

Merit of English Section

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Book Title : Before the Coffee Gets Cold

Author : Toshikazu Kawaguchi

Publisher : Picador

“You may return to the past, but you don't get to change the present.” This line struck my mind when I was reading the novel. What's the point of travelling back then? We desire to go to the past because we have regrets and want to change the present. However, the idea in the book goes completely against it as the present cannot be changed despite any efforts. As the stories of the characters unfold into a series of tragedy

and reconciliation with the past, emotions surge from the deep recesses of my heart for the stories are heartbreaking yet soothing at the same time.

Set in a cozy cafe which offers customers the precious opportunity to travel through time, the book takes the readers on a remarkable journey through time along with the four characters, who are all interconnected. However, there are rules travellers have to abide by, including drinking the coffee before it gets cold, staying in a specific seat which is usually occupied by a ghost, and they can only meet people who have visited the cafe. Or else, they either become a ghost or are forced to return to the present. Despite the irritating guidelines, the characters manage to change their heart by travelling in time.

Events we deem tragic cannot be predicted or prevented for they are the nature of life, naturally consisting of ups and downs. The book illustrates the catastrophes in life with heart-wrenching episodes. Fumiko's boyfriend Goro decides to end their relationship; Hirai loses her sister forever due to her own selfishness; Kohtake's husband is diagnosed with Alzheimer's; and Kei doesn't have a chance to witness her child's growth. We would never have the power to foresee the accidents in life, and when tragedy happens, what we can do is to adjust our mentality and move on.

Such is the main theme of the novel - to move on from the past and live in the present. Hirai, the elder sister of the family tree, decides to leave home to run her own bar with the oppression from her entire family as she is supposed to run the inn of the family. Kumi, the sister of Hirai, tries her very best to persuade Hirai to return, yet it results in nothing but the loss

of her life. She is unfortunately hit by a car when returning home from the cafe. I can only imagine the guilt and heartbreak Hirai experiences, hidden behind her composed facade. She starts pondering if Kumi has any 'dreams' to pursue that she is so persistent in her return. Therefore, she goes back to the day Kumi dies. It turns out that Kumi's dream is to run the inn with her. This undoubtedly hits Hirai in her heart once again that it is not something of a prodigious dream, but the simple idea of being with her together as a family. Yet this cannot be achieved anymore. Hirai returns home, and reconciles with her family as Kumi would have wished. Happy ending, isn't it? Indeed, losing a sister is miserable, but to move on is critical. Life is like a train, and we are our own drivers. People drop by our trains and go, but at the end of the day we still have to drive the train ourselves towards our own destinations but not stagnating. This book serves as the brutal yet apt reminder for us to stop living in the

past and continue pushing forward. It is a fact that the past cannot be altered, but the future is brimming with endless possibilities.

Another notable theme is regrets, which stem from missed opportunities. The book vividly portrays the missed opportunities of the characters and readers must be able to strongly identify with them. Hirai's heart is filled with regrets upon hearing the death of her sister. Regrets only arise in hindsight, and we can come up with a million different approaches in which we could have altered the outcome.

However, things have happened and we cannot undo them as we wish. What we can do is to take the present time seriously and get in touch with the ones we love before it gets too late. There are times we refuse to sit down and seriously talk with one because it seems to be embarrassing, and it doesn't feel necessary. Hirai doesn't have the desire to talk with her sister

until her sister's passing, and she surely regrets it. This book serves as a poignant reminder for all of us to take the initiative to engage with the loved ones before the coffee gets cold and before it is too late.

Kei's story is perhaps the most emotionally stirring. As a girl born with a fragile heart, she engages with Nagare, the manager of the mysterious cafe. Her condition deteriorates upon her pregnancy and she knows that she will die after her child comes to the world. With such a magical cafe, she and her child travel to the future and the past respectively to see each other. Miki, whom Kei doesn't know will be her daughter in the future, comes to take a picture with her. Kei is completely confused that an unknown girl comes to just take a picture with her, who should be in the cafe all the time. That is only when Kei travels to the future that she knows the girl is her daughter. Tragically, Kei is no longer alive by the time

Miki is born, so Miki has to go to the past to see her mum and Kei has to go to the future to see her daughter. It is agonising that the mother and daughter can never see each other in the present, and it is remarkable of Kei to sacrifice her life for her daughter. Meanwhile, the emotion is complicated because the sacrifice means Miki won't have a mother. Travelling to the future, Kei learns that Fumiko has been there to take care of Miki, and Kazu, the waitress, plays the role of mother and big sister, lavishing Miki with kindness. Miki shows her gratefulness that Kei brings her to the world, in contrast to the worries of Kei that her child might be living under the shadow of having no mother. The characters are well-connected and they support each other - all because of love.

It is an interesting discovery that upon finishing the book, everyone is connected and there are always people by one's side. When facing difficulties, we should always remember

that there are people by our side. This is definitely the message that Kei's story conveys to the readers.

There is no time machine in real life. That is why it is even more crucial to cherish the moment right now, just as the book title suggests: before the coffee gets cold. Even time machines have a time limit, so does life. Connect with the people around us before they become our past with regrets. The book definitely opens up another perspective to view our life, which is loaded with difficulties and misfortunes. The strength to overcome obstacles is within us, and it is up to us to move forward.