just like we are right now. Can you promise me this?'

Right. This was what his wife had said. He'd sworn that he would never forget, yet he had let it slip away from his memory. Struck by this realisation, he faltered under the gaze of his wife as she stared intently into his eyes. In that instant, he was overcome by the same disorienting sensation as before. In a blink, he had returned to the strange place that he assumed was a bookshop. The girl in the burgundy pinafore dress tilted her head slightly, her hands clasped behind her back. As though she had just pulled off a little mischief, a playful grin spread across her face.

'But it takes at least two people to make a promise,' the girl said, seemingly posing a question to Shingo.

He answered with a nod.

'So my other guest has been waiting for quite a while. More specifically, since I read *Ten Nights of Dreams* aloud the other day. But to be honest, here, time is merely a concept. Although it has been a long time, it's equally true that she only just arrived a moment ago.'

The girl put her left palm in front of her face.

'We don't usually do things this way, but I'll let your wife take over from here. Also, I'm afraid we won't be able to play Nat King Cole, but I assure you it's a fine song for dancing. Please enjoy your dance with your wife for as long as you wish – well, a hundred years might be a bit much, but if it comes down to it, Kobako will figure something out. So please, dance to your heart's content.'

While the girl continued to speak such nonsense, a figure stood up from one of the seats at the back of the shop and began walking towards Shingo. As it drew closer to him, the contours of the figure became clearer and clearer until it finally transformed into his wife. This time, it was the Yuriko he would have last seen five years ago. Now an elderly woman with silver hair, she and Shingo made the perfect couple.

'It's been a long time, hasn't it?' she said.

'Indeed. I've been looking everywhere for you.'

His wife gave a small chuckle at his response. The way she laughed sounded just like their granddaughter Mai.

'But I've been right beside you, watching all along. Not just you. I've been watching Sanae and Mai as well.'

She averted her eyes.

'I was the one who ended up breaking our promise, wasn't I? I was regretful about that – so regretful, I couldn't bear it. Then, the next thing I knew, I'd been called to this place. I've been waiting for you here.'

It was then that Shingo remembered that their next anniversary would mark fifty years. On that day in April, they'd officially become husband and wife. Amidst the falling cherry blossom petals, they'd walked together to the municipal office and registered their marriage. As their ceremony was still a little while away, they chose that day to be their anniversary. Yuriko's cheeks were tinged with a shy blush, the same pink as the cherry blossoms. He could now recall the colour vividly in his mind.

The dance music playing in the background was in three-four time.

Shingo took Yuriko's hand into his right hand and brought his left hand to her hip. Slowly, they swayed to the music.

His dancing wasn't as it had been in his youth, but that didn't matter. His wife was there, holding his hand – and that was enough for him. And before they knew it, it was as though they had returned to the day they had their very first dance together, at least in each other's eyes.

The girl was now seated at the table where Kobako sat. Her chin resting on her hands, she gently rocked her head to the beat of the music.

'Looks like they don't need us anymore.'

Letting out a single snort, Kobako closed her eyes.

'Come to think of it, there aren't any cats in *Ten Nights of Dreams*, are there? Just goldfish and pigs. Oh, and the cock crowing was in fact the doing of the evil Amanojaku, wasn't it? You can't complain though – Sōseki-sensei featured plenty of cats in his debut novel.'

As she said so, the girl turned her attention to one of the bookshelves, where a large-format edition of *I Am a Cat* was wedged in. Reaching out, she took hold of the spine and drew it towards her. Then, she returned her gaze to the couple dancing in the middle of the shop.

'Watching them makes me envious.'

The girl exhaled through her nose. It was a deep and heavy sigh. Sensing this, the cat reluctantly opened one eye and rose to its feet, making a face like it had relented. Then, as though offering an invitation, it extended its right paw towards her.

'Huh? You're actually willing? That's a first.'

Removing her left hand from her chin, the girl held up her index and middle fingers together and touched the cat's paw pads. It was the equivalent of a high five. Then, when the cat lifted its other front paw, the girl did the same with her right hand. Right, left, right, left. As if they were playing a clapping game, they continued to slap their palms and paws with each other in time with the rhythm of *Bolĭro*.

'Well done! Now this side. Here, one more time.'

Little by little, the girl raised her hands higher and higher, eventually making the cat stand on its two hind legs.

'Amazing. You've some talent, Kobako.'

But just when the cat had fully stretched its hind limbs, it abruptly turned away, apparently having had enough.

'Is that all? That's a shame.'

The cat had already turned its focus to licking its front paws, completely absorbed in the task. Seemingly giving up, the girl once again turned her eyes to the middle of the shop where the couple was still dancing.

'How long ago was it? You told me about the beautiful blossoms on the Yamazakura trees across the station in the mountains. We'd talked about going there some time, perhaps bringing along Sanae and Mai. But before we got round to it, the line closed. And then I fell ill.'

Had I said such a thing? Perhaps I did. But when?

Before he could fully form a reply in his head, the sensation of Yuriko in his arms began to fade. Perplexed, he watched her gradually dissolve into that same

shadow-like figure. He tried to call out to her, but his voice was stuck in his throat.

The next thing he knew, Shingo was standing alone in the middle of the shop. Only the strains of music lingered, filling the room with its unwavering rhythm in three-four time. Its tempo had maintained perfect punctuality.

'So Did you manage to remember a few things?'

He turned around to find the girl standing with her hands clasped behind her. Shingo nodded silently.

'In that case, I believe it is time for you to return to your rightful place. Of course, I will not be accepting a payment. It was us, or rather the capricious Kobako, who chose you and invited you here. Besides, it was the book that opened up the passage and connected us. Let's just say that we were brought together by a series of coincidences.'

The girl bowed reverently to Shingo.

'The shop is called Sakura. I would be happy if you remembered it sometime. Although—'

The girl brought both of her hands up to her face, pressing her fingertips together. There was a touch of gravity in her eyes.

'It's absolutely fine if you don't. And, Mr Kikukawa – saying this makes me feel a bit presumptuous, but there's no need for you to be so afraid of forgetting. Once created, memories and words will never be erased. Even if you forget yourself completely, that will never mean that you did not exist. You see, when a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, it will still make a sound.'

At last, her smile returned to her lips as she said, 'It's still chilly in the mornings and evenings. Please look after yourself and take care not to catch a cold.'

From somewhere far away, he thought he heard the soft flop of a book closing.

Shingo had returned to the wheelchair by the Kawazu cherry tree. The book laid open on his lap, and his fingertip was almost exactly at the same spot where he had been tracing the words. For a moment, he sat there in shock, then, hastily

looked around him. But that building and the mysterious weeping cherry tree seemed to have completely disappeared.

Have I been asleep? he wondered, although it didn't feel at all like he had been. Cocking his head to one side, he noticed something draped over his shoulders. It was what looked like a woman's shawl. Judging by the sunlight, the day was already close to evening. A chilly breeze had picked up.

'Grandpa, you're awake.'

A voice came from behind him. Then, he saw his granddaughter peering over his shoulder.

'Hello there, Mai. Sorry, I seemed to have dozed off.'

Mai looked momentarily surprised before breaking into a bright smile.

'You recognise me?'

'Well, I suppose so.'

Indeed, compared to how he'd felt before he found himself in that shop, his mind was much clearer. He felt sure that he could retrieve the memories he wanted to hold on to. And Mai – she wasn't a little girl anymore. Her limbs had grown so long, and she was much taller than him now. It's all coming back to me, he thought. I know exactly who she is.

But deep inside, he also had a feeling that this clarity wouldn't last long. I'm sure my memory will start to fade again, he thought to himself. Yet, strangely, he didn't feel anxious.

'Hmm. It feels like we haven't seen each other for a very long time, but I'm guessing that's not the case.'

'You're right. I say hello to you pretty much every day. We see each other two or three times a day in the canteen. Although, usually, the most I get from you is a polite nod. If not, you just ignore me and look the other way.'

'Is that so? I'm sorry about that.'

'No need to apologise.'

His granddaughter smiled warmly. The contagious smile that brightened up everyone around her.

'Where is Sanae?' Shingo asked.

'Mum had to leave to get to her next appointment,' Mai told him.

'Guess what? I just saw your grandma.'

‘“A hundred years had passed”, eh?’ Mai joked, eyeing the book on Shingo’s lap.

‘I already did all of that with Yuriko.’

‘What?’

‘Oh, forget it.’

Squinting, Shingo moved his eyes to the Kawazu cherry blossoms.

‘Anyway, Mai, you’ve really grown up, haven’t you? No, I should say that you’ve become a truly admirable woman.’

After hesitating for a moment, Shingo turned to his granddaughter and spoke the words that came to his mind.

‘The way you’re always smiling – it’s not an easy thing to do, you know. You do it for me and the other old folks, don’t you? You keep smiling, so that you can brighten up our moods. You’re really something. I couldn’t do it myself.’

‘Well, I’m only doing what Grandma used to do.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Maybe you never noticed it because you only ever thought about work, even when you were at home. To arrive at your shift on time, you had to go to bed before a certain time, get up at a certain time and spend however many minutes on brushing your teeth. You would go on and on about this stuff. To tell you the truth, Grandma would sometimes complain, saying how obsessed you were with being on schedule. That you had a timetable not only for the trains you drove, but for yourself. She would of course be smiling as she spoke, though.’

His granddaughter’s carefree smile reminded him of his wife. Again, his words came flowing from his lips.

‘Mai, there’s a place I’d like to visit. Will you take me there while the cherry blossoms are still in bloom? I’d like Sanae to come, too.’

‘Sure. Let me guess – it’s a station in the mountains, isn’t it? Along the line you used to drive your train, where the beautiful Yamazakura trees are.’

‘How did you know?’

‘Well, I’m your granddaughter.’

Mai averted her eyes.

‘Actually, before Grandma passed away, when I went to see her in hospital, she mentioned to me that she never got to go. Although she was smiling, I

couldn't help but notice the sadness in her eyes. So I decided to look it up.

'I found out that after the train line closed, the station became quite difficult to access,' Mai continued, a smile reappearing on her lips. 'I think it was around that time that Grandma had wanted to visit. That railway is still disused, but the tracks on either side of the former station have now been turned into a footpath. You remember that the Yamazakura trees became famous at one point, right? Apparently, they've made a comeback and the place has been revived. It's become one of those Insta-worthy "secluded" stations – *hikyō* stations – as enthusiasts call them.'

Right, so it's my turn to fulfil a promise. Yuriko had come to me so that we could have our dance, after all.

'We can take my car there on my next day off. I'll also submit a request for the outing.'

Shingo smiled quietly at Mai's cheerful voice.

A few days later, the four of them – Mai and her husband, who took turns driving, Shingo and Sanae – set out for a day trip. Just as Mai had said, the area around the station had been transformed into a modern tourist spot with a newly built park, as well as stylish cafй́s and restaurants. The station building had been turned into a coffee shop, with seating set up where the platform used to be. It was the perfect spot for admiring the Yamazakura trees. Girls even younger than Mai were taking turns snapping photos of themselves on their phones.

Shingo's memory seemed to improve after his visit to that strange shop, but as the days passed, it gradually slipped back to the way it was before. More and more often, he stood at the serving counter without recognising Mai, only remembering her after he'd sat down. There were probably instances when he tucked into his meal, completely unaware that he'd overlooked his own granddaughter. Even so, for some reason, the sense of urgency that used to trouble him did not come.

Although only for a short while, they strolled along the footpath, with Mai and her husband taking turns pushing his wheelchair. The place where railway

sleepers had once been laid was now paved with flexible asphalt. The path, which was just wide enough to fit a train carriage, didn't feel so narrow, but that was only until they were faced with the task of passing another wheelchair. This required a certain level of consideration for each other, but such moments were when Mai was in her element. She spoke in such a cheerful, carefree way that even the grumpy-looking occupant of the other wheelchair smiled wryly at her.

Still, when Shingo took in the sight of the tall grass and overgrown thickets just past the paved footpath, a deep hopelessness filled his chest. There wasn't even the faintest chance that a train would ever pass through here again. That thought struck him with the inescapable truth that an era had come to an end. Had his former colleagues looked upon the same scenery? If so, what emotions did they feel?

The path also allowed access to the opposite platform, just beneath the Yamazakura trees. Mai, working together with her husband, pushed his wheelchair up the gentle slope. When they reached the top, he found that this side, too, had been completely renovated. Falling cherry blossom petals fluttered in the air like snowflakes.

'A hundred years had passed,' Shingo found himself saying, his lips moving on their own.

He no longer understood why he had recalled those words now. In fact, he couldn't remember where the line originated.

'There's no need for you to be so afraid of forgetting.'

Who was it that had said those kind words to him? Only the image of a burgundy hue had been imprinted onto his mind. He also faintly remembered there being a cat, one that looked like a big ball of fluff.

It seemed that the other three had not heard Shingo, as they were too immersed in the excitement of the cherry blossoms in full bloom. White petals whirled like confetti. As he watched on, suddenly, Mai widened her eyes. Delightedly taking her husband's hand, she placed it over her stomach. Sanae brought her hands together in a soundless applause.

Yuriko, my dear. Our beloved daughter and her little one have grown up so wonderfully, haven't they?

It was at that moment. The breeze that brushed his ears turned into words.

We're here together at last.

From somewhere, a soft, soundless voice seeped into Shingo's heart, warmth gently spreading through him. *Right, we're still together, aren't we?* Slowly, he surrendered himself to the weight of his eyelids.

'Grandpa? Are you asleep?' he heard his granddaughter say as he breathed out softly.

'Looks like he's having a nice dream. He's smiling.'

That voice came from his daughter.

'He is, isn't he? I can't remember the last time he smiled like this.'

Their voices were drifting away, slipping farther into the distance. Not wanting to let go, Shingo somehow parted his eyelids. Across the narrow haze of his vision, a single white petal fluttered from left to right, disappearing into nowhere.



INTERLUDE

THE SECRET HELD IN A NAME

AFTER SEEING the former train driver off, the girl put *Ten Nights of Dreams* back to where it belonged, then picked up the copy of *I Am a Cat*, which was stored right next to it. As usual, she pretended to clear her throat before opening the book.

"'I am a cat. My name is yet to exist—'"

But just as she began to read, she abruptly pressed her lips together and turned back to the cat, uncharacteristically knitting her eyebrows. It was as though she'd suddenly remembered something important.

'Hey, Kobako. You want to hear a really embarrassing story about me?' she said. 'You do, don't you? I know you do.'

Although the cat held her usual loaf pose, she opened one eye. Not all the way, but just enough to betray a flicker of curiosity. Her whiskers gave a single twitch.

'After I heard this opening line, for some time, I was convinced that the cat's name was "Yet-to".'

Seemingly disappointed by the story, the cat replied with a soft yawn.

'I suppose I first learned the line through my ears. I'm almost sure that it was my dad who read it to me. His intonation was probably a little off.'

The girl puffed out her cheeks.

'Had I been reading the text with my eyes, I don't think I would've made such a silly mistake. Also, I was far too young. I hadn't even started elementary school. You see, Dad wasn't the type of person who thought about these things. Perhaps

there's no such thing as being too young to read Sōseki, but *Botchan* would have been more suitable for a pre-schooler. Don't you agree?'

The cat didn't utter a sound. The girl put *I Am a Cat* back on the shelf, then, clasping her hands behind her back, she began to roam around the shop.

'And since I'm already on the subject, I'll just go ahead and say it. When I first met you, the name that immediately came to mind was "Yet-to".'

At this, the cat sprang to its feet, pulling a face like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over its head. The hair along the cat's spine had bristled.

'What do you think? Do you kind of wish that your name had been "Yet-to"?'

By the time the girl finished speaking, the cat was lashing its puffed-up tail back and forth, thumping it against the surface of the table. Clearly in a foul mood, the cat looked moments away from launching an attack.

'Oh, sorry. Are you upset? Is it really that bad?'

The girl didn't seem to be particularly bothered. Instead, she approached another bookshelf, and holding her finger in front of the spines, she began moving it across. It was time to pick a new book.

'Do you remember the day we met? You were sitting in your loaf pose, but as soon as I said hello, you did what you're doing now. One brave kitty you were! You weren't shy about trying to intimidate me, even though you were only this big.'

