

Sweet Bean Paste PDF (Limited Copy)

Durian Sukegawa



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Sweet Bean Paste Summary

Finding connection through shared stories and small joys.

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About the book

In "Sweet Bean Paste" by Durian Sukegawa, the heart of humanity is explored through the unlikely bond between a weary, solitary dorayaki shop owner and a resilient elderly woman with a mysterious past. As they unite over a shared love for the artisan sweet red bean paste that defines the delicacies they create, the novel beautifully weaves themes of loneliness, redemption, and the transformative power of connection. Sukegawa invites readers to savor the quiet moments of life, revealing how fleeting encounters can lead to profound changes, all against the backdrop of Japan's charming streets and the bittersweet layers of human experience. This touching tale encourages us to look beyond the surface, reminding us that each person carries their own story and the capacity for sweetness, even amidst the hardships.

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About the author

Durian Sukegawa is a contemporary Japanese author known for his poignant storytelling and rich character development, which often explore themes of social isolation, personal redemption, and the intricacies of human relationships. Born and raised in Tokyo, Sukegawa's unique voice reflects his diverse experiences, including his work as a writer and screenwriter across various media. His acclaimed novel "Sweet Bean Paste" has garnered international recognition, capturing readers' imaginations with its delicate portrayal of an unlikely friendship between a struggling baker and a woman with a profound connection to her past. Through his meticulously crafted narratives, Sukegawa invites readers to reflect on the beauty of everyday life and the power of compassion.

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Chapter 1 Summary:

In the opening chapter, we are introduced to Sentaro, a griddle cook at the Doraharu shop located on Cherry Blossom Street—a run-down part of town characterized more by empty storefronts than the sparse cherry trees lining the avenue. The day is unusually lively due to the cherry blossoms being in full bloom, attracting more passersby.

As Sentaro mixes batter for his dorayaki, an elderly woman named Tokue Yoshii approaches. She inquires about a Help Wanted sign displayed in the shop window and expresses her desire to apply for the job, despite being seventy-six years old. Sentaro, taken aback by her age, is unsure how to respond without causing offense. Intrigued yet hesitant, he jokingly asks about her interest, prompting her to offer to work for half the advertised wage, which further surprises him.

Despite her cheerful demeanor, Sentaro remains reluctant to hire her, worried about the physical demands of the job. Their conversation reveals Tokue's hearing difficulties and the subtle differences in her facial features, hinting at a life marked by challenges. She abruptly shifts the topic to the cherry tree outside, asking about its origins—a question that hints at her connection to the past, perhaps seeking a sense of belonging or nostalgia.

As the exchange concludes, Tokue, with a stiff but determined gait, indicates



she will return, leaving Sentaro to ponder their interaction. This meeting subtly sets the stage for themes of aging, human connection, and the search for purpose, contrasting the vibrant beauty of the cherry blossoms with the stark reality of their surroundings.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of human connection and purpose, regardless of age.

Critical Interpretation: Reflect on Tokue's unwavering spirit and her determination to seek employment despite her advanced age. This reminds you that life's purpose does not diminish with time; in fact, it can thrive in unexpected ways. Embrace the relationships that nourish you and inspire others, for they can blossom like the cherry blossoms, bringing beauty and meaning into your life even in the face of adversity.

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Chapter 2 Summary:

In Chapter 2 of the story, we are introduced to Sentaro, the owner of a small dorayaki shop named Doraharu, which operates throughout the year. Each morning at eleven, he prepares for the day by making pancakes and sweet bean paste—an essential filling for his signature treat, dorayaki. Sentaro follows a unique production method by mixing freshly delivered coarse sweet bean paste (tsubuan) with leftover paste from the previous day. Although his approach may not align with industry standards, it allows him to minimize waste and keep his business afloat.

As Sentaro prepares the batter for the pancakes using his homemade recipe—opting for it over expensive pre-made options—his day takes a turn when an elderly woman named Tokue appears at his window. Despite being a regular customer, Sentaro is reluctant to engage. Tokue, who has difficulty using her fingers, expresses her desire to work for him, even offering to accept a lower hourly wage. However, Sentaro remains firm in his refusal, not because of the pay, but rather due to his reluctance to hire her.

The conversation reveals Tokue's deep connection to bean paste; she has been making it for fifty years and believes that "feeling" is crucial to its essence. She critiques Sentaro's bean paste as being "lacking," a statement that unsettles him because he's aware that his paste doesn't reflect any personal touch or emotion.

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Despite his unease, Sentaro gives her a dorayaki for free, prompting Tokue to offer him her homemade bean paste in return. This exchange hints at a deeper connection being formed between them, as Tokue departs with a nod, leaving Sentaro to ponder her words and the exchange.

This chapter highlights the themes of craftsmanship, emotional expression in food making, and the societal barriers between generations, as embodied by the unlikely interaction between Sentaro and Tokue.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of emotional connection in craftsmanship

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing in the kitchen, your hands moving to create something special, and you realize it's not just about the ingredients or the recipe—it's about the love and intention you pour into your work. Sentaro's journey teaches you that when you infuse your creations with personal touch and emotion, they transform from mere products into expressions of your soul. This idea inspires you to approach your own endeavors with heart, reminding you that every act of creation, whether in the kitchen or beyond, can resonate with deeper meaning and connection to those around you.

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Chapter 3 Summary:

In Chapter 3, Sentaro finds himself reflecting deeply on the day's events as he enjoys a meal at a downtown noodle restaurant. After Tokue Yoshii, an elderly woman who offered him her exceptional homemade bean paste, left, Sentaro impulsively threw her container into the rubbish bin. Nevertheless, he couldn't shake off the urge to taste her work, prompting him to retrieve the container. As he savored the paste, he was astonished by its rich flavor, which surpassed any store-bought alternatives he had previously known.

Among his thoughts, Sentaro reminisces about his late mother, drawing connections between Tokue's talent and his own memories of family. His emotional responses evoke not only nostalgia but also a sense of loss, as he reflects on how far he has strayed from his youthful aspirations of becoming a writer. Sentaro's life has unfolded into routines of cooking dorayaki—Japanese confectionery—and his regret about missed opportunities bubbles to the surface.

These memories blend with his current predicaments as he considers Tokue's situation and her proposal to help him with the bean paste for a mere 200 yen an hour. Sentaro does the math in his mind, weighing the financial benefits against his hesitation about the perception of her age and her physical appearance, particularly her hands, which might make customers uncomfortable.



Despite his initial reservations, a plan starts to form: he imagines having Tokue work in the kitchen, away from customer view, solely focused on making the bean paste. This arrangement could potentially elevate his business and ease his burdens, allowing him to potentially repay his debts sooner. As he contemplates this idea, he mutters to himself, momentarily drawing the attention of the restaurant proprietor, who merely acknowledges him as Sentaro orders another drink, reveling in his newfound thoughts.

This chapter captures Sentaro's internal conflict between the desire for progress and the weight of his past, exploring themes of lost dreams and unexpected connections as he considers bringing Tokue into his life.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace Unexpected Connections for Growth

Critical Interpretation: In this chapter, Sentaro's journey illustrates the transformative power of embracing unexpected connections in our lives. By contemplating the possibility of bringing Tokue into his kitchen, he not only reawakens his creative aspirations but also finds a path towards healing from past regrets. This moment serves as a reminder that sometimes, by opening ourselves up to new relationships and experiences, we can discover new dimensions of life and work that propel us forward. Just as Sentaro's initial revulsion gives way to appreciation, we too can find that through collaboration and acceptance, we might uncover untapped potential in ourselves and those around us.

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Chapter 4:

In this chapter, the story highlights the burgeoning connection between Sentaro, a young man struggling to manage a traditional sweet shop, and Tokue, an elderly woman with a passionate expertise in making bean paste.

