



Before  
the  
coffee  
gets  
cold

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# I

## *The Lovers*

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'Oh gosh, is that the time? Sorry, I have to go,' the man mumbled evasively, as he stood up and reached for his bag.

'Eh?' the woman said.

She glared with uncertainty. She hadn't heard him say it was over. But he had called her – his girlfriend of three years – to come out for a *serious conversation* . . . and now he had suddenly announced he was going to work in America. He was to leave immediately – in a few hours. Even without hearing those words, she knew now that the *serious conversation* was about breaking up. She knew now it was a mistake to have thought – to have hoped – that the *serious conversation* might have included '*Will you marry me?*' for example.

'What?' the man responded dryly. He didn't make eye contact with her.

'Don't I deserve an explanation?' she asked.

The woman spoke using an interrogative tone the man particularly disliked. They were in a windowless basement cafe.

The lighting was provided by just six shaded lamps hanging from the ceiling and a single wall lamp near the entrance. A permanent sepia hue stained the cafe interior. Without a clock, there was no way to tell night and day.

There were three large antique wall clocks in the cafe. The arms of each, however, showed different times. Was this intentional? Or were they just broken? Customers on their first visit never understood why they were like this. Their only option was to check their watches. The man did likewise. While looking at the time on his watch, he started rubbing his fingers above his right eyebrow while his lower lip began to protrude slightly.

The woman found that expression particularly exasperating.

'And why are you looking like that? Like I'm the one being a pain?' she blurted out.

'I'm not thinking that,' he replied sheepishly.

'Yes you are!' she insisted.

With bottom lip again protruding, he evaded her stare and offered no reply.

The man's passive behaviour was infuriating the woman more and more. She scowled. 'You want it to be me who says it?'

She reached for her coffee, from which all heat had now gone. With the sweetest part of the experience lost, it sent her mood plummeting further.

The man looked at his watch again and counted back from the boarding time. He had to leave the cafe very soon. Unable to compose himself any better, his fingers had found their way back to his eyebrow.

The sight of him so obviously hung up about the time annoyed her. She recklessly plunked the cup down on the table. It came down hard on the saucer. *Clang!*

The loud noise startled him. His fingers, which had been busy caressing his right eyebrow, began to pull at his hair. But then, after taking a short deep breath, he sat back down and looked her in the face. All of a sudden, his face was calm.

In fact, the man's face had so clearly changed that the woman was quite taken aback. She looked down and stared at her hands clenched on her lap.

The man who had worried about time didn't wait for the woman to look up. 'Now, look . . .' he started.

No longer muttering, he sounded collected and together.

But as if she was actively trying to stop short his next words, the woman said, 'Why don't you just go?' She didn't look up.

The woman who wanted an explanation now refused to hear it. The man sat motionless as if time itself had stopped.

'It's time for you to go, isn't it?' she said, as petulantly as a child.

He looked at her perplexed, as if he didn't understand what she meant.

As if she was aware of how childish and unpleasant she sounded, she uncomfortably averted her eyes from the man and bit her lip. He rose from his seat, and spoke to the waitress standing behind the counter.

'Excuse me, I'd like to pay,' he said in a small voice.

The man tried to grab the bill, but the woman's hand was pressing down on it.

'I'm going to stay a bit longer . . . so I'll pay,' was what she

meant to say, but he had pulled out the bill from under her hand with ease and was walking to the cash register.

'Together, thanks.'

'Oh, I said leave it.'

Not moving from her chair, the woman reached out her hand to the man.

But the man refused to look at her. He pulled out a thousand-yen note from his wallet.

'Keep the change,' he said as he handed the waitress the note together with the bill. The man turned his face filled with sadness to the woman for a split second, as he picked up his bag and left.

#### CLANG-DONG

'... and that happened one week ago,' said Fumiko Kiyokawa.

Her upper body flopped into a heap on the table like a deflating balloon. As she collapsed, she somehow avoided spilling the coffee cup in front of her.

The waitress and the customer seated at the counter who had been listening to Fumiko's story looked at each other.

Before Fumiko had finished senior high school, she had already mastered six languages. After graduating top of her class from Waseda University, she joined a major medical-related IT firm in Tokyo. By her second year at the firm, she was already directing numerous projects. She was the epitome of the smart, career-driven woman.

Today, Fumiko was dressed in ordinary business attire: a white blouse and black skirt and jacket. Judging by her appearance, she was on her way home from work.

Fumiko's looks were better than ordinary. Blessed with well-defined features and petite lips, she had the face of a pop idol. Her mid-length black hair shone and crowned her with a glowing halo. Despite her conservative clothes, her exceptional figure was easy to discern. Like a model from a fashion magazine, she was a beautiful woman who would draw anyone's gaze. Yes, she was a woman who combined intelligence and beauty. But whether she realized this was a different matter.

