

The prize-winning Japanese bestseller

Lonely Castle in the Mirror

Mizuki
Tsujimura



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LONELY CASTLE IN THE MIRROR

Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel



doubleday

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About the Author

MIZUKI TSUJIMURA lives in Tokyo and is a well-known author of bestselling mystery novels in Japan. Her groundbreaking novel *Lonely Castle in the Mirror* combines elements of Japanese fantasy with highly relevant themes of emotional wellbeing and friendship. It won the coveted Japan Booksellers' Award, voted by booksellers as the book they most like to sell, and became an instant no. 1 bestseller in Japan, selling over half a million copies. Tsujimura has also won the Naoki prize for her work. Rights have sold across the world.

Lonely Castle: (1) A castle situated off by itself. (2)
A castle surrounded by enemies, with no hope of
relief forces arriving.

Daijirin dictionary

I SOMETIMES FIND MYSELF DREAMING.

A new transfer student has started at our school, and everyone wants to be friends with them. The most cheerful, kind and athletic person in our class. And smart, too.

Out of all my classmates this new student picks me out with a generous smile, as dazzling as the sun, and says, 'Kokoro-chan, it's been such a long time.'

The other students can't believe it. 'What?' they say, looking at me meaningfully. 'Do you two already know each other?'

In another world, we were already friends.

There's nothing special about me. I'm not athletic, and I'm not smart. There's nothing about me anyone would envy.

It's only that we had the chance to meet before, and form a special bond.

We go everywhere together: when we move to a different classroom, when we go for break, and when we walk through the school gates at the end of the day.

Sanada's gang may be dying to be friends with them, but all the student says is, 'I'm with Kokoro-chan.'

So I am no longer alone.

I've been hoping something like this will happen for such a long time.

Though I know it never will.

I

FIRST SEMESTER: WAIT AND SEE

May

BEYOND THE DRAWN CURTAINS floated the sound of the little truck from the local supermarket coming to sell produce. ‘It’s A Small World’ – the song from Kokoro’s favourite ride at Disneyland – boomed from the large speaker on the back, reminding her of the world of laughter and hope that lay just outside her window. Ever since she could remember, it always played the same song.

It was abruptly cut off, and an announcement followed. ‘Hello everyone. This is the produce truck from Mikawa Market. We have fresh goods, dairy products, bread and rice for sale!’

The supermarket along the highway was far away, and you needed a car to get there, so ever since Kokoro was small the Mikawa Market truck had driven over every week, and parked behind her house. Its melody was the signal for old people in the neighbourhood, and mothers with small children, to come outside and buy their provisions.

Kokoro had never gone to shop there herself, though her mother apparently had. ‘Mr Mikawa’s getting on in years, so I wonder how much longer he’ll keep coming,’ she’d said.

In the past, before the supermarket appeared in the area, it really had been convenient for the truck to drive over, and plenty of families bought its produce. But it was beginning to lose its customers. Some people even complained about the loudspeaker, calling it noise pollution.

Kokoro didn’t think it was a nuisance, but whenever she heard the melody she became, like it or not, aware that it was daytime, and a weekday. *Forced to be* aware of it.

She could hear children laughing.

It was only after Kokoro stopped going to school that she discovered this was what eleven o’clock in the morning was like in her neighbourhood.

While in elementary school, she only ever saw the Mikawa truck during the holidays.

She'd never listened to it so intently – on a weekday, in her bedroom, curtains drawn, her body rigid. Not until last year.

She watched TV with bated breath, the sound on mute, hoping the light from the set wouldn't filter out through the curtains.

Even when the Mikawa truck wasn't there, there were always young mothers and children playing in the park beyond their house. Whenever she spied the strollers lined up by the park benches, colourful bags hanging from the handles, a thought came to her: *It's not early morning any more.* The families who gathered between ten and eleven always disappeared by midday, heading home to have lunch.

And then she slid open her curtains a tiny bit.

Spending so much time alone in her bedroom – gloomy during the day despite the orange curtains – feelings of guilt welled up in her. She felt she was being blamed for being slack and lazy.

At first she'd enjoyed being at home, but as time passed, though no one said anything, she knew she couldn't carry on like this.

There were good reasons why set rules existed.

Rules like: you should open your curtains in the morning.

And all children should attend school.

TWO DAYS AGO, SHE AND her mother had visited a private alternative 'School' (they used the English word), and today she'd been sure she could make a start there.

Yet when she woke up, she realized it wasn't going to happen.

As usual, her stomach was killing her.

She wasn't faking it. It really did hurt.

She had no idea why, but in the mornings, her stomach, and sometimes even her head, pulsed with pain.

Don't force yourself to go, her mother had said.

