

Inaka

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Chapter 1: The Northern Line

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher's Note Chapter 1 takes place entirely in London. It establishes who Charlie is, where she comes from, and what her life feels like at twenty-three: the commute, the pub, the flat, the job applications, the friendship. There is nothing here that requires prior knowledge of anything outside London. Pre-reading activities focus on setting, voice, and the experience of feeling stuck. Comprehension, language, and writing activities are designed for the lesson after reading.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Think about where you live. What sounds, smells, or sights would you use to describe it to someone who had never been there?
- Have you ever had a period in your life when things felt “stuck” — when you were waiting for something to change? What was that like?
- What do you think life is like for a young person in a big city who has just finished university and is looking for a job?
- Do you have a “local” — a café, bar, or place where people know you and you feel at home? What makes a place feel like that?

1.2 Setting the Scene: London

Chapter 1 is set in London — specifically in the south of the city, in the area around Stockwell, Elephant and Castle, and the streets around them. The chapter takes place on a Wednesday evening in November.

Before you read, think about:

- What do you already know about London? What images or ideas come to mind?
- What do you think a Wednesday evening feels like in a large city? Who is out? Where are they going?
- The chapter is called “The Northern Line” — this is the name of a London Underground line. What might a chapter named after a commuter train line be about?

1.3 First Impressions: The Opening Line

The novel begins with this sentence:

“The Northern line was, as always, an act of faith.”

Discuss with a partner:

- What do you think “an act of faith” means in this context?
- What does the phrase “as always” add to the sentence? What does it tell us about Charlie’s relationship with this train?
- What kind of person do you think the narrator might be, based on this one sentence alone?
- Write your own sentence describing public transport in your city, using a similar style.

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 1. Study them before or after reading. The list is in alphabetical order.

an act of faith	something you do even though you are not certain it will work; you have to trust and hope for the best
Bayes Business School	a real business school in London, part of City, University of London; Charlie's university
a cross to bear	something difficult or annoying you have to deal with regularly (originally from a religious expression)
to chase someone	to contact someone again to ask about something you are waiting for; to follow up
constitutionally incapable	completely unable to do something — it is part of who you are; used here with gentle, affectionate humour
the correct and established order of things	the usual way things happen between two people; a routine that both accept without needing to discuss it (said with irony and warmth)
entry-level position	a job intended for people just starting their career, with little or no experience required — in theory
a gust of cold air	a sudden rush of cold air
jukebox	a machine in a pub or café that plays music when you put in money and select a song
landlord	the person who owns or manages a pub
last orders	the announcement in a British pub that it is nearly closing time and customers should buy their final drink
the long way	a route that takes more time than necessary; often chosen to delay arriving somewhere, or simply to think
off-licence	a shop that sells alcohol to take away (British English)
Oyster card	a reloadable card used to pay for public transport in London (buses, Underground, trains)
pint	a unit of liquid measure (568 ml); in a pub context, a glass of beer of this size
soulless	without character or warmth; used to describe places that feel cold and impersonal
temping agency	a company that finds people short-term or temporary work in offices
the Wednesday crush	the crowd of people on public transport on a Wednesday evening; 'crush' means a very crowded, pressed-together space
well actually	a phrase used before correcting someone, often in a self-important or annoying way; Derek uses it as a habit
Zoopla	a British website for finding flats and houses to rent or buy; Charlie used it to find her flatmates

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. Taking the bus at rush hour is always _____. You just have to hope there is space.
2. She applied for several _____ positions, but they all required two years of experience.
3. He always says “_____” before correcting people, and everyone in the office finds it exhausting.
4. The new shopping centre is clean and modern, but somehow completely _____.
5. I sent my CV two weeks ago. I think I’ll have to _____ them if I don’t hear anything soon.
6. Living far from family is my _____. I’ve accepted it.
7. She left an hour early and still took _____: through the park, past the old library, along the canal.

2.2 Word Work: British English

Several words in Chapter 1 are specifically British English. Match each British word or phrase with its meaning or equivalent.

British English	Meaning / Equivalent
off-licence	_____
pint	_____
landlord (of a pub)	_____
last orders	_____
chips	_____
the high road	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

1.	Charlie is on the Northern line on a Wednesday evening.	T / F / NM
2.	Charlie always remembers her umbrella.	T / F / NM
3.	Bryony always arrives on time.	T / F / NM
4.	The Anchor is a modern pub near a shopping centre.	T / F / NM
5.	Charlie has a degree in Business Management.	T / F / NM
6.	Charlie has been offered a job in Canary Wharf.	T / F / NM
7.	Bryony is thinking about moving back to Glasgow.	T / F / NM
8.	Charlie has lived in London her whole life.	T / F / NM
9.	Charlie and Bryony met at university.	T / F / NM
10.	The Anchor has recently changed its crisp supplier.	T / F / NM
11.	Charlie's father worked near her flat.	T / F / NM
12.	Charlie sings well.	T / F / NM

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

1. What does Charlie do on the train to pass the time?
2. How does Charlie know the Anchor so well? Give at least two details from the text.
3. What does the list of things Charlie has — her degree, her Oyster card, her loyalty card for a closed café — tell us about her situation?
4. What does Bryony suggest at the end of the evening, and how does Charlie respond?
5. How does the chapter end? What is the last image the author gives us, and what mood does it create?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author does not say directly.

1. Charlie says: "I'm alright here. I'll figure it out." Do you believe her? What do you think she really means?
2. "This was, as far as she could tell, normal." Why does the author add "as far as she could tell"? What does this suggest about Charlie?
3. Nothing dramatic happens in Chapter 1. Why do you think the author chose to begin the story this way?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Expressing Routine and Habit

Chapter 1 is full of routine. The author uses specific structures to show that things happen again and again. Look at these examples:

“She had been meaning to buy a proper coat since October.”

“Bryony was constitutionally incapable of arriving on time to anything that wasn’t a flight or an exam.”

“This was the correct and established order of things.”

Notice the structures: had been + -ing (past perfect continuous — something going on for a long time) • was + adjective + of + -ing (a fixed personal trait) • This was... (naming and accepting a pattern)

Now write three sentences about your own routines or habits, using one of these structures each time.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4.2 Understatement and Dry Humour

Charlie’s narration is dry, self-deprecating, and ironic. The humour often comes from understatement — saying something in a smaller way than you might expect. Look at these examples:

“The Northern line was, as always, an act of faith.”

“London didn’t do more than four.”

Each of these could be said more dramatically. Instead, Charlie states the problem as a simple, accepted fact. This creates a particular kind of humour — the humour of someone who has seen too much to be surprised.

Rewrite these dramatic sentences in Charlie’s understated style. The first is done as an example.

Example: “I was utterly exhausted by the relentless chaos of London commuting.”

Charlie’s version: “The commute was, as always, a commute.”

4. “Seven months of job rejections had left me feeling completely hopeless about my future.”

Charlie’s version: _____

5. “I was absolutely devastated when they gave the job to someone else.”

Charlie’s version: _____

6. “Bryony was so late that I thought she would never come.”

Charlie’s version: _____

4.3 Specific Detail as Characterisation

The author uses very specific details to build Charlie's world without explaining it. Look at this passage:

“She had a Boots Advantage Card and an Oyster card and a loyalty card for a coffee place that had closed down.”

This list tells us a great deal about Charlie without saying any of it directly. The Oyster card tells us she uses public transport every day. The loyalty card for a closed café tells us she has been in this city long enough for places to disappear around her. The Boots card is simply ordinary — which is the point.

Now write a similar list for a fictional character of your own. Choose three or four specific objects or small facts that reveal something about who they are, without explaining.

My character: _____

4.4 Prepositions of Place and Movement

Chapter 1 is full of movement through the city. Find five prepositional phrases from the chapter that describe movement or location (for example: “at Stockwell”, “past the new flats”). Write them below and explain what each tells us about the scene.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- By the end of Chapter 1, what kind of person do you think Charlie is? What evidence from the text supports your view?
- Charlie says she is “alright” and will “figure it out.” Do you believe her? What do you think she is really feeling?
- Charlie and Bryony have been friends since their first week at university. What does their relationship tell us about each of them?
- The chapter describes Charlie’s life as “normal” and “just what being twenty-three was.” Is it contentment, resignation, or something harder to name?
- Charlie walks home “the long way.” Why might someone do this? What does it suggest about how she feels?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie can see “about four stars” from London. What might this detail suggest? Is it a complaint, an observation, or something else?
- The chapter is full of places that are changing: the new flats where the market used to be, the café that closed down. What does this tell us about Charlie’s relationship with her city?
- Nothing dramatic happens in Chapter 1. Why might an author choose to begin a novel this way?
- The last line of the chapter is: “Charlotte Spicer slept.” The rest of the chapter uses “Charlie.” Why might the author use her full name here, at the very end? What effect does it create?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Do you have a place like the Anchor — somewhere you go regularly where people know you? What makes it feel like “yours”?
- Have you ever felt stuck — between where you are and where you want to be? How did you deal with it?
- Charlie and Bryony both studied Business Management and both ended up doing something else. Is this a familiar situation? What do people in your country typically do after university?
- Charlie describes Bryony making her laugh “in a way that felt like breathing, easy and necessary.” Do you have a friendship like that? What makes it different from other friendships?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Anchor Conversation

Work in pairs. You are Charlie and Bryony at the Anchor on Wednesday evening.

The Situation

- Bryony has just arrived (late, as always). Charlie has been waiting.
- Bryony explains why she is late — make up your own reason.
- Charlie tells Bryony about the Canary Wharf interview.
- Bryony mentions that she is thinking of going back to Glasgow.
- Charlie responds — remember her personality: dry, warm, not one to ask for help.
- End the scene as the chapter does: both of them agree it has been a good Wednesday night.

6.2 The Phone Call Home

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie. The other is a parent or close family member calling to check in.

The Situation

- It is late Wednesday night. Charlie has just got home from the Anchor.
- A parent calls. How much does Charlie tell people about her real situation?
- Is she honest, or does she perform being fine?
- What does her parent worry about? What do they want for her?
- What — if anything — does Charlie almost say, but doesn't?

