

# A Tale for the Time Being



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RUTH OZEKI

Ruth Ozeki is an author, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest. After graduating from Smith College with degrees in English and Asian studies, Ozeki pursued graduate work at Nara University in Japan. Afterward, she returned to America and began working in TV and films, first as a production set designer and then as a documentary filmmaker for Japanese TV. She eventually made two of her own films, which were highly acclaimed and shown at several film festivals. Ozeki's first novel, *My Year of Meats*, was published in 1998 and was awarded the Kiriyama Prize as well as the Imus American Book Award. *A Tale for the Time Being*, which was published in 2013, is Ozeki's most recent work of fiction. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ozeki published her first work of nonfiction in 2016, called *The Face: A Time Code*, in which she traces every thought she has for three hours while looking at her face in the mirror. This book is a meditation on the passage of time and of being aware of each moment, which are themes Ozeki also brings up in *A Tale for the Time Being*. Ozeki teaches creative writing at Smith College.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth worries that Nao and her family might have been victims of Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami, which decimated entire coastal towns and claimed around 10,000 lives. This was the most powerful earthquake ever to hit Japan, and it triggered immense waves that reached over 130 feet in height and traveled rapidly, at over 435 miles per hour. As a result, residents of coastal towns had only about 10 minutes of warning before they were engulfed by the waves. Over 200,000 people ended up being displaced by the earthquake as their homes were washed away. Another tragedy in Japan's history that the novel documents is the Japanese involvement in World War II. Japan joined the Axis powers—Germany and Italy—in 1940, after signing the Tripartite Pact. In 1941, Japanese forces carried out a coordinated attack on American forces at Pearl Harbor, after which the U.S. officially joined the Allies. Japan suffered as a result of America's attacks—and in 1943, in a desperate attempt to make up their losses, the Japanese government decreed that students 19 and older were required to drop out of university and enroll for military service. In the novel, Nao's great-uncle Haruki #1 is one of these students, and he ends up becoming a kamikaze pilot—a pilot who would go on a suicide mission and crash his plane into an American warship. The novel parallels kamikaze pilots with the terrorists who bombed

the Twin Towers on 9/11. Nao and Ruth and the other characters are shocked by the terrorist attack and are very disturbed as they witness the desperate and heart-wrenching images of New Yorkers trying—and often failing—to escape death. The novel also portrays the ensuing violence against people of color in America and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as tragic aftermaths of 9/11.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *A Tale for the Time Being*, Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* has two linked plotlines that are narrated in alternating sections. Both novels also have metaphysical elements and a splash of magical realism—they puzzle over whether dreams can have consequences in the real world. The books also share a supernatural crow figure that acts as a guardian, and each has characters who believe that their spirits can leave their bodies and travel to other realms. Ozeki has said that *A Tale for the Time Being* demonstrates how characters call to their writers, as Nao does to the character Ruth. Nao and her story become an inextricable part of Ruth's life, and soon, Ruth finds herself unable to keep their lives and worlds separate. Another novel that shares *A Tale for the Time Being*'s metafictional (self-referential) elements is *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, in which the author creates characters who then interact with the original (fictional) author himself. Like the character Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*, the fictional author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* ends up questioning his own agency and wonders if he is at the mercy of his creation.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Tale for the Time Being
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Tokyo, Japan; Whaletown, Cortes Island, British Columbia, Canada
- **Climax:** Ruth has a mysterious, metaphysical dream in which she travels to Japan and changes the events of Nao's life that might have led Nao to commit suicide.
- **Antagonist:** Nao's bullies; war
- **Point of View:** First Person; Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**A Tale of Two Ruths.** Just like Ruth, the character in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki the author lives on a remote island in Canada with her husband, Oliver, who is an environmental

artist. Ozeki used the character of Ruth as a stand-in for herself to highlight the metafictional (self-referential) aspects of the novel. In an interview, Ozeki says that this novel illustrates how a character, like Nao, can call to a writer like Ruth across space and time.

**Kindred Spirits.** Ozeki is biracial, and she mentions in an interview that while growing up in Connecticut, she was “bullied, taunted, and beaten-up” for being half Japanese. She used these memories to describe the pain that Nao experiences when Nao is bullied in school for being a cultural outsider.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Ruth, a writer who lives on a remote Canadian island, finds a lunch box washed up on the beach. Inside it, she is surprised to find an old wind-up **watch**, some letters written in Japanese, and a diary written in English by a 15-year-old girl named Nao from Tokyo. As Ruth becomes invested in Nao’s story, the novel switches between Nao’s diary and Ruth’s narrative.

Nao begins her diary by saying that she and her reader are both “time beings,” or impermanent creatures. Nao used to live in California but moved back to Japan after her father, Haruki, lost his job. She feels like a cultural misfit in Japan, and she is severely bullied by her classmates who consider her to be a foreigner. Haruki is unable to find a job in Japan, so the family is forced to live in a tiny, rundown apartment. Haruki feels like a failure, and he attempts suicide. He doesn’t succeed, but after the attempt, Nao constantly worries. She is overwhelmed by her problems, and she says that she, too, will die after she writes down the life story of her great-grandmother, Jiko, who is a Buddhist nun. Nao, and most everyone she knows, are wasting their lives—but Jiko uses every moment wisely.

As Ruth reads, she’s concerned about Nao, who has implied that she will kill herself. Ruth quickly flips to the end of the diary and is reassured to see that Nao filled every page. Ruth’s husband, Oliver, says that he thinks the lunch box might have made its way to their island on an ocean drift from the Japanese tsunami and earthquake of 2011. This worries Ruth as well; she begins to search for Nao or her family on the internet, to see if they might be among the dead or displaced. However, she finds nothing. Soon after this, a Japanese **Jungle Crow** shows up outside Ruth’s house. Oliver finds it very odd that this bird has made its way to their island all the way from Japan; he guesses that it might have ridden the same drift as the lunch box.

In her diary, Nao writes that she spends her summer vacation at Jiko’s temple. After hearing about Nao’s struggles, Jiko teaches Nao zazen meditation—she says it will be Nao’s “superpower” and that it will show her how to really focus on the present. As Nao improves at *zazen*, she feels empowered

and at peace. Jiko tells Nao that she became a nun after her son, Haruki #1, died in World War II. Before Nao leaves Jiko’s temple at the end of summer, Jiko gives her Haruki #1’s watch and a stack of letters that Haruki #1 wrote to Jiko when he was a soldier. The letters document how Haruki #1 was bullied during training, and they show how Haruki #1 came to terms with his imminent death as a kamikaze pilot. Nao idolizes Haruki #1. In comparison, Haruki (Nao’s father) seems like a huge failure to her.

Meanwhile, Ruth worries that she, too, is wasting her life. For the past decade, Ruth has tried and failed to write a memoir. Nao’s story is a welcome distraction from writing, and Ruth ends up spending a lot of time trying to make sense of the lunch box’s mysterious contents. Ruth wears Haruki #1’s watch, and she reads the stack of letters that he wrote to Jiko. However, Nao makes no mention of the French booklet, which turns out to be a secret diary in which Haruki #1 wrote his true feelings about the war. Haruki didn’t want to die, and he confessed his plan to fly his plane into the ocean because he didn’t want to kill other people. Ruth is puzzled about how this booklet ended up in the lunch box.

Nao writes about a horrific incident of bullying: she’s assaulted and almost raped by a gang of male classmates. Nao stops going to school after this incident. She thinks that one of the waitresses at the café, Babette, is her friend—but Babette is only interested in setting Nao up on “dates” with men who pay for sex. Nao is lonely and broken, so she goes along with Babette’s plans. After a particularly sordid sexual encounter with a hentai who hurts Nao, she gets a text message that Jiko is on her deathbed. Nao rushes home to tell Haruki, but when she gets home, he behaves strangely. Nao guesses that he is about to try and kill himself again. She decides it would be pointless to tell him about Jiko and decides to go alone to the temple.

When Ruth gets to this point in the diary, she turns the page and is shocked to see that the last few pages of the diary are blank. She initially saw that all the pages of the diary were written on, so she cannot understand what happened. Nao seems to have decided to kill herself too, and Ruth is very concerned. Oliver tells her that perhaps *she* must change Nao’s story, since she is a writer. That night, Ruth has a dream that feels very real: she is in a strange place without form or time, and then suddenly the Jungle Crow appears and guides her to Haruki. Ruth tells the Crow that Nao is very worried about him, and that Nao plans to kill herself if Haruki goes through with his suicide. She tells him that Nao is at the train station on her way to see Jiko. The Crow then whisks Ruth off to Jiko’s temple, and Nao finds she has Haruki #1’s secret French booklet in her hand. She places it on the family altar, beside Haruki #1’s picture.

The following morning, Ruth finds that the words have reappeared in Nao’s diary. Nao writes that Haruki came looking

for her at the station, and that they went to see Jiko together. Before Jiko dies, she paints a *kanji* (Chinese character) that translates to “Live.” Nao and Haruki understand that this is Jiko’s final message to them. At the family altar, Nao finds her uncle’s secret French diary and understands his love of life. Haruki becomes emotional when he reads that Haruki #1 planned to fly his plane into the ocean, and he confesses to Nao that he was fired from his job because he refused to sell his software to a defense contractor. Nao realizes that both the Harukis in her life are heroic because they stood up for their ideals, just as she and Haruki #1 are similar because they endured severe bullying. Nao concludes the diary by saying that she is doing well, and that Haruki has started working hard and seems very passionate about a new idea. Neither of them wants to die.

At the conclusion of the novel, Ruth is left with many mysteries—she still doesn’t know if Nao is alive or where she might be. She also doesn’t know how the diary and the other items ended up in the lunch box and reached her shore. Still, these events have taught Ruth that she must pay attention to her present rather than getting weighed down by her past. Ruth realizes that she is happy with her and Oliver’s life on the island, at least for the time being.

a supernatural dream soon after this. She talks him out of killing himself and tells him where to find Nao. Afterward, more words mysteriously appear in the diary, and Ruth is happy to read that Nao is alive and well. Nao is an observant and funny writer, and she seems to have a deep appreciation for life and beauty even though she wants to kill herself. Ruth cannot help being charmed by her voice and moved by her story.

**Ruth** – Ruth is a writer who lives in Whaletown on a remote island in Canada. She finds Nao’s diary when it washes ashore on the island. Ruth used to live in Manhattan but moved to the island to be with her husband, Oliver. Though the move was voluntary, Ruth feels displaced and stifled on the island, and she finds unable to write. For the past 10 years, she has been working on a memoir about caring for her mother, who had Alzheimer’s. Ruth now finds this project unpleasant, but she feels she has worked on it too long to abandon it. When Nao’s diary washes up on Ruth’s shore, it is a welcome distraction. Like Nao, Ruth has lived in Japan and America, so she understands both cultures. She becomes worried for Nao as she reads about her troubles, and she frantically begins looking for Nao and her family online to see if they are alive—but she finds nothing concrete. As she reads more of the diary, Ruth, too, becomes influenced by Nao’s great-grandmother Jiko’s words on the importance of living each moment mindfully. She realizes that it is important to not dwell in the past since life is constantly changing—for Ruth, the past is represented by her memoir. When Nao’s diary entries suddenly end, leading Ruth to believe that Nao must have killed herself, Ruth is able to “rewrite” Nao’s life: she visits Haruki in a dream and convinces him not to kill himself. This, in turn, saves Nao from committing suicide. At the end of the novel, Ruth hasn’t solved many of the novel’s mysteries—she still hasn’t tracked down Nao, and she has no idea how the diary ended up in the ocean. Still, reading the diary helps Ruth realize that she is happy in the present moment. Ruth the character is a stand-in for Ruth Ozeki, the author of *A Tale for the Time Being*, and Ruth’s fascination with Nao can be read as an author’s immersion in a character’s story.

**Haruki Yasutani / Nao’s Father** – Haruki is Nao’s father and Tomoko’s husband. He was a software programmer in Silicon Valley, but he was forced to relocate to Japan with his family after he lost his job in America. In Tokyo, Haruki isn’t able to find employment, and the family lives in a tiny, rundown apartment. He feels guilty for causing Nao and Tomoko such distress, to the point that he tries to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train—but he ends up surviving. Soon after, Haruki turns into a social recluse and doesn’t leave the apartment. Nao loves her father but is exasperated by his defeatist attitude, and she worries that he might try to kill himself again. She is especially disappointed when she compares Haruki with her great-uncle Haruki #1, who was a kamikaze pilot in World War II and whom Nao idolizes for his courage and bravery. Haruki plans to attempt suicide again, but Ruth visits him in a dream



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Naoko “Nao” Yasutani** – Nao is a 15-year-old girl living in Tokyo, Japan. She’s Haruki and Tomoko’s daughter, Haruki #1’s great-niece, and Jiko’s great-granddaughter. Nao is the author of the diary that washes up on Ruth’s beach. She used to live in Sunnyvale, California but was forced to move back to her home country after Haruki lost his job in America. Nao is severely bullied at her Japanese school and is constantly worried about her father, who is depressed and suicidal. Jiko invites Nao to spend her summer vacation at her temple in the mountains, and they end up forming a close bond. Jiko also gives Nao letters written by Haruki #1 during World War II—and Nao finds that she and her great-uncle have a lot in common. Back in Tokyo, Nao continues to be abused at school. One day, a gang of classmates attempts to rape her and record the assault, ultimately settling for stealing Nao’s panties and auctioning them off online. Nao stops going to school after this. She decides that she will kill herself after she writes down Jiko’s life story, since she doesn’t want Jiko to be forgotten—this is what she plans to use the diary for. When Nao gets a text message that Jiko is on her deathbed, she goes to find Haruki and sees that he is behaving suspiciously—she guesses that he is about to commit suicide. Nao’s last lines in the diary say that she feels hopeless and alone as she goes to visit Jiko by herself. Reading the diary, Ruth is sure that Nao must have committed suicide soon after writing these words. However, Ruth visits Haruki in

and convinces him not to. Soon after, Nao discovers that the two Harukis are more alike than different: Haruki was fired from his job in America because he protested against his software being sold to a defense contractor. Similarly, Haruki #1 died in disgrace as he pointed his kamikaze plane into the ocean, away from the American battleship he was supposed to target, since he disliked war and violence. Nao realizes that her father is heroic and ethical too, and that she's proud of him. At the end of the novel, Haruki runs a successful computer start-up and is happy to be alive.

**Jiko Yasutani** – Jiko is Nao's 104-year-old great-grandmother. Nao describes her as an anarchist-feminist Buddhist nun. Jiko decided to become a nun after her gentle, philosophical son, Haruki #1, was drafted into the military during World War II and died as a kamikaze pilot. Jiko tells Nao that her sorrow felt like a "whale" behind her chest, and by becoming a nun, she slowly "learned how to open up her heart so the whale could swim away." Jiko knows that Nao is hurting, too, from all the troubles in her life—so she teaches Nao zazen (Zen Buddhist meditation) as a coping mechanism. Nao and Jiko become very close when Nao stays with Jiko at her temple over her summer vacation. Jiko talks to Nao about some Zen Buddhist principles that she values, like the importance of the present moment and the impermanence of all things. Nao feels loved and blessed when they are together. Jiko seems to know when Nao and Haruki feel defeated by life and are on the verge of committing suicide. She calls them to her temple when she is on her deathbed, and her final word to them is to live. Both of them love and respect her and take her advice to heart.

**Haruki #1 Yasutani** – Haruki #1 was Jiko's son and Nao's great-uncle. He was drafted to fight in World War II when he was a 19-year-old student of French literature and philosophy. He was a "kind boy" who hated war and violence. During his training, he had to endure severe bullying from his commanding officer who considered him to be pretentious. The bullying took the form of severe beatings—Haruki #1 often passed out from the pain—and possibly rape. When Nao reads about Haruki #1's difficulties through the letters he wrote to Jiko, she feels connected to him because they were both bullied. Haruki #1 decided to be a kamikaze pilot because this would earn Jiko a bigger pension after his death. Also, he was convinced that he would die in the war, and he preferred being able to choose the moment of his death rather than leaving it to chance. While he didn't admit this in his official letters to Jiko because the information might have gotten her into trouble, Haruki #1 wrote in his secret diary that he planned to fly his plane into the ocean and not into the American battleship he was supposed to destroy. Since he abhorred violence, he didn't want to cause any deaths. Haruki #1 also wrote that he didn't want to die and that he couldn't stop counting all the beautiful things in life. When Nao and Haruki read this, they are moved that Haruki #1 still found life beautiful, despite all his suffering. As a result,

they, too, are inspired to live.

**Tomoko / Nao's Mother** – Tomoko is Nao's mother and Haruki's husband. Like Nao, she, too, is badly shaken by the turn their lives take after Haruki loses his job in America and they are forced to relocate to Japan with no savings. Initially, she cannot shake herself out of her depression and ends up staring at the jellyfish at the aquarium for hours every day. However, after Haruki's first suicide attempt, Tomoko realizes that Haruki cannot pick himself up and that it is up to her to provide for the family. She ends up getting a job at a publishing house, and she works long hours. Since Tomoko is rarely home, she and Nao don't communicate much, and Tomoko is largely ignorant of Nao's problems. However, even when Tomoko finds out about the bullying that Nao faces at school, she isn't very understanding. She implies that the situation might be Nao's fault for not making friends with more of her classmates, and she speaks to the school authorities about the situation even though Nao begs her not to. This worsens the bullying, as Nao predicted it would. In general, Tomoko has an authoritarian parenting style that causes a rift between her and Nao.

**Oliver** – Oliver is Ruth's husband. He is an artist who lives in Whaletown on a remote island in British Columbia, where Ruth moved to to be with him. Though Ruth feels unhappy on the island, she doesn't tell Oliver this. She also doesn't tell him that she is struggling with her writing. So, even though they have a loving relationship, there is much that they leave unsaid since they don't want to hurt each other's feelings. After Ruth finds Nao's diary, Oliver becomes interested in Nao's story too, and he and Ruth spend a lot of time discussing the diary. When Nao's diary entries end, and Ruth is convinced that she is dead, it is Oliver who convinces Ruth that she is a writer and can therefore rewrite Nao's life. Oliver is a well of information and scientific facts, and his interests range from ornithology to quantum physics. Ruth admires his intelligence, talent, and humility. However, Oliver is insecure that he doesn't earn enough money and feels that his financial failings disappoint Ruth. She truly doesn't care about this, however, and tells him at the end of the novel that she is happy with him.

**Babette** – Babette is a waitress at the French-maid-themed coffee shop where Nao likes to write in her diary. Nao initially says that Babette is her friend and that she lets Nao have free coffee at the café. Babette first meets Nao at the public bath, where she compliments Nao on the shape of her head after Nao shaves all her hair off. At this point in her life, Nao is very lonely. When Babette offers to take her shopping to help her pick a wig, Nao jumps at the chance to make a friend. However, Babette is actually a pimp and soon begins to insist that Nao go on "dates" with men who come to the café. Nao doesn't want to displease her only friend, so she ends up having sex with men while Babette collects the money. While Babette is initially kind to Nao, she turns vicious when Nao says that she no longer wants to go on "dates." She pinches Nao very hard and tells her

that people like Nao “don’t deserve to have self-respect.” Babette preys on Nao’s loneliness and insecurity to exploit her. She represents the constant sexual danger that young, naïve women like Nao are in when they do not have a support system.

**Zen Master Dogen** – Dogen was a Japanese Zen Master who lived in the 13th century. He wrote a book called the *Shobogenzo*, which is translated as *The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*. Jiko’s spiritual philosophy is very influenced by Dogen, especially by his ideas of impermanence and of the importance of focusing on the present moment. Dogen’s musings about time infuse the novel’s characters, especially Ruth and Nao, as they learn about his ideas and try to practice them.

**Muriel** – Muriel is a retired anthropologist who lives in Whaletown. Muriel represents many things that Ruth dislikes about the island’s residents: Muriel has no respect for privacy and boundaries, and she is a big gossip. However, she is also an intelligent and kind friend who is a good listener. Muriel is the one who first mentions that **crow**s are considered to be magical creatures in many cultures. She says that the Sliammon people who used to live on their island believed in a magical ancestor who could shape-shift into the form of a crow. Muriel’s words clue readers into the idea that the Jungle Crow (which suddenly appears outside Ruth’s house) might be a supernatural animal.

**Ugawa Sensei** – Ugawa Sensei is Nao’s ninth-grade homeroom teacher who joins her classmates in bullying her. He is a substitute teacher, since Nao’s class teacher is on maternity leave—and usually, substitute teachers are bullied too. However, Ugawa Sensei realizes that he can ingratiate himself with the popular kids if he joins them in bullying Nao. Nao says that she feels sorry for Ugawa Sensei because she sees that he is a “loser” with bad breath and body odor. She recognizes that his mean actions are a product of his deep insecurities. Despite Nao’s generous analysis of his character, Ugawa Sensei is striking because he is an adult and a teacher, and he should ideally be more mature than the teenagers he teaches. He represents how people who are constantly bullied and trampled on can turn vicious themselves.

**Kayla** – Kayla used to be Nao’s best friend when she lived in Sunnyvale, California. For a while after Nao moves to Japan, the two of them text and email each other quite often. Kayla is popular and smart—and since Nao used to be hang out with her, Nao was part of the popular crowd too. However, Nao is shunned and bullied at her Japanese school, and she is embarrassed to admit this to Kayla because she thinks Kayla might stop wanting to associate with Nao if she knows this. Nao proves to be right. When she tells Kayla about her problems, Kayla sends back a “bright, cheerful little email” that makes it clear to Nao that Kayla isn’t interested in Nao’s troubles. Kayla and Nao’s relationship demonstrates the difficulty of forming true connections and highlights the fact that many so-called

friendships are superficial.

**Daisuke** – Daisuke is one of Nao’s classmates who is bullied too, since his family is poor. He lives in the same neighborhood that Nao lives in, and Nao corners him and beats him up when she wants information about what the bullies at school might be plotting against her. Daisuke willingly tells her whatever she wants to know. He has no fight left in him, and Nao gets very irritated by this—she is tempted to cut his throat with the kitchen knife she has brought to scare him with. This moment seems to show power’s intoxicating effects. Nao’s actions are similar to those of the kids who bully her. Like them, she is irritated by Daisuke’s powerless sniveling—and like them, she is tempted to hurt him. Nao, however, resists the urge, showing that she has stronger morals than the other teenagers.

**Reiko** – Reiko is Nao’s smart and popular classmate who is the ringleader of the gang of kids that bullies Nao. Though Reiko rarely does any of the bullying herself, she is the one who usually plans it. Nao says that Reiko looks at her as if Nao were “something loathsome or half dead,” and Nao hates her. When Nao’s classmates corner her in the bathroom to try to rape her, Reiko seems to be the one who planned the whole thing.

**Dr. Leistiko** – Dr. Leistiko is a professor of psychology at Stanford University who studies the impact of culture on suicide. Ruth finds his website when she is looking for Nao and her family online, and she finds an excerpt from a letter on Leistiko’s website that she suspects might be written Haruki. It turns out that Leistiko and Haruki were friends when Haruki used to live in California. While Haruki is usually shown through Nao’s point of view in the novel, Leistiko’s emails to Ruth show different aspects of Haruki’s character. While Nao sees her father as a loving but defeated man, Leistiko’s emails reveal that Haruki is a brilliant programmer and an ethical person.

**Callie** – Callie is a marine biologist who lives in Whaletown. She helps Ruth by analyzing the age of the barnacles on the freezer bag that Ruth finds on the beach, and she tells Ruth that the freezer bag and lunch box were most likely in the ocean even before the Japanese **tsunami** of 2011. Ruth is disappointed by this information, as she was attached to the theory that the tsunami washed the freezer bag and its contents were washed from Japan to her island.

**Ayako** – Ayako is the Japanese wife of an oyster farmer who lives in Whaletown. She tries to help Ruth decipher the Japanese letters that Ruth found in the lunch box that washed up on the beach, but Ayako cannot read the old-fashioned, handwritten Japanese characters. Ayako is young and is used to the kind of Japanese characters that can be typed on the computer. She represents how language changes and shifts with time.

**Muji** – Muji is a young Buddhist nun who lives with Jiko in the temple on the mountainside. She is kind to Nao and welcomes

her happily when Nao spends her summer vacation at the temple, including Nao in chores and activities. Since Jiko is so old, the bulk of the work at the temple falls to Muji, who does it cheerfully. Muji and Jiko have a relationship of mutual respect and affection. Nao says that she is so fond of Muji that Muji almost seems like an aunt to her.

**K** – K was Haruki #1’s friend at his training camp and a fellow philosopher. K was bullied so severely by F that Haruki #1 couldn’t bear to watch it. He volunteered to take K’s place, and as a result, was horribly beaten up by F; from then on, he was always targeted for beatings and punishments. K suffered as he watched his friend get bullied for standing up for him. Early one morning, K tried to run away from the camp, but the officers found him and shot him. K probably knew he would be caught and killed, but he must have preferred that fate since he didn’t want to inflict violence on others as a soldier. K’s story tragically illustrates how young men suffered after they were drafted.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**F** – F was Haruki #1’s cruel commanding officer. F disliked student soldiers like Haruki #1 and his friend K, who were peace-loving intellectuals, and he bullied them severely.

**Benoit** – Benoit works at the trash dump in Whaletown. He helps Ruth by translating Haruki #1’s secret diary from French into English. Benoit is so disturbed by the diary’s depressing contents that he ends up drinking heavily.

**Masako / Ruth’s Mother** – Masako was Ruth’s mother. She and Ruth had a good relationship when she was alive. Masako suffered from Alzheimer’s, and Ruth cared for her in her final years.

**Dora** – Dora is the postmistress in Whaletown. She is a busybody who is always well-informed on the island’s gossip.

**Ema Yasutani** – Ema is Jiko’s daughter and Haruki’s mother.

**Kenji** – Kenji is Ema’s husband and Haruki’s father.

**Sugako** – Sugako is Jiko’s daughter and Haruki’s aunt. She didn’t marry or have children.

**Akira Inoue** – Akira owns a sushi restaurant in the neighboring town that is closest to Whaletown.

**Kimi** – Kimi is Akira’s wife. She helps Ruth by translating Haruki #1’s letters from Japanese to English.

**Ryu** A wealthy man with whom Babette sets Nao up on a “date,” which means that he has paid for Nao to have sex with him. Ryu is generally kind and gentle with Nao, though he prefers when she has short hair and looks to him like a beautiful boy.

deviant.

**Yanki** – *Yanki* is a Japanese term for a subculture of juvenile delinquents who dress in brightly colored coats.

**Zazen** – *Zazen* is a type of Zen Buddhist meditation. Practitioners usually sit on the floor with their legs crossed and their backs straight. The purpose of *zazen* is to relax, sit still, and focus on one’s breathing. Practitioners try to suspend all judgment and simply observe their thoughts and surroundings. According to **Master Dogen**, “Nonthinking [...] is the essential art of *zazen*.”



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## TIME, IMPERMANENCE, AND THE PRESENT

The term “time being” refers to the present, and *A Tale for the Time Being* aptly examines the importance of the present moment. Nao, a Japanese teenager who records her experiences in her diary, explains that all creatures are “time beings,” meaning that everything and everyone is impermanent. This pun in the title hints that the novel will explore these two notions of time that are influenced by Zen Buddhist philosophy: the importance of the present moment and the short-lived nature of all things. Nao and Ruth (the novelist who discovers Nao’s diary washed up on a beach and becomes engrossed in it) struggle to reconcile themselves with change, and they both seem stuck in their pasts. Ozeki suggests that for these characters to move forward, they must learn to accept the impermanence of all things, and that they must see every moment they have—the “now”—as an opportunity to improve themselves.

Right from its title, *A Tale for the Time Being*—in other words, a story for the present moment—emphasizes the importance of “now.” Yet the novel’s characters struggle to move on from their pasts and make the present count. For instance, Nao (whose very name is pronounced “now”) points out that as soon as one even says the word “now,” that moment is already in the past—it is “like a slippery fish” that is impossible to catch. Nao’s present is full of troubles, like her father’s suicide attempts and the cruel bullying she experiences at school. As a result of her difficulties, Nao often reminisces about her past, which seems more “real” to her than the present since she was happier back then. However, she acknowledges that her past happy self no longer exists and that memory is often faulty. Therefore, the past is unreal—all that anyone has is the elusive, ungraspable

## TERMS

**Hentai** – *Hentai* is a Japanese term for a sexual pervert or

“now.” Ruth, too, feels the burden of her past, as she struggles with the memoir she has been trying to write for a decade. Memoirs are, of course, based on the writer’s memories, and Ruth finds this project weighty and tiresome. The subject of the memoir is Ruth’s mother’s struggle with Alzheimer’s, and this stokes Ruth’s own fear that she is losing her memory and will get Alzheimer’s herself. Despite the fact that the memoir is deeply unpleasant to Ruth, she lacks the courage to abandon it—it becomes a physical manifestation of her complicated, painful past. As a result, like Nao, Ruth becomes preoccupied with her memories and is unable to make constructive use of her present.

As Ruth and Nao struggle to stay focused on the present, they are also forced to reckon with change as a difficult but necessary part of life. Change can be a cataclysmic force that wreaks havoc and upends thousands of lives, as represented by the earthquake and tsunami that hits Japan in 2011. In the news stories that Ruth watches about this event, she observes that the **wave** is immense and rapid—the “tiny people” in its path have no chance of escape. The formidable tsunami is a striking image of change, and “tiny people” are powerless victims to it. Yet change is also necessary, as exemplified by the ancient Japanese belief that earthquakes are caused by a gigantic catfish under the islands that violently shakes the land. Importantly, Japanese people don’t see the catfish as malevolent—they even call it “The World-Rectifying Catfish,” since they believe that old orders and established codes need to be shaken up every now and then in order to ensure fairness and justice. For instance, earthquakes force the rich to pay builders and workers to clear debris and rebuild what was destroyed, and in this way, ensure that the rich have to distribute their money to the labor class. Even a traumatic upheaval like a nature disaster, then, can bring about necessary and beneficial change.

Yet change can also lead to personal suffering, as exemplified by Ruth’s and Nao’s stories. Ruth moved from New York City to an isolated Canadian island—and even though the move was voluntary, she feels stuck and unhappy in her new environment. Nao was forced to move from Sunnyvale, California back to her home country of Japan after her father lost his job. She has moved from affluence and acceptance to social ostracization in Japan, which causes her a great deal of anguish. But Ruth and Nao grow to have a deeper appreciation for life’s happy moments and for human relationships because of these changes. By the end of the novel, they have grown in self-awareness and are more resilient people.

Along with Nao and Ruth’s growing awareness that change is inevitable, Nao’s great-grandmother Jiko’s Buddhist teachings help Nao and Ruth learn to live in the present moment. To help Nao, who is being horribly bullied in school, Jiko teaches her to “sit zazen,” or meditate. While meditating, Nao clears her mind of all thoughts and simply focuses on her breathing, and she is

therefore able to focus solely on her present—according to Jiko, to practice zazen is “to enter time completely.” Nao calls this her “superpower,” and she uses this to overcome the terrible bullying she experiences at school. Ruth, too, embraces this technique when she reads about it in Nao’s diary. Jiko tells Nao that an ancient Zen teacher, Master Dogen, preached that each moment in time gives a person an opportunity “to wake up and choose actions that will produce beneficial karma.” He exhorts his disciples to “*Wake up now! And now! And now!*” Influenced by Jiko’s Zen Buddhist ideas, Ruth and Nao realize that every moment is an opportunity to make a good choice. While they previously viewed themselves as victims of life’s circumstances, they now see that they are empowered and can choose how to live.



## THE DIFFICULTY OF COMMUNICATION

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, characters find it difficult to communicate with one another. Even when they love each other—like Nao and her father Haruki, or Ruth and her husband Oliver—they are rarely able to speak about their fears or concerns. As a result, they lead isolated lives. Their loneliness is exacerbated by the environments they live in, which they perceive as strange, unwelcoming, or even hostile. Yet the book suggests that a person like Jiko, Nao’s great-grandmother who is a Buddhist nun, can form true connections because she is deeply generous and loving—according to the novel, her attitude is a product of her spiritual beliefs. The novel also suggests that the bond between a writer and a reader can be just as deep as an intimate relationship—both spirituality and the written word offer alternate paths for people to meaningfully connect.

The novel has many examples of how characters who love each other are unable to communicate and end up suffering in loneliness. For instance, Nao is severely bullied at her new school but doesn’t tell her parents about it. Every morning, her father, Haruki, walks her to school, and Nao says that the “important thing [is] that [they are] being polite and not saying all the things that [are] making [them] unhappy, which [is] the only way [they] know how to love each other.” Though Nao and her father care for each other deeply, their refusal to speak openly about their problems creates a huge rift between them. Haruki, too, has his own troubles that he doesn’t share with anyone. He feels a deep sense of shame because he doesn’t have a job and can’t provide for his family, and because of this, he tries to commit suicide twice. Haruki never speaks to his family about his deep sadness. They, in turn, willingly turn a blind eye to his troubles—they even laugh off his suicide attempts as being silly accidents. Their refusal to acknowledge his problems closes the door to compassion and support. Similarly, Ruth finds it difficult to communicate openly with her husband, Oliver. She reads Nao’s diary aloud to Oliver, and they spend a lot of time discussing Nao’s problems. However, they

never talk about Ruth's loneliness and isolation that are hampering her work as a writer. Additionally, Ruth finds it difficult to express her admiration and love for Oliver. After an argument, Ruth thinks about how Oliver is "the most intelligent person she [knows]" and the "least egotistical man [she's] ever met"—yet she's unable to say these things to him. Like Haruki's relationship with his family, Ruth and Oliver's bond is stifled by their inability to meaningfully communicate.

The characters' loneliness is intensified by their environments, which they perceive to be foreign and hostile. However, Ozeki hints that the characters' environments only mirror their state of mind rather than cause it. Nao is forced to move from an affluent life in Sunnyvale, California to a shabby apartment in Tokyo after her father loses his job. Nao blames her isolation and unhappiness on the fact that she isn't fluent in Japanese or familiar with the country's culture. However, when she goes to live with her great-grandmother Jiko in a temple—a place where the rituals and language are even more foreign than in Tokyo—Nao easily adapts to the new routines and thrives there. Since she is comfortable and happy with Jiko, the unfamiliarity of her environment is irrelevant. Similarly, Ruth perceives herself to be a perpetual outsider on the tiny Canadian island that she moves to from New York City. While her move isn't as traumatic as Nao's, Ruth nevertheless finds herself unmoored by her island life, living among people whose ideas and mannerisms she finds strange and annoying. However, these islanders repeatedly prove themselves to be kind and helpful neighbors, suggesting that Ruth's sense of dislocation is more a state of mind than a fact.

While even loving relationships are sometimes inadequate in encouraging true communication, Ozeki suggests that a spiritual outlook can help foster connections between human beings—like Nao's relationship with Jiko. While Nao finds it impossible to share her fears and worries with her family and friends, she easily confides in Jiko. Nao knows she has Jiko's unconditional love, so she feels free to tell Jiko exactly what is on her mind, even when she knows it is not the "correct" thing to say. For instance, when Jiko tells Nao that they should work together to help people attain enlightenment, Nao replies, "No way! [...] Forget it! I am no fucking [nun]!" Jiko isn't angered by this response. Instead, she still looks at Nao like she is "saying a blessing" for her—which is how she always looks at Nao—and Nao says that this makes her feel "safe." The consistency of Jiko's affection—which is a product of her Zen Buddhist practice that preaches love for all creatures—helps her win Nao's trust.

Ruth's character is a stand-in for Ruth Ozeki, the author, and the novel can thus be read as metafictional (self-referential as a work of fiction). The book is an account of how characters and stories call across time to their writer and form a deep bond with them. The writer, in turn, shares these stories with her reader—and if they connect with the reader, it is like "making

magic," in Nao's words. While Nao can be seen as a character who calls to Ruth and whom Ruth writes into existence, Nao is also a diary-writer who holds her reader (Ruth) in thrall. The magic and power of this relationship is demonstrated by Ruth's (the reader's) ability to enter a spiritual dream to rescue Nao (the writer) from death. To Ozeki, this link across time and space between a writer and reader has the heft of a spiritual connection, giving people a different way to meaningfully connect with others.