A few days after their first encounter under the cherry tree, Sentaro notices Tokue's warm smile once more as she greets him. They discuss the seasonal changes, transitioning from cherry blossom viewing to observing the new leaf buds, which Tokue charmingly describes as leaves waving like children. This light conversation paves the way for Sentaro to express his interest in having Tokue help him with the shop.

Sentaro is motivated by Tokue's delicious bean paste, which he had tasted previously, leading him to invite her to make the paste at his shop. Tokue, taken aback by the proposition, hesitantly agrees, although Sentaro is concerned about her aged hands, which appear gnarled as a side effect of a past illness. Despite her physical limitations, Tokue expresses determination to contribute, leading to a candid exchange of their names—Sentaro Tsujii and Tokue—highlighting her endearing nature.

Their conversation reveals more about their pasts; Sentaro discusses his employment at the shop, which he views as a day job rather than a calling, and alludes to the shop's ownership history, mentioning his former boss's



passing and the current health struggles of the owner's wife. As they talk, Tokue shows her desire to work again, displaying determination that endears her to Sentaro further.

Sentaro asks Tokue for her contact information, signaling a formalization of

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Chapter 5 Summary:

Chapter 5 takes place on an anxious night as Sentaro, a relatively inexperienced dorayaki shop owner, struggles with a restless mind. Despite having enjoyed a drink to aid his sleep, he finds himself staring at the ceiling instead, preoccupied with thoughts of Tokue Yoshii, an elderly woman he has hired to make sweet bean paste for the shop. Tokue is set to arrive the following morning every two days, and Sentaro realizes he can't afford to be late.

Sentaro's unease about Tokue stems from her unexpected assertiveness during their initial meeting. Despite her deafness, which often leads to miscommunication, Sentaro senses a strong-willed character beneath her mild demeanor. Her insistence that he prepare the bean paste at dawn clashes with his usual practices of relying on convenience and efficiency; he typically starts preparations only two hours before opening. Tokue challenges him on this, stating that the freshness of the bean paste is critical to the quality of the dorayaki—a popular Japanese confection. Their conversation exemplifies a generational clash, with Tokue's dedication rooted in traditional values and Sentaro's more modern but complacent business approach. He reluctantly acknowledges her demands after she aggressively questions his commitment to quality and the heart of their craft.

This internal conflict highlights Sentaro's greater struggles with

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responsibility and apprehension about the shop's direction. He also reflects on the challenges posed by the shop owner's wife, who became increasingly finicky and difficult after her husband's death. Sentaro remembers a previous fiasco with a part-time student he hired without her approval, which had led to significant consequences. This time, he considers keeping Tokue's hiring a secret to avoid the same trouble, especially since he has doubts about her ability to work given her physical limitations.

As Sentaro wrestles with his thoughts, his mind drifts to the schoolgirls who frequent the shop, causing commotion and complaints about minor imperfections, like cherry-blossom petals in the dorayaki. He worries about how they would react to an elderly woman's presence and what Tokue's forthrightness would bring to this noisy, youthful energy.

Sentaro's reflections paint a picture of a man caught between his traditional business roots, represented by Tokue, and modern operational convenience, accentuated by the incessant demands of youthful customers. Tension builds as he lays awake, questioning his decisions and anticipating the challenges that lie ahead with his new employee.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace Tradition Over Convenience

Critical Interpretation: In Chapter 5 of 'Sweet Bean Paste,' the pivotal moment arises when Sentaro's internal conflict reveals the profound impact of embracing tradition, as embodied by Tokue's insistence on preparing fresh bean paste. This key point inspires us to reflect on our own lives, urging us to honor the time-honored practices that enrich our experiences and strengthen the quality of our endeavors. Rather than succumbing to the pressures of modern efficiency, we can find deeper fulfillment by investing the extra effort into the things we value, whether it's through our work, relationships, or personal growth, ultimately leading us to a more meaningful and enriched life.

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Chapter 6 Summary:

In Chapter 6 of the story, the morning opens with Sentaro arriving slightly late to meet Tokue Yoshii beneath the blossoming cherry tree. Tokue, unfazed by Sentaro's tardiness, cheerfully gestures at the small cherries above her head. As they enter the kitchen, Sentaro is struck by the state of the adzuki beans he had left soaking overnight. They swell in the bowl and seem to radiate life, setting a vibrant atmosphere in the kitchen.

Despite their origins being less prestigious than sought-after regions like Obihiro or Tamba, they decide to use Canadian adzuki beans due to budget constraints. Sentaro meticulously calculates the quantities needed for their dorayaki—a popular Japanese dessert—with hopes of serving customers effectively. Tokue, however, demonstrates a deep reverence for the beans, inspecting each one closely and discarding those with imperfections. Her dedication raises Sentaro's curiosity as she treats the beans with almost familial care, emphasizing that their quality, despite international sourcing, deserves meticulous attention.

As Tokue begins the cooking process, she diverges from Sentaro's typical methods. Rather than allowing the beans to continuously boil, she manages the temperature and water levels through a series of intricate steps, aimed at ensuring optimal flavor and texture. Tokue's actions are characterized by an almost spiritual connection with the food, inviting Sentaro to observe her



intricate and nuanced technique. She addresses the beans as if they have feelings, insisting that they deserve the best possible treatment because they traveled far to be part of their culinary endeavor.

The chapter unfolds with Tokue guiding Sentaro through the laborious process of creating the bean paste. He finds himself engaged, albeit with mixed feelings regarding the demanding work she expects of him. When it comes time to mix the sugar syrup with the beans, he learns the delicate balance of maintaining heat and stirring technique that will prevent the mixture from burning—an area where he had previously struggled. Tokue's instructions are firm but not without care; she encourages him at every challenging step in a way that transforms the labor into a shared art form.

As the chapter concludes, Sentaro is astounded by the transformation of the beans into a beautiful, coherent paste. Tokue's reassurance that they must allow the mixture to steep indicates her wisdom and experience in achieving the perfect consistency. Both the beans and their preparation embody the essence of Tokue's philosophy: genuine dedication to one's craft and the respect for the ingredients themselves, which she sees as deserving of love and care. This encounter not only enhances Sentaro's skills as a cocinero but also embodies the unfolding relationship between him and Tokue, hinting at deeper themes of mentorship and respect for tradition in cooking.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of respecting the ingredients we work with

Critical Interpretation: Imagine approaching your daily tasks, whether in cooking, work, or relationships, with the same reverence that Tokue shows for the adzuki beans. Each interaction and ingredient in your life deserves care and attention, transforming mundane chores into an art form and fostering a deeper connection to what you create. Just as Tokue's meticulous attention brings out the best in her food, embracing this philosophy can inspire a richer, more meaningful existence in your own life.

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Chapter 7 Summary:

In Chapter 7, the relationship between Sentaro and Tokue deepens as they collaborate in the kitchen, preparing to make dorayaki—fluffy pancakes filled with sweet red bean paste. Tokue, an experienced confectioner, urges Sentaro to take detailed notes on the process, highlighting the importance of precision in creating traditional sweets. Despite Sentaro's initial resistance, he reluctantly complies, showcasing his reluctance to embrace the meticulous nature of the craft.

As they work, Sentaro expresses his frustration with rowdy schoolgirls who frequent the shop, revealing his struggle to connect with younger customers and his intent to keep Tokue away from them after their work together, reflecting his protective instincts. Tokue, however, remains undeterred and continues to impart her knowledge about making the bean paste, which requires patience and skill.

