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Days at the Torunka Café is the first novel in his newest series to be translated into English. It was first published in Japan in 2013 and reissued in 2022.

Also by Satoshi Yagisawa

Days at the Morisaki Bookshop
More Days at the Morisaki Bookshop

Days at the Torunka Café

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Part One

Sunday Ballerinas



It was on a Sunday afternoon, near the end of the year, when a strange woman named Chinatsu Yukimura first appeared at the Torunka Café.

Perhaps because everyone else was busy getting ready for New Year's, the café had been deserted all day long. Around noon, one of the regulars who lived nearby stopped in, but after that there were no more customers, and the only people in the café were me, the owner (his name is Isao Tachibana, but I always call him the owner) and his daughter Shizuku. Outside the windows, the sun was shining brightly, but inside the café, tucked away in an alley a few steps from the busy street of shops and markets, the light was already fading.

We could hear the steady ticking of the pendulum clock on the wall and the sound of a Chopin piano piece playing from the speakers, the volume so low it was barely noticeable.

"Slow day, right?" Shizuku said as she sat lazily behind the counter, reading the sports page a customer had left behind. She'd already said the same thing at least thirty times since we opened that morning.

"Sloooow day," I repeated for probably the twenty-eighth or

twenty-ninth time, as I pretended to mop the floor. Shizuku liked to call herself the poster girl of the Torunka Café, and she probably would've said so even if she saw what she looked like flipping through the sports page with her mouth half open, revealing her braces.

"It's because it's the end of the year." Apparently, there weren't any articles capable of holding a high school girl's attention because, after making a lot of noise folding the newspaper in half, Shizuku threw it down on the counter.

"It's got to be because of the end of the year," I said listlessly, still holding the mop and staring off into space with nothing to do. I admit I was a little curious about the pictures of naked women inside the sports section that she'd tossed aside, but it seemed a bit too soon to reach for it, so I held off.

"Hey, Shizuku, sit properly if you're going to sit in that chair. Anybody can see your underwear." The owner, who had been on the other side of the counter, amusing himself polishing the glasses, shot her a disgusted look. To look at him, the owner seemed stern, even a little scary, but he was soft-spoken and rarely revealed his feelings. Even on a day as slow as this, his expression didn't change at all. He devoted his attention to polishing the glasses and cups, an act that made pleasant little squeaking sounds now and then.

"Dirty old man," Shizuku said and stuck her tongue out at him, but the owner seemed unfazed.

"No one wants to look at your underwear," he said rather coldly. "Clean up your act."

A chocolate-brown cat was walking along the concrete wall outside the window, taking delicate little steps as the pale winter sun shone on its back. It was a tomcat I'd seen many times; he

slept in the back alley. The front of the café was a thoroughfare for the cats in the neighborhood. The short, fat tail on this one, held straight up, was a testament to all the battles and struggles he'd survived.

I'd read somewhere in a book a long time ago that this downtown area in Tokyo had a lot of stray cats, but since I started to work here part-time, I had made the acquaintance—if that's the right word—of a number of them. Now, I wondered how many of them would make it through the harsh winter this year.

"I wish something interesting would happen."

"Hey," the owner said, looking dumbfounded again. "How do you expect something interesting to happen? If you want something to be interesting, the important thing is to start by living your life fully every day. Then things will start looking interesting all by themselves."

"Don't be so serious. I was just wishing for something to chase away the boredom. Shūichi, you've been wishing for the same thing, right?"

"I have."

"Should've known. My part-timers are hopeless." The owner let out a big sigh, which Shizuku completely ignored. She turned to look at me.

"Shūichi, are you on winter break?"

"For a while now. You're not off yet?"

"Not yet. We still have two more days. What have you been doing over break?"

"Hmm? Reading, taking naps, drinking."

"So, pretty much the same thing you always do then."

"You could say that."

"Being a college student sounds like a pretty easy life."

"That's not fair to the other college students in this world. There are a lot of good students out there who have their act together."

"So, you're one of the bad ones then."

"Oh, I'm one of the bad ones," I said proudly.

"It sounds nice being a bad college student. That's what I want to be. Okay, that settles it. When I graduate high school, I'm going to become a bad college student."

"Well, I wish you luck. I'll strive every day to set an example for you."

"Hey, Shūichi! Don't be a bad influence on Shizuku. You're going to be a senior next year, aren't you? Pretty soon, you're going to have to . . ."

Fortunately, just as the owner was about to start his sermon, the bell on the door jingled, and the door opened. All at once, the three of us turned our heads in that direction, like a goose and her goslings.

A woman appeared in the doorway.

She was fairly young, a rare thing at a café where many of the customers were elderly. She was dressed in a heavy black coat with a bright scarlet scarf; she was small in stature and seemed very quiet. She wore her black hair elegantly cut in a longish bob. It must've been cold outside because her pale cheeks were slightly flushed.

