

# A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING RUTH OZEKI



'Bewitching, intelligent & heartbreaking' Junot Díaz  
'I truly love this novel' Alice Sebold

# *Nao*

## 1.

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.

You wonder about me.

I wonder about you.

Who are you and what are you doing?

Are you in a New York subway car hanging from a strap, or soaking in your hot tub in Sunnysvale?

Are you sunbathing on a sandy beach in Phuket, or having your toenails buffed in Brighton?

Are you a male or a female or somewhere in between?

Is your girlfriend cooking you a yummy dinner, or are you eating cold Chinese noodles from a box?

Are you curled up with your back turned coldly toward your snoring wife, or are you eagerly waiting for your beautiful lover to finish his bath so you can make passionate love to him?

Do you have a cat and is she sitting on your lap? Does her forehead smell like cedar trees and fresh sweet air?

Actually, it doesn't matter very much, because by the time you read this, everything will be different, and you will be nowhere in particular, flipping idly through the pages of this book, which happens to be the diary of my last days on earth, wondering if you should keep on reading.

And if you decide not to read any more, hey, no problem, because you're

not the one I was waiting for anyway. But if you do decide to read on, then guess what? You're my kind of time being and together we'll make magic!

## 2.

Ugh. That was dumb. I'll have to do better. I bet you're wondering what kind of stupid girl would write words like that.

Well, I would.

Nao would.

Nao is me, Naoko Yasutani, which is my full name, but you can call me Nao because everyone else does. And I better tell you a little more about myself if we're going to keep on meeting like this . . . !☺

Actually, not much has changed. I'm still sitting in this French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town, and Edith Pilaf is singing another sad chanson, and Babette just brought me a coffee and I've taken a sip. Babette is my maid and also my new friend, and my coffee is Blue Mountain and I drink it black, which is unusual for a teenage girl, but it's definitely the way good coffee should be drunk if you have any respect for the bitter bean.

I have pulled up my sock and scratched behind my knee.

I have straightened my pleats so that they line up neatly on the tops of my thighs.

I have tucked my shoulder-length hair behind my right ear, which is pierced with five holes, but now I'm letting it fall modestly across my face again because the otaku<sup>4</sup> salaryman who's sitting at the table next to me is staring, and it's creeping me out even though I find it amusing, too. I'm wearing my junior high school uniform and I can tell by the way he's looking at my body that he's got a major schoolgirl fetish, and if that's the case, then how come he's hanging out in a French maid café? I mean, what a dope!

But you can never tell. Everything changes, and anything is possible, so maybe I'll change my mind about him, too. Maybe in the next few minutes, he will lean awkwardly in my direction and say something surprisingly beautiful to me, and I will be overcome with a fondness for him in spite of his

---

4. *otaku* (お宅)—obsessive fan or fanatic, a computer geek, a nerd.

greasy hair and bad complexion, and I'll actually condescend to converse with him a little bit, and eventually he will invite me to go shopping, and if he can convince me that he's madly in love with me, I'll go to a department store with him and let him buy me a cute cardigan sweater or a keitai<sup>5</sup> or handbag, even though he obviously doesn't have a lot of money. Then after, maybe we'll go to a club and drink some cocktails, and zip into a love hotel with a big Jacuzzi, and after we bathe, just as I begin to feel comfortable with him, suddenly his true inner nature will emerge, and he'll tie me up and put the plastic shopping bag from my new cardigan over my head and rape me, and hours later the police will find my lifeless naked body bent at odd angles on the floor, next to the big round zebra-skin bed.

Or maybe he will just ask me to strangle him a little with my panties while he gets off on their beautiful aroma.

Or maybe none of these things will happen except in my mind and yours, because, like I told you, together we're making magic, at least for the time being.

### 3.

Are you still there? I just reread what I wrote about the otaku salaryman, and I want to apologize. That was nasty. That was not a nice way to start.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I'm not a stupid girl. I know Edith Pilaf's name isn't really Pilaf. And I'm not a nasty girl or a hentai,<sup>6</sup> either. I'm actually not a big fan of hentai, so if you are one, then please just put this book down immediately and don't read any further, okay? You will only be disappointed and wasting your time, because this book is not going to be some kinky girl's secret diary, filled with pink fantasies and nasty fetishes. It's not what you think, since my purpose for writing it before I die is to tell someone the fascinating life story of my hundred-and-four-year-old great-grandmother, who is a Zen Buddhist nun.

You probably don't think nuns are all that fascinating, but my great-

---

5. *keitai* (携帯)—mobile phone.

6. *hentai* (変態)—pervert, a sexual deviant.



grandmother is, and not in a kinky way at all. I am sure there are lots of kinky nuns out there . . . well, maybe not so many kinky nuns, but kinky priests, for sure, kinky priests are everywhere . . . but my diary will not concern itself with them or their freaky behaviors.

This diary will tell the real life story of my great-grandmother Yasutani Jiko. She was a nun and a novelist and New Woman<sup>7</sup> of the Taisho era.<sup>8</sup> She was also an anarchist and a feminist who had plenty of lovers, both males and females, but she was never kinky or nasty. And even though I may end up mentioning some of her love affairs, everything I write will be historically true and empowering to women, and not a lot of foolish geisha crap. So if kinky nasty things are your pleasure, please close this book and give it to your wife or co-worker and save yourself a lot of time and trouble.