Now facing the cat, the girl stretched her index finger and thumb as far apart as possible. At most, it was about ten centimetres. The cat gave a short growl as if in protest. *There's absolutely no chance I was that small!* Then, apparently feeling calmer, the cat suddenly tucked its front and back paws under its body one by one, returning to its signature loaf pose.

'From the grey steel of the mental image,
The chocolate vines entangle in the clouds.'

Before long, a stream of words began to flow from the girl. Perhaps she was speaking to herself, but as if lost in a trance, she appeared to be unaware of her own voice.

‘Thickets of wild roses and wetlands rich in humus.
Patterns of distortion all around.’

The cherry blossoms in the shop had begun their quiet swaying. But then, the cat gave another brief meow when the girl’s fingertip passed above a particular book.

‘I guess this one is next?’

Kobako meowed again, this time for a little longer. It sounded like she was pleading for something.

‘This is a pretty lengthy book, though. Which bit do you want me to read? The part where the children take off into the sky? Perhaps the Mermaids’ Lagoon?’

The girl crouched down toward the cat as she spoke. The cat widened its eyes, directly meeting the girl’s gaze. Then came a series of *hmm* sounds like nods of agreement, not from the calico cat but from the girl herself.

‘I see. We’re having two guests, then. And they’re coming together? That’s unusual, isn’t it? Not quite the same as the husband-and-wife pair who were here earlier. Hmm, hmm. All right, then.’

With that, the girl pushed herself up, and, holding out the book reverently, she turned the cover. Letting out her signature *ahem*, she lowered the tone of her voice a notch and began reading out loud.

‘“The rock was very small now; soon it would be submerged.”’

The rhythmic beat of *Bolŭro* resonated alongside the girl’s voice, steady as the ticking of a clock.

THREE



'Only the gay and innocent and heartless.'

UPON KNOCKING on her big sister's door, she heard a brief 'Yep'. After a short pause, the door opened. Her sister's carpet was a faint blue, a colour she wouldn't describe as traditionally 'girly'. The only reason this caught her eye was because the room was practically empty. She noticed the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall.

'Sorry – you busy? Preparing for a house move must be hard work, huh?'

Dressed in a sweatsuit, her sister touched the rim of her black-framed glasses as she shook her head, saying that it wasn't as bad as she expected. *Liar*, Kaho thought bitterly to herself. Her sister had a habit of bringing her fingertip to her glasses whenever she was being dishonest. Did she really think that Kaho hadn't noticed? Maybe she didn't even know that she had developed such a habit. Not that any of that mattered. Again, Kaho kept these thoughts to herself as she brought up the topic she was here to discuss.

'So Got any plans tomorrow, Shiho?'

'Nope,' Shiho answered without missing a beat. Her reply was as curt as before, but this time, she didn't bring her hand up to her glasses.

'Apparently, the cherry blossoms along the river have opened – you know, the ones on our school route. Chii sent me a message about them. I was wondering if you wanted to see them – go for a little Hanami together?'

'Hanami? You mean just us two?'

'Well, we walked that route together for six whole years, but we didn't really get to see the cherry blossoms in full bloom, did we?'

'That's because we were usually on our spring break during peak season. We never went that way unless we were going to school.'

'Exactly. So I thought it might be nice for us to go there together, before you leave.'

'I don't mind.'

The two of them fell into silence. *Don't I get any credit for mustering up the courage to ask you?* thought Kaho. Then, she found herself saying something that even she didn't see coming.

'Is *that* all you have to say?'

'What?'

'It's just—'

Kaho stopped mid-sentence, too embarrassed to follow with the words that had floated into her mind. At the same time, she knew that this might be her only chance to say them.

'From April, we're going to start living apart from each other for the first time in our lives,' Kaho continued. 'In fact, since we're twins, we were together even *before* we were born. Don't you feel – something? At least a little bit emotional or sentimental or whatever?'

'Well, I guess I feel—' Shiho began. Then, touching her glasses again, she continued, '—like I need to thank the gods that I no longer have to worry about my ice-cream and *purin* suddenly disappearing.'

'That goes both ways.'

'And I don't deny that, but Tae-chan has definitely been found guilty before.'

Tae-chan was their mother. At some point, the two of them had stopped calling her 'Mum' or 'Mama,' and began using her name instead. If there was something that had prompted them to do so, Kaho could no longer remember. But she was pretty sure that it was Shiho's idea. At least, according to their mother, it was Shiho who'd suddenly called her that one day. Although, when this was mentioned to her, Shiho shrugged it off with a nonchalant 'Did I?' and that was the end of it. As for Kaho, she simply followed her sister's lead, never thinking much about it.

'Whatever,' Kaho said.

Then, holding up her hand, she continued, 'Anyway, we're going tomorrow. Don't forget.'

'Okay, then. Night.'

'Goodnight.'

Once Kaho was on her way, her sister gently closed the door.

When Kaho was younger, she believed that she and Shiho were two halves of a whole. In fact, according to their mother, even after they'd become old enough to be aware of the world around them, there were moments when she questioned whether the girls fully understood that they were two separate beings.

For instance, if Shiho finished her meal quickly, then Kaho, who had barely touched her food, would claim that she was full and stop eating. Other times, Kaho would fall and scrape her knee, and Shiho would start to cry, saying that she, too, felt pain in the same spot. There were even times when, if one of them had a particularly bad injury, say on her right knee, their mother would find mysterious welts on the other – also on the right knee.

However, whether it was because of her laid-back personality – she was, to put it positively, the happy-go-lucky type, and to put it bluntly, extremely naïve – their mother didn't find it particularly strange. It might have also been because she was a first-time mother, but whatever it was, she just dismissed it as twins being twins. Even their father wasn't too bothered, believing that one of them had scratched herself because she wanted to be the same as her sister. Still, their parents made sure that the two sisters were treated equally.

But then things began to shift, probably after they performed in the play at their preschool. Shiho was given the role of Wendy, while Kaho played Tinkerbell. Towards the beginning of the play, there was even a scene where Wendy and Tinker Bell – in other words, Shiho and Kaho – came to blows over Peter Pan.

At first, Kaho had been quite excited. Not only was she going to be playing a fairy, but she was also going to be wearing a costume that came with a pair of sheer wings. She probably even believed, at least for a little while, that they would give her the ability to fly. Wendy's costume, on the other hand, was a dull-coloured, rather normal-looking dress. Frankly speaking, Kaho had felt a little sorry for her sister.

Yet the more she learned about the story, the more she grew envious of Shiho. While he called her 'Tink' affectionately, to Peter, Tinker Bell was merely his loyal companion whom he took for granted. He was fond of Wendy, however, and she was therefore the one who got his special attention. Kaho also watched the Disney film at the time, only to find that Tinker Bell had been turned into a character with no lines.

Rehearsals for the school play would have been just a few hours a day for no more than a month. In this short period, Kaho was forced to experience the emotions that lay beyond likes and dislikes all at once – in other words, she had

begun comparing herself to her sister, and that had awakened feelings of superiority and jealousy in her.

But a big part of the reason why Kaho couldn't seem to forget about the performance was Shoma Hiiragi, the boy who played Peter Pan. Kaho was pretty sure that Shiho felt the same.

The next day came wrapped in pleasant spring sunshine. It was the last Sunday of March. That week, her sister would leave home and start living on her own in Tokyo. When she was accepted to medical school in the city – there weren't any within commutable distance from their house – their father had taken a day off work to help her look for a flat. They ended up choosing one that was close to the university. Kaho hadn't yet seen this so-called 'new home', but Shiho had mentioned to her that the building had incredibly tight security, which was exactly what their father had wanted. Meanwhile, Kaho was going to attend a junior college near home, and that was simply because it was the only school she'd been accepted into. Which was only to be expected, as, unlike Shiho, she had stopped taking her studies seriously after she passed the junior-high entrance exams.

It wasn't as though they had commuted to and from school together every single day. But still, this could be the last time they walked that path side by side. The night before, after her conversation with Shiho, Kaho had been thinking about what to wear for the occasion. Then, suddenly realising that she was acting as if she was preparing for a date, she smiled wryly to herself. In the end, she wore a denim skirt with a white knitted top and layered a moss-green cardigan over it. She decided to take a lightweight jacket with her just in case.

At breakfast, the two sisters agreed that they would leave by 9.30 a.m. As soon as it was time, Kaho went to the front door and waited for Shiho. When she appeared, Kaho was utterly astonished by what her sister was wearing.

'W-Why are you dressed in your school uniform?'

'I've packed most of my clothes away.'

'But not your uniform?'

'Well, I will never wear *this* to college, will I?'

Shiho had made a valid point.

'If you have an issue with it, shall I ask Tae-chan if I could borrow one of her outfits? If you're okay to wait while I get changed, that is.'

'That is the worst idea ever.'

'Did I just hear my name?' came their mother's voice as she emerged from the back of the house. She was wearing a black dress with a huge white lily on it. For a second, it gave the illusion that something was about to swallow her up. On her head was a headband covered in lace, sitting triumphantly like a seated passenger on a packed commuter train.

The sisters exchanged glances and silent words: *She wasn't wearing that this morning, was she? At least this one seems less flamboyant than some of her other outfits.* They nodded at each other in agreement.

'You're going out, right? Wouldn't you both like to wear something prettier?'

'No thanks, Tae-chan, we're good with what we're wearing.'

As Kaho hurried out of the door, she noticed a large tote bag slung over Shiho's shoulder. Aside from the jacket in her hand, all Kaho had with her was a small crossbody bag.

'Watch out for cars!' They heard their mother call out to them through the gap of the closing door.

Once they were on their way, the sisters spent some time chatting about their mother's style of fashion. The outfit she was dressed in earlier was what she considered everyday clothes. It was the kind of thing she wore while she cooked or even while she cleaned the toilet.

'Speaking of fashion,' said Shiho, "a lot of people think that "Lolita fashion" started in Japan, but apparently that's not the case.'

'Really? I mean, not that I'm particularly interested.'

'Decades ago, like in the 80s, there was a pop duo from the UK called Strawberry Switchblade. Apparently, that was their style. You know, black-and-white polka dot dresses and big hair accessories, that kind of thing. I say "Lolita" but I guess they were a bit more on the goth side.'

'And you know this because ?'

'Oh, well, whenever I get tired of studying and I need a little break, I like to look up random stuff online. For example, words that I'm familiar with but don't have a deep understanding of. These days, I've been reading about "neoteny", the Buddhist concept "*issai shujō shitsu u busshō*" and "sin-aplenty". The last one turned out to be a made-up word though – disappointing, really.'

Right, Kaho almost said, but instead cocked her head to one side. 'Wait a sec. That does not sound like a break to me.'

'Huh? Sure, it is. Using my head for something else, even for a little bit, helps me move forward when I feel like I've hit a dead end. Especially when it comes to things like maths.'

'And here I thought our mother was the only weirdo in the house.'

'Well, we're both Tae-chan's daughters. It must run in the family.'

'Not me. I'm a sensible person, like Dad.'

'That would be a stretch – we're *twins*, remember?'

As they walked along, the sun grew warmer and warmer. *I might not need my jacket after all*, Kaho thought briefly. Shiho was still speaking.

'Anyway, this word "neoteny" is so interesting. Broadly speaking, it means that there are certain creatures that retain childlike traits, even after they've grown into an adult. The axolotl is one of them. That's why they seem so cute to us, apparently.'

'Childlike traits?'

'You know those insects that turn themselves into cocoons? They look completely different before and after their transformation, right? Well, though very rarely, there are these moths that can reproduce while they're still caterpillars. And that's what they call "neoteny". I guess birds and mammals don't go through such dramatic transformations, but still, babies and adults look quite different, like the head-to-body proportions and stuff. Right?'

'True.'

'And that's when I remembered something I'd heard about cats, that only kittens communicate with their mother through mewing and meowing. Two cats almost never meow at each other. But over the long history of being domesticated, they learned to cry at humans even after reaching maturity. Evolution is probably not the right word, but it feels like it's something along those lines.'

'Were you always this nerdy, Shiho?'

'I can't help it. Textbooks and reference books have been my only friends for the past three years. Anyway, unfortunately, we can't stay kids for ever. It'll be our coming-of-age ceremony in no time.'

As their conversation went on, the story of the boy who never got to grow up surfaced in Kaho's mind. But in truth, it had always been there, quietly smouldering within her long before she knocked on her sister's door.

The Hiiragi family used to be their next-door neighbours. Since they were the same age, Shiho, Kaho and Shoma naturally moved through the same pre-school and elementary school together. For the sisters, the Hiiragis were probably the first people with whom they developed a close relationship outside of their own family. Shoma was an only child, and although Kaho and Shiho had each other, they didn't have any other siblings. And so the bond they shared was something that went a little beyond a typical childhood friendship.

However, as they progressed through each year of school, all of this began to feel bothersome to Kaho. As it happened, there wasn't a single year where the three of them were placed in the same class, and while they had frequently walked to and from school together in the first few years of elementary school, they gradually grew out of this, too.

But one day, as soon as Kaho got home, her mother told her that Shoma had passed away. It was just before the summer break of their fifth year in elementary school. Kaho was so stunned, she couldn't even take her school backpack off her shoulders. She just stood paralysed in the entranceway, unable to say anything. She still remembered the thought that struck her at the time. The realisation that things like this, the kind of things that were only supposed to happen in dramas and manga, can happen to her, to the people around her. For the first time in her life, she felt the precariousness of simply being alive. When she finally managed to move her mouth, she found herself giving a listless reply, then heading towards her room. 'Don't forget to wash your hands and gargle,' her mother chided her. Kaho could still recall the scene vividly.

Entering their room, she saw Shiho lying with her face down on the bed. Back then, they'd shared a room with bunk beds, switching between the top and bottom bunks on a monthly rotation. It had been Shiho's turn to use the bottom bed.

Have you heard? Kaho opened her mouth to say, but quickly shut it again. Her sister's shoulders were trembling. She hadn't made a sound, but she was crying. Noticing Kaho's gaze, Shiho slowly turned her body away. Her back towards Kaho, she lay there motionless, seemingly clenching her teeth.

Eventually, Kaho came to see that the boy might have occupied a place in Shiho's heart that was not the same as where he had been inside hers, but that wasn't until much later. And so, in that moment, she had no sense of what to say or do. Without saying anything, Kaho set her backpack down and got changed as quietly as possible, then quickly slipped out of the room. Making her way downstairs, she found her mother in the kitchen and asked if she needed a hand with anything. Her mother was wearing a dress covered in a strange pattern of dull-coloured plants that reminded Kaho of the Seven Herbs. She had felt such relief at the sight of her mother that this pattern became permanently imprinted in her mind. After this, Kaho couldn't bring herself to go back to their room, not until it was time to tell her sister that dinner was ready.

The following day, Kaho learned that Shoma had acute leukaemia. Thinking about it, their mother had once taken her and Shiho to visit him in hospital. It must have been in the winter of the previous year or early spring, just after the new school year. But no one had told her why Shoma was in hospital or why she had been brought there. Moreover, for some reason, she ended up being alone with him. She had no idea where her mother and sister had disappeared to. She didn't remember. But she wished that it never happened. Like a thorn stuck in her heart, that feeling remained deeply lodged within her.

'You know – I like you, Kaho-chan.' He had said it out of nowhere. 'Huh?' was all Kaho could manage. Maybe she had said something a little more, perhaps thanks, but the details were now hazy. Still, she remembered saying what immediately came to her mind: 'But you get along better with Shiho, don't you?'

The boy's face froze at those words. At least, that was what it seemed like to Kaho. A faraway look came to Shoma's eyes, his stare passing through her.

'Well, I guess I like you and Shiho-chan equally. If I could, I would marry you both.'

The boy broke into a smile. Taking this as a sign that he must have been joking, Kaho relaxed. But then, without thinking, she said something that she

shouldn't have. Even now, she couldn't bring herself to tell Shiho about the words that escaped her in that moment.

Nothing was the same after they received the news of Shoma's passing. From that point on, Kaho felt like she had carried a secret, one that she couldn't even share with her own family. As for her sister, she grew quieter as the days went on.

