

Ame

Teacher Resources

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CHAPTER 1 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever lived with people who were not from your family? What was it like?
2. Imagine moving to a foreign country to study music. What would be the hardest thing about it?
3. Have you ever felt like a 'foreigner' somewhere, even if you were not far from home? Tell the class.

Key ideas

This chapter introduces life in a shared flat in Rome. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Living with flatmates means sharing space, sounds, and sometimes silence.
- In Italy, food — especially traditional dishes — is a way of caring for people.
- Musicians often face practical pressures: money, time, and finding the balance between work and practice.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 1. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
carbonara	A classic Roman pasta dish made with eggs, cured pork (guanciale), cheese, and black pepper. No cream.
cane	The natural plant material (a type of reed grass) used to make the reeds for woodwind instruments such as the oboe.
concert	A live performance of music in front of an audience.
dishwasher	A machine that washes plates, cups, and cutlery automatically.
elastic	(here) A hair tie or hair band used to hold hair back.
fridge	Short for refrigerator; the kitchen appliance used to keep food cold.
load-bearing wall	A wall that supports the weight of the structure above it. Important in architecture and construction.
microwave	(noun/verb) A kitchen appliance that heats food very quickly using electromagnetic waves. Also used as a verb: 'to microwave' something.
oboe / reed instrument	A double-reed woodwind instrument. The musician must make their own reeds by hand from cane.
practise	(British English spelling) To repeat an activity in order to improve a skill. American English: 'practice' (verb).
rack	(here) A frame or stand near the door where shoes are placed — common in Japanese and some European homes.
reception desk	The front desk of a hotel or office where visitors are welcomed and helped.
reed	A thin strip of material (often cane) that vibrates to produce sound in instruments such as the oboe or clarinet.
review	(here) An academic assessment or test, likely an oral or studio critique at a university.
scooter	A small, low-powered motorbike, very common on the streets of Rome.
shift	A fixed period of work, especially in jobs such as hotel reception or waiting tables.
substantial	Large, filling, and satisfying — used here to describe a hearty meal.
worktop	The flat surface in a kitchen where food is prepared. Also called a counter or countertop.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 1.

1. Who are the three people living in the flat? What do we learn about each of them in this chapter?
2. Why does Ame decide to leave her job at the hotel?
3. What is Concetta doing when Ame comes home, and why is she having difficulty?
4. What does Ame eat when she gets home, and how does she eat it?
5. What is Eleni doing the next day, and why does this matter to the flatmates?
6. What time is Ame's final shift at the hotel?
7. What is Ame looking forward to after her last shift?

WRITING TASK

Option A — Short description (B1+)

Describe the flat as you imagine it from the chapter. What does it look like? What sounds can you hear? What does it smell like? Write 80–120 words.

Option B — Message (B1+–B2)

Ame has not replied to her mother's last message. Write the message her mother might have sent, and then write Ame's reply.

Each message should be 60–90 words. Try to show the relationship between the two without stating it directly.

Option C — Reflection (B2)

Concetta says: "Some problems you make worse by trying."

Do you agree? Write a short paragraph (100–140 words) in which you agree or disagree, using at least one example from your own life or from something you have read or seen.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Indirect communication

In Chapter 1, characters often say something without saying it directly. The author writes: 'This was what she did when she was thinking about something she was not going to say.'

Match each moment in the left column to what the character really means in the right column.

What is said / done	What it really means
Concetta puts the knife down and picks it up again without speaking.	She is worried about money.
Concetta says: "There's some carbonara in the fridge."	She is showing she cares about Ame, without saying so directly.
Concetta makes a face when she hears the shift is 4–9 pm.	She thinks working in a hotel is a waste of time for a musician.

Now think of another example in the chapter where a character does not say exactly what they mean. Discuss with a partner.

B. Correction and self-correction

Ame says 'Stupid foreigners' and then corrects herself to 'Stupid tourists'. Why does she make this change? What does the correction tell us about her?

Write your answer in two or three sentences.

C. Vocabulary in context

Choose the correct word to complete each sentence.

1. She put the food away in the _____ because she wanted to keep it cold. (fridge / rack / worktop)
2. He worked the evening _____ at the hotel — from five o'clock until midnight. (review / shift / concert)
3. Making a reed by hand requires patience and the right quality of _____. (elastic / cane / shading)
4. The architect explained that you cannot remove a _____ wall without risking the building above. (load-bearing / substantial / dishwasher)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame is Japanese and lives in Rome. Do you think it is easy or difficult to live in a country where you are a foreigner? What might help?
2. Ame decides to stop working at the hotel even though she needs the money. Have you ever had to choose between money and something more important to you?
3. Concetta is also a musician. How are the two women similar, and how might they be different? What do you imagine about Concetta from this chapter?
4. The author describes Rome at night as 'mostly being dark and slightly noisy'. What does this tell you about how Ame sees the city — with affection, irritation, or something else?
5. Ame has not answered her mother's last message. Why do you think she hasn't? What might her mother have said?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: A late-night kitchen conversation

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, the other is Concetta.

Ame has just come home from work and told Concetta she is leaving her hotel job. Concetta is not sure it is the right decision.

Act out the conversation. Try to use indirect ways of expressing concern — like Concetta does in the chapter — rather than stating everything directly.

Expressing concern indirectly:

"Are you sure about that?" / "The money, though..." / "I'm just thinking about..."

Showing you have made a decision:

"I've thought about it." / "I know what I'm doing." / "This is what I need."

CULTURAL NOTES

Taking off shoes at the door

The chapter begins with Ame noticing the shoes by the door — and carefully placing her own shoes on the rack. Removing shoes when entering a home is a strong social custom in Japan. The entryway of a Japanese home is called the genkan (玄関), a distinct lowered area where outdoor shoes are left before stepping up into the house. Wearing outdoor shoes inside is considered unclean and disrespectful.

In Italy and much of Western Europe, this custom is less common, though it varies by household. For Ame, placing her shoes on the rack may feel like a small but meaningful way of carrying a piece of home with her.

Carbonara: a Roman classic

Carbonara is one of the most famous dishes of Roman cuisine, and Romans are famously protective of it. The authentic recipe uses only eggs, Pecorino Romano cheese, guanciale (cured pork cheek), black pepper, and pasta — no cream, no onion, no garlic. Adding cream is considered a serious error by Roman cooks.

Concetta has left the carbonara in the fridge for Ame, and Ame eats it cold — noting that this is 'how you were supposed to eat it if you'd missed dinner.' Whether cold carbonara is truly correct is debatable, but Ame says it with confidence.

Making reeds for woodwind instruments

Concetta plays an instrument that requires handmade reeds — almost certainly the oboe. Unlike the clarinet, which uses a single reed, the oboe uses a double reed made from two pieces of cane bound together. Oboists spend considerable time making and adjusting their own reeds, a highly skilled craft. The quality of the cane, the humidity, the scraping of the blade — all affect the final sound.

When Concetta says she should have stopped working on it after forty minutes, she is recognising something that experienced musicians know well: overworking a reed can ruin it, just as overworking a problem can make it worse.

Rome in October

The chapter mentions that Rome in October is 'still warm enough to complain about and cool enough to sleep.' October in Rome typically brings mild temperatures — warm afternoons, cooler evenings — and marks the transition from the intense heat of the Roman summer to more comfortable autumn weather. For residents of Rome, this is a welcome change. For visitors, it is one of the best times to see the city, which is why tourism remains high.

CHAPTER 2 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever had a teacher or mentor who inspired you to do something differently — not by explaining, but simply by asking you to think? What happened?
2. Think about a piece of music, a film, or a book that made you feel something strongly. Did you understand why, or did the feeling come before the understanding?
3. When two people know each other well, they often communicate without many words. Can you think of an example from your own life?

Key ideas

This chapter moves between two spaces: the city and the conservatoire. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A great teacher does not always explain — sometimes they ask you to understand something for yourself.
- Music can change completely without a single note changing.
- Shared living means paying attention to small things — a book on a sofa, a sound from the kitchen.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 2. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
advisor meeting	A scheduled meeting where students receive guidance and feedback from an experienced professional or academic.
Allegro malinconico	An Italian musical instruction meaning 'fast but melancholy'. It appears at the opening of Poulenc's Flute Sonata.
assemble	(here) To put together the parts of a flute before playing.
carriage	(here) A single compartment or car of a train or metro.
collective patience	The shared, unspoken tolerance of a group of people — here, Rome commuters.
flute sonata	A piece of music written for flute, usually accompanied by piano. A sonata has multiple movements.
interval	(music) The difference in pitch between two notes.
irreducible	Something that cannot be broken down into anything simpler; here, a smell that simply is what it is, with no further explanation.
malinconico	Italian for 'melancholy' or 'sad'. Used as a musical instruction.
middle distance	The space between nearby and far away — looking at nothing in particular.
movement	(music) A self-contained section of a longer piece such as a sonata or symphony.
Neapolitan	Relating to Naples, a city in southern Italy. Neapolitan dialect is famously expressive and distinct from standard Italian.
negotiate	(here) To move carefully through a difficult or narrow space.
oboe case	The hard protective box used to carry an oboe safely.
platform	The raised area beside a metro or train track where passengers wait and board.
Poulenc	Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), a French composer. His Flute Sonata is a well-known work in the flute repertoire.
rosin	A solid resin used to coat the strings of bowed instruments, or found in places where string players practise. It leaves a fine dust.
turnstile	A rotating gate at the entrance to a metro or other ticketed space, which lets one person through at a time.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 2.

1. Where do Ame and Concetta meet at the start of the chapter, and what do they do there?
2. Why is the oboe case difficult to manage on the metro?
3. What does Castelli ask Ame to do before she plays the second time? Does he explain why?
4. What changes between Ame's first and second performance of the Poulenc?
5. What does Castelli say about the advisor meeting, and what does his comment suggest about his attitude toward it?
6. What has Eleni been looking for, and where does she find it? How long has it been there?
7. How does the chapter end? What small detail tells us about the three women's relationship?

WRITING TASK

Option A — Short paragraph (B1+)

Describe a moment when you did something — played a sport, performed, cooked, spoke in public — and it went right. What was different that time? Write 80–120 words.

Option B — The lesson (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (120–160 words) in which a teacher or mentor gives advice that is not direct — they ask a question, or tell a story, or say something that the student has to think about. The student should realise something by the end of the scene.

Option C — Programme note (B2)

A programme note is a short text given to an audience before a concert, explaining the music they are about to hear. Write a programme note for the Poulenc Flute Sonata (100–140 words) based on what you have learned from Chapter 2. You do not need to research further — write from what the chapter has told you.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Simile and comparison

The author uses comparisons to describe things precisely. Match each comparison from the chapter to what it describes.

Comparison	What it describes
"like a third person who took up too much space"	The oboe case between Ame and Concetta at the bar
"like a slow ship"	The oboe case clearing a path through the crowd
"like something trying to stay upright"	The opening phrase of the Poulenc sonata
"the way you learn to distinguish weather from climate"	Learning the difference between student and professional playing

B. What is not said

Castelli does not explain what he wants Ame to understand. He simply says: "He knew, when he wrote this, that he was almost finished. Think about that for a moment. Then play again."

In your own words, what do you think Castelli wants Ame to understand? Write two or three sentences.

C. Verb forms — movement and habit

Look at these sentences from the chapter. Each one describes a habitual or repeated action using a simple past form. Rewrite each sentence using 'used to' or 'would' to make the habit more explicit.

1. "Concetta drank hers in two swallows, the way she did everything."
2. "A man at the nearest table moved his chair without looking up from his newspaper."
3. "She had heard it before, on other Tuesdays, arriving early for reasons she did not examine."

Now write one sentence about a habit of your own, using 'would' or 'used to'.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Castelli tells Ame to think about Poulenc knowing he was "almost finished" before she plays again. Why do you think this changes how she plays? Has a piece of information ever changed how you felt about something — a song, a film, a person?
2. The chapter describes the shared patience of Roman commuters as something the city has "made its peace with". What do people in your city or country have to make their peace with in daily life?
3. Ame arrives twelve minutes early to Castelli's lesson and stands in the corridor to listen. What does this tell you about her? Is it professional, personal, or both?
4. Concetta declines a teenager's offer of help on the metro "with a politeness that did not invite further offers." What does this mean? Have you ever had to be politely firm with someone?
5. At the end of the chapter, the sound of a third cup being taken from the shelf tells us that Concetta is making coffee for Ame without being asked. Why does the author end the chapter on this detail?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: After the lesson

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, the other is Concetta. You are on the metro going home after your separate lessons.

Concetta asks how the lesson with Castelli went. Ame tries to explain what happened — the two performances, what Castelli said, and why it mattered — without it sounding strange or overly dramatic.

Concetta, as a fellow musician, should ask questions that show she understands what Ame means. Try to have a conversation that musicians would actually have.

Describing something hard to explain:

"It's difficult to put into words..." / "It's like when you..." / "Something just shifted."

Showing you understand:

"I know exactly what you mean." / "That happens sometimes." / "Did it feel different while you were playing?"

CULTURAL NOTES

The Italian bar

In Italy, a 'bar' is not primarily a place to drink alcohol — it is a café, usually busy in the morning, where people stop briefly for an espresso and sometimes a pastry. Italians typically drink their espresso standing at the counter, not sitting at a table, which would be slower and more expensive. The barista often knows regular customers by habit and may prepare their usual order before they ask. It is a social ritual as much as a practical one.

The espresso

An espresso in Italy is a small, strong shot of coffee served in a small ceramic cup. It is drunk quickly — often in two or three sips. Ordering a 'caffè' in Italy means an espresso; if you want milk, you ask for a 'caffè macchiato' (espresso with a drop of milk) or a 'cappuccino' (but only in the morning — ordering a cappuccino after lunch is considered unusual). The espresso counter is a place of brief, efficient social exchange.

The Rome metro

Rome's metro system (the Metropolitana) has only three lines — A, B, and C — which is remarkably small for a city of nearly three million people. This is largely because excavation in Rome almost always uncovers ancient ruins, which halts construction. As a result, Romans rely heavily on buses and on foot, and the metro is often very crowded during peak hours. Navigating it with a large instrument case is a practical challenge that many music students in Rome will recognise.

Francis Poulenc and the Flute Sonata

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) was a French composer known for music that combines wit and emotion, often within the same piece. His Sonata for Flute and Piano was commissioned by the American flautist Elaine Shaffer and completed in 1957. It was one of his last major works. The first movement is marked *Allegro malinconico* — fast, but with a quality of sadness. Poulenc was in poor health in his final years, and the knowledge that this was late work adds a layer of meaning to the music that Castelli wants Ame to find.

Italian conservatoires

Italy has a long tradition of formal music conservatoires — dedicated institutions for training professional musicians. Many are named after famous Italian composers (such as the Santa Cecilia Conservatoire in Rome, named after the patron saint of music). Students at conservatoire level are expected to practise intensively and often have individual lessons with a single main teacher who plays a central role in their development. The relationship between student and teacher in this tradition is close, sometimes difficult, and often formative.

CHAPTER 3 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever taught someone something — a younger sibling, a friend, a student? What was it like? Did the person want to learn?
2. Think of a time when someone said something nice to you but it felt uncomfortable or wrong. How did you respond?
3. Can you think of a public place where you have seen someone doing something unexpected — playing music, reading, practising a skill? What did it feel like to watch?

Key ideas

In this chapter, Ame visits three different students in three very different settings. Think about these contrasts before you read:

- A wealthy home is not always a sign of serious interest or real engagement.
- Effort is not the same as talent, but it can be just as meaningful to a teacher.
- Objects can be used in ways that miss their meaning — or even become a kind of mistake.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 3. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
ascending run	(music) A series of notes played in order from low to high, often used as a technical exercise.
casing	The outer covering or shell of an object — here, the wooden body of a piano.
Clementi sonatina	A short, structured piece for piano by Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), an Italian composer. Sonatinas by Clementi are widely used in piano teaching.
cooperative	Willing to do what is asked; not difficult or resistant.
cultural background	The customs, traditions, and heritage that a person comes from.
diligent	Working carefully and consistently; putting in steady effort.
dim	Not very bright; only slightly lit.
fingering	(music) The specific way of placing fingers on an instrument to play notes correctly.
fluency	(here) Playing music smoothly and confidently, without stopping or stumbling.
gouge	A cut or groove in a surface, usually accidental.
housekeeper	A person employed to manage the cleaning and domestic tasks of a home.
iron gate	(here) The sliding metal door of an old-style lift.
je ne sais quoi	A French phrase meaning 'I don't know what' — used in English to describe an attractive quality that is hard to define.
kimono	A traditional Japanese garment with long sleeves, worn on formal or ceremonial occasions.
koto	A traditional Japanese stringed instrument, about 180 cm long, played by plucking strings stretched over a wooden body. It produces a distinctive, delicate sound.
minuet	A slow, elegant dance in three-beat time, common in Baroque and Classical music. Bach wrote many minuets for piano students.
register	(music) The range of pitch — high, middle, or low — in which an instrument is playing.
Roland piano	A brand of digital (electronic) piano. Unlike an acoustic piano, it produces sound electronically and sounds the same regardless of how it is tuned or played.
shutters	Wooden or metal panels fitted to the outside (or inside) of windows that can be opened or closed to control light and air. Common in Italian homes.
sonatina	A short and relatively simple sonata, often written for teaching purposes.
tasteful	Showing good aesthetic judgment; not excessive or showy.
upper register	The higher pitch range of an instrument. On a piano, the keys on the right side of the keyboard.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 3.

1. Where does Ame teach each of her three students? Describe each setting in one sentence.
2. What does Signora Marchetti's comment about Ame's 'cultural background' suggest about the way she sees Ame?
3. What is the koto doing in the Marchetti living room? Why might Ame find this uncomfortable?
4. How does Giulia approach her piano lesson? How is this different from Federico?
5. What does Ame observe about Lorenzo that tells her he has practised?
6. Why does the lesson with Lorenzo run over time, and why does neither of them notice?
7. What does Concetta say to help Ame put the Marchetti encounter into perspective?

WRITING TASK

Option A — Three places (B1+)

Think of three places you know well. Write two or three sentences describing each one, focusing on the atmosphere and how it makes you feel. Try not to use the word 'nice'. (80–120 words total)

Option B — The backhanded compliment (B1+–B2)

A 'backhanded compliment' is a remark that sounds positive but contains a hidden criticism or assumption. Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which one character gives another a backhanded compliment, and the second character has to decide how to respond.

Option C — A letter home (B2)

Write a short letter or message from Ame to someone at home — a parent, a friend, or her teacher in Japan — describing her day and what happened at the Marchetti flat. She should be honest about her feelings without being too negative. (120–160 words)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Three students — three portraits

The author describes each student in a different way. Complete the table using information from the chapter.

	Federico	Giulia	Lorenzo
Age			
Setting			
Has he/she practised?			
How does Ame feel about teaching them?			

B. Tone and implication

The chapter is full of sentences that say more than they appear to. For each sentence below, discuss or write what the author is really telling us.

1. "She smiled warmly and stepped back to let Ame in." / "Federico has been practising," she said, in the tone of someone who believed this to be true."
2. "The Roland sounded exactly as it was supposed to sound, which was perfectly and without character."
3. "Lorenzo was twelve and had been taking lessons for eight months. He sat without self-consciousness while the station moved around him."
4. "Effort, which was rarer and in some ways more valuable."

C. Relative clauses — describing people and things

Look at this sentence from the chapter: "...the kind that had been bought to fill a room and had stayed because removing it would have required a decision."

This is a relative clause beginning with 'that'. Use the same structure to complete these sentences about people or objects.

1. A teacher is someone who _____.
2. A digital piano is an instrument that _____.
3. A koto is a Japanese instrument that _____.
4. Write your own sentence using a relative clause to describe someone or something from the chapter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Signora Marchetti says that Ame's cultural background gives the music a "je ne sais quoi". What is she really saying? Why might this comment be hurtful or insulting, even though it sounds like a compliment?
2. The koto is in the Marchetti flat as decoration. Is there anything wrong with this? When does appreciation for another culture become something else?
3. Concetta tells Ame not to worry about the Marchetti encounter and makes a joke about where they might have ended up if they were like their parents. Do you think this is helpful advice? How do you respond when a friend says 'don't worry about it'?
4. The author says of Lorenzo's effort: "Not talent exactly. Effort, which was rarer and in some ways more valuable." Do you agree? Think of examples from music, sport, or school.
5. Ame teaches in three very different environments — a wealthy home, a modern flat, and a public station. Which do you think would be the most enjoyable to work in, and why?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Explaining a compliment that wasn't

Work in groups of three. One of you is Ame, one is Concetta, and one is Eleni (who is hearing about the Marchetti encounter for the first time).

Ame explains what Signora Marchetti said. Eleni asks questions to understand why it bothered Ame. Concetta tries to help Ame see the funny side, without dismissing how she feels.

Explaining why something bothered you:

"It's not that she meant to be rude..." / "It's the assumption that..." / "What bothered me was..."

Finding the lighter side:

"You have to admit it's a bit..." / "At least she tried." / "Imagine if she'd said..."

CULTURAL NOTES

The koto

The koto is one of Japan's most recognisable traditional instruments. It is a long, flat stringed instrument with thirteen strings, each raised by a movable bridge. The player plucks the strings with picks worn on the right hand. The koto is associated with classical Japanese music and formal occasions, and learning to play it has traditionally been considered part of a cultured education, particularly for women. To place a koto in a room purely as decoration — as the Marchettis do — is to reduce a living instrument and musical tradition to an aesthetic object. Ame's quiet discomfort is understandable.

The kimono

The kimono is a traditional Japanese garment worn on formal or ceremonial occasions — festivals, weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies, and tea ceremonies. There are many types of kimono, differing in formality, pattern, and the way they are tied. While the kimono remains an important part of Japanese cultural identity, most Japanese people today wear Western clothing in everyday life, reserving the kimono for special events. Concetta's comment — "you'd be in Matsuyama selling kimono" — is a gentle joke, but it also touches on ideas about what young women from traditional families are expected to do.

Street pianos

Since the early 2000s, public pianos have appeared in train stations, airports, shopping centres, and city squares in many countries around the world. Projects such as 'Play Me, I'm Yours' (begun in Birmingham, UK, in 2008) have placed decorated pianos in public spaces, inviting anyone to sit down and play. The idea is to make music accessible, unexpected, and democratic. Rome's Termini station has hosted public pianos at various times, and the image of a child taking a piano lesson while announcements echo overhead captures something genuine about how these instruments are used.

Bach minuets and Clementi sonatinas in piano teaching

Two of the most commonly used pieces in beginner and early-intermediate piano teaching appear in this chapter. The minuets attributed to J.S. Bach — many of which are actually by other composers but were long included in the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook — have been used in piano lessons for generations because of their clear structure, elegant melody, and manageable difficulty. Clementi's sonatinas serve a similar purpose at a slightly more advanced level, introducing students to sonata form in a compact and accessible way. Both types of piece are used so widely that many adult musicians can still play them from memory.

CHAPTER 4 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever made plans that went wrong because of the weather — or for any other reason? What did you do instead?
2. Think of a word or phrase in your language that does not translate easily into English. How would you explain it to someone who does not know your language?
3. When you meet someone new, what kind of small things do you notice about them that tell you what kind of person they might be?