6.3 The Job Interview

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie. The other is an interviewer at the Canary Wharf company.

The Situation

- The role is Marketing Coordinator.
- The office is in Canary Wharf — which Charlie has already described as “soulless.”
- Charlie needs the job, but she also has to be herself.
- The interviewer must ask at least two standard interview questions.
- After the scene: discuss as a class whether you think Charlie got the job.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Stuck and Waiting

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Do you have a “local” — a place where people know you?		
Have you ever felt stuck, waiting for the next thing to happen?		
Is there somewhere you’ve lived your whole life, or have you moved around?		
What’s something you’ve been meaning to do since last month but still haven’t done?		
Do you walk “the long way” home sometimes? When, and why?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Typical Evening

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing a typical evening in your town or city. Try to use specific details — smells, sounds, places — the way the author does in Chapter 1. Use the present tense.

Useful language: The streets are... • It smells like... • The kind of place where... • At this hour... • You could hear... • This was, as far as I could tell...

7.2 Creative Writing: Charlie's Diary

Write a short diary entry (100–130 words) from Charlie's point of view, written the night after the Anchor conversation. She has just got home. What is she thinking about? What does she feel about her life, about Bryony possibly leaving, about her job search?

Try to capture Charlie's voice: dry, observational, honest with herself even when she pretends she is fine.

7.3 Extended Writing: Is This Just Normal?

Charlie tells herself that her situation — degree, no job, flatshare, waiting — is “just what being twenty-three was.” Write 150–180 words exploring this idea. You might consider:

- Is Charlie right? Is this experience common for people her age in your country?
- Is there a difference between accepting a situation and being content with it?
- What do you think Charlie really wants, even if she would not say it out loud?

7.4 Short Writing: A Place That Is Changing

Charlie walks past “the new flats that had gone up where the market used to be” and “the corner where her nan had lived until the year before last.” The city is changing around her.

Write 80–100 words about a place you know that has changed, or is changing. What was it like before? What is it like now? What do you feel about the change?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 1.

The East End of London

The East End of London is the area of the city most historically associated with the working class, the docks, and successive waves of immigration — Irish, Jewish, South Asian, and others over the decades. It is also the area that has undergone some of the most dramatic change in recent years, with gentrification replacing older neighbourhoods and communities. The novel is attentive to this: Charlie walks past “the new flats that had gone up where the market used to be” and “the corner where her nan had lived until the year before last.” The minicab office where her father worked for eleven years, the off-licence that has been there since her grandmother’s time — these are the details of a place with deep roots that is visibly changing around the people who live in it.

The British Pub

The pub (public house) is a central institution in British social life. A traditional pub is not simply a place to drink: it is a neighbourhood space, somewhere people return to regularly over years and decades. The jukebox has been there since before anyone can remember. Charlie has been coming to the Anchor since before she was legally allowed to drink alcohol. This kind of relationship between a person and a local pub — the pub as an extension of home — is specifically British, and the Anchor functions as a place of continuity and belonging. The word ‘local’ used as a noun (‘her local’) means exactly this: the pub that belongs to you, or that you belong to.

Graduate Employment in the UK

Charlie has a Business Management degree from a respected London university and cannot find a job in Business Management. This is not unusual. The UK graduate job market is competitive and frequently absurd: entry-level positions routinely require two years of experience; second interviews lead to silence; applications sent in August go unanswered until January, or are never answered at all. Charlie’s situation — degree in hand, loyalty card for a closed café in pocket, waiting — is recognisable across many generations of graduates.

The London Underground: The Northern Line

The London Underground, commonly called the Tube, is one of the world’s oldest metro systems, opened in 1863. It covers much of central and inner London with eleven lines. The Northern line, which Charlie uses, runs from the southern suburbs through the city centre and out to the north, and has a reputation among Londoners for unreliable service, heat in summer, and a general air of barely-managed chaos. Charlie’s description of it as ‘an act of faith’ is a shared joke with anyone who uses it regularly. The Oyster card — a reloadable contactless card — is the standard way to pay for all public transport in London.

Canary Wharf

Canary Wharf is a large business district in east London, built in the 1980s and 1990s on the site of the former West India Docks. It is home to the headquarters of many major banks and financial companies, and its glass towers are among the most recognisable features of London’s skyline. Charlie calls it ‘soulless’, which is a common reaction among Londoners who grew up in the older, more organic parts of the city. The contrast between Canary Wharf and the neighbourhood streets Charlie walks home through — the chicken shop, the minicab office, the off-licence — is part of the social geography of modern London.

Bayes Business School

Bayes Business School, formerly known as Cass Business School, is part of City, University of London, is a well-regarded institution, particularly for finance and business degrees. The chapter’s quiet joke — that a Business Management degree turned out to be excellent preparation for a career in Business Management, which was not simply handed to graduates on request — is one that many university graduates will recognise regardless of subject.

Chapter 2: Yamagata?

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher's Note Chapter 2 is the pivot of the story's opening: Charlie receives the JET Programme acceptance letter on the same morning as a job rejection, and everything that follows in this chapter — the phone call to Bryony, the Japanese classes, the farewell at the Anchor — flows from that single moment on the doormat. The chapter introduces Japan, the Japanese language, and the idea of leaving for the first time, but entirely through Charlie's perspective in London. Exercises focus on the language of surprise, decision-making, and transition, as well as the chapter's considerable dry humour.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever received news that surprised you completely — good or bad? How did you react?
- Have you ever done something and then not remembered why you did it? What happened?
- If you found out you had been accepted for a job or programme in a country you had never visited, what would your first reaction be?
- What would make it harder to say yes? What would make it easier?

1.2 The Title: Yamagata?

The chapter is called “Yamagata?” — with a question mark.

Before you read: What do you think the question mark tells us? Is it a geographical question, an emotional one, or both? Who do you think is asking it — and how do you think they feel?

1.3 The Opening Line

Chapter 2 begins:

“The letter from the Canary Wharf job arrived on a Thursday morning, which Charlie thought showed a certain lack of consideration.”

Discuss:

- What does this sentence tell us about Charlie's personality?
- What do you think the letter contains? What kind of news does a letter from a job usually bring?
- Why might the day of the week matter to someone receiving bad news?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 2. The list is in alphabetical order.

Aberdeen	a city in the far north of Scotland; used here as an example of a job so distant or unappealing that Charlie never followed up on it
administrative machinery	the systems, processes, and paperwork that run a large organisation; used here with wry humour
clarifying	making something clearer; here used ironically — someone else's negative reaction helps Charlie realise what she actually thinks
commencing	beginning, starting (formal written English)
a community centre	a local building used for classes, clubs, and events, open to the public
consistent with the evidence	matching the facts; said here as a dry, slightly formal way of agreeing with something obvious
a cry for help	a sign that someone is struggling and needs support, even if they don't say so directly
Dorset	a rural county in the south-west of England, known for countryside and coastline
excessive	too much; more than is needed or reasonable
the District line	a line on the London Underground; used here humorously to contrast the scale of Japan with a short Tube journey
formality	the level of politeness or officiousness required in a given situation or language register
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education; exams taken by students in England and Wales at around age 16
give or take	approximately; more or less
the haze of a mild hangover	the fuzzy, slightly unwell feeling after drinking too much the night before
irrational conviction	a belief you hold even though you know it is probably not based on logic
non-negotiable	not open to discussion or change; final
to notice (London didn't notice)	used here to personify the city — London carries on regardless of what happens to one person
placement	a position or posting assigned to someone as part of a programme or scheme
a PhD	Doctor of Philosophy; the highest university degree, requiring several years of original research
prefecture	an administrative region in Japan, similar to a county or province
to relocate	to move to a different place, usually for work
to give notice	to formally inform someone (here, a landlord) that you are leaving, usually with a set period of warning
Tohoku	the northern region of Japan's main island, Honshu; known for mountains, rice, cold winters, and distinct regional culture
warranted	deserved; justified by the situation
は and が (wa and ga)	two Japanese grammatical particles; both mark the subject of a sentence but in different ways — the most discussed distinctions for learners of Japanese

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The programme told us our placements were _____. We could not request a change.
2. She had the _____ conviction that drinking more coffee would help her think more clearly.
3. He sent his resignation letter yesterday, so he has officially given _____.
4. Applying for eleven jobs in one afternoon was either productive or a _____ — probably both.
5. The course _____ in September and runs for two semesters.
6. Her flatmate's reaction was, unexpectedly, _____: it helped Charlie understand what she actually wanted.
7. Learning three writing systems seemed _____. One would surely be enough.

2.2 Language and Register

The JET Programme letter uses formal written English. Find a phrase in the glossary — or in the letter as quoted in the chapter — that matches each informal equivalent below.

Informal / everyday English	Formal English (from the letter or glossary)
starting	_____
your application was successful	_____
you've been given a place in	_____
this cannot be changed	_____
moving to another city for work	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | The rejection letter from Canary Wharf arrives on a Friday. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie opens the rejection letter before the brown envelope. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Charlie clearly remembers applying to the JET Programme. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie applied for eleven things in a single afternoon in August. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The JET letter says her placement in Yamagata is non-negotiable. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Charlie passed her GCSE French exam. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | The Japanese class is held on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | There are twelve people in Charlie's Japanese class. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie's flatmate who works in finance encourages her to go to Japan. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Bryony arrives on time for the farewell at the Anchor. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie has bought a new coat by the time she goes to the Anchor. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie and Bryony agree to stay in touch. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- What two pieces of post does Charlie find on the doormat, and in what order does she open them?
- What does Charlie find when she searches for Yamagata online? List at least four things.
- Who is in Charlie's Japanese class? Describe at least three of the other students.
- What does Yuki say to Charlie after learning she has no experience with children? What does Charlie notice about this answer?
- What four things can Charlie do in Japanese by the time we reach the end of her language classes?
- What does Charlie say to Bryony's question "Are you actually going to do this?" What are her exact reasons?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie says she "may have applied to some things she would not, in a more composed state of mind, have applied to." What does this tell us about August, and about Charlie at that point in her life?
- Charlie's flatmate who works in finance looked at her "with an expression that suggested Japan was not a sensible career move, which Charlie found, unexpectedly, clarifying." What does this mean? Why would someone else's disapproval be clarifying?
- At the Anchor farewell, Bryony "sat down without apologising, which meant she was taking this seriously." What does this tell us about Bryony, and about their friendship?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Language of Surprise and Gradual Understanding

When Charlie reads the JET letter, her understanding arrives slowly. The author shows this through repetition and pacing. Look at this sequence:

“It took her a moment to understand what she was reading.”