Mr and Mrs Hiiragi had moved away that same year, and Kaho's family hadn't heard from them since. It was during that summer holiday that their parents began strongly encouraging the sisters to attend the all-girls school that they ended up going to. Perhaps they felt that attending the local junior high school, which was right next to their elementary school, would make it harder for them to break away from the sadness. They would have had to walk more or less the same school route as well. The all-girls school, on the other hand, was in the opposite direction.

But, as one might expect, a long time had passed before Kaho understood such things. Once Shiho had made up her mind about applying to the school, she even helped Kaho study for the entrance exams. It was around this time that Shiho began to wear glasses. Kaho, hoping to go to the same school, also worked as hard as she could, and managed to pass. When the family walked the path together on the day of the induction ceremony, the cherry blossoms along the river, though past their peak, would still have been in bloom.

Now that they were in junior high, they were each given their own room. It was Shiho who persuaded their father. The room they had shared became Kaho's, and Shiho moved into the adjacent bedroom, which had previously been used as storage space. On the nights that Kaho checked, Shiho's light was almost always on, even as Kaho was getting ready for bed.

For some reason, the river along their school route was always teeming with carp. And it wasn't just the dull-coloured ones. There was also a group of vibrant nishikigoi adorned with patches of red, white and black, and even one in dazzling gold that looked like some kind of ancient lord. Every so often, someone would

toss in breadcrumbs or something similar, and the carp would swarm in from all directions, turning the river into a turmoil of ripples so violent that it almost made Kaho wonder if there might be a volcano erupting at the bottom of the river.

There was a time when the two of them would watch with great interest, but after six years, the novelty had completely worn off. On this day, however, the surface of the water was blanketed with fallen cherry-blossom petals, and beneath them, spots of red, white and gold swam across the water, creating a scenic view that felt unique to the season.

'Doesn't it look like something you see on a hanafuda card?'

'Maybe. Although I think it would be nicer if the water was clearer.'

Standing on the bridge, the two of them looked down at the carp as they chatted.

'Seriously, though, I can't get over the fact that you got into such a good university.'

'You could have done it too if you really wanted to, Kaho. I mean, we're mostly made from the same ingredients.'

'Did you just say "ingredients"?'

'Up until elementary school, we pretty much got the same grades. You got into the same junior high school as me, too.'

'I couldn't have done that without your help, though.'

Then Kaho bowed at Shiho and thanked her for looking after her so well. Shiho bowed back, playfully saying that she had looked after her very well indeed.

'Anyway, that was the hardest *I* ever worked. You never stopped studying though, even after you passed the entrance exam. You're so strict with yourself sometimes.'

'I guess ' Shiho said. 'By that time, I was already determined to get into medical school.'

Although Kaho knew this already, this was probably the first time she'd heard it from Shiho herself.

'And is that because—' Kaho began to ask, but without meaning to, she stopped in her tracks. Shiho, who was a few steps ahead of her, also paused and turned around to face her.

'Of course, it was because of what happened to Shoma-kun.'

The sisters found themselves locked in a gaze. Neither of them tried to look away. They couldn't. A carp suddenly jumped out of the water with a big splash, but they didn't so much as flinch.

Why was I left alone with him in that hospital room that day? Where had Mum and Shiho gone? Kaho had asked herself these questions, over and over again. But she still didn't have any answers. All she remembered was that suddenly, it was just the two of them, with him lying on the bed. It had seemed that he deliberately chose that moment, when Shiho was not there, to confess his feelings for her. And that had made her heart flutter, just a bit. But then, he had backtracked, saying that he liked both of them. Kaho had felt a little annoyed by this.

'But you get along better with Shiho, don't you?'

The boy's face was so pale, almost the same colour as the hospital bedlinen.

'I guess so. I admit I feel more at ease when I'm with Shiho-chan. I'm so nervous right now, my palms are unbelievably sweaty. But I can't choose.'

Shoma chuckled weakly.

Feeling somewhat proud, Kaho found herself saying, 'That's probably because you're not in love with anyone, not in the true sense. We're just kids, after all. And kids will never be adults – not until we grow up. I'm sure you'll be able to choose properly when you do, though. My dad chose my mum, you know. So for now, let's not think about who we like and stuff.'

They were Kaho's honest feelings. Around that time, the girls in her class had started playing around with make-up, and were often chatting excitedly about which classmate or idol they liked. Kaho had felt a little out of place, and this was part of the reason she had said such things. If Shoma hadn't died, then it would have just been one of those trivial moments, the kind that disappears entirely before it has a chance to leave any real impression.

But everything changed on that summer day.

Perhaps Shoma-kun never got to grow up because I treated him like a kid that day. Did my words somehow call fate upon him? Kaho knew that it was

impossible. That she was overthinking it. Even still, she couldn't suppress the emotions that lingered within her.

Ah. So this is why I invited Shiho out today – because I wanted to pour out these feelings to her. Although Kaho finally understood, she was at a loss for what to do next.

They kept walking along the riverbank, neither of them saying anything. *When did the payphone by the sweet shop disappear? Remember that greengrocer's dog that used to sleep in a cardboard box? That shop is gone now.* They should have been chatting away about these things, but the words wouldn't come.

Soon, they were approaching a row of cherry trees. As Kaho lifted her head, she was astounded by the sight before her. Although only for a moment, all her thoughts vanished as she gasped in wonder. When she finally glanced beside her, she saw that her sister, too, was moved by the scene. Under the dazzling light, Shiho squinted behind her glasses.

Spotting a bench, the sisters agreed that no Hanami was complete without a picnic and sat down. Shiho placed her tote bag on her knees and produced a bag of chocolates. She handed it to Kaho. They were those high-cocoa-content chocolates that claimed to help with drowsiness.

'Oh, yeah, I thought I'd give this back to you.'

Shiho pulled out a book from her bag. It was *Peter Pan and Wendy*.

Then she added, 'I found it while clearing out my room. And I thought, "Kaho used to like this book."'

'Oh? But wasn't it *you* who liked it, Shiho? That's why we kept it in your room, I think.'

'Seriously?'

'Well, I vaguely remember talking about it. I think we said that it didn't really matter which room it was in.'

'Come to think of it, we were sharing a room back then.'

'Yeah. We were excited to get the book, but then we were dismayed when we found out how long it was.'

'Dismayed? Look at you, pulling out the fancy vocabulary.'

'Hey, don't be mean.'

Placing both hands on the bench, Kaho arched her body and tilted her head back. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom.

'But anyway ' Kaho continued, 'I guess we're all grown up now – at least, mature enough to say things like "dismayed".'

'Well, yeah. Compared to when we were just starting pre-school or elementary school.'

The sun had climbed much higher than when they left the house that morning. Its rays reflected off the flowers, each of the white petals looking like a sparkling light.

'What were your lines again, Shiho?'

'Huh?'

'Don't you remember your lines in the school play?'

'Oh, *that*. Of course I don't remember.'

Kaho opened *Peter Pan and Wendy*, not choosing any particular part of the book. As her eyes wandered over to the text in the middle of the page, she thought: *Now would be the time to bring up Shoma-kun*. Shiho drew her face closer and peered into the book.

'"The rock was very small now; soon it would be submerged. Pale rays of light tiptoed across the waters "'

Which scene was this again? As Kaho pondered, Shiho tugged on her sleeve.

'Did you just hear that? I think it's a cat.'

Huh? Kaho strained her ears as she looked up. Although she could not hear anything, it seemed that the scenery had shifted in some way. As she gazed at the path she knew so well, something about it felt slightly off. Apparently feeling the same way, Shiho stood up and restlessly scanned her surroundings.

'Hey, look – over by the crossing. Has that building always been there?'

Turning her eyes in the direction Shiho was looking, Kaho saw a traffic light. Right beside it stood an unusually tall weeping cherry tree. Only the tree seemed to stand out from the rest of the scenery.

'Wait, isn't that tree kind of weird? I've never seen flowers in so many different colours on a single tree – not even on TV.'

Shiho was right. At that moment, Kaho finally heard it, too. A cat had cried. It was an earnest voice, like it was pleading for something or calling out to them.

The next thing Kaho knew, Shiho had taken her hand and was leading her towards the two-storey wooden building that she hadn't once seen in the six years she'd walked this path.

As they drew closer, it became apparent that the building was some kind of shop. Written in red and white chalk, the sign read, 'Sakura'. The sisters exchanged words with just their eyes: *We don't know this shop. No, this was definitely not here before.*

'What should we do?'

'It feels scary to go in, doesn't it?'

But before Kaho could reply, Shiho had already pushed the door open. Standing on her tiptoes, Kaho took a peek at the shop from behind her sister, who had popped her head inside. The scent of coffee drifted through the air, and music played softly in the background. It was *Bolĭro* by Ravel. She knew this because she had once listened to it during music class.

Shiho gripped Kaho's wrist and pulled her inside. At first, Kaho assumed that it was a coffee shop, but then she noticed that there were bookshelves everywhere, each crammed with books. She also spotted cherry-blossom branches in individual vases all around the room.

Mustering up the courage, she placed herself next to Shiho. A girl in a white blouse and a burgundy pinafore dress stood across from them. She was about the same height as them, and although she looked a few years older, she didn't seem to be wearing any make-up.

Holding an open book in front of her face, she was reading a passage from it:

'"Pale rays of light tiptoed across the waters; and by and by there was to be heard a sound at once the most musical and the most melancholy in the world: the mermaids calling to the moon."'

The girl looked up, a joyful smile rising to her lips. Her eyes darted back and forth between Kaho and Shiho.

'W-What is it?'

'Oh, it's just that I'd assumed that our next guests would be young children. That was quite shallow of me. Preconceptions are never good, are they? Anyway, you are both very welcome. Please take a seat.'

The girl gestured towards a two-person table topped with a sign that read 'Reserved'. It seemed that the same thought was going through the sisters' minds (*Wait, we didn't make a reservation!*), but since neither of them knew what else to do, they simply sat down across from one another.

Then, the girl placed a napkin and a coaster in front of each of them. Bringing her hand to her mouth, she formed a loose fist and gave a small *ahem* in a sweet voice.

'Now, then. The book you two were reading, the story of Peter Pan – also known as the boy who wouldn't grow up – was originally produced as a stage play. It was a big hit when it debuted in 1904, and quickly became a beloved Christmas tradition. Oh, and by the way, the line " no one can fly unless the fairy dust has been blown on him" is said to have been added three or four years later at the request of the London Ambulance Service. It was rumoured that lots of kids ended up at their doctor's after recklessly jumping from their beds. Not that I can blame them. I admit there was a time when even I believed that I could fly.'

Holding the book in one hand, the girl held up the index finger of her other.

'The play was novelised, by the playwright himself, as *Peter Pan and Wendy*, the book we have right here. Personally, my favourite part in this book is in the final chapter. It's where Wendy, who has become a mother, is asked by her daughter Jane, "Why can't you fly now, Mother?" And this is what she says.'

Reopening the book, the girl brought her fist to her face and gave another *ahem* before speaking with a dramatic intonation.

'"Because they are no longer gay and innocent and heartless. It is only the gay and innocent and heartless who can fly."'

Then, with a look on her face that said, *Well, what do you think?* she turned to the sisters. But all they could do in response was stare in stunned silence. *Exactly what is going on?* they both thought.

'Now, Miss Shiho Fukamachi and Miss Kaho Fukamachi.'

How do you know our names? Kaho tried to confront the girl, but Shiho held up her hand and stopped her.

'To tell you the truth, it was my friend who invited you both here. I believe you've both heard her voice already, but she would like to properly introduce herself.'

By the time the girl had finished speaking, a cat had leapt onto the sisters' table. It was a calico cat with an impressively long coat. Deftly navigating around the coasters and napkins, the cat walked past the sisters to a relatively spacious spot at the edge of the table. Then, turning around to face them, she lowered herself into a loaf pose.

'This is Kobako. Her real name is Kōbako with an elongated "kō", but I shortened it.'

As the cat yawned in response, it tilted its head back, and its collar came into view.

Indeed, the name written in kanji characters was 'Kōbako'.

'But what is this place exactly? Are we supposed to order something? Or is this a bookshop?'

'Well, I suppose we are a bookshop, but we also serve coffee. To put it simply, it's a bit of a strange shop. But it doesn't matter if you buy anything. It's just that by coincidence, you happened to open the same page of the same book I was reading, and so the passage became connected. I say "coincidence", but actually, it was kind of deliberate.'

'I honestly have no idea what you just said.'

Acknowledging this, the girl pointed her index finger and tipped her head to one side.

'I mentioned this to another customer before, but the service we offer is kind of like letting people win the lottery even when they haven't bought a ticket. The world needs a bit of that. This one thinks so, too.'

The cat, opening just one eye, gave a sleepy meow. Kaho and Shiho gazed back and forth between the girl and the cat.

'Each of you has something you want to know, something you want to confirm, and if possible, something you'd like to confess to each other today, am I right?'

Kaho and Shiho exchanged glances. Shiho's mouth was agape, forming an 'O' shape.

'And if that is the case, the easiest thing to do is for you to go and take things into your own hands. Oh, for the record, things like this don't happen every day.

But it's also true that unexpected things *do* happen, as experienced by the author of this book.

'He was inspired to create the story of a boy who never grows up after meeting five brothers at his local park. When he turned it into a play, it became a huge success. Then, when the parents of those five boys tragically passed away, he ended up becoming their guardian, one by one. There are more miracles in this world than we tend to believe, you know. The fact that you two were born twins is one of them.'

Then, tilting her head, the girl said, 'Seeing is believing,' before turning to the cat. 'Over to you, Kobako.'

At last, both of the calico cat's eyes were wide open. Rising to her feet atop the table, she gave a long, lingering meow.

'Oh, I almost forgot. You'll feel a little bit dizzy at first, but please don't worry, it's nothing serious.'

The girl's voice began to distort midway through. At the same time, Kaho felt a deep discomfort take hold inside her, as though her heart alone was being gripped forcefully. *What's so 'little' about this?* she wanted to say. But before she could protest, she was hit by a sensation that felt like she was being hurled away somewhere.

The next thing she knew, Kaho was standing in a corridor. Judging from the smell, she was inside a hospital. *What's happening?* she thought, and turned to her sister. But what she saw was truly unexpected. Her sister was a child; she didn't even look old enough to be in the upper years of elementary school. And the fact that she wasn't wearing glasses yet was proof of this. Her hands clasped behind her, the young girl stood with her head down and her eyes fixed on the linoleum floor.

Outside the nearest hospital room, four names had been written by hand. One of them was 'Shoma Hiiragi'. Kaho noticed someone holding her hand. It was her mother. She was wearing a navy-coloured skirt, a white blouse and a green cardigan. Kaho had almost never seen her dress so modestly.

'We're here. I know you haven't seen Shoma-kun in a long time, but don't get too carried away, okay? Don't forget that we're in a hospital. And you too, Kaho-chan, don't go wandering around on your own.'

Kaho was perplexed. Her mother had turned to her sister when she called Kaho's name. Could it be that Tae-chan couldn't actually tell them apart? For a moment, she thought that this might be the case, but that seemed impossible. Kaho took a closer look at the young girl in front of her – the girl she thought was Shiho. It was then that she realised. That she remembered. What the girl was wearing was the outfit that Kaho herself had worn that day.

So I'm inside Shiho's body on that day. But is that even possible? Unable to make sense of it, her gaze wavered until it met the eyes of the other girl – the one who seemed to be herself. It was at this moment that she realised where Shiho was. She must be in *that* place. Kaho was almost sure of it.

But it didn't seem like her present self – the one who had just graduated from high school – was controlling the young Shiho's body. In fact, contrary to Kaho's intentions, the young Shiho suddenly tugged at her mother's sleeve and said:

'I want to go and talk with Shoma-kun for a bit. Is it okay if you and Kaho wait for me here? Actually, can you go to the waiting room and see what drinks they have?'

Rather than answering straightaway, for a moment her mother dropped her gaze and silently stared at her. Then, she directed her attention to the young Kaho and asked, 'What about you, Kaho-chan? Is that okay with you?'

'Me? I'm totally fine with that.'

Then her mother took the young Kaho's hand and began to walk away from the room. The young Shiho was now alone. All that Kaho could do now was 'watch' how things unfolded from inside Shiho's body. The one thing she had sensed, albeit vaguely, was that the young Shiho was acting with a firm sense of purpose.