Key ideas

This chapter follows Ame on a date that does not go as planned. Think about these ideas before you read:

- How we deal with things going wrong says a lot about who we are.
- Some words carry a whole cultural attitude inside them — more than a translation can carry.
- Sometimes a moment becomes meaningful because of a coincidence you could not have planned.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 4. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
accumulate	To build up gradually over time, often without anyone noticing.
blanket	A thick, warm covering used outdoors or in bed.
collar	(here) The part of a jacket or coat that goes around the neck and can be turned up for warmth.
deliberate	(here) Steady and purposeful — the rain is described as 'deliberate' to suggest it had made up its mind to keep falling.
emergency	(used humorously here) An urgent situation that needs immediate attention. Ame has not had coffee yet — this is her 'emergency'.
focused urgency	The feeling of needing to do something quickly but concentrating hard on it at the same time.
forecast	A prediction of what the weather will be like in the future.
highlights	(here) A short video showing the best or most important moments from a sporting event.
on the nose	(informal) Something that is too obvious or too directly on the subject — here, Luca notices the bar is called 'Forza Lazio' when they are meeting nearby.
optimism	A tendency to expect the best possible outcome; hopefulness.
picnic	An informal meal eaten outdoors, usually on a blanket in a park or green space.
platform	(here) The area beside the railway track in a station where trains stop and passengers board.
rain-streaked	Covered with lines of rain running down a surface, such as a window.
sharpness	(here) A quality in the air — a coolness or crispness — that had not been there before.
shikata ga nai	A Japanese phrase (仕方がない) meaning roughly 'it cannot be helped' or 'nothing can be done about it'. It expresses calm acceptance of a situation that is beyond one's control.
staleness	The quality of air that is not fresh — old, slightly stale, typical of large enclosed spaces.
subdued	Quiet and slightly low in energy or mood; less lively than usual.
Tiburtina	Roma Tiburtina — one of Rome's main railway stations, in the eastern part of the city.
turn up one's collar	To fold the collar of a jacket or coat upward around the neck for warmth or shelter from rain.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 4.

1. How does the opening scene tell us, without stating it, that something has changed in Ame's life since the previous chapter?
2. What does Eleni notice, and how does she react to it?
3. What had Luca planned for the morning? Why does the plan fail?
4. What does Ame mean when she says "Shikata ga nai"? How does Luca respond to hearing this phrase?
5. Where do they end up spending the morning, and how does Luca feel about this?
6. What is the meaning of Ame's name in Japanese? Why is this a significant moment in the chapter?
7. How does the chapter end? What does the final sentence suggest?

WRITING TASK

Option A — When plans change (B1+)

Write about a time when something went wrong or was cancelled and something unexpected happened instead. It does not have to be dramatic — it can be a small event. Write 80–120 words.

Option B — Explaining a concept (B1+–B2)

Choose a concept, phrase, or word from your own culture that is difficult to translate into English. Write a short explanation of it for someone who does not know your language or culture. Use examples and comparisons to make it clear. (100–130 words)

Option C — The name (B2)

A name can carry meaning, history, or coincidence. Write a short piece (120–160 words) about a name — your own, someone you know, or an invented character's — and what that name means or suggests. It can be factual, personal, or fictional.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Describing mood through description

The author never directly states how Ame feels about Luca. Instead, we understand her feelings through small details. Find the evidence in the chapter for each inference below.

Inference	Evidence from the chapter
Ame is distracted / preoccupied when she gets home.	
Ame is looking forward to seeing Luca.	
Ame is not easily flustered when things go wrong.	
Ame and Luca are comfortable with each other.	

B. Untranslatable words

Ame explains that shikata ga nai means 'it cannot be helped' — but she also says it carries a cultural attitude. Many languages have words or phrases that carry meaning a simple translation cannot fully capture.

Think of a word or expression from your own language (or another language you know) that is difficult to translate into English. Write a short explanation (3–5 sentences) as if you were explaining it to someone who has never heard it.

C. Sentence rhythm — short sentences for effect

The author often uses very short sentences at key moments. Look at these examples and discuss what effect each one has on the reader.

1. "She didn't read it."
2. "It decided on the way to the park."
3. "It means rain."
4. "Oh. Okay."

Now try writing two or three short sentences of your own that create a sense of surprise, realisation, or quiet emotion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame's attitude to the rain is very different from Luca's. She says "It rained. We need somewhere to eat these sandwiches." Do you think her reaction comes from her personality, from the concept of shikata ga nai, or from something else?
2. Luca keeps apologising for the rain, even though it is not his fault. Why do you think people apologise for things they cannot control? Is this a cultural habit, a personality trait, or something else?
3. The discovery that Ame's name means 'rain' happens on a rainy day, in a conversation that started because of the rain. Does this feel like a meaningful coincidence to you? Does it change the atmosphere of the chapter?
4. The chapter describes November in Rome as "not cold enough to complain about and not warm enough to ignore". What is the author doing with this description? Can you think of a season or time of year in a place you know that you would describe the same way?
5. Eleni notices something about Ame without being told anything. Do you think flatmates usually notice this kind of thing? How much do the people we live with know about us, even without being told?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Eating sandwiches at the station

Work in pairs. You are Ame and Luca, sitting at Tiburtina station watching the rain. The picnic in the park has not happened.

Have a conversation. Luca should try to make up for the failed plan — asking questions, trying to keep things going. Ame should be relaxed and genuine, not overly enthusiastic but clearly enjoying herself.

At some point in the conversation, Luca asks what Ame's name means. Ame can decide when and how to reveal it.

Keeping a conversation going:

"So tell me..." / "I've always wondered..." / "What made you decide to...?"

Responding warmly without overdoing it:

"Actually, this is fine." / "No, really — I mean it." / "This is better in some ways."

CULTURAL NOTES

Shikata ga nai (仕方がない)

Shikata ga nai is a Japanese phrase that translates literally as 'there is no way to do it' — meaning that a situation cannot be changed, so it must be accepted. It reflects a broader cultural value sometimes described as acceptance in the face of circumstances beyond one's control. The phrase has been used historically to describe responses to natural disasters, personal hardship, and everyday inconvenience alike. It is not quite the same as giving up, and not quite the same as resignation — it is closer to a practical, calm acknowledgement that some things simply are what they are. Similar ideas exist in other cultures: the Stoic tradition in Western philosophy, or the Arabic expression inshallah in some of its uses.

Names and their meanings in Japanese

Japanese names are typically written in kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese writing), and the meaning of a name depends on which characters are chosen. The same pronunciation can correspond to different written forms with very different meanings. Ame (雨) means rain and is an evocative name — rain in Japanese culture is associated with change, cleansing, and the rhythm of the seasons. It appears in poetry, in traditional music, and in everyday life in a country where the rainy season (tsuyu, 梅雨) is a significant and celebrated part of the year.

Football culture in Rome: Lazio and Roma

Rome has two major football clubs: AS Roma and SS Lazio. The rivalry between them — known as the Derby della Capitale — is one of the most intense in Italian football, and in Rome it is more than a sporting contest: it often reflects social and political identities. Supporting one club or the other can be a marker of neighbourhood, family, and personal identity. Luca's comment that 'Forza Lazio' is 'a bit on the nose' is a joke about the coincidence of their meeting in a bar that openly declares its allegiance. Ame's response — 'I have no opinion about this' — is both honest and a quiet way of staying outside a local rivalry that is not hers to take sides in.

The changing seasons in Rome

Rome is known for its warm climate, and the city's character does change with the seasons. Summer brings intense heat, crowded tourist sites, and long evenings. October remains mild and is considered one of the best months to visit. November marks a shift — cooler, quieter, with shorter days and a different quality of light. Romans themselves often speak of November as the beginning of 'real' autumn, when the city belongs more to its residents than to tourists. The chapter captures this transition precisely: 'not cold enough to complain about and not warm enough to ignore.'

CHAPTER 5 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever discovered that something you hoped to do was not available to you — because of your age, your nationality, your qualifications, or another rule? How did you find out, and how did you feel?
2. Think about the difference between saying nothing and lying. If someone does not mention something difficult, is that dishonest? When might silence be a reasonable choice?
3. Have you ever been asked to do something connected to your culture or background that you did not really know how to do — or that felt strange to be asked? What did you say?

Key ideas

This chapter is quieter than the ones before it, but more is happening beneath the surface. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Bureaucratic rules can close doors in ways that feel impersonal and final.
- Choosing not to talk about something is itself a kind of decision.
- Being seen as a representative of your culture can feel like a compliment — and also like an erasure of who you actually are.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 5. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
application fee	A sum of money paid when submitting an application, for example to a competition or programme. Not all applications charge a fee.
chamber orchestra	A small orchestra, typically with fewer than fifty players, performing in a smaller venue than a full symphony orchestra.
citizen / citizenship	A citizen is a legally recognised member of a country, with full rights including the right to work and vote. Citizenship is the status of being a citizen.
compounds	(here, verb) To grow or develop in layers over time — each benefit building on the previous one.
dropdown	(computing) A menu on a screen that opens to reveal a list of options when clicked.
eligibility	Meeting the required conditions to be allowed to apply for or take part in something.
ensemble	A group of musicians who regularly perform together.
EUYO	The European Union Youth Orchestra — a prestigious orchestra for young musicians from EU member states, aged 14 to 26.
indifferent	(here) Not caring; showing no reaction or interest. The street is 'indifferent' — it does not respond to Ame's feelings.
La Scala	The Teatro alla Scala in Milan — one of the most famous opera houses and performance venues in the world. A reference point for the highest level of the profession.
listing	(here) A published notice advertising available positions or opportunities, usually with requirements and a deadline.
member state	A country that belongs to an international organisation, such as the European Union.
noncommittal	Not giving a clear answer or decision either way; vague. Here used to describe the grey, undecided quality of the morning sky.
one-on-one	A private meeting between one student and one teacher or advisor.
prestigious	Highly respected and admired, usually because of a long history of excellence.
residency	(music) A short-term professional placement at an institution, festival, or venue — usually involving both performance and community work.
seminar	A structured class or meeting for a group of students, often led by an expert guest.
student visa	An official document allowing a foreign national to live in a country for the purpose of study. It does not usually grant the right to work.
work permit	An official authorisation allowing a foreign national to work legally in a country.
youth orchestra	An orchestra made up of young players, typically students or early-career musicians, often providing high-level training and performance experience.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 5.

1. What is the EUYO and why does the advisor recommend it strongly?
2. What happens when Ame tries to fill in the online application form for the EUYO?
3. What does Ame do immediately after closing the browser? What does this tell us about her?
4. How does Ame respond when she discovers the Teatro Olimpico positions are also closed to her? What words does she use?
5. Why does Paolo have no answer for Ame's situation? Is he at fault?
6. What does Signora Marchetti ask Ame at the end of the chapter? Why is this moment difficult, even though Signora Marchetti means well?
7. Ame tells the seminar advisor "I meant it" when she thanks her. What does this tell us about Ame's character?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The form (B1+)

Imagine you are filling in an online form and you discover that you do not meet a key requirement. Write a short scene (80–120 words) describing the moment — what you see on the screen, how you feel, and what you do next.

Option B — What you don't say (B1+–B2)

Think of a time when you chose not to tell someone something — not to protect them necessarily, but because you needed time, or because you were not ready. Write about that decision and what happened. (100–130 words)

Option C — A letter to the EUYO (B2)

Write a formal letter from Ame to the EUYO, explaining her situation and asking whether there is any possibility of an exception or an alternative pathway. The letter should be polite, professional, and honest — not angry, but clear. (120–160 words)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. What is not said — silence as a narrative choice

After discovering she cannot apply for the EUYO, Ame says nothing to Concetta for two days. The author writes: 'She didn't mention it at breakfast. Or dinner. Or the morning after that.'

Answer these questions:

1. Why do you think Ame says nothing? Consider at least two possible reasons.
2. What does this silence cost her? What might she be missing by not talking about it?
3. Is Concetta likely to notice? What might she be thinking?

B. The language of bureaucracy

Official documents and rules often use formal, impersonal language. Look at these phrases from the chapter and rewrite each one in plain, everyday English.

Official / formal phrasing	Plain English version
Open to citizens of European Union member states.	
The application opens in January.	
The work permit — my student visa doesn't cover it.	
Eligibility section	

C. Modals — possibility and recommendation

The advisor uses careful, professional language. Look at these examples and discuss the difference in meaning between the modal verbs used.

1. "I'd recommend starting early." — Why does she say 'would recommend' rather than 'recommend'?
2. "Maybe sometime you could play it for us." — What does 'could' suggest here about Signora Marchetti's request?
3. "Maybe sometime I could try." — Ame uses the same modal. Is she making a promise? What is she really saying?

Now write two sentences of your own using modal verbs to make a suggestion or recommendation that is polite but not firm.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame discovers she is excluded from the EUYO because she is not an EU citizen. This is not anyone's personal decision against her — it is simply a rule. Does that make it easier or harder to accept? What is the difference between being rejected by a person and being excluded by a system?
2. Ame chooses not to tell Concetta about the EUYO disappointment. Do you think this is the right decision? Is there something protective about not sharing every difficulty, or is it a form of isolation?
3. When Paolo finds out Ame cannot apply for the Teatro Olimpico positions, he says 'Sorry, I didn't realise.' He is not unkind — he just hadn't thought about it. Why might opportunities feel equal to some people while being genuinely closed to others?
4. Signora Marchetti asks Ame to play the koto, thinking this would be 'educational' for Federico. Ame says it is 'not really my instrument'. What is the problem with Signora Marchetti's assumption? Have you ever been assumed to know or represent something simply because of where you come from?
5. Ame uses *shikata ga nai* twice now — once with Luca about the rain, and once with Paolo about the work permit. Does the phrase mean the same thing in both cases? Is it always a healthy response to difficulty?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Two days later — Ame tells Concetta

Work in pairs. Two days have passed since Ame discovered she cannot apply for the EUYO. She has said nothing until now. Finally, over dinner, she tells Concetta what happened.

Concetta already suspected something was wrong. She should respond as someone who is a close friend but also a fellow musician who understands the professional stakes. She should not be overly dramatic, but she should not minimise it either.

Telling someone difficult news:

"I found out something last week..." / "I didn't say anything because..." / "I just needed a bit of time."

Responding with care but not over-reaction:

"That's genuinely unfair." / "So what can you do instead?" / "I wondered why you'd gone quiet."

CULTURAL NOTES

The European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO)

The European Union Youth Orchestra was founded in 1976 and is one of the most prestigious youth orchestras in the world. It selects musicians aged 14 to 26 through competitive auditions held in EU member states. Membership is open only to citizens of EU countries. The orchestra performs across Europe and internationally, working with leading conductors and soloists. For a young musician, membership is considered a significant professional milestone — it provides performance experience at the highest level, professional connections, and a mark of distinction on a CV. The restriction to EU citizens is not unusual for EU-funded cultural institutions, but it creates a genuine barrier for talented musicians from outside the EU studying in Europe.

Student visas and work rights in Europe

International students studying in EU countries typically hold a student visa, which allows them to live and study in the country but places limits on paid work. The rules vary by country — some allow a certain number of hours of part-time work per week, while others are more restrictive for certain professions. Music presents a particular complexity: performing in an orchestra, even a youth orchestra, may be considered work, requiring additional permits. For a student from Japan studying in Italy, paid performance opportunities are often legally restricted in ways that their Italian or EU classmates do not face. This structural difference is part of Ame's experience in the novel.

The koto and cultural assumptions

In Chapter 3 the koto appeared as a decorative object in a Roman apartment. Now it reappears — this time as something Signora Marchetti assumes Ame can play. This assumption reflects a common pattern: that a person from a particular country will know and be able to perform all aspects of that country's culture. In reality, the koto is a specialist instrument with a long training tradition. Most Japanese people do not play the koto any more than most Italians can play the mandolin. Ame's response — 'it's not really my instrument' — is measured and polite, but the discomfort underneath it is easy to understand.

Teatro Olimpico, Rome

The Teatro Olimpico in Rome is a historic concert hall in the Prati neighbourhood, known primarily for orchestral and chamber music performances. It is smaller and more intimate than the larger Auditorium Parco della Musica, and it occupies an important place in Rome's classical music life. For a conservatoire student, the prospect of a position in a chamber orchestra performing at venues like this represents a realistic early-career step — not the top of the profession, but a serious, visible, paid opportunity. That this door, too, is closed to Ame because of her visa status adds another layer to the chapter's central concern.

CHAPTER 6 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever done something for someone that you thought was a nice gesture — and it turned out to be awkward or unexpected? What happened?
2. Think of a tradition or seasonal event that is important in your culture. How would you feel if you found it happening somewhere very different — another country, another setting?
3. How do you know when someone likes someone else, without being told? What small signs do people give away?

Key ideas

This chapter is the lightest in tone so far. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A gesture made in good faith can land in an unexpected place — and become meaningful for reasons nobody planned.
- Being present — not thinking, not comparing, just being somewhere — is its own kind of feeling.
- Shared rituals, even borrowed ones, can create a sense of belonging.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 6. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
accumulated	(here) Built up over time — the petals on the water have gathered slowly into a drift.
architecture	The design and construction of buildings. Here used to suggest the EUR district's deliberate, imposing visual style.
at peak	At the highest point of something — here, the cherry blossoms are fully open and at their most beautiful.
blanket	A thick covering used outdoors for sitting or lying on. In this context, spread on the ground for a picnic.
blossom	The flowers of a tree, especially fruit trees or ornamental trees such as cherry trees. Often used in the plural: 'blossoms'.
breeze	A light, gentle wind.
cluster	A small group of people or things gathered closely together.
distribute	(here) To hand out or share something among a group of people.
drift	(here, noun) A slow, gentle movement; also a small collection of something — here, fallen cherry petals floating on water.
EUR	An abbreviation for Esposizione Universale Roma — a planned district in southern Rome, built in the late 1930s and 1940s in a monumental architectural style. Now a residential and business area.
hanami	A Japanese tradition of viewing cherry blossoms, typically outdoors with food and drink.
landing	(here) Falling gently and settling on a surface.
Matsuyama	A city on the island of Shikoku in western Japan. Ame's home city.
monumental	On a very large scale; imposing and grand in design.
out of habit	Doing something automatically, without thinking, because you always do it.
Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana	A large, striking building in the EUR district of Rome, famous for its rows of arched windows. It is often called the 'Square Colosseum' (Colosseo Quadrato). Built in the late 1930s, it is a well-known example of Italian Rationalist architecture.
peak	(here) The moment when something is at its best or most intense.
petals	The coloured or white parts of a flower. Cherry blossom petals fall from the trees in the wind.
recalculate	(here) To quickly rethink a situation or assessment — Carlo is rethinking what his gesture means.
symmetrical	Having two sides that are mirror images of each other; balanced and regular in form.
unapologetic	Not sorry; not feeling the need to apologise or explain oneself.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 6.

1. Why did Carlo choose a park with cherry trees? Did he know Ame would be there?
2. How does Ame react to Carlo's accidental gesture? Is she offended, touched, or something more complicated?
3. What does Ame say she hasn't done in three years? What does this tell us?
4. How does the author describe the EUR district? What does the description suggest about the area?
5. What does Ame observe about Carlo and Eleni during the picnic? How does she read the situation?
6. What does Luca say near the end of the scene under the trees, and what is the significance of him saying it?
7. How does the chapter end? What is the small detail that the author closes on, and why is it significant?

WRITING TASK

Option A — A seasonal memory (B1+)

Describe a seasonal event or tradition from your culture — a festival, a type of weather, a food associated with a time of year. Write as if you are explaining it to someone who has never experienced it. (80–110 words)

Option B — The accidental gesture (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which one character does something for another character — not knowing it will be significant. The second character realises the coincidence and has to decide how to react.

Option C — Being somewhere (B2)

Write a short descriptive piece (120–160 words) about a moment when you were fully present somewhere — not thinking about the past or the future, just in the place. Try to describe the physical details as precisely as the author does, and end with a sentence about how you felt.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Showing character through small actions

The author reveals character through what people do, not what they say. Match each action to the character it reveals something about, and write what it suggests.

Action	What it reveals
Concetta brings the oboe case out of habit, then leaves it behind the bar without explaining.	
Carlo brings enough food for twice as many people.	
Concetta watches Carlo and Eleni with useful opinions she has decided to keep.	
Carlo helps Eleni fold the blanket with slightly unnecessary care.	
Luca sits beside Ame — not close enough to be a statement, close enough.	

B. Being present

Ame sits under the cherry trees and the author writes: 'She was not thinking about Matsuyama, exactly. She was not thinking about anything, really. The blossoms were the blossoms and the lake was the lake and Rome was Rome and she was simply here, present.'

This is a description of a mental state — being fully in the moment without comparison or memory. In your own words, describe what this feels like. Have you ever experienced it? Write 3–5 sentences.

C. Adverbials of manner

Look at how the author uses adverbials and adverbial phrases to add precision to actions. Find one example of each type in the chapter, then write your own sentence using the same structure.

Type	Example from chapter / Your own sentence
Adverb (e.g. quietly, slightly)	
Prepositional phrase of manner (e.g. with the expression of...)	
Comparative phrase (e.g. the way...)	

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Carlo chose the park because of the cherry trees — not knowing Ame would be there. The gesture was accidental, but it becomes meaningful. Can an accidental gesture be more moving than a planned one? Why or why not?
2. Ame says she hasn't been to a hanami in three years. She is sitting under cherry blossoms in Rome, not in Japan. Do you think this feels like home to her, or like a reminder of home — or both? Is there a difference?
3. Concetta brought the oboe case by mistake and is completely unapologetic. What does this tell you about her character? Do you find this admirable, funny, or both?
4. The chapter ends with the three women removing their shoes and adding them to the rack — the same action that opened the very first chapter. Why do you think the author repeats this detail? What does it mean by this point in the story?
5. Luca attempts to say shikata ga nai and his pronunciation is not good, but Ame says 'getting better'. What does this small exchange tell us about where their relationship is now?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The moment Carlo realises

Work in groups of three: Carlo, Eleni, and Ame. You are at the bar before going to the park. Carlo has just realised that Ame is Japanese and that he chose cherry trees — and he is trying to figure out whether this is wonderful or deeply embarrassing.

Ame should be measured and kind, not making Carlo feel too uncomfortable but also not rushing to reassure him entirely. Eleni is slightly exasperated with Carlo but also fond of him. Carlo is genuinely trying.

Recovering from an awkward moment:

"I honestly didn't mean it to be..." / "It's just a coincidence, but still..." / "I should probably just stop talking."

Putting someone at ease:

"It's a good idea, really." / "Don't worry about it." / "It's actually quite nice."

CULTURAL NOTES

Hanami — flower viewing

Hanami (花見) is the Japanese tradition of gathering outdoors to appreciate the beauty of cherry blossoms (sakura). It typically takes place in late March or early April, when the cherry trees are in bloom, and usually involves eating, drinking, and spending time with friends, family, or colleagues under the trees. Hanami is one of the most important seasonal customs in Japan, with roots going back over a thousand years. The blossoms are valued in part because they are brief — they last only a week or two — which gives them a connection to the Japanese aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*: the awareness of impermanence and its quiet beauty.