[the letter, quoted in full]

“Then she read it again.”

[the letter, quoted again]

“Nope, it was still the same.”

Notice how the author slows time down at the key moment. The repetition makes the reader experience Charlie’s disbelief directly.

Now think about a time you received surprising news. Write four or five sentences describing how you understood it gradually — perhaps reading or hearing something more than once before it felt real.

4.2 Expressing Degrees of Certainty

Charlie uses many phrases that show she is not completely certain about things. Look at these examples from the chapter:

“She may have applied to some things she would not... have applied to.”

“I think I might.”

“I think I’m going to Japan.”

“I might want to learn Japanese.”

Key structures: may have + past participle (uncertain past) • might + infinitive (uncertain present/future) • I think + clause (hedging a statement)

Rewrite these confident statements to make them less certain, using the structures above.

1. I applied for that job last week. Less certain: _____
2. I want to move abroad next year. Less certain: _____
3. She forgot to send the email. Less certain: _____
4. He is unhappy about the decision. Less certain: _____

4.3 Ellipsis in Dialogue: What Is Not Said

In the phone call between Charlie and Bryony, a great deal is communicated through silences and half-sentences. Look at this exchange:

“Then she read it again.” – “Right,” Bryony said. “Well. You’ll need a coat.”

“To Japan,” Charlie said. “Whatever that means.”

Bryony does not say: “I support you” or “I will miss you” or “I am worried.” She talks about a coat. Charlie does not say what Japan means to her, because she doesn’t know yet. Both speakers communicate far more than their words contain.

Discuss with a partner: what do you think Bryony is really feeling in this phone call? What is Charlie really feeling? What are the things neither of them says out loud?

Then write the “unspoken” version of the conversation — what each character would say if they were being completely honest. (60–80 words)

4.4 Humour Through Bathos

Bathos is a sudden drop from something grand or serious to something small or ordinary. It is one of the main sources of humour in Chapter 2. Look at these examples:

“She closed the laptop. Opened it again. More snow.”

“I was one, once.” (in response to: “Do you have experience with children?”)

“It’s not a bit further up the District line.”

Each example takes a large, serious situation (a life-changing decision, a question about experience, the scale of international travel) and deflates it with something small and specific.

Write three of your own bathetic sentences, following the same pattern: large situation, small or absurd response.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie describes August as “a low point she did not think about too often.” What do you think August was like for her? What evidence does the chapter give?
- Charlie says about learning Japanese: “I didn’t want to learn French.” What does this distinction tell us about how she makes decisions?
- The finance flatmate’s disapproval is “clarifying” for Charlie. Have you ever felt like this — where someone else’s negative reaction helped you understand what you actually wanted?
- How has Charlie changed between the beginning and the end of the chapter? Or has she changed at all?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie says Japan is “the best thing I got so far. It’s the only thing I got so far.” Is this a good reason to go somewhere? What is the difference between going towards something and going away from something?
- The chapter ends: “London did not notice. It had things to be getting on with.” What does this tell us about the relationship between a person and the city they live in?
- Bryony says “For a bit. Not the last one.” — insisting that the farewell at the Anchor is not really a farewell. Why might it be important to her to say this?
- The JET letter contains the phrase “placement decisions are final and non-negotiable.” Why might the programme need to say this? What does it tell us about how placements work?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever said yes to something you weren’t sure about? What happened?
- Charlie has a mixed reaction to the news: she isn’t exactly excited, isn’t exactly frightened. Have you ever felt that way about a big change? How would you describe the feeling?
- The people in Charlie’s Japanese class are all there for very different reasons. If you were in a language class, what would your reason be?
- Charlie learns to introduce herself, ask where the bathroom is, order food, and apologise. If you were moving to a country where you didn’t speak the language, what four things would you want to be able to say first?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Phone Call

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie, one is Bryony. Play out the phone call from the beginning.

The Situation

- Charlie has just read the letter. She calls Bryony at half past eight in the morning.
- Bryony is half asleep. Charlie tells her the news.
- Bryony asks questions. Charlie tries to explain something she doesn't quite understand herself.
- Include the moment where Bryony asks: "Are you actually going to do this?"
- Try to capture both characters: Charlie's dry understatement, Bryony's directness.

6.2 The Japanese Class

Work in groups of four or five. One student is Yuki, the teacher. The others are students from the class.

The Situation

- It is the first session. Yuki asks each student to introduce themselves and explain why they are learning Japanese.
- Each student must invent a reason — use the characters from the chapter or create your own.
- Yuki asks Charlie about her experience with children.
- After the introductions, Yuki teaches the class to say one thing in Japanese. Decide together what it should be.

6.3 The Last Night at the Anchor

Work in pairs. You are Charlie and Bryony on the last Friday before Charlie leaves.

The Situation

- This is their last evening together for a while.
- Neither of them is quite saying what they feel — like in the chapter.
- Talk about ordinary things: the pub, the crisps, the football on the screen.
- Try to include one moment where something true almost gets said, but doesn't.
- End with the toast: "To Japan. Whatever that means."

6.4 Mingling Activity: Big Decisions

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever said yes to something you didn't fully understand?		
What language would you most like to learn, and why?		
Have you ever received news that took a while to feel real?		
What is the furthest from home you have ever been?		
What four phrases would you learn first in a new language?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Letter of Reply

Charlie has to reply to the JET Programme accepting the placement. Write her reply in 80–100 words. Use formal letter English, but try to let a little of Charlie's personality show through.

Useful language: I am writing to confirm... • I am pleased to accept... • I would be grateful if... • I look forward to... • Please find enclosed... • I remain, yours sincerely...

7.2 Creative Writing: Bryony's Point of View

We see the phone call entirely from Charlie's side. Write Bryony's account of the same call (100–130 words) — from her perspective, in her voice. Consider:

- What is Bryony doing when Charlie calls? How does she feel being woken up?
- What goes through her mind as she listens?
- What does she almost say, but doesn't?

7.3 Extended Writing: Saying Yes

Charlie says yes to Japan because it is "the best thing I got" and "the only thing I got." Write 150–180 words exploring the idea of saying yes to something uncertain. You might consider:

- Is "it's the only option" a good reason for a big decision? Or is it better than nothing?
- Think about a decision you or someone you know has made for similar reasons. What happened?
- Is there a difference between a brave decision and a desperate one?

7.4 Short Writing: The Flatmate's Expression

The flatmate who works in finance looked at Charlie with an expression that suggested Japan was not a sensible career move. Write that flatmate's diary entry for that evening (80–100 words). What do they think of Charlie's decision? What do they think Charlie should have done instead?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 2.

The JET Programme

The JET Programme (Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme) is a Japanese government initiative that recruits young graduates from participating countries to work in Japanese schools as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). It is one of the largest cultural exchange programmes in the world, with several thousand participants placed each year. Placements are assigned by the Ministry of Education: participants apply to the programme, not to a specific school or location. Charlie's situation — being sent to a place she has never heard of, which she had apparently forgotten she applied to — is structurally typical of the programme. The ALT role is specifically a supporting one: ALTs work alongside a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) rather than teaching independently, though the balance varies widely depending on the school.

Yamagata Prefecture

Yamagata Prefecture is in the Tohoku region of northern Honshu, Japan's main island. It is known for heavy winter snowfall, mountainous terrain, rice and fruit production (particularly cherries and pears), traditional lacquerware and textiles, and several celebrated onsen resorts including Zao Onsen and the photogenic Ginzan Onsen. The prefecture also contains Yamadera, a mountaintop temple complex reached by climbing over a thousand stone steps. When Charlie searches online and finds mountains, rice fields, and “a great deal of snow”, she is getting an accurate if incomplete picture of where she is going.

Japanese as a Language

Japanese has three writing systems used simultaneously: hiragana and katakana (syllabic alphabets of 46 characters each, used for different purposes) and kanji (Chinese-derived characters, of which a Japanese adult is expected to know around 2,000). The grammar works very differently from European languages: verbs come at the end of sentences, and the subject is often omitted entirely when it is clear from context. Japanese also has an elaborate system of speech levels (keigo) — different vocabulary, verb forms, and sentence structures depending on the relative social status of the speaker and the listener. Getting this wrong communicates things you did not intend to communicate. The distinction between は (wa) and が (ga) — both of which can mark the subject of a sentence but in subtly different ways — is one of the most discussed points in Japanese language teaching.

The GCSE

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the main school-leaving qualification in England and Wales, typically taken at age 15–16. Students sit exams in a range of subjects of their choosing, including mathematics, English, sciences, and optional subjects such as history, art, and foreign languages. French has traditionally been the most commonly taught foreign language in English schools, though take-up has declined significantly in recent decades. Charlie's comment that she failed GCSE French — offered as a reason why Japanese might be different — is also a small piece of data about the general relationship between England and foreign language learning.

Bermondsey

Bermondsey is a neighbourhood in south London, on the south bank of the Thames, historically associated with the leather trade, food markets, and working-class communities. Like much of inner south and east London, it has changed significantly since the 1990s, with new cafes, galleries, and restaurants alongside older residential streets and the famous Bermondsey Antiques Market. Charlie's Japanese evening class is held in a community centre there — placing it in the same south London world she is about to leave.