'Hey, Shiho-chan.'

Shoma smiled weakly as she approached his bed.

'How are you feeling? You seem like you're quite unwell.'

'Uh Neither good nor bad, I guess. The dizziness is getting better, though.'

'That's good.'

From the way the conversation was going, Kaho gathered that Shoma must have told Shiho more about his illness than she'd imagined. As this thought occurred to Kaho, Shoma averted his eyes slightly and said:

'So I've been thinking about it, about what the doctor said. I don't think I'll be able to live much longer.'

'Stop it. We don't know that, right? I'm sure you'll get better.'

'Yeah The thing is, I want to tell Kaho-chan that I like her. Before it's too late. But I wonder if that would put a burden on her. What do you think, Shiho-chan?'

Kaho felt Shiho's chest tighten painfully as his words tore through her heart. *What's happening?* she wondered, but the answer came to her immediately. That was how deeply her sister had loved him. But since when? Could it be that she already had feelings for him when she played Wendy? As such questions ran through Kaho's mind, she heard the voice of young Shiho.

'Okay, then. I'll help you. Let's make sure you don't have any regrets, shall we? In fact, this is exactly the reason I asked Mum to bring along Kaho today. So let's do this – you tell her how you feel.'

When she finished speaking, Shiho laid her hand over his.

Shiho then went out to get her mother and young Kaho. Pushing only Kaho into the room, she took her mother's hand and guided her away. *So this is why I ended up alone with Shoma-kun in that room* – as Kaho recalled this, the young Shiho, who had led her mother to the vending machines at the end of the corridor, stopped walking. Then, telling her mother to wait there, she turned on her heel.

'Wait – Shiho-chan?'

Her mother tried to follow her. And without meaning to, Kaho let the words 'It's fine, Tae-chan' slip from her mouth. The voice came out of the young Shiho. Kaho assumed that this was because Shiho's mind was no longer present.

'Huh? Shiho-chan, did you just call me "Tae-chan"?'

Leaving behind her flustered mother, she hurried back towards the hospital room. The young Shiho desperately wanted to know the outcome of the boy's confession – Kaho could feel it so intensely, it was almost painful.

But when she finally peeked into the room, she quickly pulled her head back. Although she couldn't be sure, it felt like she had accidentally met Shoma's eyes. Pressing herself against the wall in the corridor, she listened as Shoma continued to speak.

'Well, I guess I like you and Shiho-chan equally. If I could, I would marry you both.'

Now Kaho understood. Shoma had known that Shiho was listening. That was why he had pretended like he couldn't choose between them. And her sister regretted making him say such a thing.

Why did I have to go back?

The sound of Shiho's pounding heart boomed through her, and Kaho could feel every beat as if it were her own.

At that moment, the world around her suddenly jolted. A great force gripped Kaho, and almost instantly pulled her back to the shop, where she found herself sitting across from Shiho.

At first, it felt incredibly awkward to meet her eyes, and Shiho seemed to feel the same way. They each looked around in search of something to focus on, their gazes eventually synchronising on the cat on the table. The cat, opening just one eye, gave a small cry.

Shiho kept her face turned away from Kaho as she finally broke the silence.

'I'm sure you know by now, but that day, I was standing outside the room – I had gone back. And that's why Shoma couldn't tell you that he liked you the best. Maybe he realised how I felt about him. I've always wanted to apologise to you about that.'

'None of that is your fault, Shiho. I'm the one who should apologise.'

'But for what?'

'I had no idea how you felt about him. And you heard me, right? I told Shoma-kun that he was still a kid, that he couldn't be an adult. If I hadn't said something like that, then maybe he could have grown up—'

'What? That's ridiculous. You're overthinking it.'

'I know that. But still—'

'Is that what you've been thinking all this time?'

'I suppose so '

'I wish you had told me but I guess you couldn't, especially not to me.'

'No, not really.'

'Yeah '

'But you must feel a little bit better now,' a voice interrupted.

It was the girl in the burgundy pinafore dress, suddenly standing right beside them. A satisfied grin had spread across her face.

'Looks like you two are going to be just fine now. In fact, I don't think there was anything we needed to worry about in the first place. Even if we hadn't been brought together in this way, I'm sure that the thorn in your hearts would have found its way out. If not, it probably would have dissolved away without you even knowing. But I suppose we – me, my little companion and this shop – are what you'd call peddlers. We draw in customers and push miracles onto them.'

The girl bowed deeply.

'Now, I believe it is time for you to return to the world you've come from. It's still chilly in the mornings and evenings. Please look after yourselves, and take care not to catch a cold as you each embark on your new student lives. Oh, and I will not be accepting a payment, of course. But some day, if you happen to remember that this shop was named Sakura, then that would make me very happy indeed.'

After the girl finished speaking, a beat passed before the soft flop of a book closing echoed from somewhere in the distance.

For a while, the girl kept her eyes fixed on the spot where the twins had been.

'They're lovely, aren't they? They seem to share a deep bond with each other.'

Stretching her arm to the side, she laid her hand on the cat's head.

'I've got someone like that, too, someone who's like my other half. Well, you're also special to me, but in a different way.'

The cat responded by firmly pressing its head against the girl's hand.

'That's right. You know her well, too, don't you? She means the world to us '

Now, the calico cat's eyes were half closed. Unlike her usual self, she purred affectionately.

Before they knew it, the sisters found themselves sitting on the bench by the riverbank. Cherry-blossom petals were dancing in the air. 'Oh,' they said in unison as they exchanged glances, stretching their arms towards one another. Both sisters

had flower petals all over their hair. In the end, they shook their heads and brushed the blossoms off themselves. Kaho was the first to ask:

'How long do you think we were in that shop for?'

'No idea.'

'What *is* that place, anyway?'

Shiho held out her palms and shrugged her shoulders.

Then, she said, 'Probably exactly as that girl said.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's a bookshop, it's a coffee shop, and it's a peddler of miracles.'

'A peddler?'

'Yeah. That's what she said.'

'But peddlers don't have shops like that, do they?'

'*That's* the part that concerns you?'

The sisters looked at each other and laughed wryly. At that moment, Shiho sneezed. Perhaps she had caught a chill in the short time they'd been sleeping? But were they sleeping, though? Remembering the jacket she'd brought with her, Kaho offered it to Shiho, who immediately accepted it.

Slipping her arms through the sleeves, her sister muttered, 'Let's just say that we both had a little nap and leave it at that.'

As Kaho sat there, unsure of what to say, Shiho continued, 'I'm sure we share the same dreams all the time. We're twins, after all.'

Slightly pouting her lips, Kaho replied, 'Maybe so.' But if that were the case, it would mean that they were both ruminating about what happened in the hospital at the exact same time. *How corny is that?* she thought, suddenly flushing with embarrassment. And they both knew well that there was only one person they could rely on in such awkward situations.

'Tae-chan—' the sisters said in perfect harmony.

Each syllable was impeccably synchronised, so much so that they were even surprised themselves. 'Ugh, why are twins like this?' they said, again almost simultaneously.

'Anyway, how long do you think she's going to keep dressing like that?'

'I doubt she'll stop anytime soon. Although, her crow's feet are getting pretty serious.'

'You should tell her then, Kaho.'

'I'm not going to tell her that. Maybe she'll realise if I make her a grandma – have a shotgun marriage or something.'

'Wait a sec, Kaho – are you seeing someone? Since when?'

'Obviously not? We're living under the same roof – you would have known if I was.'

'Why did you randomly bring up "shotgun marriage", then? You nearly gave me a heart attack. There's usually at least a boyfriend in the picture when people start mentioning kids and marriage, you know. How is it that you think of yourself as a "sensible person" and me a "weirdo"? You really make me laugh.'

She sure does like to hold a grudge, Kaho thought. But instead, she said, 'Don't you laugh at me.'

Shiho's expression turned serious at that moment. Kaho knew that it wasn't because she was obeying her.

'If I'm honest, though, I don't really understand love or being in love anymore. But I'm pretty sure that what I felt at the time was real. It came from the deepest part of my heart. I sincerely wanted to protect him, to be there for him, to save him. But in the end, I couldn't do anything, and then he was gone '

The emotion, that sense of helplessness that Shiho felt in the hospital corridor came rushing back to Kaho.

'And that's the reason a part of me feels like I'm done with all of that.'

'I mean for now, of course,' her sister added.

To which Kaho responded, 'I guess we can't predict the future.'

Averting her gaze, Shiho looked up at the cherry blossoms. 'So, if you are interested in this whole getting married and having kids thing, then that's great news for me – I mean, I'd be so grateful.'

At a loss for a reply, Kaho told her again that no one can predict the future.

'Time to go home?'

'Yeah. I'm getting hungry.'

So they agreed, and got to their feet. As they did so, Shiho began to speak.

'By the way, I forgot to mention something earlier. Apparently, there's a theory that humans are also neotenous. You know how we have relatively less body hair and bigger heads? These are typical traits of juvenile mammals, you see. And that

got me thinking. If that theory is true, then the people who have chosen to live their entire lives as children must be the ones who started playing around with words. They're the ones who created a distinction between adults and children, and invented such a term as "neoteny", and began diligently analysing themselves as well as other creatures. And that made me go, "How funny is that? It's like one massive comedy, right? Or maybe it's a bad joke." But yeah that's all, really.'

As she listened to Shiho in a daze, Kaho was also thinking to herself.

Eventually, I will forget about the boy who never got the chance to grow up. While I may never forget him completely, I will find a place for him somewhere deep inside my heart and keep him locked away. But my sister will not; Shiho will forbid herself to forget. She will forever resent the passing of time as she and Shoma grow further and further apart in age.

It's all equally tragic, Kaho thought. *For me, for Shiho, and most of all for him.*

The whole way home, Kaho couldn't get these thoughts out of her mind. The surface of the river was scattered with cherry blossoms. A school of small fish – different from the carps – glimmered in the sunlight.

As soon as they walked through the door with a '*Tadaima*', they heard the sound of their mother's slippers flapping against the floor as she came running towards them. Instead of greeting them with '*Okaerinasai*', she spread out her arms and exclaimed, 'Ta-da! Isn't this outfit *so* cute? It arrived today. I was so excited, I had to put it on straightaway.'

Their mother was wearing a different set of clothes from when she saw them off. This time, it was a trouser suit with faint pink stripes over white.

'Shiho-chan, there's going to be an induction ceremony at your university as well, right? I'm thinking of wearing this. What do you think?'

'Yeah, why not?'

Taken aback by her sister's cool response, Kaho gave her profile an icy glare.

Shiho continued, 'But Dad mentioned to me that he would come to my ceremony, and send you to Kaho's. The dates are so close together, he said it'll be tricky for both of you to attend both ceremonies.'

What? Where did that come from? Flustered, Kaho began to say, 'Is that for real?' But her mother interrupted.

'Really? He hasn't told me any of this!' she said.

'He said that he didn't really have a choice because "Tae-chan might not be able to get back here safely from Tokyo on her own." I think he has a point, to be honest.'

'But you'll be with me, Shiho-chan. So I'll be fine.'

'I don't think you've thought that plan through.'

Their mother considered this for some time. Then, she eventually said, 'Oh, I see. I'll be on my own on the way back, won't I?' Nodding triumphantly, Shiho proceeded to make the most outrageous remark.

'Also, Kaho is going to make you a grandmother soon, so you might want to start preparing yourself. Your outfits are a bit much, to be honest.'

'Huh? Shiho, what the—'

'*Ohh?* Kaho-chan, do you have a special man in your life, then? You don't tell me anything.'

Their mother puffed out her cheeks and puckered her lips sulkily.

I guess that Tae-chan Mum *will probably never change,* Kaho thought silently. *And she gets to be the way she is because Dad takes care of her so wholeheartedly. I wonder if a day would come when my heart would fill with this kind of overwhelming, almost painful warmth for someone.*

Kaho looked at her sister out of the corner of her eye. Her sister, who had passed through such emotions much too young, long before Kaho realised it. All of a sudden, she felt a deep affection for her. The intense emotion that welled up from within her strangely carried a trace of nostalgia.

Catching Kaho's gaze, her sister raised her eyebrows ('What?'), to which Kaho responded with just her head ('Nothing.').

Then, putting on the cutest voice she could muster, she said, 'What's for lunch, Tae-chan? I'm so hungry.'

'Omelette rice topped with hamburger steak. I went all out today.'

It was then that Kaho noticed her mother was wearing disposable gloves. The sisters made their way to the bathroom to wash their hands. Next to the bathtub, the white lily dress they'd seen that morning had been left to soak in the washbasin. It appeared to be an attempt to remove a stain – there was a ketchup mark on the chest of the dress.

Peering over her shoulder, Shiho said, 'She's quite organised when it comes to these things, isn't she? She does it straightaway.'

'She's just obsessed with her clothes,' Kaho snorted.

'But maybe it's a quality worth emulating.'

'I'd rather learn to cook from her. But wait—'

'What?'

'Did she get changed with her gloves on?'

'I guess so. She must have forgotten to take them off.'

'See? That is not a quality I wish to emulate. That outfit is brand new, right? She must have bits of raw mince stuck to it.'

'Maybe it's okay-ish because the pink will camouflage it? Kind of?'

After that, the three of them had lunch together. The demi-glace sauce poured over the omelette rice was a little on the rich side, just how her sister liked it. Their mother, who was sitting opposite them, eventually asked, 'What would you like for dinner, Shiho-chan?' For a moment, Kaho wondered why she was being left out, but soon realised that her sister wouldn't be eating their mother's cooking for much longer. *Mum must be conscious of how many more times she'd have the chance to cook for her,* Kaho thought.

That afternoon, Kaho spent some time alone in her room.

'It is only the gay and innocent and heartless who can fly.'

Just as she lay down on her bed, the girl's voice resonated through her.

I wonder if we can still fly.

If so, is that a good thing?

As her thoughts wandered, Kaho dozed off for a little while. It was a dreamless sleep.

After dinner, Kaho knocked on her sister's door again. When it opened, the room looked even barer than the night before, but it somehow felt a little warmer.

'I think you should keep this, Shiho.'

As Kaho said so, she tentatively held out *Peter Pan and Wendy*. Glancing down at the book, Shiho touched her glasses with her fingertip.

'No, thanks. You keep it. It'll look out of place in a medical student's room.'

Kaho was tempted to argue back, but thought better of it.

'Fine. Can I put it in your room after you've moved out, then?'

'I suppose so—'

Shiho told her that she could put it on the bookshelf on her desk after she'd left. Kaho nodded and said that she would.

'So, is that all? Or was there something else you wanted to say?' her sister said as she lowered herself back into her desk chair.

Shiho's tone suggested that she was happy for Kaho to leave her room now, and so Kaho defiantly plonked herself down on the floor. She placed the book beside her. Since her sister had asked, Kaho began to speak the words that popped into her head, but now, she started to wonder if this was, in fact, why she had knocked on her door in the first place.

'After you leave, we may never sleep under the same roof again—'

'Actually, I plan on coming home for all the big holidays as well as during my breaks, so that definitely won't happen. Unless of course, you plan on eloping with the imaginary father of your imaginary child. I guess it also depends on how busy I'll be with my studies, but '

'You're missing the point. What I'm trying to say, is that well, I thought that maybe we should like hug? You know, to mark the occasion or something.'

'A hug? Now? You and me?'

'Come on, just this once.'

'If you insist. It's the request of my precious little sister, after all. I'll do it, for you.'

But then, Shiho crossed her arms on her chest.

'If we're going to do this, let's make a bet,' she continued.

'What?'

'I would say chances are very slim – not even one in a million – but if one of us starts to cry, then that person loses.'

'I'm in. What are we betting?'

'How about something like, even if your ice-cream goes missing, you have to turn a blind eye?'

'What about taking a photo in one of Tae-chan's fanciest outfits? That's a consequence you'd want to avoid.'

'But if Tae-chan found out, she'd make us both get dressed up.'

'True. Let's go with the ice-cream, then.'

Shiho got out of her chair and sat across Kaho.

'Ready?'

'Let's go.'

