

KLARA AND THE SUN

A NOVEL



KAZUO
ISHIGURO

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE
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Klara and the Sun

KAZUO ISHIGURO



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In memory of my mother

Shizuko Ishiguro

(1926–2019)

PART ONE

hen we were new, Rosa and I were mid-store, on the magazines table side, and could see through more than half of the window. So we were able to watch the outside – the office workers hurrying by, the taxis, the runners, the tourists, Beggar Man and his dog, the lower part of the RPO Building. Once we were more settled, Manager allowed us to walk up to the front until we were right behind the window display, and then we could see how tall the RPO Building was. And if we were there at just the right time, we would see the Sun on his journey, crossing between the building tops from our side over to the RPO Building side.

When I was lucky enough to see him like that, I'd lean my face forward to take in as much of his nourishment as I could, and if Rosa was with me, I'd tell her to do the same. After a minute or two, we'd have to return to our positions, and when we were new, we used to worry that because we often couldn't see the Sun from mid-store, we'd grow weaker and weaker. Boy AF Rex, who was alongside us then, told us there was nothing to worry about, that the Sun had ways of reaching us wherever we were. He pointed to the floorboards and said, 'That's the Sun's pattern right there. If you're worried, you can just touch it and get strong again.'

There were no customers when he said this, and Manager was busy arranging something up on the Red Shelves, and I didn't want to disturb her by asking permission. So I gave Rosa a glance, and when she looked back blankly, I took two steps forward, crouched down and reached out both hands to the Sun's pattern on the floor. But as soon as my fingers touched it, the pattern faded, and though I

tried all I could – I patted the spot where it had been, and when that didn't work, rubbed my hands over the floorboards – it wouldn't come back. When I stood up again Boy AF Rex said:

'Klara, that was greedy. You girl AFs are always so greedy.'

Even though I was new then, it occurred to me straight away it might not have been my fault; that the Sun had withdrawn his pattern by chance just when I'd been touching it. But Boy AF Rex's face remained serious.

'You took all the nourishment for yourself, Klara. Look, it's gone almost dark.'

Sure enough the light inside the store had become very gloomy. Even outside on the sidewalk, the Tow-Away Zone sign on the lamp post looked gray and faint.

'I'm sorry,' I said to Rex, then turning to Rosa: 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it all myself.'

'Because of you,' Boy AF Rex said, 'I'm going to become weak by evening.'

'You're making a joke,' I said to him. 'I know you are.'

'I'm not making a joke. I could get sick right now. And what about those AFs rear-store? There's already something not right with them. They're bound to get worse now. You were greedy, Klara.'

'I don't believe you,' I said, but I was no longer so sure. I looked at Rosa, but her expression was still blank.

'I'm feeling sick already,' Boy AF Rex said. And he sagged forward.

'But you just said yourself. The Sun always has ways to reach us. You're making a joke, I know you are.'

I managed in the end to convince myself Boy AF Rex was teasing me. But what I sensed that day was that I had, without meaning to, made Rex bring up something uncomfortable, something most AFs in the store preferred not to talk about. Then not long afterwards that thing happened to Boy AF Rex, which made me think that even if he had been joking that day, a part of him had been serious too.

It was a bright morning, and Rex was no longer beside us because Manager had moved him to the front alcove. Manager always said that every position was carefully conceived, and that we were as likely to be chosen when standing at one as at another. Even so, we all knew the gaze of a customer entering the store would fall first on the front alcove, and Rex was naturally pleased to get his turn there. We watched him from mid-store, standing with his chin raised, the Sun's pattern all over him, and Rosa leaned over to me once to say, 'Oh, he does look wonderful! He's bound to find a home soon!'

On Rex's third day in the front alcove, a girl came in with her mother. I wasn't so good then at telling ages, but I remember estimating thirteen and a half for the girl, and I think now that was correct. The mother was an office worker, and from her shoes and suit we could tell she was high-ranking. The girl went straight to Rex and stood in front of him, while the mother came wandering our way, glanced at us, then went on towards the rear, where two AFs were sitting on the Glass Table, swinging their legs freely as Manager had told them to do. At one point the mother called, but the girl ignored her and went on staring up at Rex's face. Then the child reached out and ran a hand down Rex's arm. Rex said nothing, of course, just smiled down at her and remained still, exactly as we'd been told to do when a customer showed special interest.

'Look!' Rosa whispered. 'She's going to choose him! She loves him. He's so lucky!' I nudged Rosa sharply to silence her, because we could easily be heard.

Now it was the girl who called to the mother, and then soon they were both standing in front of Boy AF Rex, looking him up and down, the girl sometimes reaching forward and touching him. The two conferred in soft voices, and I heard the girl say at one point, 'But he's perfect, Mom. He's beautiful.' Then a moment later, the child said, 'Oh, but Mom, come on.'

