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We know
books

Also by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

Before the coffee gets cold

Tales from the cafe

Before your memory fades

Before we say goodbye

Before we forget kindness

Toshikazu Kawaguchi

BEFORE I KNEW I LOVED YOU

Translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot

PICADOR

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Prologue



There is a mysterious rumour about a peculiar seat in a cafe tucked away somewhere in the city. They say that whoever sits on that chair can travel to a time of their choosing.

However, there are the following annoying and extremely frustrating rules:

1. You can only meet someone who has visited or will visit the cafe.
2. Nothing you say or do in the past will change the present.

3. The chair is already occupied, so you must wait for its current occupant to move.
4. Once in the past, you must remain sitting there, never getting up.
5. Your time is short. It lasts only until you finish the coffee, which you must do before it gets cold.

And yet, despite these rules, customers still come, hoping to take that journey.

The name of the cafe is Funiculi Funicula.

If you were given the chance, would you take that journey, having heard all those rules?

These are the stories of four heart-warming miracles that occurred in this mysterious cafe:

I The Runaway

II The Patient Man

III The Secret

IV The Father and Son

If you could return to that day, who would you go to meet?

I

The Runaway

October 1999

'Let go of me!'

A girl's voice echoed through Tenmonkan Arcade in Kagoshima.

The arcade was colourfully hued by countless neon lights. Cheerful laughter came from the many bars and restaurants.

Her name was Azami Togo, and she had been wandering the streets, alone, still in the tracksuit bottoms and jacket she was wearing when she impulsively fled from home.

'Wait!'

Azami's stepmother, Yumiko, was gripping her arm as the crowd teemed around them.

Yumiko's expression exposed her exhaustion, with deep bags under her eyes. She had been searching for Azami for three days and nights without a moment of sleep.

Azami bucked against Yumiko's grip, and as she wrenched free, the backpack she was holding was propelled into a man passing by, who spared her only a glance before being swallowed up into the sea of people.

Azami darted away from Yumiko, intending to flee into the crowd.

'Azami, wait! Please wait!' Yumiko desperately pushed through the throng. She could not lose Azami after finally finding her, she had to keep her in sight.

For those three days, Azami had been roaming the streets of Kagoshima. Imagining where she had wandered and how she had spent the past three days made Yumiko's heart ache.

The journey from her home in Miyazaki to Kagoshima a hundred and twenty kilometres away, even taking the cheapest expressway bus route, would have cost about three thousand yen, leaving Azami with barely any money, given she was a junior-high student with limited funds.

Judging by her pale complexion, she was undernourished. Early October nights were getting chilly, and Yumiko worried that if Azami got drenched in the rain she might catch a bad cold.

'Azami!'

'Stop following me!'

'Wait! Please!'

Azami's father, Genji, had refused to file a missing-person report, even though his daughter had run away, whereabouts unknown: he didn't want the community gossiping. 'She'll come back eventually,' he had insisted, making no effort to

search for her. But Yumiko, after learning from Azami's friends where she had headed, searched tirelessly and finally found her.

'Azami!'

Yumiko once again grabbed hold of Azami's arm.

'Stop chasing me! Let me go!'

Driven by anger, Azami's flailing hand pushed Yumiko away. Yumiko lost her balance and fell to the ground.

'Just leave me be!'

Yumiko got up quickly, fearing that Azami might run away again.

'How can I just leave you alone? Why would you say that?'

Yumiko looked at Azami. Her sad eyes seemed to plead, *I've been so worried about you, searching everywhere . . .*

Azami averted her eyes with an exasperated expression as if loathing even to answer.

Yumiko approached her cautiously.

'Please, come back home. Your father is worried too, you know?'

'Oh, get real! I bet he's relieved that I'm gone. It's not just Dad, either. You think the same, don't you? You'd both be relieved with me out of the picture. You don't have to try to be my mum – we are not even blood-related!'

Relieved that she's gone? Who? Me?

Since she had married Azami's father, Yumiko had never once thought such a thing. On the contrary, she had been striving to be called 'Mum' as soon as possible.

What were all my efforts for?

Yumiko stared back at Azami in a daze. She felt the fatigue of three days and nights of relentless searching, the futility of her unrewarded efforts, and the burden of entering the family as an outsider, caught between father and daughter. Overcome by this mix of feelings, Yumiko felt all strength drain from her body. A voice in the back of her head spoke.