## LIFE VS. DEATH

Death comes up frequently in *A Tale for the Time Being*: not only are Nao and her father, Haruki, preoccupied with death and suicide, but the world

these characters live in is also slowly dying. Huge gyres of plastic trash are floating around the oceans, animals are going extinct, and climate change threatens life everywhere. Images of death and destruction—for instance, from Japan's 2011 tsunami and the 9/11 terrorist attack—frequently appear on the news. Nao and Haruki both think of suicide as a solution to a chaotic world and to their lives that are spinning out of control: they believe that by committing suicide, they can finally have some power over their disordered lives. However, their story makes the case that despite being messy and often heartbreaking, life has its beauty and is worth living.

Nao's decision to commit suicide is largely influenced by the story of her great-uncle Haruki #1, who was a kamikaze pilot during World War II. Nao mistakenly believes that he embraced his death with courage and peace, when in reality, he didn't want to die. Nao's interpretation of the events surrounding Haruki #1's death comes from the letters he wrote to his mother, Jiko, while he was training to be a soldier. In the letters, Haruki #1 wrote that he volunteered to be a kamikaze pilot because he was certain that he would die in the war—but rather than letting his moment of death be "random and imprecise," he preferred to have control over the exact nature and time of his death. He was calm about his impending death, and he always seemed to be in control—even when he had just one day left to live. Nao is very impressed by how heroic Haruki #1 was, and she yearns to embody his maturity and composure. She also sees Haruki #1 as a stark contrast to her father, Haruki, who struggles with unemployment and a lack of confidence, and who seems like such a loser to Nao that he has even failed at committing suicide. However, Ruth reads Haruki #1's secret diary that holds his true feelings about being a soldier and dying in war—this diary is mysteriously included among the contents of the lunch box that washes up on Ruth's shore. Haruki #1 made it clear in this diary that he certainly didn't want to die—but unfortunately, he had no other choice as he was forced to fight and die for his country. He was unable to write to Jiko about his true feelings because the soldiers' commanding officers spied on them, and they even read the



soldiers' letters—this was why Haruki #1's letters expressed a stoicism he didn't actually feel. In his diary, he wrote that every night, he counted his juzu beads, "one for every thing on earth [he] loved, on and on, in a circle without end." Haruki #1 loved the world and loved his life despite the suffering he experienced.

Like Haruki #1, Nao and Haruki's love of life ultimately trumps the despair they feel over their personal struggles and life's tragedies. Nao plans to commit suicide because she thinks that her life is filled with too much pain. She also has very low self-esteem and thinks that her absence from the world would make no difference to anyone or anything. In contrast to her views about herself, her diary entries prove that she is observant and humorous, and she is interested and invested in the world around her. She is moved by the beauty of nature at Jiko's temple, and she is enchanted by the hustle and bustle of Akiba, Tokyo. At her Japanese school, the extreme bullying she undergoes forces her to adopt an uninterested demeanor, but when the bullying temporarily ceases, she is even academically curious. This proves that despite her claims to the contrary, Nao is very interested in life. She says in her diary that she will kill herself after writing about Jiko's life, but she procrastinates and writes very little about Jiko's life and a lot about her own. It seems like Nao is looking for an excuse to live.

Similarly, while Haruki attempts suicide twice, it is implied that he *wanted* to fail at killing himself since he enjoys many aspects of life. He attempts suicide because he's unemployed and faces a huge crisis of confidence—he is convinced that he has no reason to live, since he is of no use to anyone. Yet he busies himself with various interests, like reading the works of all the great Western philosophers and making complicated origami bugs. He writes to his old friend, Dr. Leistiko, explaining why Japanese people regard suicide as a "beautiful thing that gives meaning and shape and honor" to life. Leistiko, however, discerns that Haruki's letter is a "moving cry for help"—he rightly guesses that Haruki does not want to die and wants to be convinced not to kill himself, since he loves living. Jiko understands Nao and Haruki's love of life, perhaps better than anyone else: as a Zen Buddhist nun who loves all creatures, her love for the world is even more amplified than theirs. This is why, on her deathbed, she entreats Nao and Haruki to live. Her dying wish makes the case that life is worth living, despite being confusing and chaotic.



### COINCIDENCES AND CONNECTIONS

Characters in *A Tale for the Time Being* lead difficult lives, and they often feel lonely and disconnected from others. However, their lives overlap in ways

that demonstrate the connections and similarities between these characters. They often find one another through almost-impossible coincidences, which sets up the idea that human connections have a magical or spiritual quality to them.

Additionally, the characters are alike not only in their thoughts and mannerisms but even experience similar events in their lives. Though this isn't often obvious to the characters themselves, Ozeki suggests that all people are connected in complex and metaphysical ways.

The novel's plot relies on several huge coincidences for characters to find one another, and these read as if they are somehow destined or meant to be. The precipitating event of the novel—Ruth finding Nao's diary and letters in the Hello Kitty lunch box that has washed up on the beach—almost doesn't happen, because Ruth doesn't notice the box at first. When she does, she only means to take it home to throw away what she assumes must be trash. She leaves it on her porch, and her husband Oliver brings it in and opens it—he is too curious to heed Ruth's admonishments against bringing it inside. These fortunate coincidences propel the events of the novel, making it seem like Ruth is destined to find Nao's diary. Like Ruth, Nao has a connection to America and Japan, which helps Ruth understand the struggles that Nao writes about. Also, like Ruth, Nao is struggling with displacement and loneliness, which gets Ruth very invested in her story. Another striking coincidence in the book—which almost feels supernatural—occurs when Ruth is frantically looking for information about Nao's family online, since she is worried that they might not have survived Japan's earthquake and tsunami. She types in various search terms, including their names, but has no luck. Then, she mistypes Nao's father's name, Haruki, as "Harryki" and hits enter before she can correct it. This produces a surprisingly useful result that helps Ruth track down one of Haruki's old friends. Ruth's lucky mistake leads to her finding a person who knew Nao's family, which makes it seem like Ruth was destined to find the friend and know more about Nao's family.

Underscoring these seemingly predestined connections between the characters are events and tropes that are repeated in the lives of different characters across different timelines. This shows how people's lives are connected even when they live in different times and places. One set of characters who echo each other are Haruki #1 (Nao's great-uncle who was a kamikaze pilot in World War II) and his namesake, Haruki (Nao's father). Haruki #1 was a scholar interested in philosophy who thought of suicide as an opportunity to gain control over the moment of one's death by choosing it. He opposed war and chose to fly his plane into the ocean so that he wouldn't have to kill other people. Haruki, too, is interested in philosophy and suicide—and unknown to Nao, he quits his job in an American software company because his work is being sold to a defense contractor. Nao thinks that Haruki #1 was a hero and is constantly disappointed by her father, but Ozeki shows that the two Harukis are more similar than Nao can imagine. In another example, Ruth explains to Oliver that according to an ancient Japanese legend,

earthquakes occur when a gigantic catfish under the islands thrashes around. Oliver recounts that when he was a child growing up in Stuttgart, Germany, there were gigantic catfish that lived at the bottom of the River Neckar, and the fish swam up to the top right before an earthquake. The motif of the catfish appearing during earthquakes unites these two people from two different cultures, further emphasizing the idea that there are untold coincidences and connections even among people from different walks of life.

These connections and patterns emphasize the Zen Buddhist notion that all beings are linked together. In the epigraph that precedes Section III of the novel, Ozeki quotes Zen Master Dogen who says that “every being that exists in the entire world is linked together as moments in time, and at the same time they exist as individual moments of time.” The characters in this novel illustrate this idea of connectedness. While they exist as individuals, they’re also linked since they all exist in time—or, in other words, they’re all “time beings.” By using far-fetched coincidences as well as echoing similarities between characters and their experiences in different timelines of the novel, Ozeki exemplifies this Buddhist notion of an inexplicable connectedness between all creatures.



## SEXUAL PERVERSION AND VIOLENCE

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Nao is a young teenager who is curious about sex. At the beginning of the novel, she has had no sexual experiences, but she is keenly aware of the men who stare at her body and of her body itself changing. When she is at the public baths, one of the bar hostesses who is bathing next to her teases Nao about “her breasts, which [have] started to grow,” and Nao is flattered. However, Nao’s eventual sexual experiences are neither pleasant nor voluntary. She ends up being abused and exploited as the novel progresses, and it seems that her innocence itself is a magnet for hentais, or sexual perverts. She experiences terrible abuse when she is in her school uniform (which is a symbol of youth and innocence), and the sexual abuse she experiences only worsens when she tries to discard her femininity by shaving her head. Trying to rid herself of the characteristics that make her a target of abuse only makes Nao *more* of a target. In this sense, the novel acknowledges and condemns the unfortunate reality that women can’t win when it comes to sexual violence.

Nao’s school uniform—a mark of her youth and innocence—ends up making her a sexual target. At the beginning of the novel, Nao is sitting at a café, writing in her diary, when she notices a salaryman at the table next to hers staring at her, which “creeps [her] out.” She says she can tell that he has “a major schoolgirl fetish” by the way he is “looking at [her] body.” In order to discourage his attentions, Nao “modestly” lets her hair fall across her face to cover it. The man is a “salaryman,” which is a term for a Japanese office worker, so

he is clearly much older than Nao. Yet he is unabashed about his desire for her, and Nao is the one who must deal with her discomfort and attempt to hide from him. Even more shockingly, Nao’s classmates want to make a video of her being raped in her school uniform—they know that there is a huge market for violence and perversion. The draw of the video is that a young girl in a school uniform, which symbolizes her innocence, is being forced into a sexual situation against her will. The fact that these teenagers want to make a rape video indicates that they know that their buyers on the internet would be more interested in witnessing the young woman’s abuse and humiliation. Luckily for Nao, the boy who is supposed to rape her is too nervous to see the plan through—but the video of the attempted rape is still posted on the internet, while her panties are sold to the highest online bidder. These unsettling events in the novel acknowledge that young schoolgirls are sexualized in popular culture, which has horrific effects on real schoolgirls like Nao.

Unfortunately, even Nao’s attempt to be more “nun-like” by shaving her head ends up being fetishized and leads her into deeply dangerous situations. In an attempt to escape the trauma Nao experiences as a result of being nearly raped, she shaves her head and decides to become a nun like Jiko, her great-grandmother. Jiko, with her bald head and flowing robes, appears completely desexualized, and Nao seems to think that this might keep her safe. Characteristics like long hair or a visibly feminine body shape can mark women as targets for violence, so in a sense, becoming a nun is Nao’s attempt at separating herself from her sexuality altogether. However, Nao catches her neighbor Babette’s eye with her shaved head, and she tells Nao that she looks cute and unusual. In her naïveté and loneliness, Nao thinks that Babette is her friend. However, Babette turns out to be a pimp who sells Nao’s virginity to the highest bidder, a man named Ryu. While Ryu and Nao regularly meet up for sex for about a month, he disappears after Nao’s hair starts growing back. This shows that Ryu had a fetish for Nao’s bald head and that Babette, too, saw her baldness as an incentive to sexually exploit her. The very thing that Nao hoped would protect her against abuse ends up putting Nao in a dangerous, vulnerable position. In this way, the novel demonstrates that due to the normalization of sexual perversion in popular culture, young women like Nao are perceived as sexual objects even when they don’t wish to be seen in this way. Even drastic measures, like shaving one’s head, aren’t effective in staving off sexual violence. Altogether, Nao’s experiences tragically suggest that young women are targets for sexual exploitation, regardless of how they look on the outside or the measures they take to protect themselves.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## WATCHES/CLOCKS

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, watches and clocks symbolize the fleeting nature of time. Inside the lunch box that washes up on Ruth's beach, Ruth finds an old wind-up watch alongside Nao's diary. Even before Ruth knows that this was Nao's great-uncle Haruki #1's watch, she wears the watch and is constantly reminded of the passage of time by the watch's loud ticking. This is especially significant because Ruth is stuck in her past: she is trying to work on a memoir she finds unpleasant, and she is unable to focus on her present. The watch serves as a constant reminder that her present is passing her by.

Later in the novel, when the narrative switches to Haruki #1's secret diary, he writes that he is agitated about his impending death and that "the ticking of the clock is the only sound he can hear." He wishes he could "smash the clock and stop time from advancing," but of course, there is no way to stop time. Since Haruki #1 has very little time left to live and is so aware of every moment that passes him by, his watch becomes an especially potent symbol of time passing. One of the novel's themes is the importance of using the present moment wisely and well, and watches and clocks remind characters that their present is quickly passing them by.



## CROWS

In the novel, crows—especially the Jungle Crow that shows up outside Ruth's house—symbolize supernatural connections between the characters that transcend space and time. The Jungle Crow, a species native to Japan, inexplicably shows up outside Ruth's house in Canada at the same time as the lunch box washes up on her shore. When Ruth's friend Muriel hears about the Jungle Crow, she mentions that the Sliammon people who used to live on their island believed in a supernatural crow called "Grandmother Crow" who could shape-shift into human or animal form and who saved her granddaughter's life.

Similarly, the Jungle Crow might be Jiko's spirit in animal form, as it guides Ruth into a dream that helps her save Jiko's great-granddaughter Nao's life. Additionally, Haruki #1 mentions that he loves to fly his plane and that he feels like a character in a children's story called the Crow Captain—so the Jungle Crow might be a manifestation of him as well. The novel mentions that Haruki, too, sits on a park bench and feeds the crows around him, and this is how Ruth recognizes him in her dream. Crows link these various characters who live at various times and places, and they become a symbol of this link, showing how these characters are connected across time and space—even when they don't realize it.



## WAVES/TSUNAMI

Waves, particularly the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011, symbolize the unavoidability of change. One of the novel's themes is that everything and everyone is constantly changing, and that people's attempts to avoid change are doomed to fail. When Ruth watches news coverage of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami, she sees that the wave is immense and rapid, and that the "tiny people" people who are trying to get away from it don't "stand a chance." This suggests that, more generally, people are powerless against change in their lives.

When Jiko and Nao go on a picnic to the beach, Jiko asks Nao to try to attack the waves in an attempt to teach her that one can't stop change no matter how hard one tries. Nao eventually realizes this too. After she stops trying to hit the waves with a stick, she gets tired, lies down in the water, and enjoys the feeling of the waves washing over her body. Afterward, she tells Jiko that it was a good feeling to let the ocean win, meaning that happiness lies in accepting change rather than resisting it.



## QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *A Tale for the Time Being* published in 2013.

### Part I, Chapter 1: Nao Quotes

Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I will tell you.

A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be. As for me, right now I am sitting in a French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad chanson that is playing sometime in your past, which is also my present, writing this and wondering about you, somewhere in my future. And if you're reading this, then maybe by now you're wondering about me, too.

**Related Characters:** Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker), Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, Nao's ideas are intriguing, especially given her young age. Nao seems to be wise beyond her 16 years. Ruth later reads Nao's diary, in which Nao has written down these words, and she is charmed by

Nao's intimate, confessional tone and quickly becomes invested in Nao's life story. This is a testament to the close connection that can form between a writer and the right kind of reader—a connection that can transcend time, age, and geography. While Nao and Ruth struggle to communicate effectively with the people in their lives, they're connected to each other through Nao's writing. As Nao writes these words, she wonders about her reader, just as Ruth will wonder about Nao, the writer, as she reads the diary.

In these first lines, Nao also brings up the idea of passing time. There are several time markers in this passage—Nao mentions the words “time,” “moment,” “past,” “present,” and “future.” Even Nao's name is a homophone of “now.” One of the novel's themes is that time is fleeting and that everyone must strive to make use of every moment, and these repeated time markers emphasize this idea.

Nao explains that both she and her reader are “time beings,” since they “[live] in time.” Since they exist in time, they are impermanent, as are all things. The novel's title is *A Tale for the Time Being*, and this is a story for the reader, who is also a time being by nature of being alive. Furthermore, the term “the time being” is usually used to mean “the present moment,” and the importance of the present moment is an idea that's emphasized throughout novel. This phrase also acknowledges that this story, too, is impermanent and fleeting, since it is only “for the time being”—not forever.

## Part I, Chapter 3: Nao Quotes

💬 “But Granny, it's going to take forever!”

“Well, we must try even harder, then.”



“We?!”

“Of course, dear Nao. You must help me.”

“No way!” I told Granny. “Forget it! I'm no fucking bosatsu...”

[...] I think maybe she was saying a blessing for me just then, too. I didn't mind. It made me feel safe, like I knew no matter what happened, Granny was going to make sure I got onto that elevator.

**Related Characters:** Jiko Yasutani, Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 18-19

### Explanation and Analysis



Jiko, Nao's great-grandmother, tells Nao that one of her vows as a Buddhist nun is to become enlightened only after everyone else in the world reaches enlightenment first. Nao thinks of this as Jiko letting everyone else go ahead of her in an elevator. Jiko and Nao's exchange in this quote demonstrates the love and concern they have for each other. Nao worries that Jiko's vow is too ambitious, and that Jiko might never get the chance to be enlightened, which shows her concern for Jiko. In turn, Jiko seems to think highly of Nao because she believes that Nao can help her get more people on the path to enlightenment. While Nao doesn't believe she's worthy of such lofty goals, Jiko sees Nao's potential. And although Nao protests when Jiko asks for her help, Nao does write in her diary about Jiko's ideas on the fleeting nature of time and the necessity of living mindfully. In this way, Nao passes these ideas on to her reader, Ruth, and possibly to the novel's readers too.

While Nao struggles to communicate freely with other people in her life, including her parents, she feels comfortable enough with Jiko to say exactly what she thinks, even when her ideas are contradictory or underdeveloped. Nao doesn't feel the need to censor her language either: she doesn't hesitate to swear at her 104-year-old great grandmother, telling her that she, Nao, is no *bosatsu* (nun). Nao is confident that Jiko accepts her wholeheartedly and will not be fazed by her rude outburst. She is comforted to know that by Jiko loves her “no matter what happen[s].” This shows that in order for people to communicate openly, they need to know that the other person loves them and trust them without reservation.

💬 But since these *are* my last days on earth, I want to write something important. [...] I want to leave something real behind.

But what can I write about that's real? Sure, I can write about all the bad shit that's happened to me, and my feelings about my dad and my mom and my so-called friends, but I don't particularly want to.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao's Father , Jiko Yasutani, Babette, Kayla, Tomoko / Nao's Mother, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 22**Explanation and Analysis**



Right before Nao writes these words, she disclosed to her reader that she plans to commit suicide soon. Her desire to leave something “real” behind implies that her own life—“all the bad shit” that’s happening to her in the present—seems unreal and unimportant to her. The novel often brings up the idea that unhappy moments seem unreal, while happy times feel real. Since Nao is unhappy in her present moment, her past life in California seems more real to her than her unhappy life in Tokyo. However, one of her great-grandmother Jiko’s Buddhist teachings is that the present moment is the only one that people have any control over and is therefore the only “real” time. This is an idea that Nao comes to terms with by the end of the novel.

Since Nao wants her diary to be “important” and “real,” she decides that she won’t write about her own meaningless life. However, the diary ends up being precisely about all the things that Nao says she won’t write about: “all the bad shit that’s happened to [her], and [her] feelings about [her] dad and [her] mom and [her] so-called friends.” While Nao doesn’t believe this story will have any value, her reader, Ruth, is engrossed in it and is continually impressed with Nao, whom she sees as being interesting and wise. Ruth’s reaction is proof that Nao’s story has value, even though Nao herself doesn’t see it. Ruth feels deeply connected to Nao through her diary, and this helps Ruth to understand Nao’s worth, even when Nao doesn’t see it herself. True communication—as between Nao, the writer, and her reader, Ruth—results in empathy and understanding.

☝ What if you never even found this book, because somebody chucked it in the trash or recycled it before it got to you? Then old Jiko’s stories truly will be lost forever, and I’m just sitting here wasting time talking to the inside of a dumpster. [...]

Okay, here’s what I’ve decided. I don’t mind the risk, because the risk makes it more interesting. And I don’t think old Jiko will mind, either, because being a Buddhist, she really understands impermanence and that everything changes and nothing lasts forever.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Oliver, Ruth, Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 27**Explanation and Analysis**

Nao has decided to write Jiko’s life story in her diary before she dies, and in this passage, she worries that her diary might end up in the trash and not even be found by a reader. Later, when Ruth finds Nao’s diary washed up on the beach in a plastic bag, she assumes it’s trash and takes it home to throw away. But Ruth’s husband, Oliver, fortunately opens the bag before she throws it in the trash, and he finds the diary inside. If not for this lucky event, Nao’s diary would have ended up in the trash, just as she fears. Nao seems to have some notion that this might happen in the future, but her diary is rescued from this fate at the last moment, almost as if she and Ruth are destined to connect.

Even though Nao has hinted that she’s suicidal, it seems like she’s seeking a form of immortality by writing down something important that she hopes will live on after her. She is uncomfortable with the idea that she will be completely erased after her death. This is why she is anxious that her work—and Jiko’s stories—might not find an audience and might end up being lost forever. However, as Nao mentions, Jiko doesn’t share these concerns. Whereas Nao is still struggling with the notion of her mortality (her own impermanence), Jiko has made peace with hers. Even though Nao understands the ideas of change and impermanence that Jiko preaches, she struggles to practice them.

**Part I, Chapter 5: Nao Quotes**

☝ [...] Dad would walk me to school and we’d talk about stuff. I don’t remember exactly what, and it didn’t matter. The important thing was that we were being polite and not saying all the things that were making us unhappy, which was the only way we knew how to love each other.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao’s Father

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 47**Explanation and Analysis**

Nao describes how she and her father, Haruki, would walk together to school every day right after they moved to Japan—before he attempted to kill himself. Nao and Haruki seem to love each other very much, and Nao cherishes their time together—she says that she appreciated the fact that

they were together and that the things they said were irrelevant, which shows that she is happy in Haruki's company. And yet, their relationship seems strained by politeness and a reluctance to talk about the things that are bothering them. Nao writes that the "important thing" was that they were "not saying all the things that were making [them] unhappy," which shows that she is critical about their superficial conversations. Both of them are living through tumultuous changes in their lives and a lot of hardships, but neither of them brings these up.



The novel shows that relationships like Nao and Haruki's are problematic, because without open communication, people can never truly understand one another. Much of the complications in Nao's and Haruki's lives could be resolved by communication, but because it is such a struggle for them to tell each other what they really think, they end up struggling with their problems alone. This compounds their loneliness. There are problems with the "only way [they] [know] how to love each other" since they cannot communicate how important they are to each other.

The reason that Nao and Haruki are both suicidal is because they're convinced that they're aren't useful to anyone. Yet it's implied that if Haruki knew how much Nao loved him, and vice versa, perhaps neither of them would be suffering in this way. This shows that communication is hard, even between people who love each other. It also suggests that communication is essential to mitigate loneliness and show people that they are worthy of love.

## Part I, Chapter 6: Ruth Quotes

☝️ But here, on the sparsely populated island, human culture barely existed and then only as the thinnest veneer. Engulfed by the thorny roses and massing bamboo, she stared out the window and felt like she'd stepped into a malevolent fairy tale. She'd been bewitched. She'd pricked her finger and had fallen into a deep, comalike sleep. The years had passed, and she was not getting any younger. [...] Now that her mother was dead, Ruth felt that her own life was passing her by. Maybe it was time to leave this place she'd hoped would be home forever. Maybe it was time to break the spell.

**Related Characters:** Naoko "Nao" Yasutani, Zen Master Dogen, Masako / Ruth's Mother, Oliver, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 61

## Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, Ruth recalls that her life in New York City had been rich and exciting. In comparison, she finds the remote island where she now lives to be almost barbaric—there is only "the thinnest veneer" of human culture here, suggesting that Ruth views the residents of the "sparsely populated island" to be unsophisticated. The wildness of the "thorny roses and massing bamboo" in the next line emphasizes the uncivilized nature of life on the island, in Ruth's opinion. She is lonely here because she feels that the islanders are too different from her; she and the islanders can't understand each other.



Ruth goes on to compare herself to a character from a "a malevolent fairy tale" who has pricked her finger and fallen asleep, and who is cut off from the rest of the world by wild vegetation. This is a reference to the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, in which the character pricks her finger on a bewitched spindle and falls asleep for years, with overgrown plants blocking her castle from the outside world. Like *Sleeping Beauty*, Ruth feels cut off from the rest of the world by the wild, uncivilized island. She also feels she has fallen into "a deep, comalike sleep," indicating that she is so overwhelmed by her unhappiness that she isn't able to write or be productive on the island. This is why she feels like she is asleep rather than living and doing things.

However, unlike *Sleeping Beauty*, who stayed ageless in her sleep, Ruth is aware that time is passing her by even when she doesn't use it—Ruth is not "getting any younger" and her "life [is] passing her by." Her mother's death reminds her of her own mortality. While Ruth uses the metaphor of *Sleeping Beauty* to emphasize her isolation in the island and her resulting unproductivity as a writer, the novel also later brings up the term "sleeping" to describe people who waste time. When Zen Master Dogen (who Ruth learns about from Nao's diary) lectured his disciples on the importance of living each moment mindfully, he told them to "wake up" and realize the importance of this. Therefore, Ruth has been asleep in a spiritual sense, as well, since she hasn't been making productive use of her time.

## Part I, Chapter 7: Nao Quotes

☝ I already thought my father was insane, because this was at a time when I still believed that only insane people try to kill themselves, but at the back of my mind, I guess I was hoping that my mom was normal and okay again [...]. But at that moment I knew she was as crazy and unreliable as my father, [...] which meant there was nobody left in my life I could count on to keep me safe. I don't think I've ever felt as naked or alone. My knees went all soft as I sank, crouching there, cradling my fish. It thrashed one last time, rising up almost into my throat, and then it flopped back down and just lay there, gasping for air. I held it. It was dying in my arms.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao’s Father , Tomoko / Nao’s Mother

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 74

### Explanation and Analysis

Nao has scars on her body as a result of being severely bullied at school—which includes being pinched and cut. After her mother, Tomoko, spots them, she asks Nao to spend more time in school with her classmates and advises her to try and befriend them, which Nao finds completely insensitive and irrational. At the beginning of this passage, Nao writes that she thought her father was crazy, because this event took place at a time when Nao “still believed that only insane people try to kill themselves.” By the time she writes this, however, Nao has also decided to kill herself. This highlights the idea that everything constantly changes: Nao’s new self has completely different ideas about insanity and suicide compared to Nao’s old self.

Additionally, this scene describes one of the precipitating events that leads to Nao’s decision to kill herself. Before this scene, she was struggling with the move to Japan, and with being bullied at school, yet she never felt completely alone—and this helped her stay optimistic. In this scene, however, Nao realizes that both her parents are incapable of caring for her. She’s only a teenager and still depends on them to take care of her, so it’s hard for her to admit that her mother and father are both “crazy and unreliable.” Tomoko’s complete lack of understanding and sympathy shows that communication between her and Nao has completely broken down.

Nao uses the metaphor of a dying fish to describe her desperation and panic as she realizes that she is all alone in the world. When Nao realizes that she has no one stable who will watch out for her, she is so afraid that she flops to the ground, just like a dying fish would. She compares her

own panicky breathing to the fish “gasping for air.” When she says that she holds the fish as it dies, she implies that the old Nao—the vulnerable, trusting child—is dead, and an emotionally hardened version of Nao must carry on. However, Nao is ultimately too overwhelmed by living a lonely life without a support system, and which is why she resolves to kill herself.


## Part I, Chapter 9: Nao Quotes

☝ When I was a little kid in Sunnyvale, I became obsessed with the word *now*. [...] The word *now* always felt especially strange and unreal to me because it was me, at least the sound of it was. Nao was *now* and had this whole other meaning.

[..] [*N*ow felt like a slippery fish, a slick fat tuna with a big belly and a smallish head and tail [...].

NOW felt like a big fish swallowing a little fish, and I wanted to catch it and make it stop. I was just a kid, and I thought if I could truly grasp the meaning of the big fish NOW I would be able to save little fish Naoko, but the word always slipped away from me.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Zen Master Dogen

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

The word “now” is a homophone of Nao’s name. As a child, since Nao felt that she herself was “now,” the word “felt especially strange and unreal” to her. She was unable to understand its meaning, since the present moment—the now—was always passing by too quickly for her to completely grasp it. Nao likens the present moment to a slippery fish. This is not a docile, benign fish either—it is a big, fat fish that seems to put “little fish Naoko” in danger by threatening to swallow her. Since being unable to grasp the “now” endangers Nao, this suggests that if people don’t grasp the present, they are wasting time and losing the opportunity to better themselves and their lives. If people don’t mindfully use the present, they will be swallowed by time—in other words, they will have no control over it.

The idea that Nao is “now” expands on the novel’s theme that all human beings are “time beings” who exist in time and are constantly subject to change and impermanence. All people only exist in the “now,” even though many of them

are too preoccupied by the past. In this passage, Nao writes that the “now always felt especially [...] unreal,” since she is stuck in the past. According to Zen Master Dogen, only the “now” is real. However, it is difficult to grasp this idea and practice it, which is why the Nao finds the big fish, “NOW,” to be elusive. She also understands that the only way to save herself (or attain enlightenment) is to fully grasp and immerse herself in the present moment, even though it is difficult to do so.


## Part II, Chapter 1: Ruth Quotes

☹️ Every few hours, another horrifying piece of footage would break, and she would play it over and over, studying the wave as it surged over the tops of the seawalls, carrying ships down city streets, picking up cars and trucks and depositing them on the roofs of buildings. She watched whole towns get crushed and swept away in a matter of moments, and she was aware that while these moments were captured online, so many other moments simply vanished. [...]

But always, from the vantage point of the camera, you could see how fast the wave was traveling and how immense it was.

**Related Characters:** Ruth

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 112-113

### Explanation and Analysis

During the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011, Ruth watches footage of the event on the news. In the novel, waves symbolize change—and the tsunami, in particular, represents the idea that change can be vast and destructive. The images in this passage are of topsy-turvy, unfamiliar scenes—with ships on the streets and cars on the roofs of buildings—which emphasize that change can be disorienting and confusing, and that it often upsets people’s ideas of how life *should* be. The image of towns being “crushed and swept away in a matter of moments” also highlights how powerful change can be. To people, towns and cities seem immense and permanent, and yet the tsunami destroys these man-made structures in a matter of seconds. Compared to the immensity of the wave heading their way, people are “tiny” and don’t “stand a chance,” which shows that people are ineffective and powerless against change.

However, even as these immense changes occur, and lives and cities are destroyed, Ruth is aware that while some



moments were “captured online, so many other moments simply vanished.” While some of these events are reported in the news, most changes are so rapid that the larger world doesn’t have the chance to empathize and mourn for those who suffer. Additionally, news cycles are brief, and tragedies are quickly forgotten, which also highlights how quickly everything changes.

## Part II, Chapter 6: Nao Quotes

☹️ It’s the cold fish dying in your stomach feeling. You try to forget about it, but as soon as you do, the fish starts flopping around under your heart and reminds you that something truly horrible is happening.

Jiko felt like that when she learned that her only son was going to be killed in the war. [...] In fact, she said she had lots of fishes, [...] but the biggest fish of all belonged to Haruki #1, and it was more like the size of a whale. She also said that after she became a nun and renounced the world, she learned how to open up her heart so that the whale could swim away. I’m trying to learn how to do that, too.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Haruki #1 Yasutani, Ruth, Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 180

### Explanation and Analysis

Right before this section, Nao says that she will tell her friend, the reader, how to sit *zazen* (meditate) since this is an important part of Jiko’s Buddhist practice and helped Nao achieve her “superpower” of inner calm. In this passage, Nao uses the metaphor of a “cold fish dying in [her] stomach” to describe her visceral reaction to experiencing great sorrow and anxiety. This extreme discomfort is something she tries to treat by practicing *zazen*. For Nao, trying “to forget about” her troubles hasn’t helped. In fact, pretending to ignore her troubles only makes it worse: the fish moves up from her stomach and takes residence under her heart, where it starts “flopping around” and refuses to be ignored.

Jiko admits to Nao that she, too, has felt the extreme sorrow that Nao describes after her son, Haruki #1, died as a kamikaze pilot in World War II. Jiko’s sorrow took up residence under her heart, too, and she tells Nao it was as big as “a whale,” which emphasizes its enormity. Since Nao’s fish are uncomfortable enough for her, she realizes that Jiko’s whale must have been so much more painful. And yet, Jiko learned how to move past that weight and leave it



behind her by practicing *zazen* and other aspects of Zen Buddhism. Nao comes to see spiritual practice as a way of gaining power over her grief rather than letting her troubles control her, which is why she is eager to learn it. *Zazen* has practitioners focus on their breathing and on the present as a way to let go of the weight of the past.

This passage shows the close relationship between Nao and Jiko. Especially when compared to Nao's parents, who never discuss their troubles with Nao, Jiko respectfully treats Nao as an equal, even though Jiko is over 100 years old and Nao is a teenager. Jiko speaks freely to Nao about her own suffering and sorrows, and she makes an effort to give Nao advice and solutions, which shows her love and concern. Jiko also ensures that she connects with Nao by communicating in ways she'll understand. When Nao brings up the metaphor of the dying fish in her stomach to describe her pain, Jiko uses the same metaphor and expands on it by including the whale to describe the extent of her sorrow. Jiko's attempt at connection, by using the same images as Nao, shows that she's making the effort to show Nao that she is heard and valued.

changes in her life, and she keeps wishing that she could return to her happier past. However, Jiko wants to show Nao that it is impossible for her to stop change—time passes quickly, and Nao will only get frustrated and sad if she tries to resist this.



By having Nao battle the ocean and see how pointless it is to do it, Jiko shows her that accepting change is more pleasant than fighting it. Nao beats the waves with the stick until she's tired, and then she lies down in the ocean and lets "the waves wash over" her. She has stopped fighting it and instead immerses herself in it, realizing that it feels pleasant to do so. Also, she comes to understand that fighting the waves doesn't affect them at all—it only tires her out. Nao also imagines what might happen if she lets the waves take her out to sea. She imagines that she will be completely transformed, and some of these changes are indeed violent—"sharks would eat [her] limbs and organs"; and "fish would feed on her fingertips."


However, while Nao would be dead, she would also be a life source to the sea creatures, suggesting that the changes won't be all negative. The language and images that Nao uses emphasize the beauty of these changes. She describes her bones falling to the ocean floor but calls them "beautiful," showing that she recognizes the positive aspects of this transformation. She describes anemones growing on her bones, which could be a disconcerting image, but Nao tempers this by describing them as "flowers." When she describes her skull lying at the bottom of the ocean, Nao mentions that she will have pearls in her eye sockets, once again pointing out the uniqueness in what might otherwise be a terrifying image. Jiko seems to have successfully communicated to Nao that change is unstoppable, and also that there can be beauty in it even though it might seem frightening.

## Part II, Chapter 8: Nao Quotes

☹️ Over and over, I ran at the sea, beating it until I was so tired I could barely stand. And then the next time I fell down, I just lay there and let the waves wash over me, and I wondered what would happen if I stopped trying to get back up. Just let my body go. Would I be washed out to sea? The sharks would eat my limbs and organs. Little fish would feed on my fingertips. My beautiful white bones would fall to the bottom of the ocean, where anemones would grow upon them like flowers. Pearls would rest in my eye sockets.

**Related Characters:** Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker), Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 193

### Explanation and Analysis

Jiko takes Nao for a picnic on the beach and asks her to try "bullying a wave." In the novel, waves symbolize constant change, and by having Nao try to "bully the wave" by beating it with a stick, Jiko wants to illustrate to her that change cannot be stopped. Nao is struggling because of all the



## Part II, Chapter 9: Ruth Quotes

☹️ The Earthquake Catfish is not solely a malevolent fish, despite the havoc and calamity it can wreak. It has benevolent aspects as well. A subspecies of the Earthquake catfish is [...] World-Rectifying Catfish, which is able to heal the political and economic corruption in society by shaking things up. [...]

The World-Rectifying Catfish targeted the business class, the 1 percent [...].

The angry catfish would cause an earthquake, wreaking havoc and destruction, and in order to rebuild, the wealthy would have to let go of their assets, which would create jobs [...] for the working classes.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani, Jiko Yasutani, Oliver, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 198-199

### Explanation and Analysis

Ruth is explaining to Oliver how people in medieval Japan believed that a gigantic catfish that lived under the islands caused earthquakes when it wriggled. The people of Japan were keenly aware of the extreme destruction that earthquakes caused, and yet, they philosophically acknowledged that the “Earthquake Catfish [was] not solely [...] malevolent.” Elsewhere in the novel, Jiko illustrates to Nao that change is unstoppable by having her battle waves by beating them with a stick. After trying that experiment, Nao realizes that change is not only unstoppable and frightening but also that it can be beautiful and necessary. Nao’s realization parallels the ideas the medieval Japanese had about earthquakes, since they, too, perceived them as being destructive but also saw that they had some positive effects.