#### 4.

I think it's important to have clearly defined goals in life, don't you? Especially if you don't have a lot of life left. Because if you don't have clear goals, you might run out of time, and when the day comes, you'll find yourself standing on the parapet of a tall building, or sitting on your bed with a bottle of pills in your hand, thinking, *Shit! I blew it.* If only I'd set clearer goals for myself!

I'm telling you this because I'm actually not going to be around for long, and you might as well know this up front so you don't make assumptions. Assumptions suck. They're like expectations. Assumptions and expectations will kill any relationship, so let's you and me not go there, okay?

The truth is that very soon I'm going to graduate from time, or maybe I shouldn't say graduate because that makes it sound as if I've actually met my goals and deserve to move on, when the fact is that I just turned sixteen and I've accomplished nothing at all. *Zilch. Nada.* Do I sound pathetic? I don't

---

7. New Woman—a term used in Japan in the early 1900s to describe progressive, educated women who rejected the limitations of traditional gender-assigned roles.

8. Taisho era, 1912–1926, named for the Taishō emperor, also called Taishō Democracy; a short-lived period of social and political liberalization, which ended with the right-wing military takeover that led to World War II.

mean to. I just want to be accurate. Maybe instead of graduate, I should say I'm going to drop out of time. Drop out. Time out. Exit my existence. I'm counting the moments.

One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

Four . . .

Hey, I know! Let's count the moments together!<sup>9</sup>

---

9. For more thoughts on Zen moments, see Appendix A.

# *Ruth*

## 1.

A tiny sparkle caught Ruth's eye, a small glint of refracted sunlight angling out from beneath a massive tangle of drying bull kelp, which the sea had heaved up onto the sand at full tide. She mistook it for the sheen of a dying jellyfish and almost walked right by it. The beaches were overrun with jellyfish these days, the monstrous red stinging kind that looked like wounds along the shoreline.

But something made her stop. She leaned over and nudged the heap of kelp with the toe of her sneaker then poked it with a stick. Untangling the whiplike fronds, she dislodged enough to see that what glistened underneath was not a dying sea jelly, but something plastic, a bag. Not surprising. The ocean was full of plastic. She dug a bit more, until she could lift the bag up by its corner. It was heavier than she expected, a scarred plastic freezer bag, encrusted with barnacles that spread across its surface like a rash. It must have been in the ocean for a long time, she thought. Inside the bag, she could see a hint of something red, someone's garbage, no doubt, tossed overboard or left behind after a picnic or a rave. The sea was always heaving things up and hurling them back: fishing lines, floats, beer cans, plastic toys, tampons, Nike sneakers. A few years earlier it was severed feet. People were finding them up and down Vancouver Island, washed up on the sand. One had been found on this very beach. No one could explain what had happened to the rest of the bodies. Ruth didn't want to think about what might be rotting inside the bag. She flung it farther up the beach. She would finish her walk and then pick it up on the way back, take it home, and throw it out.

## 2.

"What's this?" her husband called from the mud room.

Ruth was cooking dinner, chopping carrots and concentrating.

"This," Oliver repeated when she didn't answer.

She looked up. He was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, dangling the large scarred freezer bag in his fingers. She'd left it out on the porch, intending to deposit it in the trash, but she'd gotten distracted.

"Oh, leave it," she said. "It's garbage. Something I picked up on the beach. Please don't bring it in the house." Why did she have to explain?

"But there's something in it," he said. "Don't you want to know what's inside?"

"No," she said. "Dinner's almost ready."

He brought it in anyway and laid it on the kitchen table, scattering sand. He couldn't help it. It was his nature to need to know, to take things apart and sometimes put them back together. Their freezer was filled with plastic shrouds containing the tiny carcasses of birds, shrews, and other small animals that their cat had brought in, waiting to be dissected and stuffed.

"It's not just one bag," he reported, carefully unzipping the first and laying it aside. "It's bags within bags."

The cat, attracted by all the activity, jumped up onto the table to help. He wasn't allowed on the table. The cat had a name, Schrödinger, but they never used it. Oliver called him the Pest, which sometimes morphed into Pesto. He was always doing bad things, disemboweling squirrels in the middle of the kitchen, leaving small shiny organs, kidneys and intestines, right outside their bedroom door where Ruth would step on them with her bare feet on her way to the bathroom at night. They were a team, Oliver and the cat. When Oliver went upstairs, the cat went upstairs. When Oliver came downstairs to eat, the cat came downstairs to eat. When Oliver went outside to pee, the cat went outside to pee. Now Ruth watched the two of them as they examined the contents of the plastic bags. She winced, anticipating the stench of someone's rotting picnic, or worse, that would ruin the fragrance of their meal. Lentil soup. They were having lentil soup and salad for dinner, and she'd just put in the rosemary. "Do you think you could dissect your garbage out on the porch?"