Cherry blossoms outside Japan

Cherry blossom trees have been planted in many cities around the world, often as diplomatic gifts or through cultural exchange programmes. Washington DC, Vancouver, Bonn, and several other cities have parks or avenues with cherry trees that bloom each spring and draw large crowds. Rome has cherry trees in several parks, including in the EUR district. The blossoms are not traditionally associated with Italian culture, but they have become a familiar spring sight in many European cities. For Japanese people living abroad, a hanami under foreign cherry trees is often a bittersweet experience — familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

The EUR district, Rome

EUR stands for Esposizione Universale Roma — a world exposition that was planned for 1942 but never held because of the Second World War. The district was built in the late 1930s under Mussolini's government as a showpiece of Italian Fascist architecture: wide avenues, grand public buildings, and a stark, symmetrical visual style sometimes described as 'Rationalist'. The most iconic building is the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, with its six storeys of identical arched windows — it is sometimes called the 'Square Colosseum'. Today EUR is a mixed residential and business area, and its architecture remains striking and unusual. Eleni's silence as they pass the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana — cut short before she can say what she is thinking — is a small joke for anyone who knows the building's history.

Mono no aware

Mono no aware (物の哀れ) is a Japanese aesthetic and philosophical concept, often translated as 'the pathos of things' or 'the bittersweet awareness of impermanence'. It describes a gentle sadness at the passing of things — moments, seasons, beauty — combined with a deep appreciation of them precisely because they do not last. Cherry blossoms are one of its most celebrated expressions: they are beautiful, and they fall within days. The concept appears in Japanese literature, poetry, and art, and is part of the reason hanami carries an emotional weight beyond a simple picnic in the park.

CHAPTER 7 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever received news — good or bad — that you had been expecting for a long time? Was the waiting easier or harder than the news itself?
2. Think of a time when someone close to you had good news and you had to find the right way to be happy for them, even though it was complicated. What did you do?
3. When something important in your life ends — a school year, a project, a period of study — how do you feel? Is there a name for that feeling in your language?

Key ideas

This chapter covers several months and several endings. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Rejection is different when it comes from a system rather than from a person — but it still lands somewhere.
- Being genuinely happy for someone while also hurting yourself is possible. It is also difficult.
- An ending is often also a beginning — the question is which feeling arrives first.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 7. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
administrative	Relating to the organisation and management of a business or institution — here, paperwork, processes, and official costs.
audition	A performance given to show ability, usually as part of a selection process for a musical role or position.
commission	(here) The amount deducted, or in context, the burden of additional processes an employer must manage for a foreign worker.
complication	(here) An additional difficulty or requirement — here used to describe how a prospective employer views the visa and work permit process for a non-EU worker.
compound	(verb) To build up and multiply over time. A career compounds when each step makes the next step easier.
contract	A formal legal agreement. Here used to mean a paid, official position with a professional arts organisation.
faculty	(here) A division of a university, such as the Faculty of Architecture or the Faculty of Music.
filed away	(informal) Put something in a mental category of 'things not to think about' — as though storing a document somewhere out of sight.
formality	The quality of being serious, official, and ceremonial — following expected procedures carefully.
graduation ceremony	The formal event at which students receive their degrees or diplomas at the end of their studies.
neutral professionalism	The manner of workplace colleagues who are polite and efficient but do not make personal remarks or show obvious reaction.
Pantheon	A famous ancient Roman temple in the centre of Rome, now a church and popular tourist landmark. The surrounding neighbourhood has many restaurants and cafes.
permit	(here) Official authorisation to do something — here, a work permit allowing a foreign national to take paid employment.
Prati	A residential neighbourhood in central Rome, known for being quiet, middle-class, and well-connected by metro. Close to the Vatican.
private thing	(here) Something kept inside oneself; not shared or expressed.
regularisation	(legal/administrative) The process of making something officially compliant with the law — here, making a foreign worker's employment legally valid.
rehearsal	A practice session for a performance — musicians, actors, or dancers rehearse before performing in public.
residency situation	(here) The legal status of where and how someone is permitted to live and work in a country.

scholarship	A financial award, usually given to a student to cover study costs. When a scholarship ends, its financial support stops.
Teatro Comunale	A municipal theatre — a publicly funded performing arts venue. Florence's Teatro Comunale (now called the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino) is one of Italy's leading opera and concert venues.
trattoria	A traditional Italian restaurant, typically informal, family-run, and serving regional food. Less formal than a ristorante but more substantial than a bar or café.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 7.

1. What is the phone call at the start of the chapter? What does the caller tell Ame, and how does he say it?
2. How does Ame react immediately after the call? What does she do?
3. What is Concetta's news? Why had she not said anything until now?
4. Ame says 'That's wonderful' and means it — but then says something she immediately regrets. What does she say, and why does she regret it?
5. What is Eleni's news? How do Ame and Concetta receive it, and what do they not say to each other afterwards?
6. What happens at the graduation ceremony? Who is there, and what is the exchange with Castelli like?
7. How does the chapter end? What is Ame looking at, and what does she decide?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The walk (B1+)

After the phone call, Ame goes for a walk without deciding where to go. Write a short description of a walk someone takes to deal with difficult news — what they notice, what they think, how they feel when they return. (80–110 words)

Option B — Both things are true (B1+–B2)

Think of a time — or imagine a situation — where two things were true at the same time: something difficult and something good. Write about it honestly, without resolving the tension too quickly. (100–140 words)

Option C — The unanswered message (B2)

Ame has not answered her mother's message for three weeks. Write the message her mother sent — and then write Ame's reply, which she finally sends at the end of the summer. Both messages should feel real and specific, and Ame's reply should reflect everything that has happened in these months without explaining it all. (130–170 words total)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. How to deliver difficult news — register and tone

The caller at the start of the chapter has 'a manner for delivering difficult news'. Look at how he phrases the rejection and answer the questions below.

He says: '...a small operation like theirs couldn't afford the complication. The work permit, the regularisation process, the administrative cost of it.'

1. What is he actually saying, in plain language?
2. Why does he use words like 'complication' and 'administrative cost' rather than saying directly that they don't want to hire a non-EU worker?
3. How would you describe the tone of his message — sympathetic, cold, professional, evasive? Use evidence from the text.

Now write a short version of the same message in plain, direct English — as if there were no need to soften it. Then discuss: which version is kinder? Which is more honest?

B. Holding two feelings at once

Ame says 'That's wonderful' about Concetta's news — and she means it. But then she also says something that comes from a different feeling. The chapter shows both feelings are real at the same time.

Look at these sentence pairs from the chapter. For each one, identify the two feelings present simultaneously.

Sentence / moment	Two feelings present
'That's wonderful.' [...] 'I'm not — it's not about you. I'm sorry.'	
'I'm genuinely happy for you. That came out wrong.'	
They received Eleni's news well... 'Neither of them said anything about the rent.'	
Her parents were not at graduation. 'She had told them not to worry about it and had meant it and had also, briefly, not meant it.'	

C. Time and pacing — how the chapter moves

Chapter 7 covers many months (May to August) in a few pages. The author uses short paragraphs and date/time markers to move quickly through time.

Find three moments in the chapter where the author compresses time — skipping over days or weeks without describing them. For each one, write:

1. What time period is being skipped.
2. What phrase or technique the author uses to signal this.
3. Why you think the author chose to move quickly here rather than describe in detail.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. The rejection call says Ame is 'a complication'. How does it feel to be described this way — not by a person who dislikes you, but by a system that simply cannot accommodate you? Do you think this kind of rejection is easier or harder than a personal one?
2. Ame says things to Concetta that she immediately regrets — but Concetta understands and lets the silence sit. Is this the right response? What would you have done in Concetta's place?
3. When Eleni announces she is moving out, Ame and Concetta 'receive the news well' — but they do not mention the rent. The author leaves this unsaid. What does this silence tell us? Why do you think neither of them speaks?
4. Ame describes the morning after graduation — playing the flute for nobody, in the flat, with the city waking up outside — as one of the best feelings of the chapter. 'Both things were true: the hotel desk and the morning light.' What does she mean by this? Do you think it is possible to hold a difficult situation and a good feeling at the same time?
5. At the very end, Ame looks at her mother's unanswered message and puts the phone down again: 'Not yet.' Why do you think she keeps not answering? What might happen when she finally does?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The kitchen after Concetta's news

Work in pairs. You are Ame and Concetta, in the kitchen, the evening Concetta tells Ame about the Florence position.

Ame should start by saying something genuine and kind — and then accidentally say something that comes from a different feeling. Concetta should let Ame work through it, without making it worse, and without making Ame feel too guilty.

The scene should end with both of them feeling a little better — not because the difficulty has been resolved, but because they understand each other.

Expressing mixed feelings carefully:

"I'm so happy for you, I really am. It's just..." / "That came out wrong." / "I didn't mean it like that."

Receiving mixed feelings with grace:

"I know." / "You don't have to explain." / "Do you feel a bit better now?"

CULTURAL NOTES

Italian music conservatoire graduation

Completing a course at an Italian conservatoire — such as the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome — is a significant academic and professional achievement. The graduation ceremony, like those at universities, is a formal occasion. In Italy, a conservatoire diploma at the advanced level (Diploma Accademico di II Livello) is equivalent to a university master's degree. For a foreign student who has studied in Italy on a scholarship, graduation marks not only an achievement but also a change in legal status — the student visa tied to the scholarship will typically end shortly after, and the path forward becomes uncertain.

The Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Florence

The Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino — historically known as the Teatro Comunale — is one of Italy's most important opera houses and concert halls, based in Florence. It hosts opera, ballet, and orchestral concerts throughout the year. For a young oboist like Concetta, securing a position in its orchestra would be a significant first professional step — the kind of position that, as the novel puts it, 'compounds': providing experience, professional contacts, and credibility that open further doors. Positions in professional orchestras in Italy are extremely competitive, and many musicians spend years in temporary contracts and auditions before securing a permanent post.

The work permit problem for foreign musicians in Italy

Italy, like other EU countries, has specific legal requirements for employing workers from outside the European Union. Employers must navigate visa sponsorship, work permits, and administrative processes that add time and cost to the hiring process. For arts organisations — particularly smaller ones with limited administrative resources — this can make hiring a non-EU candidate significantly more complicated than hiring an EU citizen with equal skills. This structural reality affects many international students who train in Europe to a high level and then find themselves excluded from the positions for which they are qualified. The language used in rejection — 'complication', 'administrative cost' — reflects the impersonal nature of the barrier.

The Pantheon neighbourhood, Rome

The area around the Pantheon in central Rome is one of the city's most historic and atmospheric districts. The Pantheon itself is a remarkably well-preserved ancient temple, built around 125 AD, with a famous domed roof that remains one of the greatest achievements of ancient architecture. The surrounding streets are full of restaurants, bars, and small shops. Carlo's choice to book a graduation dinner at a trattoria near the Pantheon suggests a celebration that is special without being formal — the right balance for the occasion.

CHAPTER 8 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever cried in a public place — or felt you were about to, but held it back? What made the difference?
2. Think of a time when someone helped you not by saying anything clever, but simply by being present. What did they do, and why did it help?
3. When something is unfair, does it help to hear someone acknowledge it clearly — 'this is unfair' — even if they cannot change it? Or does it make things worse? Why?

Key ideas

This chapter is one of the most emotionally concentrated in the novel. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Sometimes the kindest thing someone can do is say clearly and precisely what was lost — not soften it, not explain it away.
- Grief that has been held for a long time does not announce itself. It waits for the right moment.
- After the hardest moment, small things — a glass of water, a river, a familiar smell — can bring you back.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 8. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
absorbed	(here) Taken in and adapted to — the city absorbed the flooding and continued.
allocated	Set aside or assigned for a specific purpose. Here, one position has been formally reserved for a non-EU musician.
blur	(here, verb) To become unclear or out of focus — her vision blurs as she begins to cry.
Borghese	(here) The Villa Borghese — a large public park and cultural complex in Rome, home to the Borghese Gallery and an outdoor theatre used for concerts and events.
consolation	Something said or done to make a person feel better after a loss. A 'consolation prize' is something given when you did not win.
distinction	(here) A difference between two things. Sala says the distinction between 'the right choice' and 'the easier choice' is real — even if it does not help Ame.
exhaust	(here, noun) The fumes from cars and vehicles — part of the characteristic smell of a busy city.
heartbreak	A deep feeling of sadness and loss — not necessarily romantic. Here, Sala feels heartbreak at knowing exactly what Ame has lost.
Lungotevere	The road running alongside the River Tiber in Rome. There are several sections; the name means 'along the Tiber'.
open air	Outside, in the fresh air, as opposed to being underground (on the metro) or inside a building.
partial	(here, adverb: partially) To some degree but not completely. Ame believes Sala's words partially — more than she has believed anything recently.
permesso di soggiorno	An Italian phrase meaning 'permit to stay' — the official document allowing a foreign national to reside legally in Italy.
precisely	In an exact and specific way, with no vagueness. Sala knows precisely what was lost — not approximately.
quota	A fixed number or amount that is officially permitted. Here, the ensemble has one non-EU position per season; this quota has been filled.
season	(arts) The annual programme of performances by a theatre, opera house, or orchestra, typically running from autumn to spring.
Tiber	The river that runs through Rome. In Italian: il Tevere. It is one of the longest rivers in Italy and central to the city's history and identity.
undid	(past tense of 'undo') Here used figuratively — the precision of Sala's understanding of what was lost caused Ame's composure to come apart.
warranted	Justified; deserved. Sala says the music warranted her recommendation — it was good enough to deserve it.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 8.

1. What does Professor Sala tell Ame at the café? What were the two specific reasons the position went to someone else?
2. Sala says: 'You're better. [...] The paperwork made someone else the easier choice. Those are not the same thing.' What does she mean by this distinction?
3. The author lists the things Ame has been 'holding' since earlier in the story. What are they? Why does she list them at this moment?
4. What causes Ame to finally cry — and why does the author say it is Sala's precision that 'undid her'?
5. How does Sala help Ame — what does she do and not do during the difficult moment?
6. When Luca calls, Ame says 'it's been a long day'. What does Luca understand, and how does he respond?
7. How is the flat described when Ame returns home? What is different about it compared to earlier chapters?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The river (B1+)

Ame walks along the Tiber after the café meeting. Write a short description of a walk beside water — a river, a lake, the sea — and what it feels like when you are there and need to think or feel something through. (80–110 words)

Option B — The right thing not to say (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which one character has bad news and another character helps — not by saying the right thing, but by being present, doing small things, and knowing when to stop talking. Focus on actions and gestures rather than words.

Option C — Holding it (B2)

The chapter describes everything Ame has been 'holding' — a list of disappointments and silences across many months. Write a first-person piece (120–160 words) in which a character lists the things they have been carrying — and describes what happens when they finally let them go. You can draw on your own experience or invent a character.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. The language of precision and comfort

Professor Sala makes two kinds of statement in this chapter: ones that name things clearly, and ones that offer comfort. Look at the sentences below and decide which type each one is — then explain what effect it has.

Sentence	Type (precise / comforting) and effect
'You're better. [...] The paperwork made someone else the easier choice.'	
'I don't recommend people who don't deserve it, and my contacts know it.'	
'You'll find your way. I mean that. Not as a consolation, as a fact.'	
'Drink your coffee. It's getting cold.'	

B. 'She had been holding all of it'

The author writes a long sentence listing everything Ame has been holding — all the disappointments and silences since Chapter 5. Re-read it carefully, then answer:

1. How many separate things does the list contain? What are they?
2. Why does the author put them all in a single long sentence at this moment rather than spreading them across the chapter?
3. What is the effect on the reader of seeing the full list together?

C. What is 'underneath' — subtext in dialogue

When Luca calls, Ame says 'It's been a long day. I need to sleep.' The author then writes: 'He heard it, she knew he heard it, the something underneath the words that she wasn't offering. He didn't reach for it.'

This is a perfect example of subtext — when what is said is different from what is meant, and both people know it.

1. What is the 'something underneath' Ame's words?
2. Why does Luca not ask further questions? Is this the right thing to do?
3. Write a short exchange (6–8 lines of dialogue) between two people in which one is upset but does not say so directly, and the other understands but chooses not to push. Try to make the subtext clear to the reader without stating it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Sala says 'You'll find your way. Not as a consolation, as a fact.' What is the difference between a consolation and a fact? Why does this distinction matter to Ame — and to you as a reader?
2. The author says Ame 'believed her, partially, which was more than she had believed anything in several months.' What does it mean to believe something only partially? Is partial belief better than no belief? When is it enough?
3. Sala tells Ame to go out and walk in the open air, not take the metro. Why do you think she says this? What is the difference between walking in the city and going underground?
4. Ame walks along the Tiber and thinks about the river flooding Rome repeatedly, and the city absorbing it and continuing. Why does she think about this at this moment? What does the image mean to her?
5. The flat is quieter now — Concetta and Eleni have both gone. The chapter ends with Ame sitting at the kitchen table 'looking at nothing in particular'. How does the atmosphere of the flat compare to Chapter 1, where this same table was full of light and activity? What has changed?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The café meeting with Professor Sala

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is Professor Sala.

Sala must deliver the news about the quota and the visa. She should be honest, clear, and warm — not evasive, but not brutal. She should acknowledge what was lost without softening it. Ame should listen, and the student should find the point in the scene where Ame's composure begins to slip.

The person playing Sala should try to find the right moment to move from delivering news to simply being present — when words stop being useful.

Delivering difficult news with clarity:

"I want to be honest with you." / "This isn't a reflection of your ability." / "The situation is..."

When words run out:

[silence] / [a hand on an arm] / "Take your time."

CULTURAL NOTES

The River Tiber (il Tevere)

The Tiber is one of the great rivers of European history. It runs through Rome for about 25 kilometres, and the city grew up around it — the river provided water, transport, and a natural boundary. For most of Roman history, the Tiber flooded regularly and sometimes catastrophically, inundating low-lying areas of the city. The floods continued into the modern era until the construction of high embankments (the Lungotevere walls) in the late nineteenth century. Ame's thought — that the city 'absorbed it, rebuilt, continued' — reflects a real historical truth. The Tiber today is wide, slow-moving, and brownish in colour; the Lungotevere road along its banks is a busy but atmospheric place to walk.

The permesso di soggiorno

The permesso di soggiorno (literally 'permission to stay') is the official residence permit required for non-EU citizens living in Italy. Students on scholarship typically hold a permesso for study purposes. When the study period ends and the scholarship expires, the permesso expires with it. Converting a student permesso to a work permesso requires an employer willing to sponsor the process — and, in competitive professional fields, those employers often prefer to hire candidates who do not require this step. The combination of the quota system (one non-EU position per season in the ensemble) and the permesso conversion timeline creates a double barrier that closes the door on Ame even when her playing is considered superior.

Quota systems in Italian arts organisations

Italian performing arts organisations — orchestras, opera houses, and ensembles — that receive public funding often operate under rules governing the hiring of non-EU workers. The number of non-EU positions available in any given season may be fixed by law or institutional policy. These quotas exist within a broader Italian immigration framework that regulates how many work permits can be issued across different sectors each year. For a musician, this means that even exceptional ability does not guarantee access to the position: timing, administrative capacity, and the luck of whether a quota slot is open all play a role. This is the mechanism that ultimately defeats Ame.

Villa Borghese and outdoor culture in Rome

The Villa Borghese is Rome's most famous public park, a large green space on a hill above the city centre. It contains the Borghese Gallery (home to important sculptures and paintings), a small lake, cafes, and various cultural spaces including an outdoor theatre. Romans use the Villa Borghese for jogging, cycling, picnics, and evening events throughout the year. The park is associated with leisure and culture — Luca's suggestion to go to 'that thing at the Borghese' is the kind of casual invitation that characterises Roman cultural life: an outdoor evening event, easy and pleasant. That Ame cannot take him up on it this evening is a small but clear sign of where she is emotionally.

CHAPTER 9 | LEVEL B1–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever gone through a period when you felt disconnected from the world around you — present in body but not fully present in mind? How did it feel, and what helped?
2. Think of a friend or family member who lives far away. How do you stay connected? What does it feel like when a conversation with them reminds you of who you are?
3. Have you ever done something creative — played music, drawn, written — in a setting that had nothing to do with it? What was that experience like?

Key ideas

This chapter is about a long, quiet passage through difficulty. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Withdrawal is not always dramatic. It can look like ordinary life — work, routine, sleep — while something important goes missing inside.
- A good friend does not try to fix everything. Sometimes the most useful thing is to be angry on someone's behalf.
- Music can matter in an unexpected place and at an unexpected time, without any audience and without any plan.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 9. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
accusatory	Suggesting that someone has done something wrong; implying blame.
autumn season	(here) The busy time of year for a confectionery or gift shop — in Japan, autumn brings festivals, gift-giving occasions, and seasonal products.
browser	(computing) A programme used to access the internet, such as Chrome or Safari. Here used figuratively to mean searching for jobs and opportunities online.
capacity	(here) The ability to hold or manage something emotionally. 'Someone who had the capacity to hold it' means someone able to receive difficult news without being overwhelmed.
client	A person or organisation that pays for a professional service.
distribute	(here, figuratively) To spread the weight of something — sharing a burden makes it lighter.
eligibility section	(here) The part of a job application listing who is permitted to apply.
engineering	The field of study and practice involving the design and construction of structures, machines, or systems.
gap	(here, figuratively) An emotional distance between two people. Luca can see the gap between himself and Ame widening.
insomnia	The inability to sleep; a condition where a person regularly cannot fall or stay asleep.
listing	(here) A published notice about a job vacancy, usually with requirements and a closing date.
lobby	The entrance hall of a hotel or large building, where guests arrive and check in.
marble	A hard, smooth stone used in floors and walls. Common in Italian buildings and hotels.
matter-of-fact	Calm and practical; describing something difficult without emotional exaggeration.
night shift	A period of work during the night hours, typically from late evening to early morning.
resolved	(here) Settled; with a clear outcome. Ame is 'not resolved' — her situation has no clear ending yet.
rest	(music) A moment of silence in a piece of music, marked in the score. Musicians must count rests carefully.
texture	(here, figuratively) The distinctive quality or feel of a particular experience or time period.
withdrawal	The act of pulling back from people, activity, or engagement with the world around you.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 9.

1. How does Ame describe her new flatmate Davide? How is he different from the previous flatmates?
2. Ame says she has 'stopped opening the browser'. What does this mean, and what does it tell us about where she is emotionally?
3. What does Concetta say when Ame finishes telling her everything? Why is this the right response?
4. What does Concetta's story about the reed teach Ame — or remind her of?
5. What happens one night in the hotel lobby? Why does the author say 'the venue was entirely irrelevant'?
6. How does the situation between Ame and Luca develop in this chapter? What does the author mean by 'patience had a limit — not a wall exactly but it was something you could see from a distance'?
7. What is significant about the way Ame's mother addresses her messages? What does the character 飴 mean, and how is it different from her usual name?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The voice message (B1+)

Write a voice message from Concetta to Ame — one of the 'long' ones described in the chapter, about everything and nothing. Include at least one small story, one complaint, and one ordinary detail of her new life in Florence. (80–110 words)

Option B — Playing for nobody (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character does something creative — plays music, draws, sings, cooks — alone, with no audience, in an unexpected place. Focus on what they feel during the activity and what they understand about themselves afterwards.

Option C — The gap (B2)

The chapter describes a growing gap between Ame and Luca. Write a scene from Luca's point of view — what he notices, what he feels, and what he decides to do or not do. (120–160 words)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Decisions and non-decisions

In this chapter, Ame repeatedly frames her actions as things she does because the alternative would have required a decision. Find three examples of this pattern in the chapter and complete the table.