Medieval Japanese people called a subspecies of the Earthquake Catfish the “World-Rectifying Catfish,” implying that this catfish rectified or corrected injustices in the world by “shaking things up.” This idea acknowledges that change is often necessary to ensure justice for the disenfranchised—often, when people are treated unfairly, and power remains in the hands of the few, a big “shake up” is required to ensure fairness and equality. These changes will be unpleasant for a lot of people, but that doesn’t make them any less necessary or beneficial in the long term.

Medieval Japanese people also believed that the World-Rectifying Catfish targeted the richest and most powerful members of society, whom Ruth describes as “the 1 percent.” When there was an earthquake, these people had a lot to lose, since much of the property that was destroyed belonged to them. In order to rebuild, they were forced to hire people from the labor classes, which ensured the redistribution of wealth. While this didn’t discount the suffering and destruction caused by earthquakes, it makes the point that even scary or difficult changes often have positive effects as well.

## Part II, Chapter 13: Haruki #1’s Letters Quotes

☝☝ Choosing this death has various benefits associated with it. First, and most important, it guarantees a posthumous promotion of two ranks, which of course is meaningless, but it comes with a substantial increase in the pension paid to you upon my death. [...]

So that is one benefit, and it is practical. The other benefit is perhaps more philosophical. By volunteering to sortie, I have now regained a modicum of agency over the time remaining in my life. Death in a ground offensive or bombing attack seems random and imprecise. This death is not. It is pure, clean, and purposeful. I will be able to control and therefore appreciate, intimately and exactly, the moments leading up to my death.

**Related Characters:** Haruki #1 Yasutani (speaker), Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 256-257

### Explanation and Analysis

Haruki #1 decides to become a kamikaze pilot while training to fight in World War II, and he explains this decision in a letter to Jiko. He says his main reason for doing this is to make sure that Jiko gets more money after his death. This is evidence of Haruki #1’s love for his family, since he is even willing to die in order to ensure their financial stability. He also specifies that the “posthumous promotion” is “meaningless” to him, which shows that he is unimpressed by notions of pride and honor. Haruki #1 was forced to fight in the war even though he is a peace-loving young man, and war honors do not impress him. So, he makes it clear that he values these honors only for their practical aspect, which is more money for his family after his death.


Haruki #1 also likes the idea of gaining “a modicum of agency” over the rest of his life. He studied French and philosophy before he was forced to quit university and join the war effort—this decision was made for him by the government of the time. Even when he was a student, he had a great deal of anxiety about when he’d be forced to quit in order to become a soldier. As a result, Haruki #1 feels like he has no control over his life and is only waiting for the Japanese authorities to make decisions for him. This is another reason why he prefers the option of choosing how he will die rather than having that determined for him by someone else. Still, he acknowledges that he only has a “modicum,” or small amount, of choice in this matter, since he would prefer not to die at all but cannot choose that option.

Haruki #1 desires a “purposeful” death as a kamikaze pilot rather than a “random” one as a soldier who is killed in a ground offensive. As a kamikaze pilot, he would be aware of the exact moment that he will crash into the enemy and can therefore, he writes, “appreciate” the last few moments of his life. The novel continuously emphasizes the fleeting nature of life and the importance of every moment of time, and Haruki #1 is very aware of this. He knows that his death is fast approaching, so he knows that he’ll appreciate every moment of life he has left.

☛ Today during a test flight, I remembered Miyazawa Kenji's wonderful tale about the Crow Wars. [...] [As] I was soaring in formation at an altitude of two thousand meters, I recalled the Crow Captain lifting off from his honey locust tree, and taking to wing to do battle. *I am Crow!* I thought, ecstatically. The visibility was good, and since this was the very last of the special training flights, I flew in all directions to my heart's content.

**Related Characters:** Haruki #1 Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao's Father , Naoko “Nao” Yasutani, Ruth, Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 258

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is an excerpt from a letter that Haruki #1 writes to Jiko, in which he tells her that he feels moved by the beauty of literature as he prepares for his death. Miyazawa Kenji was a deeply spiritual Buddhist children's author whose works dealt with ethical themes. In the story Haruki #1 mentions, which is called “The Great Bear of the Crows,” the Crow Captain wages battle with another crow. However, after winning against his enemy, the Crow Captain is sad about the other crow's death and ends up wishing that there would be no more senseless fighting. The Crow Captain says that he would even give up his life if it would mean ending wars in the future.

Haruki #1 writes that he feels like he is the Crow Captain, since he loves to fly—and, just like the bird in the story, he's off to battle. However, Haruki #1 seems to imply to Jiko that, just like the Crow Captain, he's distraught over having to kill his enemy. Meanwhile, in his secret diary, he writes that he plans to fly his plane into the ocean, so that he won't

have to kill anyone. He can't write this in his letter to Jiko, which might be opened and read by his officers, but Haruki #1 seems to be hinting to her that he, like the Crow Captain, would give up his life rather than cause any more violence. Haruki #1 and Jiko both read a lot, and Haruki #1 probably hopes that Jiko will understand him because she, too, will be familiar with the story he is referring to. The boorish officers who might read his letter, on the other hand, would not understand his hidden meaning.

Decades later, the Jungle Crow that shows up outside Ruth's is a supernatural spirit animal. It guides her across time and geographical space to communicate with Haruki and save Nao's life. In this passage, when Haruki #1 writes that he is Crow and that he loves to fly, the implication seems to be that it is his spirit that shows up as the Jungle Crow and helps Ruth save the lives of Haruki #1's nephew and grand-niece.

## Part III, Chapter 3: Nao Quotes

☛ [...] I climbed up on [my chair] and then onto my desk, and I stood there, tall and straight. Then, when everybody was looking, I flipped back my hoodie.

A gasp went around the room that sent shivers up my spine. The supapawa of my bald and shining head radiated through the classroom and out into the world, a bright bulb, a beacon, beaming light into every crack of darkness on the earth and blinding all my enemies. I put my fists on my hips and watched them tremble, holding up their arms to shield their eyes from my unbearable brightness. I opened my mouth and a piercing cry broke from my throat like an eagle, shaking the earth and penetrating into every corner of the universe. I watched my classmates press their hands over their ears, and saw the blood run through their fingers as their eardrums shattered.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 287-288

### Explanation and Analysis

After Nao's classmates attempt to rape her and record it on video, also steal her panties to auction on the internet, Nao stops going to school. In this passage, she has shaved her head and returns to her school one last time to show her classmates her bald head. By shaving her head, Nao aspires to be like her great-grandmother, Jiko, who is a Buddhist

nun and has a shaved head as part of her spiritual practice, since nuns are supposed to distance themselves from worldly matters like beauty and sexuality. Since Nao sees her own gender and sexuality as a reason for her abuse and humiliation, she probably feels that discarding her long hair (which is a sign of her femininity) will save her from similar situations in the future. Also, she finds Jiko to be wise and enlightened, which is why she feels that shaving her head like Jiko will empower her.

This is why Nao sees her bald head as a superpower, or “supapawa,” as she writes it, imitating the way that Jiko pronounces the word. Jiko had taught Nao to practice *zazen* (Buddhist meditation), describing it as a superpower since it will help her stay focused in the present moment and also help her to move beyond her troubles. During the attempted rape, Nao was very distressed at first and then practiced *zazen* to calm herself down. *Zazen* isn’t a “superpower” in the sense that it helped her defeat her abusers, but it did help her to endure those horrible moments. However, in this passage, Nao describes herself as being very like the traditional superheroes of comic books. Even her pose—putting her “fists on [her] hips”—is one that traditional superheroes strike as they survey the world below from high cliffs or the tops of buildings. Nao has also climbed onto her desk and is looking down at her classmates from a height.


Nao describes herself as being a powerful, intimidating figure and writes that her “enemies” “trembled” in her presence and that their ears started bleeding because of how loudly Nao screamed. Clearly, much of this is imagination or wishful thinking on Nao’s part. Her classmates might have been surprised by her shaved head and her behavior, but they were certainly not cowering in her presence or blinded by the brightness of Nao’s bald head. Nao has been horribly bullied by her classmates and wants to hurt them in return, so she seems to wish that she could blind them with her brightness or have their eardrums shatter by screaming so loudly. Nao wants to protest against their terrible behavior, and she successfully does this. However, she still doesn’t have any real power over them and can only fantasize that she does. Nao knows that *zazen* is no match for the violence of the world—but for this moment, she allows herself to believe that it is.

☞ The pale scorpion used its pincers to flip the staghorn beetle into the air. The beetle reared up and fell over on his back, exposing his underside. The scorpion’s segmented tail curled over to deliver its venomous sting. [...] *Yellow Scorpion stings!* The staghorn beetle shuddered. In the small, bare terrarium, he had no place to hide. His spindly legs writhed and flailed in the air, until they didn’t anymore. *It looks like Staghorn Beetle is the loser, yes, he’s dying, he’s dying, he’s... DEAD!*

Neon-colored titles flashed across the screen. *Yellow Scorpion Wins!*

I started to cry.

**Related Characters:** Naoko “Nao” Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao’s Father, Babette

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 291

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nao and Babette go shopping together in Akiba, Nao walks by a DVD shop playing a reality show called *Bug Wars*, and this moves Nao to tears. Nao didn’t cry when her father, Haruki, attempted to kill himself, nor did she cry even when her classmates tried to rape her. Still, watching these bugs tear each other apart makes her cry, which makes it a puzzling moment in the novel.

The clue to unraveling the weight of this moment is that Nao associates Haruki with the staghorn beetle, since he once won a prize at an origami contest for making this beetle out of paper. Nao sees this as one of Haruki’s few victories, since he has otherwise been beaten down by life. He was fired from his high-paying Silicon Valley job, could not find employment in Japan, and did not even succeed in committing suicide. More recently, when Nao’s classmates stole her panties from her and listed them for sale on an auction website, Haruki bid on them using the screen name “C.imperator.” He did so in an attempt to prevent sexual predators from buying the panties, but he lost the auction because he did not have enough money. Even though Haruki didn’t tell Nao that he was bidding on the panties, she deduced that it was him because she recognized that his screen name was a short form of the Latin name for the staghorn beetle—*Cyclomatus imperator*. After he lost this auction, Haruki was so ashamed of his failure that he tried to kill himself again—and, again, he didn’t succeed.

Even though Nao never spoke to Haruki about all this, she must have been moved by Haruki’s attempt to prevent a



pervert from buying her panties, and she shared Haruki's hurt at his many failures. In the *Bug Wars* segment that she watches, the staghorn beetle doesn't seem to stand a chance against its bigger, more vicious opponent. To Nao, this must seem like an apt metaphor for Haruki's struggles. While the staghorn beetle "writhed and flailed" its legs pathetically as it died, the voiceover in the show seems very upbeat and excited about the insect's suffering. The voiceover joyfully proclaims that the beetle is "the loser" and that he is dead, and this must remind Nao of how she almost lost her beloved father for the second time. However, the world seems to have no sympathy for Haruki, which mirrors the commentator's callousness to the beetle's predicament. This probably strikes Nao as being similar to how the world perceives Haruki—and by extension, Nao, who sees herself as a loser like him.

### Part III, Chapter 5: Nao Quotes

☝ We had a couple more dates after that, and we always did it the same way, with me wearing his suit. Once, I made him put on my school uniform, but he looked so ridiculous with his knobbly knees sticking out from under the pleats that I got angry and wanted to hit him, so I did. I was wearing his beautiful Armani, which is a cruel suit, and he stood passively in front of me, wearing my skirt and my sailor blouse, and kept his eyes fixed on the floor. His passive attitude made me even angrier, and the madder I got, the harder I wanted to hit him. [...] I thought maybe I would have to kill him. But the next time my hand came toward him, he caught my wrist.

"Enough," he said. "You're only hurting yourself."

**Related Characters:** Haruki #1 Yasutani, Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker), Babette, Ryu

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 301-302

#### Explanation and Analysis

Nao's "friend" Babette turns out to be a pimp who pressures Nao to become a prostitute. Nao goes on a first "date," or encounter, with a man named Ryu, and she meets up with him for sex a few more times after this. Nao ends up dressing up as Ryu when they have sex, just like she did on their first date. The first time they had sex, she was nervous and sad about what she was doing, but she'd worn Ryu's clothes and felt empowered and had enjoyed sex with him. This suggests that Nao feels weak and victimized because of

her gender. When she takes off her clothes, she feels like she slips off her femininity—and she takes on Ryu's masculinity with his clothes. Then, Nao feels powerful and worthy, which is why she enjoys having sex while dressed as a man. Nao had been bullied and sexually abused at school, with Nao's classmates trying to rape her and make a video about it. She sees her gender as being responsible for her victimhood and appreciates the chance to discard it.

Nao says that she once "made [Ryu] put on [her] school uniform," which shows that she truly felt powerful when they were together—she could "make" Ryu do things. She describes his suit as being a "cruel" suit, which once again shows that she saw it as a symbol of power, since cruelty implies power over others. In contrast, Nao sees Ryu as being "ridiculous" and "passive" in her school uniform, which is probably how she usually perceives herself. Nao feels extremely angry when she sees Ryu dressed up as herself. She is able to externalize her self-derision and her anger at her own helplessness and victimhood, which she sees as being "pathetic." Ryu recognizes this when he tells Nao that she is only "hurting [her]self" when she hits him.

Nao's anger at herself is so extreme that she wants to hit Ryu hard enough to "kill him." This hints at her reasons for planning to commit suicide: she sees herself as an exasperatingly "passive" person for not struggling against her aggressors and not bearing her troubles with more strength. Earlier, she admired her great-uncle Haruki #1's stoicism and courage as he endured his own troubles with dignity. In contrast, she sees herself as pathetic; her hatred for herself explains her desire to die.

☝ It wasn't that I wasn't grateful to her. I really was. She was my only friend, and if I couldn't hang out at Fifi's Lonely Apron, where could I go? My home life was a disaster. Mom [...] was killing herself working overtime. Dad [...] was depressed like I've never seen him before, like he'd finally and truly lost all interest in being alive. He avoided any contact with me and Mom, which is a trick in a small two-room apartment. [...] [S]ometimes, if I happened to pass him in the narrow hallway and catch his eye, his face would twitch and start to crumple with the weight of his shame, and I had to turn my head away because I couldn't bear to see it.

**Related Characters:** Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao's Father, Babette, Tomoko / Nao's Mother

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 303-304

### Explanation and Analysis

Right before this passage, Nao refuses to go on more “dates”, or sexual encounters with men, and Babette tells her that she would then have to stop hanging around at the café. Nao tries to protest against Babette’s manipulation of her, but she’s shut down by Babette’s anger and by the threat that Babette, too, will abandon her.

Nao’s loneliness is caused by her lack of communication with her parents, who seem to have failed as her caretakers. Since Nao’s “home life was a disaster,” she feels completely abandoned and alone. This seems to make her fear that her “only friend,” Babette, might abandon her too—and Nao desperately wants to cling to their friendship. Babette made a few gestures of kindness to Nao, only because she wanted to recruit Nao as one of her sex workers in her compensated dating operation. Nao’s extreme loneliness and desperation for companionship made her a gullible and willing victim. If she’d had a support system, she would likely have been able to walk away from this dangerous situation.

Nao also notices that her father, Haruki, has changed significantly since he’s “truly lost all interest in being alive.” Nao seems worried by this change. Earlier, Haruki was a recluse, but Nao enjoyed coming home from school and spending time with him every evening. Now, he shuns companionship and ignores Nao, which makes Nao feel even more lonely and rejected. However, Nao is perceptive and notices that Haruki, too, is struggling “with the weight of shame.” She still cares about him and can’t bear to witness his pain. Nao is worried that he might kill himself—successfully this time—and these worries are an additional reason why she feels lonely and stressed out.

## Part III, Chapter 7: Haruki #1’s Secret French Diary Quotes

☝ I have written to you of my decision to die. Here is what I did not tell you. [...] [T]he ticking of the clock is the only sound I am able to hear now. Second by second, minute by minute...tick, tick, tick...the small, dry sounds fill every crevice of silence. [...] [M]y being is attuned only to one thing, the relentless rhythm of time, marching toward my death.

If I could only smash the clock and stop time from advancing! [...] I can almost feel the sturdy metal body crumpling beneath my hands, the glass fracturing, the case cracking open, my fingers digging into the guts, spilling springs and delicate gearing. But no, there is no [...] way of stopping time, and so I lie here, paralyzed, listening to the last moments of my life tick by.

I don’t want to die, Maman! I don’t want to die!

**Related Characters:** Haruki #1 Yasutani (speaker), Naoko “Nao” Yasutani, Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 322

### Explanation and Analysis

In Haruki #1’s Secret French Diary, his attitude toward his impending death is very different from his stoic letters to Jiko. Since he can be honest about how he really feels in his diary, Haruki #1 reveals his dread that with every passing moment, he is getting closer to death. The novel’s central theme is that life is fleeting and that everyone should make good use of the time they have. With Haruki #1’s approaching death, he becomes hyper-aware of this—“the relentless rhythm of time” that is heading toward death. Haruki #1 knows that he’ll die soon, but the book emphasizes that with each tick of the clock, *everyone* is getting closer to death. This is why people should make conscious use of each moment of time.



Previously, Jiko described Haruki #1 to Nao as being a good-humored, peace-loving man. However, in this passage, he expresses a desire to stop time by likening time to a person that he would like to murder with his bare hands. He wants to feel the clock’s body “crumpling” in his hands and the glass “fracturing,” as if it had bones. He wants to feel his fingers “digging into the guts” of the clock to rip apart its “delicate gearing.” This violence from an otherwise peaceful young man shows the level of desperation he feels to stop time and his approaching death.


Haruki #1's extreme anxiety is obvious in his final sentence in which he says, "I don't want to die, Maman!" He sounds like a desperate, fearful child rather than the brave, stoic man he tries to be in his official letters. And since he confesses this to Jiko, it also shows the close relationship between them. Haruki #1 hopes that, after his death, Jiko will read his secret diary and know his innermost thoughts; he does not hide his vulnerabilities and insecurities from her.

### Part III, Chapter 9: Nao Quotes

☝ Making the decision to end my life really helped me lighten up, and suddenly all the stuff my old Jiko had told me about the time being really kicked into focus. There's nothing like realizing that you don't have much time left to stimulate your appreciation for the moments of your life. I mean it sounds corny, but I started to really experience stuff for the first time, like the beauty of the plum and cherry blossoms [...]. I spent whole days [...] wandering up and down these long, soft tunnels of pink clouds and gazing overhead at the fluffy blossoms [...]. Everything was perfect. When a breeze blew, petals rained down on my upturned face, and I stopped and gasped, stunned by the beauty and sadness.

**Related Characters:** Haruki #1 Yasutani , Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 332

#### Explanation and Analysis

Just like Haruki #1 began to realize how quickly time passed by after he realized that his death was imminent, Nao realizes how fleeting life is after she makes the decision to commit suicide. However, their attitudes toward this are very different. Haruki #1 was desperate not to die—and, as a result, the ticking of the clock made him anxious since he dreamed of stopping time to prolong his life. In contrast, Nao feels like her decision to kill herself helped her to "lighten up," and she now appreciates the moments she has. Nao has decided to end her own life, while Haruki #1 had no choice in the matter, and this makes a big difference in how

they feel about the life they have left. Haruki #1 loves life, while Nao struggles with hers. The notion that it will end soon fills Haruki #1 with dread, while Nao feels "light," since she knows she will not have to live through her pain for much longer. As a result, she is able to appreciate life and enjoy her final moments.

Nao mentions that she enjoys looking at the plum and cherry blossoms, which are a symbol of fleeting life and beauty. She describes the striking beauty of these flowers overhead as she walks under them, but also says that she is "stunned by the beauty and sadness" as the petals rain down in the breeze. In Japan, plum and cherry blossoms bloom in spring, but the flowers have a very short life span. A few weeks after they are in bloom, the flowers die, which Japanese people believe represents the fleeting nature of beauty and life. As the flowers die and are blown down from the trees, they rain down in a lovely shower of petals. Just as Nao sees sadness and beauty in the flowers' demise, she thinks that her own death might share these qualities too. Though she will no longer exist, she will also escape the pain of living, which she sees as a positive.

☝ But the fact is, you're a lie. You're just another stupid story I made up out of thin air because I was lonely and needed someone to spill my guts to. I wasn't ready to die yet and needed a *raison d'être*. I shouldn't be mad at you but I am! Because now you're letting me down, too.

The fact is, I'm all alone.

[...] Everyone I believed in is dying. My old Jiko is dying, my dad is probably already dead by now, and I don't even believe in myself anymore.

**Related Characters:** Naoko "Nao" Yasutani (speaker), Haruki Yasutani / Nao's Father , Ruth, Jiko Yasutani

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 340

#### Explanation and Analysis

As Nao is waiting at the train station on her way to see Jiko, she feels hopeless as she realizes the depth of her loneliness. She not only feels that all the people in her life have lied to her or abandoned her, but that her reader, too, is "a lie." Nao admits that she only invented her reader because she didn't want to die. This is the first time Nao admits this—until this point, she had always said that she

was looking forward to the end of her life. However, her writing, and her imagined reader, stoked her desire to live despite her pain and suffering. This sends the message that life is beautiful despite its ugliness.

Nao says that her reader (Ruth) is a “story she made up out of thin air,” which describes every story ever written. In this moment of loneliness, Nao says that her reader isn’t even real—in other words, she worries that her writing won’t find a reader and that her story will fade away unread. Since the novel is metafictional (self-referential as a work of fiction) and comments on the writing process, Nao’s anxieties as a writer mirror the worries that many writers have that their stories will go unread, and that their efforts will be in vain. Nao wanted her diary to live on after she was gone, which was her attempt at some sort of permanence in a world in which everything fades. This seems to be a comment on the nature of writing since all writers hope that their works will endure. However, in this moment of self-doubt, Nao loses faith that she will ever have a reader, which convinces her that her life is completely worthless.

Nao’s loneliness is even more amplified in this moment because Jiko is on her deathbed, and Haruki has gone off to attempt suicide once again. With this final collapse of her remaining support system, Nao doesn’t “believe in [herself] anymore.” This sentence can be read as having a double meaning: not only has Nao lost faith in herself, but she also implies that she no longer believes she exists. She has even given up on writing her beloved diary and has lost all will to live. Nao seems to have made up her mind to die, since she is losing everything that made her life meaningful.

## Part IV, Chapter 2: Ruth Quotes

☛ “[M]y theory is that this crow from Nao’s world came here to lead you into the dream so you could change the end of her story. Her story was about to end one way, and you intervened, which set up the conditions for a different outcome. [...]”

[...]

“I see. So what’s your second theory?”


“[...] That it’s your doing. It’s not about Nao’s now. It’s about yours. You haven’t caught up with yourself yet, the now of *your* story, and you can’t reach her ending until you do.”

Ruth thought about this. “You’re right,” she said. “I don’t like it. I don’t like having that much agency over someone else’s narrative.”

Muriel laughed. “That’s a fine way for a novelist to talk!”

**Related Characters:** Ruth, Muriel (speaker), Naoko “Nao” Yasutani

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 376-377

### Explanation and Analysis

Ruth tells Muriel how the words in Nao’s diary disappeared and how she had a strange dream in which she met some of the people Nao wrote about, and that this caused the words to reappear. Muriel gives Ruth two possible reasons that she thinks this might have happened. Through this character’s words, Ruth Ozeki (the author of the novel) seems to explain her intent for how she thinks readers could interpret these supernatural events.

Muriel’s first theory is significant since it brings up the theme of connections between the characters that transcend space and time. Though many characters in the novel, including Nao and Ruth, feel misunderstood and isolated, the novel shows that these characters are metaphysically connected. Even though they are separated by space and time, their stories are linked, which is why Ruth can enter time and change the course of Nao’s life. This also highlights the Zen Buddhist notion that all creatures share an inexplicable connectedness.

Muriel’s second theory explores the theme of communication, and by extension, the link between writers and their readers. While Nao is the author of her diary, and Ruth is her engrossed reader, Muriel suggests that Ruth might, in fact, be the writer of Nao’s story. This would change how the novel’s readers see the events that led up to this. Ruth “finds” Nao’s diary, which could be a metaphor for how an author chances upon a character she finds interesting. Ruth spends a lot of time online, trying to unravel the mystery of Nao’s life, which could be seen as her doing authorial research to build a story. Since Ruth is stuck with her plot, the words of the diary go blank, and as Muriel says, Ruth needs to “[catch] up with herself,” since she can’t reach the end of Nao’s story unless she figures out what to write next.

Ruth has been portrayed as a writer who is wasting her time on a project—a memoir—that she doesn’t enjoy or believe in. Here, she admits to Muriel that she isn’t writing a novel because she is nervous about “having that much agency” over her characters’ lives. However, this passage suggests that Ruth needs to accept her responsibility as a novelist and make good use of her time by completing the novel. This, Muriel implies, is Ruth’s job as a novelist.





## Part IV, Chapter 4: Ruth Quotes

☛☛ *To study the self is to forget the self.* Maybe if you sat enough zazen, your sense of being a solid, singular self would dissolve and you could forget about it. What a relief. You could just hang out happily as part of an open-ended quantum array.

[...]

Had Dogen figured all this out? He'd written these words many centuries before quantum mechanics [.]

**Related Characters:** Zen Master Dogen, Oliver, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 398-399

### Explanation and Analysis

After Oliver explains some of the principles of quantum mechanics to Ruth—especially the idea that subatomic particles can exist in several places at once—Ruth begins to wonder at the similarities between this idea and Dogen's Zen Buddhist teachings. This connection between spirituality and science reinforces the connection between all things in the universe. It also defends the inexplicable,

supernatural events of the novel, because Ruth seems to be saying that just because something can't be explained doesn't make it unimportant or untrue. Quantum mechanics, which is a branch of science, comes with its own mysteries, just like Ruth's adventures with Nao's diary.

Dogen's quotes, in italics, have always puzzled Ruth, but they seem to make sense to her as she approaches them through the lens of quantum mechanics. Dogen always recommends sitting *zazen* (meditating) and focusing on the importance of each moment, but he says that the ultimate goal of *zazen* is to “forget the self.” Ruth interprets this as a dissolution of the boundaries that separate oneself from the rest of the universe. If one succeeds in dissolving one's sense of self, Ruth thinks that perhaps one can be like a subatomic particle and exist in many places at once. She sees this idea as a link between Zen Buddhism and quantum mechanics. Ruth suggests that Dogen already knew these things even though he lived “many centuries before quantum mechanics.” Since Ruth travels through time in a strange dream, she would see Dogen's anachronistic knowledge of the principles of quantum mechanics as being surprising but not impossible.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART I: EPIGRAPH

In a quote from Zen Master Dogen's *Shōbōgenzō* or *The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, Dogen writes that the "time being" can be "standing on the tallest mountaintop" or "moving on the deepest ocean floor." The "time being" can be "a demon with three heads and eight arms" or "the golden sixteen foot body of the buddha."

*Dogen uses opposites to describe what a "time being" is. Later, the reader learns that a "time being" is a being that exists in time—and the fleeting and constantly changing natural of time means that a time being is impermanent. In this excerpt, Dogen says that everything—whether a god or a demon, a mountain or an ocean floor—is fleeting.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 1: NAO

(1) Writing in her diary, Nao greets her reader and introduces herself as a "time being," which she explains is "someone who lives in time." She says that this would include everyone who's ever existed or will ever exist. Nao is writing all this in her diary while she sits in a French-maid-themed café in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad song. The song is playing sometime in the reader's past, which is Nao's present. Nao says that she wonders about who her reader might be, and she is curious if her reader wonders about her too.

*Like Dogen in the Epigraph, Nao stresses that every creature is a "time being." Since everything exists "in time," and time passes, this means that everyone and everything is impermanent. Nao already seems to trust her reader with her deepest thoughts and views them as a confidant. This suggests that the reader-writer relationship can be just as meaningful (if not more so) as an intimate, face-to-face relationship. The connection between the reader and writer also seems to transcend time, since Nao is aware that her present is in her reader's past.*



Nao writes that by the time her reader reads these pages, "everything will be different," since her diary contains her last days of life. She says it's okay if the reader decides to stop reading, but if he or she continues, then the reader and Nao will "make magic."

*Again, Nao refers to change and impermanence when she says that "everything will be different" when her reader reads her diary. Nao seems to have decided that she will be dead by this time—which is a big change and an acknowledgement of Nao's own impermanence. Nao hasn't specified whether or not she's going to commit suicide, though her belief that she's going to die soon seems to allude to this. Nao also thinks that if she has found the right kind of reader for her diary, then they will "make magic" together, which refers to the possibility of deep (and perhaps metaphysical) connection between a reader and a writer.*



(2) Nao writes that her reader must think she's dumb for writing what she did in her previous entry. She admits that she would think this too. Nao notes that a man at the café has begun to stare at her, which she thinks is creepy. Nao is wearing her junior high school uniform and can tell the man has a fetish for young schoolgirls.

However, Nao says that "everything changes, and anything is possible," so she might change her mind about this man. Perhaps he might say something beautiful to Nao, and she might want to go out with him despite his plainness. They might check into a love hotel, where the man might end up raping Nao and choking her to death. Or perhaps the man might ask Nao to strangle him with her panties. Nao writes that none of these things might happen except in her mind and the reader's, since together, she and the reader are "making magic, at least for the time being."

(3) In her diary, Nao apologizes for what she wrote about the man at the café. She doesn't want her reader to think she's "a nasty girl or a hentai" (a sexual pervert). She hopes that the reader isn't a *hentai* either—a *hentai* would find Nao's diary disappointing, since her writing won't be overly sexual.

Before Nao dies, she wants to tell someone the life story of her 104-year-old great-grandmother, Jiko. This is what Nao's diary will contain. Jiko is a Zen Buddhist nun. She was a novelist, an anarchist, and "a feminist who had plenty of lovers, both males and females, but she was never kinky or nasty." Nao says that the biography she will write about Jiko will be factual and empowering to women.

*While Nao's words are observant and thought-provoking, she tends to be very critical of herself, which shows that she is insecure and has low self-esteem. Though Nao hasn't yet explained why she is planning to kill herself, this entry suggests that her low sense of self-worth might be one of the reasons. Meanwhile, the presence of the leering man in the café hints that there's underlying danger in Nao's life—just because Nao is young doesn't mean the world around her is innocent.*



*Nao's acknowledgment that "everything changes" means that everything is fleeting. Meanwhile, even as Nao ponders the possibility of being attracted to the man, her fantasy takes a dark turn into sexual abuse and murder. Nao is a vulnerable young woman—violence and death seem inseparable even from her fantasies. This suggests that she might have experienced something that make her assume the worst in people. Nao once again mentions that she and her reader are "making magic," since they are sharing the same fantasies and ideas—the reader has the privilege of peeking into the writer's mind. Nao concludes by acknowledging that the deep connection she shares with her reader is also only "for the time being"—like everything else, it is temporary.*



*Nao seems disgusted by the hentais (perverts) she encounters. This is why she wants to ensure that her reader doesn't put her in the same category as the hentais who victimize her.*



*Nao makes it clear that she thinks sex can be empowering and fun if it is consensual—like the kind of sex that Jiko had, which wasn't "nasty." Nao dislikes the kind of perverted, "kinky" sex practiced by hentais, and she wants to dissociate herself from this.*



(4) Nao writes that it is important to have clear goals in life, especially if you're going to die soon. She confides in the reader that she isn't going to be alive for long, even though she's only 16 and hasn't accomplished anything. Nao is going to "drop out of time," and she says that maybe she and the reader can count her last moments together.

*Nao reveals that she is very young (just 16), and that she will die soon. Again, though she doesn't directly admit that she is planning to kill herself, this is heavily implied. Since a "time being" exists in time, Nao uses the phrase "drop out of time" to describe death—she suggests that after death, one is no longer part of time. To Nao, whose death is around the corner, every moment is precious, since she doesn't have too many left. Her reader and confidant is now so important to her that Nao wants to count down her last moments with them.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 2: RUTH

(1) Ruth sees a glint under some tangled kelp on the beach. She pokes the kelp with a stick, untangles it, and sees a plastic freezer bag encrusted with barnacles. Ruth isn't surprised, since the ocean is full plastic trash; she thinks that this bag must have been in the ocean for a long time. She decides to take it home to throw it out.

*Given that Ruth's narrative is presented alongside Nao's, the reader can infer that there will be some kind of connection between these two characters. Ruth's discovery of the plastic freezer bag that washed up on her beach is a complete matter of chance—or of destiny—and it may connect to Nao in some way.*



(2) Later, Ruth is cooking dinner when her husband, Oliver, spots the plastic freezer bag she found on the beach. Ruth meant to throw it in the trash, but she forgot and left it on their porch. Ruth asks Oliver not to bring the dirty bag into the house, but he is very curious about it. Oliver discovers a Hello Kitty lunch box inside the freezer bag; he says that there is something inside the box, and he opens it immediately.

*Again, this passage is full of coincidences that lead to Ruth discovering the contents of the Hello Kitty lunch box. If she had already thrown the bag in the trash, or if Oliver had listened to her and not brought it inside, Ruth would have missed out on whatever the box contains.*



(3) Oliver neatly lays out the contents of the lunch box on the kitchen table. There is a small stack of letters written in Japanese, a bound book with a faded red cover, and an antique **watch** with a Japanese engraving etched into the back. Ruth cannot read a single word of the Japanese letters, since the handwriting is old and cursive. She says that the etchings on the back of the watch are Japanese numbers. Ruth picks up the red book and reads the French title, which is *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a novel by Marcel Proust.

*The old watch inside the lunch box is a symbol of passing time, and it will reappear later in the novel to remind Ruth of this fact. The English translation of Proust's novel is *In Search of Lost Time*, which also connects to the idea that time passes quickly and is lost—and that people need to be aware of this and live every moment mindfully. Ruth also tries to read the Japanese letters, but she fails. Still, this is that she knows some Japanese and probably has some cultural connection to Japan, which is where Nao lives. For this reason, it seems like destiny that the contents of the lunch box made their way to Ruth, since she seems like the right person to receive them.*



(4) Ruth is a novelist, and she and Oliver both like books. She comments that she has never read Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and Oliver says that he hasn't either, but that he wouldn't try to read it in French. Ruth agrees and opens the book to look at the first few lines. She is shocked to see the page covered in "adolescent purple handwriting" instead of the old printed pages she was expecting.

*This is another instance in which a chance action leads to a surprising discovery. Ruth can't read French—but, in any case, she happens to open the book with the French cover even though she has no plans to read it. If she hadn't opened it, she would have never discovered the writing inside. The "adolescent purple handwriting" heavily implies that this book is Nao's diary.*



(5) As Ruth stares in confusion at the writing in the book, she sees that most of the words are in English, with a few Japanese words interspersed between them. She feels "the writer's presence" in the words, and she guesses that the purple handwriting belongs to a teenage girl. Ruth thinks that the book must be a diary of some kind and is curious about it, so she begins reading Nao's words.

*The diary Ruth found is indeed Nao's—her chance finding of this book further imbues the connection between the two characters as somehow predestined. Ruth feels an immediate bond between herself and Nao, the writer, as soon as she looks at Nao's handwriting. Ruth feels Nao's "presence" in her words and accurately guesses her age and gender. This seems to be evidence of the "magic" that Nao hoped to create between herself and her reader.*



(6) Oliver says that the lunch box that floated up on the beach was probably flotsam. Ruth is reading the diary and doesn't want to be disturbed, so she dismissively says that it is either flotsam or, more likely, jetsam. Oliver clarifies that flotsam is "accidental" stuff that is found floating on the sea, while jetsam has been "jettisoned." He says that Ruth is right that the contents of the freezer bag are probably jetsam. Picking up the lunch box, Oliver says that scientists predicted that all the stuff that the Japanese tsunami washed away would end up on the coastline of their little island. He thinks that it has started to appear earlier than expected.