While preparing the pancakes, Sentaro demonstrates his culinary prowess, successfully crafting perfectly round pancakes thanks to either the quality of Tokue's bean paste or the nervous energy that her presence brings. When they finally sandwich the warm bean paste between the pancakes, Sentaro is overwhelmed by the rich aroma and flavor that differentiates Tokue's bean paste from any he has tasted before.

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Their conversation reveals Sentaro's complicated relationship with sweet foods; although he acknowledges the quality of Tokue's bean paste, he admits he rarely enjoys a whole dorayaki. This confession shocks Tokue, prompting a lively discussion about his unexpected choice to work in a dessert shop without a sweet tooth.

Sentaro critiques the balance of flavors in their creation, suggesting that the pancakes are overshadowed by the excellence of the bean paste. Driven by his passion for improvement, he proposes enhancing the pancakes to elevate the overall experience. Tokue, amused and challenged by his suggestion, encourages him to pursue this potential, while also teasing him about his taste preferences.

As the chapter concludes, Sentaro opens the shop's shutters, ready to welcome customers, setting the stage for a new beginning in their confectionery journey, fueled by a mutual respect and the promise of better dorayaki ahead. This chapter highlights not only the technical aspects of making traditional Japanese sweets but also the dynamics of their blossoming partnership amidst personal revelations and aspirations for improvement.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of precision and collaboration in craftsmanship

Critical Interpretation: As you immerse yourself in the meticulous process of creating something meaningful, remember that every detail matters. Just like Sentaro learned from Tokue, embracing precision can elevate your work to new heights. It inspires you to refine your skills and appreciate the value of collaboration. This chapter reminds you that every small action contributes to the overall experience, encouraging you to seek improvement continuously and build meaningful relationships along the way.

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Chapter 8:

Chapter 8 reveals a transformative period for Sentaro as he navigates the evolving business at his shop, Doraharu, and his relationship with the elderly Tokue, who has become a crucial part of his operation. After Tokue joined him in making the sweet bean paste, Sentaro notices an improvement in taste, drawing positive comments from customers, though sales have yet to reflect this change. He grapples with conflicting emotions about his craft while dreaming of returning to his passion for writing, feeling increasingly weighed down by the daily grind of making dorayaki.

Observing Tokue's meticulous process and respect for the beans, Sentaro is drawn into the art of making bean paste himself. Though he attempts to learn from her expertise, he often struggles to achieve the same quality on days she isn't present. To maintain standards, he reluctantly blends his less successful efforts with her superior batches. Despite this challenge, Tokue's encouraging evaluations of his work bring him both joy and frustration.

As summer progresses, the shop witnesses a surge in customer traffic, leading to an unprecedented hit in sales. Sentaro is pushed to his limits, eventually running out of bean paste for the first time and having to put up a "Sold Out" sign, which serves as a stark reminder of his business challenges. This moment forces him to contemplate the future: whether to extend business hours to capitalize on the growing demand or to resign himself to a

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pattern of inconsistency.

Sentaro reflects on the dilemma of hard work versus creative freedom, weighing the potential financial benefits of longer hours against his desire to escape the shackles of the grill. He realizes that with Tokue's expert skills at

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Alex Walk

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Chapter 9 Summary:

In Chapter 9, Sentaro contemplates the possibility of expanding their sweet bean paste production due to an increase in customers at his shop, Doraharu, largely thanks to Tokue's exceptional recipes. Tokue shows enthusiasm and no hesitance about the extra workload, suggesting they begin making ten-kilogram batches. Thus begins a challenging yet fruitful period for the two sellers, with Sentaro assuming most of the demanding physical labor.

As they undertake this increased production, the early summer rainy season arrives, bringing with it a host of complications. The moisture in the air threatens the integrity of the fresh sweet bean paste, making it prone to spoilage. This heightens Sentaro's stress as he must carefully manage his inventory and production, cooking in small batches to avoid waste. Despite the inclement weather, customers flock to the shop, significantly increasing their sales compared to previous years.

However, Sentaro begins to feel the toll of this relentless work schedule. The oppressive heat and humidity leave him physically drained. He begins to experience dizziness and fatigue, compounded by working long hours without proper nourishment or breaks. His dedication pushes him through grueling days and nights until, one day, exhaustion overwhelms him entirely, forcing him to miss a day of business.

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When he finally wakes up, he is paralyzed by fatigue and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. After a failed attempt to prepare the bean paste and open the shop, he leaves in a state of despair, feeling detached from his surroundings. Memories of his mother, who had visited him in prison, haunt him, and he feels an acute sense of worthlessness.

As he wanders through the city under the bright sun, Sentaro grapples with dark thoughts of his past and feelings of abandonment, culminating in a frightening internal struggle that leaves him questioning his will to live. The chapter closes with Sentaro sinking into a state of feverish delirium, highlighting both his physical exhaustion and emotional turmoil.

This chapter captures the strain of balancing hard work with personal demons, illustrating Sentaro's downward spiral amidst a backdrop of unexpected success at his bakery.

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Chapter 10 Summary:

In Chapter 10, Sentaro wakes up to a persistent phone call from Tokue, who is already busy at the shop, taking initiative to prepare bean paste and open up despite being unscheduled. As Sentaro struggles with his health and feelings of exhaustion, he learns from Tokue that she has not only made the bean paste but also handled customers and cooked pancakes during his absence. Initially shocked by her unorthodox decision to open the shop, he is impressed by her efforts and the impressive sales figures she recorded, but he grapples with feelings of trepidation about letting her take on responsibilities meant for him.

Their conversation reveals Tokue's nostalgia for her childhood in Aichi Prefecture, reminiscing about cherry blossoms and traditional countryside life. Sentaro shares his own background, noting his time spent bouncing around the Kanto region and hinting at a troubled past that led him into debt, which he is currently working to repay. The dialogue deepens their connection as Tokue suggests they navigate their challenges together, expressing a sense of camaraderie and support.

As the chapter unfolds, Tokue's perception of the world contrasts sharply with Sentaro's darker experiences, with her insistence on hope and perseverance while he harbors doubt about his own future. The chapter closes on a note of mutual understanding and a burgeoning alliance, as they

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prepare to tackle their next cooking endeavors together, capturing the essence of resilience and companionship in their shared struggles.

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Chapter 11 Summary:

Chapter 11 Summary:

As summer settled in, Doraharu blossomed with the chatter of schoolgirls, keeping business vibrant despite the traditional dip during holidays. Unlike previous summers, an influx of young patrons gathered daily, drawn not only by Sentaro's dorayaki but also by Tokue's warm presence. The girls, who often frequented the counter after cram school, would chatter away about their studies, only to engage Tokue in playful banter. Her responses were met with both curiosity and teasing, reflecting her nurturing nature and keen interest in their lives.

Among these regular visitors was a quiet girl named Wakana, whose name stemmed from a beloved cartoon character, but her demeanor hinted at a more troubled past. Following her parents' divorce, Wakana had become withdrawn, finding solace in the dorayaki Tokue gifted her—often the misshapen rejects from the kitchen. This small act of kindness sparked a connection; Wakana began to share bits of her life, revealing the struggles she faced at home.

However, an unintentional moment of tension arose when Wakana noticed Tokue's crooked fingers and inquired about them. Tokue's evasive yet pained

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response suggested a deeper history that she wasn't ready to share, hinting at a "sickness" from her childhood. Following that exchange, Wakana ceased visiting Doraharu, leaving both Sentaro and Tokue concerned for her wellbeing.

Tokue continued to discuss the students' lives while working in the kitchen, but it became evident to Sentaro that she missed her interactions with Wakana. When she expressed concern about the girl's absence, Sentaro's insensitive remark about Wakana's rude question about Tokue's fingers sparked a debate about honesty versus avoidance in communication. Tokue argued that Wakana's directness was a sign of her desire for connection, while Sentaro had a more protective stance.