In the past, Fumiko hadn't been one to dwell on such things – she had lived only for her work. Of course, this didn't mean she had never had relationships. It's just that they never had the same allure for her as work. '*My work is my lover*,' she would say. She had turned down approaches from many men, as though flicking away specks of dust.

The man she had been talking about was Goro Katada. Goro was a systems engineer, and like Fumiko, he was employed by a medical company, though it wasn't a major one. He was her boyfriend – he *was* her boyfriend – and three years her junior. They had met two years ago via a client for which they were both doing a project.

One week ago, Goro had asked Fumiko to meet for a 'serious conversation'. She had arrived at the meeting place in an elegant pale-pink dress with a beige spring coat and white pumps, having caught the attention of all the men she had passed on the way there. It was a new look for Fumiko. She was such a workaholic that, before her relationship with Goro, she had owned no other clothes but suits. Suits were what she had worn on dates with Goro as well – after all, they mostly met after work.

Goro had said *serious conversation*, and Fumiko had interpreted this as meaning that the conversation was going to be special. So, filled with expectation, she had bought an outfit especially.

They arrived at their chosen cafe to find a sign on the window saying it was closed due to unforeseen circumstances. Fumiko and Goro were disappointed. The cafe would have been ideal for a serious conversation as each table was in a private booth.

Left with no choice but to find another suitable place, they noticed a small sign down a quiet side street. As it was a basement cafe, they had no way of knowing what it was like inside, but Fumiko was attracted by its name, which came from the lyrics of a song she used to sing as a child, and they agreed to go in.

Fumiko regretted her decision as soon as she peered inside. It was smaller than she had imagined. The cafe had counter and table seats but with just three seats at the counter and three two-seater tables, it only took nine customers to fill the place.

Unless the *serious conversation* currently weighing on Fumiko's mind was to be held in whispers, the entire thing would be overheard. Another negative was the way that everything appeared as in sepia owing to the few shaded lamps . . . it was not to her taste at all.

A place for shady deals . . .

That was Fumiko's first impression of this cafe. She nervously made her way to the only empty table and sat down. There were three other customers and one waitress in the cafe.

At the furthest table sat a woman in a white short-sleeved dress quietly reading a book. At the table closest to the entrance

sat a dull-looking man. A travel magazine was spread open on the table and he was jotting memos in a tiny notebook. The woman seated at the counter wore a bright red camisole and green leggings. A sleeveless kimono jacket hung on the back of her chair, and she still had curlers in her hair. She glanced fleetingly at Fumiko, grinning broadly as she did. At several points during Fumiko and Goro's conversation, the woman made a remark to the waitress and let off a raucous laugh.



On hearing Fumiko's explanation, the woman in curlers said, 'I see . . .'

Actually, she didn't *see* at all – she was just following up with the appropriate response. Her name was Yaeko Hirai. One of the cafe regulars, she had just turned thirty and ran a nearby snack, or hostess, bar. She always came in for a cup of coffee before work. Her curlers were in again, but today she was wearing a revealing yellow tube top, a bright red miniskirt and vivid purple leggings. Hirai was sitting cross-legged on the counter chair while listening to Fumiko.

'It was one week ago. You remember, don't you?' Fumiko stood up and directed her attention across the counter to the waitress.

'Hmm . . . yeah,' the waitress answered uneasily, not looking at Fumiko's face.

The waitress's name was Kazu Tokita. Kazu was a cousin of the proprietor. She was waitressing there while attending Tokyo University of the Arts. She had quite a pretty face, a pale complexion and narrow almond-shaped eyes, yet her



features were not memorable. It was the type of face that if you glanced at it, closed your eyes and then tried to remember what you saw, nothing would come to mind. In a word, she was inconspicuous. She had no presence. She didn't have many friends either. Not that she worried about it – Kazu was the sort of person who found interpersonal relationships rather tedious.

'So . . . what about him? Where is he now?' Hirai asked, playing with the cup in her hand, not seeming very interested.

'America,' Fumiko said, puffing out her cheeks.

'So your boyfriend chose work, then?' Hirai had a gift for getting to the heart of the matter.

'No, that's not right!' Fumiko protested.

'Eh? But that is right, isn't it? He went to America, didn't he?' Hirai said. She was having a hard time understanding Fumiko.

'Didn't you understand when I explained?' Fumiko said vehemently.

'What bit?'

'I wanted to scream out *don't go* but I was too proud.'

'Not many women would admit that!' Hirai leant back with a snicker, slipped off balance and nearly fell off the chair.

Fumiko ignored Hirai's reaction. 'You understood, right?' she said, looking for support from Kazu.

Kazu feigned a moment's contemplation. 'Basically you're saying you didn't want him to go to America, right?'

Kazu was also one to get straight to the point.

'Well basically, I guess . . . no, I didn't. But . . .'