*Oliver's theory that the lunch box was jettisoned during the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 ends up causing Ruth a great deal of worry for Nao's safety and well-being. Also, this theory builds on the idea that it was a very fortunate—and even magical—coincidence that the lunch box made its way all the way from Japan to Ruth's Canadian island.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 3: NAO

(1) In her diary, Nao wonders where she should start, since she has so much to say. She says that when she texted Jiko this question, Jiko replied, "You should start where you are." So, Nao takes her advice and begins describing Fifi's Lovely Apron, the French maid café she's in. The café is rather deserted, and the waitresses are standing around looking disappointed in the quality of their clientele.

*Jiko's answer to Nao's question emphasizes the importance of the present moment, since she tells Nao to begin where she is—not in her past. Nao is sitting in a French maid café, a place that markets the sexual fetishization of French maids. This seems like a surprising—and potentially dangerous—place for a young teenager to hang out in. This perhaps implies that Nao has experienced things that have desensitized her to this highly sexualized environment.*



The café is too expensive, and Nao says that she is lucky that her waitress friend Babette gives her free coffee. Babette has told Nao that there was a time when the café was very popular, with a line of people waiting to get in. However, the French maid fad is over now, which is why there are hardly any customers here. Nao always finds a quiet table here, so she thinks she should rename it “Fifi’s Lonely Apron.”

(2) Nao writes that Jiko really enjoys it when Nao tells her details about modern life, since Jiko has renounced civilization and lives in a temple in the mountains. Nao tells Jiko everything, even about the schoolgirls who get raped and murdered. Jiko understands that “shit happens,” and she says blessings for the “girls and the perverts and all the beings who are suffering in the world.” Nao writes that it is Jiko’s job to pray, since she is a nun, and that Nao gives her a lot to pray about.

When Jiko was ordained, she took a vow “to save all beings,” which meant that “she agreed not to become enlightened until all the other beings in this world get enlightened.” Nao thought of this as Jiko letting everyone go before her in an elevator. When she told Jiko that it would take forever for Jiko to get on the elevator, Jiko told her that this meant she and Nao should try even harder, but Nao refused to help her. Jiko had looked at her like she was saying a blessing for Nao. This made Nao feel safe, so she didn’t mind. Nao realizes that she never asked Jiko where the elevator goes, so she texts her the question.

(3) Nao writes that she hopes her reader wasn’t disappointed when he or she found Nao’s diary inside the cover of Marcel Proust’s book. She says that “some nasty stuff” has been happening in her life; on the day she bought the diary, she skipped school and went shopping to try and cheer herself up. The French cover of the diary is an “excellent security feature,” since her classmates wouldn’t realize that it’s actually a diary. If they did, they might steal it from her and post her writing online, since they have been bullying her. Nao says that she didn’t really know what the French title of the book—*A la recherche du temps perdu*—meant, but that she chose it because “French is cool and sophisticated feeling.”

*The transformation of the café’s “French maid fad” from trendy to unpopular highlights the idea that change is constant. It also clues readers in to the fact that sexual fetishes and deviancy are commonplace where Nao lives; something like a French maid fetish is seen as a lighthearted fad.*



*Nao and Jiko clearly have a close relationship—even though they are separated by age and lifestyle, Nao feels free to communicate freely with Jiko. She even tells Jiko about graphic sexual violence. Nao’s use of “shit happens” to describe tragedies like this imply that she’s become desensitized to violence, perhaps because she’s experienced it herself. None of this shocks Jiko either, since her spiritual practice stresses universal love and acceptance. Jiko not only loves and accepts Nao but also includes the “perverts” in her prayers, which shows that her love encompasses all beings—an important tenet of Buddhism.*



*Nao felt free to disagree with Jiko, knowing that Jiko’s love for her would never change. Jiko’s complete acceptance of Nao makes Nao feel safe, which encourages her to tell Jiko exactly what’s on her mind. Jiko’s unrelenting love for the world, which is part of her spiritual practice as a nun, is the reason she has taken her vow to let “all the other beings in this world get enlightened” before her. This self-sacrifice and all-encompassing love seems to be the reason Nao finds it easy to communicate with Jiko.*



*Previously, Nao has described the hentais (sexual perverts) as being “nasty,” so her use of this word once again suggests that the difficulties she’s experiencing might have a sexual element to them. Meanwhile, Nao didn’t know that the French title on the cover of the diary she picked translated to “In Search of Lost Time,” which seems especially apt for her meditations on time and impermanence. This is yet another fortunate coincidence.*



(4) Nao wants to write “something worthwhile” in her diary, so that she can “leave something real behind.” She feels like she doesn’t know much that’s “real”—she is leading a vapid life, just like everyone else around her. The only person who is different is Jiko, since she is the only one who doesn’t waste time. Nao wonders if wasted time is lost forever. If it is, that doesn’t mean a person gets to die any sooner—that requires “taking matters into your own hands.”

*Nao’s self-derision comes across clearly in this passage. Nao’s comment about “taking matters into your own hands” again alludes to her intention to commit suicide—she wants to hasten her death, since, as she says, simply wasting time won’t make her die sooner. Nao tends to describe her life as being “unreal,” and by this, she seems to mean that her life seems worthless to her. By saying that she wants to leave something “real” behind when she dies, Nao means that she wants to leave something worthy. Nao is aware that she wastes her time, which is why her life is worthless. Like Jiko, she believes in the importance of every moment. But while Jiko puts this idea into practice by living each moment mindfully, Nao feels that she herself doesn’t do this.*



(5) Before Nao started writing in her diary, she decided that she first needed to find out what the French title of the book meant. When she googled it, she found out that it meant “In search of lost time.” She thought it was “a cool coincidence” she was sitting in a French maid café and thinking about time, whereas Marcel Proust wrote an entire book about the subject a hundred years ago in France. Nao writes that she doesn’t know if coincidences mean anything, and that perhaps they do.

*Nao is aware of the “cool coincidence” of her choosing a diary with an apt title—this is one of the many coincidences in the book that will show how characters are linked across time. In this passage, Nao also feels a connection with Marcel Proust. With this, the novel seems to indicate that all of humanity—not just the characters in the novel—is connected.*



Nao wonders how anyone can search for lost time. She texts the question to Jiko, who replies with a poetic verse in Japanese that says, “For the time being,/ Words scatter.../ Are they fallen leaves?” The poem reminds Nao of a gingko tree in Jiko’s temple. She thinks that the tree is a “time being,” as is Jiko, and that Nao is looking for lost time among the scattered leaves underneath.

*Nao is constantly in touch with Jiko, which again indicates the closeness of their relationship. Like the hypothetical reader of Nao’s diary, Jiko is an important confidant for Nao, which suggests that the relationship between spiritual guide and student can be just as valuable as the one between writer and reader. Jiko reminds Nao that even words of wisdom are “time beings,” and that they are impermanent like everything else.*



Nao explains that the idea of the “time being” comes from an ancient Zen Master named Dogen Zenji, whose books are still considered important even though they were written more than 800 years ago. He is one of Jiko’s favorite authors. While Jiko has written many books, too, they are all out of print, so Nao thinks that “words and stories are time beings, too.”

*Nao’s reflection that “words and stories are time beings, too” reinforces the impermanence of all things, even of books and ideas.*



Nao says that Jiko is “supercareful” with her time and does everything really slowly. Jiko likes to joke that she is so slow because she wants to live longer. Nao doesn’t like this joke because the idea of a world without Jiko in it bothers her, even though it doesn’t bother Jiko. Nao doesn’t mind the idea of her own death since, she is “unexceptional”—but Jiko is special.

*Jiko has made peace with her own impermanence. Nao, however, struggles with the idea of Jiko’s death because Jiko is special. She feels she herself is “unexceptional” and seems to use this idea to justify killing herself.*



(6) Nao struggles to understand why she feels compelled to write down Jiko's story. She thinks that she wants to do it because she loves Jiko and wants to remember her, but Nao herself is "not planning on sticking around for long." She thinks that no one else would care about Jiko's story. If she thought the world would care, she would write a blog about it, but Nao feels that nobody in cyberspace cares, either. Everyone is too busy posting their own stories to pay attention to anyone else's.

Nao likes the idea of writing everything down and leaving it for her reader to find. She thinks it is like she is "reaching forward through time to touch" the reader, which is "fantastically cool and beautiful." She compares her diary to "a message in a bottle, cast out onto the ocean of time and space."

(7) Nao writes that she understands she is just assuming that her diary will find a reader—it might just be tossed into the garbage, like the young girls who are murdered by perverts and thrown into dumpsters. (Nao finds these incidents scary and disturbing.) She decides that she doesn't mind the risk of her diary being thrown away, since that makes writing more interesting. She also knows that Jiko won't care if her life stories get lost since, she is a Buddhist who understands impermanence. Nao tells her reader that he or she can find out more about Jiko's life by reading the books Jiko wrote—though they are out of print, and Nao hasn't been able to find them on Amazon.

*While Nao has decided to kill herself, it seems like her desire to write about Jiko is an attempt to achieve some sort of permanence by leaving behind something worthwhile. Nao believes that one reason that people find it difficult to communicate with one another is because they are only interested in their own lives and points of view (unlike Jiko).*



*Nao believes that a true connection between a reader and a writer—which can transcend time and space—is very special.*



*Nao suggests that her words being thrown away would cause the same amount of sorrow as her being murdered and thrown away, since they both imply a complete disregard of a person's being. Yet Nao decides that the risk of her writing being lost is worth it. Of course, the reader knows that Nao's diary does find a reader: Ruth. Unlike Nao, who is very attached to the words she is writing, Jiko completely accepts the fleeting nature of all things, including her own life story.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 4: RUTH

(1) As Ruth reads Nao's diary, she can't shake off the feeling that she wants to somehow help or save Nao. Ruth does an Amazon search for Jiko Yasutani but doesn't find anything, just like Nao said. Ruth does, however, find Dogen's book *Shōbōgenzō*, or the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*. Ruth searches for the term "time being" on the internet and finds many translations and commentaries on the concept from Dogen's book. Reading his words that "everything in the entire universe is intimately linked with each other as moments in time, continuous and separate," she finds Dogen's notion of time to be "poetic but opaque."

Ruth is worried because Nao has implied that she will commit suicide. She wonders if Nao has already committed the deed, or if she changed her mind about it, only to fall victim to the earthquake and **tsunami** that came after. Ruth gazes out her window and looks out at the ocean, and she thinks about the destroyed Japanese coastline on the far side of the Pacific. She wonders if Nao is among the dead.

*Ruth feels an intimate connection with Nao and is very invested in her life and stories, just as Nao had hoped her reader would be. Ruth isn't yet ready to completely accept Buddhist notions about time and spiritual connections between people, which is why she finds Dogen's ideas to be "opaque." However, her desire to help or save Nao illustrates Dogen's claim that everything in the universe is "intimately linked": Ruth feels a link to Nao, even though they are "separate" beings who inhabit separate moments in time.*



*The tsunami is a symbol of powerful, destructive change in the novel. It illustrates how things can change without warning, and the idea that trying to escape change is pointless.*





On Ruth's desk, there's a thick stack of notes and manuscript pages—a draft of the memoir she's been working on for almost 10 years. She decided to write this memoir about caring for Ruth's mother, who'd suffered from Alzheimer's. Now, as Ruth looks at all these pages, she feels panicked about her own "lost time" and the amount of work the draft still needs.

Ruth thinks that she shouldn't be wasting her time on someone else's story, and she quickly turns to the end of Nao's diary to see if she wrote until the end. She is happy to see that Nao has filled all the pages. Ruth wonders what happened after Nao finished the diary, but she closes her eyes because she doesn't want to cheat and read the end.

(2) Ruth's friend Muriel, a retired anthropologist who knows a lot about garbage, examines the barnacles on the freezer bag. She says that Ruth should show it to Callie, who would be able to guess how old the creatures are and how long the bag has been in the water. Ruth says that Oliver thinks the freezer bag came on a drift from the **tsunami**, but Muriel thinks it might be too early for that.

As Muriel carefully inspects the lunch box and its contents, Ruth feels tense. She realizes that she's unwilling to share Nao and her story with Muriel, as this would mean leaving Nao open to Muriel's judgment. She tells Muriel that Nao's diary isn't interesting and instead hands her the Japanese letters, saying that they seem more important. Ruth holds the diary under the table, out of Muriel's sight.

Since Ruth can't read the Japanese letters, she took them to Ayako, the Japanese wife of an oyster farmer who lives on the island. Ayako managed to decipher the dates, saying that the letters were written in 1944 and 1945. However, Ayako couldn't read the alphabets, since young people who've grown up with computer are no longer able to handwrite. She'd told Ruth to try to find someone who was alive during World War II to help her.

*The memoir represents Ruth's unwieldy past, which is filled with memories of her mother's illness and Ruth's own sorrow as she witnessed it. Instead of moving on and living in the present, Ruth has tied herself to the past by working on the memoir for the past 10 years. Because she has invested all this time on the project, she does not want to abandon it—and as a result, she spends more of her present wallowing in the past. Ruth does not want to admit that she's wasted so much time on a project she dislikes.*



*Even though Ruth is worried for Nao, her enjoyment of the writing trumps her curiosity, and she decides to savor the diary as it was meant to be read. This speaks to her respect for Nao as a fellow writer.*



*Ruth seems to have a wonderful support system of friends here who are eager to help her, but Ruth doesn't seem to realize this. Rather than sharing Nao's story with Muriel, Ruth becomes territorial and hides the diary away. This perhaps implies that Ruth finds it difficult to communicate and share intimate details about her own life with others.*



*Ruth feels very protective of Nao, which indicates that Ruth has already grown attached to her. Again, even though Ruth and Nao don't know each other and lead very different lives, it seems that they were somehow destined to connect—Ruth is exactly the kind of person that Nao hoped would read her diary. Ruth and Nao both feel somewhat alienated from the people around them, and Ruth feels like she's found a kindred spirit in Nao (a fellow writer) that she hasn't found in islanders like Muriel.*



*This passage speaks to the idea that change is constant. Harkening back to Jiko's comment that even words are "time beings," Ayako's inability to decipher old, handwritten Japanese characters (despite being fluent in Japanese) indicates that even language and writing are not immune from change.*



(3) Usually, when Ruth has a good writing day, she reads what she's written to Oliver, right before they go to sleep. However, she hasn't had a day like that in a while. Tonight, she reads the first few pages of Nao's diary to him, and she feels protective about Nao when she comes to the part about the perverts. Oliver remarks that the nun sounds cool, and he asks Ruth if she thinks Nao is still alive. Ruth says that she doesn't know and admits that she feels worried about Nao.

*Ruth is still a little anxious about sharing Nao and her ideas with another person, as evidenced by her refusal to show Nao's diary to Muriel. This mirrors Ruth's feelings about her own writing, which she keeps private and never feels is properly finished or worth sharing. However, Ruth loves Oliver, which makes it easier for her to trust him with Nao's words.*



(4) Ruth continues reading and gets to the part where Nao wonders if her diary will end up in the garbage. Oliver tells Ruth that he's been recently thinking about the Great Garbage Patches, which are immense patches of floating trash on the oceans. He says that if the freezer bag hadn't somehow escaped the ocean currents, it would be stuck in the middle of a Garbage Patch. Oliver finds it "amazing" that it escaped and made its way to their shore. He's been fiddling with the old **watch** as he speaks, and he suddenly exclaims that he wound it up and that it's working again.

*The fact that the freezer bag made it past so many potential challenges on the ocean—including but not limited to ocean currents and Garbage Patches—is rather miraculous, as Oliver points out. It seems like Ruth was destined to receive and read Nao's diary.*



(5) Ruth lies awake in bed that night, listening to the **watch** ticking and thinking of how Nao's writing flows without inhibition. Ruth hasn't written with such certainty in years, so she is in awe of Nao. Ruth recalls Nao's words that she is "reaching through time to touch" her reader, and Ruth feels like the diary is warm in her hand. However, she knows that there is nothing supernatural about this, because she has started experiencing hot flashes recently.

*The watch is a symbol of passing time. Ruth is getting older, as evidenced her symptoms of menopause like hot flashes; now, the watch's loud ticking reminds her that her time to write is slowly running out. Ruth is almost envious of Nao's writing talent and her ability to connect with her reader across time.*



Ruth decides that she should pace herself as she reads Nao's diary—she wants to experience it like Nao wrote it. Ruth also thinks that if she doesn't rush through the diary, she'll have time to work on her own writing.

*Nao's diary seems to have inspired Ruth to work on her own writing. Ruth, too, values the connection between reader and writer—and as a writer herself, she wants to forge these connections of her own.*



(6) That night, Ruth dreams of a Japanese nun inside a dilapidated temple, typing on a computer inside a dark room. The nun wears dark robes and has a shaved head, and she has thick glasses that are similar to Ruth's. Ruth sees that the nun is typing "*Sometimesup / Sometimesdown*," which Ruth assumes must be an answer to the question Nao texted Jiko—the question about where the elevator of enlightenment takes its riders. The nun goes on to type that "up" and "down" are the "same thing" but that they are "also different."

*This is the first of the vivid, supernatural dreams that Ruth has after she starts reading Nao's diary. The temple she sees in her dream, and Jiko's office, are both exactly like places that Nao will describe later in her diary. However, Ruth hasn't read these descriptions yet, so it is odd that she sees these places in her dream. In these supernatural dreams, Ruth seems to be traveling to another place and time, showing that her life has become deeply intertwined with Nao's.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 5: NAO

(1) Nao writes about having read somewhere that men born between April and June are more likely to commit suicide. Her father was born in May, and she says that this might explain why he's tried to kill himself, though he hasn't succeeded in doing so yet. Nao says that she and her dad are in the middle of a fight, because Nao has stopped going to school. She messed up her high school entrance exams and can now only go to a high school for low-achieving kids. Nao would rather become a nun like Jiko, but her parents insist that she graduates from high school first.

(2) Nao writes that it isn't really her fault that she messed up on the entrance exams. With her American educational background, she had no chance of getting into a good Japanese school. Her father wants her to apply to an international high school and then move to Canada, which he feels is like America but safer. Nao says that her dad used to love living in America, back when they lived in Sunnyvale, California. They moved there when Nao was three, and her dad was a well-paid programmer in Silicon Valley.

However, when the dot-com bubble burst, Nao's father's company went bankrupt. The family lost their visas and had to move back to Japan. Since Nao's father had taken much of his salary in stock options, they returned with no savings. Nao thought of herself as American and spoke very little Japanese, so the move was very hard on her. Since her parents couldn't afford a fancy private school that would help Nao catch up to her Japanese grade level, they enrolled her in eighth grade at a public junior high school.

Nao had no idea how to behave in a Japanese classroom, and she also struggled with the language. She was older and bigger than the other kids in her class, and she didn't have an allowance or expensive things, since her parents were broke. For these reasons, Nao says, she was bullied relentlessly. She says that she wouldn't have survived the bullying if Jiko hadn't taught her how to develop her "superpower."

*So far, Nao has revealed to her reader that she plans to kill herself. Here, she reveals that her father, too, seems to have the same idea and has even attempted suicide. There's no indication that Nao's father knows about her plan, but nevertheless, suicide is a connection between these two characters.*



*Nao's life has undergone some big changes in the recent past, as her family has moved from California to Japan. Her struggles with adapting to her new schooling shows that change can be unpleasant and difficult. Nao's father wants Nao to study in Canada, which must seem exciting for Ruth, who is reading this diary in Canada. This is yet another coincidental link between these two characters.*



*Nao's family's situation highlights the inevitability of change: even though her father was a highly skilled programmer with a seemingly stable job, the company's dissolution was beyond his control. There was seemingly nothing anyone could have done to predict or prevent the dot-com bubble burst—it just happened. Jiko's Buddhist concept of "time beings" has taught Nao that change like this is a fundamental aspect of life, but that doesn't make it any easier for Nao to cope with the fallout. All the changes in her life have clearly been hard on her, as she's been uprooted from her former life and thrust into an unfamiliar setting.*



*It seems like Jiko was the main adult figure in Nao's life who helped her survive bullying. Notably, Nao doesn't mention her parents helping her. This suggests that even people who love one another and live together can sometimes suffer alone, like Nao, until they find someone with whom they can truly communicate.*



(3) The first time Nao's father tried to commit suicide was around a year ago, just six months after they moved to Japan. They lived in a tiny, rundown two-room apartment, because the rent in Tokyo was so high and they couldn't afford anything else. All their neighbors were bar hostesses who brought their dates back home at five in the morning. While Nao and her family ate breakfast, they could hear the neighbors moaning loudly as they had sex.

In those days, Nao's father would go out every day to look for employment, and Nao and her father would leave the apartment together every morning. While Nao's father had been "cool" in Sunnyvale, riding his bike to work in jeans and sneakers, he now wore an ugly suit. Nao, too, felt foolish and unattractive in her school uniform.

Nao and her father always took the long route as they walked together, and they often stopped at a tiny temple en route that Nao says was "a special place." At the temple, she clapped her hands twice and bowed in front of a statue of the Buddha, like her father had shown her. Nao always wished that her father would soon find a job and that they could move back to Sunnyvale. If those two wishes couldn't come true, at least that the kids at school would stop bullying her.

Then, Nao's father would walk her to school, and they would talk on the way. They were always polite but avoided talking about their problems in order to keep each other happy. As they got close to the school gates, Nao wanted to cling to her father and beg him not to leave, because she knew the kids inside were waiting to pick on her.

(4) As soon as Nao's father left, her classmates started to move in. By the time she walked in through the doors of the school, she would usually be covered with cuts and bruises; her uniform would be untucked and full of tiny tears made with nail scissors that the girls kept in their pencil cases. Nao pretended to ignore them, but the bullying continued all day. Sometimes, her classmates pretended to gag as they walked by Nao's desk and said that she smelled like a *gaijin* ("foreigner"). Other times, they sang demeaning, sexist rap lyrics to her.

*While this section doesn't specify exactly why Nao's father attempted suicide, it hints that his sudden fall from grace—from being a hotshot Silicon Valley programmer to being poor and unemployed in Japan—might have had something to do with it. Like Nao, her father seems to have struggled with change. Meanwhile, even Nao's home environment is saturated with explicit sexuality, which is perhaps why she feels comfortable spending time at places like the French maid café.*



*Again, both Nao and her father are struggling with the changes in their circumstances. The reader knows that these problems cause both of them to feel suicidal, which speaks to just how difficult coping with change can be.*



*Even before Nao meets Jiko, she is attracted to the spirituality and peace of Buddhist temples; Nao and Jiko share this link. Nao's wishes at the temple emphasize her extreme unhappiness with her present circumstances and a desire to return to her past in Sunnyvale.*



*Even though Nao loves her father and enjoys spending time with him every morning, she does not feel comfortable telling him about her troubles at school. Her love for him is evident because she wants to cling to him when she is afraid to enter school—and yet their relationship is too polite for her to tell him this. Nao guesses that her father, too, has troubles that he is not sharing with her. This shows that communication is often hard, even between people who love each other.*



*The extreme bullying that Nao faced at school is shocking: she was hurt physically in addition to being called names and excluded. The bullying also had a sexual undertone, as the kids sang explicit lyrics to her. This adds yet another layer to Nao's complicated outlook toward sex.*



Nao's mother was almost never home when Nao got back from school. Her mother's favorite pastime in those days was to clutch her "old Gucci handbag" and stare at the jellyfish in the city aquarium. In hindsight, Nao realizes that her mother was probably having a nervous breakdown at this time.

(5) After a couple of months, Nao's father announced that he'd gotten a job as a chief programmer at a start-up. His salary wasn't high, but still, the family was overjoyed. Her father left for work in the mornings with Nao and came home late at night. Though Nao was still bullied at school, and the family still didn't have much money, Nao felt good because she was filled with optimism for their future. Nao's mother, too, stopped visiting the aquarium. Instead, she cleaned the apartment and even confronted the neighbors about the noise they made.

At Christmas, the family ate snacks and watched TV, and Nao's father told them about his work. Later, as Nao writes in her diary, she wonders how her father ever thought he'd get away with it. She wonders if perhaps he didn't think at all or if he was crazy enough to believe his own story.

Soon after Nao's father started working again, her parents started arguing about money. Nao's mother wanted her father to hand over his salary to her so she could manage it, but her father insisted that he deposited all of it in a high-yield account. Sometimes, he gave her mother a stack of yen bills, but never his whole salary. Right before Nao's 15th birthday, her mother found stubs from the horse races in her father's pocket and confronted him about it. He immediately left the house and got drunk on sake, and then he jumped in front of the Chuo Rapid Express train. Luckily, the conductor spotted him and was able to slam the brakes in time.

Later, at home, Nao's father confessed that he didn't really have a job and that he instead spent all day sitting on a park bench, feeding the **crows**. Initially, he'd won some money at the horse races, but later he'd lost it all. Bowing down low, he apologized to Nao for having no money to buy her a birthday present. Later, Nao's mother pretended that he'd only slipped down the train tracks since he'd been so drunk. Her father went along with this story, but Nao knows it isn't true.

*Just like Nao and her father, Nao's mother was also struggling to accept the sudden and unpleasant changes in her life. Her "old Gucci handbag" symbolizes the privileged, comfortable life she led in America, and she seemed to be "clutching" onto the past. Additionally, like Nao and her father, Nao's mother didn't communicate her anxiety and sadness with her family—it is only later on that Nao infers how her mother must have been feeling at that time.*



*This passage shows how hope can change one's perception of the present. Even though Nao and her mother were dealing with the same problems that they had before, they were now hopeful for a better future—and this changed the way they perceived their problems. However, the reader knows that Jiko and Dogen stress the importance of the present moment, because that is the only thing people can control in their lives. The future is unknowable and uncontrollable.*



*Nao hints that her father was lying to them about the job, which seems to be a consequence of the family's inability to communicate with each other. Nao's father felt intense pressure to fulfill his role as a provider and couldn't bear to admit that he was unable to fill this role.*



*The lack of communication between the family members led to Nao's father resorting to desperate lies to cover his inadequacies. Finally, when Nao's mother confronted him about them, he ended up trying to kill himself rather than owning up to his failures. This action was a result of the complete breakdown in communication between the family members. Nao's father seemed convinced that his family would reject him if they knew the truth—he didn't even consider that they would still love him if he failed at being the breadwinner.*



*Nao's mother covered up her father's suicide attempt with a lie rather than talking to him about his emotional suffering or offering him support or help. This emphasizes that Nao's family couldn't communicate openly with one another. Meanwhile, Nao's father's apology shows his deep love for her and his shame at being unable to provide for his daughter.*



(6) Nao writes about Jiko's belief that everything that happens to a person is because of his or her karma—a kind of cosmic energy that's influenced by what a person does and says, or even by what they think. A person's karma is affected not just by their deeds and thoughts in this lifetime but by their past and future lives too. Nao thinks that perhaps it is her father's karma to end up on a park bench feeding **crows**. She also can't blame him for wanting to rush into the next lifetime.

*Jiko's belief in karma (a core concept in Buddhism) speaks to the idea that everything is interconnected and that anyone and anything can be an agent of change—no deed is without consequences. Nao understands her father's desire to kill himself because, in her eyes, his life is pretty hopeless—in a sense, he seems destined to be a loser. But, since Nao and her father do not communicate freely, she has no clear sense of what's going on in his head or what's really motivated his actions thus far.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 6: RUTH

(1) Oliver remarks that the part about the **crows** is interesting. Ruth shuts the diary, frustrated that after listening to all of Nao's emotional revelations, Oliver is most struck by the crows. However, she patiently asks him what about the crows he finds interesting.

*Ruth is irritated at Oliver's reaction—but by keeping the channels of communication open by asking him about his thoughts rather than expressing her anger, Ruth ends up finding out useful information. This emphasizes the importance of communication and contrasts with Nao and her parents' struggles to be open with one another.*



Oliver says that Japanese **crows** look quite different from the Northwestern Crows that are native to Canada. On the day that Ruth found the freezer bag, Oliver had heard the crows around their house making a big noise. Up in the trees, he saw them harassing a smaller bird that was trying to join them—the bigger crows kept pecking at it and chasing it away. When Oliver saw the smaller bird up close, he thought it looked exactly like a Japanese crow. Now, he guesses that it must have ridden over on the flotsam, with the freezer bag. Ruth wonders aloud if that is possible, and Oliver answers that it is “an anomaly,” but that it is “not impossible.”

*The Japanese crow seems to have mysteriously ended up on their island at the same time as the lunch box, which is a clue that something supernatural might be afoot. Oliver remarks that this is “an anomaly,” but that it is “not impossible.” It is also an eerie coincidence that Oliver and Nao's father both have noteworthy encounters with Japanese crows. The novel seems to feature many of these “anomalies” that result in the characters forming connections with one another across time.*



(2) Ruth thinks that Oliver himself is “an anomaly.” She often grows impatient with his wandering mind. However, Ruth is always glad when she follows Oliver's thoughts, because he comes up with interesting ideas and connections—like his observations about the **crow**. Ruth and Oliver first met at an artists' colony in the early 1990s. After the residency, Ruth moved back to New York City, while Oliver went back to the island farm in British Columbia where he taught permaculture. They emailed each other every day. As Ruth eagerly read his emails, she realized that she was in love with him.

*Oliver thinks and communicates differently from other people, but Ruth is patient with him and is appreciative of his unique ideas. Their relationship seems to have been built on close communication from the very beginning, since Ruth specifically recalls that their daily emails paved the way to her falling in love with him.*



That winter, Oliver and Ruth tried living together in New York—but by spring, they had decided to move to Oliver’s island instead. Presently, Ruth thinks that she yielded to Oliver persuading her, but she acknowledges that Canada’s healthcare system was a big draw too. Oliver had become sick with a long-lasting flulike illness, and healthcare in the U.S. was too expensive for them. Additionally, Ruth’s mother had Alzheimer’s and was in a facility in Connecticut, and Ruth couldn’t figure out how to care for an ailing mother in one country and a chronically-ill husband in another. So, she’d decided to move to Oliver’s island with her mother.

(3) Ruth soon realized that life on the island was very different from what she was used to. Whaletown wasn’t really a town—the province of British Columbia defined it as a “locality [...] with a scattered population of 50 or less.” It had been a whaling station in the 19th century, though whales rarely came by anymore. Most of the whales in the region had been slaughtered for blubber while the rest had fled. Ruth thinks that whales, too, are “time beings.”

(4) Ruth and Oliver’s house in Whaletown is set in a meadow carved out of a temperate rainforest. When Ruth first saw the gigantic trees that surrounded their house, she was so moved that she wept. She told Oliver that humans have spent barely any time on Earth compared to these trees, which were over 1,000 years old. Oliver was very happy to live here. Though he was weak and dizzy with his illness when they first moved in, he slowly became healthy enough to exercise.

Oliver is an environmental artist and is working on a project that he calls “the NeoEocene,” for which he is planting groves of trees that were native to area in the Eocene period, 55 million years ago. He is keeping global warming’s effects in mind as he does this, since the trees he is planting include warm weather trees like palm and ginkgo. However, Oliver will not know if his experiment will succeed, since he won’t live long enough to see the results. He doesn’t mind this, since he is patient and has accepted that human beings live relatively short lives.

*Even though Ruth was deeply in love with Oliver and wanted to be with him, she had to move from New York City to his lonely Canadian island after she married him. Given the ongoing parallels between Ruth and Nao, the reader can infer that Ruth will struggle with this change, much like Nao struggled with her family’s move to Japan.*



*Ruth moved from New York City to Whaletown, which is so tiny that it isn’t even technically a “town”; she struggles to adjust to this change. Meanwhile, Ruth has internalized Nao’s ideas about change and impermanence and observes that “time beings” are everywhere—even in tiny Whaletown’s history.*



*The ancient trees in Whaletown remind Ruth of her own mortality, which shows that she was already thinking of her own impermanence even before reading Nao’s diary. However, Jiko would see even these ancient trees as “time beings”: even though they live much longer than people, they, too, will die.*



*In contrast to Ruth, who wept when she was reminded of her own mortality, Oliver has made peace with it. Though he is not spiritual like Jiko, he is similar to her in his acceptance of change and in his endeavors to make his present count by working on meaningful projects. Oliver acknowledges that the ancient trees on the island won’t last forever because of global warming. Instead of seeing this as a negative, he is planning for the future (which he won’t live to see) by planting trees that will do well on the island after its temperature rises as a result of global warming, many years in the future. This indicates that Oliver is completely accepting of change.*



In contrast, Ruth is “neither patient nor accepting.” Fifteen years after moving out of New York City, Ruth’s mother has since passed away, and Ruth feels hemmed in by the island. She feels like she is in a dark fairy tale and has fallen into a “deep, comalike sleep.” As a novelist, Ruth misses the buzz of the city and being around people. She feels like her life is passing her by and wonders if she should leave the island that she’d hoped would be her home.

(5) For Ruth, leaving home means returning to the city. However, in the Buddhist sense, “home leaving” means leaving regular life behind and becoming a monk or nun. Zen Master Dogen writes about this in the *Shōbōgenzō*, in a chapter titled “The Merits of Home-Leaving.” In it, he says that even the tiniest moment in time gives a person an opportunity “to wake up and choose actions that will produce beneficial karma.” Dogen’s true message is that “life is fleeting.” He exhorts his disciples to “Wake up now! / And now! / And now!”

(6) Whenever Ruth tries to reread and edit her memoir, she feels “inexplicably sleepy.” It’s been about a year since she’s added a single word to it. The project seemed like a good idea when Ruth’s mother was still alive— now, however, the pages embarrass Ruth when she reads them.

Ruth has tried to pace herself as she reads Nao’s diary, so that she can focus on her own writing too. However, she had spent her morning on the internet, looking for any Yasutanis who might have been victims of the earthquake and **tsunami**. Ruth hadn’t found anyone named Jiko or Naoko, and since she didn’t know Nao’s parents’ names, she had spent her time looking for likely matches. Ruth ended up seeing pictures of many people who’d lost their lives in the tsunami—but she didn’t find the Yasutanis.

(7) That night, Oliver tells Ruth that he’s been reading about Japanese Jungle **Crows**—he’s discovered that they’re very clever birds. In Japan, the crows have learned the trash pickup schedules, and they show up on time to rip up trash bags and scavenge for food. They build their nests on electricity wires, which causes many power outages in Tokyo. The power company dismantles their nests, so the crows have taken to building dummy nests as decoys.

*Ruth compares herself with Sleeping Beauty to describe how she feels stuck and asleep on the island—and her unhappiness is hampering her productivity as a writer. She feels like she is wasting her time and describes this as being “asleep.” Zen Master Dogen advises people to “wake up” and be conscious of the present moment—so Ruth is “asleep” in a spiritual sense as well since, she is wasting her present.*



*Zen Master Dogen wants his disciples to understand that since “life is fleeting,” every moment is precious. He thinks of those who do not understand this as being “asleep,” in the same way that Ruth considers herself as wasting time on the island and being asleep. Dogen exhorts his disciples to “wake up” and use every moment wisely.*



*Ruth is wasting her time by wallowing in the past. The memoir is a symbol of her past, and she is “sleepy” when she tries to work on it. Dogen would advise Ruth to “wake up” and make use of her present, but she is stuck in the past and struggling to let go of it.*



*Nao’s diary beckons to Ruth, encouraging her to stop working on her memoir and to instead become more aware of her time and focus on using it wisely. Meanwhile, when Ruth sees images of the tsunami, she is shocked by the immense destruction that it caused—which serves as a reminder that change can be terrifying and can cause immense suffering. The changes in Ruth’s and Nao’s lives mirror this, though their suffering is smaller in scale.*



*Again, Oliver’s interest in crows aligns him with Nao’s father, connect characters who live in different places and in different time periods.*





## PART I, CHAPTER 7: NAO

(1) Nao begins the next section in her diary with a family tree. She explains that her great-grandmother Jiko had three children: a son, Haruki #1, and two daughters, Sugako and Ema. Haruki #1 died in World War II, and Sugako didn't marry. Jiko adopted Ema's husband, Kenji, so that the Yasutani name wouldn't die out. Ema and Kenji Yasutani were Nao's grandparents, and they named their son (Nao's father) Haruki in memory of Ema's dead brother. Haruki married Tomoko, and Nao is their child. Nao says that thinking of the family tree makes her uncomfortable, because she is the last of the Yasutanis—the family name will die with her.