Manager by this time had brought herself quietly behind them. Eventually the mother turned to Manager and asked:

'Which model is this one?'

‘He’s a B2,’ Manager said. ‘Third series. For the right child, Rex will make a perfect companion. In particular, I feel he’ll encourage a conscientious and studious attitude in a young person.’

‘Well this young lady here could certainly do with that.’

‘Oh, Mother, he’s perfect.’

Then the mother said: ‘B2, third series. The ones with the solar absorption problems, right?’

She said it just like that, in front of Rex, her smile still on her face. Rex kept smiling too, but the child looked baffled and glanced from Rex to her mother.

‘It’s true,’ Manager said, ‘that the third series had a few minor issues at the start. But those reports were greatly exaggerated. In environments with normal levels of light, there’s no problem whatsoever.’

‘I’ve heard solar malabsorption can lead to further problems,’ the mother said. ‘Even behavioral ones.’

‘With respect, ma’am, series three models have brought immense happiness to many children. Unless you live in Alaska or down a mineshaft, you don’t need to worry.’

The mother went on looking at Rex. Then finally she shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, Caroline. I can see why you like him. But he’s not for us. We’ll find one for you that’s perfect.’

Rex went on smiling until after the customers had left, and even after that, showed no sign of being sad. But that’s when I remembered about him making that joke, and I was sure then that those questions about the Sun, about how much of his nourishment we could have, had been in Rex’s mind for some time.

Today, of course, I realize Rex wouldn’t have been the only one. But officially, it wasn’t an issue at all – every one of us had specifications that guaranteed we couldn’t be affected by factors such as our positioning within a room. Even so, an AF would feel himself growing lethargic after a few hours away from the Sun, and start to worry there was something wrong with him – that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he’d never find a home.

That was one reason why we always thought so much about being in the window. Each of us had been promised our turn, and each of us longed for it to come. That was partly to do with what Manager called the ‘special honor’ of representing the store to the outside. Also, of course, whatever Manager said, we all knew we were more likely to be chosen while in the window. But the big thing, silently understood by us all, was the Sun and his nourishment. Rosa did once bring it up with me, in a whisper, a little while before our turn came around.

‘Klara, do you think once we’re in the window, we’ll receive so much goodness we’ll never get short again?’

I was still quite new then, so didn’t know how to answer, even though the same question had been in my mind.

Then our turn finally came, and Rosa and I stepped into the window one morning, making sure not to knock over any of the display the way the pair before us had done the previous week. The store, of course, had yet to open, and I thought the grid would be fully down. But once we’d seated ourselves on the Striped Sofa, I saw there was a narrow gap running along the bottom of the grid – Manager must have raised it a little when checking everything was ready for us – and the Sun’s light was making a bright rectangle that came up onto the platform and finished in a straight line just in front of us. We only needed to stretch our feet a little to place them within its warmth. I knew then that whatever the answer to Rosa’s question, we were about to get all the nourishment we would need for some time to come. And once Manager touched the switch and the grid climbed up all the way, we became covered in dazzling light.

I should confess here that for me, there’d always been another reason for wanting to be in the window which had nothing to do with the Sun’s nourishment or being chosen. Unlike most AFs, unlike Rosa, I’d always longed to see more of the outside – and to see it in all its detail. So once the grid went up, the realization that there was now only the glass between me and the sidewalk, that I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I’d seen before only as

corners and edges, made me so excited that for a moment I nearly forgot about the Sun and his kindness to us.

I could see for the first time that the RPO Building was in fact made of separate bricks, and that it wasn't white, as I'd always thought, but a pale yellow. I could now see too that it was even taller than I'd imagined – twenty-two stories – and that each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge. I saw how the Sun had drawn a diagonal line right across the face of the RPO Building, so that on one side of it there was a triangle that looked almost white, while on the other was one that looked very dark, even though I now knew it was all the pale yellow color. And not only could I see every window right up to the rooftop, I could sometimes see the people inside, standing, sitting, moving around. Then down on the street, I could see the passers-by, their different kinds of shoes, paper cups, shoulder bags, little dogs, and if I wanted, I could follow with my eyes any one of them all the way past the pedestrian crossing and beyond the second Tow-Away Zone sign, to where two overhaul men were standing beside a drain and pointing. I could see right inside the taxis as they slowed to let the crowd go over the crossing – a driver's hand tapping on his steering wheel, a cap worn by a passenger.

The day went on, the Sun kept us warm, and I could see Rosa was very happy. But I noticed too that she hardly looked at anything, fixing her eyes constantly on the first Tow-Away Zone sign just in front of us. Only when I pointed out something to her would she turn her head, but then she'd lose interest and go back to looking at the sidewalk outside and the sign.