What Ame does (or doesn't do)	Why — as she explains it
She says nothing about Davide's shoes.	
She picks up Concetta's phone call.	
She brings her flute to the hotel shifts.	

What does this pattern of 'non-decisions' tell us about Ame's state of mind in this chapter?

B. Metaphor and figurative language

The chapter uses several figurative expressions to describe emotional states. For each one, explain what it means in plain language and what it adds to the writing.

1. 'You sound like someone who has been underwater for two months and is only just remembering that air exists.'
2. 'Her Italian came back immediately, fully formed, like a room she had stepped out of briefly and that had been waiting exactly as she left it.'
3. 'The weight was still there when Ame hung up but it was distributed differently, shared across a distance.'
4. 'Patience had a limit. Not a wall exactly but it was something you could see from a distance.'

C. Register — informal warmth

Concetta's voice messages are 'long, about everything, about nothing'. When she calls, her language is direct and warm. Look at these lines and identify what they show about the relationship.

1. 'Talk to me.' (said as a statement, not a question)
2. 'That is genuinely terrible and I am furious on your behalf.'
3. 'Are you eating?'
4. 'Sometimes that's all you can do. Make another one.'

Now write three sentences that Concetta might say, in the same register, in a different situation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame says she has 'stopped being able to see Rome properly, the way she used to'. What do you think this means? Can a place feel different depending on your mood or circumstances? Has this ever happened to you?
2. Concetta says she is 'furious on your behalf'. Is anger a useful response to an injustice — even when it cannot change anything? What does it do for the person who hears it?
3. In the hotel lobby at two in the morning, Ame plays her flute for nobody. She feels 'at peace' — not happy, not resolved, just present. Is this enough? Do you think it is a turning point, even a small one?
4. Luca has been patient, but Ame 'noticed his absence less than she should have'. What does this tell us about the relationship at this point? Is Ame being unfair to Luca, or is she simply not able to be more present?
5. Ame's mother calls her 餡 (ame — sweet) rather than using her name. What might this tell us about their relationship? Why do you think Ame still does not reply?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Concetta calls

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is Concetta, calling from Florence.

Concetta has listened to weeks of short voice messages and knows something is wrong. She calls and says 'Talk to me.' Ame should tell her everything — the café with Sala, the quota, the walk, the flat, the closed browser. Concetta should listen without interrupting, then respond with anger, practicality, and eventually the reed story.

Saying difficult things out loud for the first time:

"I don't really know where to start." / "It's been building up for a while." / "I haven't told anyone this."

Responding with useful anger and care:

"That's genuinely awful." / "I'm angry about this." / "But — are you eating?"

CULTURAL NOTES

Japanese writing: kanji and the character 飴

Japanese is written using a combination of three scripts: hiragana and katakana (syllabic scripts) and kanji (Chinese characters, each carrying meaning). The character 飴 means 'candy' or 'sweet'. When Ame's mother writes her name as 飴, she uses a different character from the one for rain (雨), the source of Ame's actual name. This small shift — from rain to sweet — is a private, affectionate gesture: the mother reaching toward her daughter with a softer version of her name. It requires knowing both the person and the writing system well enough to make the gesture. In a novel about belonging and displacement, it is a quietly significant moment.

Japanese seasonal gift-giving and confectionery

Japan has two major gift-giving seasons: ochugen (中元) in summer and oseibo (歳暮) in winter, both involving gifts of food, drink, or household goods sent to people one feels gratitude toward. Japanese confectionery (wagashi, 和菓子) occupies a central place in this culture. Confectionery shops are busy around national holidays, festivals, and seasonal occasions. Ame's parents appear to run such a shop in Matsuyama, and the reference to a busy autumn season and a complicated wedding order gives a grounded image of the life Ame has left behind.

Music in unexpected spaces

Street musicians, buskers, and informal performers have always been part of urban life. The presence of pianos in train stations, hotel lobbies, and public spaces has created new informal musical encounters — where a trained musician may play not for an audience but simply because the instrument is there and the space is quiet. Ame playing her flute in the hotel lobby at two in the morning belongs to this tradition. The absence of an audience, a lesson, or a performance goal is precisely what makes the moment feel free.

What it means to 'see' a city

Many people who live in cities for extended periods describe a shift in how they perceive their surroundings. When life is difficult, a city that was once vivid can become a backdrop — present but not seen. Conversely, when life is going well, the same streets feel full of detail and meaning. Ame's observation that she has 'stopped being able to see Rome properly' is not about the city changing — it is about the quality of her attention. Writers and psychologists sometimes describe this as a flattening of perception. In the novel it is expressed simply and accurately.

CHAPTER 10 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever received a phone call or message that changed the direction of your day — or your plans — immediately? What happened?
2. Think about the difference between what people say and what they mean. Can you think of a phrase — in any language — that people use to say everything is fine when it isn't? What does it sound like when someone says it?
3. Have you ever known what you needed to do before you could admit it to yourself? How long did it take before you acted?

Key ideas

This chapter is a turning point. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Sometimes a decision makes itself. By the time we acknowledge it, it has already been made.
- People who love each other can ask for help without saying the words. And hear it without being told.
- Returning to something — a place, a person, a piece of music — can mean something different the second time.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 10. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
acknowledge	To accept or recognise that something is true — sometimes after a period of avoiding it.
aerial	An antenna for receiving television or radio signals, usually mounted on a rooftop or high point.
audible	Loud enough to be heard. Here used to describe tiredness that is now detectable in the mother's voice.
book (a flight)	To reserve and purchase a ticket for a flight in advance.
connection time	The amount of time between one flight and the next when a journey involves changing planes.
domain	(here, figurative) An area of responsibility or expertise. The accounts and supplier calls are the father's 'domain' — his usual area of responsibility in the family business.
formal Japanese	Japanese has different levels of politeness built into the grammar and vocabulary. More formal registers are used with parents, elders, or in official contexts.
Haneda	Tokyo Haneda Airport — one of two major international airports serving Tokyo, Japan.
kanji	The characters used in written Japanese that were originally adopted from Chinese. Each kanji carries a specific meaning. Ame uses the kanji 雨 (rain) for her name.
logistics	The practical organisation of complex activities — here, the administrative and planning work involved in running the shop.
malinconico	Italian musical term meaning 'melancholy'. The word appears in the score of the Poulenc Flute Sonata as an instruction for how the first movement should be played.
Matsuyama	A city on the island of Shikoku, Japan. Ame's home city, where her family and their shop are based.
medication	Medicine prescribed by a doctor to treat an illness or injury.
rental tracking	(here) The management of rental income — possibly the family owns and rents out property as well as running the shop.
supplier	A company or person who provides goods to a business. A confectionery shop would have suppliers for ingredients, packaging, and other materials.
surfacing	(here, figurative) Coming up from beneath — as if something hidden is rising to where it can be seen or heard.
television aerial	An antenna used to receive broadcast television signals. In Japan, many homes have roof-mounted aerials.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 10.

1. What does the timing of the phone call tell Ame before she even answers it?
2. What has happened to Ame's father? How does her mother describe it?
3. The author writes that her mother's 'we're managing' meant something different from the words. What did it really mean?
4. What is significant about Minato's message? What does he say, and what does he not say?
5. Ame says 'Nobody had said: come home. She heard it anyway.' What does this mean?
6. On the third day, Ame plays the Poulenc well for the first time since her father's accident. Why is this significant? What connection does the author draw?
7. What does Ame's mother reply when she receives the message about the flight booking? Why does the author end the chapter here?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The message (B1+)

Write two short messages: the one Minato sent to Ame the morning after their father's accident, and the one Ame might have sent back. Each should be no more than 60 words and should show something about the relationship between the siblings without stating it directly.

Option B — The decision (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character realises that a decision they thought they hadn't made yet has in fact already been made. The moment of realisation should come through an action rather than a statement — something the character does that shows they have already decided.

Option C — Calling home (B2)

Write the phone call from Ame's point of view — but this time, write what she is thinking as her mother speaks, rather than what she says aloud. Use a format that shows both the spoken words and Ame's internal response. (120–160 words)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. What is said and what is meant

This chapter is built on the gap between words and their real meaning. For each phrase below, write what the speaker says and what they actually mean.

What is said	What is meant
Mother: 'We're fine. Everything is fine.'	
Mother: 'Focus on your music.'	
Mother: 'There's no need. We're fine.'	
Minato: 'I can't get away right now, work is complicated.'	

Now write one example of your own: a sentence someone might say that means something different from its surface meaning. Write both the surface meaning and the real meaning.

B. The decision that makes itself

Ame thinks: 'The decision had already been made. She had been sitting with it not to make it but to acknowledge it.'

This is an unusual way of describing a decision. Answer these questions:

1. What does it mean for a decision to 'already be made' before you consciously make it?
2. What is the difference between making a decision and acknowledging one?
3. Can you think of a decision in your own life that felt like this — something you knew before you admitted it? You don't have to share the specifics.

C. Formal and informal writing in Japanese — and in English

Ame writes to her mother in 'the formal Japanese she used with her mother'. Most languages have registers — different levels of formality used in different contexts.

In English, formality is expressed through vocabulary, sentence structure, and tone. Look at these two versions of the same message and discuss the differences:

Informal version:

Hey Mum — I've booked my flight. I'll be there on the 14th around 2. I'll come to the shop first. See you soon.

Formal version (as in the chapter):

I've booked my flight. I arrive on the fourteenth at two-fifteen in the afternoon. I'll come to the shop first.

What are the specific differences in vocabulary, tone, and structure? Which feels more like Ame, and why? Write your answer in 3–5 sentences.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame's mother calls at four in the morning her own time. What does this tell us about the call — before a word is spoken?
2. Ame's mother says 'focus on your music' — and has clearly been managing alone for weeks without saying anything. Do you think this is a form of love, or is it unfair to Ame? Should parents tell their children when things are difficult?
3. Minato says 'I can't get away right now' but nobody says 'come home'. Ame hears it anyway. Do you think this kind of unspoken communication is common in families? Does it depend on culture, personality, or something else?
4. On the third day, Ame plays the Poulenc well again — with the malinconico present. The chapter suggests this is connected to having made the decision to go home. Do you think a personal decision can change how someone plays music? Can it change how someone does any kind of creative work?
5. Ame's mother replies with just one character: 飴. Nothing else. Why is this the perfect reply? What would have been wrong with saying more?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The phone call

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is her mother in Matsuyama. It is nine in the evening in Rome and four in the morning in Japan. The mother has been awake before making the call.

The mother must tell Ame about the accident without asking for anything. She should sound calm and careful — managing the information rather than the emotion. Ame should ask practical questions and listen for what is not being said.

Delivering difficult news while staying calm:

"Everything is fine, but..." / "The doctor is pleased with..." / "There's nothing to worry about."

Asking practical questions to understand the real situation:

"Which leg?" / "And the shop?" / "Is anyone helping you?"

CULTURAL NOTES

Japanese communication styles and indirect speech

Japanese culture places considerable value on maintaining harmony and avoiding direct expressions of need, difficulty, or conflict — a concept sometimes described as *enryo* (遠慮), meaning restraint or holding back. This does not mean that Japanese people do not feel or communicate emotion — it means that communication often takes place indirectly, through what is left unsaid, through tone, and through context. A parent who says 'we're managing' and 'focus on your music' while quietly managing a crisis alone is not being deceptive; they are protecting their child from worry and preserving the child's freedom to pursue their own life. Understanding what is being communicated requires knowing the speaker. For Ame, who grew up in this communication style, hearing it correctly — decoding 'we're managing' as 'I need you' — is natural.

Matsuyama and the island of Shikoku

Matsuyama is the largest city on Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. It is known for Matsuyama Castle, the hot springs of Dogo Onsen (one of the oldest in Japan), and the poetry of Masaoka Shiki, a celebrated haiku poet who was born there. Shikoku is less visited than Honshu or Kyushu and has a quieter, more traditional character. The island is also known as the setting of the 88 Temple Pilgrimage (Shikoku Henro), a famous walking pilgrimage that circles the island. For Ame, Matsuyama represents home: specific, grounded, tied to family and season and the rhythms of a particular place.

The Poulenc Sonata: *malinconico* revisited

The word *malinconico* — melancholy — appears at the top of the first movement of Poulenc's Flute Sonata as a performance instruction. In Chapter 2, Castelli explained to Ame that Poulenc knew when he wrote the piece that he was 'almost finished' — that the word was not just a musical direction but a true description of the composer's state. In Chapter 10, Ame plays the Poulenc correctly for days without finding the quality Castelli pointed her toward. On the third day — after having made the decision to go home — the *malinconico* returns. The novel suggests that the emotion the music requires, and the emotion Ame is now carrying, have met each other. Understanding and experience have aligned.

Flights between Rome and Matsuyama

There is no direct flight between Rome and Matsuyama. A journey from Rome would typically involve flying to a major Japanese hub — Tokyo Haneda or Narita, or Osaka Kansai — and then taking a domestic flight or train to Matsuyama. The total journey time, including connections and waiting, is usually between 14 and 20 hours. The connection through Haneda (Tokyo) is one of the most common routes. The fact that Ame has not made this journey in four years — the full length of her time in Rome — is a significant detail: she has been in Italy for her entire study period without going home.

CHAPTER 11 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Think of a teacher, mentor, or older person who gave you something — advice, an object, a skill, an opportunity — that mattered more than they let on at the time. What was it, and how did you understand it later?
2. Have you ever realised something about a person — something that was always there but you had never quite seen before? What was the moment of realisation?
3. When you leave a place or a situation that has been important to you, how do you say goodbye? Is there a right way to do it?

Key ideas

This is one of the most concentrated chapters in the novel. Very little is said. Almost everything matters. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A gift given without ceremony can carry more weight than one given with great formality.
- Knowing someone well enough to understand what they cannot do anymore is a form of intimacy.
- Some goodbyes are complete without words. The difficulty is accepting that.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 11. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
absorbed	(here, figurative) Taken in gradually without a conscious decision to learn — something known through long exposure rather than deliberate study.
accumulated	Built up or gathered over a long period of time.
cabinet	A piece of furniture with doors and shelves or drawers, used for storage.
ceremony	A formal act or set of actions performed on an important occasion. Here used in the negative: Castelli gives the flute 'without ceremony' — casually, without making a big occasion of it.
dismissive	(here) Treating something as small or unimportant — not with contempt, but with deliberate understatement. Castelli waves away the significance of the gift.
folded note	A small piece of paper, folded and placed inside the flute case alongside the instrument.
gap	(here) The distance between what the music asks for and what Castelli's hands can now give — a physical limitation beginning to show.
latch	A metal fastening on a case or box that clicks shut and open.
made his peace with	Accepted something difficult or painful — come to terms with it without bitterness.
restraint	The quality of holding back; doing less than might be possible. Here, the careful control of a musician whose hands are no longer fully responding.
rosin	A solid resin used by string players on their bows. It leaves a fine dust in spaces where strings are played or practised.
upper register	The higher pitch range of an instrument. A phrase 'in the upper register that reached for something and fell just short' suggests difficulty with the highest notes.
velvet	A soft, smooth fabric. Instrument cases are often lined with velvet to protect the instrument.
visiting hours	(here, informal) The regular times when Ame knows Castelli will be in his office — not formal visiting hours, but a pattern she has learned over four years.
worn smooth	Rubbed so many times that the surface has become smooth — here, the latches of the old case have been opened and closed thousands of times.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 11.

1. Ame arrives early, as she always has. The author reminds us of this detail from the very beginning of the novel. Why does she arrive early?
2. What does Ame hear differently in Castelli's playing today that she has never let herself hear before? What does it tell her?
3. When Castelli opens the door, the author says both of them 'understood what the visit was without either of them having said so.' What did they both understand?
4. What does Castelli take from the cabinet? What does he place inside the case before giving it to Ame?
5. What does Castelli say when he gives Ame the flute? Why does he say it that way — simply, without ceremony?
6. The author says Castelli 'waved it away like lending her an umbrella'. What does this comparison tell us about how he handles the moment?
7. How does the chapter end? What does Ame carry out with her, and what is the significance of having two cases?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The note (B1+)

Castelli places a folded note inside the flute case. Write what the note says. It should be short — no more than 60–80 words — and it should sound like Castelli: precise, slightly formal, not sentimental. It might be practical, or it might say something he could not say out loud.

Option B — An object with weight (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which one character gives another an object that carries significant meaning — but the exchange is handled simply, without ceremony. The reader should understand the weight of the moment even though the characters do not draw attention to it.

Option C — Hearing something new (B2)

Write a short piece (120–160 words) about a moment when you heard, saw, or understood something you had always been exposed to — a piece of music, a place, a person — differently, because something in you had changed. Describe what changed and what you understood.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. What Castelli does not say

In this chapter, Castelli says very little. But the author tells us what he does not say. Look at this passage:

"He didn't ask her to stay. He didn't tell her she would regret it. He didn't say anything at all for a moment."

Answer these questions:

1. Why does the author list what Castelli does not say, rather than just what he does?
2. What does each thing he does not say tell us about what kind of teacher and person he is?
3. What does he say instead? And what does he do?

B. The language of understatement

Castelli gives Ame his flute with deliberate understatement — treating a profound gesture as if it were nothing. Find three examples of understatement in this chapter (things said or done in a way that reduces their apparent importance) and explain what each one actually means.

Understated expression	What it actually means
'It's a flute. It's for playing.'	
The wave of his hand, 'as if lending her an umbrella'	
'Remember me when you're in Japan.'	

C. Objects and meaning

The flute case appears three times in this chapter with increasing significance. Trace what the case represents at each moment.

Moment	What the case represents
Castelli brings it from the cabinet and opens it.	
He places the note in the velvet and closes the latches.	
Ame walks out carrying it alongside her own case.	

Now think of an object from your own life that carries more meaning than it appears to. Write two or three sentences describing it without stating directly what it means.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Castelli gives Ame his own flute without being asked and without much explanation. Why do you think he does this? What is he saying with the gesture that he is not saying in words?
2. The author tells us Castelli's hands can no longer fully do what the music requires. We have heard hints of this before. Why do you think the author waited until this moment to make it clear? What does it change about the earlier chapters?
3. Castelli places a folded note inside the case. We never find out what it says. Why do you think the author never tells us? What might it say?
4. Ame walks out of the conservatoire carrying two flute cases. What does this image mean to you? What is she carrying, in both the literal and the figurative sense?
5. This chapter has very little dialogue. The most important things happen through action and through what is not said. Do you think silence and gesture can communicate things that words cannot? Think of an example from your own experience.

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The office

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is Castelli.

Ame has come to tell Castelli she is returning to Japan. Castelli should not ask her to stay, not tell her she'll regret it, and not make the moment more emotional than it needs to be. Ame should be calm and clear. The moment of the flute should happen near the end.

The challenge: keep the scene short and restrained. The power of this chapter comes from what is held back. Resist the temptation to fill the silence.

Saying something big with few words:

"I'm going back to Japan." / [silence] / "I see."

Receiving a gift without making too much of it:

"Thank you." / [a pause] / "I'll take care of it."

CULTURAL NOTES

The student–teacher relationship in music conservatoires

In the tradition of European classical music conservatoires, the relationship between a student and their principal teacher is one of the most formative of a musician's professional life. The teacher shapes not only technical ability but musical understanding, professional identity, and artistic values. It is typically a long, close relationship — often lasting the entire course of study, sometimes continuing informally for years afterwards. Castelli has been Ame's teacher for four years. When he gives her his own instrument without drama or sentimentality, it is an act within this tradition: an acknowledgement that the student is ready, and a passing of something that cannot quite be put into words.

The gift of a musical instrument

Among musicians, instruments are deeply personal objects. A flute, violin, or oboe is shaped by the player who uses it — the tone develops with use, the mechanics adjust to one particular set of hands. Giving an instrument to another person is therefore an unusually intimate gift. It says not only 'this is yours now' but 'I trust you with this, and I believe you can make it more than it was for me.' In this chapter, Castelli gives Ame the instrument he can no longer play as he once could. This is not quite a retirement gift, not quite a blessing, not quite a farewell. It is all of these, and it is done without any of the ceremony that would diminish it.

Hands and musicians

For a musician, the hands are everything. Injuries, arthritis, tremor, and other conditions affecting the hands can end or severely limit a performing career. Many famous musicians have faced this: pianists, violinists, and wind players have all lost careers to hand conditions. For a flautist, finger mobility and breath control are central, and any deterioration in the fine motor control of the hands will affect the most demanding passages first — precisely the upper register, the sustained notes, the phrases that require absolute control. Ame has been listening to Castelli's playing through the door for four years. Today she hears, for the first time, that the gap between what the music asks and what his hands can give has grown. She has been careful not to hear it until now.

Italian attitudes to emotion and restraint

Italy is often associated with expressiveness, warmth, and emotional directness. And this is frequently true. But Italian culture also has strong traditions of dignity and composure in moments of serious significance. The word *sprezzatura* — a Renaissance Italian concept meaning the art of making difficult things look effortless and uncontrived — captures something of this. Castelli handles the most important moment of the chapter as though it were nothing: a casual wave, a practical instruction ('it's a flute, it's for playing'), a quick return to his desk. This is not coldness. It is a particular kind of care — the refusal to let the weight of the moment crush it.

CHAPTER 12 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever said goodbye to a place you had lived in for a long time? What did you do in the last days? What did you notice that you had never noticed before?
2. Think of a conversation you have had — or wish you had had — where you finally told someone the whole truth about something difficult. What made it possible, or what stopped it?
3. When a relationship ends or changes significantly, what is the right way to part? Is there a right way?

Key ideas

This is the last chapter set in Rome. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A proper goodbye is not always possible in the moment. Sometimes it happens in stages, over days, in different ways with different people.
- Telling someone the full truth — finally — can be an act of respect, even when it is also a farewell.
- Leaving is its own kind of arrival. What you go toward is already present in how you leave.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 12. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
by accident and then by habit	(here) A place or thing that became meaningful not through planning but through repeated use over time.
cent	A small unit of currency. 'Every cent' means every small amount of money — saving carefully.
collectively	(here) Together as a group; all at once.
conspire	To plan something secretly together. Here used affectionately: Concetta and Eleni have quietly organised the evening for Ame.
covering something	(here, informal) Hiding a feeling by being louder or more energetic than usual. Concetta's loudness is covering something she cannot say.
deflect	To turn something away — here, to redirect the conversation when Ame tries to pay.
deliberately	On purpose; with intention. Ame chose the café deliberately, not by chance.
discursive	Moving freely from one topic to another; not following a strict structure. Used positively here to describe the open, wandering quality of a long conversation.
farewell	A goodbye, especially a formal or significant one.
hook	A small peg or nail on a wall used to hang things. Earlier in the novel, Ame's keys were always on the hook by the door.
overnight bag	A small bag containing essentials for a stay of one night.
platform	(here) The area beside the railway tracks in a station where passengers board trains.
protest	(here, verb) To object or argue against something. Ame tries to protest when Concetta and Eleni pay.
reconsider	To think again about a decision, possibly changing it. Luca does not ask Ame to reconsider.
reservation	(here) A booking at a restaurant, holding a table for a specific time.
worktop	The flat surface in a kitchen used for preparing food. Ame places her key here, not on the hook.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 12.