Through their discourse, Tokue revealed her unfulfilled dream of becoming a teacher, inspired by her love of poetry and imagination during difficult times. Sentaro, surprised by her aspirations, acknowledged that their differing perspectives stemmed from their own life experiences. He came to appreciate that Tokue's joy in interacting with the students was as fulfilling for her as it was for him to provide a space for them.

As the chapter concludes, Sentaro silently hopes for Wakana's return, recognizing the void left by her absence and the impact of Tokue's kindness. This blend of summer vibrancy and underlying emotional currents captures the essence of youth, dreams, and the complexities of human connections in

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the cozy setting of the dorayaki shop.

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Chapter 12:

As summer came to a close, the familiar scene at the Doraharu shop returned, with the girls appearing again in their school uniforms against the backdrop of cooling evenings and fading leaves. Sentaro, the shop's diligent worker, found himself uneasy when his boss made an unexpected visit to the shop. Their meetings were typically scheduled, allowing him to prepare for her arrival and ensure the presence of Tokue, an elderly woman with a mysterious past that had been the key to the shop's recent success.

During this unscheduled visit, the owner broached a sensitive subject—rumors about Tokue. It was revealed that she suffered from the effects of Hansen's disease, formerly known as leprosy, which triggered an avalanche of fear and discrimination in society. The owner's concerns were framed around the potential risk to the shop's reputation, suggesting that if word got out about Tokue's history, it could spell disaster for their business.

Sentaro tried to defend Tokue, emphasizing her experience and the burgeoning popularity of their bean paste, which she crafted with care and precision. Despite his efforts, the owner remained adamant that keeping Tokue in the shop would jeopardize its future, insisting that Sentaro let her go for the sake of their collective livelihood. Her worries were rooted in the deep-seated societal stigma attached to Hansen's disease, exacerbated by images and memories of those who had suffered from it in the past.



Feeling cornered, Sentaro spent a sleepless night researching Hansen's disease, uncovering a more hopeful reality: modern medicine had rendered the disease nearly eradicated, and there were no current sufferers in Japan. Yet, despite gathering this knowledge, the stigma surrounding the disease

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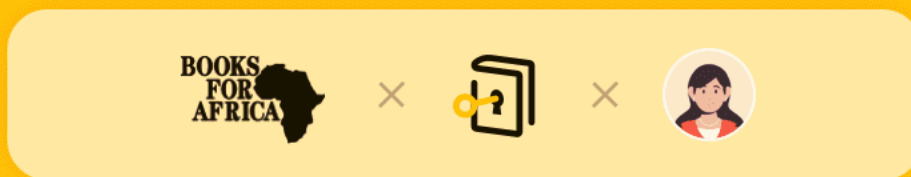




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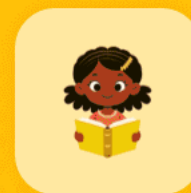
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Chapter 13 Summary:

In this chapter, Sentaro grapples with overwhelming anxiety regarding Tokue, a woman employed at his dorayaki shop, and the repercussions of her past with Hansen's disease. Despite witnessing a noticeable decline in business, he refrains from addressing his concerns about Tokue with her, instead choosing to maintain a facade of normalcy as he cooks dorayaki and interacts with customers.

The chapter delves into Sentaro's past, revealing his troubled history with the law, specifically a conviction related to drug trafficking. After serving a two-year prison sentence, he was offered a position by his late boss at the pub, which ultimately led him to the dorayaki shop, Doraharu. Haunted by memories of the boss's tragic death from cirrhosis and his widow's heartfelt plea to continue operating the shop, Sentaro feels bound by duty to repay that kindness.

As autumn drizzles settle over the town, the business starts to suffer. Sales take a sharp downturn, prompting Sentaro and Tokue to discuss the unexpected slump. While Sentaro tries to dismiss his growing worries, he can't shake the feeling that something more is amiss than just the weather, especially in a time when many businesses, including a nearby fishmonger, have shuttered.

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The plot thickens with the return of the shop owner, who confronts Sentaro after noticing the persistent presence of Tokue in the shop. She expresses her concerns about Tokue’s historical association with illness, insisting that her past could irreparably damage the shop's reputation. The confrontation escalates as the owner demands Tokue's dismissal, underlining her authority as the shop’s proprietor and invoking Sentaro’s sense of loyalty to the business. However, Sentaro grapples with the moral implications of firing someone who is no longer sick, emphasizing Tokue's humanity against the backdrop of societal stigma. Ultimately, the chapter closes with the owner delivering an ultimatum, leaving Sentaro in a state of turmoil as he faces impossible choices about loyalty, ethics, and his future at the shop.

Key Element	Summary
Character Focus	Sentaro, a dorayaki shop worker, struggles with anxiety over Tokue, his colleague with a history of Hansen's disease.
Business Decline	Despite declining sales, Sentaro avoids confronting Tokue and chooses to maintain a façade of normalcy.
Sentaro’s Background	Sentaro has a troubled past, including a conviction for drug trafficking and a two-year prison sentence, leading to his current job.
Responsibilities	Feeling obligated to honor his late boss’s wish to keep the shop running, Sentaro is haunted by the boss's tragic death.
External Pressures	As autumn rains worsen business conditions, more shops close, leading to Sensei and Tokue discussing their struggles.
Conflict	The shop owner confronts Sentaro about Tokue’s presence and insists he must fire her, citing potential damage to the shop's reputation.



Key Element	Summary
Moral Dilemma	Sentaro faces a moral conflict about firing Tokue due to her past illness versus his loyalty to the shop and ethical considerations.
Closing Tension	The chapter ends with the owner issuing an ultimatum, leaving Sentaro conflicted as he contemplates his choices.

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Chapter 14 Summary:

In chapter 14, the setting is a serene autumn night under a cherry tree, where the sounds of crickets and distant footsteps fill the air. Sentaro, a young man running a small pancake shop, is grappling with the impending departure of Tokue, an elderly woman he hired to help him with making sweet bean paste. Despite his pleas for her to reconsider, Tokue is resolute, stating that she feels worn out and believes her past—having survived Hansen’s disease—has negatively impacted their business.

The conversation delves into Tokue's past and the stigma surrounding her illness. Hansen's disease, known historically as leprosy, carried a heavy societal burden, often leading to the isolation of those afflicted. Tokue recalls her experiences of being in a sanatorium, Tenshoen, where she was effectively cut off from the outside world, sharing how this disease was perceived as divine punishment and how isolating it was for those diagnosed. Even after being cured, she still faces the lasting physical effects and the emotional scars left by society's treatment of her.

Sentaro learns from Tokue that the mindset of the public has changed little despite her having been a non-carrier for forty years. This discussion only deepens Sentaro's regret for not being able to fully support her and keep her part of his life and business. As their dialogue unfolds, it becomes clear how much Tokue has cherished her time working at the shop and interacting with

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the younger girls, a stark contrast to her past isolation.

Despite her ill health and feeling weary, Tokue expresses gratitude for the chance to work, highlighting Sentaro's kindness and openness to hire her, despite her age and condition. As she prepares to leave, they bid heartfelt farewells, with Sentaro feeling a deep sense of loss over her departure.

Watching her walk away, he is struck by her frailness and the weight of responsibility he feels for her resignation, which he perceives as almost maternal.

When he returns inside, Sentaro's frustration culminates in a moment of rage as he throws a bottle of disinfectant, symbolizing the lingering stigma that still surrounds Tokue and perhaps his own feelings of helplessness. This chapter intricately explores themes of companionship, societal prejudice, and the lasting impact of past traumas on present relationships.