Haruki #1 was a student of philosophy before he became a kamikaze pilot. When Nao told Jiko that Haruki was also interested in philosophy and suicide, just like his uncle Haruki #1, Jiko told her that Haruki #1 wasn't really interested in being a suicide bomber—he was forced to be one. What Haruki #1 really liked was French poetry, and he was bullied for this in the army. Nao thought that she and Haruki #1 were similar because they shared an interest in French culture, and she got bullied, just like he did.

(2) Nao's family pretended that Haruki's suicide attempt never happened, though it changed all their lives. After this, Haruki began withdrawing from the world and turned into a *hikikomori* (a recluse). Nao's mother realized that she would need to find work and landed a job as an administrative assistant at a publishing house. Nao says that this was very impressive, even though the job paid very little, because Japanese companies usually don't hire 39-year-old women.

Nao started ninth grade that March, and the bullying became worse. She had managed to hide her bruises and cuts from her family, but one day, their bathtub broke and they had to use the *senjo* (public baths). Nao tried to go to the *senjo* when Tomoko was at work, so that Nao could hide her bruises. Nao enjoyed observing the grannies and the bar hostesses who were around at that time. She played a game in which she matched the smooth-bodied hostesses to the grannies, trying to guess how each one's body might change as she aged.

*In the previous section, Ruth struggled to find the Yasutanis online because she didn't know Ruth's parents' names. The next pages she reads in Nao's diary gives her all their names, which is a strange coincidence—it seems like an answer to her question. Nao's father is named Haruki, after his uncle Haruki #1. This indicates to the reader that they might share other qualities as well. Finally, Nao points out that she is the last of the Yasutanis, which makes her nervous. If she carries out her plan to kill herself, the family name will die along with her. Jiko made the effort to adopt her son-in-law in order to keep the family name going, so Nao likely assumes that that Jiko would be disappointed that the name would die out with Nao.*



*Nao realized that Haruki #1 and Haruki share some commonalities, and that Nao and Haruki #1 do too. In this way, they are all connected despite Nao and her father never knowing Haruki #1s.*



*Haruki's suicide attempt caused him to become even more isolated and insecure. Tomoko, on the other hand, seemed empowered as she successfully re-entered the work force. This is an example of how a significant event can affect different people in different ways, though they are both changed by it. Importantly, Nao's parents made these decisions in isolation, without communicating and acknowledging the problems they were facing together.*



*The fact that Nao made the extra effort to hide her bruises from her mother shows how reluctant she was to share her problems and feelings. Nao certainly found it hard to communicate with her. At the public bath, Nao observed how time passes and changes everyone. This emphasizes that change is an unavoidable and universal part of life.*



Nao was fascinated by the hostesses and thought they were “pretty and bold and behaved in a liberated way.” However, Nao’s mother disapproved of Nao hanging out with them, and she insisted that Nao go to the *senjo* with her to avoid them. One night, a woman who was at the *senjo* spotted Nao’s bruises and began to ask loudly if she had a rash or a disease. Nao’s mother came to inspect her too, and she quickly told the woman that they were just bruises from gym class.

*Nao thought that the hostesses were simply “bold” and “liberated” women, which reveals her naïveté about sex. The hostesses were actually sex workers, and the people they dressed up for and had sex with were their clients rather than partners they chose—but Nao didn’t realize this. Her mother wanted to discourage Nao from spending time with the hostesses, but she wasn’t clear to Nao about why, exactly, she disapproved of them. The lack of clear communication between them resulted in Nao not understanding that hanging out with the hostesses might be dangerous for a young girl like her.*



At home, Tomoko inspected Nao’s bruises and scabs, and Nao finally told her mother about the bullying. She didn’t want her mother going to the school and complaining, so she downplayed it and said it happened to all the new kids. Tomoko told Nao that she should join some after-school activities or clubs to make friends. Nao was shocked that her mother would suggest this after seeing how badly her classmates had hurt her. She writes that until that point, she thought that only her father was insane—but she now realized that her mother was crazy too. Nao says that she has no one to rely on and feels completely alone.

*Even when Nao finally told her mother about the bullying, her mother’s reaction showed that she didn’t really listen to Nao. She didn’t hear Nao’s pain and loneliness, and she instead came up with her own solutions that were completely disconnected from the way Nao felt. As a result of this complete breakdown in communication, Nao felt abandoned by the adults who were supposed to take care of her.*



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(3) Nao’s mother didn’t do anything immediately, so Nao hoped that she had forgotten about the incident. However, a week after her mother spotted her scars and bruises, Nao arrived at school and sensed that something was different. Her classmates ignored her, and Nao suspected that they were planning something terrible. She decided to be very cautious, but no one bothered her all day. As she left school, she felt like an invisible ghost.

*Nao didn’t trust her mother to respect her feelings and not mention the bullying to the school administrators. In fact, even after Nao suspects that her mother did complain to the school, she’s left to deduce this herself rather than confirming it with her mother. Again, there was no communication between them, and Nao is left feeling ostracized and overlooked.*



(4) Nao’s ninth-grade homeroom teacher, Ugawa Sensei, joined her classmates in ignoring her. Ugawa Sensei was a substitute for the regular teacher, who was away on maternity leave. Usually, substitute teachers were even lower on the food chain than transfer students, but Ugawa Sensei managed to gain some points with the popular kids by joining them in ignoring Nao. He marked her absent every day and pretended he couldn’t see or hear her when she answered him. Nao’s classmates enjoyed this joke. Soon, Nao felt like her “voice stopped working,” and like she was barely even visible to others.

*The new form of bullying that Nao’s classmates and teacher used on her was to completely ignore her—in other words, they completely stopped communicating with her. While even the previous forms of bullying were extreme, Nao found being completely ignored even harder to deal with. Completely cut off from communicating with others, she began to doubt her very existence.*



Sometimes, Nao texted with her Kayla, her best friend from Sunnyvale. She found this stressful, because Kayla wanted to know what Japanese school was like, and Nao didn't want to tell her about the bullying and seem like a loser. So, instead, Nao told her about interesting Japanese things like anime and fashion trends. Kayla wrote that Nao seemed so far away that it felt "kind of unreal." Nao thought that it was true that Nao was "unreal, and [her] life was unreal," while the real place of Sunnyvale felt incredibly distant in time and space.

*Nao's inability to tell Kayla what her life was really like shows that it can even be difficult to communicate with friends, especially when a person is worried about being judged. In contrast, Nao could communicate easily with Jiko because Nao knew that Jiko would accept her completely. Nao thought of her past as being "real," because her memories of it were happy, while she found her unhappy present to be "unreal." However, according to Jiko's Buddhist philosophy, only the present is real, while the past is a memory and therefore unreal. At this point in time, Nao hadn't yet realized this.*



(5) After his suicide attempt, Nao's father spent all his time reading books on Western philosophy and making origami insects. He covered a philosopher per week, which kept him busy. Also, his origami insect creations were intricate and beautiful. In the evenings, Nao did her homework next to her father while he read his books and worked on his origami. Nao liked spending time with him, even though she suspected that he wished he were dead.

*Despite his suicide attempt and shutting himself off from the outside world, Haruki is still interested in learning and in creating art—he was still interested in some aspects of life. This passage also shows Nao's and Haruki's love for each other, as Nao enjoys hanging out with her father despite all the problems they've endured. At the same time, she can only suspect what Haruki feels, since they do not communicate freely.*



(6) Nao says that in Japan, a *furiitaa* is a person who works only part-time and has a lot of free time. Sitting at Fifi's, Nao looks around and thinks that the other customers must all be *furiitaa*, since they have time to waste at coffee shops. Later, Nao thinks, they'll go to their bedrooms in their parents' houses. The waitresses are *furiitaa* too, just working there "for the time being." Sometimes, *furiitaa* is spelled "freeter" in English, which reminds Nao of the expression "to fritter your life away." She says that she is still young, so it's fine for her to waste her time—but she worries about her father doing this.

*Nao's reflection that the waitress at Fifi's is just working there "for the time being" is a reference to the title of the novel. If the narrative in Nao's diary is the titular "tale for the time being," then perhaps Nao, too, feels like her story is only temporary—which makes sense, as she's revealed that she plans to commit suicide. Nao also emphasizes the importance of using every moment of time wisely—especially for an adult like her father, who is supposed to be responsible about his time and doesn't have too much life left to live.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 8: RUTH

(1) Ruth thinks that she and Oliver are frittering their lives away, too. The part in Nao's diary about the *hikikomori* ("recluses") made them both uncomfortable, since they, too, are recluses on their island. Ruth feels like changes take place in "a world far away."

*Ruth feels cut off from the world on her desolate island because only the "world far away" seems to change, while everything seems to stay the same on the island. As a result, the island seems frozen in time, and Ruth feels like she is wasting her time as a "recluse" on the —she's cut off from change, and by extension, excitement and progress.*



(2) The following morning, Ruth approaches her memoir with a sense of determination. She's wearing the antique **watch** and she decides to time herself by it, resolving to do 30 minutes of uninterrupted work. However, Ruth gets distracted by the watch itself, and she starts trying to decipher the kanji characters etched on its back. With the help of her kanji dictionary, she discovers that they read "sky soldier." She begins to google "WWII" and "sky soldier" to try to locate the manufacturer of the watch. Ruth lands on a forum for watch enthusiasts and discovers that the watch was made by Seiko Company during World War II. She finds out that the numbers engraved on the back were the serial number of the soldier who wore it.

*The watch is a symbol of passing time, and Ruth intends to use it to stay focused on her memoir. However, the watch ironically distracts her more and leads her back to Nao's story, which seems to suggest that this is a more productive use of her time than being stuck in her unpleasant past with her memoir.*



(3) Ruth googles "Haruki Yasutani" but finds nothing about either a kamikaze pilot or a computer programmer. She also cannot find Haruki or Tomoko among the Yasutanis who were missing or dead in the earthquake and tsunami, and Ruth is relieved. She looks for Jiko Yasutani and Zen temples but once again draws a blank. Finally, she looks for "Chuo Rapid Express" and misspells Haruki as "Harryki" in the search bar; she is surprised by the results.

*A misspelling—another fortunate mistake—seemingly leads Ruth to information about Haruki on the internet. This is an example of a lucky coincidence that connects the characters.*



(4) The website Ruth lands on belongs to Dr. Leistiko, a professor of psychology at Stanford University who researches first-person accounts of suicide. Dr. Leistiko has posted an excerpt from a letter from a Japanese man who calls himself "Harry." The man writes that, in Japan, suicide is regarded as a something beautiful, honorable, and meaningful.

*Ruth's discovery seems very fortunate: the subject of the website, and the fact that Harry is from Japan, indicates that this is probably Haruki writing under a pseudonym.*



Harry continues by saying that in modern, technology-ridden society, people complain about how everything feels unreal. However, Harry says, this is the way life has always been. Even Plato wrote that "things in this life are only shadows of forms." Suicide, Harry says, makes life real—and it feels like "stopping Time Forever." However, he acknowledges that this is a delusion, too, since suicide is a part of life.

*Harry ties ideas of suicide both to modern technology and famous Western philosophers like Plato. This is further evidence that Harry is indeed Haruki, who was reading books on Western philosophy and works in computers.*



Harry says that suicide is popular in Japan among middle-aged salarymen like himself because of the recession. Men like him are ashamed that they can't support their families; they spend their days on park benches. Harry says that the most popular method of suicide is by hanging, and another popular way is to jump in front of a train like the Chuo Rapid Express. He says that he's tried the train method, but he failed.

*This passage makes it clear that Harry is indeed Haruki; while Haruki was unable to speak to Nao and Tomoko about the feelings that led him to attempt suicide, he seems much more forthcoming in his letter to Dr. Leistiko. Perhaps he feels like he won't be judged as harshly by Dr. Leistiko, which encourages him to share how he really feels.*



Harry says that young people in Japan prefer to jump off roofs to kill themselves. He worries about his daughter, who is unhappy in her Japanese school. Some young people form suicide “clubs”: they meet online, rent a car together, drive to the countryside, and then kill themselves by inhaling carbon dioxide from the car’s exhaust.

Harry fears that his attitude toward suicide is unhealthy for his daughter. Initially, he wanted to kill himself to spare her the shame of his failures—but after he threw himself in front of the train, he saw that his daughter looked incredibly sad. Now, Harry wants to live, but he’s too afraid to do so. He asks Dr. Leistiko to teach him how to love his life—he wants to find “the meaning of [his] life” for his daughter.

(5) Ruth sends a quick email to Dr. Leistiko, asking him if “Harry” from the letter is, in fact, a man named Haruki Yasutani who used to live in Sunnyvale. She says that she needs to reach either Mr. Yasutani or his daughter, Naoko, as soon as possible, since Ruth is concerned about Naoko’s well-being. After she does this, Ruth is disappointed to see that it is already one in the afternoon—she hasn’t managed to get any writing done. Even worse, she hears someone’s car outside.

(6) The car outside Ruth’s house is Muriel’s. Residents of the island often drop in without warning, which Ruth and Oliver dislike. Out of politeness, Ruth sits with Muriel and Oliver as they chat about garbage—but she’s bored. She inspects the packet of letters that came in the lunch box and finds that one envelope is thicker than the rest and is wrapped in wax paper. Inside is a thin, folded composition book written in French. Ruth interrupts Muriel and Oliver to ask if they can help her with the French.

(7) Neither Muriel nor Oliver get very far with the French in the composition book, and as Muriel prepares to leave, she suggests that Ruth call Benoit—another resident of the island—to help her decipher it. Watching Muriel walk tentatively down the steps, Ruth is reminded of Nao’s description of the old naked ladies in the public baths. Ruth, too, is beginning to feel her age in her knees and hips, and she recalls that she never had trouble getting enough exercise when she lived in New York, because she walked everywhere. Ruth’s memories of New York feel “vivid and real,” just like Nao’s memories of Sunnyvale.

*While Haruki never told Nao that he knew that she was being bullied in school, and that this worried him, he confides all of this to Dr. Leistiko. Nao would have surely appreciated his concern if Haruki had expressed it to her—but instead, they both felt disconnected and alone in their struggles.*



*This passage shows Haruki’s love for Nao. While Nao thought he was reading all the tomes on Western philosophy just to kill time, he actually was looking for advice on how to keep living despite his feelings of hopelessness. Haruki wanted to live for Nao’s sake and was trying his best to find “the meaning of his life” so that he could keep being her father. Though the reader can see this, Nao, unfortunately, doesn’t realize it.*



*Ruth’s discovery of Dr. Leistiko’s website is a fortunate find—it seems like it will lead her to information about the Yasutanis. Ruth still hasn’t had any time to work on her memoir, which she is disappointed about. However, it seems like Nao’s story is rescuing Ruth from the past in its own way—it’s helping her enjoy her present as she works on solving these mysteries.*



*Ruth’s dislike of some of the islanders’ practices, and her boredom at being forced to socialize with other residents, are other elements that add to her unhappiness. She seems to feel that she is too different from the people on the island to form true friendships here.*



*Despite Ruth’s negative perception of the islands’ residents, they seem to be helpful and intelligent—for instance, Benoit is capable of deciphering something that Ruth herself struggles with. This suggests that Ruth’s grudges against them might be based on her own prejudices rather than on reality. Ruth’s memories of New York are happy—and therefore seem “real”—as she thinks back on her younger self enjoying city life. However, she has aged and changed since then, so her memories might not be as “real” and true as she thinks.*



Muriel is surprised to see the Japanese Jungle Crow as she gets into her car. Oliver tells her that he thinks it rode the same drift as the lunch box. Muriel tells him that the Sliammon people who used to live in British Columbia believed that a crow named T'Et's was a "magical ancestor who could shape-shift and take human or animal form." After Muriel has driven away and Oliver has gone into the garden, Ruth speaks aloud to the crow, asking it what it wants. The crow stares silently back at her, and Ruth is convinced that it's waiting for something.

*Muriel's story about the Sliammon people's belief in a magical crow ancestor not only suggests that the Jungle Crow might also be supernatural—it also links the old legend with the events in Ruth's life, showing how people and stories are mysteriously connected across time.*



## PART I, CHAPTER 9: NAO

(1) Nao says that the past is hard to write about. For instance, when she tries to write about her life in Sunnyvale, her past "happy life seems realer" than her present life—but she also feels disconnected from it. Perhaps, Nao says, her past self only ever existed in her imagination. She also points out that it's impossible to write about the "now," since one's pen can never keep up with the present moment.

*Nao realizes that although the past seems "realer" to her than her present (because it was happier), there's no way of verifying that it's any "realer" than the present. Nao recognizes that her conception of her past self only exists in the present—and in this way, the past is what's unreal. This reflection connects to Ruth's in the previous chapter, when she realized that her past life in New York City felt more real than her present life in Canada.*



Nao says that when she was a little girl, she became obsessed with the word "now" because it sounded just like her name. The Japanese believe that "some words have *kotodama*, which are spirits that live inside a word and give it a special power." To Nao, the *kotodama* of "now" was like a "slippery fish" that she couldn't catch. Every time she said the word "now," that moment in time was already over—it had changed to "then."

*Nao uses the simile of a slippery fish to express how the present moment is difficult to grasp, since it immediately turns into the past. In order to use the present, people need deep awareness of passing time. Since Nao's name is a homophone of "now," this signifies how she, too, is a product of time. For Ruth, meanwhile, Nao seems as hard to grasp as the present moment—the events of Nao's life and her whereabouts are mysterious.*



(2) Nao writes that Haruki was "doing really well for a suicidal person"—he even won third place in an origami contest called the Great Bug Wars. He'd made a giant staghorn beetle or *Cyclommatus imperator*.

*Haruki is so interested in origami that he even enters a competition and wins a prize in it, which shows that he is still interested in some aspects of life. His creation, the giant staghorn beetle, is important, since this insect will remind Nao of her father later in the novel.*



At school, all the ninth graders pretended that Nao was invisible. In Nao's presence, her classmates wondered aloud whether she was sick, since she never came to school. When they changed out of their uniforms for gym class, the other girls held their noses when Nao took off her clothes, and they said that it smelled like something had died. Nao says that this is how they probably got the idea for her funeral.

*Nao's bullies completely ignored her, even when she spoke. This lack of communication leads to a complete erasure of Nao's identity and value as a person, and it seems to be a fate similar to death. This connects to her classmates' comments that Nao smells dead, as well as their idea of holding a funeral for her.*



(3) The week before summer vacation, Nao saw her classmates passing some cards around to one another. After school, Nao went home and grabbed a kitchen knife and then offered to buy her father some cigarettes so she could go out again. She lay in wait by some vending machines in her neighborhood for one of her classmates, Daisuke—a spindly, pathetic boy. When Nao saw him approach, she jumped out, grabbed him, and ordered him to give her the card. The card, written in calligraphy, was an announcement for a funeral service the next day. The deceased was “former transfer student Yasutani Naoko.”

Like Nao, Daisuke was bullied at school because he was poor. However, Nao thought that he must be happy that she was being bullied instead of him. To punish him for this, she pulled his hair and held the knife against his throat. Then, time seemed to slow, and the future seemed full of limitless possibilities. Nao ended up releasing Daisuke; she told him she was sorry, and then they both went home.

(4) At Nao’s funeral, her classmates set up a framed photo of Nao at her desk, and they took turns coming up to it and bowing. Ugawa Sensei chanted a Buddhist hymn called the Wisdom Heart Sutra, which is about how nothing in the world is permanent and how all things and beings “are just kind of flowing through for the time being.” Nao felt comforted by this idea.

(5) Nao writes that she wasn’t actually present at her funeral—she pretended she was sick that day, so Nao’s mother let her stay home from school. She was happy to have missed the whole thing, but that evening, she got an anonymous email with a link to a video of the funeral. As Nao watched it, she saw that the video was getting thousands of views. She felt weirdly proud that she was so popular.

(6) Nao thinks of the Wisdom Heart Sutra, which Jiko explained to her. The last lines of the sutra mean, “gone completely beyond, awakened, hurray...” Nao thinks of how relieved Jiko will feel when all beings, even Nao’s cruel classmates, reach enlightenment and finally leave Jiko to rest.

*By stopping all communication with Nao, her classmates were slowly erasing her existence, and they planned to finalize this erasure with a funeral service. This shows that communication and the exchange of ideas and feelings is an essential part of being alive—without the ability to communicate with others, a person isn’t fully living.*



*This passage illustrates Dogen’s idea that a single moment of time contains the opportunity for making several decisions to change one’s life around. When Nao is on the brink of a huge decision that could change her life forever, time seems to slow down, and she comprehends the importance of a single moment in determining one’s future.*



*Though the experience of seeing her own funeral must have been strange and hurtful for Nao, she does appreciate the idea of impermanence in the sutra that Ugawa Sensei chanted. The image of everything “flowing through for the time being” once again hearkens to the book’s title, suggesting that things are only real “for the time being”—that is, in the present moment. Since Nao’s own present situation was so painful for her, the idea of its impermanence must have been a consolation to her.*



*While Nao was shunned and bullied at school, she gained popularity after her staged funeral. This highlights the odd and impermanent nature of fame—it’s something random, ever-changing, and fleeting.*



*The sutra celebrates the transformation that people experience after enlightenment. This shows that change isn’t always painful—it can also be joyful, since people can move from lives filled with pain and suffering to the freedom of spiritual enlightenment.*





## PART II: EPIGRAPH

Part II opens with a quote from Marcel Proust's novel *Le temps retrouvé*, which translates to *Time Regained* in English. Proust writes that a writer's words are like an "optical instrument" through which a reader discerns his true self.

*This quote suggests that a writer's role is to pass on meaning and insight to their reader, which can help them discover their true self. A writer can enrich his or her reader's life in the same way that Nao's diary changes Ruth's perceptions.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 1: RUTH

(1) Ruth watches a TV interview of a Japanese man, Mr. Nojima, who stands amid the wreckage left by the **tsunami** and speaks of how his family—his wife, little daughter, and infant son—were all washed away. Mr. Nojima tried to grab them, but the water pushed him away, and their house broke apart. He sounds hopeless and says that he will probably never find his family, or even their remains.

*Mr. Nojima's tragic story demonstrates that change—as represented by the tsunami—can be powerful and destructive. His family is most likely dead, his house is destroyed, and the entire town is in shambles. As Ruth watches this video, she must be worried about Nao, since she assumes that Nao's lunch box was washed into the sea during the tsunami.*



(2) Right after the **tsunami** and earthquake, Ruth w been mesmerized by videos of the disaster—she watched entire towns being destroyed in just a few moments. Many of these videos had been shot on people's cellphones, and it often seemed like those recording didn't quite understand what they were filming. From the vantage point of the camera, it was easy to tell that the wave was fast and immense, and that the "tiny people didn't stand a chance."

*The tsunami is that of a huge wave that quickly and powerfully sweeps away people and towns in its path—it is so powerful that "tiny people" could never stop it. The tsunami symbolizes the inevitability of change—just as it's useless to try to escape such an enormous natural disaster, it's futile to resist change in one's life.*



(3) For a while, after the **tsunami** in Japan, the news was full of this tragedy. However, with time, other stories from around the world occupied the news cycle.

*Like everything else, the news, too, is a "time being." It's impermanent and ever-changing, as it adapts to the continuous changes happening in the world.*



(4) Ruth spent her afternoon looking for the video of Nao's funeral on the internet, but she didn't find it. Ruth feels like she really needs to know if Nao is alive. She telephones Callie to have her inspect the barnacles on the plastic freezer bag, so that Ruth can get a better idea of when the package ended up in the ocean.

*Ruth is worried that Nao is dead, and her desperation to find out to what happened speaks to the deep connection she's formed with Nao through the diary. In finding out more about the barnacles on the freezer bag, Ruth hopes to figure out if it was indeed washed away in the tsunami.*



(5) Callie, a marine biologist who volunteers at a marine mammal protection agency, says that it's hard for her to predict the exact age of the barnacle colony on the plastic bag—but she thinks they are fairly young. Her best guess is that this colony of barnacles has been floating around for at least two years, and more likely for around three or four years. Ruth is disappointed to hear this, because if the barnacles are three years or older, they would be older than the **tsunami**. This would negate her theory about the contents of the lunch box being washed to her by the tsunami.

(6) That night, Ruth has a second dream about the Japanese nun. This time, the nun sees Ruth and offers her thick glasses to her. When Ruth puts them on, she finds she cannot see through them. As Ruth experiences “a feeling of nonbeing,” she brings her hands to her face to pull off the glasses. However, she no longer has a face—there is no Ruth. She is terrified as she feels like she's dissolving into something eternal and unnamable. However, she feels a gentle touch, after which her terror is replaced by calm. Ruth feels like time itself is cradling her in its arms.

*Ruth probably hopes that the lunch box was washed to her in the tsunami because that would mean there's hope that Nao herself experienced and survived the disaster. On the other hand, Ruth might think that if Nao threw the lunch box into the ocean years before the tsunami, it is more likely that Nao killed herself.*



*In her second vivid and vaguely supernatural dream, Ruth seems to meet Jiko, who helps Ruth experience her own impermanence and also her connection to everything else across time and space. Ruth is terrified at first—but with Jiko's help, she realizes that it is actually comforting to lose her individuality and feel connected with everything.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 2: NAO

(1) Nao writes that in Japan, when people wake up in the middle of the night and can't move, feeling like a huge, evil spirit is crushing them,” they call it “metal-binding.” Nao experienced this after her father's suicide attempt. However, she says that this stopped after her “funeral” at school, probably because she became a ghost. Nao wished that she could turn into a ghost who could get revenge on her classmates.

(2) After Nao's funeral, she had a “crazy cosmic dream” about one of her classmates, Reiko. Reiko was smart and popular, and she always looked at Nao as if Nao was repulsive. Nao dreamed that she was stabbing Reiko's “horrible eye”; it felt so real that she wondered if she would later hear that Reiko was murdered or that she hanged herself in the night.

Nao knew that Daisuke and Reiko went to the same cram (test-prep) school, so she cornered Daisuke one day to ask him how Reiko was doing. He said that Reiko had started wearing an eye patch over her left eye. Nao was excited that she had actually managed to hurt Reiko. The thought that she had become “a living ghost” made her feel empowered.

*Nao's descriptions of waking up feeling paralyzed and afraid are similar to how a person would feel during a panic attack. This suggests that she was struggling with anxiety and insomnia in the aftermath of Haruki's suicide attempt. Nao was very attached to him, and the thought of losing him terrified her. However, her funeral changed Nao's perception on death: she was quite convinced that she was now a ghost herself, and as a result, was more accepting of death. It no longer terrified her.*



*Like Ruth, Nao, too, had dreams that felt very vivid. However, while Ruth's dreams are about the quest for deeper spiritual understanding, Nao's dream was violent and vengeful, which reflects her state of mind at the time.*



*Nao was convinced that she was a ghost and had supernatural powers—and strangely, this belief of hers seems to have come true. Nao's violent dream resulted in Reiko's eye injury, which was a strange coincidence. Nao's anger and desire for vengeance were so strong that they seemingly inflicted an injury on her enemy—but in the process, they were also changing Nao into a cruel, bitter person.*



(3) A week after this, Jiko unexpectedly came to visit. When Nao opened the door, she first thought there were two men on the doorstep. Then, just as Nao realized that the visitors were women, the older of the two walked into the apartment past her. The woman went to the balcony, where Nao's father was hiding out, and talked to him and patted his head when he started crying. Nao's father called her "grandmother," and Nao saw that he looked flushed and ashamed. Nao also felt ashamed of her father's shabbiness and of their rundown apartment.

(4) Nao made tea with the younger nun, Muji, and then they all made polite conversation until Nao's mother came home from work. Nao's mother seemed *too* surprised to find Jiko there, so Nao suspected that her mother organized the whole thing. After dinner, Nao snuck off into the bedroom to check the stats on her funeral video, but she was disappointed to see that there were no new views even though the funeral happened less than two weeks ago. Outside, in the living room, she could hear her parents talking to the Jiko and Muji about Nao's problems at school.

When Nao returned to the living room, she felt everyone watching her. Then, Nao's mother told her in a bright voice that Jiko had invited Nao to spend her summer vacation at Jiko's temple in Miyagi. Nao's father promised her that he would see some doctors while she was gone, and that they would make him better. Nao was upset as she realized the whole thing was a setup. She felt frozen and willed herself to stop breathing—but Jiko lightly put her hand over Nao's, and Nao felt herself returning to the room. She agreed to go stay with Jiko.

*All the difficulties in Nao's life were changing her into a vengeful person, but Jiko seems to have arrived in time to save Nao from her own anger and bitterness. The first time Nao saw the nuns, she thought they were men, an observation that will be important later, when Nao contemplates becoming a nun for her own reasons.*



*Nao's funeral video was briefly popular, and this had made her proud. But, like all things, this too changed, and her video was now old news.*



*Tomoko probably thought of Jiko's temple as a safe place for Nao to spend her vacation, since Tomoko was always at work and couldn't be sure that Nao was safe around her suicidal father and sketchy neighbors. However, this turned out to be a fortunate decision, since the reader knows that Nao ended up forming a close bond with Jiko. From the beginning, Jiko seemed to be able to sense the Nao's pain and offer her the support she needed. Jiko's comforting gesture of putting her hand over Nao's recalls the gentle touch that grounded Ruth in her dream.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 3: RUTH

(1) Ruth knows that Miyagi prefecture, in the northeastern part of Japan, was one of the regions that was hardest hit by the earthquake and **tsunami**. Jiko's temple was located somewhere along its coastline. Fukushima prefecture, where the nuclear power station had a catastrophic meltdown after the earthquake, was located just south of Miyagi.

(2) The island Ruth and Oliver live on has a nickname—"The Island of the Dead"—probably because it has tribal burial grounds or because of its aging population of retirees. Ruth likes the nickname, since Ruth's mother died there, and she interred both of her parents' ashes at Whaletown Cemetery. She plans to have her and Oliver's ashes buried there, as well.

*Ruth is worried that Jiko and her ancient temple might not have survived the tsunami. They, too, are impermanent "time beings"—no matter how old and awe-inspiring they are.*



*The island Ruth lives on reminds her of her own mortality and the impermanence of all people. Although Ruth doesn't particularly enjoy living on "The Island of the Dead," the nickname is comforting to her, as it seems to reassure her that death is a natural part of life.*



(3) Dora, the postmistress in Whaletown, is a busybody who knows everything about everyone on the island, so Ruth asks her if she knows anything about Benoit LeBec. Ruth previously called Benoit and left him a message, but she hasn't heard back yet. Dora says that the LeBecs are away at a wedding and asks Ruth why she needs to speak to Benoit. Ruth feels protective of Nao's story, so she answers vaguely that she needs help translating something. Dora immediately asks if it is related to the diary Ruth found on the beach, and Ruth realizes that Muriel has already spread the word.

(4) There is a storm that evening, and Ruth suspects that they will lose power soon. She checks her email before the power goes to see if she has an email from Dr. Leistiko, but he hasn't replied yet. She then quickly searches for the terms "Yasutani Jiko," "Zen," and "nun," with the addition of a new search term: "Miyagi." The wheel on her browser keeps spinning, and just as Ruth is about to give up hope, there's a bright flash of light on her monitor followed by darkness. When it flickers back on, she sees that she has one result from her search: an excerpt from an archive of scholarly journals.

The scholar who wrote the article is discussing the work of Jiko Yasutani as a groundbreaking feminist author who writes autobiographical fiction. Ruth would need a subscription to the archive to read the whole article, but she is excited to have proof that Jiko and Nao are real people. But when Ruth clicks the "Read more" link, she gets a "Server Not Found" message—and then the power goes out.

(5) The next morning, Oliver wants to go to the beach to gather some seaweed for fertilizer. At the beach, Ruth and Oliver are surprised to see a huge crowd of people walking around. They spot Muriel, who says that the crowd is Ruth's fault—all these people have heard about the freezer bag she found, and they, too, want to find something from the **tsunami**. Muriel explains that most of these people are looking for money or valuables. Ruth angrily says that the scavengers are Muriel's fault, since she was the one who told the whole island about the freezer bag. Muriel agrees and apologizes.

## PART II, CHAPTER 4: NAO

(1) Nao writes that Jiko lives on the side of a mountain, in a tiny temple near the coastline. Nao's father agreed to take Nao there by train, and Nao could see that he was stressed at the idea of going out in the daytime. They finally reached Sendai, transferred to another train, and then took a bus to get to the beautiful countryside.

*Ruth dislikes the complete lack of privacy on the island—the islanders love to gossip, and everyone seems to know everything about one another. Ruth feels that this makes her different from (and even superior to) the other islanders, since she's from a city and has no interest in gossip. However, this passage shows that she, too, is reliant on the network of island gossip (like when she asks Dora for news of Benoit), and that the islanders are always keen to help.*



*The scholarly article appears on Ruth's monitor like magic—there is even a flash of light before it shows up. This suggests that these coincidences and connections among characters have a supernatural element to them.*



*Much like the scholarly article lauds Jiko's "autobiographical fiction," Ruth admires Nao's style of writing in her diary. In this way, Jiko and Nao seem to share a talent for writing about their experiences.*



*While Ruth's irritation at the islanders often seems unmerited, this is one instance in which she is justifiably angry. Muriel's tendency to gossip has spread the news about Ruth's find even beyond their little town, and the people combing the beach are motivated by greed. Muriel's humility in apologizing, however, shows that she's not as bad as Ruth assumed.*



*Ruth is worried that Jiko and her temple were obliterated by the tsunami—and Nao's description of the temple suggests that this was almost certainly the case, since the temple was near the coastline.*



Finally, the bus stopped in front of “an ancient stone gate [...] covered with dripping moss, and stone steps that [...] disappeared into the darkness. As Nao and her father exited the bus, Nao realized that her father was soon going to leave her in this lonely place with Jiko, whom she barely knew. Nao began to cry, but her father didn’t even notice—he was gazing up the mountainside with a look of excitement that Nao found surprising, since he rarely looked that happy anymore.

(2) Many of Nao’s classmates in California took medication for their mental health—but Nao didn’t because her Japanese parents didn’t believe in psychiatry. However, Nao thinks that she might have all sorts of syndromes like ADHD and manic depression, as well as suicidal tendencies. Jiko told her that zazen meditation might not cure her, but that it would help her to be less obsessed with her ailments. Nao says that since she hasn’t killed herself yet, it might really be working.

(3) After climbing up the steps for a long time, Nao and her father finally saw the enormous temple gate at the top. Muji came running out to greet them. Nao’s father looked so happy at the temple that Nao hoped that he’d decide to stay there for the summer too. She thought it would be better for him than seeing psychologists. After dinner, Jiko invited Nao to have a bath with her. Nao felt immense compared to Jiko’s ancient, tiny body. However, Jiko didn’t even seem to notice, and Nao began to relax. She says that this is one of Jiko’s “superpowers”—she can make a person feel good about themselves.

Over the next few weeks, Nao observed Jiko and Muji following all kinds of “crazy routines,” even when it came to washing their face or using the toilet. They constantly said prayers of gratitude before everything they did— they even “bowed and thanked the toilet,” which Nao found hilarious. However, this began to rub off on Nao too, and one day, Nao caught herself saying thank you to the toilet—it felt quite natural to her. Initially, though, Nao didn’t speak much to Jiko. She was upset at her father for abandoning her at the temple, and she was convinced that she’d be bored there.

(4) One day, while Nao was scrubbing Jiko’s back in the bath, Jiko asked her if she was angry, and Nao didn’t answer. Then, when Jiko scrubbed Nao’s back, she gently touched one of the scars that Nao had gotten at school. Jiko said that Nao must be very angry. Nao made a huge effort not to cry, and she ran out of the bath as soon as she could.