Rosa only looked elsewhere for any length of time when a passer-by paused in front of the window. In those circumstances, we both did as Manager had taught us: we put on 'neutral' smiles and fixed our gazes across the street, on a spot midway up the RPO Building. It was very tempting to look more closely at a passer-by who came up, but Manager had explained that it was highly vulgar to make eye contact at such a moment. Only when a passer-by specifically

signaled to us, or spoke to us through the glass, were we to respond, but never before.

Some of the people who paused turned out not to be interested in us at all. They'd just wanted to take off their sports shoe and do something to it, or to press their oblongs. Some though came right up to the glass and gazed in. Many of these would be children, of around the age for which we were most suitable, and they seemed happy to see us. A child would come up excitedly, alone or with their adult, then point, laugh, pull a strange face, tap the glass, wave.

Once in a while – and I soon got better at watching those at the window while appearing to gaze at the RPO Building – a child would come to stare at us, and there would be a sadness there, or sometimes an anger, as though we'd done something wrong. A child like this could easily change the next moment and begin laughing or waving like the rest of them, but after our second day in the window, I learned quickly to tell the difference.

I tried to talk to Rosa about this, the third or fourth time a child like that had come, but she smiled and said: 'Klara, you worry too much. I'm sure that child was perfectly happy. How could she not be on a day like this? The whole city's so happy today.'

But I brought it up with Manager, at the end of our third day. She had been praising us, saying we'd been 'beautiful and dignified' in the window. The lights in the store had been dimmed by then, and we were rear-store, leaning against the wall, some of us browsing through the interesting magazines before our sleep. Rosa was next to me, and I could see from her shoulders that she was already half asleep. So when Manager asked if I'd enjoyed the day, I took the chance to tell her about the sad children who'd come to the window.

'Klara, you're quite remarkable,' Manager said, keeping her voice soft so as not to disturb Rosa and the others. 'You notice and absorb so much.' She shook her head as though in wonder. Then she said: 'What you must understand is that we're a very special store. There are many children out there who would love to be able to choose you, choose Rosa, any one of you here. But it's not possible for them.'

You're beyond their reach. That's why they come to the window, to dream about having you. But then they get sad.'

'Manager, a child like that. Would a child like that have an AF at home?'

'Perhaps not. Certainly not one like you. So if sometimes a child looks at you in an odd way, with bitterness or sadness, says something unpleasant through the glass, don't think anything of it. Just remember. A child like that is most likely frustrated.'

'A child like that, with no AF, would surely be lonely.'

'Yes, that too,' Manager said quietly. 'Lonely. Yes.'

She lowered her eyes and was quiet, so I waited. Then suddenly she smiled and, reaching out, removed gently from my grasp the interesting magazine I'd been observing.

'Goodnight, Klara. Be as wonderful tomorrow as you were today. And don't forget. You and Rosa are representing us to the whole street.'

—

It was almost midway through our fourth morning in the window when I saw the taxi slowing down, its driver leaning right out so the other taxis would let him come across the traffic lanes to the curb in front of our store. Josie's eyes were on me as she got out onto the sidewalk. She was pale and thin, and as she came towards us, I could see her walk wasn't like that of other passers-by. She wasn't slow exactly, but she seemed to take stock after each step to make sure she was still safe and wouldn't fall. I estimated her age as fourteen and a half.

Once she was close enough so all the pedestrians were passing behind her, she stopped and smiled at me.

'Hi,' she said through the glass. 'Hey, can you hear me?'

Rosa kept staring ahead at the RPO Building as she was supposed to do. But now I'd been addressed, I was able to look directly at the child, return her smile and nod encouragingly.

‘Really?’ Josie said – though of course I didn’t yet know that was her name. ‘I can hardly hear *me* myself. You can really hear me?’

I nodded again, and she shook her head as if very impressed.

‘Wow.’ She glanced over her shoulder – even this movement she made with caution – to the taxi from which she’d just emerged. Its door was as she’d left it, hanging open across the sidewalk, and there were two figures still in the back seat, talking and pointing to something beyond the pedestrian crossing. Josie seemed pleased her adults weren’t about to get out, and took one more step forward till her face was almost touching the window.

‘I saw you yesterday,’ she said.

I recalled our previous day, but finding no memory of Josie, looked at her with surprise.

‘Oh, don’t feel bad or anything, there’s no way you’d have seen me. I was like in a taxi, going by, not even that slow. But I saw you in your window, and that’s why I got Mom to stop today right here.’ She glanced back, again with that carefulness. ‘Wow. She’s *still* talking with Mrs Jeffries. Expensive way to talk, right? That taxi meter just keeps turning over.’

I could then see how, when she laughed, her face filled with kindness. But strangely, it was at that same moment I first wondered if Josie might be one of those lonely children Manager and I had talked about.