Shizuku sprang up from her chair, quickly ran her fingers through her long hair, and retied her apron. Then she called out "Welcome!" as the sullen look on her face gave way to a professional smile to greet our new customer.

The young woman seemed to hesitate when she realized that

with no other customers she had our undivided attention. She looked down and fiddled with her hair.

She was almost like a young deer, so out of fear of startling her, I sidled back into the kitchen like a crab retreating into its burrow.

Shizuku led her to the table farthest in the back and brought her a glass of water. After a conversation so quiet that they seemed to be sharing confidences, Shizuku finally came back with her order.

"One Colombian."

"Coming right up."

The owner milled the beans in the grinder, poured the grounds into the filter, and then began pouring boiling water over them, and the room filled with the rich aroma of coffee. Breathing in that aroma as the melody of the piano nocturne drifted through the café, I seemed to lose my grip on reality, and I felt instead like I was walking through the old streets of a European city.

Outside the window, another cat was passing by. As I watched it, the owner moved silently through the phases of extracting the flavor from the grounds, and before I knew it, the cup of black, lustrous liquid was ready, the steam rising faintly above it. It's no exaggeration to say that the coffee the owner made was delicious. Although Shizuku was born the daughter of a coffee master, she hated coffee and never drank it.

It always seemed like such a waste. If I'd been in her position, I would have been happily drinking coffee from childhood.

"Shūichi."

The owner placed the white porcelain cup filled to the brim with black liquid and gestured with his chin for me to take it away.

Up to this point, there was nothing too out of the ordinary here, aside from the fact the day had been strangely slow. It was a normal afternoon at the Torunka Café.

But . . .

The moment I placed the cup of coffee on the table, the young woman, who until then had kept her eyes lowered, looked up at me.

Then, for some reason, her large eyes opened even wider, and she stared intensely at me. Her eyes were radiating such intensity that I had the uneasy feeling that she could see inside me.

She stood abruptly, and I felt a chill as she took my hands in her cold, firm grip. Before I could react to this sudden turn of events, she looked at me and said in a voice overcome with emotion, "We meet at last."

I'm positive that's what she said.

With her holding my hands, I couldn't do anything but stare back at her vacantly in response. For a moment, the café was plunged into silence.

"Um, uh, are you a friend of Shūichi's?" Shizuku, who had retreated into the kitchen, had now returned at full speed, and was looking back and forth between us.

I shook my head violently from side to side.

"I don't think so."

I looked at her again and searched my memory. Was she a girl from campus, someone from the neighborhood, a relative . . . I had absolutely no recollection of ever having seen the woman in front of me.

"Um . . ." I said, trying nonchalantly to shake myself free. But she still held my hands tightly with her cold, pale fingers.

"I'm sorry, could you tell me your name? I apologize if I'm drawing a blank here, but have we met before?"

"No, we haven't," she said, in a tone that was quiet but definitive. It hit me with such force that I felt myself unconsciously take a half step back. "But I've known you for a very long time."

"Huh?"

"My name is Chinatsu Yukimura."

"Oh, um, my name is Shūichi Okuyama."

"Nice to meet you."

"Ni-nice to meet you too . . . ?"

My brain was completely overwhelmed. When something so inconceivable actually happens to you, you're so shocked you don't know how to respond. Shizuku was staring at us with her mouth open, watching to see how things developed.

"This is our first time meeting in this life. We knew each other in a previous life."

"Previous life?"

"We . . ." She stopped talking for a moment then smiled, her cheeks turning red as if she suddenly felt embarrassed. Then she whispered as if she were sharing a precious secret, "In a previous life, we were lovers." She played with her bangs, looking self-conscious again, and let out a little laugh.

The sun was setting and the café was soon lit up by the amber light of the lanterns. And for some reason, in that dim light, I was sitting down with the woman I knew as Chinatsu Yukimura. It was all because of Shizuku blurting out, "Well, there's no point in standing around talking." Shizuku had grabbed hold of my arm as I was trying to flee and plopped down beside me in a chair.

She was clearly enjoying this.

"I'm, um, really not a shady person . . ." Chinatsu said, in the shadiest way possible. And yet she seemed for the most part to have regained her composure since she first saw me. She spoke in the near whisper that she'd used when she first came into the café.

"So, Chinatsu, can I call you that? Chinatsu, um, so you really didn't know Shūichi until a moment ago, right?" Shizuku asked, her friendly disposition on display again.

"Yes, I didn't know him."

"But you had met him in a previous life."

"That's right."

Miss Yukimura glanced up at me as if studying my face.

"You mean you don't remember?"

"No. And I, um, didn't understand a single word of what you were saying a moment ago," I said, without hiding my discomfort. Shizuku responded by elbowing me as hard as she could under the table.