So when she went downstairs to the dining room, she wasn't worried about her mother's reaction.

'Mum, my stomach hurts.'

Her mother had been preparing some hot milk and toast, and when she heard this her face went blank.

She wouldn't meet her daughter's eye.

As if she hadn't heard, she looked down and carried a mug of hot milk over to the dining table. '*How does it hurt?*' she asked.

Then her mother yanked off the red apron she was wearing over her work clothes – a trouser suit – and draped it over a chair.

‘The same as always,’ Kokoro said in a small voice, but before she’d managed to finish speaking, her mother interrupted.

‘*The same as always?* But you were fine until yesterday. The School we visited isn’t like your public junior high, you know. You don’t need to go every day, there are fewer children in each class, and the teachers seem so kind. You said you’d go. But now you’re telling me you won’t?’

Her mother obviously wanted her to attend. The sudden accusations made that clear enough. But Kokoro wasn’t feigning illness. Her stomach really *was* killing her.

When Kokoro didn’t reply, her mother shot an irritated glance at the clock.

‘Ah – I’m going to be late,’ she said, clucking her tongue. ‘So – what do you want to do?’

Kokoro’s legs felt paralysed.

‘I can’t go,’ she said.

It wasn’t simply that she didn’t want to go. She *couldn’t*.

When Kokoro was finally able, with great effort, to mutter a response, her mother let out a huge sigh and grimaced, as if she too felt a twinge of pain.

‘Is it only today you can’t go? Or are you never going to go?’

Kokoro couldn’t say.

She wasn’t going today, but she had no idea if, the next day, she might not have a stomach ache again.

‘OK then,’ her mother said, and rose to her feet. She picked up the plate with Kokoro’s breakfast and threw it in the triangular waste collector in the corner of the sink. ‘So no milk either? And after I heated it up for you,’ she added, and poured it down the drain without waiting for a reply. A burst of hissing steam rose up from the hot milk, quickly vanishing under the sound of tap water.

Kokoro had planned to eat it later, but before she could get a word out the toast and milk were history.

‘Could you please move?’ her mother said, brushing past Kokoro, sitting motionless in PJs. She disappeared into the living room. After a few moments, Kokoro heard her talking on the phone. ‘Good morning, this is

Mrs Anzai.’ Her earlier testiness had gone, replaced by a formal, polite tone.

‘Yes, that’s correct,’ she heard her mother say. ‘She says her stomach hurts. I’m so sorry. When we visited the School, she seemed so enthusiastic to start. Yes, that’s right. I apologize for any trouble.’

The School that her mother had taken her to was called *Kokoro no kyoshitsu* – literally ‘Classroom for the Heart’, a sort of children’s counselling centre and alternative School. Above the entrance were the words *Supporting Children’s Development*.

It was situated in an old building, a former school or perhaps a hospital, and when they’d first arrived, Kokoro had heard children’s voices coming from upstairs. Elementary age kids, she thought, from the sound of them.

‘You must be a little nervous, Kokoro, but let’s go in,’ her mother had said, smiling. She looked more on edge than her daughter but nevertheless gave Kokoro’s back a tiny, encouraging push.

Kokoro had felt awkward that she and the School shared the same name – *kokoro*, ‘heart’.

Her mum must have noticed the coincidence, too. It wasn’t as if she’d named her that just so she could bring her here. Even thinking such a thing brought a pang of pain.

This was how Kokoro learned for the first time that the so-called *non-attende*e children had somewhere else to go, other than normal school. Back in elementary school, no one in her class ever refused to go to school. A few kids might fake a sick day or two, but there hadn’t been a single child who would have to go to a school like this one.

Even the teachers who greeted them all referred to the alternative School by the English word ‘school’.

Kokoro felt a bit strange in the open slippers she’d been given, and as she sat waiting, she nervously curled up her toes.

‘So Kokoro, I understand you’re a student at Yukishina No. 5 Junior High School?’ The teacher was smiling gently as she checked all her information was correct. She was young, and reminded Kokoro of those cheerful, ever-smiling older girls who danced and sang on children’s TV. The woman had a sunflower-shaped name tag on her blouse, with a tiny portrait of her, undoubtedly created by one of the children at the School, and the name Kitajima written on it.

‘Yes,’ Kokoro said. Despite her efforts, her voice came out sounding weak and muffled. She wondered why, but at that moment it was the only voice she could manage.

Ms Kitajima smiled broadly.

‘I went there too,’ she said.

‘Oh.’

Their conversation stalled.

Ms Kitajima was actually a beautiful young woman, her short hair giving her a vivacious look. And she had the kindest eyes. Kokoro immediately liked her, and she envied her no end that she had long since graduated and no longer had to attend the junior high.