"You picked it up," he said. "And anyway, I don't think it's garbage. It's too neatly wrapped." He continued his forensic unpeeling.



Ruth sniffed, but all she could smell was sand and salt and sea.

Suddenly he started laughing. “Look, Pesto!” he said. “It’s for you! It’s a Hello Kitty lunchbox!”

“Please!” Ruth said, feeling desperate now.

“And there’s something inside . . .”

“I’m serious! I don’t want you to open it in here. Just take it out—”

But it was too late.

### 3.

He had smoothed the bags flat, laid them out on top of one another in descending order of size, and then sorted the contents into three neat collections: a small stack of handwritten letters; a pudgy bound book with a faded red cover; a sturdy antique wristwatch with a matte black face and a luminous dial. Next to these sat the Hello Kitty lunchbox that had protected the contents from the corrosive effects of the sea. The cat was sniffing at the lunchbox. Ruth picked him up and dropped him on the floor, and then turned her attention to the items on the table.

The letters appeared to be written in Japanese. The cover of the red book was printed in French. The watch had markings etched onto the back that were difficult to decipher, so Oliver had taken out his iPhone and was using the microscope app to examine the engraving. “I think this is Japanese, too,” he said.

Ruth flipped through the letters, trying to make out the characters that were written in faded blue ink. “The handwriting’s old and cursive. Beautiful, but I can’t read a word of it.” She put the letters down and took the watch from him. “Yes,” she said. “They’re Japanese numbers. Not a date, though. Yon, nana, san, hachi, nana. Four, seven, three, eight, seven. Maybe a serial number?”

She held the watch up to her ear and listened for the ticking, but it was broken. She put it down and picked up the bright red lunchbox. The red color showing through the scarred plastic was what had led her to mistake the freezer bag for a stinging jellyfish. How long had it been floating out there in the ocean before washing up? The lunchbox lid had a rubber gasket around the rim. She picked up the book, which was surprisingly dry; the cloth cover was soft and worn, its corners blunt from rough handling. She

put the edge to her nose and inhaled the musty scent of mildewed pages and dust. She looked at the title.

*“À la recherche du temps perdu,”* she read. “Par Marcel Proust.”

4.

They liked books, all books, but especially old ones, and their house was overflowing with them. There were books everywhere, stacked on shelves and piled on the floor, on chairs, on the stairway treads, but neither Ruth nor Oliver minded. Ruth was a novelist, and novelists, Oliver asserted, should have cats and books. And indeed, buying books was her consolation for moving to a remote island in the middle of Desolation Sound, where the public library was one small humid room above the community hall, overrun with children. In addition to the extensive and dog-eared juvenile literature section and some popular adult titles, the library’s collection seemed largely to comprise books on gardening, canning, food security, alternative energy, alternative healing, and alternative schooling. Ruth missed the abundance and diversity of urban libraries, their quiet spaciousness, and when she and Oliver moved to the small island, they agreed that she should be able to order any book she wanted, which she did. Research, she called it, although in the end he’d read most of them, while she’d read only a few. She just liked having them around. Recently, however, she had started to notice that the damp sea air had swollen their pages and the silverfish had taken up residence in their spines. When she opened the covers, they smelled of mold. This made her sad.

“In search of lost time,” she said, translating the tarnished gilt title, embossed on the red cloth spine. “I’ve never read it.”

“I haven’t, either,” said Oliver. “I don’t think I’ll be trying it in French, though.”

“Mm,” she said, agreeing, but then she opened the cover, anyway, curious to see if she could understand just the first few lines. She was expecting to see an age-stained folio, printed in an antique font, so she was entirely unprepared for the adolescent purple handwriting that sprawled across the page. It felt like a desecration, and it shocked her so much she almost dropped the book.

## 5.

Print is predictable and impersonal, conveying information in a mechanical transaction with the reader's eye.

Handwriting, by contrast, resists the eye, reveals its meaning slowly, and is as intimate as skin.

Ruth stared at the page. The purple words were mostly in English, with some Japanese characters scattered here and there, but her eye wasn't really taking in their meaning as much as a *felt* sense, murky and emotional, of the writer's presence. The fingers that had gripped the purple gel ink pen must have belonged to a girl, a teenager. Her handwriting, these loopy purple marks impressed onto the page, retained her moods and anxieties, and the moment Ruth laid eyes on the page, she knew without a doubt that the girl's fingertips were pink and moist, and that she had bitten her nails down to the quick.

Ruth looked more closely at the letters. They were round and a little bit sloppy (as she now imagined the girl must be, too), but they stood more or less upright and marched gamely across the page at a good clip, not in a hurry, but not dawdling, either. Sometimes at the end of a line, they crowded each other a little, like people jostling to get onto an elevator or into a subway car, just as the doors were closing. Ruth's curiosity was piqued. It was clearly a diary of some kind. She examined the cover again. Should she read it? Deliberately now, she turned to the first page, feeling vaguely prurient, like an eavesdropper or a peeping tom. Novelists spend a lot of time poking their noses into other people's business. Ruth was not unfamiliar with this feeling.

*Hi!*, she read. *My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is? . . .*