In similar motions, they both spread their arms wide and wrapped them around each other's backs in a tight embrace. For a while, they stayed that way in silence. It was Kaho who spoke first.

'Take care, okay? Don't forget to eat properly. And you know that you can message me anytime, right?'

'Thanks. You take care of yourself, too. Oh, and please look after Tae-chan and Dad.'

'Okay. Hey, Big Sis—'

Kaho choked on her words. Her sister gently patted her back.

'I haven't even told Dad yet, but as soon as I get my medical licence, I plan on going straight to America to study.'

Well, well. My big sister is still determined to fly, after all. Suddenly, Kaho felt the urge to laugh. When she did, tears began to spill from her eyes. There was a gentle push on her shoulders before her sister's face appeared right in front of hers. Shiho reached her hand out and gently wiped her tears away.

'Well, I will be claiming that Hдagen-Dazs tomorrow. That was the deal.'

As Shiho spoke triumphantly, she, too, had a damp glimmer at the corner of her eyes. But for once, Kaho pretended not to notice. She figured that it would make the perfect parting gift.



INTERLUDE

THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

THE SHOP WAS TUCKED AWAY in a place beyond anyone's understanding.

In front of it stood a mysterious, weeping cherry tree.

The tree was bursting with blossoms in every imaginable shade of red and white.

When a gust of wind swept through the flowers in full bloom, they blended together then parted again, at times creating a swirl of colours. As the colour spectrum moved from white to red, and red to white, the tree pulsated like life itself. Perhaps this was how the tree created the flow of time in this place.

Or perhaps this was the work of the gods. But this place lay within a world beyond our understanding, where no one could know the truth.

Such were the words that filled the squares of his manuscript. But that was where his right hand stopped, refusing to move any further. The stiffness in his wrist was close to pain, and he was now aware of a similar tightness that had crept inside his chest as well as between his eyebrows. A deep sigh escaped his lips.

Resignedly, Kazuhiko Tonami rose from his chair and rolled his neck and shoulders to loosen them. He couldn't, however, rid himself of the sense that something was clinging to him. Whatever it was, it had been there for a long time.

Kazuhiko looked down at the centre of his desk where his partially written manuscript lay spread out. Behind it was a photo frame. Nestled inside the oak rectangle was an image of a woman dressed in a burgundy pinafore dress, smiling

at the camera while cuddling a long-haired calico cat. Once again, his eyes were drawn to the photo, unable to look away. Nearly ten years had passed since this had become the only place he could see her. And still, he found himself wishing that he could hear her voice just one more time.

A part of him wanted to believe that as long as he didn't give up, hope would not fade. Yet at the same time, he feared that unless he accepted reality, he would remain stuck, unable to move forward with his life. The thought unsettled him, especially when he considered his only daughter. He could hardly believe how long her limbs had grown. She was certainly not a toddler anymore. In fact, she was now old enough to help him with the housework – something even he had yet to master.

Eventually, he twisted around exaggeratedly, forcing himself to turn away from the desk. Then, he began to circle the room, wearing an incomprehensible expression that hovered somewhere between uncertainty and irritation. Kazuhiko had no idea how much time had passed when he eventually stopped by the wall on the west side of the room. It was entirely occupied by a bookcase with two sliding glass doors which could be locked at the point they met. Kazuhiko stood there deliberating until he finally pulled a set of keys from a drawer and unlocked it.

As soon as he slid the doors open, a musty smell escaped into the room. Perhaps it was something that the passage of time had released – something that had been trapped inside until now. Behind the glass doors was a collection of books that looked like they'd been there for ever. Choosing a book, Kazuhiko drew it off the shelf. It was *Spring and Asura* by Kenji Miyazawa.

More intensely than the wind-instrument of noon,
When traces of amber are poured,
The bitterness of anger, the blue of anger.

Kazuhiko traced the lines with his eyes. It was the poem she loved the most. He read the lines over and over again in silence, occasionally muttering the words under his breath. The light in his eyes gleamed desperately, as though he was searching for something.

Outside the window, the season was spring. Cherry-blossom petals fluttered one by one, quietly floating across the square of the scenery and vanishing entirely.

FOUR



'Beneath the light of the atmosphere in April.'

KOZUE TONAMI suddenly found herself standing in front of the shop.

A weeping cherry tree shaped like a bell stood before her. *But is it really a cherry tree?* she had to wonder. It didn't look artificial by any means, but something about it struck her as different from the plants she was used to seeing.

Now in peak bloom, the tree was adorned with flowers in every imaginable shade of red and white. The colours seemed to transition gently from one hue to the next, beginning in pale white at the top and deepening into vivid reds as her gaze travelled downwards. At eye level, the blossoms were painted in a rich scarlet reminiscent of a camellia flower. As the branches stirred in the breeze, the colours twisted and marbled into a wondrous pattern too magnificent for words. Overwhelmed by its beauty, Kozue almost forgot to breathe. She was certain that she had never seen anything like it before, not in a photo or a video, let alone with her own eyes.

But if so, where in the world am I?

And what am I doing here?

She nearly laughed at her own thoughts, realising that they sounded like something an amnesiac character might say in some sort of story.

But she couldn't help it – everything had happened so abruptly. The only thing she could recall was her own name. Although, the fact that she remembered that much gave her a small sense of relief. She didn't know anything more than that, except that she had come to a place that she didn't recognise. She had no recollection of what she was doing before this. It was as though she had been thrown into another world. Maybe she was asleep and had suddenly entered an impossibly realistic dream, she thought.

Still, little by little, Kozue regained her senses. She felt a similar sensation to that of waking up in the morning as her mind began to clear. It wasn't that she had completely lost her memory, she realised. But rather, she was in a state of confusion because she seemed to have forgotten how to retrieve her memories.

Glancing down, she saw that she was dressed in her junior-high-school uniform – a dull blazer in a drab shade of grey. She'd hated it ever since she first laid eyes on it. Strangely, it felt like it had been a long time since she last wore it.

Taking another good look at her surroundings, she noticed a building behind the weeping cherry tree. It was a wooden structure that resembled a traditional

Japanese house. A bronze weathercock was perched on the ridge of the roof, puffing out its chest as it quietly announced which way the wind was blowing.

She turned her gaze down again. From where she stood, there was a pathway leading to the entrance of the building. The path was completely blanketed in colourful cherry-blossom petals. A sign stood outside the building, suggesting that it was some kind of shop. She squinted as she tried to make out the letters on the sign. It was at this moment that the door swung open, and a girl emerged holding a broom and a dustpan. She was wearing a burgundy pinafore dress and a white blouse.

An odd sensation washed through Kozue. At first, she thought that a mirror had suddenly appeared before her. It was a similar feeling to when she looked at the reflection of herself in the mornings as she fixed her hair by the bathroom sink. Her intuition told her that the person standing in front of her was someone she knew.

At the same time, she was just as certain that the person was not Kozue herself. Judging from her appearance, she was a bit older than a junior-high-school student. She also recognised her outfit. Where did I see it ?

'Oh—'

But it was the girl who spoke first. After taking her time to examine Kozue from head to toe, she broke into a beaming smile.

'Oh, I'm so happy. You're here at last.'

Letting go of her broom and dustpan on the spot, the girl scurried over to Kozue, kicking up the cherry-blossom petals as she went. Stretching both arms forward, she took Kozue's hands in hers and shook them up and down enthusiastically. Now that Kozue was looking at her up close, she could clearly see how much they resembled each other.

'I've been waiting for you. For a long, long time. Nothing can start unless you come here, you know.'

'Huh? What are you—'

Kozue finally managed to speak. Thankfully, her throat seemed to function properly in this world, too. And the voice that echoed through her ears sounded so similar to her own that, for a second, she couldn't tell who'd spoken.

'I was getting quite tired of waiting for you, to be honest. Hey, Kobako, you too, right?'

Kozue flinched when she heard the name 'Kobako'. In the meantime, the girl nonchalantly turned around, facing the entrance of the shop. Then, through the door that had been left open, a single cat sauntered into view. It was a calico cat with unusually long fur. As soon as it acknowledged Kozue, the cat walked right up to her and began rubbing its head just below her knees. Maybe because the cat was on the large side, it was surprisingly strong. Kozue had to plant her feet to keep her balance as it pressed against her.

She had assumed from the very beginning that this was all a dream. Although, everything – the girl's voice, the warmth of the cat – felt so real, it was almost enigmatic. And even if this were a dream, she had to admit that her mood had lifted from being welcomed so wholeheartedly. Still, a part of her wondered if she was really inside a dream.

It was just then that she finally managed to read the letters on the sign. The name handwritten in red and white chalk on the greenboard was 'Sakura'. *I knew it,* she thought. But what she 'knew' wasn't immediately clear to her.

Sakura was the name of someone who had almost faded from Kozue's memory – her mother.

Her mother went missing when Kozue was five years old. It wasn't a memory of her own, of course. It was something she had learned through her ears – through listening to stories that others had told her. She was so young at the time, Kozue had no recollection of how she'd felt when the person she loved was suddenly taken away from her.

Since Kozue had lost her mother, just as she was beginning to become aware of the world, the way she imagined her was shaped by the photograph in her father's study. In the photo, her mother was wearing a white blouse and a burgundy pinafore dress. A large calico cat was held in her arms. The cat looked rather unimpressed, probably because it had been picked up against its will. But even so, she could tell that the cat had relaxed its legs, completely entrusting itself to Kozue's mother.

The cat originally belonged to her mother and was named Kōbako. This was also something Kozue had heard rather than remembered. Apparently, her mother

simply called her 'Kobako' without the elongated 'kō'. According to her father, this Kobako acted like Kozue's big sister ever since she was born. Sometimes they even asked the cat to keep an eye on her, and Kobako would move to a spot where she could overlook the crib and settle into a loaf pose. She would stay in that position until she was asked to do something else.

Another photo that Kozue was familiar with was the one of her mother holding her as a newborn. She often wished that she could remember when and where the picture was taken, even though she knew that it was unreasonable to expect such a thing from a baby.

When she looked at herself in the photo, her face all scrunched up and her neck still wobbly, she couldn't tell which of her features resembled her mother or her father. But by the time she entered junior high school, her relatives had begun telling her that she looked just like her mother. Whenever she received such remarks, her father would wear an expression on his face that was neither happiness nor sadness.

Kozue didn't really know her mother's voice, either. What she did know was that she'd loved books, just like her father. She'd also loved cats, of course, and Ravel's *Bolĭro*. And, given the origin of her name, perhaps it was only natural that she had a deep fondness for cherry blossoms.

Whenever the time felt right, her father would share such stories with Kozue. It seemed to be a sign that, though slowly, her father was starting to regain his footing – at least enough to tell Kozue about her mother. Still, some part of him must have been suppressing his grief for the sake of his growing daughter.

Because she knew that her father was trying his best to keep his emotions under wraps, Kozue pretended not to notice. And so, even upon hearing about her father's darkest days from the other adults around her, she could not fully grasp what he had gone through.

Beyond the sign, the door to the shop hung open. Kozue caught the scent of coffee drifting out, along with the sound of a familiar tune. Its distinct melody was bold but not overwhelmingly so – she might have called it majestic, but that wasn't quite the right word. What she knew for certain was that it was *Bolĭro* by Ravel. The piece her mother loved, according to the stories she'd heard. Ever since learning this, Kozue had listened to it countless times.

'Come on, let's go inside. I need you to take a good look around the shop. Let me make you some coffee – it's on the house. We've got lots of books, too.'

The girl seemed to be in high spirits, but Kozue felt unsettled. When she answered with a nervous nod, the cat pushed its head into her leg as though it was urging her on. Reluctantly, Kozue walked past her mother's name on the sign and stepped through the door. As she did so, she found herself showing her respect with a polite '*Ojamashimasu*'.

The interior of the shop was quite eclectic. It had the atmosphere of a coffee shop, but the place was indeed brimming with books. The walls were lined with multiple bookcases, and the tables and the counter were cluttered with shelves and bookends filled with books. It reminded Kozue of an old, traditional inn that looked like it was constantly being renovated on a whim. There were small vases holding cherry blossoms here and there, adding to the maze-like atmosphere of the room.

'Please,' the girl said, gesturing to a table with a 'Reserved' sign on it.

Once Kozue was seated, the girl placed a coaster and napkin in front of her. Then, the cat jumped on the table and planted itself on an empty spot, deftly tucking its front paws under its body to form a perfect loaf. Everything unfolded so smoothly, it was as though they were following a well-practised procedure.

'Do make sure you observe everything as thoroughly as possible, down to the smallest detail,' the girl told Kozue with a cheerful smile on her face.

'Huh?' was all Kozue could say in reply, but the girl seemed completely nonchalant as she swiftly prepared some coffee and brought it over. Then, she proceeded to pull out the chair opposite Kozue and lowered herself into the seat. Once again, Kozue felt as though she was looking into a mirror. While Kozue's body tightened with nerves, the girl seemed perfectly relaxed, sitting with her elbows on the table and her chin resting lightly on her interlaced fingers.

'I've always wanted to talk with you like this,' the girl said. 'I never stopped believing that you would one day show up.'

It wasn't what Kozue expected to hear from someone she'd just met. Yet somehow it didn't feel out of place. Perhaps because their faces were almost identical, it even felt like this was something Kozue herself had wished.

'Do you like Kenji as well?'

As the girl continued with those words, Kozue noticed that there was a single book in her hands: *Spring and Asura* by Kenji Miyazawa. She'd taken it from her father's collection of books. 'Huh?' she said instinctively. How had she not noticed that she'd been carrying it around this whole time? It didn't feel like it had suddenly appeared in her hands, either. Unable to make sense of it, she lifted her head. The girl curled her lips into a mischievous grin.

'Have you forgotten? You were able to get here because you were reading that book. The book opened the door for us. In order for someone in your world to be invited here, that person must be reading the same passage from the same book as me, at exactly the same time on the same day, and in the same season. Not only that, but it also has to be a sunny spring day, beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom.'

Could this be true? Now that she thought about it, just before she found herself in this place, she was perhaps – yet again – reading *Spring and Asura*. It wasn't entirely out of the question.

'Now, I'm going to tell you once more, so listen closely and remember. You have to read the same passage from the same book, at the exact same time, on the same day, in the same season. And it has to be on a sunny spring day, beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom.'

Once the girl finished repeating the words, it was as though Kozue had come under some kind of spell. *That's right*, she thought. She had entered her father's study just as he was taking this book out from the bookcase that he normally keeps locked. *Dad and I read it together while gazing out at the cherry blossoms outside. That must be it.*

But did I really?

Her mind went round in circles, unable to find a way out. Still, Kozue wanted to answer the girl's initial question properly. Carefully choosing her words, she parted her lips.

'I'm not sure if I can say that I like him. But Dad always says that there has never been, and there will never be, another writer who could manipulate the Japanese language in the way Kenji Miyazawa did. But I still have no idea what he means by that. I started reading him because I want to understand.'

'And, what did you think?'

'Umm It just made me go, "Wow." I was blown away – I feel like I understand it, yet I don't. But when I feel like I don't understand it, I still do. I've never been able to put it into words; it's just like this loud thud inside my chest.'

'As you're reading, you can actually say, "*There. This is where my heart moved.*" Right? Yet you can't really explain it. And every time you read it, it feels like you're reading it for the very first time.'

'Yes, yes! Exactly like that.'

Kozue was so excited to learn that they shared the same experience, she couldn't help herself from leaning forward. The girl, still facing Kozue, had relaxed her hands and was now sitting with her back straight. Making a loose fist in front of her face, she gave a small *ahem*.

'Kenji Miyazawa is the very definition of "unparalleled" – you won't find another writer like him. However, surprisingly, only two of his books were published in his lifetime: *Spring and Asura* and *The Restaurant of Many Orders*. What's more, both books were essentially self-published.'

'Really?'

The girl nodded her head.

'His works could have easily been lost to history. But before he passed away, Kenji entrusted his younger brother with all his manuscripts. Perhaps he sensed his own death. After his departure, people who had been deeply moved by the beautiful *Spring and Asura* travelled from afar to see his brother, and began publishing all his works. This was how his famous works *Night on the Galactic Railroad* and *Strong in the Rain* came to light.'