She glanced over to Rosa – who was still gazing dutifully at the RPO Building – then said: ‘Your friend’s really cute.’ Even as she said this, Josie’s eyes were already back on me. She went on looking at me quietly for several seconds, and I became worried her adults would get out before she could say anything more. But she then said:

‘Know what? Your friend will make a perfect friend for someone out there. But yesterday, we were driving by and I saw *you*, and I thought that’s her, the AF I’ve been looking for!’ She laughed again. ‘Sorry. Maybe that sounds disrespectful.’ She turned once more to the taxi, but the figures in the back showed no signs of getting out. ‘Are you French?’ she asked. ‘You look kind of French.’

I smiled and shook my head.

‘There were these two French girls,’ Josie said, ‘came to our last meeting. Both had their hair that way, neat and short like you. Looked cute.’ She regarded me silently for another moment, and I thought I saw another small sign of sadness, but I was still quite new then and couldn’t be sure. Then she brightened, saying:

‘Hey, don’t you guys get hot sitting there like that? Do you need a drink or something?’

I shook my head and raised my hands, palms up, to indicate the loveliness of the Sun’s nourishment falling over us.

‘Oh yeah. Wasn’t thinking. You love being in the sunshine, right?’

She turned again, this time to look up at the building tops. At that moment the Sun was in the gap of sky, and Josie screwed up her eyes immediately and turned back to me.

‘Don’t know how you do that. I mean keep looking that way without being dazzled. I can’t do it even for a second.’

She put a hand to her forehead then turned away once more, this time looking not at the Sun, but to somewhere near the top of the RPO Building. After five seconds, she turned back to me again.

‘I guess for you guys, where you are, the Sun must go down behind that big building, right? That must mean you never get to see where he *really* goes down. That building must always get in the way.’ She looked over quickly to check the adults were still inside the taxi, then went on: ‘Where we live, there’s nothing in the way. From up in my room you can see exactly where the Sun goes down. The exact place he goes to at night.’

I must have looked surprised. And at the edge of my vision I could see that Rosa, forgetting herself, was now staring at Josie in astonishment.

‘Can’t see where he comes up in the morning though,’ Josie said. ‘The hills and the trees get in the way of that. Kind of like here, I guess. Things always in the way. But the evening’s something else. Over that side, where my room looks out, it’s just wide and empty. If you came and lived with us, you’d see.’

One adult, then another, climbed from the taxi out onto the sidewalk. Josie had not seen them, but perhaps she'd heard something for she began to talk more quickly.

'Cross my heart. You can see the exact place he goes down.'

The adults were women, both dressed in high-rank office clothes. The taller one I guessed to be the mother Josie had mentioned because she kept watching Josie even as she exchanged cheek kisses with her companion. Then the companion was gone, mixing with the other passers-by, and the Mother turned fully our way. And for just one second, her piercing stare was no longer on Josie's back, but on me, and I immediately looked away, up at the RPO Building. But Josie was speaking again through the glass, her voice lowered but still audible.

'Have to go now. But I'll come back soon. We'll talk more.' Then she said, in a near-whisper which I could only just hear, 'You won't go away, right?'

I shook my head and smiled.

'That's good. Okay. So now it's goodbye. But only for now.'

The Mother by this time was standing right behind Josie. She was black-haired and thin, though not as thin as Josie, or some of the runners. Now she was closer and I could see her face better, I raised my estimate of her age to forty-five. As I've said, I wasn't so accurate with ages then, but this was to prove more or less correct. From a distance, I'd first thought her a younger woman, but when she was closer I could see the deep etches around her mouth, and also a kind of angry exhaustion in her eyes. I noticed too that when the Mother reached out to Josie from behind, the outstretched arm hesitated in the air, almost retracting, before coming forward to rest on her daughter's shoulder.

They entered the flow of passers-by, going in the direction of the second Tow-Away Zone sign, Josie with her cautious walk, her mother's arm around her as they went. Once, before they left my view, Josie looked back, and even though she had to disturb the rhythm of their walk, gave me one last wave.

It was later that same afternoon, Rosa said: ‘Klara, isn’t it funny? I always thought we’d see so many AFs out there once we got in the window. All the ones who’d found homes already. But there aren’t so many. I wonder where they are.’

This was one of the great things about Rosa. She could fail to notice so much, and even when I pointed something out to her, she’d still not see what was special or interesting about it. Yet every now and then she’d make an observation like this one. As soon as she said what she did, I realized that I too had expected to see many more AFs from the window, walking happily with their children, even going about their business by themselves, and that even if I hadn’t acknowledged it to myself, I too had been surprised and a little disappointed.

‘You’re right,’ I said, looking from right to left. ‘Just now, among all these passers-by, there isn’t a single AF.’

‘Isn’t that one over there? Going past the Fire Escapes Building?’

We both looked carefully, then shook our heads at the same time.