*Nao’s description of the temple gate makes it seem like the gateway into a mysterious, magical realm. Already, it seems that the temple will be a place of peace and transformation for Nao. Haruki, too, seemed to recall the wonder of the place as he gazed up at it, suggesting that he also had wonderful experiences here with Jiko.*



*Jiko thinks of zazen meditation as a tool to focus on the present moment and pay close attention to how one spends one’s time. Being obsessed with an illness means being worried about how it might affect one’s future and how it has affected one’s past. Zazen would help with this by encouraging the meditator to focus on the present. Notably, while Nao didn’t talk to anyone else about her problems, she freely discussed her worries with Jiko.*



*The temple was a welcome respite after Nao’s cramped, unhappy life in Tokyo; Haruki seemed immediately changed and happy too. Jiko’s unjudgmental love and acceptance of everyone seemed to permeate the temple, immediately putting Nao and Haruki at ease. Jiko’s spiritual practice as a Buddhist nun seemed to give the place its magic.*



*Jiko and Muji’s sense of gratitude and humility, which Nao initially found strange and hilarious, began to rub off on her—a change in herself that surprised her. Despite the “crazy routines” at the temple, Nao never feels isolated or out of place, like she did when she moved back to Japan after living in America. This suggests that unfamiliar customs are easy to get accustomed to when they are accompanied by a spirit of generosity and love.*



*Jiko’s reaction to Nao’s scars was very different from Tomoko’s. While Tomoko insisted on her own solutions for the problem and didn’t listen to Nao when she spoke, Jiko actually asked Nao about her feelings. Nao wasn’t used to speaking about her troubles, so these questions overwhelmed her.*



The next morning, Nao went to Jiko and admitted that she was angry. Nao went on to give her “an executive summary of [her] crappy life,” and Jiko listened quietly. Nao said that she was undoubtedly angry, and that it was “a stupid thing” for Jiko to ask. Jiko agreed that it was stupid, but she said she asked the question because she wanted Nao to hear her own answer. After that day, Nao began talking to Jiko about her life, and Jiko listened while she fingered her *juzu* (Buddhist prayer beads). Nao knew that every bead Jiko moved was a prayer for Nao.

*Whenever Nao spoke to Jiko about her life, Jiko always listened, which invited Nao to trust her and confide in her. Jiko was unfazed by Nao’s rudeness when Nao called her question “stupid,” and Nao could tell that Jiko would lovingly accept everything Nao said or did. She was also certain that Jiko wished the best for her, since she said prayers for Nao as she listened to her problems.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 5: RUTH

(1) Ruth and Oliver lose power for four days. After it comes back on, Ruth checks her email, but she still has nothing from Dr. Leistiko. She returns to the academic archive where she found the excerpt from the article on Jiko’s fiction, and she clicks on a link to pay and order the complete article. However, to Ruth’s disappointment, this prompts a message that says that the article has been removed from the journal’s database. Ruth screams out, “No!”

*Ruth has experienced some lucky coincidences as she searches for the Yasutanis, but they seem to be amounting to nothing, which frustrates her. As Ruth has noted earlier, she isn’t very patient—the same sense of impatience that makes her unhappy with the island also trickles into her search for the Yasutanis.*



(2) Outside the house, the Jungle **Crow** hears Ruth screaming, “No!” The crow shrugs.

*This brief passage seems to confirm that the Jungle Crow is a supernatural being, since it shrugs like a person might when it hears Ruth’s scream. The bird’s reaction suggests that it doesn’t think the reason for Ruth’s unhappiness is important or pertinent to the reason for it being in Canada.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 6: NAO

(1) Nao writes that she might not be able to write much today, since she is feeling uncomfortable at the café. Babette is upset because Nao refused to go on a date, and Nao thinks that she might soon have to find another place to write in.

*When the bar hostesses in Nao’s apartment complex brought their customers home, Nao called them their “dates.” With this in mind, when Nao says here that Babette is angry at her for refusing a “date,” it seems to suggest something more sexually explicit than a date in the traditional sense.*



(2) Nao says that since she and her reader are friends, she will share something personal that has really helped her: Jiko’s instructions for zazen meditation, which Nao and Jiko refer to as Nao’s “superpower.”

*Nao feels that her reader is her “friend,” which stresses the intimacy between writer and reader. Ruth, of course, feels the same way toward Nao.*



Nao relays the sad story of how Jiko became a nun. Jiko's son, Haruki #1, was 19 and studying French literature when he got drafted to fight in World War II. Jiko said that he was a peace-loving boy who liked life. Nao thought that when Haruki #1 was forced to become a kamikaze pilot, he must have felt much more miserable than Nao did amid all the difficulties in her life.

*While Nao likes to tell Jiko about her troubles, Jiko, too, is open about her sorrows with Nao. This is a stark contrast to Nao's parents, who lie and hide their troubles from her. Jiko and Nao's relationship shows that open communication between people must come from both sides.*



Nao said that this this kind of extreme misery feels like a fish flopping around under one's heart, and Jiko agreed. Jiko said that the sadness she felt for Haruki #1 was more like a whale. However, after she became a nun, Jiko "learned how to open up her heart so that the whale could swim away." Nao says she, too, is trying to learn how to do this.

*Jiko's Buddhist practice helped her deal with her extreme sorrow by helping her to focus on the present rather than wallow in past suffering. This is how she allowed her immense heartbreak, represented by the image of the whale pushing up under her heart, to "swim away." Nao, too, wants to be able do this.*



Nao tells her reader that she will now describe how to do zazen: one has to sit down without slouching and stack one's hands in one's lap with the thumbs touching. Then, one must relax and focus on one's breathing. Nao says that although it sounds simple, she struggles to do it without getting distracted. Jiko says that this is fine, since minds do think—but one must pay attention when this is happening and choose to drop it. This is how a person can develop their "superpower." Jiko says "that to do zazen is to enter time completely."

*Zazen meditation is one of the tools that Jiko teaches Nao to help her to focus on the present, or "enter time." Nao values the practice and finds it empowering and calming, which is why she shares it with her friend—her reader.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 7: RUTH

(1) Ruth tries to sit zazen, but she always ends up dozing off. She wonders how this practice could open up her mind, she just feels bored.

*Ruth's challenges with zazen suggest that she isn't spiritually ready for it yet. She is still "asleep" in a spiritual sense and is struggling to pay attention to the present and "wake up" the way Dogen advises.*



(2) Ruth continues trying zazen meditation, but she keeps falling asleep. Between sleeping and waking, she hovers in a dreamlike state.

*As Ruth keeps trying zazen, her experience of it seems to be gradually changing. Before she falls fully asleep, she enters a semiconscious state that is not quite a dream—which seems very similar to the vivid dreams she has in which she encounters Jiko. This seems to imply that zazen triggers the same kind of spiritual experience in Ruth that her supernatural dreams do.*



(3) When Ruth was a little girl, she used to worry that she would travel so far away in her dreams that she wouldn't be able to return in time to wake up. To console her, her father told her that he would always come and find her.

*As a child, Ruth was fearful that she would get stuck in the dream world. When she enters a strange dream state as she practices zazen, Ruth remembers this, because the dream state feels so real to her. Throughout the novel, dreams are a vehicle for characters to connect across time and space, which leads to Ruth questioning if the dream state is any less real than her conscious life.*



(4) Oliver tells Ruth that she is perhaps trying too hard to succeed at zazen—she probably needs a nap instead. Ruth says her entire life is like a nap that she needs to wake up from. She says that the universe has sent Nao her way, and that she really wants to heed Nao's words to achieve her “superpower.”

*Ruth recognizes that she is spiritually “asleep.” She takes Nao's words to heart, and she feels fortunate for their connection that seems to transcend time and space.*



(5) Ruth and Oliver go to get some clams and oysters from a clam garden. After they've harvested enough, they drink beer and eat oysters. Oliver tells Ruth that these oysters are called the “Miyagi oyster,” since they are originally from Miyagi, Japan. Ruth is surprised by this coincidence. She thinks about Jiko's temple, which might or might not still be clinging to the mountainside in Miyagi. Ruth then wonders aloud how much time she and Oliver have left, and Oliver replies they had better enjoy their lives while they can.

*Jiko's temple is in the Miyagi prefecture in Japan, and Ruth is surprised that there's a connection to that place right on her island: the Miyagi oysters she's having for dinner. Once again, the characters are connected through a coincidence that seems destined. When Ruth feels this connection with Jiko, she is reminded of her own mortality as she thinks of how Jiko's temple is impermanent.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 8: NAO

(1) One morning, Jiko decided to take Nao on a picnic to the beach. When they stopped by the Family Mart to pick up food for the picnic, Nao saw that there was a crowd of biker yanki girls hanging around outside the door. Nao was nervous and told Jiko that she wasn't hungry so they could avoid the *yankis*. Jiko, however, insisted on going in and didn't seem to notice when the girls made rude comments as they walked past.

*Jiko loves and accepts all people. She is not intimidated by rudeness, since she doesn't judge people for their poor behavior.*



The yankis were still outside when Nao and Jiko left the store. They started yelling rude comments, and Nao placed herself in front to try and protect Jiko. But Jiko, to Nao's dismay, started heading toward the *yankis*. Jiko stood in front of the girls and bowed deeply to them, and a girl in front was surprised into nodding back. The leader of the group reached over and punched the girl who nodded, scolding her for not bowing properly. All the girls bowed back, and Jiko bowed again. Jiko asked Nao to bow too.

*Nao thought that the yankis were intimidating and rude, and that they were impossible to communicate with. However, Jiko's respectful gesture—which the yanki girls return—demonstrates that all people have the capacity for humility and love.*





(2) At the beach, Jiko asked Nao if she has ever “bullied a **wave**” and asked Nao to try it. Nao hit the waves with Jiko’s stick until she was exhausted. The waves kept coming at her, and Nao lay down, letting them wash over her. She walked back to Jiko and told her that the ocean had won. Jiko asked if it was a good feeling, and Nao said that it was.

(3) Nao watched some surfers on the ocean, and she told Jiko that one of them fell and then got back up. Jiko says, “Up, down, same thing.” Nao told her that up and down are certainly not the same thing for a surfer, and Jiko said that they weren’t the same but also not completely different.

Jiko said that the surfer and the **wave** are also the same: a person rises up like a wave until they fall again. Presently, Nao writes that she never completely understand what Jiko says, but that she thinks it is really nice of Jiko to try to explain it, anyway. Nao thinks that Jiko’s “little wave” won’t be around for much longer, which makes Nao sad.

*Waves are a symbol of change in the novel, and Jiko demonstrated to Nao that it’s impossible to “bully a wave”—in other words, it is impossible to stop change. Nao realizes that it is a good feeling to stop struggling against change and simply let the tides of life flow over her.*



*Jiko tried to explain the Buddhist idea of nonduality to Nao, a concept that essentially means that all creatures and things are connected through time. For instance, Jiko believes that the difference between up and down are inconsequential.*



*Jiko elaborated on the idea that everything is connected by also explaining that all “time beings” are similar in their impermanence. Jiko explained these things to Nao with patience and love, but Nao still struggles to understand these complicated ideas. However, she appreciates Jiko’s attempt at communication and worries that Jiko, too, will die. Nao still struggles to accept impermanence.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 9: RUTH

(1) Ruth thinks that no one can keep hold of water and prevent it from floating away. She remembers how Tepco (the company that tried to fix the nuclear leak at the plant in Fukushima) learned this lesson when it tried to use seawater to cool the reactors. The contaminated sea water started to leak from its containment zone, so Tepco finally released it back into the Pacific Ocean. Ruth thinks that information, like water, is difficult too is to hold on to. Tepco and the Japanese government tried to contain this information, but the Japan public found out, and they were angry.

(2) In medieval Japan, people believed that earthquakes were caused by “an angry catfish who lived under the islands.” They believed that the Kashima Deity held the fish in check by pinning its head to the ground with a huge stone. But when the god was distracted or dozed off, the fish thrashed around, causing the earth to shake.

*Ruth compares information with water to show that both these things are beyond people’s control—they are constantly moving and changing and can’t be contained. Just as the contaminated water couldn’t be contained, neither could the fact that the water was put back into the ocean stay hidden from the public.*



*The medieval belief that earthquakes were a catfish shaking the land speaks to the idea that change is unavoidable. Just like Ruth’s recognition that it’s futile to try to escape a tsunami, people in medieval Japan seemed to understand that they were powerless to stop cataclysmic changes like natural disasters—whether the catfish myth was actually real or not.*



(3) The Earthquake Catfish wasn't considered a malevolent creature despite the destruction it caused. A subspecies of this fish was called the World-Rectifying Catfish, and this fish caused beneficial political and economic disruptions. It went after rich elites who rigged the economy and engaged in political corruption. The catfish caused havoc and destruction, forcing the wealthy to surrender their assets in order to rebuild—they had to distribute their wealth to the labor class of builders and workers.

(4) Even in modern times, earthquakes and catfish are linked: Ruth has a smartphone app to track earthquakes, and the app's logo is a cartoon catfish. Oliver wonders if the app would even work in Whaletown. He says that in Stuttgart, where his parents grew up, there were gigantic catfish that lived at the bottom of the river, and the fish swam up to the top right before an earthquake. Oliver downloads the app, but he is disappointed to find out that it only works in Japan. Ruth says that he should probably go to Japan so he can use the app, but Oliver replies that Japan seems to be coming to them.

(5) Ruth asks Oliver what he means by saying that Japan is coming to them, and he explains that the earthquake and **tsunami** moved Japan's coast closer to Canada. He also says that it caused Earth's mass to shift closer to its core, which makes the planet spin faster. Earth's days are now very slightly shorter. Ruth thinks that this is terrible.

## PART II, CHAPTER 10: NAO

(1) With Jiko's help, Nao felt stronger in her body and mind by the end of summer—she felt that she was “becoming a superhero.” Jiko encouraged Nao to sit zazen for many hours and showed her how to restrain herself from killing things, even the mosquitoes that buzzed around her. Nao learned not to swat them when they bit her and not to itch the bites after. At first, her skin swelled up from the bites; but soon, she became immune to the poison, and it no longer bothered her. She felt that there was no difference between her and the mosquitoes—her skin was no longer a barrier.

*People in medieval Japan recognized that change was necessary. Even though something like an earthquake it was destructive, it shook things up and shifted dynamics of power and money, which was necessary in order to keep society balanced and fair. Despite the often violent and chaotic nature of change, this passage makes the case that it is ultimately a positive thing.*



*The catfish represents earthquakes across geography and time, showing that people in different cultures and at various periods in history are connected by common associations. The fact that both medieval Japanese culture and Oliver's own hometown associated earthquakes with catfish further strengthens the connection between Ruth and Oliver's lives and Nao's life in Japan.*



*So far, Ruth has focused on how the tsunami destroyed human life and property—but Oliver points out that the changes are even bigger than what Ruth thought. Land masses, the length of days, and the structure of Earth itself have all been transformed. Even the planet, and time itself, are “time beings.”*



*With Jiko's help, Nao was able to practice zazen and focus on her present. This helped her feel empowered, so that she was no longer overwhelmed by the problems in her life. Jiko also taught Nao to not let her problems—as represented by the mosquitoes—bother her. Nao realized that she was connected to everything, even to the mosquitoes (and, by extension to her enemies and cruel classmates), since they were all connected as “time beings.”*



(2) In August, Jiko and Muji cleaned and prepared the temple for Obon, which they believed was the time when ghosts came back from the land of the dead to visit the living. The night before Obon started, Nao was too excited to sleep and went out to sit under the temple gate. Suddenly, she saw her father sitting next to her. She assumed that Haruki had finally killed himself, which was why his ghost was there. Then, she noticed that the ghost looked really young and was wearing some kind of uniform. Nao realized that this was not her father—it was Haruki #1. Nao introduced herself to Haruki #1, who said that he didn't know he had a grand-niece. He said, "How quickly time flies...." Nao didn't know what else to say to him, and soon, he was gone.

*Nao mistakes Haruki #1's ghost for Haruki at first, suggesting that the two of them looked similar, in addition to sharing a name. Haruki #1's ghost acknowledges that time passes too quickly and that he is not aware of all the new changes in the world—Nao's very existence is something he didn't know about. It's implied that Haruki #1's ghost did actually appear to Nao—he doesn't seem to have been a figment of her imagination, since Nao herself never doubted that she actually saw him. The reader will also soon learn that the ghost's looks and behavior were accurate to how Haruki #1 looked and acted when he was alive. Given that Nao never met Haruki before he died, the only explanation for their meeting seems to be that Haruki #1's ghost somehow transcended time and space to visit her.*



(3) Nao berated herself for not saying more to Haruki #1 when she had the chance. She thought that she should have asked him all sorts of interesting things about his life, including what death felt like.

*Nao was curious about death even before she decided that she would kill herself. She knew that no one would be able to tell her more about it than someone who had already died.*



(4) The next morning, Nao sneaked off to Jiko's study, Nao's favorite room at the temple. It overlooked the garden and had a low desk where Jiko worked. The room also had an altar with pictures of Jiko's three dead children: Haruki #1, Sugako, and Ema. Nao inspected Haruki #1's picture and recalled that he was just a few years older than her when he died. The picture frame suddenly came apart in her hands, and she found a letter had been jammed between the picture and the frame. Nao pocketed the letter so that she could decipher it later.

*This is the first time that Nao describes Jiko's study in the diary—but the room is already familiar to readers, because it's the same place where Ruth saw Jiko in her dreams. This is evidence that Ruth's dreams were indeed supernatural—she seems to have really traveled to Jiko's temple in them, as she couldn't have known what this room looked like without actually going there.*



(5) In his last letter to Jiko, Haruki #1 wrote that he would be dying the following day. He asked Jiko not to cry for him. Haruki #1 said that he expected to be terrified, but that he was instead "relieved and happy." He wrote that he wanted to say many more things to Jiko and send her other things too, but that it was too late to do so. Haruki #1 wrote that he was not "a warlike man," and all his actions would "be in accordance with the love of peace" that Jiko had taught him.

*Nao regretted not asking Haruki #1 what it felt like to die, and this letter seems to answer her question. Haruki #1 seemed sad that he'd run out of time to tell Jiko all the things he wanted to—but otherwise, he was facing his death with courage. Since he was dying as a kamikaze pilot and was supposed to crash his plane into an American warship, it is odd that he wrote that his actions would reflect "the love of peace" that Jiko taught him. This is a mystery that will be resolved later in the novel.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 11: RUTH

(1) Ruth finally meets Benoit at the island's garbage and recycling dump where he works. Benoit tells Ruth that she looks a lot like her mother, Masako. He says that he and Masako were "great friends." It had slipped Ruth's mind that her mother often visited the "Free Store" at the dump, which was filled with good-quality discarded items that anyone could take for free. Benoit would ask Masako if she'd "found any good bargains," which always made her laugh.

Benoit glances through the French booklet and asks Ruth if he can keep it so he can work on making a full translation. She feels hesitant to leave it with him, but she doesn't want to offend him by refusing. Benoit notices the stack of Japanese letters too, and he recognizes that those letters and the French booklet were written by the same person, since the writer used the same pen for both. He guesses that the "sky soldier" probably wrote the booklet in French in order to keep his thoughts a secret from his squadron-mates.

(2) At home, Ruth tells Oliver about Benoit's guess that Haruki #1 was the author of the letters and the booklet, and that he wrote the booklet in French to keep it a secret from the other soldiers. Oliver remarks that it is an "excellent security feature," and as soon as Ruth hears him say this, she recalls that Nao wrote the same thing about hiding her diary inside the Proust cover. She thinks that "Secret French diaries run in the family," and she is faintly annoyed that Oliver made the connection while she didn't.

(3) It's been nine days since Ruth emailed Dr. Leistiko, and she still hasn't heard back from him. She resends it with a note of apology for her persistence, but she then feels guilty for bothering the professor. Ruth also feels terrible for ignoring her memoir for so many days.

(4) That night, Oliver says that he has news for Ruth: a scientific article on quantum computing that appeared on his newsfeed is authored by someone named "H. Yasudani." Ruth gets very excited and wants to email the author right away, but Oliver says that he already did that. He also tells Ruth that instead of searching for new leads, she should "focus on what's tangible in the here and now" and have the Japanese letters translated.

*Ruth worries that she might get Alzheimer's like Masako did. Anytime Ruth forgets something, it triggers her fear that her forgetfulness is a symptom of Alzheimer's. In this passage, Ruth not only forgets that Masako and Benoit knew each other, but Benoit also says that she looks just like her mother—which must make Ruth even more anxious that she's becoming like her mother.*



*Haruki #1 was a kamikaze pilot and wrote letters to Jiko, so the reader can infer that he is the "sky soldier" who wrote the letters. Nao also found out that Haruki #1 was bullied during his military service, which explains why he would want to decode his writing to hide it from his squadron-mates. Benoit seems confident that he'll be able to translate the French booklet—if he's successful, the booklet will serve as yet another connection between Ruth and Nao.*



*Nao and Haruki #1 both used French writing to hide their diaries from the people who bullied them. It is an eerie coincidence that they both faced similar problems and devised similar solutions to their problems. This is yet another example of how people can be connected despite vast differences in their respective time periods and circumstances.*



*Ruth's impatience and persistent guilt about her memoir show that she hasn't quite mastered the lessons in Nao's diary about the transience of life and the importance of focusing on the present.*



*In yet another coincidence, an article by someone called "H. Yasudani" pops up on Oliver's newsfeed. Of course, Ruth and Oliver think there is a good chance that the author might be Haruki, as the last name and field of study are a match. Meanwhile, Oliver gives Ruth the advice that she needs to hear: that she needs to focus on the "here and now." This sounds like something Jiko would say. Toward the beginning of the novel, when Nao doesn't know what to write in the diary, Jiko tells her that she should "start where [she is]," and Oliver's advice to Ruth mirrors this.*



(5) Oliver and Ruth make the trip to Arigato Sushi, a restaurant in Campbell River, which is the closest city to Whaletown. The owner of the restaurant, Akira Inoue, and his wife, Kimi, emigrated from Fukushima, Japan many years before. Right when they were planning to sell the restaurant and move back to Japan, the nuclear plant melted down, and their old city became uninhabitable. So, they decided to stay in Canada. Presently, Kimi glances through the bundle of letters that Ruth has brought, and she says that she can read the old-fashioned writing. She agrees to write down the translations for Ruth.

*Ruth has been worried that the 2011 earthquake and tsunami hurt the Yasutanis. To have the Japanese letters translated, she ends up taking them to Akira and Kimi, whose lives have also been adversely affected by the earthquake and tsunami. This is yet another link between the characters in the novel, again making the point that people from all different walks of life are connected in untold ways.*



## PART II, CHAPTER 12: NAO

(1) Several people turned up at the temple for the Obon ceremony. Jiko sat in a golden throne in the altar room, and after a lot of chanting and praying, she began to read out a long scroll that listed the names of the dead family and friends of the parishioners. Nao found it boring at first, but then she suddenly felt like the names were alive. This made her feel less alone and less afraid of dying.

*Since the dead are remembered with love and affection, they seem to exist even in the present. The dead have transformed into memories, but the fact that they still live on in their loved one's hearts lets Nao know that she shouldn't fear change, particularly death.*



Nao played the big ceremonial drum during the ceremony—Muji had trained her for this, and Nao had practiced hard. Nao liked playing the drum. She says that she could pay attention to every moment of time when she drummed, since she had to get the rhythm exactly right. By drumming, she “resolved [her] childhood obsession with now,” because the drum turned the present moment into sound.

*Nao had been struggling her whole life to get a grasp on the present moment—the “now.” At Jiko's temple, she finally managed to do this by playing the drum, which was a kind of meditation for Nao. Like sitting zazen, drumming helped Nao connect with the present and let go of her past and future.*



(2) After the ceremony, Nao saw that the door to Jiko's study was open, and she went inside to investigate. She saw an old man kneeling before the family altar and crying. Nao noticed that Jiko was in the room too, kneeling quietly in a corner. Nao felt guilty about being there and tried to sneak out quietly, but she suddenly heard Haruki #1's voice.

*At the Obon ceremony, Nao saw people who celebrated and remembered their dead friends and relatives. But here, she saw that death also resulted in great sorrow.*



On the altar, there was a box wrapped in a white cloth. Previously, Muji told Nao that it held Haruki #1's remains. Nao had said that this didn't “make any sense,” because his remains must be the bottom of the sea—but Muji hadn't given her any answers. Now, Haruki #1 asked Nao if she knew what was in the box. Nao said that she knew, and he echoed her thoughts—“No sense. No sense at all...” Then, Haruki #1 disappeared. Nao managed to slip out quietly too.

*Haruki #1 echoes the reaction that Nao had when she first found out about the white box, which highlights the connection between them.*



(3) The Obon festival lasted for four days. After all the visitors left, Jiko, Muji, and Nao visited all the parishioners' houses to do Buddhist services in front of all the family altars. By now, Nao had read Haruki #1's letter and sneaked off every night to wait for him by the temple gate—but he never returned.

*Nao is impatient to see Haruki #1 again, which is similar to how Ruth is impatient to solve the mystery of Nao's whereabouts. In both cases, their impatience yields no results. Given Jiko's expertise as a spiritual guide, she's likely to have the answers about Haruki #1 that Nao is looking for.*



(4) Soon, Nao's summer vacation was almost done, which she was very sad about. Muji and Jiko threw her a farewell party with pizza and chocolates. Later that night, Nao told Jiko about seeing Haruki #1's ghost and then taking his letter out of the frame and reading it. Jiko told Nao how the student soldiers were beaten and bullied by their officers, who despised them. This made Nao feel insignificant, because the bullying she faced from her classmates paled in comparison to what her uncle must have gone through.

*Nao turned to Jiko with her questions about Haruki #1, and Jiko was able to provide answers. Haruki #1 was a student soldier—which meant that he was a university student before he was forced to enroll in the army—and his officers perceived him as an outsider. They despised him for this, in much the same way that Nao's classmates disliked her and bullied her for being a foreigner.*



Nao asked to know if Haruki #1 hated Americans, and Jiko replied that he only hated war and the thought of killing others. She explained that he had no choice in the matter—he was drafted against his will. Jiko had cried when his notice came, but Haruki #1 was merely amused that he of all people would have to be a warrior.

*Haruki #1 seemed to have been wise beyond his years, much like Ruth finds Nao to be mature and insightful for her age. Additionally, Haruki #1 was forced to deal with having his life uprooted, just like Nao and her father were.*



One of Haruki #1's classmates had given a speech proudly proclaiming that he did not expect to return alive. Haruki #1 and the other 25,000 student soldiers knew they would die. However, the boy who gave the speech survived, and Jiko said that he now comes to the temple every year at Obon to apologize. Nao realized that this was the old man she'd seen in Jiko's study. Nao asked Jiko what was in the white box, and Jiko looked tired as she said it was empty.

*Haruki #1's classmate who returned alive carried was guilty, because his friends and classmates died while he was spared. He could no longer enjoy the life he had, which is why he shows up at Obon to show his respects.*



(5) The next day, Nao returned to the study to replace Haruki #1's letter. Since she was very curious about the contents of the white box, she opened it and saw that it was empty except for a tiny slip of paper. Jiko appeared at the door, and she said that she had been very surprised when she opened the box for the first time and saw the paper. It had just one word printed on it: "Remains." This is what the Naval Authority sent when they had nothing else to send. Jiko had found it quite funny and had laughed. Her daughters worried that she had lost her mind, but Jiko said that Haruki #1 would have seen the humor in it too.

*Jiko found it amusing that she was sent a piece of paper instead of Haruki #1's remains, and she was confident that Haruki #1 would have found it funny too. The two of them were very close and shared a similar sense of humor. Given the similarities between Haruki #1 and Nao, perhaps this is why Jiko considers Nao a kindred spirit.*



Jiko handed Nao a freezer bag full of letters written by Haruki #1, and she told her that she could keep them and read them, along with the letter she'd found in the photo frame. Nao was excited, because Haruki #1 was her "new hero." Jiko also gave her Haruki #1's old **watch**, and she made Nao promise to wind it every day and never let it stop.

Nao's father arrived that afternoon to pick her up. He told her that they could stop at Disneyland on their way back home. Nao knew that crowded places were really hard for him and that he must have been preparing for this for weeks. However, she no longer wanted to go and told him so, which seemed to disappoint him. Nao wrote that the idea of Disneyland seemed childish and frivolous to her after meeting a real hero like Haruki #1.

## PART II, CHAPTER 13: HARUKI #1'S LETTERS

*December 10, 1943.* In Haruki #1's first letter, he wrote to Jiko that although it had just been a week since he left to the navy airbase, he's changed so much that Jiko might not recognize him if she passed him on the street.

*January 2, 1944.* In Haruki #1's second letter, he wrote that when he found out that students were no longer exempt from being conscripted, he immediately knew that he would die. At this, he felt somewhat relieved, since he'd spent many months not knowing. Now, certainty, even if it meant knowing that he would die, felt exciting.

Haruki #1 recalled that Jiko had cried when she found out he'd have to join the army, which had irritated him. He'd asked her to pull herself together. Haruki #1 wrote that he regretted this, and he explained that he'd behaved this way out of fear and a desire to distract himself from his own heartbreak.

*February 23, 1944.* In Haruki #1's next letter, he wrote that his squadron leader, F, and the other senior officers considered the student recruits to be pretentious and singled them out for "special exercises." Haruki #1 was targeted by the officers, but a fellow recruit called K, who was "a true philosopher," was treated even worse.

*The lunch box that Ruth found was placed inside a freezer bag, which is likely the same one that contained Haruki #1's. Haruki #1's old watch is a symbol of passing time, and by asking Nao to promise to keep it wound and running, Jiko wanted her to always remember that time was rushing by. Given that Ruth is the one in possession of the watch now, she'll likely take this reminder to heart as she reads it in Nao's diary.*



*Nao felt changed after meeting Haruki #1 and hearing his story of courage and sacrifice. By idolizing a ghost, Nao ended up not recognizing the hero in her present: her father, who seems to have worked hard to improve himself over the summer.*



*Haruki #1's first letter stated that he looked different—and it hinted that he felt different, as well. This suggests that life in the military had a deeply transformative effect on Haruki #1—it changed him inside and out.*



*Haruki #1's ideas in this letter were similar to what Haruki wrote in his letter to Dr. Leistiko about death giving life shape and meaning. Haruki #1 finds comfort in certainty after spending many anxious months wondering about his fate.*



*Haruki #1 admitted that an extreme sadness at his impending death accompanied his relief about knowing his fate. Though he found it hard to admit this to Jiko before, he did ultimately confessed his grief to her. Haruki #1, much like Nao, saw Jiko as his confidante.*



*The officers found Haruki #1 and K to be different and perceived them to be outsiders, which is why the officers disliked them and beat them up. Similarly, Nao's classmates saw her as an outsider to Japanese culture, which is why they bullied her.*



February 26, 1944. In his fourth letter, Haruki #1 wrote that he was doing well in his training and advancing in rank and status. He said that he became concerned about K and volunteered to take his place during a training session. Since then, F had been showering Haruki #1 with special attention.

April 14, 1944. In Haruki #1's next letter, he said that since he was now F's favorite, he was singled out for special treatment in F's post-dinner games. While the others in the squadron sometimes laughed at these games, K never laughed and watched quietly.

June 16, 1944. In his next letter, Haruki #1 wrote that he was very excited that Jiko would be visiting him soon. He also wrote that K disappeared, and the officers then informed the squadron that he was found dead. Haruki #1 suspected that there might have been foul play, and he felt very sad.

August 3, 1944. In the next letter, Haruki #1 wrote that he was very happy to see Jiko and his sisters. He recalled Jiko's shocked expression when she saw him, and he apologized for preparing her for the change in his appearance and his cut and bruised face. Haruki #1 told her that these wounds were normal aspects of military life.

December 1944. In the next letter, Haruki #1 wrote that he had volunteered to be a Special Attack Force (or kamikaze) pilot. He asked Jiko to forgive him and begged her to understand why he did this. One reason Haruki #1 chose this was because it would leave Jiko with a higher pension after his death, and he liked the idea of being useful to Jiko and his sisters. Secondly, he would now have more control over his death, since he knew he would certainly die in the war. Haruki #1 would know the exact moment his death would occur, rather than dying randomly on a battlefield.

*Haruki #1 was clearly a kind and honorable man: he helped his friend K, even when he himself was getting brutally bullied. This is a complete contrast to how Nao treated Daisuke; it shows that Haruki #1 was more mature and emotionally resilient than Nao.*



*Haruki #1 willingly took K's place so that K would not be tortured, but K seemed to suffer more from watching Haruki #1 being tortured instead of him. This speaks to the depth of their friendship—they seemingly understood each other without talking.*



*It's implied that K was murdered by the officers, which was, of course, very disturbing to Haruki #1. Much as Haruki #1 tried to protect his friend, he couldn't prevent this tragedy from happening.*



*Even though Jiko expected to see changes in Haruki #1, she was shocked by his wounds and bruises. Perhaps, for Jiko, Haruki #1's cuts and bruises are a tangible reminder that her son is going to suffer and die in the war. Haruki #1 attempted to explain these away as the typical injuries from military training, which, of course, was not true. This is similar to how Nao tried to explain away her own cuts and bruises to Tomoko.*



*Haruki #1 was certain that he would die in battle, so he came to terms with it. He preferred having a choice in the manner of his death, as this gave him a small degree of control over his life, which had spun completely out of control.*





March 27, 1945. In his final letter, Haruki #1 wrote that he was reading poetry and novels as he prepared for his death. He said that during a test flight, he was reminded of the children's story, the "Crow Wars," and he felt like the Crow Captain flying off to wage battle. Haruki #1 loved to fly—it gave him as much pleasure as sitting zazen. He concluded the letter by saying that Jiko would receive another "official" letter from him, but that those would not be his last words.

Haruki #1 mentioned feeling like the "Crow Captain," a character in a children's story, and said that he loved flying. This suggests that his spirit might have returned to the world as the Japanese Jungle Crow that hangs around Ruth's house. Haruki #1 also said that the final letter Jiko would receive would not be his last words, which hinted at the existence of his secret French diary. Even if Jiko understood his meaning, she would not have been able to get her hands on the secret diary.



## PART III

In an excerpt from Master Dogen's *Uji*, Dogen writes that time is not separate from the "time being." He says that every being in the world is "linked together as moments in time"—but, at the same time, they "exist as individual moments in time."

The characters in the novel are connected in various ways—whether through the events they experience, the ideas they have, or the metaphysical communication that happens in dreams and ghostly conversations encounters. However, they are also separate people with separate experiences. This is what Dogen means in this passage—while all beings exist as individuals, they are all also linked.



## PART III, CHAPTER 1: NAO

(1) As Nao read Haruki #1's letters, she felt ashamed for making a fuss about the bullying she experienced, since he went through so much more. She realized that Haruki #1 was not much older than she was—he was only 19—and yet he'd studied so hard and knew so much. In comparison to him, Nao felt pathetic.

Haruki #1's letters ended up changing Nao's perception about her own life. Previously, she believed that her life was unbearable, but she ended up realizing that it wasn't as bad as Haruki #1's.



One day, Nao saw Haruki making an origami beetle out of a page from a book on Heidegger. This irritated Nao because she remembered that Haruki #1 studied Heidegger seriously. She told Haruki that his uncle actually studied philosophy rather than childishly playing with origami. Nao said that she had his letters, and that Haruki should probably read them too, so he could stop feeling sorry for himself. Nao told him to be more like his uncle. Haruki went pale and quietly said that she was right.

Nao saw no similarity between the noble Haruki #1 and her own father, who seemed pathetic to her as he sat around the house making paper bugs. Haruki seemed very hurt by the harsh verdict Nao passed about him, but he accepted it quietly and agreed with her—clearly, Nao and Haruki are still struggling to communicate.



(2) When school started again, Nao was determined to be calm and use her "superpower." On the first day, her heart was pounding, but she didn't feel afraid—and the kids ended up leaving her alone. Haruki #1's letters made Nao feel ashamed of how little she knew, so she started to pay attention in her classes and especially enjoyed science. Then, in November, her father attempted suicide again.

In the brief respite that Nao got from the bullying at her school, she ended up becoming a curious and interested student. This shows that when given a chance, Nao loved learning—and by extension, living. Haruki #1 was also a passionate scholar, which was evidence of his interest in all that life had to offer. This highlights the connection between Nao and her great-uncle.



(3) Nao writes that she'd have to back up to September 11 in order to explain it properly. Late on the night of September 11, Nao found Haruki sitting in front of the TV. On the screen was the image of two skyscrapers with smoke coming out of them. At first, Nao thought it was a movie, but she soon realized that it was the news. Haruki told her that this was happening in New York, and that it was a suspected terror attack. Nao reached for his hand as they watched the tiny shapes of people jumping out of buildings. They watched as the towers fell and people ran screaming. Haruki spent days staring at these images on the news.

(4) Haruki became obsessed with the people who jumped out of the Twin Towers, and he looked for them on the internet. He found the picture of the Falling Man, which was a famous photograph of a man falling head down, with the steel building behind him. Haruki spent hours staring at it.

(5) After Haruki attempted suicide, the idea of killing herself began to make sense to Nao. She began to think that if she was going to die anyway, she might as well just get it over with. Nao thinks that the best way to die would be to jump off a cliff near Jiko's temple. She would think fondly about Jiko and jump into the Pacific Ocean, where her remains would join Haruki #1's.