1. Why does Concetta come to Rome? What has she arranged, and why does she not mention the effort it took?
2. How does Ame know that Concetta and Eleni have conspired? What gives them away?
3. Eleni asks 'You're not coming back, are you?' How does the author describe the way she asks it? What does this tell us about Eleni?
4. What does Ame tell Luca at the café? Why has she chosen that particular café?
5. Luca says 'I wondered. I didn't know the shape of it. But I wondered.' What does this tell us about him?
6. The author compares Luca's response to Castelli's. In what way are they similar?
7. On her last morning, Ame puts on her shoes 'right then left' rather than 'left then right'. She has always done it left then right. Why does the author change this detail?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The last morning (B1+)

Write a short description of a last morning in a place you have lived in for a significant amount of time — real or imagined. Focus on small, specific details: what you see, what you pick up, what you leave behind. (80–110 words)

Option B — The full truth (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character finally tells someone the full story of something they have been carrying alone. The listener should receive it well — without making it about themselves, without offering solutions, without getting it wrong.

Option C — She went (B2)

The chapter ends with 'She went.' Write the moment just before and just after this — the last look at the building and the first steps away from it. Try to capture both the weight of leaving and the clarity of having decided. (120–160 words)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Returning images — tracking what has changed

Chapter 12 returns to many images and details from earlier in the novel. For each one below, find where it first appeared, and write what it means now — what has changed, and what has stayed the same.

Image / detail	First appearance and what it means now
Bar Forza Lazio, the barista, the table that was theirs	
The café near the Lungotevere	
Shoes at the rack, left then right	
The worktop where the reeds used to be	
Two cases, one in each hand	

B. The full story — finally told

At the café, Ame tells Luca everything. The author lists it in a long passage of short phrases: 'The dropdown with no J. Paolo in the corridor. The theatre orchestra call...'

This is the same accumulation technique used in Chapter 8. But there, it was the weight Ame had been holding. Here, she is giving it to someone else.

1. What is the effect of listing everything in short phrases rather than full sentences?
2. Why does Ame tell Luca all of this now, when she is leaving? What does it mean to tell someone the full truth at the end?
3. Luca says 'You told me now.' Why is this the right answer?

C. 'Twice now'

At the end of the café scene, Ame reflects: 'She had sat in it twice now. Once falling apart. Once whole enough to explain herself. That was something.'

The phrase 'that was something' is deliberately understated. In your own words, what is Ame saying about herself? What has changed between the two visits to the café?

Write your answer in 3–5 sentences. Then think of a similar moment in your own life — when something that once broke you became something you could face. You do not need to share it, but try to describe the feeling in the same understated way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Concetta travels from Florence just to spend an evening with Ame before she leaves, then says nothing about the effort. What does this kind of friendship look like? Have you experienced it, or given it?
2. Eleni asks 'You're not coming back, are you?' and Ame answers 'No.' Nobody says anything else about it. Why is this enough? Why is it sometimes better not to discuss something that has already been understood?
3. Ame chooses to tell Luca everything at the café near the Lungotevere — the same café where she fell apart with Sala. Why do you think she goes back there? What is she trying to do?
4. On her last morning, Ame puts her shoes on 'right then left' — the reverse of every other time in the novel. This is a tiny detail that the author places in the final paragraph. What do you think it means?
5. The chapter ends with 'She went.' Two words. The novel has built to this moment across twelve chapters. Do you think this is the right ending for the Rome section of the story? What does the simplicity of 'She went' do?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The evening at Bar Forza Lazio

Work in groups of three: Ame, Concetta, Eleni. It is the last evening before Ame leaves Rome.

The three of them are at the bar. Nobody is saying directly what the evening is. But at some point Eleni asks the question, and Ame answers it. After that, the conversation should continue — not about leaving, but about ordinary things: the television, the barista, something Concetta complains about, something that makes them all laugh.

The challenge is to hold the sadness of the occasion and the warmth of the friendship at the same time, without making either too large.

Holding a big moment lightly:

"So." / [a pause] / "Anyway." / "Who wants another?"

Saying something true without making it a speech:

"You're not coming back, are you." / "No." / [beat] / "Right. More wine then."

CULTURAL NOTES

Saying goodbye in Italian culture

Italian goodbyes are often extended, layered affairs — multiple rounds of farewell, a return, another round. The formal goodbye (addio) carries more finality than the everyday arrivederci or ciao. Among close friends, the farewell is rarely clinical: it involves food, physical contact, and the kind of conversation that circles around the thing being said rather than saying it directly. Concetta and Eleni's conspiracy — the dinner, the concert, the conspired payment, the staying too late — is a version of this. The evening is an Italian goodbye even if none of the three women is Italian: the form has been absorbed along with the city.

The significance of the shoe rack

The shoe rack by the door has been present since the opening sentence of the novel. Removing shoes on entering a home is primarily associated with Japanese custom, but it has been the quiet constant of the flat that Ame, Concetta, and Eleni shared. It became a ritual of belonging: left then right, without discussion, the way they always did it. On the last morning, Ame puts her shoes on right then left before going out. This reversal is so small that a reader might miss it. But in a novel built on precise, repeated details, it is the most direct statement of departure in the chapter: she is not arriving now. She is leaving.

The Lungotevere café: a place revisited

Chapter 8 introduced the café near the Lungotevere as the place where Professor Sala delivered the final and most devastating piece of news — and where Ame finally cried. In Chapter 12, Ame chooses to return to this same café to tell Luca everything. The novel makes nothing explicit of this choice — Ame acknowledges it only obliquely ('for reasons that weren't fully clear to herself'). But the return is meaningful: the café where she fell apart is now the place where she is whole enough to explain herself. It is also, perhaps, a final act of reclaiming a place that had been associated with one of her lowest moments.

Termini station as a place of arrivals and departures

Roma Termini is Rome's main railway station, one of the busiest in Europe. It appears several times in the novel: as the place where Ame and Luca ate sandwiches in the rain in Chapter 4, and where Lorenzo took his piano lessons. Now Concetta arrives there from Florence, and the reader understands that within days Ame will leave from there too. In Italian culture, railway stations carry a particular emotional weight — they are places of reunion and separation, of beginnings and endings, woven into the national experience of movement and migration. In the novel, Termini is where things happen that the city itself cannot contain.

CHAPTER 13 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever returned to a place from your childhood after a long time away? What did you notice that you had not noticed before? What felt smaller, and what felt the same?
2. Think about the feeling of being home — not a place, but the feeling itself. How would you describe it? Is it always comfortable?
3. Have you ever done something familiar — cooked a dish, played a piece of music, walked a particular route — and found that you were doing it differently because you had changed?

Key ideas

This chapter is the arrival. After everything, Ame is home. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Home is something the body knows before the mind does. The senses — smell, sound, the weight of rain — carry memory in ways words cannot.
- Returning changes how you see a place. Distance makes familiar things visible.
- Some conversations happen entirely in silence, or in things not said. Families often communicate this way.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 13. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
aerial	An antenna for receiving television or radio signals, usually mounted on a rooftop.
assessing	Looking at something carefully to judge its condition or quality.
binder	A folder with rings or clips for holding loose papers together.
cedar	A type of wood with a distinctive, pleasant smell, often used for storage, especially for textiles and clothing.
ceremony	(here) Important life events such as weddings and coming-of-age celebrations, for which special clothing is worn and rented.
collapsed	(here, figurative) Completely failed or fallen apart.
correspondence	Letters, emails, or other written communications, especially in a business context.
dazed	Slightly confused and disoriented, as after a long journey or shock.
dignity	The quality of being worthy of respect; self-respect. Ame's father tries to maintain dignity while knowing he cannot.
elevated	(here) Raised above the normal level — his leg is raised on a support to help it heal.
haze	A state of slight confusion or half-awareness — here, the half-sleep of someone very tired.
jetlagged	Tired and disoriented because of travelling across multiple time zones.
kimono	A traditional Japanese garment worn on formal and ceremonial occasions.
recalibrate	To adjust or correct something after a change — here, both Ame and her mother are recalibrating to each other after four years apart.
rental rack	A rack of items available to borrow for a set period in exchange for payment. Kimono shops often offer rental for weddings and ceremonies.
score	(music) The written notation of a piece of music. Student editions are versions simplified or annotated for learning.
supplier correspondence	Written communications from the companies that provide goods to the shop.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 13.

1. How does Ame know the shop is not quite managing? What specific details tell her this?
2. Describe the moment Ame and her mother see each other. What does the mother do, and what does Ame understand from it?
3. What does Ame's father say about the television aerial? How does Ame respond, and what is her mother's contribution to the conversation?
4. What does Ame eat at dinner, and how does the author describe the experience?
5. What does Ame play in her childhood bedroom? Why does she choose this piece rather than the Poulenc?
6. What wakes Ame after midnight? What is different about this rain compared to Rome's rain?
7. How does the chapter end? What does the author mean by 'the body knowing it before the mind had finished catching up'?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The smell of home (B1+)

Write a short piece (80–110 words) describing a place you know well through its smell. You should not name the place directly — let the smell, and one or two other sensory details, do the work.

Option B — The room left exactly as it was (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character returns to a room that has been kept exactly as they left it. What do they see? What do they feel? Does the unchanged room comfort them, unsettle them, or both?

Option C — Before and after (B2)

The chapter moves between what the shop, the house, and the room look like to Ame now, and what they looked like before she left. Write a short piece (120–160 words) from the perspective of someone who has returned to a familiar place and sees it differently because they themselves have changed. What is the same? What looks different? What does the difference say about them?

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. The senses and memory

Chapter 13 is rich in sensory detail — smell, sound, taste, and the particular weight of rain. For each sense below, find an example from the chapter and explain what memory or feeling it carries for Ame.

Sense	Detail from chapter and what it carries
Smell	
Sound	
Taste	
Touch / physical sensation	

Now write two or three sentences about a sensory memory of your own — something you smell, hear, or taste that takes you immediately to a specific place or time.

B. What is not said — family conversation

The exchange between Ame and her father about the aerial is a masterpiece of indirect communication. Read it carefully and answer:

1. What has actually happened with the aerial? Why does nobody say it directly?
2. What does Ame's father's final line — 'It's good you're here' — actually mean? What is he really saying?
3. What is her mother's contribution to the conversation? What does her silence say?

Write a short exchange (6–8 lines) between two family members in which something important is communicated entirely through what is not said.

C. The body before the mind

The chapter ends: 'she was home, properly, in the oldest sense, the body knowing it before the mind had finished catching up.'

This idea — that the body knows something before the conscious mind does — appears in several forms across the novel. Find two other moments in the story where something similar happens (the body or the senses leading before thought does), and write a sentence about each.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame's mother looks at her and says 'You're thin.' This is the first thing she says. What does this tell us about the mother? Is it a criticism, a form of love, or both? Is this kind of comment common in your culture?
2. Ame's father refuses to admit that climbing on the roof to fix the aerial in November was a bad idea. Why? What does his behaviour tell us about him? Is this kind of pride familiar to you?
3. The childhood bedroom is 'exactly as she had left it.' What do you think this tells us about Ame's parents and the place she holds in their lives? How do you feel about the idea of a room kept exactly as it was?
4. Ame plays a piece she learned in this room before Rome — not the Poulenc, not anything from her conservatoire years. Why do you think she makes this choice? What is she doing when she plays it?
5. The novel has been building toward this moment for thirteen chapters. Ame finally sleeps — properly — to the sound of Matsuyama rain. Why is this the right ending for this part of the story? What has been resolved, and what hasn't?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Ame arrives at the shop

Work in groups of two or three: Ame and her mother, or Ame, her mother, and her father (in a later version of the scene in the living room).

For the shop scene: Ame arrives with her cases after four years. Her mother must welcome her without making it a big occasion — because making it a big occasion would mean acknowledging how worried she has been, which is not something she is going to do. Ame should read this and respond accordingly.

For the living room scene: keep the exchange about the aerial short and indirect. The important things — gratitude, relief, the unspoken apology — should arrive sideways.

Welcoming someone home without making it too much:

"You're thin." / "Come in. Put your cases down." / "Tea first."

Indirect gratitude and apology:

"It was a clear day." / "It's good you're here." / [silence]

CULTURAL NOTES

Kimono rental shops

In Japan, kimonos are worn for formal occasions — weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies (seijin-shiki, 成人式), tea ceremonies, festivals, and graduations. Because a quality kimono is expensive to own and complex to put on correctly, rental shops (kimono rental or kimono lease) are common and well-used. Customers rent the kimono, the obi sash, and all accessories, and are often helped by staff who dress them in the traditional way. In smaller cities and towns like Matsuyama, such shops may serve the same families across generations, and their seasonal peaks — around spring ceremonies and autumn weddings — are among the busiest times of the year.

The smell of cedar in Japanese life

Cedar (sugi, 杉) has a distinctive, fresh, slightly resinous smell that is deeply embedded in Japanese domestic and cultural life. It is used in traditional architecture, in bathhouses (ofuro), in storage boxes for seasonal clothing, and in household objects. The smell of cedar is associated with care, preservation, and the keeping of things across time. In a kimono shop, cedar would be used to protect the fabric from insects and moisture. For Ame, arriving after four years in Rome, this smell is one of the first signals of home — specific, wordless, and entirely of this place.

Jetlag and the body's clock

Jetlag occurs when a person travels rapidly across multiple time zones, and their internal body clock — the circadian rhythm — falls out of alignment with local time. The flight from Rome to Matsuyama crosses approximately eight time zones, making it one of the more significant time shifts a traveller can experience. Symptoms include exhaustion at unexpected times, difficulty sleeping, disorientation, and a sense of being not quite present. The author captures this precisely: Ame is 'tired and slightly dazed and her body didn't know what time it was.' That she is finally able to sleep — to the sound of rain she has known since childhood — suggests that the body is beginning to find its place again.

Rain in Matsuyama and on Shikoku

The island of Shikoku receives significant rainfall, particularly along its Pacific-facing coast. Matsuyama, on the western (Seto Inland Sea) side of the island, is somewhat drier, but rain is still a frequent and defining presence. Japan's rainy season (tsuyu, 梅雨) runs roughly from June to mid-July in most of the country. Autumn also brings typhoon season and frequent rain. For Ame, who has spent four years in Rome — a city with a much drier, more Mediterranean climate — the weight and consistency of Matsuyama rain is an immediate physical marker of difference. That she finds it comforting rather than foreign says something about where home, ultimately, lives in the body.

CHAPTER 14 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever gone back to a public bath, a swimming pool, a spa, or a hot spring? How did the water feel? Did it bring back memories?
2. Think about a friendship that survived a long gap. When you met again, what was easy? What required adjustment?
3. Have you ever expected something to be waiting for you when you returned — an object, a place, a relationship — and found it was gone? How did you feel?

Key ideas

This chapter is about re-entering a life. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Returning to familiar places reveals what you have been carrying without knowing it.
- Old friendships don't always come back smoothly. Some need time; some are simply there.
- Some things don't wait. And some things can't be displayed in a different room and still be what they were.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 14. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
arcade	(here) A covered shopping street, with a roof to protect shoppers from rain. Common in Japanese towns and cities.
articulate	(here, adjective) Clearly expressed in words. 'Nothing that articulate' means what happened in the bath could not be put into words.
awning	A roof or canopy that extends from a building over a doorway or window to provide shelter from rain or sun.
binder	A folder with metal rings for holding loose papers together.
circadian rhythm	(implied) The body's internal clock, which regulates sleep and wakefulness over a 24-hour cycle.
dialect	A regional variety of a language, with distinctive vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Matsuyama has its own dialect of Japanese.
Dōgo onsen	One of Japan's oldest hot spring bath houses, located in Matsuyama. It is a famous landmark and an important part of local life and culture.
erode	(here, figurative) To wear away gradually over time. A friendship that 'doesn't erode' stays strong without needing constant attention.
grief	(here) Sadness or distress about a loss — here, Ame notes changes in the city 'without grief', meaning she accepts them calmly.
onsen	A Japanese hot spring bath. The word refers to both the naturally heated water and the bathing facilities built around it.
recalibration	The process of adjusting to a new or changed situation. Here, two people who were close and have been apart for years must readjust to each other.
Seto Inland Sea	The body of water between the main islands of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu in Japan. Matsuyama faces onto it. The sea has a calm, sheltered character and is famous for its scenery.
stock	(here) Goods held by a shop for sale or rental. 'New stock' means items that were acquired after Ame left.
uchikake	A highly formal outer kimono, worn over other garments, usually for weddings. Often decorated with elaborate embroidery.
unself-conscious	Not worried about how one appears to others; natural and at ease.
video call	A telephone call made over the internet in which both people can see each other on screen.
warranted	Justified or deserved. The decision about which product to buy 'didn't warrant' the amount of time spent on it.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 14.

1. How does Ame's mother send her out for the day? What does this tell us about her mother's character?
2. Ame notices changes in Matsuyama during her walk. What has changed, and how does she feel about these changes?
3. What happens to Ame in the onsen that she had not expected? How does the author describe it?
4. How does Ame describe the experience of living in Rome — 'a place that was hers by choice and not by origin'? What had she been doing without realising it?
5. Ame meets three old friends in this chapter. How is each reunion different in tone and ease?
6. What is the dark blue uchikake with silver cranes, and what had Ame assumed about it? Why is its absence significant?
7. How does the chapter end? What does the mother not ask, and why?

WRITING TASK

Option A — Noticing change (B1+)

Write a short description (80–110 words) of a walk through a familiar place where some things are the same and some things have changed. Note both without judgement — simply what you see.

Option B — The thing that was held (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character arrives somewhere — a place from their past, or a completely new environment — and only then realises what they had been carrying. The realisation should come through the body, not through thought.

Option C — The thing that didn't wait (B2)

Write a short piece (120–160 words) about an object, a place, or a person that you imagined would be waiting for you — and wasn't. Try to capture both the specific nature of the loss and the way you processed it or put it away.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Three friendships, three registers

Ame meets Akari, Mie, and Sanae in this chapter. Each reunion has a different character. Complete the table using evidence from the chapter.

Friend	How the meeting goes / what it feels like
Akari	
Mie	
Sanae (by message)	

What does the difference between these reunions tell us about the nature of friendship and distance?

B. The thing that was held

In the onsen, Ame experiences something releasing — 'the low-level effort of existing somewhere that doesn't belong to you.' The author describes it as something she hadn't known she was doing until it stopped.

Answer these questions:

1. In your own words, what had Ame been carrying for four years in Rome, without knowing it?
2. Why is an onsen — this particular place, this particular kind of experience — the right place for this to happen?
3. Can you think of a time when you only noticed you had been tense, or worried, or holding something, when it stopped? Describe the feeling of the release, not the tension itself.

C. The koto and the kimono — things in wrong places

Near the end of the chapter, Ame thinks briefly about the koto in the Marchetti flat: 'Bought somewhere, by someone, for reasons that had nothing to do with what a koto was. Displayed in the corner of a room it didn't belong to.'

She has just discovered that the uchikake she had imagined for herself was sold to American tourists who were 'very pleased with it'.

1. What do the koto and the kimono have in common in this moment? What is Ame putting together?
2. Why does she 'put the thought away' rather than examining it further?
3. What does this moment tell us about the difference between owning something and understanding what it is?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame notes changes in Matsuyama 'without grief' and reflects that the same process happened in Rome while she was away. Is this a healthy way to think about change? Do you think it's possible to accept that places change without you, or does it always involve some loss?
2. In the onsen, Ame realises she had been holding 'the low-level effort of existing somewhere that doesn't belong to you' for four years. Did you suspect this was happening while reading the earlier chapters? What signs were there?
3. The dark blue uchikake is gone. Ame had never said anything about it, never claimed it, only imagined it as a future possibility. Do you think it was fair to feel the loss of something you never owned and never asked for? Is this kind of loss real?
4. Mie says 'I'm adjusting' is honest. 'I'm okay' is safe; 'I'm adjusting' is more precise and more true. When someone asks how you are, how do you decide what to say? Do you usually say the safe thing or the true thing?
5. The chapter ends with Ame's mother not asking what the day helped with. Why is this the right ending? What would have been wrong with her asking?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: Meeting an old friend

Work in pairs. You are Ame and Akari, meeting in the supermarket after four years. Neither of you has quite caught up to the other's life yet.

The conversation should feel warm but slightly awkward — the warmth of genuine affection and the awkwardness of distance and time. Eventually agree to meet for dinner. Neither of you should say too much too soon.

Reconnecting after a gap:

"You look different." / "Different how?" / "Good different."

Making plans without pressure:

"We should catch up properly." / "Message me when you're free." / "It's good to see you."

CULTURAL NOTES

Dōgo Onsen

Dōgo Onsen (道後温泉) in Matsuyama is one of Japan's oldest and most famous hot spring facilities, with a history said to stretch back over a thousand years. The main building, the Honkan, is a wooden structure from 1894 and a Nationally Designated Important Cultural Property. It was one of the inspirations for the bathhouse in the animated film *Spirited Away* (2001). Dōgo Onsen uses naturally heated spring water and is part of daily life for many Matsuyama residents. For Ame, it is not a tourist attraction but simply the bath she has always used — which is why the release she experiences there is so complete.

Japanese onsen culture

Hot spring bathing (nyuu-yoku, 入浴) is deeply embedded in Japanese culture. Onsen are natural hot springs; sento are public bathhouses that heat ordinary water. Both function as social spaces where people relax, talk, and are simply present with others in a way that daily life does not always allow. The bathing culture has rules: washing thoroughly before entering the communal bath, no swimwear in traditional onsen, no towels in the water. The communal aspect — bathing with strangers in shared hot water — is an equalising experience. For Ame, the Matsuyama dialect she hears the older women speaking, the specific temperature of the water, the particular quality of the sound in the space — all of these belong to a sensory vocabulary she grew up with.

The uchikake

An uchikake (打掛) is the most formal type of outer kimono worn in Japan. It is typically worn by brides at traditional Japanese weddings and is characterised by a padded hem that trails on the floor. Uchikake are often richly embroidered with auspicious motifs: cranes (symbols of longevity and good fortune), pine trees, waves, flowers. A dark blue uchikake with silver cranes would be a particularly striking and valuable piece. In a kimono rental shop, an uchikake of this quality would be among the most prestigious items. That it was sold rather than kept — to tourists who 'were very pleased with it' — is a practical decision that Ame receives as a small, private loss.

Covered shopping arcades in Japan

Japan's covered shopping arcades (shōtengai, 商店街) are a distinctive feature of town centres across the country. They are typically long, covered pedestrian streets lined with small independent shops — butchers, sweet shops, clothing stores, pharmacies, and restaurants. The roof provides protection from rain, making them usable year-round. Many shōtengai date from the post-war reconstruction period. In recent decades, competition from large shopping centres and online retail has reduced footfall in many arcades, and some have declined. For Ame, the specific smell of Matsuyama's shopping arcade is an immediate sensory marker of home — one of those ambient details that accumulate into identity.

CHAPTER 15 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever had to learn something quickly because circumstances required it — not because you chose to study it, but because it was suddenly necessary? What happened?
2. Think about the difference between playing or practising something for yourself, with no audience, and doing it professionally. Does the context change how it feels?
3. Have you ever opened something — a letter, a box, a message — and found something inside that you weren't expecting? How did you respond?