Though she’d been the one to bring up this question about the AFs outside, it was typical that she soon lost all interest in it. By the time I finally spotted a teenage boy and his AF walking past the juice stand on the RPO Building side, she barely looked their way.

But I went on thinking about what Rosa had said, and whenever an AF did go by, I made sure to watch closely. And before long, I noticed a curious thing: there were always more AFs to be seen on the RPO Building side than on ours. And often, if an AF did happen to be coming towards us on our side, walking with a child past the second Tow-Away Zone sign, they would then use the crossing and not come past our store. When AFs did go by us they almost always acted oddly, speeding up their walk and keeping their faces turned away. I wondered then if perhaps we – the whole store – were an embarrassment to them. I wondered if Rosa and I, once we’d found our homes, would feel an awkwardness to be reminded that we hadn’t always lived with our children, but in a store. However much I

tried, though, I couldn't imagine either Rosa or me ever feeling that way about the store, about Manager and the other AFs.

Then as I continued to watch the outside, another possibility came to me: that the AFs weren't embarrassed, but were afraid. They were afraid because we were new models, and they feared that before long their children would decide it was time to have them thrown away, to be replaced by AFs like us. That was why they shuffled by so awkwardly, refusing to look our way. And that was why so few AFs could be seen from our window. For all we knew, the next street – the one *behind* the RPO Building – was crowded with them. For all we knew, the AFs outside did all they could to take any route other than one that would bring them past our store, because the last thing they wanted was for their children to see us and come to the window.

I shared none of these thoughts with Rosa. Instead, whenever we spotted an AF out there I made a point of wondering aloud if they were happy with their child and with their home, and this always pleased and excited Rosa. She took it up as a kind of game, pointing and saying: 'Look, over there! Do you see, Klara? That boy just loves his AF! Oh, look at the way they're laughing together!'

And sure enough, there were plenty of pairs that looked happy with each other. But Rosa missed so many signals. She would often exclaim delightedly at a pair going by, and I would look and realize that even though a girl was smiling at her AF, she was in fact angry with him, and was perhaps at that very moment thinking cruel thoughts about him. I noticed such things all the time, but said nothing and let Rosa go on believing what she did.

Once, on the morning of our fifth day in the window, I saw two taxis, over on the RPO Building side, moving slowly and so close together someone new might have supposed they were a single vehicle – a kind of double taxi. Then the one in front became slightly faster and a gap appeared, and I saw through that gap, on the far sidewalk, a girl of fourteen, wearing a cartoon shirt, walking in the direction of the crossing. She was without adults or an AF but seemed confident and a little impatient, and because she was walking at the same speed as the taxis, I was able to keep watching her

through the gap for some time. Then the gap between the taxis grew wider still, and I saw she was with an AF after all – a boy AF – who was walking three paces behind. And I could see, even in that small instant, that he hadn't lagged behind by chance; that this was how the girl had decided they would always walk – she in front and he a few steps behind. The boy AF had accepted this, even though other passers-by would see and conclude he wasn't loved by the girl. And I could see the weariness in the boy AF's walk, and wondered what it might be like to have found a home and yet to know that your child didn't want you. Until I saw this pair it hadn't occurred to me an AF could be with a child who despised him and wanted him gone, and that they could nevertheless carry on together. Then the front taxi slowed because of the crossing, and the one behind drew up and I couldn't see them any more. I kept watching to see if they would come over at the crossing, but they weren't in the crossing crowd, and I could no longer see the other side because of all the other taxis.

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I wouldn't have wanted anyone other than Rosa beside me in the window during those days, but our time there did bring out the differences in our attitudes. It wasn't really that I was more eager to learn about the outside than Rosa: she was, in her own way, excited and observant, and as anxious as I was to prepare herself to be as kind and helpful an AF as possible. But the more I watched, the more I wanted to learn, and unlike Rosa, I became puzzled, then increasingly fascinated by the more mysterious emotions passers-by would display in front of us. I realized that if I didn't understand at least some of these mysterious things, then when the time came, I'd never be able to help my child as well as I should. So I began to seek out – on the sidewalks, inside the passing taxis, amidst the crowds waiting at the crossing – the sort of behavior about which I needed to learn.

At first I wanted Rosa to do as I was, but soon saw this was pointless. Once, on our third window day, when the Sun had already

gone behind the RPO Building, two taxis stopped on our side, the drivers got out and began to fight each other. This wasn't the first time we'd witnessed a fight: when we were still quite new, we'd gathered at the window to see as best we could three policemen fighting with Beggar Man and his dog in front of the blank doorway. But that hadn't been an angry fight, and Manager had later explained how the policemen had been worried about Beggar Man because he'd become drunk and they'd only been trying to help him. But the two taxi drivers weren't like the policemen. They fought as though the most important thing was to damage each other as much as possible. Their faces were twisted into horrible shapes, so that someone new might not even have realized they were people at all, and all the time they were punching each other, they shouted out cruel words. The passers-by were at first so shocked they stood back, but then some office workers and a runner stopped them from fighting any more. And though one had blood on his face, they each got back into their taxis, and everything went back to the way it was before. I even noticed, a moment later, the two taxis – the ones whose drivers had just been fighting – waiting patiently, one in front of the other, in the same traffic lane for the lights to change.