Chapter 3: Arrivals

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 3 covers a great deal of ground — the flight, the orientation in Tokyo, the group of five new JET participants, Tokyo itself, and finally the long journey to Oguni, arriving at night. It is a chapter of arrivals: each section lands Charlie somewhere new, and the emotional register shifts each time. The humour is high (Graham, Ryan, Tyler), the observation is sharp (Tokyo vs London, the connecting train), and the chapter ends with one of its quietest and most precise moments. Exercises explore character, contrast, the language of comparison, and the experience of arriving somewhere unfamiliar.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever been on a very long journey — by plane, train, or another means of transport? How did it feel when you finally arrived?
- Have you ever been to a place where you didn’t speak the language and didn’t know anyone? What was the first day like?
- When you arrive somewhere completely new, what is the first thing you look for? What makes you feel better?
- What do you think is the hardest thing about moving to another country? What do you think might be unexpectedly easy?

1.2 The Chapter Title: Arrivals

The chapter is called “Arrivals” — in the plural.

Before you read: Why do you think the title is plural? How many different “arrivals” might Charlie experience in a single chapter? Think about this as you read, and note each time she arrives somewhere new.

1.3 First Impressions

The chapter opens with Charlie landing in Japan after a twelve-hour flight. Think about:

- What is the first thing most people notice when they arrive in a new country?
- Charlie’s first observation about Japan is: “Japan outside the terminal windows looked, so far, like an airport.” What does this tell us about how she is feeling at that moment?
- Have you ever had a first impression of a place that turned out to be completely wrong? Or one that turned out to be right?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 3. The list is in alphabetical order.

abstraction	a state of not paying full attention; being somewhere else in your mind
ALT handbook	a manual given to Assistant Language Teachers on the JET Programme; referenced here as an example of thorough bureaucratic preparation
apologetic	showing that you are sorry; behaving as if you feel responsible for something
authority	a quality of confidence and competence that makes others trust you or follow your lead
to be winter-forward	a humorous, slightly corporate-sounding phrase meaning “having a lot of winter” or “dominated by cold weather”
boot (of a car)	the storage compartment at the back of a car (British English); American English: trunk
compensating	making up for something by doing something else; here, Tyler hides his anxiety by being loud and enthusiastic
a concourse	the large open area in a station or airport where passengers move through
curtains in the doorways	in Japan, fabric curtains called noren hang in the doorways of bars, restaurants, and shops, indicating they are open
an estate (car)	a car with a longer body and extra storage space behind the rear seats (British English); American English: station wagon
filed away to misunderstand later	a humorous phrase meaning: she registered the information but knew she would not really absorb it until it was too late
general goodwill	friendly, positive feeling; here used humorously to describe what seems to be holding a very old train together
a History degree from Leeds	a university qualification in History from the University of Leeds, a large research university in northern England
indifferent	not caring; showing no particular interest or preference
instinctive solidarity	a natural feeling of being on the same side as someone, without needing to discuss it
jet lag	extreme tiredness caused by travelling across many time zones; the body’s internal clock does not match the local time
Kyoto	a city in central Japan, historically the imperial capital, known for temples, gardens, traditional culture, and geisha districts
a laminated folder	a folder whose pages or cover have been sealed in plastic to protect them; associated here with careful, well-meaning bureaucratic effort
to maintain its views on the subject of motion	a humorous phrase meaning: the engine kept going; used to give the train a stubborn personality
Nagoya	Japan’s fourth-largest city, located in central Honshu, known for industry, food, and Nagoya Castle
Narita	Narita International Airport, one of Tokyo’s two main international airports, located about 60 km east of the city centre
Niigata	a prefecture on the Sea of Japan coast, known for rice, sake, and heavy snowfall in winter
an onsen	a Japanese hot spring bath, fed by naturally heated geothermal water; found throughout Japan, especially in mountain areas

old pewter	a dull, dark grey colour; pewter is a metal alloy used historically for plates and cups, with a particular grey-silver tone
proximity	physical closeness; being near someone
renegotiating its position	a humorous phrase meaning: the coat was proving less warm than expected; as if the coat were reconsidering its original promise
a resident's card	an official registration card required for foreign nationals living in Japan (called "zairū card"); necessary for accessing many services
Shinjuku	a major commercial and entertainment district of Tokyo, one of the busiest in the world
Shinkansen	Japan's high-speed bullet train network; known for punctuality, speed, and comfort
shared suffering	the experience of enduring the same difficult or tedious thing as someone else; here a source of immediate friendship
thoroughness	the quality of doing something very carefully and completely; not leaving anything out
a vending machine	a machine that sells food, drinks, or other items automatically when you insert money; Japan is famous for having them everywhere
Year Eight	the second year of secondary school in England and Wales, typically attended by students aged 12–13

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. She arrived with such _____ — everyone followed her without question.
2. The two strangers bonded immediately through the _____ of sharing a delayed flight.
3. After twelve hours in the air, her body was suffering from severe _____.
4. He drove an old _____ that had clearly seen better years.
5. She was so tired she walked through the station in a state of mild _____, barely noticing the crowd.
6. The folder was _____, produced, it was clear, with great effort and good intentions.
7. The train sat on the platform with complete _____, as if it did not particularly care whether anyone got on.

2.2 People and Places: Who Goes Where?

Chapter 3 introduces five JET participants, each going to a different location. Match the person with their home country and their placement in Japan.

Name	From	Placement in Japan
Charlie	_____	_____
Daniel Park	_____	_____
Zara Mitchell	_____	_____
Tyler Cousins	_____	_____
Ryan Hodge	_____	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | Charlie's flight from London to Japan is about twelve hours. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | The orientation hotel is in Shinjuku. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Graham has been on the JET Programme for two years. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie reads the entire ALT handbook during the orientation. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Daniel Park is from South Korea. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Zara Mitchell is going to Kyoto because she requested it. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Tyler Cousins is going to a suburb of Nagoya. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Ryan Hodge has a degree in History from Leeds. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie takes the Shinkansen all the way to Oguni without changing trains. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Takeda picks Charlie up at the platform. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie's apartment is on the second floor. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie tells Bryony that she is fine when she calls. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How do Charlie and the other four participants first come together during the orientation? What is the detail that connects them?
- How does Charlie describe Tokyo compared to London? What is the same, and what is different?
- Describe the connecting train from Yamagata city to Oguni. What does Charlie notice about it?
- What happens when Takeda opens the boot of his car? How does Charlie react?
- What does Charlie say when Bryony asks "How is it?" Why does she say this instead of answering the question?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie notices Takeda's exhaustion "with a clarity that surprised her." She had seen it "in the library at exam time, in people who had been running on not enough for too long." What does this moment of recognition tell us about Charlie?
- "This is Tokyo," Zara said. "Tokyo is the easy bit." What does Zara mean? How do the others react? What does this moment foreshadow about the rest of the year?
- The chapter ends with "Outside, it began to snow." This is the second chapter in a row that has ended with a single sentence about the outside world continuing. What effect does the author create by doing this?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Comparison: Tokyo vs London

Chapter 3 contains some of the novel's richest comparative writing. Look at how the author describes Tokyo:

"It was not London. This was the first thing. The scale was different, the noise was different, the way people moved was different — purposeful in a way that... London was also purposeful but not in the same way, if that made sense, and it barely made sense to Charlie but she felt it in her feet on the pavement."

Notice how the comparison trails off mid-sentence: "purposeful in a way that..." Charlie cannot quite articulate the difference, but she feels it physically. The author captures the experience of arriving somewhere new — where language is not enough.

Now write a similar comparison of your own. Choose two cities, places, or environments you know, and describe what is different about them — including something you can feel but struggle to put into words. (60–80 words)

4.2 Characterisation Through Small Details

Each of the five participants is introduced through a single defining detail or characteristic. Look at how the author works:

Daniel: "had read the entire ALT handbook and found it... thorough to the point of being slightly threatening"

Zara: "carried herself with the authority of someone who had survived worse than Graham's orientation presentations"

Tyler: "visibly overwhelmed... compensating by being enthusiastic about everything at a volume slightly above what the conference room required"

Ryan: "arms crossed in a posture of mild suffering that Charlie recognised as specifically Northern English"

Each description tells us who the person is without saying it directly. Now write a single-sentence introduction for a fictional character, using one specific detail or action to reveal personality — without naming any qualities directly.

4.3 Personification

The author frequently gives human-like qualities to non-human things in Chapter 3. Look at these examples:

“It looked back, in the way of things that don’t actually have eyes but give that impression.” (the connecting train)

“The doors closed with a sound like a problem being addressed reluctantly.”

“The engine maintained its views on the subject of motion.”

“The mountains had apparently had it [snow] for some time and hadn’t thought to mention it.”

This technique — giving personalities and intentions to trains, doors, and mountains — creates a world that feels alive and slightly indifferent to Charlie’s arrival. It is also one of the main sources of humour in the chapter.

Write three sentences using personification to describe an object, a place, or a weather condition. Try to give it a specific personality or attitude.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4.4 The Language of Gradual Change

The journey from Tokyo to Oguni is described as a series of gradual shifts. Find and copy the phrases the author uses to show each stage of the journey changing. The first one is done for you.

Stage of the journey	Language from the text
Leaving the city	“The city gave way to suburbs, which gave way to...”
The landscape opening up	_____
The mountains arriving	_____
Snow appearing	_____
The stations getting smaller	_____

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie finds Tyler “exhausting in a way that was also somehow reassuring.” What does she mean? Have you ever felt that way about someone?
- Ryan says “rural-rural” and then goes quiet. What do you think he was going to say? Why does he stop?
- Zara “announced without embarrassment” that she got exactly the placement she wanted. What do you think of Zara? How would you describe her in a few words?
- Charlie recognises Takeda’s exhaustion because she has seen it “in the library at exam time.” What does this moment of recognition tell us about her? Does it change how you see her?
- When Bryony asks “How is it?” Charlie says “I’m here.” What would you have said in her position?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The five JET participants form a group through “proximity and shared suffering.” Is this a common way for friendships to start? Does it produce a different kind of friendship than other kinds?
- Charlie thinks Tokyo is “alive” in the way she understands cities to be alive: “lit and loud and full of people going somewhere.” Is this what makes a city feel alive to you? What else might?
- The last section of the chapter is almost silent — the elderly man’s bag rustling, the woman sleeping, the engine. How does the author use quiet to create atmosphere?
- Charlie ends the chapter alone in her apartment, coat still on. The last line is about snow beginning to fall outside. Why does the author choose this ending rather than showing Charlie unpacking or settling in?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever found a group of people through shared experience — not by choice, but by circumstance? What held you together?
- Charlie says the city was “being itself” and she liked that it didn’t need her approval. Have you ever felt that way about a place?
- Think about a time you arrived somewhere and the first impression was misleading. What did you expect? What was it really like?
- Charlie’s response to Bryony at the end is not an answer. Is it sometimes better not to answer? When?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 At the Orientation Table

Work in groups of five or six. It is the second morning of Graham's orientation. Students play the five participants at the back table.