*Just like Ruth was obsessed with news footage from the tsunami, Haruki was fixated on the news footage from 9/11. This event, like the tsunami, was quick and destructive, and it resulted in many deaths. This once again shows the destructive potential and inescapable nature of change. Since Haruki #1 was a kamikaze pilot, his work was much like the suicide bombers who carried out the terrorist attack. With this in mind, this attack also suggests that Haruki #1 likely caused violence and death for his American victims.*



*Much like Ruth after the tsunami, Haruki seemed to be very invested in the tragedy and in the people who were affected by it.*



*Haruki's suicide attempts filled Nao with a deep sadness, which is why she first thought of killing herself. However, her justification for suicide is similar to the idea that Haruki #1 expressed in his letter about how he preferred to have control over the moment of his death. The difference is that Haruki #1 had no choice but to die, whereas Nao can choose to live.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 2: RUTH

(1) Ruth recalls that she and Oliver were visiting some friends in rural Wisconsin during September 11. After hearing about the terror attack, Ruth immediately tried to reach her friends in New York. Her editor yelled over the phone that she could see the tower falling down, and then the phone connection went dead. Ruth tried to call Masako, who was back home at the island in Canada, but she couldn't get through. She thought that her mother, who often got confused about time, would think that Ruth still lived in New York and worry about her.

(2) Since the airports were closed after September 11, Ruth and Oliver rented a car and began to drive home. They saw American flags pop up everywhere and listened to the president promise to get the terrorists. While eating dinner at a restaurant in Montana, their waitress, who looked Mexican, told them that they would be closing early as a security precaution. Later, Ruth and Oliver heard on the news that there had been a spate of hate crimes against Muslim Americans. Oliver realized that their waitress had probably not been afraid of Arab terrorists.

*Ruth, Nao, and Haruki were all impacted in some way by 9/11. This is yet another connection between characters who otherwise lead very different lives. It also emphasizes how big changes—even ones that don't impact a person directly—can be traumatic and difficult to cope with.*



*The 9/11 terror attack didn't just affect the people who'd lost their lives in the event. Its effects rippled outwards and changed many people's lives for the worse, as Muslim Americans who had nothing to do with the attacks were scapegoated.*



(3) Ruth and Oliver finally made it into Canada, where they felt safe. The people on the island only had a vague notion of the events in New York. Every time Ruth's mother watched the news, she was surprised that America was at war again and asked Ruth who they were fighting. Months and years passed, and yet Masako was always surprised when she saw the coverage of the war on TV. She always asked Ruth who America was fighting.

*Ruth is often frustrated that their island is so remote and isolated, but this turned out to be an advantage when the rest of the world was thrown into chaos. This passage also references the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed 9/11, which speaks to the idea that traumatic events often have serious ripple effects.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 3: NAO

(1) After 9/11, Nao's classmates initially seemed sympathetic toward her because of her connection to America. But by the end of September, they started bullying her again. One day, Nao got her period when she was at school. She wasn't prepared for it, so she rushed to the bathroom to wad some toilet paper into a makeshift pad. She heard a scrabbling noise in the stall next to hers and looked up to see one of her classmates taking a video of Nao on a cellphone.

*Nao found the constant changes in her classmates' behavior difficult because her days at school were unpredictable. After some seemingly calm days, she was stunned by the cruel and surprising turn they took.*



Nao tried to leave the bathroom, but Reiko and her sidekicks blocked her path. Daisuke was recording the whole encounter with a video camera. Nao's classmates tied her skirt above her head with a jump rope. Nao couldn't see anything through her skirt, which covered her face completely. Her classmates threw her on the floor and pulled down her panties. They were excited to see bloodstains in her underwear, and one of them said that they would "get more for stains." Reiko instructed Daisuke to rape Nao since they wanted to make a rape video. But Daisuke was too terrified to do anything, and Nao heard him run away.

*While Nao's classmates were always cruel to her, this incident was still shocking because of its violent nature. Nao's classmates were very aware of the online market for violent pornography and fetish items, as they planned to film Daisuke raping her and seemingly planned on selling her bloodstained underwear. This incident gives readers insight into why Nao has a pessimistic view of sex: her status as a vulnerable young woman has made her vulnerable to sexual violence like this.*



While Nao's classmates were discussing who could rape her, Nao started thinking about Haruki #1 and these thoughts gave her courage. She summoned up her "superpower" and started zazen. Immediately, her classmates seemed like the mosquitoes that Jiko taught her to ignore. One of her classmates got nervous that Nao wasn't moving, so they all ran away.

*While zazen wasn't a "superpower" in the sense that it actually protected Nao from the dangerous situation she was in, it did help her to endure and distance herself from her suffering. Jiko taught her to even let the mosquitoes at the temple bite her, and Nao used this lesson to refuse to be bothered by her classmates' violence. In a sense, zazen did end up helping Nao: her calm breathing frightened her classmates, who fled the bathroom because they were worried that she was dead.*



That evening, one of Nao's classmates emailed her a link to the video. Nao was happy to see that her face wasn't clear in it. Next to the video was a link to bid on her bloodstained panties on an auction site; Nao was creeped out by the number of bids that hentais were already placing on it.

*Nao was in her school uniform in the video and was clearly being abused and was struggling against her classmates. The market for videos like these, and for her bloodstained panties, is evidence of perversion and violence in society. Young, naïve women like Nao are in constant danger.*



(2) Nao writes that she was the one who found her dad after he attempted to kill himself. After the “Panty Incident,” she’d stopped going to school. Instead, she left home in her school uniform every morning and then changed into her street clothes at an internet café. All day, she hung out at stores and coffee shops. On the day the bidding ended on her panties, she was sickened at the thought that some hentai would soon own them. To cheer herself up, she went shopping at a boutique, where she found and bought the diary hidden inside the cover of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

However, when Nao got home, she immediately knew that something was wrong: the house was silent, and her father was missing. She finally found him in the bathroom, face down in a puddle of vomit. Nao called the ambulance, and the paramedics took him away—Haruki wasn’t dead yet, but the paramedics didn’t answer when Nao asked if he would live.

Nao tried to reach Tomoko but got her voicemail, so she texted her instead. Nao saw one of her father’s philosophy books on the table, and she found a note inside it written on Nao’s Gloomy Bear stationery. She put it in her pocket because she didn’t feel ready to read it yet. Also, she felt guilty because she might be responsible for Haruki’s death, since she was cruel to him. She mopped up the vomit in the bathroom, thinking it was weird that she had “Two nasty Toilet Incidents” in one week.

Nao’s mother eventually called her back, explaining that she had been in a meeting earlier, and Nao filled her in. Later, Nao opened her father’s note: he had written that he would “make [himself] ridiculous” in his own eyes if he “clung to life and hugged it when it has no more to offer.” Nao recognized this as a Socrates quote, because her father had told her about it while he was reading his philosophy books. Haruki had written a second line below this, which was that he would “make [himself] ridiculous in the eyes of others” if he “clung to life and hugged it when [he had] no more to offer.”

*Nao was traumatized when she was almost raped and was disgusted that her panties would soon be owned by a sexual pervert. Still, she was so convinced that her parents would be of no help in these matters that she didn’t even try to tell them what happened. This shows the extent of Nao’s loneliness, as she’d rather write about her problems in a diary than confide in her own parents.*



*In addition to all the problems Nao faced at school, she now had to now deal with Haruki’s suicide attempt as well. All this was undoubtedly difficult for a young girl to handle. The reader knows that Nao will later become suicidal herself, and witnessing her father like this certainly contributed to Nao’s feelings of hopelessness and despair.*



*Previously, Nao told Haruki that he should stop feeling sorry for himself and that he should try to be more like Haruki #1. Now, she worried that her words hurt him so deeply that he attempted suicide. Nao and Haruki’s relationship is filled with misunderstandings and miscommunication, as the true reason for Haruki’s suicide is has nothing to do with Nao’s words (as the reader will learn later).*



*Even though Haruki and Nao never discussed their personal troubles, they did talk about ideas that interested them. Nao must have enjoyed these conversations, since she remembered details like the Socrates quote. Haruki seemed to believe not only that life had no more to offer—which was Socrates’ idea—but also added his own quote to it that said that he had no more to offer. The second line seemed to more closely express his reason for committing suicide: he felt ineffective and powerless, and therefore ridiculous.*



Immediately, Nao had a horrible thought and rushed to the computer, and she saw that the auction site with her panties for sale was on the computer. Her dad must have found it after she'd forgotten to clear the cache. Nao saw that the auction had ended and that someone called "Lolicom73" had won the auction. A bidder called "C.imperator" had come close to winning but had lost at the last moment. Nao went to the bathroom and threw up.

At the hospital, the doctors pumped Haruki's stomach, and he lived. After he was discharged, Haruki apologized to Nao and Tomoko, and he said that he took the extra pills by mistake. Nao's mother looked relieved and agreed with him that it was a mistake. Nao, too, pretended to believe this story.

That night, after Nao's mother went to bed, Nao gave her father a note written on Gloomy Bear stationery. He looked terrified to open it, but Nao told him he'd better read it. Instead of his own note, Nao wrote another note on the same stationery. She wrote that his uncle "Haruki #1 would not keep screwing up like this," and that if her father was going to do something, he should "do it properly." Her father agreed that Nao was right.

After her parents were asleep, Nao went to the bathroom and shaved her head. She sat zazen for the rest of the night, and she got dressed and left the apartment as soon as it was light out. Nao wore a hoodie with the hood up under her uniform blazer.

*Haruki was most likely "C.imperator," since it references the Latin name for the staghorn beetle *Cyclommatus imperator*—the beetle that Haruki made and won a prize for in the origami contest. By writing that he had "no more to offer," Haruki probably meant that he had no more money to place a higher bid on Nao's panties so he could prevent a pervert from buying them. It seems that Nao's suffering, and Haruki's inability to protect her, is what actually drove him to suicide. Nao deciphered Haruki's meaning from his rather cryptic message, which shows that she understood him very well, even though they didn't really speak about their feelings.*



*Once again, the family agreed to bury the painful truth in favor of a convenient lie. In doing so, they only further perpetuated the lack of communication and emotional intimacy that exacerbated Haruki's mental health problems in the first place.*



*Nao was upset that Haruki tried to kill himself, and in her anger, she ended up telling him the exact opposite of what she wanted to. Instead of saying that she loved him and was hurt that he wanted to kill himself and leave her, she told him he should "do it properly," meaning that he should stop bungling his suicide attempts. As a result, Haruki ended up assuming that she would be happier without him.*



*Haruki's suicide attempt, as well as the auction of her panties, triggered a change in Nao. Rather than continuing to feel like a victim, Nao decided to take back some control over her body. By shaving her head, Nao wanted to discard a characteristic that marked her as feminine and take on the non-sexual appearance of a Buddhist nun.*



When Nao walked into her classroom, she could hear Reiko and her friends giggling about the auction and the panties. Nao climbed onto her desk and lowered her hood, and her classmates gasped. Nao says the “superpower” of her bald head seemed to radiate throughout the classroom, and that she watched her classmates “tremble.” She opened her mouth and let out a fierce cry, causing her classmates to cover their ears with their hands. Then, Nao stopped because she pitied them. She walked to the front of the class and bowed deeply to the teacher and her classmates. Then, Nao left, knowing that she’d never return.

*Nao writes that her actions in the classroom terrified her classmates, and that she only stopped screaming while standing atop her desk because she pitied them. This was clearly an empowering moment for Nao—she felt like she was telling off the world for constantly mistreating her. However, her sense of power was in her own head. It was very unlikely that her classmates actually “trembled” when she revealed her bald head, or that her scream hurt their ears. Like zazen, which is not truly a “superpower” but helps Nao bear her troubles better, this moment was a triumphant for Nao even though it most likely did not affect the others in the way Nao perceived it.*



(3) Nao told her parents that she decided to drop out of school to become a nun. Nao’s mother was very upset, and the conversation turned into a huge fight. Finally, Nao agreed to at least take the entrance exams, though she was sure she would do badly.

*Nao’s parents were upset at Nao’s decision to stop attending school, though they didn’t ask her what caused her to make this decision. If they know about the terrible bullying and sexual violence Nao had to endure at school, they would likely be sympathetic. This once again shows that the family did not communicate well—rather than trying to understand what Nao is going through, their angry response only deepens her sorrows.*



Later that week, at the public baths, one of the bar hostesses who lived in the apartments next door told Nao that she had a pretty head. Nao replied that she didn’t “give a shit about pretty” and that she was a “superhero.” But then, she ended up confiding in the hostess that Tomoko was upset that she’d shaved her head and wanted to get her a wig. The hostess, who said her name was Babette, offered to take Nao to a nice wig shop.

*Babette called Nao’s head “pretty,” which was exactly what Nao didn’t want to be, since she shaved her head to prevent herself from being sexually objectified again. However, after protesting against this compliment, Nao ended up talking with Babette and confiding in her—mainly because Nao was so lonely and had absolutely no one else to talk to.*



Nao and Babette took a train to Akiba to the wig shop. Nao had never been to Akiba before, and she found the hustle and bustle of it very exciting. Soon, they passed a DVD store in which all the TVs were playing a show called “INSECT GLADIATORS!”—a show documenting insects in a terrarium fighting each other to the death. Nao watched as a staghorn beetle was stung to death by a yellow scorpion. The commentator excitedly said that the beetle was “the loser” and jubilantly said that it was dead. Nao started to cry.

*Nao was clearly shaken by watching the staghorn beetle being killed. The beetle likely reminded Nao of Haruki, since this was the insect he made and won a prize for in the origami contest. The Latin name of this beetle was also the screen name Haruki had used when he tried to bid on Nao’s panties to try to stop a pervert from buying them. But he lost the auction, and he felt so helpless about it that he’d tried to kill himself. With these associations in mind, Nao couldn’t take it when she heard the commentator of the show calling the beetle a “loser” and delighting in its death. Nao loved Haruki and appreciated his gesture of bidding on her panties, so the idea of his death saddened her.*



Nao crouched down by the store and wept. Babette stood by her and occasionally gave Nao's bald head a gentle tap. Later, Babette helped Nao pick out a wig and some other clothes. Nao writes that Babette really knows how to take care of her.

*Nao was very lonely and deeply appreciated Babette's small gestures of friendship. But the reader knows that Nao is young and somewhat naïve—it's not yet clear whether Babette is really trustworthy, or if she, too, will take advantage of Nao.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 4: RUTH

(1) Oliver says that Babette seems like a nice friend for Nao. He remarks that he'd like to visit Akiba someday and says that he feels sorry for the bugs. Ruth shuts the diary, turns her back to Oliver, and turns the light off. As they lie there in silence, it feels like a huge amount of time passes.

*Ruth is moved by Nao's struggles and also seems to sense that Nao's friendship with Babette is potentially dangerous or manipulative, given that Babette is a much older woman. This is why Oliver's carefree comments annoy Ruth—yet Ruth is also aware that moments of silent anger are a waste of time.*



(2) Finally, Oliver asks if he said something wrong, and Ruth replies that he did. She says that after all the horrible things Nao has been through, including a father who selfishly tried to kill himself, Oliver can only talk about bugs and Babette. Oliver says that he sees her point, but that it's still nice that Nao has a friend. Ruth says that Babette is “a pimp” who is “recruiting” Nao, since she is “running a compensated-dating operation” out of Fifi's. Oliver is surprised to hear this.

*It seems that, as a woman, Ruth is more attuned than Oliver to the sexual dangers that women face. She suggests that Babette is essentially trying to recruit Nao into sex trafficking, and that Fifi's café is just a front for an escort or prostitution service.*



(3) Oliver admits that he was wrong about Babette, but he says that Ruth is wrong about Haruki not trying to help Nao. He explains that Haruki almost won the auction—he was “C.imperator”—and it wasn't his fault that he lost at the last minute. *Cyclommatus imperator* is the Latin name for the staghorn beetle, which Haruki had made an origami version of and won a prize for.

*Oliver is a careful listener and has connected the dots to discern that Haruki tried to buy Nao's panties. Nao, too, seems to have known this. She didn't explicitly explain it in her diary, though she dropped hints and expected her reader to make the connections.*



Ruth hates that Oliver has made all these connections and explains all of it “so slowly and carefully” to Ruth—as if “she were an imbecile or had Alzheimer's.” Oliver used to use the same tone on Ruth's mother. Oliver continues, saying that he thinks Nao figured this out. This was why she understood her father's line in his suicide note about the pointlessness of clinging to life when he had nothing more to offer—her father had no more money to offer in the auction. Ruth is annoyed that Oliver sounds so smug.

*Oliver is most likely just trying to be kind and explain things in a way that makes sense, but this triggers upsetting memories of Ruth's past. Her fear that she will get Alzheimer's like her mother clouds her emotions and makes her angry with Oliver, because he made connections that she didn't.*



Ruth says it's disgusting that Haruki bid on his daughter's panties, and she calls him a "sicko." Oliver is surprised—he says that Haruki only wanted to stop some hentai from buying them. He says that Ruth must be "the sicko" to think that Haruki might get sexually excited by the panties. Oliver says that Haruki may be a loser, but he's not a pervert. Ruth retorts that Oliver would surely understand about losers.

(4) Ruth immediately apologizes, explaining that she was angry because Oliver had called her a "sicko." However, she knows it is too late as she sees the look in Oliver's eyes.

(5) Ruth and Oliver don't fight often, and they know to avoid certain subjects that are triggers. Oliver knows Ruth is sensitive about her memory, and she knows that the word "loser" hurts Oliver's feelings. Ruth knows that he isn't a loser—he is, in fact, the smartest person she knows. His mind has helped Ruth learn new things and open up her perspective.

Ruth thinks that Oliver isn't egotistical or ambitious. He says that his land art projects are successful when he separates himself from his work. Ruth thinks that this means Oliver thinks his work is only successful if he erases himself—yet doing this makes it harder to earn a living. Oliver is insecure because he doesn't make enough money, and he says that he feels like a loser.

## PART III, CHAPTER 5: NAO

(1) The first date that Babette set Nao up with was with a stylish, rich man who worked in an ad agency—Nao says that she'll call him Ryu in her diary. He wore Armani suits and carried a platinum lighter with diamonds on it, and Babette told Nao that he was very polite and gentle. Before the date, Nao was so nervous that she felt nauseous, so she refused Ryu's offer to go have dinner beforehand.

*Oliver clarifies that Haruki wasn't trying to buy Nao's panties for perverted reasons—he was only trying to protect her by preventing an actual pervert from buying them. In her anger, Ruth makes some comments that she doesn't quite believe, implying that Oliver would understand Haruki because they are both losers.*



*Oliver seems deeply hurt because Ruth implied he was a loser, and her apology doesn't make a difference. Ruth's mean comment has cut off all effective communication between the couple.*



*Ruth knows that Oliver is insecure about being a "loser," just like she is insecure about her memory. Even though Ruth is in awe of Oliver's brilliance, she doesn't tell him these things, and instead lies next to him in silence.*



*Oliver feels like a "loser" because his work doesn't make much money. Despite this, he stays true to his artistic vision and has no qualms about his identity and personality as an artist being erased, as long as his work lives on. In this way, he seems similar to Jiko, who is focused on her job of enlightening as many people as she can but is unconcerned about her own mortality.*



*Ruth's suspicions about Babette turn out to be true. Earlier, Nao described the hostesses' customers as their "dates," so the "date" that Babette set Nao up on was probably with a client who paid for sex.*





Ryu took Nao to a nice love hotel, where he opened some champagne and took off all of Nao's clothes. Nao was so nervous that Ryu couldn't penetrate her, and after trying unsuccessfully to have sex, Nao started weeping. She blamed the champagne for her tears and also said that she was moved by Ryu's kindness. He was being really nice about everything although he'd paid for this date with her. Ryu wrapped Nao in his soft shirt because she was shivering, and Nao ended up wearing all his clothes, including his pants and tie.

Then, Nao took off her wig, and Ryu told her she looked like a beautiful boy in her buzz cut. Nao told Ryu to pretend he was her while they had sex. Afterward, Ryu asked her how old she was—she was about to say 15 but suddenly realized that it was her birthday that day, and she was 16. Ryu gave her his platinum lighter as a present. On a later date, Nao had Ryu wear her school uniform; he looked so foolish and his passivity irritated her so much that she started to hit him as hard as she could. Ryu stopped her, saying that she was just hurting herself.

(2) Nao and Ryu met often for sex, and after, Nao liked to wear his expensive suits and go for walks, enjoying feeling like a man. When Nao's hair started growing back, Ryu vanished. Nao was developing feelings for him by this point, so she was heartbroken. She kept asking Babette about him, but Babette said that Nao must have done something wrong to drive him away, and that it was time for her to stop moping and start dating again.

(3) Nao felt like Babette was her only friend, since her parents were too distracted to focus on her. Previously, even when Haruki was suicidal, he was always interested in something—whether origami bugs or 9/11 victims. Now, he ignored everything around him, including Nao and Tomoko. In the computer's cache, Nao saw that her father was part of an online suicide club and that he was trying to convince a high schooler in the club not to kill herself. Nao found this very hypocritical. Then, she got the idea of killing herself too.

*In this section, it becomes clear that Ryu paid for sex with Nao. He took her to a "love hotel," which is a type of hotel in Japan where customers pay for rooms by the hour, and it is understood that guests are there only to have sex. Nao knew Ryu paid a lot of money to have sex with her—and since she didn't mention that she had any of it, most (or all) of the money probably went to Babette. Rather than being upset about this, Nao feels guilty that Ryu is unable to have sex with her, which shows the extent of Nao's naïveté and her unhealthy dependence on Babette's friendship.*



*While Nao was helpless and crying earlier, she felt more empowered when she wore Ryu's clothes and pretended to be a man. This implies that she saw her femininity as a weakness. Nao also felt a strong sense of self-derision and felt enraged at Ryu when he dressed like her. All the difficulties in her life have led to make poor choices, and Nao felt disgusted at herself. She had reached a very low point in her life.*



*Again, this passage shows that Nao liked taking on a male identity. She had suffered indignities and abuse as a woman, and she continued to be in a dangerous position as a sex worker. So, Nao enjoyed the opportunity to pretend that she was a powerful man who wouldn't have had to suffer these things. Unfortunately, Nao ended up becoming quite attached to Ryu and was devastated when he disappeared. He seems to have fetishized her bald head and no longer desired her when her hair grew back. Nao shaved her head in an attempt to protect herself from sexual predators, but it ironically ended up leading into an even more dangerous situation with Babette and her clients. With this, the novel suggests that there is no surefire way for women to protect themselves from sexual violence and exploitation—anyone can be victimized, regardless of what they look like.*



*Since Nao was so lonely, she seemed to be obeying Babette in a desperate attempt at friendship—even though, in reality, Babette was far from a friend. Nao also noticed that Haruki was losing all interest in life, and she suspected that he was finally really serious about killing himself. Nao hinted that his previous interests were evidence that he didn't really want to die, but Haruki no longer seemed to care about anything. Nao's life was spiraling out of control, and she realized it. Suicide ended up seeming like a good option to her. Like Haruki and Haruki #1, Nao saw it as a way to regain control.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 6: RUTH

(1) Dr. Leistiko finally writes Ruth back: he says that it is likely that the “Harry” from the letter is the person Ruth is looking for. Haruki Yasutani was Leistiko’s friend in the ‘90s when he was an engineer in Silicon Valley. Leistiko says that he and Yasutani gradually lost touch after he moved back to Japan, and that they haven’t communicated in many years.

Leistiko says that Haruki was having qualms about his engineering work for a gaming company being reused for a defense project. Haruki wondered if it was possible to make technology with a conscience—machines that would refuse to kill. His employer asked him to stop working on this, and Haruki refused. This was the reason he was ultimately fired.

After Haruki moved back to Japan, and Leistiko continued his research on “cultural influences on suicide,” he received a “beautiful and moving cry for help” from Haruki, which Leistiko excerpted on his website. Leistiko suggested to Haruki that he should get professional help, but he doesn’t know if Haruki actually did. Soon after, a virus obliterated all of Leistiko’s computer files, and he even lost Haruki’s email ID. Leistiko wonders why Ruth is concerned about Haruki’s daughter’s well-being.

(2) Ruth immediately emails Leistiko back, explaining how she found the diary and why she is concerned about Nao’s safety. When she tells Oliver about the email, he’s puzzled that Ruth still thinks the matter is of great “urgency,” since Nao was 16 during 9/11, and that was more than a decade ago. Ruth is very embarrassed to admit that she forgot that so much time has passed since then.

(3) Ruth tells Oliver that she got confused, and that Nao will always be 16 to her. Ruth also realizes that Nao didn’t know about Haruki’s morality and courage, which was why he was fired from his Silicon Valley job. Ruth is sad that it is too late to tell Nao this and help her, but Oliver says that she owes it to Nao to keep reading. Then, he also mentions that his cat is missing, and that he is worried about it.

*Ruth seems to have tracked down an old friend of Haruki’s through a lucky coincidence. This is yet another example of how people from very different walks of life can actually be connected by common associations.*



*This is the first time that Ruth—and readers—hear about the true reason that Haruki was fired from his Silicon Valley job. He wasn’t simply laid off—he was punished for standing up for his beliefs. Nao, too, seems to have had no idea about this. If Haruki had spoken to her about it, she might have had more respect for him, as Haruki’s anti-war stance mirrors Haruki #1’s.*



*Leistiko interpreted Haruki’s letter to him as being a “moving cry for help,” implying that Haruki didn’t really want to die and was, in fact, looking for a reason to live.*



*Ruth is so preoccupied by Nao’s diary that she failed to register how much time has passed since Nao wrote it. This is evidence of Nao’s point that time is like a “slippery fish”—it can easily slip away from people without them realizing it. Ruth feels especially annoyed at her forgetfulness since she is already sensitive about her memory, and she sees any memory lapses as potential symptoms of Alzheimer’s. She is terrified that she will get Alzheimer’s, just like her mother did.*



*Ruth now realizes that she and Nao are separated by time. Until this point, she was convinced that she might be able to find Nao and help her, but she now thinks that it is too late for her to make any difference in Nao’s life.*



(4) Benoit's wife calls Ruth to come pick up the translation of the French diary. When Ruth goes to Benoit's house, she sees that Benoit is drunk and distraught, and he tells her that the diary is full of suffering. Ruth apologizes to his wife for upsetting Benoit, but his wife tells her it is not just the diary—his little dog was eaten by wolves the previous night, which is why Benoit is doubly distressed.

*Benoit's reaction is a warning to Ruth that Haruki #1's diary is dark and depressing. Also, Benoit's pet dog went missing and was found dead, which doesn't bode well for Oliver's missing cat.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 7: HARUKI #1'S SECRET FRENCH DIARY

*Secret French Diary 1.* Haruki #1 wrote that he was keeping the pages of this diary secret by hiding them inside the lining of his uniform. Some of the other student soldiers warned him that the officers read their letters and diaries without warning, so to be careful not to write his true feelings. Haruki #1 decided to keep two records—one for show and one that told the truth. He wanted to get the true one to Jiko, but he wasn't sure how he would be able to do this.

*Haruki #1 and Jiko communicated very openly, which is why Haruki #1 wanted her to know the truth about his experience as a soldier. However, he was hampered from doing this by the very nature of his military camp, which forbade and punished open communication with the outside world.*



*Secret French Diary 2.* Haruki #1 described how his commanding officer, F, brutally beat up the student soldiers, especially K, who acted "as though he didn't feel a thing, blinking and smiling his sweet, otherworldly smile." Haruki #1 volunteered to take K's place, and F punched him so hard that it shredded the inside of Haruki #1's mouth. Haruki #1 wrote that he could stand all this bullying only by thinking that Jiko would know the truth about it someday, although he didn't know how to get these pages to her.

*Haruki #1's friend, K, was a philosopher who read Dogen's work. He seemed like he "didn't feel a thing" when he was being badly beaten, probably because he had learned to tune out the "mosquitoes," just like Nao learned to do this with Jiko's help. Haruki #1 describes his smile as "otherworldly," which seems an apt description of someone who took Dogen's spiritual wisdom to heart and wasn't affected by the sorrows of this world. Haruki #1 was facing a lot of problems at the squadron, but what troubled him the most was that he couldn't share this with Jiko and therefore had to bear everything alone.*



*Secret French Diary 3.* The previous night, F forced Haruki #1 was forced by to play "the pleasure quarters game," in which Haruki #1 had to pretend to be "a lady of the night." Haruki #1 could hear K weeping that night.

*"A lady of the night" is a prostitute, so Haruki #1 is implying that F sexually assaulted him. Like Nao's experiences at school, the bullying Haruki suffered took a dark and sexual turn. And while K seemed immune to his own pain, Haruki #1's suffering hurt him deeply.*



*Secret French Diary 4.* Haruki #1 confessed that he wanted to kill F. Haruki #1 had been counting each blow that he got from F, and the total number so far was 267. He dreamed of returning each blow someday. Haruki #1 didn't want to die before he got his revenge on F.

*Like Nao, who felt angry and vengeful toward her classmates, Haruki #1's anger overwhelms his life. Jiko rescued Nao was rescued from her dark thoughts, but Haruki #1 had to suffer alone, since he couldn't communicate with anyone.*



*Secret French Diary 5.* K escaped at dawn. The other soldiers were told that he committed suicide, but someone who'd seen K's body told Haruki #1 that he was actually shot in the back. Haruki #1 found K's copy of Master Dogen's *Shōbōgenzō* in his duffel. Haruki #1 felt frozen with grief and could not even cry. He thought it was best to forget how to think and feel during a war.

*Secret French Diary 6.* Haruki #1 was planning to slip these pages to Jiko when she visited, but he couldn't bear to do it after seeing her pained expression upon meeting him. He lied and told her that his bruises were all part of military training, since he wanted to spare her more sorrow.

Haruki #1 was initially afraid of F, but recently, he had been filled with pity for F. F seemed to sense this and beat him even harder, which made Haruki #1 pass out from the pain. However, when he regained consciousness, he experienced no pain and felt peaceful and empowered. Haruki #1 was no longer interested in counting the blows he had received or in returning them.

*Secret French Diary 7.* In an entry dated August 3, 1944, Haruki #1 wrote that there were rumors that Japan was doing badly in the war and that there might be an American invasion soon. He asked Jiko to be careful and consider moving to the countryside.

*Secret French Diary 8.* Haruki #1 was obsessed with the ticking of the **clock**, since each moment hastened him toward his death. He wished that he could stop time. Haruki #1 wrote to Jiko: "I don't want to die, Maman! I don't want to die!"

Haruki #1 apologized for his outburst and said that he didn't want to be remembered that way. He said that the reason he didn't rip up the pages was because he knew that he was the only one who would read them. Haruki #1 also pointed out that destroying his diary wouldn't cure his fear, just like breaking the **clocks** wouldn't stop time. He vowed to sit zazen and "study the self" as Dogen advised, so that he could improve himself in the little time he had left to live.

*K attempted to escape, probably knowing that he wouldn't succeed. He was willing to risk it because he could no longer bear to witness the officers' cruelty at the camp, especially toward his friend, Haruki #1. When Nao was engulfed by her anger and bitterness, Jiko stepped in to help her. Similarly, K left Haruki #1 his copy of the *Shōbōgenzō*, which will be of help to him.*



*Haruki ended up lying to Jiko to spare her further pain, which indicates that the war's far-reaching effects have even changed their close relationship.*



*Haruki #1 was previously festering in his own anger, but then he chosen to move on from it. This made him feel empowered and peaceful despite the difficulty of his situation. He realized that he could control his reactions, even when the rest of the world was spinning out of control. Like Dogen advised, Haruki #1 made use of the present moment to make a positive change.*



*This letter suggests that Haruki #1 still hoped to get all these letters to Jiko. At this point, Haruki #1 is clinging to the hope that someone will be able to read his true thoughts—much like Nao is hopeful that someone will read and understand her diary.*



*In his "official" letters to Jiko, Haruki #1 seemed stoic about death, since the soldiers weren't allowed to openly express their fears. However, in his secret diary, Haruki #1 expressed his true feelings of frustration and fear over being forced to die.*



*Clocks are a symbol of passing time in the novel, and in this passage, they reminded Haruki #1 that the little time he had left to live was quickly passing him by and he was powerless to stop it. He recognized his own fear and attempted zazen as a way to overcome these emotions. Nao admired Haruki #1 for his brazen courage, but this passage contradicts her earlier image of him—she and Haruki #1 are much more alike that Nao thought.*



Haruki #1 felt silly about the fanciful ideas he wrote in his official letter to Jiko, in which he compared himself to the **Crow Captain**. He remembered how the Crow Captain in the story asked the stars to prevent anyone from having to kill others. In exchange for this, the Crow Captain promised to not complain even if he was forced to suffer endlessly. Haruki #1 found this passage to be moving and true to his own heart.

*Secret French Diary 9.* Haruki #1 recalled Dogen's words that a person only needs one moment to find truth. Since Haruki #1 had little time left, he saw the value of each moment and understood the truth of those words. Haruki #1 wondered if he would, in his final moment, guide his plane into the "so-called" enemy or choose to die "in watery disgrace rather than inflamed heroics." At night, he counted his *juzu* (Buddhist prayer beads), each one representing something he loved, situated in an endless circle.

*Secret French Diary 10.* Haruki #1's squadron arrived at Kyushu, where he met two veteran soldiers from the China Offensive who boasted about their cruelty in China: they had raped grandmothers, murdered babies, and burned men over open fires. Haruki #1 was glad that he would not live long enough to become inured to such violence.

After listening to these horrific tales, Haruki #1 was ashamed that he had wasted the diary about his troubles, which seemed negligible compared to what the people of China had experienced. He wrote that he would be flying out the following day, so this was his farewell note. He would like to somehow get this secret diary to Jiko, but he didn't dare to—if it were to be discovered, it would jeopardize the pension she would receive after Haruki #1's death.

Haruki #1 planned to take these pages with him to the bottom of the sea. He trusted that Jiko already knew the things he had written, since she knew him so well. Haruki #1 had made his decision about where to fly his plane. He had always "hated war," so he decided to steer his plane away from its target and to fly into the sea.

Once again, Haruki #1 brings up the Crow Captain, which solidifies his association with the Japanese Jungle Crow that hangs around Ruth's house. In this passage, Haruki #1 hinted that he wouldn't mind sacrificing himself for a gesture of peace, which hints at what his final action will be.



Haruki #1 built on the idea he brought up in the previous section: that of sacrificing himself for a gesture of peace. He realized that this would be a big decision—in a moment, he would change the lives of many even though he would die "in disgrace." As his death approached, Haruki #1 realized that there was so much he loved about the world despite its ugliness and sorrow.



Haruki #1 recognized that the more time he spent in violent situations among violent men, he, too, might gradually become like the soldiers who seemed to have lost their humanity. He is glad that he will die before he changes so drastically.



Nao had a similar reaction after she read Haruki #1's letters: she felt petty for complaining about the bullying she experienced when Haruki #1 had endured so much more. However, unbeknownst to Nao, Haruki #1 felt the same way when he heard about the violence that Chinese people had to endure at the hands of Japanese soldiers. This shows that both Nao and Haruki #1 are deeply empathetic, and that they both tend to question the validity of their own problems.



Haruki #1 trusted so deeply in his relationship with Jiko that he believed she understood his feelings, even though he would not be able to share this diary with her. He was right about this, as Jiko told Nao that she knew how Haruki #1 would react and what things he would find funny. In his last official letter to Jiko, Haruki #1 cryptically wrote that his every action would be motivated with the love and nonviolence that Jiko had taught him. He seemed to have been implying that he planned to fly his plane into the sea rather than at people, though he couldn't say it openly in that letter. With this, Haruki #1 took Dogen's advice to use each moment he had to the best of his ability.



## PART III, CHAPTER 8: RUTH

(1) Ruth realizes that Nao doesn't know that her great-uncle flew his plane into the sea—Nao thinks that Haruki #1 died “a war hero, carrying out his mission.” Nao has only read his official Japanese letters, but she never mentions a secret French diary. If Haruki #1 destroyed these pages, Ruth wonders how they ended up in the freezer bag. She wants to discuss this with Oliver, but he is out in the storm, looking for the missing cat.