Captivated by the story, Kozue unconsciously leaned further over the table as she listened to the girl. The cat gazed at her with half-opened eyes, as though it was watching over her. The girl continued to speak.

'Kenji edited his works over and over again, to the point where it often became difficult to identify the final draft. Moreover, some of his manuscripts were partially burned in a small fire, and there was even a short story for which the opening lines were never found. Despite all of those obstacles, we're here today reading Kenji Miyazawa's works together – that in itself is like a miracle. The words woven by Kenji have continued to move people even after his passing.'

The girl narrowed her eyes. Something about her tender expression made Kozue's heart flutter – it had filled her with an unexpected sense of nostalgia.

'What's truly amazing is the fact that, through the publication of his works, the words that he invented, such as "Ihatov" and "Galactic railroad", have also taken root in this world. Of course, these words have no physical form. Even so, many people are familiar with them to this day, and share the same idea of what they mean. In that sense, these words "exist" in their own form.'

The girl looked straight into Kozue's eyes.

'This is very similar to our way of "being". Kobako and I are both here, but that doesn't mean that we "exist as physical beings". But we *are* here, and that is an absolute truth. I wouldn't be sitting here speaking to you if it wasn't.'

The tone of the girl's voice grew solemn as she continued.

'And you're the one who holds the key – you're the beginning of everything. We need your help, Kozue-chan.'

As if in agreement, the cat lifted its head and gave a meow. Although the girl had suddenly mentioned her name, Kozue somehow accepted it without hesitation. In fact, the only question she wanted to ask was the one that had been occupying her mind since the very beginning. She knew that it was finally time to say it out loud.

'Umm, there's something I'd like to know first. What sort of place is this? And, err, could it be that you're my mother?'

Out of nowhere, a breeze rushed inside. All around the room, the cherry-blossom branches shifted in their vases. Or, perhaps, what shook at that moment was the very world in which the girl and the cat lived.

Kozue's mother and her beloved cat disappeared on a chilly day in early spring. It was sometime between noon and the evening. The earth shook, and the sea roared violently.

That day, her mother had gone into town to take her cat to the vet. She would have been driving along the coast around that hour, and that was when her father lost contact with her. It was presumed that her car had been swallowed

by the raging waves. But for her family and others left behind, accepting this as reality was another matter.

Kozue's father, who made a living as a writer, was left unable to produce any more work after that.

The reason her father decided to move with his family to the Tohoku region in the first place was because he had been considering a novel based around Kenji Miyazawa's works. He was thrilled by the prospect of being able to 'breathe the same air as Kenji' while he lived there for research. On the other hand, her mother, Sakura, wasn't so keen, especially because Kozue was still young. She was only half convinced when her father pushed forward with the move.

And so when things turned out the way they did, her father's regret was immeasurable. Unable to do so much as sit at his desk, he essentially retired from writing.

Even so, from time to time, people from publishers came all the way from Tokyo to visit Kozue and her father's home. Kozue could sense that they truly loved her father's writing. It was only recently that, through conversations with these people and the few relatives she had, Kozue managed to piece together the facts about her mother.

' could it be that you're my mother?'

Once again, Kozue examined the girl in front of her. From what she'd seen in the photograph of her mother, she figured that this might be how she'd looked in her youth. But if someone had told her that this was how Kozue herself would look in a few years' time, she would probably believe it right away.

A shadow seemed to pass across the girl's face as she opened her mouth.

'Hmm The answer to your question is kind of complicated,' the girl said, scratching the back of her head self-consciously. 'You're old enough to understand – I mean, you know what your dad does for a living now, right?'

Kozue gave a nod and replied, 'My father writes novels. He told me that he started writing because he aspired to be like Kenji Miyazawa.'

'Oh,' she said, covering her mouth with her hand. 'I should probably say that he *used* to write novels. I think we're living off his savings now, to be honest.'

'You two talk about that?'

‘Oh no, he would never tell me that himself. But I can pick up on these things now.’

‘You must be worried about money.’

‘I suppose so, but— *Hmm*,’ Kozue said as she pressed her fingertips together by her face. It wasn’t until much later that she realised how similar her movements were to those of the girl in front of her. ‘I genuinely enjoy reading my father's books. His stories have this kind of understated, almost quiet narrative. But then, there are these moments when you feel like you’ve been suddenly swept off the ground; like you’re floating in the air. I really like that about his work. As one of his fans, it makes me go, “I really want to read another book by him.” And knowing that this isn’t completely impossible makes me want it even more. I just wish that there was something I could do to help.’

Kozue spoke in one breath. The girl lifted the corners of her mouth into a broad smile.

‘Wow. Talk about deep reading. Be sure to tell him all of that. He'll be absolutely delighted.’

‘*Hmm*.’

There’s no way I could tell him that, I’d feel so awkward. Kozue kept this thought to herself.

‘But aren’t his books a little tricky for a junior-high student?’

‘They are, but not at all compared to Kenji Miyazawa’s works.’

‘I wonder if your dad will be happy to hear that. Maybe he’ll be disappointed.’

Cocking her head to one side, Kozue deliberated for a moment.

Then, she said, ‘I guess a bit of both.’

‘I agree.’

They both burst into laughter. More than ever, Kozue understood how well the person in front of her knew her father and his works, perhaps even better than he did. This made her very happy.

‘I’m really happy so far, too. Hey, Kobako, does this count as self-satisfaction? What do you think?’

The girl turned to face the cat as she spoke. When Kozue tilted her head, wondering what she had meant, the girl returned her gaze and narrowed her eyes into a gentle expression.

'You don't need to worry. Kazuhiko Tonami's next book will be released soon enough. I assure you.'

'Will it? But how do you know that?'

'Well, the fact that we – my cat and I – are here is proof enough.'

The cat grunted contentedly. This time, Kozue was almost sure that it was chiming in.

'By the time you've grown up, your dad's new book will have been published, and it won't stop there – it will be read widely, and for a long time. Writer Kazuhiko Tonami will create a character based on his lost wife and will write a story about her. The book will be entitled *A Shop Named Sakura*. But the character won't reflect just his wife. She'll also be his daughter – in other words, *you* will very much influence how he shapes her. And that's why I am your mother, but at the same time, I am you. I'm probably not doing a great job at explaining it, but that's the essence of it.'

While Kozue sat there, flabbergasted, the girl narrowed her eyes again, her face softening into tenderness itself. It was then that Kozue realised. She was wearing an expression that a mother would only show her child. That was why it had made her feel so nostalgic.

'Once the book is finally out in the world, my cat and I will be able to exist here. This isn't a metaphor or anything – quite literally, the words woven by your father have begun to flow time into this world. Of course, here, the flow of time is completely different to that of yours. This place is certainly not reality. But just think of it as a world that's firmly attached to reality. In short, your father's words will give Kobako and me a place to belong.'

Saying that, the girl brought her hand in front of her face, made a small fist, and let out a single *ahem*.

'In other words, this is an example of how the power of human imagination can, at times, transcend the very thing we call "imagination".

But then, the girl gently drew her brows together. The cat also exhaled through its nose.

'The thing is, although your dad has finally managed to start writing, he's suddenly stopped. I think it's only natural that he's struggling, but if things don't change, we'll be in trouble.'

This was news to Kozue. Her father never brought up the subject of work with her.

'Which is why I need you to deliver a message from me and Kobako to your father. Please tell him that he needs to pull himself together. Otherwise, we'll never be able to see you here. We've already been waiting way too long.'

'What? I don't understand.'

'If he doesn't resume his writing, we'll never be able to exist. This is why we decided to invite you here – so that we can hopefully kick things off. Right?' the girl said to the cat, and the cat responded by making purring sounds.

'Uh, umm ' Kozue spoke as she tried to organise her thoughts. 'But if my father's manuscript is incomplete, and if you therefore don't exist, then, how do you explain the situation we're in right now? What I mean is – how could you have invited me here, if you don't exist yet? This feels like a contradiction; like the cause and effect are the other way around. No, actually, I don't even know if I can accept this whole thing about you only existing through my father's writing.'

Kozue felt as though she had become lost in a maze of words that she had created herself. The more she spoke, the more confused she became. Then, the girl raised her index finger in front of her face and shook her head. It was as though she was mimicking a detective who was about to point out a critical flaw in someone's story.

'Like I said, here, time doesn't flow in the same way as your world. It can meander and it can move in reverse. Sometimes you find it flowing along the main path, and yet the next thing you know, it's slipped into the backroads. And right now, as you're listening to my explanation, you're probably picturing in your mind the time, twisting and turning or going backwards, even though you've never "seen" the flow of time before. This is the amazing thing about the human imagination. You could say that through imagining them, such flows of time have come into existence. Words and the human imagination are that powerful.'

As she spoke, the girl's voice grew more and more fervent.

'Here's another example. Even as we sit here, millions of people all around the world must understand what a "time paradox" is, and their minds are probably spiralling with countless theories and questions. And yet none of them – not a single person – has experienced such a thing. Which is why I can't help but

wonder: can we say that this "time paradox" that people are visualising in their minds actually exists? That's the essence of existence without physical form.'

The girl, whose eyes had been sparkling with enthusiasm, suddenly seemed to snap back to her senses. A serious expression returned to her face as she brought her fist to her mouth again and gave another *ahem*. This time, however, she was just trying to hide her embarrassment.

'Well anyway, that's essentially why Kobako and I are here in this shop. First, your father will finish writing our story. Once it's out in the world and is read by many people, each reader will picture it in their minds. And that's how this shop will come into existence. Of course, the reason it can exist is because it's in this place, and this is the only place it can exist.'

What the girl said seemed to make sense, but at the same time, it was completely beyond Kozue's understanding. Yet there was something about the urgency in the girl's voice that she couldn't ignore. When Kozue nodded her head, the girl looked pleased.

'I guess you kind of get it? You're right – this *is* a strange place. And that is exactly why there are so many conditions that need to be met before anyone can travel between the two worlds. I want to make sure your father makes this very clear in his book.'

Saying so, the girl straightened up her posture before continuing.

'Here are the conditions that need to be met for someone in your world to be invited to this place: they have to read the same passage from the same book as me, at exactly the same time, on the same day in the same season. It also has to be a sunny day in spring, beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom. Please, make sure you tell your father.'

Taking in the girl's words, Kozue nodded deeply. It felt like something she ought to do. The girl's expression softened with relief.

'Although, admittedly, it's Kobako who chooses the book. Once the book has been selected, I find a passage that catches my eye and read it out loud. And at the same time, someone in your world opens the book and reads the same passage. When that happens, the door opens. As the old saying goes, a book is "a door to another, unknown world".'

Now, it was Kozue's turn to tilt her head in wonder.

'So, after Dad's book is published if I go and read a book, and if you happen to open the same book at the same time, will I be able to come back here again?'

'That I don't know. I'm afraid that's something even I can't say for sure. Miracles are capricious things.'

The girl shot a glance at the cat.

'You, Kobako, must be the one holding the key to that. Right?'

But the cat ignored her and turned its head away. The girl gave a sigh.

'To be honest, I still don't understand what she is. But if, in the future, you find yourself in need of a miracle, and if you happen to open the same book at the same time as me, then perhaps the door will open again. Kobako will make sure of it, I think.'

The girl narrowed her eyes, this time even further.

'But you must know this by now – humans have the power to create miracles. What happened with Kenji Miyazawa's posthumous works is a perfect example of that. His words could have ended up in storage or inside the liner pocket of an old trunk, forgotten, and withered away. That thought alone is enough to send a chill down my spine. Had this happened, then it would be no exaggeration to say that the world that we know today could have been a very different place. Some of the most famous films might have never been created, and your father might have never become a writer. And if that were the case, you might not have been born.'

Could she be right? Maybe she is. Maybe, a long time ago, before I even existed, Kenji's words brought my father and mother together. Perhaps not in a direct way, but it's definitely possible that his words somehow played a role in it. Come to think of it, I haven't heard the story of how they met yet. I hope that Dad will tell me some day. Only when he's ready, of course. I hope that day will come.

'That you're alive right now – that in itself is a miracle.'

Such words suddenly formed inside Kozue's mind. At first, she thought that the girl had said them, but that didn't seem to be the case. Shifting her gaze, she locked eyes with the cat. At that moment, she felt a sense of familiarity, like the same thing had happened a long time ago. As she lay in her crib, the same round eyes had looked upon her, speaking to her softly. As Kozue stared intently at her,

the cat seemed to give a faint nod. But perhaps Kozue was imagining it. The cat, still sitting in a loaf pose, gave a small yawn.

'Right then. It's about time that we got some work done.'

With that, the girl sprang to her feet. As though it'd been waiting for those words, the cat also sat up on the table. But the two beings of the mysterious shop seemed to be frozen to the spot as they both stared at Kozue. It was almost as though they were trying to imprint an image of themselves on her. When the girl finally began to move, she approached Kozue and gently caressed her cheek.

'Listen, I know what I said earlier, but I do want to see you again. So don't forget. Now, Kobako, it's time for us to get to work.'

'Sorry, work?' Kozue found herself asking. For some reason, the girl was wearing a proud look on her face.

'Yep. Peddling miracles. We have a good collection of books, and we serve coffee, but *this* is our primary business. Oh, some people might think that there's no such thing as a peddler with a shop. But, well, it can't be helped – it can only be done in this place, and it can't be done without my cat.

'You might feel a little dizzy-ish, but there's no need to worry – you'll be fine.'

As the girl finished speaking, Kobako gave a slightly drawn-out meow. Then, all of a sudden, Kozue felt like someone had thrust their hand between her lungs and her stomach and was twisting her insides. *What is this?* Kozue thought. *I'm not fine!* Wanting to protest, she looked around, searching for the girl.

In that instant, someone held her hand. As warmth seeped into her, Kozue began to feel soothed. She thought she heard a voice in her ear – it sounded slightly more mature than the girl's. The voice seemed to whisper, *Take care of your father for me*.

But Kozue's view had completely distorted. The shop, the girl and the cat were nowhere to be seen. The world before her had marbled like swirls of colourful clay, reminding her of the scene created by the weeping cherry tree.

The next moment, Kozue realized that she was in her father's study. Her father's eyes were fixed on his writing desk, but not at the blank sheet of manuscript

paper sitting in front of him. His gaze seemed to be directed at the unmoving figures inside the photo frame behind it. As evidence of this, his hand was completely still.

As she stood behind her father, Kozue could smell the pleasant scent of his hair. Just then, his shoulders flinched. He must have been startled by Kozue's presence.

'Kozue, what are you doing? How long have you been there?'

'Well, I – I think I might have been reading *Spring and Asura* with you.'

A look of puzzlement crossed her father's face. Kozue had to think quickly. *Did I suddenly appear here? Maybe I've just been thrown back here, like the way I found myself in front of that shop*. But if that were the case, there was no logical way of explaining it. Taking a deep breath, she summoned up the resolve to tell him everything she remembered.

'Umm, Dad, I think I I just saw Mum.'

This time, her father turned his chair around to face her. His expression had stiffened, his eyes unusually stern. But Kozue kept her composure as she told him about the place she'd just come back from, and its residents. With the memory still fresh in her mind, she was able to speak fluently, so much so that it made her wonder if the girl herself was speaking through her lips. *I wouldn't be surprised if she and I were connected in that way,* Kozue thought.

Kozue also remembered to mention the conditions that needed to be met for the two worlds to be connected: read the same passage from the same book as the girl, at the exact same time on the same day in the same season. On a sunny day in spring, beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom.

Her father listened until she finished speaking without ever interrupting. Then, he simply said, 'I see.' For a while, he sat with his arms folded, thinking to himself. Eventually, he pulled a sheet of manuscript paper from his drawer and handed it to Kozue. Could you have a read of this? he asked. There were a few lines of handwritten text on the sheet.

The shop was tucked away in a place beyond anyone's understanding.

In front of it stood a mysterious, weeping cherry tree.

The tree was bursting with blossoms in every imaginable shade of red and white.

When a gust of wind swept through the flowers in full bloom, they blended together then parted again, at times creating a swirl of colours...

Having finished reading, Kozue looked up to find her father smiling awkwardly.

'Is that the scene you saw, then?'

Kozue nodded at her father. He let out a heavy sigh. She had never heard him sigh so deeply.