But when I tried to talk with Rosa about what we'd seen, she looked puzzled and said: 'A fight? I didn't see it, Klara.'

'Rosa, it's not possible you didn't notice. It happened in front of us just now. Those two drivers.'

'Oh. You mean the taxi men! I didn't realize you meant them, Klara. Oh, I did see them, of course I did. But I don't think they were fighting.'

'Rosa, of course they were fighting.'

'Oh no, they were pretending. Just playing.'

'Rosa, they were fighting.'

'Don't be silly, Klara! You think such strange thoughts. They were just playing. And they enjoyed themselves, and so did the passers-by.'

In the end I just said, ‘You may be right, Rosa,’ and I don’t think she gave the incident any more thought.

But I couldn’t forget the taxi drivers so easily. I’d follow a particular person down the sidewalk with my gaze, wondering if he too could grow as angry as they had done. Or I would try to imagine what a passer-by would look like with his or her face distorted in rage. Most of all – and this Rosa would never have understood – I tried to feel in my own mind the anger the drivers had experienced. I tried to imagine me and Rosa getting so angry with each other we would start to fight like that, actually trying to damage each other’s bodies. The idea seemed ridiculous, but I’d seen the taxi drivers, so I tried to find the beginnings of such a feeling in my mind. It was useless, though, and I’d always end up laughing at my own thoughts.

Still, there were other things we saw from the window – other kinds of emotions I didn’t at first understand – of which I did eventually find some versions in myself, even if they were perhaps like the shadows made across the floor by the ceiling lamps after the grid went down. There was, for instance, what happened with the Coffee Cup Lady.

It was two days after I’d first met Josie. The morning had been full of rain, and passers-by were walking with narrow eyes, under umbrellas and dripping hats. The RPO Building hadn’t changed much in the downpour, though many of its windows had become lit as if it were already evening. The Fire Escapes Building next to it had a large wet patch down the left side of its front, as though some juice had leaked from a corner of its roof. But then suddenly the Sun pushed through, shining onto the soaked street and the tops of the taxis, and the passers-by all came out in large numbers when they saw this, and it was in the rush that followed that I spotted the small man in the raincoat. He was on the RPO Building side, and I estimated seventy-one years old. He was waving and calling, coming so near the edge of the sidewalk I was worried he’d step out in front of the moving taxis. Manager happened to be in the window with us just at that moment – she’d been adjusting the sign in front of our sofa – and she spotted the waving man at the same time I did. He

had on a brown raincoat and its belt was dangling down one side, almost touching his ankle, but he didn't seem to notice, and kept waving and calling over to our side. A crowd of passers-by had formed right outside our store, not to look at us, but because, for a moment, the sidewalk had become so busy no one had been able to move. Then something changed, the crowd grew thinner, and I saw standing before us a small woman, her back to us, looking across the four lanes of moving taxis to the waving man. I couldn't see her face, but I estimated sixty-seven years old from her shape and posture. I named her in my mind the Coffee Cup Lady because from the back, and in her thick wool coat, she seemed small and wide and round-shouldered like the ceramic coffee cups resting upside down on the Red Shelves. Although the man kept waving and calling, and she'd clearly seen him, she didn't wave or call back. She kept completely still, even when a pair of runners came towards her, parted on either side, then joined up again, their sports shoes making small splashes down the sidewalk.

Then at last she moved. She went towards the crossing – as the man had been signaling for her to do – taking slow steps at first, then hurrying. She had to stop again, to wait like everyone else at the lights, and the man stopped waving, but he was watching her so anxiously, I again thought he might step out in front of the taxis. But he calmed himself and walked towards his end of the crossing to wait for her. And as the taxis stopped, and the Coffee Cup Lady began to cross with the rest, I saw the man raise a fist to one of his eyes, in the way I'd seen some children do in the store when they got upset. Then the Coffee Cup Lady reached the RPO Building side, and she and the man were holding each other so tightly they were like one large person, and the Sun, noticing, was pouring his nourishment on them. I still couldn't see the Coffee Cup Lady's face, but the man had his eyes tightly shut, and I wasn't sure if he was very happy or very upset.

'Those people seem so pleased to see each other,' Manager said. And I realized she'd been watching them as closely as I had.

‘Yes, they seem so happy,’ I said. ‘But it’s strange because they also seem upset.’

‘Oh, Klara,’ Manager said quietly. ‘You never miss a thing, do you?’