*Nao had idolized Haruki #1's stoicism and courage, but his secret diary painted a more vulnerable picture of him and revealed his fears and moral quandaries. Ruth knows that this would change how Nao thinks of Haruki #1—and probably how she thinks of Haruki too, since Nao would no longer compare him to an impossible ideal. The mystery of how the secret diary ended up in the lunch box and reached Ruth puzzles her—it seems to have washed onto the island in an inexplicable, supernatural way that she can't make sense of.*



(2) Ruth goes out in the rain to get more firewood from their woodpile. She sees that it is very windy and worries about Oliver, who is out in the woods. She hears the Jungle Crow above her and asks it to go find Oliver, even though she feels silly talking to it. When she turns around, she sees Oliver walking out of the woods. He says that he hasn't found the cat.

*The Jungle Crow seems to be a magical guardian that understands Ruth's anxieties and helps her out. This spiritual or supernatural connection between them reflects the idea that all “time beings” are connected.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 9: NAO

(1) After Nao's decided to commit suicide, everything that Jiko had told her about time started to make sense to her. Nao appreciated every moment she had left, knowing that she didn't have too many. She walked around the park looking at the cherry blossoms. When the wind blew petals down, she was felt overcome with both beauty and sadness. Nao also decided to write Jiko's story before she killed herself, because she valued Jiko's wisdom and wanted it to live on even after she and Jiko were gone.

*As soon as Nao decided to kill herself, she became more aware of the fleeting nature of time that Jiko had talked about. Nao also started paying attention to the beauty of the world, since she knew she wouldn't be around much longer to appreciate it. In Japan, cherry blossoms symbolize the beauty of spring and also the fleeting nature of life. The flowers bloom only for a short period before they dry and fall—however, the falling petals are also beautiful, which acknowledges the idea that change and death can be beautiful. Nao was moved by this idea.*



(2) Since Nao had very little time left on Earth, she didn't want to waste it on “stupid dates.” But at the café, Babette told her that she had to go on a date or get out. Then, Babette proceeded to set her up on a date with the “creepy hentai” who was a regular at the café—the same man who used to stare at Nao in her school uniform, which made her uncomfortable. Babette gave Nao a cut of the money the hentai paid her, but Nao said she had self-respect and wasn't doing it for the money. Babette pinched Nao and called her a “lazy and selfish” American, and she ordered her to go to the hentai.

*Earlier, Nao was feeling very defeated and hopeless—she didn't even care to protest against the “dates” Babette set her up on. However, after she decided to kill herself, she was more aware of the value of her time and protested against doing something she didn't want to. This shows that Dogen's advice to pay attention to every moment worked for Nao, since readers can see that it helped Nao make a good choice. However, Babette was no longer friendly to Nao when Nao refused to go on dates—she bullied Nao into going. Like Nao's classmates, Babette, too, saw Nao as an outsider because she used to live in America.*



The hentai was waiting for Nao in the reception area, and in the crowded elevator, he groped her under her skirt. Nao wanted to scream, but she reasoned that he had paid to do this, and so she had to allow him to do what he wanted. Nao said that she had “no self-respect,” so this didn’t matter. At the hotel, the *hentai* performed sexual acts on her, and Nao dissociated into a faraway place in her mind.

Nao’s phone rang while she was with the hentai, and she began to cry because she thought it might be Jiko, who she missed very much. Just then, the *hentai* did something that hurt Nao a lot and shocked her into reacting. She straddled him and began hitting him, which he seemed to enjoy very much. After he fell asleep, Nao checked her phone and saw that the call was from Jiko. There was also a text from Muji which said: “Sensei’s last moments. Come soon.”

Nao hurried home. She wanted to find her father and go to Jiko’s temple, and she hoped that Jiko would be absolutely fine by the time they reached. She found her father dressed in his cheap suit and ready to go out. There was “something strange about him, even stranger than usual, like he had turned into a zombie.” He told Nao that he was going out to have a drink with an old friend and that he would be back soon. Nao knew that he was lying and realized that he was going to go kill himself. She said nothing to him about Jiko and decided to go by herself to Jiko’s temple.

Nao reaches the town closest to the temple late at night, and she has to wait until morning for the buses to start running again. She sits at the station, writing in her diary and pretending that she has a friend to write to. But Nao says that her reader is just a lie—just “another stupid story she made up” because she is lonely. The truth is that Nao is “all alone.”

Nao says that she only cared about her “stupid life,” just like her father only cared about “his own stupid life.” Nao hasn’t written about Jiko’s life, and now, Jiko is probably dead—Nao has wasted the time she had. Nao’s father, too, is probably already dead, and Nao doesn’t believe that she herself exists, either, since she doesn’t believe in herself. At the station, no one looks at her, and she feels “invisible.” She thinks that this “is what now feels like.”

*Nao was clearly in a more dangerous situation with this hentai than was with Ryu, who was relatively gentle with her. After her encounter with Babette, Nao once again felt defeated and too broken to fight against the abuse—she thought that Babette was her only friend, and after Babette’s treachery, Nao once again felt completely alone. Nao felt such a strong sense of self-derision that she seemed to believe she didn’t deserve any better.*



*When Jiko called Nao, Nao was reminded that there was someone in the world who loved her and cared about her, and she found the strength to fight against the hentai. Nao intended to use her time wisely and write Jiko’s life story, but she has instead been wallowing in grief and self-derision. Now, Jiko was dying, which reminded Nao that she had ended up wasting her time.*



*Previously, Haruki was interested in his hobbies and in the news, but he changed. He now seemed lifeless and uninterested in everything around him—Nao described him as being like a “zombie.” She suspected that his suicide attempt this time would be successful, since he seemed serious about dying. Nao felt that it was no use telling him about Jiko, since Haruki was too focused on his own misery. She felt like she wouldn’t be able to reach him even if she spoke to him.*



*Nao is worried that Jiko and Haruki will soon be dead, and this makes her feel lonelier than ever before. Previously, she took comfort in confiding in her reader—but in her extreme sadness this is no longer enough to comfort her.*



*Nao is aware that she didn’t use her time mindfully, the way she hoped she would. With this, she realizes that, just like Haruki, she’s been too focused on her own misery. She regrets this, because she sees it as selfish and wasteful of her time. As she waits at the station for the bus to Jiko’s temple, she seems completely hopeless and writes that her present moment makes her feel “invisible,” as if she doesn’t matter and doesn’t exist.*



## PART III, CHAPTER 10: RUTH

(1) The fierce storm causes the power to go out across the entire island. Ruth and Oliver's little house is usually a blaze of light, but on this night, the Jungle **Crow** sees that it is barely visible in the dim light shining out of a bedroom window.

(2) In the bedroom, Ruth reads Nao's diary to Oliver and reaches the part when Nao is alone at the bus station. But when Ruth turns to the next page, her heart skips a beat when she sees that it is blank. She turns the pages frantically, but all the pages left in the diary are blank. This doesn't add up—Ruth had previously checked and saw that Nao's writing went all the way until the end of the diary.

Ruth tells Oliver that the words are gone—that they were there before, but that they've disappeared now. She thinks that Nao changed her mind and that her life was shortened. Oliver is quiet for a while, and then he says that this probably affects their own lives, too—if Nao stops writing to her readers, maybe her readers cease to exist.

(3) Outside, the Jungle **Crow** sits in a tree and caws loudly, but it can't be heard over the wind.

(4) Ruth tells Oliver that he sounds crazy, but he says that he is being logical. He says that Ruth should go find the words—since she is a writer, it is her job to find “missing words.”

(5) That night, Ruth has a strange dream that feels very real. In the dream, at first, she is in a forest and then finds herself in water. Words surround her, but she finds that they are just sounds that have lost their meanings. Ruth realizes that she is in time, and that time has robbed the words of their meanings. When Ruth surfaces, she sees Jiko, who hands her glasses to Ruth. Immediately, she experiences Jiko's memories, but Ruth wants to look for Nao, so she opens her mind and surrenders.

*Nao wrote that she felt invisible—and similarly, the Crow sees that Ruth's house is barely visible. This is evidence of the strong metaphysical link between Nao and Ruth. It also brings up the idea that Nao “creates” Ruth as her reader—and since Nao doesn't believe in her reader anymore, Ruth is fading.*



*This magical erasure of the diary's words emphasizes the idea that the diary's arrival and the connection between Nao and Ruth are supernatural. At the beginning of the diary, Nao wrote that she and her reader will “make magic” together, and the events happening now certainly seem magical.*



*Ruth understands that Nao has probably decided to kill herself, which is why the words disappeared. Oliver points out that their lives are closely linked to Nao's, since they exist as her readers. He wonders if, much like Nao disappears for them when her words stop, they will disappear when Nao is no longer writing to them.*



*The Jungle Crow, which is a symbol of supernatural connections between characters, sounds out a warning, since the characters seem to be on the verge of fading away.*



*Ruth has been struggling to write her memoir, as she dislikes feeling stuck in her past. Oliver gives her a more interesting project, which is to save Nao by rewriting her life. This also underlines the power that a writer like Ruth has over her characters, like Nao.*



*In the vivid dream that Ruth has, she feels like she has entered time itself and can therefore emerge at any point in the past, present, or future. She first emerges and meets Jiko, which is the wrong time, so she enters time again.*





Ruth is transported to a hotel room, where she sees Nao wearing a man's shirt and staring at herself in the mirror—but Nao disappears before Ruth can speak to her. Then, out of the corner of her eye, Ruth sees a quick movement that looks like a dark void, and she realizes it is the Jungle Crow, here to save her. The Crow leads her to a park in a busy city, where Ruth finds a man sitting on a bench, feeding crows. The Jungle Crow lands at his feet, and Ruth sits beside him.

*Ruth thinks that she needs to meet Nao, but she turns out to be wrong about this. However, the Jungle Crow knows where she needs to go in order to change Nao's fate, and he appears in her dream to guide Ruth to it. Haruki liked to sit on the park bench and feed crows, which is where the Jungle Crow takes Ruth. Haruki's early connection to the crows now seems resonant, as this is the moment in time that the Jungle Crow chooses to take Ruth to.*



The man nods at Ruth and asks her if she is the person he is waiting for. Ruth realizes that he is Haruki, and that he must be waiting for someone from his suicide club. She tells him that she and Nao are pen pals, and that Nao sent her to tell him not to kill himself. She says that Nao worries about him, and that Nao, too, plans to kill herself if Haruki commits suicide. Haruki is shocked to hear this

*Ruth realizes that in order to save Nao's life, she must save Haruki's too, since Nao and Haruki's lives are linked. Ruth tells Haruki the things that Nao couldn't: that Nao loves him and worries about him, and that his death would break her. Haruki is shocked to hear this, because he seems to have assumed that he was completely worthless and unlovable.*



Ruth tells Haruki that Nao is at the train station, on her way to see Jiko. Ruth wants to tell Haruki more, but she is transported again and finds herself on Jiko's temple grounds. She is holding Haruki #1's French composition book in her hands. Ruth makes her way to the altar in Jiko's study and places the book inside the white box. Ruth sees Jiko appear in the doorway and lets herself fall into Jiko's arms, "into silence, into darkness."

*Though Ruth has decided she wants to save Nao, she is unclear about how, exactly, to do this. She seems guided in her effort by some kind of supernatural power. The Crow is described earlier as a black "gap," and now Jiko's arms are "darkness," suggesting that the Crow might be a spiritual manifestation of Jiko.*



(6) The next morning, Ruth tells Oliver about her strange dream. She tells him that she tried to find Nao's words but couldn't, so she "came back empty-handed." Oliver says that this sounds like an important dream, and he asks Ruth if she has checked Nao's diary that morning.

*Ruth thinks she has failed in her mission, until Oliver suggests that she check Nao's diary. With this, he suggests that Ruth's actions might have actually saved Nao, which speaks to the magical connection between writer and reader. In "rewriting" Nao's story by saving Haruki, Ruth may have been able to save Nao as well.*



## PART IV: EPIGRAPH

In an excerpt from *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel Proust compares books to a large cemetery where the names on the tombs aren't discernible. Sometimes, one remembers the names, but one cannot tell if anything about the person who existed survives in the book's pages.

*Proust's excerpt brings up the idea that characters in books are open to the reader's interpretation—they aren't static. Names and personalities are forgotten, and they eventually live in the reader's memory. Similarly, Ruth's version of events in Nao's story is the only one that matters, whether or not the real Nao actually lived as Ruth recalls.*



## PART IV, CHAPTER 1: NAO

(1) Nao asks her reader if he or she is still there and thanks her reader for believing in her. She writes that when she was waiting at the station, she saw her father walking toward her. Nao says she was trying not to think about him, because every time she did, she pictured him suffocating to death in a car with the members of his suicide club. Nao could not believe that he was alive, and that he had come to find her.

At the temple, Nao and Haruki found a big crowd of people who had come because Jiko was on her deathbed—these included some parishioners, nuns and priests from other temples, and even some reporters who were there because Jiko was so old. Muji immediately took Nao and Haruki to see Jiko, who told Nao that she was glad that Nao made it in time. Jiko squeezed Nao's hand, and her fingers feel like "hot sticks." Nao tried not to cry and said nothing.

However, it seemed like Jiko had something to say. She called for Muji, who helped her sit up and then placed a sheet of white rice paper before her and gave her some ink and a brush. Nao explains that it was traditional for Zen Buddhist master to write a final poem before they died.

Slowly, Jiko wrote a single kanji on the paper, which meant "to live." Right after, she lay down and took her last breath. As Muji began all the death rituals, Nao couldn't believe that Jiko was really gone. Right before Jiko was cremated, Nao slipped some chocolate into Jiko's hands, since she was so fond of chocolate. When she touched Jiko's fingers, they were "stiff and cold," and Nao realized that Jiko had already changed since she died—she was no longer Jiko.

The reporters and the priests debated the meaning of Jiko's final words, "to live." No one really understood this except Nao and her dad, and they weren't about to tell anyone else that it was a message to them. When Nao and Haruki were alone at the altar, Haruki asked Nao if she knew what was inside the white box. Nao opened the box to show him, and to her surprise, she found Haruki #1's French booklet inside. They decided to take it home to figure out what it said.

*Nao's words seem to be directly addressed to Ruth, since Ruth believed in Nao and tried to save her life. Ruth wasn't sure how her actions in her dream would save Nao, but Nao's words show her that by stalling Haruki's suicide attempt and telling him where to find Nao, Ruth gave Nao a renewed sense of hope. She showed Nao that she wasn't completely alone, nor was she invisible.*



*For the longest time, Nao was afraid that Jiko would one day die—and now, the moment seemed to be here. Even on the verge of death, Jiko's fingers are "hot," showing that she is still full of life.*



*Jiko seems to have waited for Nao and Haruki to arrive before writing her final message to the world. The fact that a Zen master's final act is to write a poem emphasizes the importance of the written word, as writing can capture and preserve a person's innermost thoughts even after they're gone.*



*Nao realized that Jiko was changed by death—her "hot" fingers were now cold. Like everything in the world, Jiko, too, was an impermanent "time being."*



*Jiko's final message was directed at Nao and Haruki. Jiko understood that they were thinking of killing themselves, and she wanted to urge them to live. She knew that they would be more likely to honor her dying wish, which is why she wanted them there before she died. Before Nao left the temple, she also found Haruki #1's secret French diary where Ruth left it. This is more evidence that Ruth actually traveled back in time and did what she dreamed about—there truly is a "magical" or metaphysical connection between Ruth and Nao.*



## PART IV, CHAPTER 2: RUTH

(1) Ruth goes to the little cemetery in Whaletown to tidy up her parents' graves. After reading Nao's account of Jiko's funeral, Ruth wishes that she'd had a more elaborate ceremony to commemorate Masako's passing. Her mother hadn't wanted a funeral, and the whole thing had been a very low-key affair with just Ruth and Oliver present.

*Jiko's funeral reminds Ruth of her own mother's death. Ruth loved her mother and misses her, just as Nao feels the absence of Jiko's presence in her life.*



(2) Muriel visits Ruth and Oliver, hoping to spot the Jungle Crow. Oliver is trying to get a clear picture of the bird to send to a database in order to identify it. Muriel asks Ruth if she is done reading Nao's diary, and she is shocked when Ruth admits that she still hasn't gotten to the end. Ruth tells her how the pages went blank and about her weird dream.

*Ruth now feels comfortable enough with Muriel to tell her about her weird dream and the words in the diary changing, which shows that she's come to trust her as a friend. It seems that Nao's diary has taught Ruth the importance of communicating openly and being vulnerable with other people.*



Muriel says that Ruth's descriptions sound interesting. She mentions that "in indigenous myth, crows are pretty powerful." Muriel thinks that the Jungle Crow probably came to the island to lead Ruth in the dream, so that she could alter Nao's story.

*Muriel's idea points out to readers that the Crow is indeed a supernatural creature that guided Ruth to change Nao's story. The Crow could be a spiritual representation of either Jiko or Haruki #1.*



Muriel's second theory is that the story is now Ruth's—it has now become *her* story, rather than Nao's, so Ruth has to discover how it ends. Ruth says that she wants the responsibility of having so much control another person's narrative, but Muriel laughs and says that this is what a novelist does.

*Ruth has been nervous about owning up to her power as a writer, but the experience with Nao's diary shows her that she is capable of handling it. Now, once again, she can use her moments wisely and write what she wants to, instead of wallowing in self-doubt and struggling with her past in her memoir.*



Just then, Oliver spots the Jungle Crow. Muriel admires it, and Ruth recognizes it as the crow from her dream. Oliver takes a photo of it. Just then, the crow flies toward the deck they're standing on, and it drops a hazelnut beside them before flying off. The nut gets wedged between two floorboards on the deck. When Oliver picks up the nut, he sees something moving under the floorboards. He immediately runs down the porch steps and crawls under the deck, and as Ruth and Muriel use a flashlight to try and see what he is up to, Ruth hears the cat's faint mew. She tells Muriel that the cat has "come back from the dead."

*Ruth is convinced that the Jungle Crow is the same as the one she saw in her dream, which is evidence of the Jungle Crow's magical nature. The Jungle Crow has helped Ruth save Nao's and Haruki's lives, and it also brings Oliver's pet cat "back from the dead" by pointing Oliver to the cat's location. The Crow's magic helps Ruth and Oliver in their world too.*



(3) The cat has been attacked by some wild animal, and its wounds are infected; it's so weak that it can't even stand. Ruth and Oliver take it to the vet in town, who tells them that the prognosis isn't good. On the way home, Oliver says that at least he now knows what happened to the stupid cat—not knowing was the worst part.

*Even though the cat might not recover, Oliver is glad to know what happened to it. This is similar to how Ruth feels about Nao's story: she, too, wants to know what happens to Nao, even if that means knowing that things didn't go well for her.*



(4) Dr. Leistiko writes to Ruth again, saying that he just unearthed an old email from Haruki that he doesn't even remember receiving. He says he's sent Haruki an email and has even given him Ruth's email ID. Dr. Leistiko forwards the old email from Haruki to Ruth, thinking that she might find it interesting, even though it is many years old and predates the **tsunami**.

(5) In his email to Dr. Leistiko, Haruki wrote that he and his family were doing well. His wife worked at a textbook company and also took up deep-sea diving as a hobby. His daughter, Nao, studied at an international school in Montreal, where she had become very interested in French language and culture. Haruki wrote that he was very grateful to his family for standing by him during the troubled times he experienced right after they moved back to Japan.

Haruki launched an internet start-up that worked with online encryption and security. He wrote that he got the idea from Nao, who was severely bullied in school in Japan, and whose classmates posted terrible things about her online. Haruki developed a computer program that he calls a "spider" that crawled through the internet and removed all traces of her, and Nao was happy that she could make a fresh start in Montreal.

Afterward, Haruki thought that his "cute little spider" could be useful to other people too. He ended up getting many clients who wanted to disappear from the internet. Haruki wrote that he understood that suicide was antiquated and unnecessary. His little spider could help people who no longer wanted to exist, doing so in a way that was much simpler than death. Haruki's start-up was very successful, and he was leading a comfortable life.

## PART IV, CHAPTER 3: NAO

(1) Nao writes that she will really miss her reader, even though the reader won't even exist until he or she starts reading the diary. Nao doesn't think she would recognize her reader if they ever meet. She doesn't want her reader to worry about her, so she mentions that things have started working out for her.

*Ruth is curious about Nao's life, and it seems like the universe sends her an answer. It seems odd that Dr. Leistiko doesn't even remember receiving the email and that he suddenly found it after all these years—perhaps Ruth's actions in the dream changed Dr. Leistiko's life as well.*



*Haruki's letter proves to Ruth that after all of Nao's challenges, she goes on to live a happy life—even her misfortunes were impermanent.*



*Evidence of Nao's bullying lingered on the internet, which kept her from moving past it. Haruki discovered a way to erase her past—at least on the internet—and in this way, the "spider" was useful to Nao. Haruki felt powerless while Nao's earlier troubles were happening, since he couldn't help her. However, his skills as a software programmer turned out to be a perfect way of devising a solution to Nao's problems.*



*Haruki thought of his "spider" program as a simple way of erasing one's past. People often commit suicide because their pasts are too painful, and they have no way of erasing what's happened to them. Haruki's program "killed" people online so no one could find them or their histories—and in this way, he gave them the freedom to move forward and live their present lives. This explains why Ruth couldn't find any trace of Nao online.*



*As Nao gets to the end of the diary, her life has settled down. She feels strong enough to live without the crutch of her reader, and she no longer feels lonely, since she knows that Haruki won't leave her.*



Some days after Jiko's funeral, Haruki and Nao read the translation of Haruki #1's French diary. When they got to the part where Haruki #1 said he planned to fly his plane into the ocean rather than at the enemy's warship, they were surprised. Nao understood and supported Haruki #1's decision. Haruki, however, became very upset, which surprised Nao. He locked himself in the bathroom and sobbed loudly.

Later, Haruki explained that the reason he'd been overwhelmed was because he, too, had faced a similar situation when he worked in America. Haruki had developed a software interface that his company was selling to a defense contractor. Since Haruki protested so vocally against this, he was fired. Nao was shocked to hear this—she thought that her father was a “superhero” for standing up for his beliefs, and she realized how wrong she'd been about him all along.

Haruki said that he'd felt ashamed and guilty that Nao and Tomoko had to suffer for his decision. After 9/11, his guilt worsened, because he knew that American pilots would use his interface to bomb Afghans and Iraqis. He explained that he'd been so preoccupied with his troubles that he'd paid no attention to Nao's.

Haruki then asked Nao about the Panty Incident and all the bullying she'd faced at school. She told him everything. Ever since, Haruki had been working very hard at his computer, though Nao didn't know what he was building. She says that he has found his “superpower”: computer programming.

Nao tells her reader that she and her dad are doing really well; neither of them wants to kill themselves. Nao promises to buy a new notebook and write about Jiko, like she'd initially planned to in this diary. She doesn't want to forget any details about Jiko and her life, so she wants to write them all down quickly, since memories are also “time beings”—they're beautiful until they fade away and die.

*Haruki likely has such a strong reaction to Haruki #1's plan because it reminds him of his own life—perhaps suicide is the link between them, or perhaps there's a deeper connection that only Haruki recognizes.*



*The reason why Haruki was so moved by Haruki #1's gesture is because it was so much like his own. Whereas Haruki #1 flew his plane into the ocean as an act of protest against the war, Haruki lost his prestigious career because he was morally opposed to his technology being used by a defense contractor. Having found out the truth about why Haruki lost his job, Nao recognized that he was a hero, just like Haruki #1. The secret diary that Ruth left inside Haruki #1's white box ended up healing and cementing Nao's and Haruki's relationship. It also showed Nao that her father was honorable and worthy of respect, just like Haruki #1.*



*Nao always thought that Haruki's desire to kill himself was a completely selfish one. Now, she realized that he was troubled because he was guilty that he might have caused others' death and suffering.*



*Nao and Haruki were finally communicating openly with each other, and this helped Haruki devise a way to help her. While Nao doesn't know what her father is working on, Ruth knows because of Dr. Leistiko's email.*



*Nao acknowledges that memories, too, are impermanent and fleeting, much like the beautiful cherry blossoms she observed falling off the tree. This is why she wants to write about Jiko before she forgets details about her.*



## PART IV, CHAPTER 4: RUTH

(1) Ruth closes Nao's diary after she's done reading it. When she was on the penultimate page, she'd hesitated before turning it, wondering if the pages would multiply. But they hadn't—she'd reached the end. Ruth wonders about how the diary had gone blank, and how she could have rescued the words and characters through her dream. She thinks of Nao's words at the beginning of the diary, when she'd written to her reader, "Together we'll make magic..." Ruth ends up wondering, "Who had conjured whom?" Ruth wonders if she is the dream, and if Nao created Ruth by imagining her reader.

(2) The next morning, Oliver finishes reading Nao's diary as well. Afterward, Ruth asks him if he thinks she's crazy to believe that she changed Nao's life by visiting Haruki in her dream—and if Oliver even believed Ruth when she made these claims. Oliver says that he never disbelieved her. He tells her that there is a "quantum theory of multiple worlds," which essentially states that "everything that's possible will happen, or perhaps already has." Ruth says that she doesn't quite understand, and Oliver replies that no does, because the math behind it is very complicated. He then brings up Schrödinger's cat.

(3) Ruth knows a little about Schrödinger's cat. She knows that quantum physics focuses on matter and energy at a microscopic level, which is often different from how it behaves on a macroscopic level. Ruth knows that in physicist Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment, he'd said that if a cat "behaved like subatomic particles" and was shut in a box with a mechanism that might kill it, then the cat would be both dead and alive until an observer opens the box. As soon as the box is opened, the cat would be either alive or dead.

*After Ruth finishes the diary, she's inclined to believe Nao's words that she and Ruth would end up making magic together, since Ruth had supernatural experiences as she read the diary. Ruth wonders if she exists only as Nao's creation, as her reader—much like the past version of Nao, the writer, in the diary only exists in Ruth's mind as she reads. The novel implies this idea is certainly a possibility: previously, when Nao was hopelessly waiting for the bus to Jiko's, she implied that she would kill herself. And after Ruth read this, the Jungle Crow noticed that Ruth's house was barely visible in the darkness, suggesting that Ruth, too, was fading away. Ruth couldn't exist without Nao, since she was the reader that Nao conjured up. This idea shows the symbiotic relationship between a writer and her reader: one can't exist without the other, and they are intimately connected by the story they share.*



*Oliver seems open to the idea of the "quantum theory of multiple worlds," which suggests that there are multiple parallel worlds and that all possibilities can exist in these worlds. So, Oliver thinks it is entirely possible that Ruth visited one of these worlds and changed Nao's fate. He explains more about quantum mechanics in the sections that follow, beginning with an explanation of Schrödinger's cat.*



*The main point of Schrödinger's thought experiment is that as long as one leaves possibilities open, more than one thing can simultaneously occur. He didn't mean that a real cat can be simultaneously dead and alive, but that if a cat "behaved like subatomic particles," then this could happen, since subatomic particles behave in a different manner than cats. However, this experiment will remind readers of Oliver's lost cat, and how not knowing if it was dead or alive drove Oliver crazy. When he found the cat, it was barely alive, or half-dead—in other words, both dead and alive. This seems to be a real-life illustration of Schrödinger's idea.*



Ruth asks Oliver if this means that the observer would kill the cat by looking at it. Oliver explains that this isn't the right idea, and that Schrödinger was trying to illustrate the "observer paradox." On a subatomic level, any one particle can exist in many different forms and many different places at once. This is called "superposition." However, particles only exist in superposition when no one is looking at them. When scientists try to measure it, the superposition seems to collapse, and the particle exists in only one location.

Later, another physicist named Hugh Everett came up with the theory that this collapse isn't actually what happens. When the superposed quantum particle is observed, "it branches." This means that cat is dead *and* alive, and these two different versions of it now exist in two different worlds. This implies that the observer splits too—there is an observer in one world observing the dead cat, and another observer in another world observing a living cat. The selves in various worlds can't communicate with one another, because they do not remember the other worlds and other selves.

(4) Ruth wonders if the quantum physics theory of splitting selves could explain her poor memory. She wonders if Dogen figured all this out years ago when he'd written, "To study the Way is to study the self." To study the self, one had to sit zazen, which to Ruth seems like a way of observing the self. Dogen had continued, "To study the self is to forget the self." Ruth thinks that this means one's "sense of being a solid, singular self" would vanish, and one could be part of "an open-ended quantum array."

(5) Ruth wonders if Nao is really alive, in this world. She wonders how the diary, the letters, and the **watch** ended up in a lunch box in the ocean. Ruth thinks that she expected to know the answers to those questions, and she is frustrated that she still has no idea and has no way to find out.

*Oliver explains the puzzling ways in which subatomic particles behave, which makes them very hard to measure. This seems to suggest that there are mysteries even in science that cannot be measured and explained, so supernatural or spiritual events cannot simply be dismissed. Just because they are unexplainable does not make them any less "real."*



*Hugh Everett's theory suggests that there are as many worlds and selves as there are ideas and possibilities—a dizzying thought that Ruth and Oliver seem to embrace. All these worlds and selves cannot communicate, but Ruth seemed to have broken through this barrier in her dreams.*



*Ruth has always been anxious about her memory, because every time she forgets something, she worries that she is getting Alzheimer's like her mother. However, now she considers the possibility of her faulty memory being a by-product of having multiple selves in multiple worlds. Ruth also thinks that it might be beneficial to forget her identity as a "singular self" and instead travel freely between "an open-ended quantum array" of multiple worlds, like Oliver explained. In this way, she ties ideas of quantum physics with Dogen's Zen Buddhist teachings.*



*At the end of the novel, Ruth has some answers, but not all of them. The biggest mystery is why the contents of the lunch box were thrown away at all, and Ruth still has no idea. This suggests that, much like no one can fully grasp the math behind quantum physics, some coincidences and seemingly magical events in life cannot be explained or analyzed.*



Oliver tells Ruth that perhaps, in another world, Ruth is married to someone industrious and wealthy and has a nice life in New York City. Instead, in this world, she is stuck with Oliver and his cat on a desolate island. Ruth says that by even suggesting that, Oliver has “sentenced” her to another life in another world, with an insufferable husband. Oliver laughs and asks Ruth if she is happy in this world. She says she is happy, “at least for now.” This answer satisfies Oliver.

*Oliver is concerned about being a “loser,” since he doesn’t make much money, and he knows that Ruth is unhappy on the island. However, just the possibility of living with a rich, successful man with corporate career strikes Ruth as being a kind of jail sentence—and she realizes that she is, in fact, happy with Oliver. She acknowledges, however, that she is happy with him for “the time being,” since she has learned that the present moment is all that anyone can know about. At any moment, everything could change.*



## EPILOGUE

Ruth writes a diary entry to Nao, saying that she wonders about Nao, just like Nao wonders about her. She thinks that Nao must be around 26 or 27 now. Ruth imagines her in Tokyo, or perhaps in a real French café in Paris. She is sure that Nao must be still writing, and she hopes that she will soon finish her book on Jiko’s life, so that Ruth can read it. She says that “not-knowing” has its charm since it “keeps all the possibilities open.” However, if Nao ever wants to be found, Ruth would like to meet her, since Nao is her “kind of time being.”

*Earlier, Ruth was frustrated that she still had many unanswered questions, even after she was done reading the diary. However, in this note to Nao, she wisely acknowledges that the unsolved mystery also has its charms. This applies even to the novel’s reader, who can dream up any of the possibilities that might occur after the novel ends, since the author doesn’t close any possibilities with a concrete ending. Thus, the relationship between the writer and reader continues, even beyond the pages of the book.*



## APPENDIX A: ZEN MOMENTS

Ruth writes that Jiko told her in a dream that there are several moments in the single snap of a finger, and that people have to understand how quickly time flies by if they want to wake up and try live life.

*Ruth continues to dream about Jiko and learn from her about the importance of appreciating each moment.*



## APPENDIX B: QUANTUM MECHANICS

Quantum mechanics studies how energy and matter operate differently at the smallest scales and atomic increments. It studies superposition, which means that a particle can occupy multiple forms or locations at once. Quantum mechanics also studies entanglement, which happens when two particles act like a single system across space and time. It also looks at the problem of how observation is affected when the observation process itself is observed. Ruth thinks that Zen Master Dogen would have liked quantum mechanics and would have easily understood its principles.

*Since quantum mechanics studies how multiple possibilities can simultaneously exist, Ruth likens it to the Zen Buddhist idea of how “everything is connected in time.” To Ruth, both seem to deal with the connectedness of all things.*





## APPENDIX C: RAMBLING THOUGHTS

Ruth includes the first few lines from a poem called “Rambling Thoughts” by a Japanese feminist poet named Yosano Akiko. In the poem, Akiko writes that mountains used to move in the past, and that they will soon move again. She also writes that women are “awakening from their deep slumber.” Akiko expresses a desire to “write entirely in the first person.” Ruth mentions that the poem was first published in 1911.

*Akiko's poem expresses an awareness of vast and inevitable change by talking about the moving mountains. It also expresses a desire for change in the lives of women, advocating for their empowerment and telling their “first person” stories. Nao's diary does all these things, suggesting that Ruth sees Nao's diary as a feminist work.*



## APPENDIX D: TEMPLE NAMES

Ruth writes that the name of Jiko's temple was Jigenji, and the name of the mountain it was on was Hiyuzan. Long ago, ancient Zen masters would retreat to meditate atop uninhabited mountains, away from the distractions of towns and cities. After word of their accomplishments spread, disciples would climb these mountains and seek out the masters, and slowly, temples and communities were built around them. This is why ancient temples always include the name of the mountain they are built on. Temples that are built in cities like Tokyo also adopted mountain names, even though they aren't really built on a mountain.

*Ruth explains the ancient tradition of how Zen temples came to be named after mountains, a quaint tradition connects Buddhist practitioners to ancient times. By keeping this tradition alive, Zen masters pay respect to the passage of time and memorialize the ways of the past.*



## APPENDIX E: SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT

Ruth describes Schrödinger's thought experiment. She says that the cat is shut in a box with a mechanism that might kill it. Through this, Schrödinger illustrates the impossibility of precise measurement in quantum mechanics. The moment an observer opens the box, he or she will find the cat to be either dead or alive—the “cat's state is singular and fixed in time and space.” However, before opening the box, the cat must simultaneously be both dead and alive. Ruth wonders that if there isn't an external observer, if even people would “exist in an array of all possible states at once.”

*Through this thought experiment, Schrödinger wanted to demonstrate that it is impossible to accurately measure subatomic particles, since they are in motion until they are “fixed” by being measured. Ruth likens the behavior of the subatomic particles to people's lives, wondering if people, too, lack the freedom to “exist in an array of [...] states” only because an external observer “fixes” them into a single state. Ruth seems to believe that this is the case, since people can otherwise exist in multiple, connected states, as Zen Buddhists believe. Ruth sees the similarity between Zen Buddhist thought and quantum mechanics. This also hearkens back to the idea that Nao, as the writer, only existed when Ruth was reading her words—and that Ruth, as the reader, only existed when Nao was writing to her.*



## APPENDIX F: HUGH EVERETT

Hugh Everett's contemporaries thought that his "many-worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics was far-fetched. However, Everett believed in his theory, so he thought that anything he imagined had already occurred or would occur in another world. Everett died at 51, but he had believed that "in many worlds he was immortal," so he asked his wife to throw his cremated remains in the garbage. His daughter Liz committed suicide some years later, and in her suicide note, she asked her family to throw her in the trash, too, so that she could "end up in the correct parallel universe to meet up w/ Daddy."

*At the conclusion of the novel, Ruth hints that the "many worlds" theory—which says that anything that can possibly happen will happen in another world—is confusing but also freeing. Everett wasn't concerned about mortality and change, since he believed that in some other world, he was immortal. As a result, he didn't cling to the past and even advised his family to throw his ashes in the trash and move on with their lives. The last anecdote in this section, however, describes Everett's daughter, Liz, who killed herself. She, too, seemed to have believed in her father's "many worlds" theory, but that didn't help her to stay present in this world. So, this theory isn't an all-encompassing solution—Ruth perhaps believes that Zen Buddhist practices are more effective at grounding people in the present moment. Liz's desire to "meet up w/ Daddy" ends the novel, and it connects Liz with Nao, who contemplated following Haruki into death. It also connects Liz with Ruth, who remembers that her father promised to come find her in her dreams if she happened to get lost in them. The novel leaves off on the idea that love can transcend time and space to connect people.*





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