The Situation

- Graham is talking at the front about onsen etiquette and winter preparedness.
- At the back: Charlie, Daniel, Zara, Tyler, and Ryan are sharing disappointing vending machine coffees.
- Talk quietly amongst yourselves. Introduce your characters, your placements, your feelings about the week.
- Include the moment where Ryan says "rural-rural" to Charlie.
- One student can play Graham — occasionally interrupting with something useful or absurd.

6.2 The Last Night in Tokyo

Work in groups of five. It is the final evening. The group has had dinner and is standing outside the hotel.

The Situation

- Each person names their placement in turn: Niigata, Gifu, Nagoya suburbs, Kyoto, Yamagata.
- Include the "rural-rural" exchange between Ryan and Charlie.
- Each person says something about how they feel — but not too directly.
- End with the group saying goodbye in the way the chapter describes: knowing they probably won't see each other again, and choosing not to say so.

6.3 Meeting Takeda

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie, one is Takeda Noboru.

The Situation

- It is late. The platform is cold. Takeda has been waiting.
- He drops the paper. He drops the keys. He apologises repeatedly.
- Charlie offers to drive. He declines.
- In the car, he tells her about the town, the school, the apartment.
- Try to capture Takeda's character: well-meaning, apologetic, exhausted. And Charlie's: dry, observant, not unkind.

6.4 Mingling Activity: First Times

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What is the furthest from home you have ever been?		
Have you ever arrived somewhere and felt completely lost?		
What is the strangest form of transport you have ever used?		
Have you ever made a friend through shared suffering or inconvenience?		
What would you notice first arriving in a new country?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: First Impressions

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing your first impressions of a city or place you visited for the first time. Use specific sensory details — what you saw, heard, smelled, felt. Try to include one thing that surprised you.

Useful language: The first thing I noticed was... • It was not what I expected... • The streets were... • I felt it in... • What surprised me most was... • It was alive in a way that...

7.2 Creative Writing: Daniel's Message

That evening, Daniel sends a message to a friend back in Vancouver. Write the message (100–130 words). Consider:

- What does Daniel tell them about the orientation? About Tokyo? About the group?
- What does he say about feeling “strange sitting in Japan drinking Japanese beer while being Korean”?
- What is he not quite saying? What is he leaving out?

7.3 Extended Writing: The Journey

The second half of Chapter 3 describes Charlie's journey from Tokyo to Oguni in detail: Shinkansen, connecting train, car. Write 150–180 words about a journey you have taken that felt like it was taking you somewhere genuinely different. You might consider:

- How did the landscape or environment change as you travelled?
- Was there a moment when you felt you had crossed some kind of line into unfamiliar territory?
- What did you feel when you finally arrived?

7.4 Short Writing: Takeda's Evening

Write Takeda's account of the evening (80–100 words) — from his point of view. He has just dropped off the new ALT and is driving home. What is he thinking about? What does he hope she thought of him?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 3.

The Shinkansen

The Shinkansen is Japan's high-speed bullet train network, connecting most major cities on Honshu, Kyushu, and Hokkaido. It is known internationally for its speed, comfort, and above all its punctuality: trains run to the second, and a delay of even one minute is considered significant enough to warrant an announcement. The train company may issue a formal written apology for delays of more than a few minutes.

Onsen

Onsen are natural hot spring baths fed by geothermal water. Japan sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire and has thousands of hot springs across the country, particularly in mountain regions. Onsen bathing is a central part of Japanese leisure culture: visitors wash thoroughly before entering the shared bath, and bathing is done without swimwear. Rules vary by establishment — some onsen have policies on tattoos, and most are separated by gender. Yamagata Prefecture has many famous onsen, including Zao Onsen and the photogenic Ginzan Onsen. Graham's orientation covers onsen etiquette at some length, suggesting it is among the things new arrivals most need to know.

Bowing

Bowing is the standard form of greeting, thanks, apology, and farewell in Japan. Unlike the handshake common in many Western and Southern European contexts, a bow requires no physical contact. The depth and duration of the bow communicate its meaning: a shallow nod for a casual encounter, a deeper bow for a formal introduction or a sincere apology. Takeda bows repeatedly throughout the arrival scene — when he introduces himself, when he drops the paper, when he drops the keys. This is not excessive by Japanese standards; it reflects his role as host and his genuine wish to make a good impression.

The Resident's Card (Zairū Card)

Foreign nationals staying in Japan for more than three months are required to register at their local municipal office and carry a residence card, known as a zairū card. The card functions as official identification and is required for opening a bank account, signing a lease, enrolling in the national health insurance system, and many other administrative processes. Takeda mentions it among the many things Charlie will need to do after arriving — a reminder that moving to a new country involves a significant amount of paperwork before ordinary life can begin.

Noren

Noren are lengths of fabric hung in the doorways of traditional Japanese shops, restaurants, bars, and bathhouses. They typically display the establishment's name or logo, and their presence in the doorway indicates that the business is open. Pulling aside a noren to enter carries a slightly ceremonial quality: you are crossing a threshold into a particular kind of space.

Vending Machines in Japan

Japan has approximately three million vending machines, roughly one for every forty people, making it one of the highest densities in the world. They sell not only cold drinks but hot canned coffee and tea, hot food, ice cream, alcohol, cigarettes, and many other items. They are found on street corners, in train stations, on hiking trails, and in hotel corridors. The cold, inexplicably sweet coffee from the vending machine on the third floor is what brings the five participants together at the orientation table — small objects do consequential things.

Being Placed, Not Chosen

A structural feature of the JET Programme is that participants do not choose where they are sent. They apply to the programme, not to a specific school or region, and placements are assigned by the Ministry of Education based on school needs across Japan. Zara is the notable exception in Chapter 3: she requested Kyoto and received it, which the others register with quiet envy. For everyone else, the placement is a fact to be arrived at, not a preference to be satisfied. This has significant consequences: participants arrive without local knowledge, without existing friendships in the area, and often without the regional dialect.

Chapter 4: Hot Stew

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 4 is the longest and most varied chapter so far: it covers Charlie’s first weeks at school, the children, Kudo-sensei, the nickname Suppai-sensei, the transfer request, a December of isolation, a solitary Christmas, a solitary New Year’s Eve, and then — on New Year’s Day — the knock at the door and the pot of hot stew. The chapter earns its ending. Exercises cover the full range: institutional language, the vocabulary of isolation and belonging, Japanese cultural references introduced here for the first time, and the emotional arc of a chapter that moves from arrival-anxiety to something quieter and less expected.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever started a new school, job, or group where you didn’t know anyone? What was the first week like?
- Have you ever spent an important holiday — Christmas, New Year, Eid, a birthday — alone or away from family? How did it feel?
- Have you ever received kindness from a stranger? What happened, and how did it make you feel?
- If a neighbour you had never met brought you food, how would you react?

1.2 The Title: Hot Stew

The chapter is called “Hot Stew.” It is a very plain title for a chapter that covers several weeks and many different experiences.

Before you read: What do you think the title refers to? Why might the author have chosen this image — rather than something about school, or winter, or the new year — as the title? Think about this as you read, and return to your answer afterwards.

1.3 Starting a New Job

Charlie is about to begin teaching in a Japanese school. She has no experience with children.

- What do you think are the hardest things about starting a completely new job in a country whose language you do not speak?
- The school is very small. Charlie’s classroom is set up for thirty students but will “rarely see more than twelve.” What might this tell us about the town?
- Yuki told Charlie in Chapter 2 that she would “be fine” — which was “not the same as saying it would be easy.” Keep this in mind as you read.

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 4. The list is in alphabetical order.

ambient	present in the background; surrounding; here used to describe Charlie's role as an available resource rather than a formal teacher
an automated confirmation	an automatic reply generated by a computer system, acknowledging that something has been received
arigatou gozaimasu (ありがとうございます)	thank you, in formal Japanese
baffled	completely confused; unable to understand
a covered arcade	a shopping street with a roof over it, protecting shoppers from rain and snow; common in Japanese towns and cities
deployed	used or applied in a deliberate way; here used with mild irony, as if the nickname were a weapon
discreet	careful not to attract attention or cause embarrassment; doing something quietly
fractionally	by a very small amount
frank assessment	a direct, honest evaluation; looking at someone or something openly and without pretending not to
floor polish	a liquid or wax used to clean and shine floors; associated here with the particular smell of school corridors
geothermal water	water heated naturally by the earth's internal heat; the source of onsen (hot spring) water
to inflect / inflection	to change the tone, pitch, or emphasis of a word or sound to change its meaning; here, whether Charlie said sumimasen as an apology or as a request for attention
institutional warmth	the particular kind of warmth found in large buildings like schools or hospitals — functional, not comfortable; heated just enough
Joya no Kane (除夜の鐘)	the ringing of a temple bell 108 times at midnight on New Year's Eve; a Buddhist tradition symbolising the release of the 108 earthly desires
Kudo-sensei	the history teacher at Oguni school; the '-sensei' suffix is used in Japanese for teachers, doctors, and other professionals, as well as often for the person's name
a laminated folder	a folder whose contents or cover are sealed in a thin plastic coating to protect them; produced here with great effort
Mori-sensei	the vice principal of Oguni school; 'vice principal' is the second-most senior administrator in a Japanese school
nihongo ga... (日本語が...)	the beginning of the phrase "my Japanese is..."; Charlie does not finish the sentence
Ofsted	the Office for Standards in Education: the official body in England that inspects and regulates schools; used here humorously to suggest the school's mixed-age classes would confuse British inspectors
Oda-sensei	a young teacher at Oguni school whose English "ran to practical matters delivered with great confidence"
oriented inward	turned towards the inside; focused on private, internal matters — here, the town turning towards family and ritual during Oshogatsu
Oshogatsu (お正月)	the Japanese New Year; the most important holiday in the Japanese calendar, traditionally celebrated with family, special foods, shrine visits, and rituals of renewal

pewter	a dull grey metal alloy; ‘the colour of old pewter’ describes a flat, overcast winter sky
a processing interval	a pause before responding; here used to describe Kudo-sensei’s habit of thinking carefully before she speaks
-sensei (先生)	a Japanese honorific suffix used for teachers, doctors, and other professionals; attached to the family name
sumimasen (すみません)	a versatile Japanese expression meaning “excuse me”, “I’m sorry”, or “pardon me”, depending on context and tone
suppai (っぱい)	sour (in Japanese); the origin of Charlie’s nickname Suppai-sensei
Suppai-sensei	the nickname given to Charlie by the students, meaning “sour teacher”; a play on her surname ‘Spicer’ (spicy → sour)
a tutorial responsibility	the informal role of helping or guiding a younger student; here, the older children help the younger ones without being asked
urban posting	a placement in a city rather than the countryside
a vice principal	the second-most senior person in a school, after the headteacher or principal