'I wrote this a few years ago, but I haven't touched it since. The idea of the story came from something Sakura – your mother – and I used to talk about when we were young. Just a silly dream, really. From time to time, we fantasised about running a shop like that. We'd have a collection of the books we loved, and she mentioned serving coffee, too.'

Her father quietly shook his head sorrowfully. It pained Kozue to see him like this.

'The other thing she said was that there absolutely needs to be a cherry tree in front of the shop. Recently, I've finally been able to quietly recall these memories. Probably because enough time has passed. And so, I thought I'd try and preserve your mum's dream in the only way I know how. But once I'd written that much, I couldn't keep going. Something was telling me that I shouldn't do this.'

What he really meant, Kozue imagined, was that continuing to write the story would mean accepting the death of his wife. Although he knew this, he probably didn't want to admit it and say it out loud.

Unless things changed, though, he would never be able to move forward. Besides, if he doesn't complete the story, neither the girl, the cat nor the shop will be able to exist. That is, if what the girl had said was true. But somehow, Kozue felt that she could believe her.

I have to do something about it, then. That girl Mum*, who lives inside of her, trusted me to do this.*

With firm resolve, Kozue said to her father, 'Hey, Dad. I'd love to know what happens after this. You probably haven't noticed, but I've read quite a few of your books. I'm kind of a fan. Besides—'

Unsure whether she should continue, Kozue halted for a moment.

But she went ahead and said, 'I'm sure that Mum and her cat Kobako are waiting. I think they've been waiting a long time for that shop.'

Her father briefly widened his eyes in surprise, then gazed at Kozue with a look of confusion. Eventually, he lifted his glance and murmured, 'I see, you might be right.'

From that day on, Kozue's father began to frequently call her into his study. He wanted to hear more about the shop. Kozue told him everything she remembered in detail: the girl's gestures, the cat's impressive fur, the titles of the books she spotted. What seemed to pique his curiosity the most, however, was the weeping cherry tree.

'That's right. The colours blended together, even when the air was still. It was absolutely beautiful. But the petals were – I guess you could call it single-coloured. Each petal that had fallen on the ground had a consistent colour.'

'Right.'

'This isn't something the girl told me, but it made me think that the tree is somehow responsible for creating the flow of time in that place. It had an ethereal quality to it. The moment I saw it, it almost took my breath away.'

'Hmm. That could work.'

Every so often, Kozue tried to mimic the way the girl spoke. Each time she did so, a look of conflicting emotions flitted across her father's face, probably because it reminded him of her mother. As for Kozue, it made her realise that this was how, as the girl said, both Kozue and her mother came to shape the main character of his story.

Neither Kozue nor her father ever referred to the world that Kozue experienced as a 'dream'. They didn't know why.

Several months later, her father handed Kozue a stack of manuscript papers.

The shop was tucked away in a place beyond anyone's understanding.

In front of it stood a mysterious, weeping cherry tree.

The tree was bursting with blossoms in every imaginable shade of red and white.

When a gust of wind swept through the flowers in full bloom, they blended together then parted again, at times creating a swirl of colours. As the colour spectrum moved from white to red, and red to white, the tree pulsated like life itself. Perhaps this was how the tree created the flow of time in this place.

Or perhaps this was the work of the gods. But this place lay within a world beyond our understanding, where no one could know the truth.

Now, the quiet residents of the shop were a cat and a girl.

Almost always, the girl carried with her a book – a collection of poetry.

From time to time, she would open the book, and whenever a passage caught her eye, she quietly read it out loud to the cat.

"'More intensely than the wind-instrument of noon,
When traces of amber are poured,
The bitterness of anger, the blue of anger '"

The world in which the shop existed was 'beneath the light of the atmosphere in April'.

There is only one way we can reach this shop.

We must read the same passage from the same book as the girl, at exactly the same time, on the same day, in the same season.

And it must also be a sunny day in spring, beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom.

Following these opening lines were several stories, each featuring the protagonist, Sakura, and the strange events she offers to the guests of her shop. Her father called the book *A Shop Named Sakura*. It seemed to Kozue that this was his way of expressing the very wish he had for her mother: that she would spend her days in the shop bearing her own name, alongside her beloved cat, surrounded by all her favourite things.

When his editor read the completed manuscript, they suggested presenting the story with prominent illustrations, in a format that would resemble a picture book. Her father was delighted. The project went ahead, and after some time, he received the news that they'd found an artist who was eager to work on the book. By the change of seasons, a copy of the completed illustrations had arrived.

Her father seemed to be pleased with the soft, watercolour-like drawings. As for Kozue, she was utterly stunned. The hues of the cherry blossoms, the pathway, the layout of the shop, and even the colour of the girl's pinafore dress were exactly as

she remembered. What struck her the most, however, was the cat's coat. The story had only mentioned that it was a 'calico', and yet its colours and overall patterning were spot on: its right ear was mostly black, its left ear brown, and it had white fur from its right shoulder down to its chest.

A logical explanation would suggest that her father had provided the photo of her mother and the cat for reference, and there was a good chance that he had kept detailed notes of Kozue's descriptions of the shop. But Kozue never asked her father or his editor if this was the case. She imagined that the girl would probably say, 'See? People create miracles more easily than you think.' And a part of her wanted to believe that such a miracle had happened to her.

A Shop Named Sakura was finalised with colour illustrations, printed and bound, and began to appear in bookshops, fittingly, in the spring. Soon, praise for the book began to spread, with comments like 'The tenderness and pathos resonated in my heart' and 'The illustrations perfectly capture the tone of the story and filled me with an unexpected sense of warmth.' Such recognition made Kozue happy as well.

As the years went by, the book seemed to flourish alongside Kozue, almost as if it were keeping up with her as she continued to mature. And now, offers of translated editions were starting to come in from all over the world. As Kozue pictured the girl speaking in that same cheerful tone, but in the language of another country, a strange emotion welled up inside of her. Kobako will surely make the same sound no matter where she is, she thought, which only made the situation seem all the more surreal to her. But Kozue was convinced that the world in which her mother and the cat lived would grow more resilient as the story spread to more people. That was something she could believe in.

Like the others, spring became a special season for Kozue and her father. Every year, she felt grateful to be able to admire the cherry blossoms in full bloom with him. But the knowledge that she would never be able to share such moments with her mother lingered inside of her, along with an emotion that was like regret and longing, yet not quite either. This would likely never change for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately for Kozue, that one time turned out to be the only occasion she ever got to visit the girl, the cat and the shop. No matter how many times she

opened *Spring and Asura*, it didn't happen. Especially hopeful when the cherry trees were at their peak, she tried over and over again, but her wish was never granted.

What if there's a rule that you need to choose another book the second time round? Kozue considered this possibility one day as she stood alone in her father's study and unlocked the bookcase. Although, as desperate as she was, she never doubted that the girl and the cat were still 'peddling miracles' somewhere. After trying and failing for the umpteenth time, she closed the book, returned it to the shelf and locked the door. *We will meet again*, she told herself before walking away from the bookcase. Just then, on impulse, she decided to sit at her father's writing desk. Outside the window, she saw a single cherry-blossom petal drift by.

That was when she heard the sound of a book closing with a soft flop.

Thank you.

It was the same voice that whispered, 'Take care of your father for me.' At least, that was how it felt. Or maybe it was the sound of a cat.

'Are you okay, Mummy? Did you not sleep well last night?'

A pair of round eyes peered at her as she opened her eyelids. *Huh?* Kozue thought before quickly remembering. They'd planned on going out as a family, and since they were due to leave before noon, she'd been getting ready since the morning. Her husband had gone to collect her father, who lived nearby. In the meantime, as usual, her daughter, Sakura, had begged her to read *A Shop Named Sakura* to her.

Kozue's daughter loved this book. Not only did it feature a girl with the same name as her, but it was also a source of pride for her. This was understandable, given that it was her grandfather's work. Although, since it had not been written for children, Kozue honestly didn't know how much of it she actually understood. Still, while the author might not be so pleased, Kozue had to admit that it was incredibly effective in putting her daughter to sleep.

On this day, however, it was Kozue who seemed to have fallen asleep while reading to her. She hurriedly checked the clock, only to find that less than ten

minutes had passed since her husband left the house. Yet it felt like she'd been having a long, endless dream. Her shoulders had stiffened a bit, too.

Seemingly relieved to see her mother awake, Kozue's daughter now claimed that she was hungry and darted towards the fridge. 'Hey, don't get anything on your nice clothes!' Kozue chided as she chased after her. Just as Kozue feared, her daughter carelessly flung the fridge door open, and a bottle of dressing landed on the floor. Someone must not have put it away properly. Was her husband the culprit? Or maybe it was herself. In any case, she sighed in relief as she realised that the lid on the bottle had stayed intact.

But now, her daughter, not tall enough to reach the shelves, was calling out, '*Purin*, *purin!* as she jumped up and down in front of the fridge. Kozue quickly crouched down to pick up the dressing.

As she did so, she remembered that she was wearing a grey suit. It sort of reminded her of her junior-high-school uniform. *Why did I choose this outfit again?* she asked herself at the back of her mind. But then the doorbell rang out, and her thought disappeared immediately.

'I'm back!' a voice called out from the front door.

'It's Daddy!' Her daughter jolted and twisted around, apparently forgetting all about the *purin*. *Oh dear*, Kozue thought. *Can't she stay still for one second?*

'Your father is here. He's waiting in the car.'

'Thanks. Let me double-check that the stove is off. Oh, and I'll lock up, too, so could you take Sakura with you? I'll be right there.'

'Sure.'

Sakura would soon be starting elementary school, and it was Kozue's father's idea to plant a cherry tree to commemorate the occasion. It appeared that when it came to his granddaughter, author Kazuhiko Tonami's generosity knew no bounds. Kozue learned that every year, in early March, an event was held in the city for the purpose of planting cherry trees, and so they decided to participate. A few relatives who were available, as well as some other guests from Tokyo were also due to attend.

Her father's guests were people from the publishing world, and among them was the artist who created the illustrations for his book. She was apparently stopping by as she had an errand to run in the city. Although Kozue was excited

to meet her, she felt bad that a busy artist was going to be making time for them. Still, Kozue concluded that her father's good reputation had earned her kindness.

Fortunately, it was a sunny day, but this being early spring, the air outside was still chilly. Once the sun went down, the temperature would plummet. As Kozue sat in the passenger seat, she wondered if the visitors from Tokyo would know to dress warmly. From the seats at the back, she could hear her daughter asking her grandfather for new crayons. 'Don't spoil her too much,' Kozue intervened. Glancing at the rear-view mirror, Kozue saw her daughter puffing out her cheeks. In that moment, Kozue thought: *Ah, how lucky am I?*

They arrived at the venue an hour before the ceremony was set to start. The trees that had been planted in the previous years stood in neat rows, but their buds had not begun to swell yet. Kozue had wondered if they'd arrived too early, but soon enough, she was greeting guest after guest as they continued to trickle in. After a short while, her father introduced her to the artist.

'This is Ms Mio Kisanuki. She created such wonderful illustrations for the book.'

Kozue bowed her head.

'Nice to meet you. Thank you for everything you've done for us. I am his daughter, Kozue. My surname is Shimaoka as I'm married now. I've always wanted to thank you in person, so I'm very happy to be able to finally meet you today.'

'Oh, not at all. It's your father's work that is wonderful.'

Kozue learned that Kisanuki-sensei had started contributing to manga magazines while at university, and that she'd been publishing a manga series for a long time. Just when she'd begun thinking about branching out to other types of work, she was invited to produce the artwork for the book. She explained that the book opened more doors for her, leading to more opportunities in cover art.

'So, I'm the one who needs to say thank you.'

The purple shawl draped over her shoulders looked quite warm. Just as a wave of relief washed over Kozue, someone called out to her father. Excusing himself, he stepped away. Looking around, Kozue saw her husband holding their daughter's hand – but really, it was she who was leading him as she ran around in an open space.

Kozue found herself alone with Mio Kisanuki. There were people around them, but no one seemed to be paying attention to them. It was now or never, but even before this thought occurred to Kozue, the words were already tumbling out of her mouth.

'There's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time. How were you able to illustrate the shop so accurately? And the girl and the cat as well. The clothes, and even the pattern on the cat—'

Kisanuki-sensei's eyes widened in surprise, then, after slightly puckering her lips, she replied, 'You make it sound as though you've been to that place before.'

Her intense gaze made Kozue hesitate for a second. But she figured that there was no point in being dishonest.

'I think I've been there, just once. It was a very long time ago.'

As she spoke the words, Kozue momentarily wondered if this was true. *Was it really that long ago? When I fell asleep on the sofa earlier after reading my father's book, it felt like I'd been dreaming for a long time. Could that be because—*

But such thoughts were wiped from her mind as soon as Mio Kisanuki spoke her next words.

'I've been there once before, too. Just after my mother passed away. That's why I knew.'

It was Kozue's turn to be wide-eyed. She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come. In that instant, her legs suddenly jolted. Her daughter had jumped into her.

'Found you, Mummy.'

I don't remember taking part in a game of hide-and-seek. But before that thought fully formed in Kozue's head, Mio Kisanuki spoke.

'Your daughter?'

'Yes, her name is Sakura. Sa-ku-ra in hiragana characters.'

'I see. That's a lovely name, isn't it?' The artist smiled at Kozue's daughter. Then, bowing her head, she said 'See you,' before turning on her heel and walking away. It seemed that she was going to join Kozue's father and the people from his publisher. Kozue's daughter was still clinging onto her legs.

'Hey, Sakura, it's your big day – you're the main protagonist today. Don't fall and cry or anything, okay?'

‘I won’t!’

‘You sure?’

As she exchanged such words with her daughter, Kozue wondered if her mother had spoken to her like this when she was little. Then, placing her hand on her daughter’s head, she looked up at the sky. *One day*, she thought, *when these new cherries mature into a row of wondrous blossoms, I hope that Mum and Kobako will look down at them, from wherever they are.*

The sun poured over them. Despite the chill in the breeze, the light that enveloped them felt like the warmth of life itself.



EPILOGUE

THE GIRL HAD BEEN STARING at the turntable for some time now. The same record, with its bright red label at the centre, continued spinning. Her eyebrows were slightly furrowed, and her lips had begun to pucker. The girl's eyes were still firmly pinned on the record when, suddenly, the needle slid right across the disc. What had been gradually moving towards the centre of the record, had suddenly begun to slide outwards. The switch happened in a fleeting moment, without so much as a scratching noise or a break in the tempo. The same triplet-infused rhythm in three-four time played on, the steady sound drifting seamlessly through the shop.

'See? I knew it.'

Standing in front of the record player, the girl exhaled through her nose triumphantly, then, crossing her arms exaggeratedly, she gave a dramatic nod. Now unfolding her arms, she raked her hair back with her left hand.

'I knew that something was off. It's been bothering me for a long time.'

The scent of coffee filled the air, and cherry-blossom branches arranged in vases adorned every corner of the shop. There were books of all sizes everywhere you looked – along the shelves on the walls and on the larger tables, as well as on the edge of the kitchen counter. In this mysterious shop named Sakura, these books served as a door to the other world, but solely during the cherry-blossom season. The girl turned to the calico cat, the only other resident of her shop.

'Hey, Kobako. This record keeps jumping back to the flute solo just before the piece reaches its climax, and that's why *Bolĭro* never stops playing. I thought it was strange.'

Opening one eye, the cat gave an audible yawn. Just like its name, Kobako sat atop a table in a *kobako-zuwari* – catloaf pose. It was almost as though the cat was manifesting the phrase 'a name represents one's nature' with its own body. Her *kobako-zuwari* was flawless, worthy of showing off to the rest of the world. In fact, if there was such a thing as the Cat Olympics, she would likely win a medal in the *kobako-zuwari* category.

'And by the way, I haven't forgotten, you know. You're the one who scratched this record. Did you *mean* to do this? Is that even possible?'

The girl had started to get worked up, but the cat remained unfazed. Perhaps it was pretending not to hear her. Judging from the way it twitched its whiskers, it didn't seem to be fully asleep. As she gazed at the cat, the girl thought to herself*: Maybe she is capable of doing something like that. She's Kobako, after all.*

Besides, miracles happen more often than we expect, right?