It was hard to say that Kokoro herself was actually *attending* junior high. She had only just started school in April, when the new academic year began, had only gone to lessons for the first month, and then stopped.

‘I CALLED THEM TO LET them know.’

As she reappeared in the dining room, her mother’s irritated tone had resumed. She looked at Kokoro, who hadn’t moved an inch the entire time, and frowned. ‘Look, if your stomach still hurts, you should go back to bed. I’ll leave the lunch I made for you to eat at school, so if you feel like eating, go ahead.’ Her mother spoke without so much as a glance at Kokoro, and started to get ready to go out.

If only her father were here, Kokoro thought painfully, he’d stand up for her. Both her parents worked, and since her father’s job was further away, he left early in the morning. Most days when she woke up, he was already gone.

If she just stood here, she’d most likely get told off further, so Kokoro started to climb the stairs. From behind, like a final stab, she heard her mother let out another loud sigh.

BEFORE SHE KNEW IT, IT was three o’clock.

She had left her TV on, and it was now airing an afternoon talk show. After a segment highlighting celebrity scandals and news, it switched to an infomercial, and Kokoro finally hauled herself out of bed.

Why was she so sleepy? When she was at home, she always felt so much sleepier than she did at school.

She rubbed the sleepy dust from her eyes, wiped away the trace of drool from the corner of her mouth, turned off the TV and went downstairs. As she stood at the kitchen sink and washed her face, she realized how hungry she was.

She went to the dining room and opened the bento lunch her mother had made for her.

As she untied the ribbon holding the checked cloth around it, Kokoro thought of how her mother must have pictured her as she wrapped the bento, how she saw her enjoying the lunch at the School. Her chest tightened at the thought, and she wished she could apologize to her for not going.

There was a small Tupperware container too, on top of the bento, and when she opened it Kokoro found slices of kiwi fruit, one of her favourites. The bento itself was something she loved: three-coloured *soboro* rice, minced cooked cod, ground chicken and egg in a lively design.

She took one bite and hung her head.

When they'd first visited the School, it had seemed like a fun place, so why couldn't she bring herself to go? This morning she'd thought that her stomach ache had prevented her from going today only, but now that she'd wasted the entire day, she'd lost all desire to go at all.

THE KIDS AT THE SCHOOL were of both elementary and junior high age.

They all seemed like normal children, and none struck her as the sort who couldn't get on in public school. None of them were especially overweight or particularly depressed, and none of them seemed like losers no one wanted to hang out with.

The only difference was that the junior high kids weren't in school uniforms.

Two girls a little older than Kokoro had brought their desks together, facing each other, and the snatch of conversation she'd overheard – *That totally sucks. For sure, but you know ...* – seemed no different from the chat at her junior high. When she overheard this little scene, her gut started to ache again, though she also found it strange that girls like these, seemingly so normal, had dropped out of school.

As Ms Kitajima showed them around, one child came up to her complaining that 'Masaya hit me!' The child had charm, and Kokoro

imagined herself playing games with him if she started at the School. She could see it clearly.

Her mother said she'd stay in the office downstairs with the head of the school, while Kokoro went on a little tour.

Her mother never mentioned it, but Kokoro got the distinct impression that she'd been to the School a number of times herself, before Kokoro made her visit. The way the other teachers greeted her mother made it clear they'd met before.

Kokoro remembered how awkward and uncomfortable her mother had been when she first broached the topic of visiting the School, and realized how her mother, in her own way, was trying her best to be sensitive to Kokoro's feelings.

When Kokoro stood outside the office where her mother was waiting, she heard what she took to be the voice of the head of the school, saying, 'Elementary school is such a pleasant, comforting place for most children, so it's not at all unusual for many to have trouble fitting in when they make the transition to junior high. Especially with a junior high like Yukishina No. 5, which has grown so large, what with other schools merging after the school restructuring. They now have one of the largest number of students.'

Kokoro took a deep breath.

At least they're not touching on painful subjects, she thought.

And it was true – when she'd entered junior high, she'd suddenly gone from a school with two classes in each year to one with seven, and it had definitely thrown her. She barely knew anyone in her homeroom.

But that wasn't it.

That wasn't the reason why she *had trouble fitting in.*

This woman has no idea what I've been through, she thought.

Ms Kitajima, standing beside Kokoro, seemed completely unfazed by what they'd overheard, and knocked firmly at the door. 'Excuse me,' she announced. The older head teacher and Kokoro's mother, seated opposite each other, turned simultaneously to face them.

Her mother was clutching a handkerchief, and Kokoro hoped she hadn't been crying.

IF SHE LEFT THE TV on, she would end up watching it.

And if she did, she'd feel she'd accomplished something, even though she'd wasted the entire day.