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. She paused before answering — her standard _____ before saying something accurate.
2. The older children developed a kind of _____ for the younger ones, whether they wanted to or not.
3. The nickname had been _____ by children of all ages with cheerful confidence.
4. She said _____, but wasn't sure if her tone had made it an apology or a request.
5. The form was four pages. She submitted it and received an _____ and felt _____ better.
6. The town felt _____ during Oshogatsu — turned towards family and ritual she wasn't part of.
7. The older students were somewhat more _____ about it, which was not the same as not doing it.

2.2 Japanese Words in the Chapter

Chapter 4 introduces several Japanese words and expressions for the first time. Match each word to its meaning.

Japanese word	Meaning
suppai	_____
Suppai-sensei	_____
sumimasen	_____
arigatou gozaimasu	_____
nihongo ga...	_____
Oshogatsu	_____
Joya no Kane	_____
-sensei	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | Charlie arrives at school on her first morning exactly on time. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Kudo-sensei teaches history. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Charlie's classroom has desks for thirty students. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie formally teaches English for three periods a week. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kenji is ten years old. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Suppai means "sour" in Japanese. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | The JET administrator tells Charlie she can transfer immediately. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | The transfer request form is four pages long. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie spends Christmas Day alone in her apartment. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Charlie goes to the shrine at midnight on New Year's Eve. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | The woman who brings the stew introduces herself by name. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie knows what is in the stew. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does Charlie describe her role at the school? What is the difference between her official and unofficial duties?
- How does the nickname Suppai-sensei begin? Who starts it, and how does it spread?
- What does Charlie do about her desire to be transferred to a city placement? What is the outcome?
- Describe Oguni during Oshogatsu. What has changed? What does Charlie notice about the town?
- Describe the woman who knocks on the door on New Year's Day. What does she do and say? What does Charlie do and say?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- At the end of the chapter, Charlie says "She would not have said, if asked, that anything had changed." Do you think something has changed? What, and how do you know?
- The chapter ends with two calls to Bryony: the New Year's Eve call (Charlie is alone, Bryony is at a party) and the New Year's Day call (Charlie mentions the stew). Compare the two calls. What is different about Charlie's voice in each one?
- Charlie notices an old wooden structure in the school garden and "notes it and moves on." Why might the author draw our attention to this detail without explaining it?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Institutional Language

When Charlie calls the JET office to request a transfer, the administrator responds in careful, formal language. Look at these phrases from the chapter:

“Placement decisions were reviewed annually, on renewal of the contract.”

“Transfer requests could be submitted through the formal process.”

“Urban placements were extremely limited and in high demand.”

This language is polite, passive, and non-committal. It is the language of institutions: it gives information without making promises. Notice the passive constructions: “decisions were reviewed”, “requests could be submitted”. Nobody does anything; things happen on their own.

Rewrite these direct, personal statements in institutional language, using passive constructions and formal vocabulary.

1. “We can’t change your placement.”

Institutional version: _____

2. “You have to wait until next year.”

Institutional version: _____

3. “Not many city positions are available and lots of people want them.”

Institutional version: _____

4.2 The Language of Isolation

The middle of Chapter 4 traces Charlie’s isolation through December and New Year’s Eve. Look at how the author builds this feeling through accumulation rather than statement:

“She called Bryony twice and got voicemail and then a message saying sorry, family thing, will call tomorrow.”

“She called her mum, who was watching television.”

“She opened Instagram and looked at it and found it made her feel worse rather than better and closed it.”

Notice that Charlie is not described as “sad” or “lonely.” The author shows the feeling through action: each small thing she tries does not quite work. The effect builds sentence by sentence.

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing a feeling without naming it directly — only through actions and small details. Choose one of the following feelings, but do not write its name.

Choose one: nervous before something important • relieved after something difficult • homesick • quietly content

4.3 Communicating Without a Shared Language

The scene in the clothes shop and the scene at the door both involve communication without a common language. Look at how the author describes them:

“The owner communicated with her by pointing and nodding and occasionally drawing small diagrams when pointing and nodding proved insufficient... they communicated perfectly well without a shared language and this was either encouraging or the absolute minimum that two humans could manage and she hadn't yet decided which.”

“The woman made a small sound that communicated, across the language barrier with complete clarity, that this was not the point.”

Discuss with a partner:

- What is the difference between the communication in the shop and the communication at the door? What does each person want from the interaction?
- Have you ever communicated with someone without a shared language? What methods did you use? What was and wasn't possible?
- What does “the absolute minimum that two humans could manage” mean? Is Charlie being self-deprecating, or is she making a serious point?

4.4 Contrast: Before and After

The chapter turns at the moment of the knock on the door. Find evidence from the text for each description in the table below — one detail from before the knock, one from after.

Quality	Before the knock	After the knock
Temperature / warmth	_____	_____
Noise / silence	_____	_____
Charlie's activity	_____	_____
Connection to others	_____	_____

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Kudo-sensei looks at Charlie “with calm, direct attention” and says only two things. What kind of person does this suggest? What does Charlie notice about her?
- Charlie smiles at Kenji’s comment even though she doesn’t know what it means. Is this the right response? What does it tell us about how she is learning to operate in this environment?
- Charlie submits the transfer form and “felt fractionally better in a way she recognised as probably temporary.” What does this tell us about self-knowledge? Have you ever done something practical to feel better, knowing it might not actually help?
- The woman at the door delivers the pot and leaves without ceremony. What kind of person does this suggest? How is she different from other characters Charlie has met so far?
- At the end of the chapter, Charlie tells Bryony about the stew: “someone brought me food. An old woman. I don’t know who she is. She just — brought it.” Why does Charlie choose to tell Bryony this, after saying she’s “fine”?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The chapter says Christmas “felt like a meal where a dish was missing” rather than something devastating. Is this a healthy way to think about loss or absence? What is the difference between missing something and being devastated by it?
- Oshogatsu turns the town “oriented inward, toward family and obligation and ritual she wasn’t part of.” Charlie is not excluded — people still nod to her, still bow. But she is outside the ritual. Is there a difference between being excluded and simply not belonging yet?
- Charlie says the pot being on her counter and the room being warm and the families going about their new year are “the sum of it” — as if she is counting what she has rather than what she lacks. What has shifted?
- The woman at the door never tells Charlie her name. Why might the author have made this choice?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever spent a major holiday away from home or without the people you expected to be with? How did you manage it?
- Have you ever received an act of kindness from someone you didn’t know? What was it? How did it make you feel?
- Charlie’s description of Oguni during Oshogatsu — shops closed, families gathered, streets quiet but purposeful — may remind students of other holidays. What holiday in your own culture or country creates a similar atmosphere?
- Kenji calls Charlie “sour”. Is this accurate? Has your reading of Charlie made you agree or disagree with the children?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Staffroom Introduction

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Takeda, introducing Charlie to the staff. Others are teachers.

The Situation

- Takeda shows Charlie around the staffroom and introduces her to the teachers.
- Mori-sensei makes a short welcoming speech. Takeda translates it briefly.
- Kudo-sensei speaks to Charlie in English — calm, unhurried, direct.
- Oda-sensei explains the tea situation with great enthusiasm.
- Charlie responds politely, bows, says thank you twice in four sentences.

6.2 The Transfer Request Call

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie, one is the JET administrator.

The Situation

- Charlie has prepared what she wants to say: she would like an urban posting, Tokyo or Osaka.
- The administrator is pleasant and speaks good English.
- The administrator explains the process using formal, institutional language.
- Charlie presses for more information. The administrator remains politely non-committal.
- The call ends. Charlie has the information she needed but not the answer she wanted.

6.3 The New Year's Eve Call

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie, one is Bryony.

The Situation

- It is almost midnight. Bryony is at a party; Charlie is in her apartment with a can of something.
- They talk for a few minutes. The background noise on Bryony's end is significant.
- Bryony says: "Next year. You'll be somewhere brilliant next year."
- Charlie says she's fine. She is not quite lying.
- Play the scene, then compare: what did each character communicate that they didn't say out loud?

6.4 Mingling Activity: Belonging and Not Belonging

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever felt like an outsider at a celebration or event?		
Has a stranger ever done something kind for you, unexpectedly?		
Have you ever spent an important holiday alone or differently from usual?		
What is the most important holiday in your culture or family, and why?		
Have you ever communicated successfully without a shared language?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Holiday Away from Home

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing a holiday or celebration that was different from usual — perhaps you were away from home, or alone, or in unfamiliar surroundings. Try to convey the feeling without naming it directly, as the author does.

Useful language: It was like a meal where... • The streets had a different quality... • I called... and... • Outside, the city continued... • I was not sad, exactly... • The sum of it was...

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei's Observation

Kudo-sensei watches Charlie during her first week. Write a short internal monologue (100–130 words) from Kudo-sensei's point of view — what she notices, what she thinks about Charlie, and what she decides not to say.