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Chapter 15 Summary:

As autumn settled in, the atmosphere around Sentaro's dorayaki shop reflected his desolation. With the cherry tree outside shedding its leaves and customers dwindling, Sentaro, burdened by an increasing dependence on alcohol, struggled to maintain his routine. His drinking had escalated, leading to frequent late arrivals at the shop, with some days beginning close to noon. This sense of disconnect was palpable; he felt as if the world around him, including the cherry trees, had turned against him.

One evening, as Sentaro was preparing to close up, a familiar figure entered the shop: Wakana. Dressed in a coat and carrying a wrapped object, she startled him and asked for a dorayaki. When he offered her one, she hesitated, revealing a significant problem—she had run away from home. Inside the wrapped object was a birdcage housing a canary named Marvy. Wakana explained that she couldn't let Marvy go free because he couldn't fend for himself due to his previous injuries, and she sought Sentaro's assistance, referencing a promise made to Tokue, the shop's former worker.

Sentaro was reluctant, as he had recently endured a mental health crisis, but he couldn't ignore Wakana's plea. After some coaxing, she explained how she had nursed Marvy back to health after rescuing him from the street and how her mother's insistence on releasing the pet had led her to run away. Sentaro felt a surge of responsibility but was apprehensive about keeping the



canary, uncertain about his own ability to care for another living being.

During their conversation, Wakana learned about Tokue's departure from the shop, which was tied to her illness—Hansen's disease. It was revealed that Wakana's mother had been the one to spread gossip about Tokue after noticing her hands. Sentaro, grappling with his own complicity in the shop's troubles and the sentiments in the community regarding Tokue, realized that public opinion had stifled their business.

Wakana, filled with empathy for Sentaro, urged him to consider starting anew and to reach out to Tokue for support in caring for Marvy. Moved by her spirit, Sentaro eventually agreed to temporarily look after the canary until he could hear back from Tokue. This decision marked a subtle shift in his life; for the first time, he took a step towards claiming responsibility and building a connection once more, as he hoped to reinvigorate both his spirit and his establishment amidst the encroaching winter.

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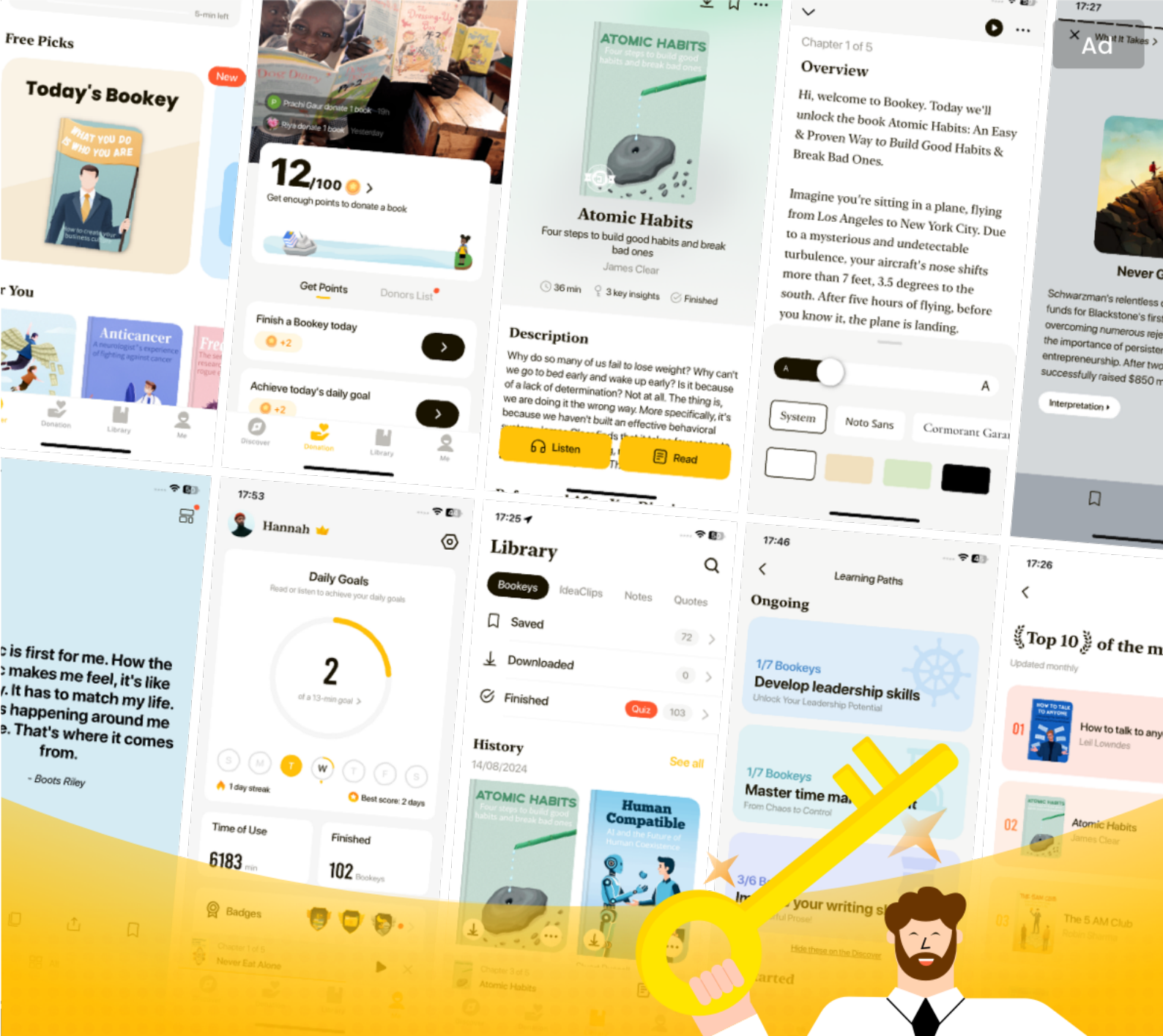
Chapter 16:

In Chapter 16, Sentaro and Wakana set out toward the National Hansen's Disease Museum and the Tenshoen National Sanatorium, guided by signs along a quiet suburban street lined with a daunting false holly hedge. This hedge, with its sharp, spiky leaves, symbolizes the historical segregation of

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Chapter 17 Summary:

In Chapter 17, we encounter Sentaro and Wakana visiting Tokue, an elderly woman with a kind heart, who has previously battled Hansen's disease. Their initial meeting is warm, filled with greetings and backstories tied to Tokue's joy at receiving a canary named Marvy, which Wakana can no longer care for at home. As Tokue expresses her delight in having Marvy as company, she fondly reflects on her past pet canary.

Wakana and Sentaro reveal their concerns about rules regarding pets in the hospital, prompted by a mysterious truck they had seen earlier. Tokue reassures them that it's a food-delivery truck, dispelling their worries about infection which linger from the history of Hansen's disease. This leads to a poignant moment where Sentaro realizes the depth of the hospital's legacy, reminding both him and the readers that it has only recently become more accepting of patients like Wakana.

Tokue shares her personal history, recounting her troubling youth after Japan's defeat in World War II, where she faced dire poverty, illness, and ultimately, the diagnosis of leprosy. Her story is tinged with sadness and loss, revealing her separation from her family at the age of fourteen when she was sent to the Tenshoen institution. As she reflects on the traumatic experience of leaving her home, a touching moment arises with her memories of a blouse made by her mother—symbolizing familial love now

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lost.

During their conversation, Tokue's friend, an elderly woman named Moriyama, arrives briefly to drop off homemade biscuits—a gesture that illustrates the bonds formed among patients in the institution. Moriyama's poignant presence highlights the visible consequences of Hansen's disease, prompting a mix of emotions in both Sentaro and Wakana, who encounter disfigurement for the first time.