Key ideas

This chapter is about settling in, and about finding something that changes everything. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Being paid fairly for work you do for your family is different from being kept. The distinction matters.
- An instrument knows its player. Playing a new instrument is a kind of meeting.
- Some gifts take time to open. Not because they are locked, but because you have to be ready.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 15. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
annotate	To add notes or comments to a text or score — here, to a piece of sheet music, to guide the player.
apron	A protective garment worn over clothing while working, often in shops or kitchens.
assortment	A varied collection of different types of the same item — here, origami paper in many colours.
back counter	The desk or work surface at the rear of a shop, used for administrative tasks rather than serving customers.
Daiso	A Japanese chain of shops selling a wide variety of goods at a fixed low price, similar to a 'pound shop' or 'dollar store'. Known for craft supplies, stationery, and household items.
domain	(here) An area of responsibility. The accounts and supplier calls were the father's domain in the family business.
duplicate	(here, verb) To make an exact copy of something. The father's system includes paper records that duplicate the digital ones.
European circuit	The network of orchestras, ensembles, concert halls, and music organisations in Europe within which professional musicians build careers.
flag	(here, noun) A marker or tag used to draw attention to an entry in a filing system — a visual signal that something requires attention.
fully formed	(here, figurative) Complete and ready, without needing to be developed or relearned. Things that come back 'fully formed' are like rooms that were waiting.
impatient	Unable to wait; wanting things to happen immediately.
origami	The Japanese art of paper folding. Origami paper is thin, square, and comes in many colours and patterns. Origami cranes are one of the most well-known origami forms.
passport	(here) A national identity document allowing international travel. Ame's Japanese passport is 'less of a wall' on the European circuit than in Italy specifically — depending on the country and employer.
precision	Exactness; the quality of fitting perfectly and working correctly. Professional instruments are made with very high precision.
resistant	(here, in a musical sense) Requiring more breath and effort to produce a full sound. A more resistant instrument demands more from the player but can produce a richer tone.
standing order	A regular, automatic arrangement — here, a supplier who delivers or bills on a fixed schedule.
toddler	A young child, typically between one and three years old, who has recently learned to walk.
velvet	A soft, smooth fabric used to line instrument cases and protect the instrument.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 15.

1. How does Ame describe the rental tracking system? How did she learn it, and how long did it take?
2. What happens when her father appears on the stairs? What does his behaviour tell us about him?
3. What does Ame buy at Daiso, and what is the significance of what her father says at dinner?
4. Her mother places an envelope on the counter. What is in it, and how does Ame understand it?
5. Describe the scene where Ame plays her flute in the shop. What does her mother say, and what does it mean?
6. What is different about playing Castelli's flute compared to her own? How does the author describe this difference?
7. What does Ame find inside the case, and what does it contain? What does she do with it?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The note (B1+)

Castelli's note has two lines and a contact. Write the full note as you imagine it — not just the practical information, but the sentence or two before it. What would Castelli write? Remember: he is precise, not sentimental. He does not say more than he means. (60–90 words)

Option B — The instrument (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character tries something for the first time — a tool, an instrument, a vehicle, a skill — and finds it asks more of them than they expected. The scene should end with them deciding whether to rise to the challenge.

Option C — A gift you weren't ready for (B2)

Write a short personal piece (120–160 words) about something — advice, an object, an opportunity — that was given to you before you were ready for it. Describe when you received it, when you were finally ready, and what changed.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Two flutes, two descriptions

The chapter describes two flutes in very different ways. Look at how the author characterises each one and complete the table.

	Ame's own flute
How it is described	
What it requires of her	
What it represents	

The author says Castelli's flute 'was what a career sounded like'. What does she mean by this? Write your answer in 2–3 sentences.

B. The knowledge that was always there

Ame discovers she already knows the logic of the family business: 'The logic of the business was in her somewhere, absorbed without being taught.'

This echoes things said earlier in the novel about how Ame learned other things — Castelli's playing, Italian, the rhythms of the flat. Find two other moments in the novel where Ame knows something she didn't consciously learn. What does this pattern tell us about how she experiences the world?

C. The decision deferred

Ame finds the note. She reads it twice. She thinks about everything she has been through. She closes the case. Then she opens it again and plays.

The author does not tell us what Ame has decided. Discuss these questions:

1. What do you think Ame will do about the note? Will she contact Federico Mancini?
2. Why does she close the case before opening it again? What is she working through in that moment?
3. The chapter ends not with the decision but with playing. What does this suggest about where Ame is, emotionally and practically?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame's mother pays her a fair wage without making it a gift. Ame's reaction is: 'This was not being kept. This was being paid.' Why does this distinction matter so much to her? Do you think it would matter to you in the same situation?
2. Ame's father tries to come downstairs to inspect the work on the third day. Her mother sends him back upstairs with a single sentence from the other room. What does this family dynamic tell you? Is it funny, tender, or both?
3. Castelli prepared the note before Ame knew she was leaving — or perhaps, the author suggests, before she knew herself. What does this tell us about Castelli? What has he been watching and thinking?
4. Ame folds the note back into the velvet and closes the case. Then she opens it and plays. The novel ends this section here, with action rather than explanation. Is this satisfying? What are you left wondering?
5. The chapter title of the entire story is Ame — rain. In this chapter, Ame is in her family's kimono shop, playing her flute, feeling at peace. There is rain outside. What does it mean to be named for something that is everywhere in your life?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The father on the stairs

Work in groups of three: Ame, her father, and her mother (who speaks from the back room without appearing).

The father has made it to the fourth step. He has a reason prepared. Ame is calm and slightly amused. Her mother delivers the decisive line without moving. The father retreats with as much dignity as possible.

Try to keep the scene short and light. The comedy comes from the father's stubbornness and the mother's precision. Nobody should be unkind.

Holding your position with dignity:

"I'm fine." / "I just thought I could—" / "I was only checking."

Ending the discussion from another room:

"Go back upstairs." / [the authority of someone who does not need to appear to be taken seriously]

CULTURAL NOTES

Origami and its place in Japanese culture

Origami (折り紙) is the art of paper folding, traditionally associated with Japan though its origins involve influences from China as well. The word combines *oru* (折る, to fold) and *kami* (紙, paper). Origami is taught in Japanese schools and practiced across all ages as a craft, a meditative activity, and a form of artistic expression. The origami crane (tsuru, 鶴) is one of the most well-known forms: Japanese legend holds that folding one thousand cranes (senbazuru, 千鶴) grants a wish. Cranes are also associated with longevity and good fortune. Ame's father's comment — 'The cranes are quite difficult. I looked it up' — is quietly funny: the impatient man who climbed the stairs against doctor's orders has apparently been sitting upstairs researching origami.

Daiso and the 100-yen shop culture

Daiso is one of Japan's best-known chain stores, selling a huge variety of products at a fixed low price (originally 100 yen, hence the general name *hyakkin* or '100-yen shop'). The range includes stationery, craft supplies, kitchen items, storage solutions, seasonal decorations, and much more. Daiso and similar shops are valued not just for their low prices but for their extensive and often surprising range — it is possible to find almost anything in a well-stocked Daiso. Ame's purchase of origami paper there is practical, affordable, and gently thoughtful: finding a way to give her father something to do with his hands while he recovers, without making it seem like a gift.

The European music circuit and Japanese musicians

Many Japanese musicians study in Europe — at conservatoires in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and the UK — and some go on to build professional careers there. The European classical music world is highly internationalised, and Japanese musicians are well represented in orchestras across the continent. However, the specific immigration and work permit challenges that Ame has encountered in Italy are real for many non-EU musicians. The existence of a contact like Federico Mancini — someone who knows the European circuit and can help navigate the administrative complexities — represents exactly the kind of practical support that is often the difference between a career path opening or closing. Castelli, who has spent decades in this world, understands this precisely.

Professional instruments and what they ask

Classical musicians often spend years working toward the instrument they will use for their professional career. Student instruments and intermediate instruments are built for practicality and durability; professional instruments are built for tone quality, response, and longevity at the highest level. The difference can be significant: a professional flute responds to subtleties of breath and embouchure that a student instrument does not register. Ame's description of Castelli's flute as 'resistant' — requiring more breath, more support, more of herself — reflects something real about the difference. The instrument does not meet her halfway because it was built for a player who had decades of technique. Playing it is a form of aspiration: reaching for what the instrument requires.

CHAPTER 16 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever had to write an important email or message and read it many times before sending it? What made it difficult?
2. Think about a time when you had to make a big decision with a deadline. Did the deadline help you decide, or make it harder? How did you feel while you were waiting?
3. Imagine you had the chance to move to a new country again — different from where you are now. What would you weigh up? What would make you say yes, and what would make you hesitate?

Key ideas

This chapter is about a door opening. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A professional contact made through a mentor carries a different kind of weight than an ordinary application.
- A deadline is not only a pressure — it can also be a gift. It forces clarity.
- Some decisions cannot be made by thinking alone. They require something else — a conversation, a feeling, a moment.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 16. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
audition	A performance given to show ability, usually as part of a selection process for a musical position.
compound	(verb, here) To build up and multiply over time — a career that compounds means each step makes the next one easier to reach.
constraint	A limitation or restriction that cannot be changed. Mancini's two-week deadline is a real constraint, not negotiable.
contract	A formal legal agreement between an employer and employee, specifying terms, duration, and pay.
current	(here, adjective) Still valid and in use. Ame wonders if Mancini's email address is still current.
distinguished	(here, verb: to distinguish oneself) To perform so well that you stand out from others and are noticed for excellence.
fixed-term contract	A work contract with a specific end date, as opposed to a permanent position.
footing	(here, figurative) A stable position from which to proceed. 'Finding their footing' means both people are carefully establishing a basis for the conversation.
foundation	(here, figurative) A shared basis or common ground. Castelli's name is the foundation beneath the exchange.
maternity leave	Time off work taken by a parent around the birth of a child. Here, a flutist is going on maternity leave, creating a temporary vacancy.
mentor	An experienced person who guides and supports someone less experienced in their field.
migration	(here, figurative) Movement from one place to another — used humorously about the father's origami cranes moving from windowsill to kitchen.
navigated	(here) Dealt with successfully, despite difficulty. Mancini has navigated the paperwork for non-EU musicians before.
procedure	The official or standard way of doing something. Holding a position for two weeks is 'not procedure' — it is a personal favour.
Radio Symphonieorchester Wien (RSO)	The Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra — a major Austrian orchestra based in Vienna, known for its wide repertoire and international standing.
stock	(here) Goods held by a shop for sale or rental — the spring stock refers to new kimono items arriving for the season.
Theater an der Wien	A historic opera house in Vienna, Austria, founded in 1801. It is one of Europe's most prestigious opera and concert venues.
vacancy	An available position that needs to be filled.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 16.

1. How does Ame write the email to Federico Mancini? What does she include, and how does she handle the moment of sending?
2. How does Mancini respond? What does his tone in the first reply tell us about him?
3. What position does Mancini describe? What are the conditions and the complications?
4. What does Mancini reveal about Castelli's flute? What does this tell Ame?
5. Mancini offers to hold the position for two weeks. Why does he do this, and what does Ame understand about the significance of this offer?
6. How does Ame describe the decision she is facing to herself after the call?
7. What are the origami cranes doing by the end of the chapter? What does this detail add to the chapter?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The email (B1+)

Write the email Ame sent to Federico Mancini. It should be formal, in English, and include the key information: who she is, where she studied, who sent her, and what she is looking for. Keep it under 120 words, as she does. Read it once and 'send it' before you change your mind.

Option B — The two weeks (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene or diary entry (100–140 words) from somewhere in the two weeks: Ame is doing something ordinary — managing the accounts, eating dinner, looking at the cranes — while the decision is in the background of everything. Show the ordinary activity and let the decision be present without being named.

Option C — What Mancini sees (B2)

Write a short scene (120–160 words) from Mancini's point of view. He has just received Ame's email mentioning Castelli's name. He reads it, thinks about Castelli, thinks about the flute. What does he decide to do, and why? Try to capture the texture of a professional decision made on the basis of personal trust.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Professional correspondence — register and tone

The chapter contains two very different styles of professional communication: Ame's formal email and Mancini's warm response. For each element below, describe what Ame does and what Mancini does differently.

Element	Ame's email / Mancini's reply
Opening / tone	
What information is included	
Level of formality	
What it signals about the writer	

Now write the opening two sentences of a formal introductory email in English — one that introduces yourself to a professional you have never met, through a shared connection.

B. The language of possibility and precision

Mancini is careful with his words. Look at these phrases from his conversation with Ame and explain the precise meaning of each one.

1. 'The possibility of something more if she distinguished herself' — with 'the care of someone who meant possibility with precision and not just as encouragement.'
2. 'I think we should talk.' — Why does the author describe this as different from how conversations about positions usually go in Rome?
3. 'That's the most I can do. I think you understand what it means that I'm doing it.'

What is the difference between saying something as encouragement and saying it with precision? Can you think of a time when someone said something encouraging to you that you knew was not quite precise?

C. The decision in the background

The chapter ends without a decision. The two weeks 'sat in the background of everything' while Ame continued her ordinary life. The author shows this through a list of small, concrete things she did.

Find five specific actions or observations the author uses to show Ame's daily life continuing during the two weeks. Then answer: why does the author choose to end the chapter here, at this moment, rather than with the decision itself?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame sends the email 'before she could revise it into something worse'. Have you ever sent something quickly on purpose, to stop yourself from overthinking it? What happened?
2. Mancini is different from everyone Ame has spoken to about positions in Rome. The author says he was 'not managing her. He was talking to her.' What is the difference? Have you experienced both kinds of professional conversation?
3. Mancini tells Ame that Castelli gave her his flute because she would 'know what to do with it'. What does this mean? Does knowing what to do with something mean the same as being ready for it?
4. The position is temporary — eight to ten months, with the possibility of something more. Ame reflects honestly: 'a better position than before, but not by as much as it might seem, probably another temporary.' Should this matter? Is it a reason to say no, or is it simply the reality of building a career?
5. The origami cranes have multiplied, migrated to the kitchen, and one frog has appeared. Why do you think the author includes this detail in a chapter about a major decision? What does it do for the tone?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The video call with Mancini

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is Federico Mancini. You are on a video call for the first time.

Mancini should describe the position clearly and honestly — including the complications. He should be warm but not falsely encouraging. Ame should ask the right questions and listen for what is not being offered as well as what is.

At the end, Mancini offers the two-week hold. Ame should accept it with the right level of appreciation — understanding what it means without making it bigger than the moment requires.

Describing a position honestly:

"The contract is fixed-term. The possibility of extension exists, but I want to be honest about what that means."

Accepting a favour with appropriate weight:

"Thank you. I understand what you're doing. I'll give you my answer in two weeks."

CULTURAL NOTES

Theater an der Wien

The Theater an der Wien is one of Vienna's oldest and most storied opera houses. It opened in 1801 and is the venue where Beethoven's *Fidelio*, his Third and Fifth Symphonies, and other major works received their world premieres. After decades as a musical theatre venue, it was relaunched in 2006 as an opera house and concert venue with a strong focus on Baroque, Classical, and contemporary repertoire. For a young professional musician, a fixed-term contract connected to a venue of this historical and cultural weight is a significant credential, regardless of its temporary nature.

The Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (RSO Wien)

The Radio Symphonieorchester Wien (RSO Wien) is a major Austrian orchestra, founded in 1924 and affiliated with the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF). It is known for its eclectic and adventurous programming, combining Classical and Romantic repertoire with a strong commitment to contemporary and twentieth-century music. The orchestra has worked with many of the most important conductors and composers of the modern era. An association with the RSO Wien, even through a fixed-term connection, would be a meaningful professional credential for a flutist at Ame's stage of career.

Maternity leave in Austria and Europe

Austria has one of the more generous parental leave systems in Europe. Parents can take extended leave from work after the birth of a child, with state support available for up to two years in some configurations. For performing arts organisations, a musician taking maternity or parental leave creates a genuine vacancy that needs to be filled for a specific period. Fixed-term contracts to cover such leave are a normal part of the professional music landscape in Europe. They are not considered a lesser form of employment; they are how many musicians begin their professional careers in major institutions.

Vienna as a musical city

Vienna has been central to the European classical music tradition for over two centuries. It was home to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Mahler, and Bruckner, among many others. The city remains one of the most active classical music capitals in the world, with multiple orchestras, opera companies, concert halls, and music festivals operating at the highest level. The Wiener Philharmoniker (Vienna Philharmonic), the Wiener Staatsoper (Vienna State Opera), and the Musikverein are among the most famous musical institutions in existence. For a musician trained at a European conservatoire, Vienna represents both a destination and a standard. Mancini is not understating it when he says the city 'is not Rome but was something, which was a great deal.'

CHAPTER 17 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Think about a place you have been going to for years — a restaurant, a park, a shop — without ever discussing whether to keep going. Why do you keep returning? What does that kind of habit say about a place, or about friendship?
2. Have you ever had a conversation where someone said something honest about what they would do in your situation — not as advice, but as a statement about themselves? How did it affect you?
3. 'I stopped needing to leave.' What do you think this means? Is choosing to stay somewhere the same as being happy there?

Key ideas

This chapter is about three friends, three different relationships to where they are and where they might go. Think about these ideas before you read:

- The same question can be answered differently depending on who you are. Nobody's answer is wrong.
- A good friend asks the question and then leaves it alone. They don't push for an answer.
- Sometimes what you need isn't an answer but someone to talk to who has already made a different choice.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 17. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
arcade	(here) The covered shopping street near the udon restaurant — the same one Ame walked through in Chapter 14.
bustling	Full of busy, energetic activity and noise — here used to describe the sound of the kitchen.
dashi	A Japanese cooking stock made from kombu seaweed and dried tuna flakes (katsuobushi). It forms the base of many soups, including udon broth. Its smell is distinctive and immediately associated with Japanese food culture.
directness	The quality of saying exactly what you think without softening or hinting — described as a personality trait in Akari.
field trip	An organised visit by a school class to a place outside school, for educational purposes.
handover	The moment at the end of a work shift when tasks and responsibilities are passed to the next person on duty.
izakaya	A Japanese informal pub or gastropub — a place to eat and drink, typically with a relaxed atmosphere and a wide menu of small dishes. A favourite social venue for friends and colleagues.
kakitama	A style of udon in which beaten egg is stirred into the hot broth to create soft egg strands. A comforting, mild dish.
negi	Japanese spring onion or leek, used as a garnish or ingredient in many dishes including udon soup.
preamble	An introduction or explanation given before the main point. 'Without preamble' means she said it directly, without building up to it.
recalibration	A small adjustment to one's understanding of a situation. Here, Ame discovers Akari knows more about Sanae's daily life than she does.
resignation	(here) A calm, accepting attitude toward something unpleasant that cannot be changed. Mie describes the construction noise with resignation.
rota	A schedule or roster that allocates tasks or shifts among members of a group.
squid tempura	Squid coated in a light batter and deep-fried, a classic Japanese dish. Tempura are typically light and crisp.
throwaway	(here, adjective) Said casually, without great emphasis — but potentially carrying more meaning than it appears to.
udon	Thick Japanese wheat-flour noodles, typically served in a hot broth. A common everyday food across Japan.
unwinding	(here) Loosening or removing — Mie is unwinding her scarf as she comes through the door.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 17.

1. How does the author describe the udon restaurant? What does the description tell us about its place in the women's lives?
2. How does Ame tell Mie about the Vienna offer? What does 'she kept it brief, just the facts, the way Mancini had given them to her' suggest?
3. What question does Mie ask Ame? Does she expect an answer?
4. What does Akari say about why she came back? What is honest but incomplete about her answer?
5. Akari says she would have left Rome immediately and not thought twice. How does Ame receive this? What does it tell us about the difference between them?
6. What does Mie say when Akari asks whether she always knew she would stay? What does this tell us about Mie?
7. How does the chapter end, and what does Ame decide she needs to do?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The question left on the table (B1+)

Write a short scene (80–110 words) in which someone asks an important question and then deliberately does not push for an answer. The question should be about a real decision the other person is facing. Show both what is asked and what is left in the silence.

Option B — A place with no name (B1+–B2)

Write a short description (100–140 words) of a place that is important to you, or to someone you know, but that nobody calls by its official name. Describe it through its atmosphere, its regulars, its smell, its habits — not its sign.

Option C — What Ame would tell Sanae (B2)

Ame decides she needs to call Sanae. Write that conversation (120–160 words). Sanae has left Matsuyama and made her own choice. Ame should be honest about where she is with the decision. Sanae should listen well and say something that neither Mie nor Akari could have said.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Three voices, three positions

Mie, Akari, and Ame each have a different relationship to the question of staying or leaving. Using evidence from the chapter, complete the table.

Character	Her relationship to staying / leaving / moving
Ame	
Mie	
Akari	

What does the variety of positions in this chapter suggest about the novel's view of the question? Is there a right answer?

B. True and incomplete

When Akari asks why Ame came back, Ame says: 'It was the right time to come back.' The author then writes: 'Which was true and incomplete and all she had.'

Think about this kind of answer — true but not the whole truth.

1. What is missing from Ame's answer? What could she have said that would have been more complete?
2. Why does she give this answer to Akari rather than a fuller one?
3. Think of a time when you gave a true but incomplete answer to someone's question. Why did you? Write 2–3 sentences.

C. Mie's two sentences

When Akari asks Mie whether she always knew she would stay, Mie answers in two sentences: 'No. I just stopped needing to leave.'

This is one of the most concentrated pieces of writing in the novel. Discuss:

1. What is the difference between 'always knowing you would stay' and 'stopping needing to leave'?
2. What does this tell us about how decisions like this actually get made?
3. Do you think it is possible to stop needing something without consciously deciding to? Can you think of an example?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. The restaurant has no name anyone uses. It has just always been 'the place'. What does it mean for a place to become yours in this way? Do you have somewhere like this?
2. Mie asks 'Think of what you've found coming back here. Can you do it again?' and then leaves the question alone. Is this better advice than telling Ame what she thinks she should do? Why?
3. Akari says she would have left without thinking twice. She isn't being unkind — she's just saying something true about herself. Does hearing what someone else would do help you figure out what you want? Or does it complicate things?
4. By the end of the chapter, Ame realises she needs to call Sanae. Why Sanae, specifically? What does Sanae represent that Mie and Akari don't?
5. This is the last chapter before the novel ends. Looking back over the whole story, what do you think Ame will decide? What would you decide in her position?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: At the udon restaurant

Work in groups of three: Ame, Mie, and Akari. The udon has arrived. The ordinary conversation has started. At some point, the Vienna offer comes up — or Akari's comment about leaving comes up. Or both.

Try to recreate the feel of the chapter: warm, easy, full of small jokes and ordinary complaints, with one or two moments that carry real weight underneath.

Ordinary conversation at a table:

"Did you try the squid? — It's been on the menu for ages." / "The construction is a nightmare." / "She always posts food pictures."

Asking the question and leaving it:

"Think about what you've found coming back. Can you do it again?" / [silence] / "Anyway. More tea?"

CULTURAL NOTES

Udon in Japanese food culture

Udon (うどん) is one of Japan's most beloved everyday foods. The thick, chewy wheat-flour noodles are served in a light soup broth — typically dashi-based — with various toppings. Regional variations are significant: Kagawa Prefecture on Shikoku is particularly famous for its udon, and Shikoku as a whole has a strong udon culture. There are different styles (kake udon with plain broth, tempura udon, kakitama with egg), and udon restaurants are fixtures of Japanese town centres, often unpretentious, busy, and inexpensive. The restaurant in the chapter — no official name, always 'the place', unchanged for years — represents the kind of udon restaurant that regulars return to for decades.

