

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

Before the coffee gets cold

Tales from the cafe

Before your memory fades

Before we say goodbye

Toshikazu Kawaguchi

BEFORE WE FORGET KINDNESS

Translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot

PICADOR

LIBRIS

We know
books

CONTENTS

I *The Son* I

II *The Nameless Child* 39

III *The Father* 87

IV *The Valentine* 143

I

The Son

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

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

'Toward the fiery flames of Mt. Vesuvius
Let's go up the slope . . .'

That's what the Japanese lyrics say in this song, whose melody most people have heard at least once. Children in Japan recognize the melody as that of 'The Imps' Trousers', a

'Funiculi Funicula' parody song. The reason why this time-travelling cafe was named after an Italian folk song was unknown, even to its owner.

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

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

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

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

Nagare shared the Tokita family name, but as a man, he

was unable to pour the coffee. That ability was something only the women of the Tokita lineage possessed.

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

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

First and foremost: the Limited Time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At times like these, rather than engaging in an argument,

Kazu remains composed and responds, 'If you say so.' After all, the decision to go back to the past is ultimately up to each customer, and she finds it too tedious to argue.



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

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

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

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

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

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

Fumiko Kiyokawa, a cafe regular who had gone back in time three years earlier, couldn't help but interject, 'You're an

elementary school student, right? Where did you hear that rumour?' Her tone was very much how an adult would speak to a child. It sounded as if she was asking, *Surely you're not thinking of travelling back to the past?*

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

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

'Gosh.'

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

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



Irreconcilable differences.

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

discontent that are difficult to move past or overcome in a relationship.

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

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

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

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

When two individuals who have been living their own lives based on their unique lifestyles and routines get married and

start co-habiting, they will inevitably spend a significant amount of time together, sharing their lives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And divorce is chosen.

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

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



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

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

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

'Don't you have work?'

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

'No. It's not that.'

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

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

'Absolutely,' Kenji agreed.