Remember: Kudo-sensei is calm, direct, and says one true thing rather than many. Her internal voice should reflect this.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Kindness of Strangers

At the end of the chapter, an elderly woman Charlie has never met brings her food on New Year's Day. Write 150–180 words exploring what this act of kindness means in the context of the chapter. You might consider:

- Why does it matter that the woman does not explain herself or stay?
- Why does Charlie describe the stew as tasting like “something that had been made with attention” — rather than describing the ingredients or the flavour?
- What do you think changes for Charlie in that moment, if anything?

7.4 Short Writing: The Nickname

Write Kenji's account (80–100 words) of the moment he gave Charlie her nickname. He is eight years old. What did he see? What did he say? What did his classmates do? What does he think of the new teacher?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 4.

Oshogatsu (New Year)

Oshogatsu, the Japanese New Year, is the most important holiday in the Japanese calendar. It is celebrated from 1 January (and the days leading up to it) and is primarily a family occasion: people return to their hometowns, spend time with relatives, eat traditional foods, and carry out rituals of renewal and fresh beginnings. Shops, businesses, and offices close for several days. The atmosphere Charlie describes — streets quiet but purposeful, familiar places shuttered, the town “oriented inward” — is accurate. For someone without family in the area or the cultural context, Oshogatsu can be one of the lonelier experiences of living in Japan.

Joya no Kane: The Temple Bell

On New Year’s Eve at midnight, Buddhist temples across Japan ring a large bell 108 times. This ritual is called Joya no Kane. The number 108 corresponds to the 108 bonno — earthly desires or sources of suffering in Buddhist teaching — and the ringing is meant to drive them away, allowing the new year to begin with a clean spirit. The sound of the bell is broadcast on television and heard across towns and cities. Charlie knows about it from her studies and understands it as “a fact established but not felt”.

Hatsumode

Hatsumode is the first visit to a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple in the new year, typically made in the first few days of January. It is one of the most widely observed traditions in Japan, with millions of people visiting major shrines on 1 and 2 January. Smaller local shrines are visited by families and community members throughout the first week. Charlie asks Oda-sensei about “something happening in town for the new year” and is told about the midnight shrine visit — this is hatsumode.

The Japanese School System

Japanese schools are structured differently from British or most Western European schools. Primary school covers years 1–6 (ages 6–12); junior high school covers years 7–9 (ages 12–15); senior high school covers years 10–12 (ages 15–18). In a small rural school like Oguni’s, classes may be combined across year groups — which is what Charlie observes and finds initially baffling. The staffroom (職員室, shokuinshitsu) is the communal work and rest space for teachers; in many Japanese schools, teachers do not have individual offices but share this space, which is central to school social life.

The ‘Sensei’ Honorific

In Japanese, ‘sensei’ (先生) is an honorific used for teachers, doctors, politicians, and others in positions of recognised expertise or authority. It is attached to the family name: Kudo-sensei, Mori-sensei, Oda-sensei. The students’ nickname for Charlie — Suppai-sensei — follows the same pattern, substituting her actual name for a descriptive word. The joke works partly because it respects the form while mocking the person: they are using the correct honorific, just with a slightly rude adjective in front of it.

The Covered Arcade (Shotengai)

The shotengai is a covered shopping street, common in Japanese towns and cities. A roof runs over the street, protecting shoppers from rain and snow. Shotengai range from thriving commercial centres to quiet streets with a few remaining shops. The covered arcade near Oguni’s station, where Charlie buys her extra layers, is one of these: practical, local, not designed for visitors,.

Christmas in Japan

Christmas is not a public holiday in Japan and is not a family occasion in the way it is in Christian-majority countries. It is celebrated commercially and as a social occasion, associated with romantic dates, illuminations, fried chicken, and Christmas cake. The atmosphere is festive but not domestic or religious for most people. For Charlie, whose Christmas is primarily a family holiday, the absence of this particular seasonal texture is one of the more disorienting aspects of December in Oguni. She describes it as “eating a meal where a dish was missing” rather than grief, which is an accurate and quietly precise description.

Chapter 5: Snow, and More Snow

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 5 is the novel’s first sustained portrait of Charlie learning to live somewhere rather than enduring it. Three things carry the chapter: the heavy snowstorm and the neighbours who arrive with food, the walk home with Kudo-sensei taking shape as a habit, and the conversation about izushi that ends the chapter on a note of genuine warmth. Language is at the centre of everything — Charlie’s Japanese improving without her noticing, communication across a language barrier during the snowstorm, Kudo-sensei’s precise and unhurried observations. Exercises focus on the language of gradual change, community without transaction, and the chapter’s considerable skill in conveying emotion through small physical detail.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever been snowed in, or stuck somewhere because of weather? What was the experience like?
- Think about the community where you live. Do people help each other in practical ways without being asked? How does this work?
- When do you notice that you are getting better at something? Does it happen gradually or suddenly?
- What does it mean to feel like a “guest” somewhere, rather than someone who belongs?

1.2 The Title: Snow, and More Snow

The title repeats itself. “Snow” and then “more snow.”

Before you read: What feeling does this repetition create before you have even opened the chapter? Does it suggest boredom? Endurance? Something else? Think about how the author might use snow as more than just weather.

1.3 Reviewing the Previous Chapter

At the end of Chapter 4, an elderly woman Charlie does not know brought her a pot of stew on New Year’s Day. Charlie ate it and felt, without quite naming the feeling, that something had shifted.

- What do you remember about that woman? What details did the author give us?
- Why do you think the author chose to end Chapter 4 with that moment rather than something else?
- What do you think might happen between Charlie and this woman as the story continues?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 5. The list is in alphabetical order.

adjacent to	near to; close to; almost the same as but not quite
ambient	present in the background, surrounding everything; not focused or directed
an arrangement with herself	a private decision; a rule she set for herself without telling anyone
broadly	in a general sense; approximately; not quite but roughly (used here humorously about the food supply)
competitive generosity	giving gifts in a way that is also a kind of social performance or competition; each person trying to be slightly more generous than the last
contracting	getting smaller; shrinking (here: the short winter days making the usable part of the day feel smaller)
a distortion	something that has changed shape; a thing whose outline is altered by something around it
economy	the system or logic by which something works; here used to describe the unspoken rules of help and reciprocity in Oguni
fermented	preserved and transformed by bacterial action over time; used for foods like miso, pickles, and izushi
filed under things to consider later	mentally noted but set aside; put in an imaginary category to be thought about at some future point
forward motion	progress; movement towards something; the sense that things are going somewhere rather than standing still
grammar (of obligation)	the unspoken rules that govern how something works; here, the complex system of implied debts and expectations around asking for or accepting help
informational density	a large amount of information communicated quickly, without pause or simplification
intermixed	combined together; here, mixed in with other things (her progress reports mixed in with her usual complaints)
izushi (鉄寿司)	a traditional fermented dish from the Tohoku region of Japan: fish, rice, and vegetables layered and left to ferment over winter; similar in principle to the ancient Japanese dish narezushi
kiritanpo (きりたんぽ)	a traditional dish from Akita Prefecture: pounded rice formed around skewers and grilled or used in hot pot; mentioned briefly here as a guess before izushi is identified
miso paste (味噌)	a thick paste made from fermented soybeans, salt, and a mould called koji; a staple of Japanese cooking, used primarily in miso soup but also in sauces, marinades, and many other dishes
a novelty	something new and interesting; here, snow has stopped being novel — it is no longer remarkable
omiyage (お土産)	a gift, typically food or a local specialty, brought back from a trip or given at the new year; a deeply embedded custom in Japanese social life
particular (taste)	specific and distinctive; here used diplomatically to describe a flavour that is unusual and strong
a pattern (arriving as a pattern)	a repeated occurrence that becomes normal; something that establishes itself without being planned
permanence	the quality of being lasting; not going away; here, the snow has stopped being temporary

pickled vegetables	vegetables preserved in vinegar, salt, or brine; tsukemono in Japanese; a staple accompaniment to rice-based meals
provisions	supplies of food; things stored in advance to be used when needed
reciprocity	a mutual exchange; doing something for someone in return for something they have done for you
reconstituted	restored to its original state by adding water; dried food reconstituted by soaking
to shovel	to move snow (or soil, etc.) with a shovel; here, clearing the path in front of the building
tofu (豆腐)	a food made from condensed soy milk, pressed into blocks; a staple of Japanese cuisine, used in soups, stews, and many other dishes
unstructured time	time without a schedule or obligations; free time, which can feel uncomfortable rather than relaxing

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The snow had stopped being a _____. It was simply part of life now.
2. She had made an _____ with herself: one hour of Japanese every evening, no exceptions.
3. The visitors communicated at full conversational speed, with the _____ of people who had already made their decision.
4. She had food. _____, anyway. There was rice, and things.
5. Help in the town worked differently — without the complex _____ of obligation she was used to in London.
6. She laughed before she'd processed whether it was funny. Something had happened. This felt like _____.
7. She filed the thought under _____ and went back inside to make tea.

2.2 Food Vocabulary: Japanese Staples

Chapter 5 introduces several traditional Japanese foods. Using the glossary and the chapter, answer these questions in full sentences.

1. What is miso paste, and what is it made from?

2. What is izushi, and why does Kudo-sensei describe its taste as “particular”?

3. What are pickled vegetables (tsukemono), and how are they used in Japanese cooking?

4. What is tofu, and what does Charlie have it for in her fridge?

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | The school returns from the holiday on the eighth of January. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Oda-sensei gives Charlie a box of sweets as an omiyage. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Charlie has been in Oguni for six weeks when she receives the omiyage. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie falls on the snow three times in January. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Charlie reads the section on winter preparedness in the ALT handbook. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | The heavy snowstorm arrives on the nineteenth of January. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie has enough food to last the snowstorm without help. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Three neighbours come to Charlie's apartment during the snowstorm. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | The elderly woman from New Year's Day is among the visitors. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Charlie's neighbour two doors down shows her a better shovelling technique. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Kudo-sensei identifies the fermented fish dish as kiritanpo. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie says she would probably eat izushi again. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

What does Charlie mean when she says she has been “counting” the days since the holiday? What has she been counting towards?