'You're a difficult one to understand,' Hirai said jovially, after seeing that Fumiko was struggling to reply.

If Hirai had been in Fumiko's place, she would have just broken down in tears. 'Don't go!' she would have screamed. Of course, they would have been crocodile tears. Tears are a woman's weapon. That was Hirai's philosophy.

Fumiko turned to Kazu at the middle of the counter. Her eyes were glistening. 'Anyway, I want you to transport me back to that day . . . that day one week ago!' she pleaded, totally straight-faced.

Hirai was first to respond to the lunacy of requesting to be sent back to one week ago. 'Back in time, she says . . .' She looked to Kazu with raised eyebrows.

Looking uncomfortable, Kazu simply muttered, 'Oh . . .' and didn't add anything further.

Several years had passed since the cafe had its moment of fame in the light of an urban legend that claimed it could transport people back to the past. Uninterested in that kind of thing, Fumiko had allowed it to fade from her memory. Visiting a week ago was complete happenstance. But last night, she had watched a variety programme on TV. In the introduction, the host spoke about 'urban legends', and like a bolt of lightning striking inside her head, she remembered the cafe. *The cafe that transports you back in time*. It was an incomplete memory, but she remembered that key phrase clearly.

*If I return to the past, I might be able to set things right. I might be able to have a conversation with Goro once more.* She replayed this fanciful wish over and over in her mind. She became obsessed and lost any ability to make a level-headed judgement.

The next morning she went to work, completely forgetting to eat breakfast. There, her mind was not on the job. She sat

there, obsessed with the passing time. *I just want to make sure.* She wanted to find out either way as soon as possible – and not a second later. Her day at work was a long string of careless mistakes. So sporadic was her attention that a colleague asked if she was OK. By the end of the day, she had reached peak scatterbrain.

It took her thirty minutes to get from her company to the cafe by train. She pretty much ran the last stretch from the station. Entering the cafe feeling quite breathless, she'd walked up to Kazu.

'Please send me back to the past!' she'd pleaded before Kazu could even finish saying, *Hello, welcome.*

Her animated gestures had continued in that vein until she had finished her explanation. But now, looking at the reaction of the two women, she felt ill at ease.

Hirai just continued to stare at her with a large smirk on her face, while Kazu wore a deadpan expression and avoided all eye contact.

If it was true about going back in time, I guess the place would be thronging with people, Fumiko thought to herself. But the only people in this cafe were the woman in the white dress, the man with his travel magazine, and Hirai and Kazu – the same faces that were here a week ago.

'It's possible to go back, right?' she asked, uneasily.

It may have been prudent to begin with this question. But it was pointless to realize this now.

'Well, is it or not?' she asked, staring directly at Kazu on the other side of the counter.

'Hmm. Ah . . .' Kazu replied.

Fumiko's eyes once again lit up. She was not hearing a *no*. An air of excitement started to surround her.

'Please send me back!'

She pleaded so energetically that she seemed about to leap over the counter.

'You want to go back and do what?' asked Hirai coolly, between sips of her tepid coffee.

'I'd make amends.' Her face was serious.

'I see . . .' said Hirai with a shrug.

'Please!' She spoke louder; the word reverberated throughout the cafe.

It was only recently that the idea of marrying Goro had occurred to her. She was turning twenty-eight this year, and she had been interrogated on many occasions by her persistent parents, who lived in Hakodate – *Still not thinking of marriage? Haven't you met any nice men?* and so forth. Her parents' nagging had grown more intense since her twenty-five-year-old sister got married the year before. Now it had reached the point where she was receiving weekly emails. Aside from her younger sister, Fumiko also had a twenty-three-year-old brother. He had married a girl from their home town following a surprise pregnancy, leaving only Fumiko single.

Fumiko felt no rush, but after her little sister got married, her mindset had changed just a little. She had started to think getting married might be OK if it was to Goro.

Hirai plucked a cigarette from her leopard-print pouch.

'Perhaps you'd best explain it to her properly . . . don't you think?' she said in a businesslike manner while lighting it.

'It seems like I should,' Kazu replied in her toneless voice as she walked around the counter and stood before Fumiko.

She looked at her with a soft kindness in her eyes as if she were consoling a crying child.

‘Look. I want you to listen, and listen carefully. OK?’

‘What?’ Fumiko’s body tensed up.

‘You can go back. It’s true . . . you can go back, but . . .’

‘But . . .?’

‘When you go back, no matter how hard you try, the present won’t change.’

*The present won’t change.* This was something Fumiko was totally unprepared for – something she couldn’t take in. ‘Eh?’ she said loudly without thinking.

Kazu calmly continued explaining. ‘Even if you go back to the past and tell your . . . um, boyfriend who went to America how you feel . . .’

‘Even if I tell him how I feel?’

‘The present won’t change.’