Perhaps I was forcing myself to believe this child was my own. After all, she isn't my daughter by birth.

Yumiko slowly closed her eyes. Tears fell for no single reason.

I might not be able to keep this up any more.

Yumiko's shoulder bag fell to the ground.

Azami glanced at the bag but didn't pick it up. Instead she turned to the downcast Yumiko.

'I'm not going back to that house,' she said and walked away.

Her expression was blank as she blended into Tenmonkan Arcade's night-time crowd.



January 2019

'I was fourteen years old at the time,' Azami recollected with a faraway look in her eyes. She was in Funiculi Funicula, a cafe rumoured to have a special seat that could take you back in time. Every once in a while, someone would call into the cafe with a wish to return to the past. Azami was one of them.

Listening to Azami's story were the cafe's waitress Kazu

Tokita and two regular customers, Kinuyo Mita and Fumiko Kiyokawa. Fumiko knew Azami from when she was a senior colleague in her company, a medical-equipment manufacturer. Fumiko was still a systems engineer there, while Azami had moved on, becoming a full-time stay-at-home wife.

Azami covered her face with her hands.

'It hit me for the first time just how much I hurt my mother, when a twist of fate landed me in the same situation,' she muttered, as if talking to herself. She had ended up being in her stepmother Yumiko's position because her husband had a child from an earlier relationship.

'Is your daughter also rebellious?' Kinuyo asked gently. She had been quietly listening to Azami's story from her seat at the counter.

She liked the coffee brewed by the cafe's owner, Nagare Tokita, and always dropped by at about this time on Sundays to drink a cup.

Azami quietly shook her head in response. 'My daughter has been calling me "Mum" from the start . . .' she managed to say before choking up.

Kinuyo and Fumiko waited silently for Azami to continue.

'I'm sorry,' Azami murmured, apologizing for crying despite her best intentions. Then, taking a shaky breath, she explained how she had often asked herself why she couldn't have been kinder to her stepmother – why she'd rebelled so much and never once called her 'Mum'. A couple of months ago, just when she began to reflect on these regrets, her father,

who hadn't contacted her for over a decade, suddenly called to say that her mother had passed away.

Her voice caught again. 'I always thought there'd come a day when I could apologize . . .'

She was filled with remorse. Even though she had been young, she regretted her coldness towards her stepmother, and for never calling her 'Mum'.

'I am a terrible daughter . . .' Azami covered her face with her hands again and her shoulders shook.

In the quiet cafe, only her sobs and the ticking of the pendulum wall clock could be heard.

CLANG-DONG

In response to the doorbell ringing, Kazu glanced towards the entrance but chose not to offer the regular greeting of 'Hello, welcome,' perhaps in consideration of Azami's crying. The person entering was Yosuke, Kinuyo's grandson. The January air outside must have been very cold as his cheeks appeared chilled and bright red. Despite his fluffy down jacket, beanie, and scarf, he was wearing shorts that left his knees completely exposed.

He sneezed, then lingered at the entrance while sniffing.

Noticing him, Kinuyo looked at the three pendulum wall clocks. The one in the middle was about to strike four in the afternoon. 'Oh, is it that time already?' she said.

Yosuke came in to fetch her. A car was waiting for them outside.

Kinuyo glanced at Azami, then at Fumiko, her eyes asking, *Will she be all right?*

Fumiko blinked slowly in reply. *She'll be OK. I'll stay with her.*

With a brief nod to convey, *I'll leave it to you*, Kinuyo accepted Yosuke's hand and stepped down from the counter seat.

'Oh, by the way, Kazu dear,' she called out, as if just remembering.

Kazu was behind the counter polishing the silver cutlery. It's a task most places avoid, but with few customers, time wasn't an issue here. She paused and looked up.

'Have you thought about what I mentioned earlier?' Kinuyo enquired.

Kazu did not answer, revealing a troubled expression so unlike her usual stoic demeanour that it piqued Fumiko's curiosity.

'What's this about?' she interjected.

'Sensei asked me to help her with her art class.' Kazu referred to Kinuyo as 'sensei' because she had been learning painting in Kinuyo's art class since childhood. It was Kinuyo who had encouraged her to pursue art at university.

Normally reserved and distant, Kazu seemed to interact with Kinuyo more freely, as if they shared a special bond. Fumiko, who often observed them closely, once told Kazu that her relationship with Kinuyo was like that of parent and child. Kazu had said only, 'Thank you,' offering neither denial nor assent.