Izakaya culture

An izakaya (居酒屋) is a Japanese informal eating and drinking establishment — somewhere between a pub and a tapas bar. The menu typically features a wide range of small dishes (yakitori, edamame, sashimi, fried items) designed to be eaten alongside drinks. Izakayas are a central part of Japanese social life, particularly for after-work gatherings among colleagues, or catch-ups between friends. The mention of Sanae finding a good izakaya near her flat in Osaka as a sign of settling in well is immediately understood by any Japanese reader as a meaningful indicator of belonging: the izakaya is where you become a regular, where you find your place in a neighbourhood.

The decision to stay or go: a generational theme in Japan

Japan has seen significant internal migration over the past several decades, with younger people moving from regional cities and rural areas to the major urban centres — primarily Tokyo, but also Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka. This has created a recurring personal and social question for people from smaller cities and regional towns: stay, or go? The question is particularly acute for people with ambitions in competitive fields — arts, music, business, academia — where the best opportunities are concentrated in major centres. The three women in the restaurant represent three different answers to this question: Mie's settled presence in Matsuyama, Akari's restlessness and not-yet-decided, and Ame's trajectory out and back and now out again, perhaps.

Dashi: the foundation of Japanese cooking

Dashi (出汁) is the cooking stock that underlies much of Japanese cuisine. The most common type is made from kombu (kelp) and katsuobushi (dried, smoked, and fermented tuna flakes). Dashi has a delicate, deeply savoury flavour — a key source of umami — and forms the base of miso soup, udon broth, and many sauces and simmered dishes. Its smell is one of the most evocative in Japanese cooking: immediate, warm, distinctively Japanese. For Ame, walking into the udon restaurant and smelling the dashi before she is through the door is a sensory marker of exactly the kind of home-without-noticing that she has been rediscovering since her return.

CHAPTER 18 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever performed or demonstrated something for children? What was different about having them as an audience compared to adults?
2. Think of a moment when you knew something without being able to explain how you knew it. When did you realise? What triggered it?
3. Is it possible for two very different things — a hotel lobby, a concert hall, a classroom — to be equally valid places to make music? What do you think music is for?

Key ideas

This chapter is where the decision takes shape. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Children hear music without critical distance. This is not the same as naivety — it is a different kind of attention.
- A decision can crystallise when you compare things that have no obvious common measure.
- Knowing who you want to play for is not the same as knowing where you will play.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 18. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
absorbent	(implied) Able to take in and adapt to something — here, the way Mie 'absorbed the disruption' of the lesson running over.
Allegro malinconico	The opening movement of Poulenc's Flute Sonata, marked 'fast but melancholy'. The piece Ame played for Castelli in Chapter 2 and has returned to throughout the novel.
apparatus	(here, figurative) A system or set of processes for making judgements. Children 'don't yet have a critical apparatus' — they haven't yet learned to evaluate music by category or reputation.
chaotic efficiency	A contradictory phrase — something that is disorganised on the surface but somehow gets the job done. Here, the children form a line that is energetic and noisy but also effective.
commute	The regular journey from home to work or school. Sanae's commute in Osaka is manageable.
crystallise	(here, figurative) To become clear and definite, as a thought or decision forming into something specific.
curriculum	The set of subjects and content taught in a school or educational programme.
delight	A feeling of great pleasure. The children are delighted by the difficulty of the flute — they find failure interesting rather than discouraging.
friction	(here, figurative) Difficulty or resistance caused by being different from those around you. Sanae faced friction as an outsider in a new city.
Golden Week	A cluster of national holidays in Japan, occurring in late April and early May. One of the main travel periods of the year when many Japanese people return home or go on holiday.
gravity	(here, figurative) Seriousness and weight of character. Misaki is described as having the 'particular gravity of someone with an important question.'
mouthpiece	The part of a flute that the player places their lips against to produce sound.
O-shōgatsu	The Japanese New Year celebration, the most important holiday in the Japanese calendar. Typically celebrated from January 1–3, with family gatherings, special foods, shrine visits, and traditional customs.
on the fly	(informal) Done quickly and without preparation, improvised as you go.
redirection	(here) The act of steering a group's attention from one thing to another — a key classroom management skill.
repertoire	The collection of works that a musician or performer knows and is able to perform.
stag beetle	A large insect known for the male's distinctive large pincers. In Japan, stag beetles (kuwa-gata-mushi) are popular with children as pets and toys. The father is now making origami stag beetles.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 18.

1. What does Ame observe about Sanae's life in Osaka? What does she understand about the difference between Sanae's experience and her own?
2. What three places or audiences does Ame hold next to each other during her walk home? What is different about each?
3. Why does Mie ask Ame to play 'something of your own'? What does Ame choose to play, and why is this significant?
4. Describe what happens when Misaki asks to try the flute. What does Misaki's reaction to failing tell us?
5. How does Ame feel about playing for the children compared to playing for an educated concert audience in Vienna?
6. What is the 'uninvited' memory that arrives as Ame walks home? Why does it arrive here?
7. What does the father's stag beetle represent, and why do neither Ame nor her mother say anything about it?

WRITING TASK

Option A — A different audience (B1+)

Write a short scene (80–110 words) in which someone performs or demonstrates something — music, cooking, a skill — for an unexpected audience. Focus on what the audience's particular kind of attention reveals about the performance itself.

Option B — Three images (B1+–B2)

Write a short piece (100–140 words) in which a character holds three images or memories next to each other to make a decision. The images should be specific and different in kind. The decision should arrive from the comparison rather than from reasoning.

Option C — A wall by another name (B2)

Write a short piece (120–160 words) from the perspective of someone who is listening to a friend describe their difficulties and recognising that those difficulties are real — but different from their own. The character should find the right way to be present without making comparisons or minimising what the friend has been through.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Three images held together

The key moment of the chapter is Ame holding three images next to each other: Lorenzo at Termini, Misaki blowing into the flute, and an imagined Vienna concert hall. For each image, write what it represents to Ame — and what the comparison reveals.

Image	What it represents / what the comparison reveals
Lorenzo at Termini station playing the Clementi	
Misaki blowing into the flute and nothing happening	
The polite applause of an educated audience in Vienna	

The author writes: 'She knew which one she wanted to play for.' Do you agree with Ame's conclusion? Write your response in 2–3 sentences.

B. Walls — the same word, different meanings

Thinking about Sanae's experience, Ame uses the word 'walls' for both of them: Sanae's walls and her own. Look at this passage and answer the questions below:

"The walls had been real. A new city, a new company, the particular friction of being from somewhere else in a culture that noticed these things. Real walls. Just not eight time zones of walls. Not a passport that didn't appear in a dropdown. Not a quota system that filled the slot before she arrived."

1. What are Sanae's walls? What are Ame's walls?
2. Why does Ame call Sanae's walls 'real' if they are a different kind from her own? What is she acknowledging?
3. Ame doesn't say any of this to Sanae. Instead, 'she asked about the izakaya.' What does this choice tell us about Ame?

C. Children as an audience — the language of attention

The chapter describes the children's attention in very specific ways. Find three phrases the author uses to describe how children hear or respond to music, and explain what each one says about the difference between children's and adults' listening.

Phrase from the chapter	What it says about children's listening

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame recognises that Sanae's experience — moving to a new city in Japan — involved 'real walls', even though they are different from hers. Why is it important to acknowledge this, even privately? What would it cost her not to?
2. The children listen to the Poulenc and the folk song with exactly the same 'total uncomplicated attention'. What does this tell us about music, about children, or about both?
3. Misaki is 'surprised and pleased' to discover that the flute is hard. Most adults would be embarrassed or discouraged. Why is this response different, and what does it say about how we learn?
4. Ame holds three images next to each other and knows which one she wants to play for. Is this the right reason to make a major life decision? Should a decision like this be made on the basis of feeling rather than practicality?
5. The father's stag beetle is set on the table without comment, and nobody says anything. By now, how has our understanding of the father changed since Chapter 13, when he was trying to sneak downstairs to check the accounts?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The classroom

Work in groups: one Ame, one Mie, and several students (everyone else). The children have just heard Ame play the folk song. Mie asks Ame to play something of her own.

After Ame plays, Misaki raises her hand. The line forms. Each 'student' tries the flute once and reacts — some get nothing, one gets a squeak, one almost gets a note. Mie tries to keep order. Ame catches the flute at the crucial moment.

Focus on the energy and chaos of the scene, and on Misaki's final question: 'Will you come back?'

Children trying something hard:

"It's hard!" / "Nothing came out!" / "I almost did it!" / [sound of a squeak, delight]

The teacher trying to maintain order:

"In a single line, please." / "One at a time." / "Ame-chan — are you sure?"

CULTURAL NOTES

O-shōgatsu — Japanese New Year

O-shōgatsu (お正月) is the most important holiday in the Japanese calendar, typically celebrated from 1–3 January. Traditions include cleaning the house before the year ends (sōji, 掃除), cooking special New Year foods (osechi ryōri, おせち料理), visiting a shrine or temple (hatsumōde, 初詣で), and spending time with family. It is one of the major periods when Japanese people travel home to their families — alongside Golden Week and the summer O-bon holiday. For Sanae in Osaka, returning for O-shōgatsu and Golden Week is a practical way of managing the distance from Matsuyama while still feeling connected. It is how many Japanese people who have moved away stay attached to home.

Music education in Japanese primary schools

Music is a compulsory subject in Japanese primary schools (shōgakkō, 小学校). Children learn to sing, to read basic musical notation, and to play simple instruments, typically the harmonica (in lower grades) and the recorder or melodica (in upper grades). The curriculum includes both Western classical music and Japanese folk and traditional songs. Visiting performers and musicians are occasionally invited into classrooms as part of cultural education programmes. The children in the chapter — sitting in rows, trying very hard to be still — are in exactly this setting. Misaki's desire to try the flute is a natural response in a culture that approaches music as something everyone can participate in, not just watch.

The stag beetle in Japanese culture

The stag beetle (kuwagata-mushi, 録甲虫) is one of the most popular insects in Japan, particularly among children. Japan has a strong culture of insect appreciation — children collect and keep beetles and stag beetles as pets, and stag beetle figures appear in toys, games, and merchandise. The stag beetle is admired for its dramatic appearance and its strength. For the father to have graduated from simple cranes and a frog to a complex stag beetle — 'larger than the others, more complex, the folds precise in a way the earlier ones hadn't been' — is a quietly significant progression: he has been practising, improving, and is now making something impressive. He sets it on the table without comment. This is exactly how he received help, and how he gives credit.

Lorenzo and Termini: a callback

Chapter 3 introduced Lorenzo — a twelve-year-old learning piano at a public piano in Rome's Termini station, taking lessons from Ame while the station moved around him. The description in Chapter 18 echoes the original almost precisely: the sticker on the casing, the gouge on the lid, the delayed train announcement, Lorenzo waiting for it to finish and then continuing. The author is asking the reader to hold this image alongside Misaki in the classroom. Both are young people for whom music is still new enough to be difficult and surprising. That Ame wants to play for people like this — not for the polite applause of an educated Vienna audience — is the clearest statement of her artistic values that the novel contains. It arrives not as a declaration but as a comparison she makes while walking home on a Tuesday morning.

CHAPTER 19 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Have you ever had to tell someone that you were saying no to something they had offered you? How did you find the right way to say it?
2. Have you ever realised that something you were worried about — disappointing someone, making the wrong impression — was entirely in your own head, and the other person was not carrying it at all? What was that like?
3. Think about what it means when someone says 'you can call me [first name]'. What changes in a relationship at that moment?

Key ideas

This is the chapter where the decision is made and the door is told about it. Think about these ideas before you read:

- A decision made on clear values is not a loss, even when it means saying no to something good.
- How someone receives a 'no' tells you a great deal about who they are.
- Some doors don't close. They change shape.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 19. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
acoustics	The properties of a space that determine how sound travels and is heard in it. A gym with hard walls and a high ceiling has poor acoustics for music.
adjacent	(here, figurative) Close to, or resembling, something without being exactly the same. Mancini's gesture is 'something adjacent to' Castelli's wave — a learned echo of it.
anticipated	(here) Expected in advance. The 'anticipated disappointment' is the fear of what Ame thought Mancini would feel.
conservatorio	The Italian word for a music conservatoire. Here used to indicate a professional performance standard — the standard by which Castelli's teaching was measured.
daunting	Seeming difficult and intimidating. Earlier in the novel, the resistance of Castelli's flute was daunting; now it is familiar.
disruption	An interruption or disturbance to normal order or schedule. A twelve-minute session where every child tries the flute is a disruption to the lesson timetable.
echo	(here) A delayed repetition of a sound, caused by reflection off a hard surface. The echo in the gym arrives 'a fraction late'.
familiar	(here) Known through repeated experience; no longer new or surprising. The flute's resistance has become familiar to Ame.
ludicrous	Absurdly unreasonable; obviously wrong. A professional recording in the gym would be a 'ludicrous thought'.
mechanism	(here) The way something works — a child watches Ame's fingers as if trying to understand a machine.
paper crown	A simple crown made of paper, worn by children at school birthday celebrations. Common in Japanese primary schools.
ration	(here, verb) To limit or control how much of something you give. Children 'don't ration' their responses — they give everything.
reverb	Short for reverberation — the way sound persists and echoes in a room after the original sound has stopped. A high-ceilinged gym produces a lot of reverb.
transition	(here, implied) The process of moving from one state or stage to another. Castelli to Federico marks a shift in the relationship between Ame and Mancini.
wince	To make a slight involuntary movement of the face in reaction to something unpleasant or painful. A conservatoire professor would 'wince' at the gym's acoustic problems.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 19.

1. Akari says Ame seems 'lighter, something'. What has changed since their last dinner at the restaurant?
2. Why does Ame bring Castelli's flute to the school gym rather than her own? What does this choice tell us?
3. The author describes the gym's acoustics in some detail. Why does this matter? What happens to the music in the imperfect space?
4. Misaki is in the front row. She catches Ame's eye during the second movement. What passes between them in that moment?
5. When does Ame stop needing to hold Vienna next to the gym? What does this tell us about how she is making the decision?
6. How does Mancini respond when Ame tells him her decision? What does he say about talent and where it is used?
7. At the end of the call, Mancini says 'By the way, you can call me Federico.' What does this mean for their relationship going forward?

WRITING TASK

Option A — Saying no well (B1+)

Write a short message or scene (80–110 words) in which a character declines something that has been offered to them — a job, an invitation, an opportunity. The refusal should be clear, genuine, and kind. It should not over-explain or apologise excessively.

Option B — Imperfect and true (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which something happens in an imperfect setting — wrong acoustics, wrong weather, wrong time — and works anyway, or even works better because of the imperfection.

Option C — The burden you carried alone (B2)

Write a short personal piece or scene (120–160 words) about a time when you were carrying the weight of someone else's anticipated reaction — and then discovered they weren't carrying it at all. Focus on the moment of discovery and what it changed.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. The imperfect space

The author describes the gym's acoustic problems in some detail, and then writes: 'the imperfect sound landed anyway, bouncing wrong off every surface and arriving true.'

This is a paradox — something that appears contradictory but contains a truth. Answer these questions:

1. What does 'arriving true' mean if the sound was acoustically imperfect?
2. What does this say about the relationship between technical quality and genuine impact?
3. Can you think of another example — in music, sport, cooking, or any skill — where something technically imperfect was more powerful than something technically correct?

B. Mancini's response — the art of receiving a no

When Ame tells Mancini her decision, he responds with care and generosity. Look at what he says and how he says it.

"Talent is never wasted if there's someone willing to listen. Castelli believed it. I believe it. You probably believe it if this is your choice. It's why he gave you the flute and not a position."

1. What is Mancini saying about Ame's decision? Is he praising it, accepting it, or something else?
2. 'He gave you the flute and not a position.' What does this mean? How does it reframe what Castelli gave her?
3. Why does Mancini say 'now I'm probably going to sound like Castelli, but here goes'? What does this phrase do?

Now write a short response (4–6 sentences) that someone might give when told 'no' to something they have offered, in a way that is generous and genuine rather than merely polite.

C. The deadline that has already passed

The chapter ends: 'She had four days left on the deadline. The deadline had already passed for her. The four days would go the way days go when you've stopped counting them.'

Discuss: what is the difference between a deadline that still counts and one that has already passed internally? How does this idea relate to other moments in the novel where Ame acted before she had fully named what she was doing?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Mancini receives Ame's decision without disappointment, pressure, or even much surprise. Ame had been 'carrying the weight of anticipated disappointment' herself. Have you ever worried about disappointing someone, and then found that they were not carrying the weight you thought they were? What did that feel like?
2. Mancini says: 'Talent is never wasted if there's someone willing to listen.' Do you agree? Does this feel like a genuine statement or a consolation? Does the distinction matter?
3. The music in the gym 'landed anyway, bouncing wrong off every surface and arriving true.' What is the author saying about where and how music — or any art — can work? Does place matter?
4. Mancini says 'you can call me Federico.' Is this just politeness, or does it mark something real? What kind of relationship is now possible that wasn't before?
5. Ame picks up Castelli's flute after the call 'not because she needed to process anything, just because it was evening and the flute was there and she wanted to play.' How is this different from every other time she has picked up the flute in the novel?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The call with Mancini

Work in pairs. One of you is Ame, one is Federico Mancini.

Ame tells Mancini her decision. She should be plain and direct — not apologetic, not over-explaining. Mancini should receive it well: generously, without pressure, and with something real to say. The call should end with Mancini saying 'you can call me Federico' and Ame using the name.

The challenge: the scene should feel complete without being long. Neither character needs to say more than they mean.

Saying no with clarity and without apology:

"I've made my decision. I'm staying." / "I appreciate what you did, and I want to explain why."

Receiving a no with grace:

"I understand. And I think you'll do that well." / "The door doesn't have to close."

CULTURAL NOTES

School birthday celebrations in Japan

Many Japanese primary schools hold monthly celebrations (*tanjōbi kai*, 誕生日会) for children whose birthdays fall in that month. The format varies by school, but commonly involves an assembly where birthday children are recognised, sometimes with paper crowns, songs, and a short celebratory programme. Guest performers and visiting artists are sometimes invited as part of these occasions or other school-wide assemblies. The atmosphere described in the chapter — the birthday children in their paper crowns, the whole school assembled, the event simultaneously a party and a school day and neither entirely — captures the particular quality of these occasions: festive but structured, joyful but organised.

Acoustic imperfection and live music

The chapter's detailed attention to the gym's acoustic problems — the late echo, the reverb, the hard parallel walls, the high ceiling — reflects real acoustic science. A room designed for music (a concert hall, an opera house) uses careful architecture to control how sound travels: angled walls to diffuse reflections, soft surfaces to absorb reverb, the right proportions to support resonance. A gym has none of these: it is designed for physical activity, not sound. And yet, as the author argues, the music 'arrived true' — it worked in the way that mattered. This is something many musicians know: technically imperfect conditions are not an obstacle to genuine musical communication. The best performance Ame gives in the novel takes place in the worst acoustic space.

First names and professional relationships in Italy

In Italian professional culture, there is a meaningful distinction between addressing someone by their title and surname (formal, professional distance) and by their first name (familiar, closer relationship). Moving from 'Professor Mancini' or 'Signor Mancini' to 'Federico' marks a shift in the nature of the relationship. When Mancini says 'you can call me Federico', he is not simply being friendly — he is indicating that the relationship has moved from that of professional contact and supplicant to something more peer-like: colleagues within the same tradition, connected through Castelli. For Ame, this matters. The door has not closed. It has, as the author puts it, changed shape.

The gift of a flute: revisited

In Chapter 11, Castelli gave Ame his flute 'not a position'. The phrase is echoed by Mancini in this chapter: 'It's why he gave you the flute and not a position.' This reframing is important. A position would have defined Ame within an existing structure, in a particular place, doing a particular thing. The flute is more open than that. It goes where she goes. It asks things of her regardless of the setting. By playing it in a school gym with bad acoustics for children who cannot tell a Boehm flute from a recorder, Ame is doing exactly what Castelli may have imagined: playing music that matters for people who are willing to listen. The flute was not a consolation prize. It was a different kind of door.

CHAPTER 20 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Think about a sibling, a close friend, or someone who knows you very well. Have they ever seen something in you before you could explain it to them? How did you know they understood?
2. Have you ever watched someone you know perform or do something they are very good at, and thought: this is exactly who they are? What was it like to see them that way?
3. Think of a time when someone tried to offer you help that you didn't need. How did you handle it without making them feel their effort was wasted?

Key ideas

This chapter brings the sibling relationship to the centre. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Understanding someone and having the words for what you understand are different things. The first can happen without the second.
- Trying to help — even clumsily, from a distance — is its own form of love.
- A life can be smaller than planned and exactly the size it needs to be.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 20. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
amber	A warm yellow-orange colour. Here used to describe the stage lighting of a civic venue — institutional and slightly impersonal.
arrivals	(here) The area of an airport where passengers emerge after clearing customs and baggage collection.
chamber concert	A concert featuring chamber music — music written for a small ensemble, typically between two and nine players.
civic	Relating to a city or town and its public institutions. A 'civic venue' is a community or municipal hall.
companionable	Pleasantly together without needing to talk. The father sits in 'companionable silence' because he has no opinions about concert etiquette.
contentment	A feeling of quiet satisfaction with one's life. Ame is not 'performing contentment' — she genuinely feels it.
departure	(here, noun) The area of an airport where passengers go to board their flights.
etiquette	The conventions of correct or polite behaviour in a particular setting. Concert etiquette includes not talking or using phones during the performance.
Il Gardellino	A famous flute concerto by Georg Philipp Telemann (c.1730). Il Gardellino means 'the goldfinch' in Italian. The piece imitates birdsong and is known for its lightness and speed.
institutional	(here) Characteristic of large official organisations rather than personal choices — functional, without individuality. The amber lighting is 'institutional'.
Komeda	A Japanese coffee shop chain, known for its distinctive retro interior design and its 'morning service' which includes toast and a boiled egg with a morning coffee order.
municipal	Relating to a town or city and its local government. A 'municipal hall' is a public venue owned and operated by the city.
recalibrate	(here, figurative) To adjust to a changed situation. The four years of distance recalibrate themselves quickly in the airport.
rehearsal	(here, figurative) Something prepared and practised in one's head before saying it. Minato's speech 'showed the rehearsal'.
salaryman	A Japanese term for a white-collar office worker, typically a company employee with a regular salary and conventional career path. Associated with long hours, company loyalty, and city life.
Telemann	Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767), a prolific German Baroque composer. One of the most performed composers of his era. His music for flute is widely performed.
tangential	Only loosely or indirectly connected. The contact Minato has is 'tangential' — several steps removed from being useful.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 20.

1. What does Ame notice about Minato before he sees her? What has he been carrying?
2. How do Ame and Minato re-establish their ease with each other at the airport? What does this exchange tell us about their relationship?
3. What is the contact Minato has found? How does Ame receive it, and why?
4. On the second day, Minato tries to offer Ame 'an exit'. What does he say, and what does Ame understand that he is really doing?
5. What programme does the quartet perform? What is Ame's role, and what does Minato notice about her?
6. How does Minato know Ame chose the third piece? What does his answer reveal about what he heard?
7. What is Minato really saying when he says 'come and visit' twice at the airport? How does Ame understand this?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The airport (B1+)

Write a short scene (80–110 words) set in an arrivals hall, in which two people who haven't seen each other in a long time re-establish their ease with each other in the first two minutes. No large emotional speeches. Just the specific, small things people say and do when they know each other well.