‘What?’ Not wanting to hear, Fumiko desperately covered her ears.

But Kazu casually went on to say the words that she least wanted to hear. ‘It won’t change the fact that he’s gone to America.’

A trembling sensation swept through her entire body.

Yet with what seemed like a ruthless disregard for her feelings, Kazu continued with her explanation.

‘Even if you return to the past, reveal your feelings, and ask him not to go, it won’t change the present.’

Fumiko reacted impulsively to Kazu’s cold hard words. ‘That sort of defeats the purpose, don’t you think?’ she said defiantly.

‘Easy now . . . let’s not shoot the messenger,’ Hirai said. She

took a drag of her cigarette, and seemed unsurprised by Fumiko's reaction.

'Why?' Fumiko asked Kazu, her eyes begging for answers.

'Why? I'll tell you why,' Kazu began. 'Because that's the rule.'

There tends to be, in any movie or novel about time travel, some rule saying, *Don't go meddling in anything that is going to change the present*. For example, going back and preventing your parents marrying or meeting would erase the circumstances of your birth and cause your present self to vanish.

This had been the standard state of affairs in most time-travel stories that Fumiko knew, so she believed in the rule: *If you change the past, you do change the present*. On that basis, she wanted to return to the past and have the chance to do it afresh. Alas, it was a dream that was not to be.

She wanted a convincing explanation as to why this unbelievable rule existed, that *there is nothing you can do while in the past that will change the present*. The only explanation that Kazu would give was to say, *Because that's the rule*. Was she trying to tease her in a friendly way, by not telling her the reason? Or was it a difficult concept that she was unable to explain? Or perhaps she didn't understand the reason either, as her casual expression seemed to suggest.

Hirai seemed to be relishing the sight of Fumiko's expression. 'Tough luck,' she said, exhaling a plume of smoke with obvious pleasure.

She had drafted that line earlier when Fumiko had begun her explanation, and had been waiting to deliver it ever since.

'But . . . why?' Fumiko felt the energy drain from her body. As she let herself slouch limply into her chair, a vivid recollection came to her. She had read an article on this cafe in a

magazine. The article had the headline 'Uncovering Truth Behind "Time-Travelling Cafe" Made Famous by Urban Legend'. The gist of the article was as follows.

The cafe's name was Funiculi Funicula. It had become famous, with long queues each day, on account of the time-travelling. But it wasn't possible to find anyone who had actually gone back in time, because of the extremely annoying rules that had to be followed. The first rule was: *The only people you can meet while in the past are those who have visited the cafe.* This would usually defeat the purpose of going back. Another rule was: *There is nothing you can do while in the past that will change the present.* The cafe was asked why that rule existed, but their only comment was that they didn't know.

As the author of the article was unable to find anyone who had actually visited the past, whether or not it was actually possible to go back in time remained a mystery. Even supposing it was possible, the sticky point of not being able to change the present certainly made the whole idea seem pointless.

The article concluded by stating that it certainly made an interesting urban legend, but it was difficult to see why the legend existed. As a postscript, the article also mentioned there were apparently other rules that had to be followed but it was unclear what they were.

Fumiko's attention returned to the cafe. Hirai seated herself opposite her at the table she had collapsed onto and proceeded to merrily explain the other rules. With her head and shoulders still sprawled on the table, Fumiko fixed her eyes on the sugar pot, wondering why the cafe didn't use sugar cubes, and quietly listened.

'It's not just those rules. There's only one seat that allows you to go back in time, OK? And, while in the past, you can't move from that seat,' Hirai said. 'What else was there?' she asked Kazu, as she moved her count to her fifth finger.

'There's a time limit,' Kazu said, keeping her eyes on the glass she was wiping. She mentioned it like an afterthought, as if she were merely talking to herself.

Fumiko raised her head in reaction to this news. 'A time limit?'

Kazu showed a slight smile, and nodded.

Hirai gave the table a nudge. 'Frankly, after hearing just these rules, barely anyone still wants to return to the past,' she said, apparently enjoying herself. And she was indeed taking great delight in observing Fumiko. 'It's been a long time since we've seen a customer like you – someone totally set in your delusion of wanting to go back to the past.'

'Hirai . . .' Kazu said sternly.

'Life doesn't get served to you on a plate. Why don't you just give it up?' Hirai blurted out. She looked ready to continue her tirade.

'Hirai . . .' Kazu repeated, this time with a bit more emphasis.

'No. No, I think it's best to clearly put it out there. Huh?' Then Hirai guffawed loudly.

The words spoken were all too much for Fumiko. Her strength had entirely drained from her body, and again she collapsed head and shoulders onto the table.

Then, from across the room . . . 'Can I have a refill, please?' said the man sitting at the table closest to the entrance with his travel magazine opened out in front of him.

'OK,' Kazu called back.