

## Before the Coffee Gets Cold

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Toshikazu Kawaguchi, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, translated from Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot, Picador, 2023, 213 pages.



Written as a play first, the novel *Before the coffee gets cold* is shaped by the gaze of both the playwright and the writer. The book invites us to reflect on our self-perception in the act of reading and observing. It consists of four different stories which complement each other and share the same setting, revolving around the life of four visitors, as follows: *The Lovers*, *Husband and Wife*, *The Sisters*, *Mother and Child*. Briefly, the first part focuses on Fumiko's story, who wants to confront the man who left her in order to follow his dream and work in America. In the second part, the author pays particular attention to the story of Mr Fusagi and Ms Kohtake. She goes back to receive a letter from her husband, whose memory has begun to fade, as he has Alzheimer's disease and cannot remember who she is. The focal point of the third narrative is the difficult relationship between two sisters, Yaeko Hirai and her younger sister, Kumi Hirai. The latter runs the family-owned inn against her will, on behalf of her disowned elder sister. Consequently, she is constantly trying to persuade Yaeko to return home,

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where she is supposed to be in order to undertake the task she was given from the very beginning, as claimed by the tradition of their family. On her way back home, Kumi dies soon after not reaching her sister in a terrible accident and for this reason Yaeko wishes to meet her one last time. The fourth part tells the story of a mother that meets the daughter she never got the chance to know. Kei Tokita, Nagare's wife, has a weak heart, which is very dangerous for herself and her upcoming pregnancy. Under the circumstances, her strongest wish is to meet her little girl in this unusual manner, as deciding to give birth involves giving up her life. As a result, she finds out that being able to travel through time implies the idea of going to the future as well.

According to urban legend, there is an old cafe in a small back alley in Tokyo that transports people back in time, to any time they like. In a nutshell, a very small cafe, as it only takes nine customers to fill this singular place. The only people in the cafe among regular customers are the woman in a white dress and the man with a travel magazine, Mr Fusagi. The owner is Nagare Tokita, cousin of Kazu. Kazu Tokita is the waitress of this coffee bar, whose principal role is to serve the coffee during the ceremony that returns people to the past. She is a sort of messenger or, in other words, the master of ceremony, which reminds us of the tea ritual that exists in Asian cultures, where tea is a central part in social life. This custom shows simplicity, appreciation and hospitality, being at the same time a perfect reflection of traditions or spiritual beliefs. The act of pouring the coffee silently and slowly – the bitterest coffee that Fumiko, the protagonist of the first story, had ever drunk – just like in an ancient ritual is done with fluid and graceful movements. In a way that arouses curiosity, the waitress looks differently when bringing the white coffee cup – that white coffee cup – and the small silver kettle, which is smaller than those that can be seen at other cafes. Thus, she is described as being a ballerina with beautiful motions and soft voice when uttering the key words: 'Just remember...' (p. 88). The hot drink, a carefully brewed coffee, is also special from many points of view.

Apparently, the tale about time travel is very simple, but in reality it lies in a set of a few strict and precise rules which are repeatedly mentioned all over the book in a symbolic way. In fact, the repetition seems impossible to avoid. Following the first principle, one should know that *no matter how hard you try, the present won't change* when you go back - on that basis, everything might seem rather useless. Another thing is that only one seat allows customers to go back in the past with a time limit. Unfortunately, this only seat is almost permanently taken by a ghost, the chair (which can be seen as a ticket to the past) being free while the woman in the white dress is gone to the toilet. That being said, there is another rule which points out that time travel begins from the moment the coffee is poured. Customers must return to the present before the coffee gets cold. In light of this, the title of the book is entirely suggestive, implying one of the most important aspects that

visitors who return to the past should take into account. But there is more. Last but not least, there is another detail of great significance: *when you return to the past, you must drink the entire cup before the coffee goes cold* (p. 43). Actually, this is the only rule one has to absolutely obey, otherwise, the person being transported in time will turn into a ghost, the next ghost sitting in that seat. Without doubt, travelling in time means so many requirements to meet, with both pluses and minuses, benefits and risks. However, time travel is *a once in a lifetime experience* (p. 93) in a cafe which seems to be especially designed for those that have regrets. These are Kohtake's words, a nurse and a regular of the cafe.

Needless to say, everything is about time and memory. In fact, the constant ticking of the clock in a windowless place like Funiculi Funicula highlights this very idea to a greater extent. The sense of time seems to be simply abolished, despite the three large wall clocks being visibly displayed. As a matter of interest, the middle clock is the only one that shows the correct time. Although it was opened at the beginning of the Meiji period, having operated more than a hundred years, Funiculi Funicula has a timeless aspect. Apart from the fact that there are no windows, it is apparently separated from the outside world, being settled in a basement, where there is no mobile-phone signal. Hence, everything appears as in sepia owing to the few shaded lamps and there is no way of telling night from day. What is more, the idea that the sense of time becomes frozen appears to be quite possible, as there are no variations of light and dark. Additionally, in *The Sisters* time stood still at the inn, due to the fact that nothing had changed. The hallway was completely dark and silent, as rooms in old Japanese houses tend to be dark.

All in all, the central concept is questioning the idea of time travel and who would you like to meet if you could go back in time, even though there is nothing that you can change... After all, this engaging story is about loss, insecurity, guilt, regrets, things that haven't been said or done at the right time and, finally, about hope.