Then Manager was silent for a long time, holding her sign in her hand and staring across the street, even after the pair had gone out of sight. Finally she said:

‘Perhaps they hadn’t met for a long time. A long, long time. Perhaps when they last held each other like that, they were still young.’

‘Do you mean, Manager, that they lost each other?’

She was quiet for another moment. ‘Yes,’ she said, eventually. ‘That must be it. They lost each other. And perhaps just now, just by chance, they found each other again.’

Manager’s voice wasn’t like her usual one, and though her eyes were on the outside, I thought she was now looking at nothing in particular. I even started to wonder what passers-by would think to see Manager herself in the window with us for so long.

Then she turned from the window and came past us, and as she did so she touched my shoulder.

‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘at special moments like that, people feel a pain alongside their happiness. I’m glad you watch everything so carefully, Klara.’

Then Manager was gone, and Rosa said, ‘How strange. What could she have meant?’

‘Never mind, Rosa,’ I said to her. ‘She was just talking about the outside.’

Rosa began to discuss something else then, but I went on thinking about the Coffee Cup Lady and her Raincoat Man, and about what Manager had said. And I tried to imagine how I would feel if Rosa and I, a long time from now, long after we’d found our different homes, saw each other again by chance on a street. Would I then feel, as Manager had put it, pain alongside my happiness?

One morning at the start of our second week in the window, I was talking to Rosa about something on the RPO Building side, then broke off when I realized Josie was standing on the sidewalk in front of us. Her mother was beside her. There was no taxi behind them this time, though it was possible they'd got out of one and it had driven off, all without my noticing, because there'd been a crowd of tourists between our window and the spot where they were standing. But now the passers-by were moving smoothly again, and Josie was beaming happily at me. Her face – I thought this again – seemed to overflow with kindness when she smiled. But she couldn't yet come to the window because the Mother was leaning down talking to her, a hand on her shoulder. The Mother was wearing a coat – a thin, dark, high-ranking one – which moved with the wind around her body, so that for a moment she reminded me of the dark birds that perched on the high traffic signals even as the winds blew fiercely. Both Josie and the Mother went on looking straight at me while they talked, and I could see Josie was impatient to come to me, but still the Mother wouldn't release her and went on talking. I knew I should keep looking at the RPO Building, in just the way Rosa was doing, but I couldn't help stealing glances at them, I was so concerned they'd vanish into the crowd.

At last the Mother straightened, and though she went on staring at me, altering the tilt of her head whenever a passer-by blocked her view, she took her hand away and Josie came forward with her careful walk. I thought it encouraging the Mother should allow Josie to come by herself, yet the Mother's gaze, which never softened or wavered, and the very way she was standing there, arms crossed over her front, fingers clutching at the material of her coat, made me realize there were many signals I hadn't yet learned to understand. Then Josie was there before me on the other side of the glass.

'Hey! How you been?'

I smiled, nodded and held up a raised thumb – a gesture I'd often observed inside the interesting magazines.

‘Sorry I couldn’t come back sooner,’ she said. ‘I guess it’s been... how long?’

I held up three fingers, then added a half finger from the other hand.

‘Too long,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. Miss me?’

I nodded, putting on a sad face, though I was careful to show I wasn’t serious, and that I hadn’t been upset.

‘I missed you too. I really thought I’d get back before this. You probably thought I’d cleared right out. Really sorry.’ Then her smile weakened as she said: ‘I suppose a lot of other kids have been here to see you.’

I shook my head, but Josie looked unconvinced. She glanced back to the Mother, not for reassurance, but rather to check she hadn’t come any closer. Then, lowering her voice, Josie said:

‘Mom looks weird, I know, watching like that. It’s because I told her you’re the one I wanted. I said it had to be you, so now she’s sizing you up. Sorry.’ I thought I saw, as I’d done the time before, a flash of sadness. ‘You will come, right? If Mom says it’s okay and everything?’

I nodded encouragingly. But the uncertainty remained on her face.

‘Because I don’t want you coming against your will. That wouldn’t be fair. I really want you to come, but if you said, Josie, I don’t want to, then I’d say to Mom, okay, we can’t have her, no way. But you do want to come, right?’

Again I nodded, and this time Josie appeared to be reassured.

‘That’s so good.’ The smile returned to her face. ‘You’ll love it, I’ll make sure you do.’ She looked back, this time in triumph, calling: ‘Mom? See, she says she wants to come!’

The Mother gave a small nod, but otherwise didn’t respond. She was still staring at me, her fingers pinching at the coat material. When Josie turned back to me, her face had clouded again.