Despite their initial hesitation, Sentaro and Wakana try the delicate French biscuits called tuile, which Tokue enthusiastically endorses. This shared experience serves as a bridge between their differing worlds—a moment of connection and understanding, as they engage in Tokue's suggestion to take a walk together, moving forward towards a new understanding of their relationships and shared humanity.

In summary, this chapter deftly intertwines moments of personal history, emotional vulnerability, and the simple joys of companionship, while weaving in the broader societal themes surrounding stigma and acceptance faced by those with Hansen's disease.

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Chapter 18 Summary:

In Chapter 18, Sentaro, Wakana, and Tokue embark on a reflective journey through the grounds of a sanatorium, accompanied by Tokue's bird, Marvy. Sentaro carries Marvy's cage as they navigate the serene landscape, contrasting sharply with the dark history surrounding Hansen's disease, or leprosy, which had once afflicted many here.

Tokue recounts the struggle to gain access to the revolutionary drug Promin, developed for treating Hansen's disease. Despite its effectiveness, access in Japan was initially limited, prompting patients to protest for their rights. Tokue shares the harrowing experiences of individuals sent to solitary confinement for their activism, exposing the cruelty and stigma related to the disease. These personal traumas resonate deeply with Sentaro, who recalls his own experiences with confinement, pondering the suffering Tokue must have endured.

As they reach a small hillock, Tokue reminisces about a place that had provided solace during her time of suffering. She describes her memories of climbing this hill while thinking longingly of home, relating the painful feelings of being confined and barred from the outside world. The hill, created by previous patients, symbolizes the shared longing for connection to their former lives.

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Through Tokue's narrative, we learn about her late husband, Yoshiaki, a confectioner who journeyed throughout Japan after being diagnosed with leprosy. Tokue tells poignant stories of their struggles, the pain he faced, and his resilient spirit. Their conversations delve into the heavy burden of illness and the tragedy of those marginalized by society, highlighting the broader implications of suffering and isolation that afflicted many within the sanatorium's walls.

As they walk through the tranquil woods, Tokue discusses how community and creativity helped patients survive within the confines of the sanatorium. The formation of various groups, including a Confectionery Group, allowed patients to utilize their skills and talents, creating a semblance of normalcy despite their circumstances. Tokue reflects on the joy of creating sweet treats, emphasizing that even amidst suffering, small pleasures could be found.

The chapter takes a somber turn as they arrive at a stone charnel house, where the remains of those who passed away in the sanatorium are laid to rest. Tokue reveals her true name, Tokue Yoshii, which was assigned to her upon her admission, symbolizing the loss of individual identity and the societal rejection faced by patients with Hansen's disease. Before the law changed, many, including Tokue and Yoshiaki, faced deep-seated stigma that prevented them from returning to their former lives.

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In a moment of shared grief, Tokue offers a tribute to her husband, honoring his memory and the many others who never returned home. The chapter ultimately reflects themes of sorrow, resilience, and the enduring search for belonging, leaving Sentaro and Wakana—and the reader—pondering the heavy weight of those lost souls who suffered silently under the constraints of fear and stigma. The journey through the sanatorium grounds not only reveals Tokue's history but also prompts introspection on life, loss, and the enduring impact of societal prejudice.

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Chapter 19 Summary:

In Chapter 19, Sentaro finds himself restless and feverish after a day filled with profound experiences at Tenshoen, a rehabilitation center for Hansen's disease patients. As he lies in bed, struggling with his thoughts, he reflects on the various elements of his visit, from the serene yet sorrowful images of the charnel house and the patients' makeshift memorial to their hometowns, to the poignant memory of Tokue, who had shared her struggles and the impact of the disease.

Despite Tokue's recovery over four decades ago, Sentaro grapples with an unwelcome anxiety about the disease, especially concerning Wakana, his companion during the visit. He recalls how visibly shaken both of them were after encountering the National Hansen's Disease Museum, a place that laid bare the historical suffering and stigma faced by patients, illuminating a world of grief that many would prefer to forget. Through haunting photographs, he is confronted with the raw realities of the disease, including a man reliant on his tongue to read due to the loss of sensation in his fingers, and others engaging in creative endeavors despite their physical limitations.

These images penetrate Sentaro's consciousness, leading him to empathize deeply with the patients, prompting a reflection on the nature of their suffering and confinement. Unlike his own past experiences with incarceration, these individuals are unjustly condemned to a life of isolation



without the hope of reintegration into society. This realization weighs heavily on him as he contemplates what emotions he might have felt had he been in their shoes.

As he drifts into a feverish sleep, Sentaro dreams of a young Tokue, a fourteen-year-old girl who, unaware of her fate, has been brought to the same place. Witnessing her sorrow from afar, he struggles with the weight of her suffering and the cruelty of her circumstances. He ponders the forces that dictate her life, blaming the gods for her torment and the brutal reality that she must face—a reality that strips her of hope and freedom.

The chapter concludes with Sentaro feeling overwhelmed by the gravity of Tokue's plight, unable to endure the sight of her despair, and he retreats back along the forest path, a poignant symbol of his own desire to escape the pervasive injustice that haunts those affected by the disease. Through this blend of personal reflection and imagined empathy, the chapter highlights themes of suffering, isolation, and the indomitable human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity.

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Chapter 20:

Chapter 20 Summary

As autumn settles in, the bitter wind sweeps through the streets, signaling the passage of time since Tokue departed from Doraharu. The shop struggles with declining sales, and the owner grows increasingly anxious about their ability to stay afloat as she frequently mulls over the financial losses. Despite this gloomy atmosphere, Sentaro finds a semblance of hope in his craft. Under the influence of Tokue's teachings, he has been diligently improving his sweet bean paste, cutting back on drinking and rising early to dedicate more time to the process. He begins to feel a connection to her methods, striving to emulate her careful attention to the nuances of the ingredients.

However, Sentaro grapples with a harsh reality: the loyalty of customers is fleeting, and the shop's decline weighs heavily on his heart. Once eager to escape the daily grind of dorayaki making, he now finds himself unexpectedly reluctant to see Doraharu close—a newfound attachment that confuses him.

One dreary day, a letter arrives from Tokue, and Sentaro quickly recognizes her familiar handwriting. In her warm, thoughtful correspondence, she

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shares her struggles with her health and reflects deeply on the essence of "Listening," a concept she had previously introduced to Sentaro. She explains that everything in the world has its own language—an idea that resonates with her own life experiences and her connection with the natural world. Tokue expresses her desire for Sentaro to embrace his individuality as a confectioner, encouraging him to find his own style in making dorayaki.

Her words touch Sentaro profoundly, shedding light on his own past struggles, including a time when he distanced himself from his mother. This painful memory weighs on him, especially as he begins to comprehend how to truly listen—not just to the world around him, but to himself and his own emotions.

In response, Sentaro writes back, thanking her for her letter and sharing his reflections. He reveals his journey of self-discovery through the art of making bean paste alongside her. While he acknowledges the challenges still facing Doraharu, he expresses a desire to learn more about confectionery and develop his own unique style of dorayaki. He yearns for guidance from Tokue and hopes to visit her at Tenshoen for deeper discussions on their craft.

As winter approaches, Sentaro's commitment to grow both personally and as a confectioner is clear. The chapter ends with him looking forward to reconnecting with Tokue, underscoring the importance of mentorship and the

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powerful bond that has formed between them, as they both navigate their respective challenges in life.

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Chapter 21 Summary:

In Chapter 21, the arrival of a new year brings a mix of rain and snow to Sentaro's shop, Doraharu, as he grapples with both the demands of business and the memories of those he has lost. Despite the holiday season's potential for increased sales, the shop sees little foot traffic as the owner considers pivoting to a different kind of food entirely, like okonomiyaki, expressing frustration over declining profits. However, Sentaro remains committed to preserving the shop's legacy and honoring the memory of its founding owner, who also was his mentor, and more importantly, the legacy of Tokue Yoshii, a remarkable woman who made a special sweet bean paste that he deeply cherishes.