Option B — Without the words (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which one character understands something about another character without having the language to name it. The understanding should be shown through what the character notices, not through explanation.

Option C — The size it needed to be (B2)

Write a reflective piece (120–160 words) about a version of your life that was smaller than you planned, or a moment when something you had imagined did not happen. Try to write about it in the way Ame thinks about her life in this chapter: without regret, without performance, simply and honestly.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. What Minato understands without words

Minato has no vocabulary for classical music. He doesn't know what the Poulenc is, or who wrote it, or what it means to Ame. Yet at the concert he observes: 'she is doing what she is supposed to be doing.' And afterwards he identifies the piece she chose.

Look at the key moments where Minato understands something without the language to name it, and answer these questions:

1. What does 'differently herself' mean? How does the author build up to this phrase?
2. Minato says he doesn't know why he knew she chose the third piece — 'it just sounded like you.' What kind of knowledge is this?
3. At the airport, 'come and visit' means several things at once. Write out the full version of what Minato is saying, in complete sentences.

B. Receiving help that isn't quite right

Minato offers a contact in the music industry — 'vaguely, tangentially, the connection several degrees removed from anything useful'. Ame 'received it correctly'. She wrote down the name. She thanked him.

Answer these questions:

1. Why does Ame receive the contact 'correctly' even though it probably isn't useful?
2. The author says: 'The trying was what mattered. The trying was real and she understood exactly what it had cost him to do it clumsily from a distance for months.' What does this mean?
3. Write a short scene (5–8 lines of dialogue) in which one character receives help that isn't quite right, in the right way.

C. A life smaller than planned

Ame thinks: 'She was simply there — in her parents' house, in the city she'd grown up in, in a life that was smaller than the one she'd planned, but exactly the size it needed to be.'

Discuss: What does it mean for a life to be 'smaller than planned' but 'exactly the size it needed to be'? Is this contentment or compromise? Write your answer in 3–5 sentences. You may want to draw on things that have happened in the novel, or on your own thinking.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Minato says 'it just sounded like you' without being able to explain how he knew. Is this surprising, given that he has no vocabulary for classical music? What does it suggest about the relationship between who someone is and what they create?
2. Ame shows Minato that she is okay by asking him to come to the concert rather than explaining it in words. Why is this a better way to show him? What would have been lost in an explanation?
3. Minato is a Tokyo salaryman, Ame is playing chamber music in a Matsuyama municipal hall. They have gone in very different directions. Does this chapter suggest that one direction is better than the other? What is the novel saying about different kinds of success?
4. At the airport, Minato can't find the right words, so he says 'come and visit' twice. His sister understands what he means. Is this kind of communication — imprecise words that carry the right meaning — a failure of language or a success of relationship?
5. The chapter ends with Ame driving home through the city waking up. How does this image compare to the beginning of the novel, when she arrived home in Rome to a quiet flat? What has changed?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The morning of the concert

Work in pairs: Ame and Minato. It is the morning before the concert. Minato has made his careful speech about Tokyo and other options. Ame needs to make him understand, without explaining too much, that she is genuinely okay.

Ame should not over-explain or justify herself. Minato should not push, but he also needs to be heard — his concern is real. The scene should end with the invitation to the concert, which is both an answer and a question.

Offering an exit that isn't needed:

"It's just that — if you wanted to think about options — I know people who..."

Saying 'I'm okay' without performing it:

"I'm okay. I mean it." / "Come to the concert tomorrow. Then tell me what you think."

CULTURAL NOTES

Telemann and Il Gardellino

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) was one of the most prolific composers of the Baroque era, and during his lifetime was considered equal to or greater than J.S. Bach. His music for flute is extensive and much loved by flautists. Il Gardellino (TWV 43:G10) is a trio sonata and later adaptation for various ensembles, inspired by birdsong — specifically the goldfinch (il gardellino in Italian). It is one of the lighter and more immediately appealing pieces in the Baroque flute repertoire, and a natural choice for a programme that also includes the emotionally heavier Poulenc. The programme in the chapter moves from Telemann's formal precision to the Poulenc and then to a Japanese piece — a journey from European classical tradition to something more local and personal.

The salaryman in Japanese society

The term salaryman (salarī-man, サラリーマン) refers to a Japanese white-collar office worker in a corporate environment. The salaryman lifestyle is associated with long working hours, strong company loyalty, commuting in Tokyo or another major city, after-work socialising with colleagues, and a conventional career path. The salaryman is a powerful cultural archetype in Japan, appearing frequently in literature, television, and popular culture. It is a life Minato represents in the novel: a different kind of ambition from Ame's, a different trade-off between belonging and aspiration. The contrast between the two siblings — one making music in a Matsuyama municipal hall, one flying home from Tokyo on a pre-dawn flight — is not presented as a hierarchy. It is simply two ways of living.

Komeda Coffee

Komeda's Coffee (コメダ珈琲店) is a Japanese coffee chain with a distinctive retro aesthetic and a loyal following, particularly in the Nagoya and Aichi region where it was founded in 1968. It is now widespread across Japan. Komeda is known for its 'morning service' (モーニングサービス): customers ordering a morning coffee receive free toast and a boiled egg. The shops have a warm, unhurried atmosphere and are popular for long, relaxed visits. That Ame's father wants to go to Komeda after the concert, while her mother notes she has milk to use, is a perfectly ordinary small domestic disagreement — the kind that continues entirely obliviously alongside the most significant moments of a novel.

Chamber music in provincial Japan

Japan has a rich and active classical music culture, including in cities outside Tokyo. Municipal halls, community centres, and arts facilities across Japan host regular chamber concerts, solo recitals, and ensemble performances, often organised by local music associations or funded through city arts programmes. Audiences for these concerts tend to be smaller than those in Tokyo, but attendance is often loyal and the community connection strong. A chamber concert in a Matsuyama municipal hall — two thirds full on a January evening — is entirely realistic and represents exactly the kind of musical life Ame is building: not famous, not in a major city, but present, live, and heard by people who came specifically to listen.

CHAPTER 21 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Has a friend or teacher ever arranged something for you without fully explaining why — and it turned out to be exactly what you needed? How did you feel when you understood what they had done?
2. Think about a space — a classroom, a room, a building — that felt right for something the moment you walked in. What made it feel that way?
3. Is there a difference between someone manipulating you and someone creating the right conditions for you to see something clearly? Where is the line?

Key ideas

This is the final chapter before the last. Think about these ideas before you read:

- The right room at the right moment can say something a person cannot.
- A good friend acts once, at exactly the right time, and then waits.
- What seems like the end of the story is often the beginning of the next one.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 21. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
acoustics	The sound properties of a space. The new classroom has better acoustics than the gym — wooden floors that absorb rather than bounce sound.
banner	A long strip of cloth or paper with a message or image, hung for a celebration or event.
construction noise	The sound of building work — drilling, hammering, machinery. Mentioned earlier in the novel as a disruption to Mie's classroom.
decorated	(here) Made attractive for a special occasion, with paper flowers made by the children.
early music education	The teaching of music to very young children, often considered beneficial for cognitive, emotional, and social development.
expansion	The process of becoming larger. The school's expansion is the new yochien wing.
inauguration	A formal ceremony to mark the opening of a new building, institution, or period.
intake	(here) The first group of children who will join the new yochien when it opens in April.
lopsided	Not balanced or even on both sides; slightly crooked. The paper flowers are lopsided because they were made by children.
manipulate	To control or influence someone in a clever or unfair way, without them being fully aware of it. Ame says Mie manipulated her.
permit	Official permission, usually in written form, to do something regulated by law. The school has had building permits for two years.
resignation	(here) Calm acceptance of something difficult or unavoidable. Mie describes the construction delay with resignation.
vision	(here) A plan or idea for the future of something — here, the school's vision for its expansion.
wing	(here) A separate section added to an existing building. The new wing is the yochien.
yōchien	A Japanese pre-school or kindergarten, typically for children aged three to five. The word combines 'yō' (幼) meaning 'infant' and 'chien' (稚園) meaning 'garden'. A yōchien focuses on structured play, social development, and early education.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 21.

1. What is the invitation Ame receives? What detail in the invitation tells her something about Mie?
2. What is the new wing? What does it contain, and when does it open?
3. What programme does Ame play at the inauguration? Why does she choose the Poulenc for this room?
4. How do the small children in the front row listen? What does the sleeping boy represent?
5. What does Mie say after the performance, in the tone she uses for facts that don't require commentary?
6. Ame accuses Mie of manipulating her. Mie disagrees. What is the difference between Mie's version and Ame's version of what happened?
7. How does the chapter end? What does Mie's stillness tell us about her?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The invitation (B1+)

Write the text of a short invitation — an email, a message, or a note — that contains more than it appears to. The writer knows what they're doing; the reader doesn't yet. Keep it brief, specific, and slightly mysterious. (50–80 words)

Option B — The room that said something (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) in which a character enters a space and understands something about their future from what they see in it. The room should do the communicating — not the character's internal monologue. Describe specific physical details.

Option C — Mie (B2)

Write a short character study (120–160 words) of Mie from Ame's point of view. Who is she? What has she done across the novel, quietly, without being asked? What does her friendship mean, and what kind of person does it take to be a friend like this?

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. What the room says

Mie tells Ame: 'I thought the room might say something that I couldn't.'

Look at how the author describes the new classroom and answer these questions:

1. What specific details of the room does Ame notice? List at least four.
2. Why can a room say something that a person cannot? What is different about a room's way of communicating?
3. Think of a place you know that communicated something to you about what it was for, or what it could be. Describe it in 3–5 sentences.

B. Manipulation or insight?

Look at this exchange:

"You manipulated me," Ame said.

Mie considered this.

"You manipulated yourself," she said. "I just — helped things along."

1. What is the difference between 'manipulating someone' and 'helping things along'?
2. Is Mie right that Ame manipulated herself? What does this mean?
3. Think of an example from your own life or from fiction where someone created the conditions for another person to see something clearly. Was this manipulation or kindness? Was it both?

C. The Poulenc: a final appearance

The Poulenc Allegro malinconico has appeared several times in the novel: in Castelli's office (Chapter 2), in the hotel lobby (implied, Chapter 9), in the school gym (Chapter 18), and now here. Each time it appears in a different context and with a different meaning.

Complete the table and then answer the question below.

Where / when the Poulenc appears	What it means in this moment
Chapter 2: Castelli's office (played twice)	
Chapter 18: The school gym	
Chapter 21: The new yochien classroom	

Why is it right that the Poulenc appears here, in this room, at this moment in the novel?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Mie has been watching quietly since December. She did exactly one thing, at exactly the right moment. Is this what good friendship looks like? Can you think of someone in your own life who has acted like this for you?
2. The small boy in the front row falls asleep during Ame's performance. The author calls this 'also a kind of attention.' What do you think this means? Is it funny, tender, or both?
3. The hooks by the door are 'at exactly the right height'. This is a very small detail. Why does Ame notice it? What does it tell her?
4. The lopsided paper flowers were made by children 'who cared more about the making than the result.' This phrase echoes themes that run through the whole novel. What is it saying about how we should approach the things we make and do?
5. Mie says there might be 'a place for a music teacher' with more children. This is not an offer, not a contract, not a certainty. But it is something. Does this feel like a satisfying ending to the novel's central question? What is still open?

ROLE PLAY

Scene: After the performance

Work in pairs: Ame and Mie. The parents have gathered for tea. The children are running in the corridor. Mie appears at Ame's elbow and says what she says about a music teacher.

Ame should realise what Mie has done — gradually, then fully. She should move from surprise to a kind of accusing warmth to gratitude. Mie should hold her ground calmly, without apology, knowing she was right.

Realising what someone has done for you:

"You knew, didn't you." / "You knew this whole time." / "You manipulated me."

Holding your ground when you were right:

"I invited you to play at an inauguration." / "You manipulated yourself. I just helped things along."

CULTURAL NOTES

Yōchien — Japanese pre-school

A yōchien (幼稚園) is a Japanese kindergarten or pre-school, typically for children aged three to five or six. In Japan's education system, yōchien falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), unlike the hoikuen (nursery school), which falls under the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Yōchien typically offer half-day programmes focused on play, socialisation, and early learning. They often include music, art, and outdoor activities. The new wing in the chapter is a yōchien attached to an existing primary school — an increasingly common arrangement in Japan, particularly as the government promotes integrated early education programmes.

Music education in early childhood

There is substantial research supporting the benefits of music education in early childhood. Studies suggest that exposure to music — singing, playing, listening — supports language development, mathematical reasoning, motor skills, and social bonding. In Japan, music is considered a natural part of early childhood education, and most yōchien and hoikuen include music activities in their daily programmes. Having a dedicated music teacher for a school that includes both a primary school and a yōchien is a meaningful educational commitment. The piano in the corner of the new classroom is not decorative. It is there to be played.

Paper flowers in Japanese school culture

Handmade decorations are a staple of Japanese school celebrations and classroom culture. Children routinely make paper flowers, banners, decorative chains (kusudama), and other crafts for school events, entrance ceremonies (nyuugakushiki, 入学式), farewell ceremonies (sotsugyoushiki, 卒業式), and seasonal displays. The lopsided paper flowers at the inauguration are entirely characteristic: imperfect, handmade, and made with care. The author's observation that the children 'cared more about the making than the result' captures something true about the spirit of these preparations — and echoes, quietly, the novel's broader theme about what it means to do something well and for the right reasons.

The piano in the corner

The piano in the new classroom appears as a single detail: 'A piano in the corner, upright, new, exactly where it was supposed to be.' The specificity of 'exactly where it was supposed to be' does significant work. A piano in the corner of a room is a common piece of school furniture. But in this novel, pianos have meant something: the hotel lobby piano in Rome where Lorenzo took his lessons in Chapter 3, the Roland in the Ferraro flat, the public piano at Termini. And in Chapter 15, Ame played her flute in the kimono shop with the cedar smell and the quiet around her. Here, the piano is not for her — it is for the children who will come in April. She is not the piano. She is what comes with it.

CHAPTER 22 | LEVEL B1+–B2

PRE-READING

Think about it

1. Think about an object from a difficult period of your life that you have kept. What does it represent? Is it a reminder of the difficulty, of what you survived, or of what the difficulty led you to?
2. Have you ever looked back at a hard time in your life and felt, not regret, but something more like gratitude — because of where it brought you? Is that possible?
3. How do you write to someone you are very close to? How is it different from writing a formal message?

Key ideas

This is the final chapter. Think about these ideas before you read:

- Content and happy are not the same thing. The journey from one to the other is what the novel has been about.
- Some things can only be understood in retrospect — when you can see the whole path, not just where you are standing.
- A good ending is not the end of everything. It is the beginning of what comes next.

GLOSSARY

The following words and phrases appear in Chapter 22. Read through them before you start the chapter.

Word / Phrase	Definition / Explanation
accounting for	(here) Taking into account or allowing for. 'Accounting for the time difference' means adjusting for the time zone between Japan and Italy.
aside	(here) A remark made as if in passing, almost as an afterthought, though it may be more significant than it appears.
breathless	(here, figurative) Full of energy and speed — Concetta's email is 'breathless' because she has many things to say at once.
brisk normality	Efficient, matter-of-fact behaviour that treats something significant as ordinary routine.
cede	(here, past tense: ceded) To give up control of something, temporarily or permanently. The father ceded the accounts when he was injured; he now reclaims them.
destination	(here, figurative) The place or state you have arrived at after a journey. Ame uses it to mean where the path of difficulties has brought her.
drift	(here) A slow, directionless movement — used to describe one of the many things Ame held in the difficult period of the novel.
eloquent	Expressing something with clear and persuasive language. Ame's explanation to Mancini was 'insufficient' — not eloquent — but it will be enough for Castelli.
expired	No longer valid because its time limit has passed. The permesso di soggiorno is expired.
frame	(here, noun) A border, usually decorative, used to display a photograph or document. Ame plans to put the expired card in a small frame.
hand back	(here) To return responsibility for something to the person who had it before.
permesso di soggiorno	The Italian residence permit for non-EU citizens. Here, the expired card that Ame finds in a drawer.
registration form	An official form completed when a child is enrolled in a school.
reorganisation	(here) The process of sorting through and rearranging things when one chapter ends and another begins.
resume	(here, verb) To begin again after a pause. The father resumes the accounts when his leg has recovered.
retrospect	Looking back at past events from the present, with the knowledge of how things turned out.
twinned	Officially linked with, as in a 'twin city' or 'twinned city' arrangement, where two cities in different countries form a cultural and economic partnership.
winter rental season	(here) The busy period for the kimono shop during the late autumn and winter months, when formal events and ceremonies are common.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions about Chapter 22.

1. What does Ame do on the morning of the chapter? What does the start date of the contract mean for her family?
2. What does she write to Castelli, and what is his reply? Why does she look at the single word for a moment before closing her laptop?
3. What does she write to Concetta? How is the tone of this email different from the one to Castelli?
4. What does Ame find in the drawer? What does she decide to do with it, and why?
5. Ame distinguishes between three states: content, settled, and happy. When did each one arrive?
6. What does Ame mean when she says 'you couldn't subtract any of it without losing the destination'?
7. What is Concetta's news at the end of her email, and how does Ame reply?

WRITING TASK

Option A — The email to Concetta (B1+)

Write Ame's email to Concetta in full — the one she sends the evening of signing the contract. It should be warm, direct, and cover the things mentioned in the novel: the yochien, Mie, the 'manipulation', the hug, the paperwork, April. Write it the way Ame talks to Concetta: without managing it. (100–140 words)

Option B — The framed card (B1+–B2)

Write a short scene (100–140 words) set one year later: Ame at her desk at the yochien, the framed permesso di soggiorno in front of her. A child asks what it is. Ame has to explain — simply, honestly, in a way a young child can understand. What does she say?

Option C — A letter to yourself (B2)

Write a short letter (120–160 words) from Ame to her younger self — the Ame at the beginning of the novel, arriving back at the flat in Rome after the hotel shift. What does she know now that she didn't know then? What would she say? Try not to explain the whole story. Focus on one or two things.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

A. Three words: content, settled, happy

The chapter introduces a distinction between three emotional states: 'She had been content, coming back. Then settled. Now she was happy.'

These are not the same thing. Using what you know from the novel, write a sentence about each state — what it means, and which moment or period in the story corresponds to it.

State	Meaning and when / how it arrived
Content	
Settled	
Happy	

Is happy necessarily better than content or settled? Can you think of moments in the novel when being content was enough?

B. The permesso di soggiorno — what to do with a difficult object

Ame finds her expired permesso and decides to frame it. She thinks: 'The suffering real, the path real, the arrival real. She didn't regret any of it, because you couldn't subtract any of it without losing the destination.'

This is a philosophical position. Discuss these questions:

1. Do you agree that you cannot regret the path that brought you somewhere you are glad to be? Is it always true?
2. What is the difference between accepting your path and being glad of your suffering? Is Ame doing the first, the second, or both?
3. Why does she want to display the expired card on her desk at the yochien? What will it mean to the children, or to her, to have it there?

C. Castelli's 'Good' and Concetta's aside

The novel ends with two contrasting communications: Castelli's single-word reply and Concetta's long, warm email with the important thing buried near the end.

For each communication, answer:

1. What does Castelli's 'Good.' communicate? How can one word say so much?
2. Why does Concetta bury the news about Kyoto near the end, as 'almost an aside'? What does this tell us about how she delivers the things that matter?
3. The novel ends with 'Yes. That would be nice.' How does this final sentence compare to the novel's opening? What has changed?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Ame looks at her expired permesso di soggiorno — the document that caused her so much difficulty — and decides to frame it. Is this a surprising reaction? What does it tell us about how she has processed what happened to her in Rome?
2. Castelli replies in one word: 'Good.' We have been waiting for his response throughout the chapter. Is this the right reply? What would have been wrong with more?
3. The novel began with Ame adding her shoes to the rack and coming home to the flat in Rome. It ends with 'Yes. That would be nice.' What is the effect of ending on this quiet, warm note? What has the novel earned the right to end this way?
4. The novel describes Ame's path as one that couldn't be subtracted from without losing the destination. Do you believe this? Can difficulties always be seen this way in retrospect, or only sometimes? When is it possible and when isn't it?
5. Looking at the whole novel: what do you think Ame's story is really about? Is it about music? About belonging? About patience? About what it costs to be a foreigner? About what it means to find your way? Try to write a single sentence that captures what the novel is about to you.

ROLE PLAY

Scene: The whole novel — a conversation

Work in groups of three or four. You have now read the entire novel. Imagine you are three or four of the characters from the story — Ame, Concetta, Mie, Castelli, Luca, or anyone else you choose — having a conversation some months after the final chapter.

What do you each know? What don't you know? What would you say to each other, or ask? How have things changed for each of you since the end of the story?

Catching up after time:

"I heard you're teaching now." / "Kyoto in October — are we really doing this?" / "How are the children?"

Saying the things you couldn't say before:

"I want you to know that I understood, even then." / "I wish I'd said something sooner."

CULTURAL NOTES

Sister city relationships: Florence and Kyoto

Florence, Italy, and Kyoto, Japan, have been sister cities (gemellaggio / 姉妹都市) since 1965, one of the earliest such partnerships between Italian and Japanese cities. The relationship was founded on the cities' shared status as historical cultural capitals — both are associated with art, craft, tradition, and a particular kind of civic pride in heritage. Exchange programmes, artistic collaborations, and cultural events continue to mark the relationship. A Florentine orchestra touring Japan as part of this partnership, with a week in Kyoto, is entirely plausible. For Concetta, this is the kind of tour that comes with a professional orchestra's schedule: part of the year's programme, not a specially planned event.

The expired residence permit as an object

Official documents have a strange quality: they are bureaucratic objects with personal weight. A passport carries a life. A visa tells a story about who was allowed to go where and when. An expired permesso di soggiorno is a document that once defined the boundaries of Ame's legal existence in Italy — what she could do, where she could be, what she was permitted. It expired, along with the life it governed. That Ame finds it in a drawer, holds it, and decides to frame it rather than throw it away is an act of integration: she is not denying what happened, not trying to forget it, not treating it as only painful. She is placing it where she can see it from wherever she sits. It is part of the view.

The difference between content and happy

In English, 'content' and 'happy' are related but distinct. 'Content' suggests a calm, settled acceptance — a quiet satisfaction with what is. 'Happy' implies something more active, more alive: a positive emotional state rather than simply the absence of dissatisfaction. The author uses both words deliberately and places them in a specific sequence. Ame arrives home and finds she is content — not in distress, at peace with the decision. Then settled — part of the place again, belonging. Then happy — which the chapter places at the moment of the contract, the emails, the framing of the card. These are not synonyms. The novel has earned each word separately.

Reaching without effort

Near the end of the chapter, the author writes: 'Castelli's flute still asked more of her than her own did, still requiring her to reach. She was reaching without effort now.' This is the final description of Ame as a player. In Chapter 15, Castelli's flute was 'resistant' — daunting, requiring more than she could give easily. Over the following months, she has grown into the instrument. To reach without effort is not the same as finding it easy: the instrument still asks more. But the asking no longer costs her. This is what development as a musician looks like, and it is also, the novel suggests, what development as a person looks like. The difficulty does not diminish. Your ability to meet it does.