‘Listen,’ she said, but for the next few seconds remained silent. Then she said, ‘It’s so great you want to come. But I want things

straight between us from the start, so I'm going to say this. Don't worry, Mom can't hear. Look, I think you'll like our house. I think you'll like my room, and that's where you'll be, not in some cupboard or anything. And we'll do all these great things together all the time I'm growing up. Only thing is, sometimes, well...' She glanced back quickly again, then lowering her voice further, said: 'Maybe it's because some days I'm not so well. I don't know. But there might be something going on. I'm not sure what it is. I don't even know if it's something bad. But things sometimes get, well, unusual. Don't get me wrong, most times you wouldn't feel it. But I wanted to be straight with you. Because you know how lousy it feels, people telling you how perfect things will be and they're not being straight. That's why I'm telling you now. Please say you still want to come. You'll love my room, I know you will. And you'll see where the Sun goes down, like I told you the last time. You still want to come, right?'

I nodded to her through the glass, as seriously as I knew how. I wanted also to tell her that if there was anything difficult, anything frightening, to be faced in her house, we would do so together. But I didn't know how to convey such a complex message through the glass without words, and so I clasped my hands together and held them up, shaking them slightly, in a gesture I'd seen a taxi driver give from inside his moving taxi to someone who'd waved from the sidewalk, even though he'd had to take both hands off his steering wheel. Whatever Josie understood from it, it seemed to make her happy.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Don't get me wrong. It may not be anything bad. It may only be me thinking things...'

Just then the Mother called and started to move towards us, but there were tourists in her way, and Josie had time to say quickly: 'I'll be back really soon. Promise. Tomorrow if I can. Bye just for now.'

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Josie didn't return the following day, or the day after that. Then in the middle of our second week, our turn in the window came to an

end.

Throughout our time, Manager had been warm and encouraging. Each morning, as we'd prepared ourselves on the Striped Sofa and waited for the grid to rise, she'd said something like, 'You were both wonderful yesterday. See if you can do just as well today.' And at the end of each day, she'd smiled and told us, 'Well done, both of you. I'm so proud.' So it never occurred to me we were doing anything wrong, and when the grid came down on our last day, I was expecting Manager to praise us again. I was surprised, then, when after locking the grid, she simply walked away, not waiting for us. Rosa gave me a puzzled look, and for a moment we remained on the Striped Sofa. But with the grid down, we were in near-darkness, and so after a while we rose and came down off the platform.

We were then facing the store, and I could see all the way to the Glass Table at the back, but the space had become partitioned into ten boxes, so that I no longer had a single unified picture of the view before me. The front alcove was in the box furthest to my right, as might be expected; and yet the magazines table, which was nearest the front alcove, had become divided between various boxes, so that one section of the table could even be seen in the box furthest to my left. By now the lights had been dimmed, and I spotted the other AFs in the backgrounds of several boxes, lining the walls mid-store, preparing for their sleep. But my attention was drawn to the three center boxes, at that moment containing aspects of Manager in the act of turning towards us. In one box she was visible only from her waist to the upper part of her neck, while the box immediately beside it was almost entirely taken up by her eyes. The eye closest to us was much larger than the other, but both were filled with kindness and sadness. And yet a third box showed a part of her jaw and most of her mouth, and I detected there anger and frustration. Then she had turned fully and was coming towards us, and the store became once more a single picture.

'Thank you, both of you,' she said, and reaching out, touched us gently in turn. 'Thank you so much.'

Even so, I sensed something had changed – that we had somehow disappointed her.

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We began after that our second period mid-store. Rosa and I were still often together, but Manager would now change our positions around, and I might spend a day standing beside Boy AF Rex or Girl AF Kiku. Most days, though, I'd still be able to see a section of the window, and so go on learning about the outside. When the Cootings Machine appeared, for instance, I was on the magazines table side, just in front of the middle alcove, and had almost as good a view as if I'd still been in the window.

It had been obvious for days that the Cootings Machine was going to be something out of the ordinary. First, the overhaul men arrived to prepare for it, marking out a special section of the street with wooden barriers. The taxi drivers didn't like this at all, and made a lot of noise with their horns. Then the overhaul men began to drill and break up the ground, even parts of the sidewalk, which frightened the two AFs in the window. Once, when the noise became really awful, Rosa put her hands to her ears and kept them there, even though there were customers in the store. Manager apologized to every customer who came in, even though the noise had nothing to do with us. Once, a customer began talking about Pollution, and pointing to the overhaul men outside, said how dangerous Pollution was for everyone. So when the Cootings Machine first arrived, I thought it might be a machine to fight Pollution, but Boy AF Rex said no, it was something specially designed to make more of it. I told him I didn't believe him, and he said, 'All right, Klara, you just wait and see.'

It turned out of course that he was right. The Cootings Machine – I named it that in my mind because it had 'Cootings' in big letters across its side – began with a high-pitched whine, not nearly as bad as the drills had been, and no worse than Manager's vacuum cleaner. But there were three short funnels protruding from its roof, and