Amid his struggles, Sentaro receives a winter greeting card from Tokue, who has been ill over the New Year. Encouraged by her invitation to visit, he sets out to see her. Upon arrival, he is confronted with a noticeable change in her condition; Tokue has lost weight and appears more frail. Despite this, her spirit shines through her determination to continue teaching the art of making sweet bean paste. Miss Moriyama, another associate, also provides support and camaraderie during his visit.

In a heartwarming reunion, Tokue and Miss Moriyama prepare a traditional sweet bean soup, a signature dish of the Confectionery Group. As they share the meal, Sentaro experiences an overwhelming sense of relief and warmth,

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further appreciating the subtle balance of flavors, particularly the addition of salty kombu, which enhances the sweetness of the bean paste. This culinary moment becomes a pivotal point not just for nourishment but for inspiration.

During their meal, Tokue invites suggestions for improving Sentaro's dorayaki, suggesting he might experiment with incorporating salt — an idea that could cater to men who enjoy a savory edge to their sweets. Miss Moriyama eagerly endorses this concept, celebrating Tokue's knack for innovative ideas. Encouraged by their endorsement, Sentaro begins to envision a new direction for his shop.

However, the conversation takes a deeper turn when Tokue gently prompts Sentaro to confront his past and the strained relationship with his father. Although Sentaro communicates his reluctance to face this part of his life, Tokue urges him to start anew and have confidence in his abilities, insisting that the journey of re-establishing connections, much like the craft of cooking, requires the bravery to begin again.

Sentaro leaves the encounter filled with fresh ideas for his business and newfound resolve to move forward, honoring the lessons imparted by Tokue—not only in cooking but in life itself. The chapter beautifully intertwines themes of resilience, the importance of tradition, and the pursuit of personal redemption through the lens of food and community.

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Chapter 22 Summary:

Chapter 22 Summary

In this chapter, Sentaro, a dorayaki (Japanese pancake filled with sweet red bean paste) maker, wrestles with the idea of creating a new type of dorayaki that incorporates salty flavors. He seeks high-quality natural sea salt, aiming to find the perfect way to blend it into his confectionery without overpowering its sweetness. Initially, he experiments with adding more salt to the bean paste, but he discovers that increasing the quantity beyond a tiny pinch results in an unpleasant, coarse taste. The challenge lies not just in the amount of salt but in finding the right balance in his recipe.

Sentaro, faced with the conundrum, shifts his focus to the pancake batter itself, determining to try different salt levels during his testing. One day, the shop owner, concerned about the shop's dwindling business, stops by as he experiments. Unsurprisingly, her reaction to the salty dorayaki is one of distaste, highlighting that while the initial taste may be intriguing, the overall flavor profile suffers. Sentaro, however, is initially captivated by the unique taste but soon recognizes the unpleasant aftertaste she describes.

As they discuss the future of the shop, the owner grows more serious. The situation is dire, and she urges Sentaro to consider abandoning dorayaki

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altogether in favor of more profitable options, like okonomiyaki (savory pancakes) or yakitori (grilled chicken skewers), which could attract more customers and perhaps even allow them to serve alcohol. She reveals her constraints, explaining that her savings are dwindling and that they must make a decision soon. Faced with the possibility of shutting down the business, she proposes a timeline: if sales do not improve by the end of February, they will pivot to a new direction.

This discussion reveals the stakes for both characters, emphasizing the tension between Sentaro's attachment to traditional dorayaki and the owner's pressing need for financial stability. Ultimately, though Sentaro is initially resistant to abandoning his craft, he reluctantly agrees to the owner's plan. The chapter closes on a note of uncertainty as the characters prepare to face the looming decision about the shop's future.

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Chapter 23 Summary:

In Chapter 23, Sentaro Tsujii writes a heartfelt letter to his mentor, Tokue, as he navigates the challenges of running his dorayaki shop, Doraharu, amidst declining sales and a lingering winter. Sentaro expresses his struggle to innovate in his recipes, particularly in creating a salty version of the traditional sweet dorayaki, inspired by Tokue's previous suggestions. His initial attempts to enhance the flavor with salt – first in the bean paste and then in the pancake – yield mixed results. He realizes that salt can easily overpower the delicate balance of sweetness and must be used judiciously, serving more as a subtle accent rather than a dominant ingredient. Despite feeling lost and burdened by the shop's poor performance, he remains determined to keep experimenting, hoping for guidance from the universe on how to revitalize his offerings and business.

In her response, Tokue reassures Sentaro, acknowledging the complexity of using salt in sweet confections. She highlights an important lesson learned from their discussions: that seemingly disparate flavors, like sweet and salty, can complement each other if creatively paired. Tokue reflects on her own life experiences in the sanatorium due to Hansen's disease, understanding that despite their hardships, they are fundamentally human and capable of finding beauty in small things. Drawing on her practice of "Listening" to the natural world around her, she encourages Sentaro not to lose hope and to remain attuned to the voices both in and outside himself. She reminds him

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that times of darkness and struggle are often followed by transformative change, and urges him to persist in his craft and maintain faith in the process.

As Sentaro contemplates Tokue's advice, he also expresses a desire to visit her once the weather warms up, hinting at a plan to bring along Wakana, a character significant in his life. They can discuss freeing the canary, a symbol of hope and freedom, which echoes the larger themes of resilience and renewal in the face of challenges. The chapter captures both characters' growth, their shared wisdom, and the underlying message about the importance of perseverance and connection in overcoming adversity.

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Chapter 24:

As February drew to a close, the promise of spring was evident in the air, stirring life into the small town. Cherry buds began to break through, and as temperatures warmed, customers returned to Sentaro's shop, many commenting on how they missed the dorayaki. His sales were gradually improving, and the shop's owner felt optimistic, teasing a potential turnaround in their fortunes.

However, one evening after the winds calmed, the owner introduced a new character into Sentaro's life—a young man named Tanaka, her nephew. She explained that Tanaka had recently left a restaurant job due to difficulties in the kitchen environment, and she wanted him to join Sentaro at the shop to help with food preparation and to connect with the youthful clientele. The owner proposed a significant shift for their business: in addition to selling dorayaki, they would begin offering okonomiyaki—a savory Japanese pancake—and she intended to renovate the shop for this purpose.

Sentaro was taken aback by this sudden decision, feeling that they had only just started to recover from their previous struggles. The owner, however, was resolute, recognizing Tanaka's potential to contribute to the business and trusting Sentaro to mentor him. Despite Sentaro's inner conflict and simmering frustration over this unexpected development, he was reminded of the owner's faith in his abilities, stemming from her late husband's belief



in him.

As the owner detailed her vision for the shop's layout, Sentaro could only watch, grappling with feelings of uncertainty. The transformation would not only change the physical space but also the dynamics of the shop he had come to care for deeply.

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Chapter 25 Summary:

In this chapter, we find Sentaro in a state of isolation and despair nearly a month after quitting his job at Doraharu, a shop known for its delicious dorayaki—a Japanese confection made of pancake-like cakes filled with sweet red bean paste. The weight of his decision and the harsh words from his former employer haunt him as he remains holed up in his flat, indifferent to the outside world and the arrival of spring.

Sentaro's days blend into one another as he becomes a recluse, only venturing out to buy food. Despite his yearning for change, he browses a job vacancy magazine, but finds himself disqualified from most positions due to his age and lack of qualifications, leaving him feeling trapped and hopeless. He reflects on the shame of his past, especially the bitter confrontation with the owner of Doraharu, who chastised him for being ungrateful despite the support he received as an ex-convict. This confrontation forces Sentaro to confront his sense of failure and the belief that he has always let people down, including his parents.