I glared at her indignantly—*You could've broken my ribs!*—but she merely gestured with her chin toward Chinatsu. Chinatsu hung her head, showing clearly that for her it might as well be the end of the world. I scratched my temple and gave a little sigh.

"So, how did we come to know each other?"

"It was in Paris, in a turbulent time: the end of the eighteenth century, right in the middle of the French Revolution."

Her expression transformed in an instant. Her eyes glittered.

"Whoa!" Shizuku made a strange animal-like wowl. It didn't seem to bother Chinatsu though, and she continued her story.

"I've missed you, Sylvie . . ."

"Eh?"

"Sylvie. That was your name before."

"I was a woman?"

"Yes."

Chinatsu nodded, smiling from ear to ear.

"Whoa," Shizuku yowled again.

"In this previous life, I was a man by the name of Etienne Apert. And you were a girl named Sylvie Soleil, as lovely as a little bird, but with the courage to make even a seasoned soldier pale in comparison."

Though I could imagine Shizuku's reaction, when I snuck a glance at the counter, I saw that even the owner was looking down, and his shoulders were trembling with laughter.

"The first time we met, Sylvie, you were still an innocent eighteen-year-old, but inside you was a spirit that burned with . . ."

"Okay, I think I get it. Can we please skip ahead?" Just listening to her, I could feel my face turning red.

"I was a poor chimney sweep. The first time I saw you was in the Jardin de Luxembourg. From the moment I laid eyes on you on your way home from school, I was spellbound."

"Whoa!" my high school-age coworker cried out again.

"All I could think about day and night was how to speak to you on your way home from school. I waited in the Jardin du Luxembourg every day for you to walk by on your way home. And then one day, one fateful day, there was a sudden rain shower, and I noticed your slender shoulders were getting wet from the rain, so I rushed to your side holding an umbrella—"

"I see," I said, flustered, brusquely cutting her off in the midst of her increasingly elaborate story.

"That's enough about that part of the story. I can imagine the rest. Basically, the two of us—Sylvie and Etienne, was it? Those two were lovers, then. That's what you're saying, right?"

"Um, yes, that's right. For us to meet again now . . . is truly a miracle."

Before I knew it, her eyes were welling up with tears. She took out a rather girlish pink handkerchief from her bag and gently dabbed the corners of her eyes with it.

"Even if you truly remember this past life, how can you be sure enough to swear that I am that person?"

"That's because . . . the moment our eyes met, I felt it instantly."

"You're saying you think it's fate?" Shizuku said. She was leaning forward at the edge of her seat.

"That's . . . right." Chinatsu Yukimura gave an embarrassed smile and took a sip of her coffee. Then she pulled her bangs forward as if to hide her blushing.

"I was just a chimney sweep with no education to speak of, and you were so intelligent, and you had such a fierce sense of purpose. You gently instructed me in the horrors of monarchism, and the potential of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and you persuaded me that what mattered above all else was that we stood up for ourselves as a people. We yearned for the fall of the *ancien régime*, and we joined the masses revolting against it."

"Ancien?"

Shizuku and I gave her a confused look, but then the owner, who had been quiet until that moment, spoke up. "The *ancien régime* was the social order in France at the time, an absolute monarchy with Louis XVI on the throne. You two should try studying history a bit more."

Chinatsu looked at the owner and smiled. "You know it well," she said. "And this coffee is quite delicious."

"Oh no, not really," the owner said, "but thank you very much." He gave an embarrassed smile.

Shizuku looked fed up and mumbled, "Dirty old man." Chinatsu didn't seem to pay her any mind and turned back to me again.

"We might have been insignificant citizens, but our hearts burned brightly with the light of hope and freedom. Yet the path ahead of us was steep. And there were many among us who shed blood in those battles. The decomposing bodies of our comrades were piled in heaps in the city streets . . ." She closed her eyes and gently shook her head like she was grieving their deaths.

"The fighting intensified, and finally I too was detained by government troops. I soon ended up in prison. Even as I approached the end, I never stopped praying that the Revolution would succeed. And, of course, I never forgot you, not even for a moment, Sylvie. The thought of dying and leaving you all alone . . . We swore we'd be together for the dawn of the Revolution; we swore if all fell to ruin, we'd be together then too. And yet . . ."

She covered her face in her hands and burst into tears at last.

"Sylvie," she went on, "I'm sorry. I only wanted to beg for your forgiveness."

I thought to myself then that in the twenty-one years I had been on this earth, I had never come across a situation this absurd. Right in front of me was a crying woman whom I had absolutely no memory of ever having met. I was so utterly baffled by everything that I almost gave in to the impulse to stand up and shout, "Oh, I remember!" A woman's tears can be that terrifying.

I held strong and suppressed the urge. If I let that happen, then I'd really be out of my depth. Even when she asked again, "You really don't remember any of it?" I shook my head silently.

"Hey, Sylvie, aren't you being awfully cold!? Isn't there some way for you to remember Etienne?"