There were times when the girl would sit and wonder what everything meant, and why they – she and the cat, as well as the shop – existed. But she decided that the answers to these questions didn't matter. She thought: *What matters is that we're here waiting, in case someone in the world needs our shop or needs the power of miracles. From time to time, we'll open our favourite books, occasionally reading the lines out loud – just as we've been doing now. That will be enough. Won't it?*

'Right, Kobako? I mean, that's what we do as peddlers of miracles.'

Again, the girl turned to the cat for a response. Slightly opening its eyes, the cat gave a brief cry in reply as if to say: *Do you even need to ask?*

Outside the window, only the colours on the mysterious cherry tree quivered gently despite the breezeless air. Its movement was indescribable, neither slow nor fast, but never staying completely still; a flicker that seemed to have neither a beginning nor an end. Whether the same pattern was ever repeated, no one could know.

Watching the tree through the corner of her eyes, the girl pondered. Does time exist in this place? Will anything ever end here? A world that embraces impermanence within eternity; a world that is confined yet is boundless in its ability to connect. Such is the space in which the girl and the cat exist – strange and unfathomable. As long as the conditions are met, it can connect to any place and any moment in time.

Yet, the truth is, you won't need to search far to find a world just like it. All you have to do is look inside a book. In the same way that the girl and the cat's shop came to be, anything can come to life in a book. Hundreds of pages bound between the front and back covers, each page filled with rows and rows of printed symbols known as letters. A book, with the help of the human imagination, brings into existence things that no one has ever seen: a prince who has come from a tiny

asteroid; a boy who would never grow up; a lily that takes a hundred years to bloom.

That's not all. By simply writing the word 'eternal' in a book, you can bring forth an infinite stretch of time, while the word 'infinite' dissolves all boundaries. Words hold such immense power. A book is a door to the unknown; it warmly welcomes those who step inside and transports them to all sorts of times and places.

And now that you're about to finish this book, the girl in the burgundy pinafore dress and her companion, the long-haired calico cat, must be residing inside your mind. Even as you're reading this, they could be flipping through the pages of their favourite book in that shop, eagerly waiting for the cherry-blossom season. Perhaps they're bubbling with anticipation, hopeful that you would read the same passage from the same book, at exactly the same time as them.

Thus, the story returns to where it began.

The shop named Sakura is tucked away in a place beyond anyone's understanding. In front of it stands a weeping cherry tree that presides over time and miracles, bursting with wondrous flowers.

The door to this world only opens during cherry-blossom season, when the flowers are in full bloom.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The reader's imagination is what brings a book to life, perhaps even more so in the case of a translation. While, as a translator, it is my responsibility to make sure that the reader never feels stranded, as though their plane has crash-landed in a desert, I try to remain mindful of the crucial difference between telling a reader to see a boa constrictor digesting an elephant and gently guiding them to see it for themselves. Even so – although I dearly hope that your experience has felt complete without these explanations – I would like to elaborate on a few nuances that may enrich your understanding.

Many readers will know that Japan is famous for the *sakura*, or cherry blossom. It is also home to a language that is rich in homonyms (same pronunciation and spelling, different meaning) and homophones (same pronunciation, different spelling and meaning). Moreover, it is written in three different types of characters: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Phonetically speaking, the shop, Kozue's mother and Kozue's daughter share the same name: Sakura. The shop, named after Kozue's mother, is written in kanji: 咲良. The character 咲 means 'to blossom' and 良 is associated with 'goodness.' The name of Kozue's daughter is written in hiragana: さくら. Sakura as in 'cherry blossom' or 'cherry tree,' written in kanji, would typically be 桜. Regardless of how it's written, the word sakura always brings cherry blossoms to mind. The girl might consider this a small miracle, as this is not the case for all Japanese words.

The nickname Kobako, for the calico cat, is written in katakana: コバコ. Her real name Kōbako (香箱) comes from her masterly execution of the catloaf, or *kōbako-zuwari* ('sitting in the shape of an incense box'). The difference in sound may seem negligible, and as far as a cat's name goes, I suppose that it is. But as I write this, I can hear Kobako hissing at me, because, well, it also isn't. In fact, the difference is significant enough that, without an explanation, one may never associate 'Kobako' with the meaning of kōbako.

Another fact about the Japanese language is that there is no true equivalent of a casual 'hello.' Instead, greetings vary based on the situation. If you're entering someone's home or premises, you would politely say *ojamashimasu* – literally 'sorry for disturbing you' (Chapter Four). When returning home, you would say *tadaima* and the person welcoming you would say *okaerinasai* (Chapter Three).

Various customs unique to Japan feature in this book, but there is one particular tradition I'd like to talk about, and that is the preservation of umbilical cords. In Chapter One, Mio discovers hers and her brother's umbilical cords inside their mother's box of keepsakes. Japan has a long tradition of keeping a portion of the umbilical cord when a baby is born. It is dried and placed in a special box. I can't recall the exact moment I learned of this custom, but I do remember my mother showing me mine. There is no definitive explanation for how this tradition began, but it continues to this day.

In Japan, springtime is deeply connected with new beginnings. It marks the start of the school year and the fiscal year; it is when new graduates enter employment, and when companies announce job transfers and promotions. Naturally, the fleeting cherry blossom season symbolises life transitions or *shinseikatsu* (literally 'new life'). While it is often associated with bittersweet moments of farewell, it is widely celebrated as a joyful time, with people gathering for picnics and festivities beneath the blooming cherry trees. However, we must also remember the spring day in 2011 when a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami struck the Tohoku region, where Kenji Miyazawa spent most of his life.

For those eager to explore beyond the boundaries of imagination, English translations of Kenji Miyazawa's stories should be relatively easy to find, although not everything is available, and it may be difficult to track down a printed copy of his poetry collection *Spring and Asura* (there are, however, multiple English translations in other formats). If you are unsure where to begin, *Night Train to the Stars* published in 2024 offers an insightful introduction to both his life and his writing. Various editions of Natsume Sōseki's works have been published in English translation, including *Ten Nights of Dreams*, *Kokoro* and *I Am a Cat*.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who contributed to the publication of this translation including: Charlotte Ledger and Kara Daniel of One More Chapter; Shiho Onodera and Risa Matsushita of HarperCollins Japan; Koji

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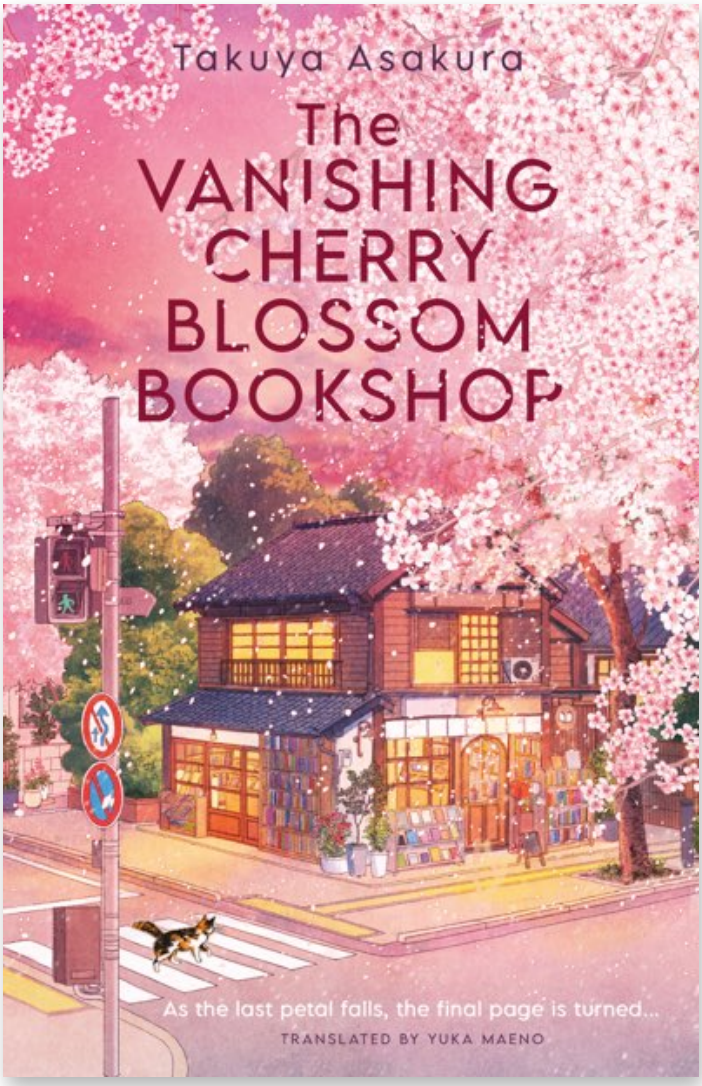
BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. After the death of her husband, Mio's mother leaned heavily on Mio. How do you interpret the emotional burden Mio carried, and how might it have shaped her?
2. Shingo's deep love for trains and routines is a central part of his character, yet his story focuses on his late wife. Do you think his passion for trains and structure mattered more to him than his relationship with her? Was there balance between personal passions and emotional connection in Shingo's life?
3. Forgetting can offer comfort, but it can also feel like a loss. Do you think part of Shingo found relief in his memory loss?
4. Shiho and Kaho were raised in the same environment yet have very different personalities. How does their relationship reflect the ongoing debate between nature and nurture?
5. If you were to find a book in the Cherry Blossom Bookshop that could help you understand or heal from something in your life, what might it be?
6. In the novel, we meet the fictional author of *The Vanishing Cherry Blossom Bookshop*. How does this metafictional twist affect your perception of the story and of Sakura and Kobako themselves?
7. If you were to visit the Cherry Blossom Bookshop, is there a memory or a fictional setting you'd like to visit? What would you hope to gain from that journey?
8. Sakura, the mysterious owner, and her calico cat Kobako serve as emotional guides. What do you think their roles symbolize, and how do they impact the visitors' journeys?
9. Do you believe the moments of clarity and peace that are offered to visitors of the Cherry Blossom Bookshop are temporary, or can they lead to lasting change?
10. Which visitor's story moved you the most, and why? What did their journey reveal about coping with sorrow or letting go of the past?

THANK YOU FOR READING...

We hope you enjoyed *The Vanishing Cherry Blossom Bookshop*!

Do leave a review if so on all your preferred platforms to help spread the word!



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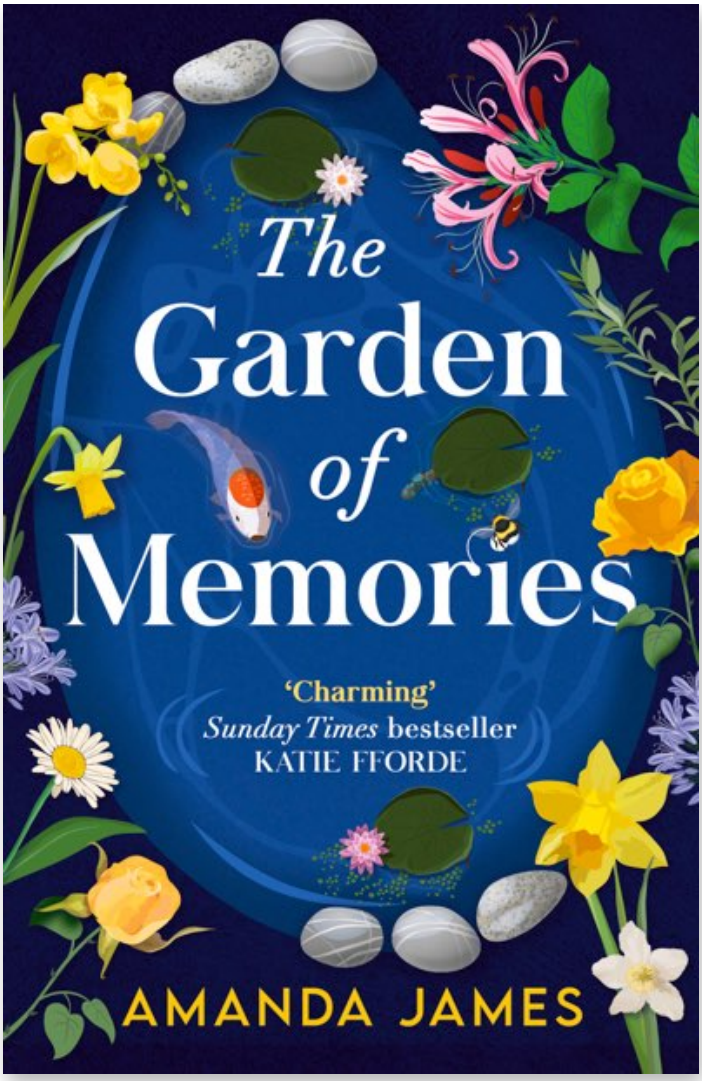


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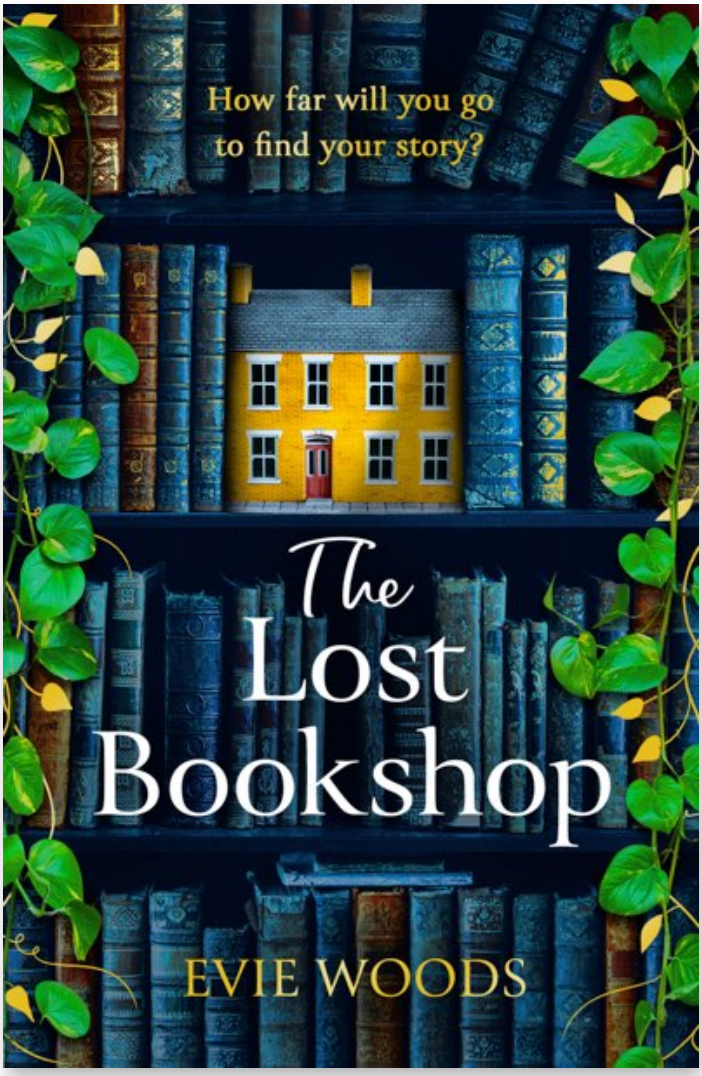
With nothing but time on her hands, retired nurse Rose Lanyon finds herself drawn to the garden that had once been her husband's pride and joy.

It may have started as a means of honouring her husband's memory, but her little Cornish garden soon becomes so much more – a place where the lost and lonely can find solace, the forgotten can be remembered, and second chances take bloom.

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Get your copy here!

Happy reading!

Born in Sapporo in 1966, **Takuya Asakura** graduated from the University of Tokyo. He won the first 'This Mystery is Amazing!' Grand Prize in 2002 for *Yokkakan no Kiseki* (*The Miracle of Four Days*), which sold over 1.3 million copies and was subsequently made into a film. Takuya is also a translator.

Yuka Maeno is a translator, editor and subtitler working in English and Japanese. Her Japanese to English literary translations include *The Ex-Boyfriend's Favorite Recipe Funeral Committee* by Saki Kawashiro. Originally from Nagoya, Japan, she currently lives in Bray, Ireland.



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