Amidst his growing despair, Sentaro contemplates self-harm, illustrating the extent of his emotional turmoil. He surveys his belongings from Doraharu packed in a box, including a cherished copper pot and cooking utensils, which evoke memories of happier times when he cooked dorayaki and interacted with joyful customers, including Tokue, an elderly woman who

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had a significant impact on his life.

Haunted by his inability to fulfill promises to Tokue and deeply affected by the bittersweet nostalgia of his past, Sentaro's thoughts drift to a memorable cherry tree outside Doraharu. He envisions it in bloom, contrasting the vibrancy of life with his own stagnation. The chapter closes with him yearning for the dorayaki he once made, almost as if calling for a return to the sense of purpose and joy that cooking brought him. The lingering questions about his future and feelings of self-doubt leave a profound impact as the reader witnesses the struggle of a man grappling with his identity and choices.

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Chapter 26 Summary:

In Chapter 26, Sentaro experiences a vivid dream set in a captivating landscape of rolling hills, where he is drawn to a magnificent blue river shimmering below. As he climbs toward the river, he perceives the surface dancing with flower petals, which he soon realizes are cherry blossoms. The entire landscape is bathed in the beauty of cherry trees in full bloom, their fragrance filling the air and enveloping him in a sense of ethereal joy.

Amid this wondrous setting, Sentaro encounters a young girl at a nearby teahouse, which showcases the local delicacy of goheimochi—grilled rice cakes. The girl is dressed in a pristine white blouse made by her mother, and she invites Sentaro to join her. Their interaction feels profound, with Sentaro addressing her respectfully, as if she were an adult. She introduces him to cherry-blossom tea, a delightful concoction made from pickled double-flowered cherry blossoms, and explains its unique salty flavor and floral aroma, both of which captivate him.

As Sentaro savors the tea, the delightful taste aligns perfectly with the girl's description, creating a moment of enlightenment for him. He contemplates the use of the flowers in various dishes, sharing his excitement with the girl. However, just as he becomes entranced by the experience, the girl suddenly disappears, leaving him in a void of shifting cherry blossoms.

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Realizing that this enchanting world is a figment of his dreams, Sentaro desperately searches for the girl, his mind racing with questions about her past and experiences, specifically regarding her connection to the cherry blossoms and the river. He is left with a yearning to discover more about her life, symbolizing his desire for deeper understanding and connection amidst the ephemeral beauty of life that the cherry blossoms represent.

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Chapter 27 Summary:

In Chapter 27, the setting shifts to spring, symbolized by cherry blossoms in full bloom as Sentaro and Wakana walk together. Despite the beautiful surroundings, their conversation is stilted. Sentaro reaches out to Wakana, asking about her school club choices, but the dialogue quickly turns serious when he mentions Marvy, the canary Tokue wishes to set free. Sentaro reflects on Tokue's own long confinement and desires to release Marvy into the wild, to which Wakana surprisingly agrees.

As they walk, Sentaro learns that Wakana is studying part-time to work, a choice that leads to a feeling of isolation as she is the only student in her class doing so. Their shared conversation reflects their struggles, with Sentaro expressing frustration over the closure of his dorayaki shop, Doraharu. Playfully, he suggests opening a new store together, an idea that momentarily lifts their spirits and establishes a bond between them.

Wakana carries a gift for Tokue, though she teases Sentaro about its nature, igniting curiosity. They soon arrive at the National Hansen's Disease Museum, a place of significance and memories for both of them.

Unfortunately, when they attempt to visit Tokue, they are informed by Miss Moriyama, a familiar face, that Tokue has passed away due to pneumonia.

The news devastates Sentaro, who struggles to process the loss. Miss



Moriyama recounts how Tokue had refused to seek medical assistance, insisting she was only unwell. Her death feels sudden and brutal, leaving Sentaro in shock, unable to articulate his grief. Wakana sits beside him, equally affected, as Sentaro learns Tokue was buried alongside her husband.

In a moment of connection, Miss Moriyama invites Sentaro and Wakana to visit Tokue's home, emphasizing the importance of their relationship with her and suggesting her spirit guided them to this place. The chapter concludes with a somber acknowledgment of loss, the lingering warmth of cherry blossoms, and an invitation to remember and honor their mentor's memory.

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Chapter 28:

In Chapter 28, Sentaro, Wakana, and Miss Moriyama visit the small home of Tokue, Sentaro's late mentor who passed away in a clinic suddenly. The setting plays a significant role in their emotional journey, as they enter a modest courtyard with a nameplate reading 'Green Wind'. The emptiness of Tokue's birdcage resonates deeply with Wakana, who finds herself drawn to the absence of Marvy, Tokue's beloved canary.

As they move into Tokue's room, which is filled with memories and the weight of her absence, Miss Moriyama reveals that Tokue passed away unexpectedly, leaving a void in their lives. Despite its small size, the room contains remnants of Tokue's life, including photographs that illustrate her youthful vibrancy and love. These black-and-white images depict her with her husband, and Sentaro reflects on their shared struggles, noting a discrepancy in the height Tokue had claimed for her spouse, which provides a brief distraction from the grief of her loss.

The trio takes a moment for homage, lighting incense and offering prayers, establishing a connection to the past and honoring Tokue's memory. Miss Moriyama presents Sentaro with a wooden box filled with Tokue's cooking utensils, which Sentaro feels a strong desire to pass on to the Confectionery Group—though it has been inactive for over a decade. Sentaro recalls fond memories of Tokue teaching him about sweet bean paste.

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As they prepare to depart, they discover an unfinished letter Tokue had written for Sentaro before she was hospitalized. It becomes a poignant element of the chapter, revealing her intimate thoughts, regrets over the freedom of her beloved canary, her dreams unfulfilled, and insights about

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Chapter 29 Summary:

In this reflective chapter, the setting transitions from the vibrant colors of sunset to the encroaching twilight as characters make their way toward a charnel house. Here, Miss Moriyama shares her haunting past with Wakana and Sentaro, revealing her struggle with illness and a near-fatal suicide attempt. After enduring the severe physical pain of her condition, she found a glimmer of hope when a fellow member of the Confectionery Group, Toku, encouraged her to embrace life by creating sweet bean paste together. Toku's optimistic belief in hearing the voices of beans becomes a central theme, reflecting a transcendence of despair through an imaginative connection to nature.

Miss Moriyama recalls Toku's insistence that although she had never actually heard the “voices of the beans,” believing in their existence was vital to living fully. Toku's philosophy was an antidote to harsh reality, advocating for a poetic approach to life that could help overcome barriers to happiness. This discussion enlightens Sentaro, who had admired Toku's perspective but was unaware of her isolation and vulnerability within the group.

As they arrive at the charnel house, Miss Moriyama leads the way to a path shrouded in darkness but still illuminated by the remaining light of sunset. She shares a poignant memory of Toku recounting a mystical experience

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involving the trees, where she felt they acknowledged her efforts with encouraging words. This encounter marked a turning point for Toku, transforming her relationship with the world around her.

They reach a clearing where the group plants trees in honor of deceased members, symbolizing their lasting impact. Toku's tree, a cherry blossom sapling, stands as a tribute to her love for these blossoms, reminding them of her roots in Aichi Prefecture. As Sentaro gently touches the sapling, the chapter culminates in a moment of spiritual connection when a full moon rises, casting a serene glow over them. This scene encapsulates themes of memory, life, and the interconnectedness of all beings, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring legacy of those who have passed. The moonlight serves as a metaphor for hope and the continuity of life, echoing Toku's belief that one can find solace and strength in nature's whispers.

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