How does Charlie describe the progress of her Japanese? What three moments in the chapter show that her Japanese has improved?

Describe the snowstorm on the nineteenth of January. How does the author convey how extreme it is without giving statistics or measurements?

What do the three neighbours bring, and what do they do in Charlie's kitchen? Describe the scene.

How does Charlie describe the way help works in Oguni, compared to London? What is the “economy” she refers to?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

Charlie sits with the box of sweets and “thought about the word guest.” She has been in Oguni for six weeks. What does this moment tell us about how she sees herself, and how she is beginning to think about belonging?

The elderly woman says something directly to Charlie at the door before leaving, and waits. Charlie doesn't understand, and says arigatou gozaimasu. The woman makes her sound and goes. What do you think the woman said? Why does the author choose not to tell us?

The chapter ends with Charlie walking, saying nothing, thinking about Ishida-san having “decided something” about her. She “did not object to this.” What has changed since her arrival in December?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Language of Gradual Improvement

Charlie's Japanese improves without her noticing — and the author shows this through a careful sequence of “one day...” moments. Look at the passage:

“One day you reached for a word and it was there. One day you understood the approximate shape of a sentence before it had finished. One day you bought something at the hardware shop and the owner said something and you laughed before you'd processed whether it was funny, which meant something had happened that hadn't been happening before.”

Notice the structure: “One day...” repeated three times, each time describing a slightly different and more instinctive kind of understanding. The third example is the most significant: she laughs before she has consciously processed the joke. The body is ahead of the mind.

Write three “One day...” sentences of your own, describing the gradual improvement of a skill — a language, a sport, an instrument, a job. Each sentence should show a different stage of the improvement.

1. One day... _____

2. One day... _____

3. One day... _____

4.2 Describing Weather Through Absence

The author describes the snowstorm not by measuring it but by describing what is no longer there. Look at these examples:

“a particular flattened grey that seemed to press down on the town”

“the usual small noises of the street gone in a way that felt less like quiet and more like the world holding its breath”

“The road, if it was still there, was not distinguishable from the spaces beside it.”

“The mountains were gone, absorbed into a sky that had decided it and they were the same thing.”

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing an extreme weather event — a storm, heavy fog, a heatwave, a flood — through what has disappeared, changed shape, or become unrecognisable. Do not give measurements or statistics.

4.3 Indirect Speech and Summary

During the snowstorm visit, the author summarises what Charlie is told through gesture and partial understanding rather than quoting it directly. Look at this passage:

“She understood... that she had been given... And that she had been told... how to use the miso paste, where to store the pickled things, that the dried something should be reconstituted in water, and something about the fish that she would ask Kudo-sensei about later.”

This is reported speech at a distance — filtered through Charlie’s partial comprehension. The author uses it to convey both what was communicated and the limits of Charlie’s understanding.

Now practise reported speech. Rewrite these direct statements as reported speech, as if someone is summarising what they were told by a person they could only partially understand.

1. “Put the jar in the fridge after you open it.” Reported: _____
2. “You need to stir it slowly, from the bottom.” Reported: _____
3. “Don’t leave it out in the warmth or it will go bad.” Reported: _____

4.4 Kudo-sensei’s Style: Precision and Economy

Kudo-sensei speaks very little but precisely. Look at the exchange about izushi:

“The taste is —” she paused briefly. “Particular.”

“That’s one word for it.”

“That,” Kudo-sensei said, “is more than most people say the first time.”

Kudo-sensei chooses the word “particular” deliberately — it is honest without being rude.

Charlie’s response (“that’s one word for it”) is dry and affectionate. Kudo-sensei’s final line is a form of praise, delivered without sounding like praise. This is the register of their friendship as it is beginning to form.

Write a short exchange (6–8 lines of dialogue) between two people in which one describes something they ate, experienced, or saw for the first time — and the other responds in Kudo-sensei’s style: precise, economical, and kind without being sentimental.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie sits with the box of sweets and thinks about the word “guest.” She has been in Oguni for six weeks. What do you think the word means to her at this moment? Is being a guest a comfortable position?
- When the neighbours arrive in the snowstorm, Charlie understands “one word in five. Maybe.” Yet the visit is a success. What does this tell us about communication? What makes the scene work despite the language barrier?
- Kudo-sensei says Ishida-san has “decided something” about Charlie. What do you think she has decided? What has Ishida-san observed?
- Charlie reports her Japanese progress “intermixed with her usual complaints” to Bryony. What does this tell us about how Charlie presents herself, and about her relationship with Bryony?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie describes the “economy” of help in Oguni as different from London: not transactions, not favours with implied futures, but simply what you do when something needs doing. Do you recognise this kind of help from your own experience? Is it possible in a city?
- The walk home with Kudo-sensei has 201carried as a pattern the way patterns do, quietly and without announcement.201d The chapter shows several things that have established themselves this way. What else in the chapter has become a pattern for Charlie?
- Charlie laughs at the hardware shop before she has processed whether something is funny. What does this moment represent? Why does the author give it more weight than a bigger, more obvious breakthrough might have?
- The chapter ends with Charlie saying nothing about Ishida-san’s decision. She just walks. What does this silence suggest about where she is now, compared to the beginning of the novel?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever learned a skill (a language, an instrument, a sport) and noticed improvement in the way Charlie does — suddenly, unexpectedly? What was that moment like?
- Charlie describes trying to manage during the snowstorm: clearing snow that fills back in, making a list that “describes the contents of her fridge rather than a plan.” Have you ever tried to manage a situation where the problem was bigger than your resources?
- Omiyage — bringing back a food gift from a trip or the new year — is described as a deeply embedded custom. Does a similar custom exist in your culture? What are the unspoken rules around gift-giving where you are from?
- At the end of the chapter, Charlie does not object to being “decided about.” Is it comfortable to be accepted by someone before you have chosen to present yourself to them?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Snowstorm Visit

Work in groups of four. Three students are the neighbours; one is Charlie.

The Situation

- The three neighbours arrive at Charlie's door during the snowstorm.
- They speak in their own language (you can use your own language, Japanese words from the glossary, or invented sounds).
- Charlie responds with gestures, the few Japanese words she knows, and confusion.
- The neighbours organise the kitchen, correct Charlie's stirring, and redirect her table-setting.
- After the scene: discuss what each character was thinking during the visit.

6.2 The Walk Home

Work in pairs. You are Charlie and Kudo-sensei, walking home after school.

The Situation

- Charlie describes what happened during the snowstorm — the neighbours, the kitchen, the food.
- She asks about izushi.
- Kudo-sensei answers carefully and precisely.
- Charlie asks about Ishida-san.
- Kudo-sensei says: "She has decided something about you."
- Play the rest of the conversation from there. What does Charlie say? What does Kudo-sensei say?

6.3 The Phone Call to Bryony

Work in pairs. Charlie calls Bryony during the snowstorm, before the neighbours arrive.

The Situation

- Charlie tells Bryony it is snowing differently.
- Bryony asks if she has food. Charlie says "broadly."
- Bryony responds. Charlie looks out at the vending machine glow.
- Play the call. Try to capture: Charlie performing being fine, Bryony seeing through it, the affection in both.
- After the call ends: one of you says aloud what the other character was actually thinking.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Patterns and Progress

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What is something you have got better at without noticing?		
Do people in your neighbourhood help each other without being asked?		
Have you ever been completely snowed in, or stuck by weather?		
What food have you tried that you found “particular” — unusual but interesting?		
Has a stranger ever made a decision about you that turned out to be kind?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Moment of Progress

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about a time you noticed you had improved at something. Use the “One day...” structure if it helps. Try to describe the moment of realisation rather than the process of learning.

Useful language: One day... • Without noticing... • I reached for... and it was there •
 Before I had time to think... • Something had happened that hadn't been happening before •
 The ear / hand / body adjusts before the mind does

7.2 Creative Writing: Ishida-san's Decision

Write a short interior monologue (100–130 words) from Ishida-san's point of view: what she observed about Charlie, when she made her decision, and what she decided. You know very little about Ishida-san from the text — this is an exercise in imagining a character from the outside in.

Remember: Ishida-san does not speak English. She communicates by doing, not by explaining.

7.3 Extended Writing: Community Without Transaction

Charlie reflects that help in Oguni works differently from London — not as transactions, not as favours with implied futures, but as simply what you do when something needs doing. Write 150–180 words exploring this idea. You might consider:

- Is this kind of community help possible in cities? What makes it easier or harder?
- Does it exist where you are from? How does it work?
- Is there a difference between helping someone because you feel obligated and helping because it is simply what you do?

7.4 Short Writing: The List

Charlie makes a list of the food she has during the snowstorm and recognises that it “describes the contents of her fridge rather than a plan.” Write her list (20–30 words), and then write her private reaction to it (50–60 words) — in her voice: dry, honest, not quite despairing.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 5.

Omiyage

Omiyage (お土産) are gifts — typically food items, and typically local specialities — brought back from a trip or given as part of a seasonal ritual. The omiyage custom is deeply embedded in Japanese social life: returning from a holiday, a business trip, or even a day out, one brings back something edible for colleagues, neighbours, or family. At the new year, omiyage are exchanged in offices and staffrooms as part of the return to work. The expectation is not extravagant: a small box of regional sweets or a bag of local snacks is standard. What matters is the gesture and the local specificity — the gift should come from somewhere and say so.

Izushi

Izushi (鉄寿司) is a traditional fermented dish originating in Hokkaido and the Tohoku region of Japan. It is made by layering fish, cooked rice, vegetables, and seasonings in a wooden container and leaving them to ferment over several weeks in the cold of winter. The result is a dish with a distinctively sour, and complex flavour, what Kudo-sensei carefully describes as “particular.” Izushi is a preserved winter food, developed in an era before refrigeration when fermenting was essential for survival through long, snowy winters. It’s not universally popular even within Japan, and Charlie’s verdict that she would “probably eat it again” is genuinely complimentary.

Miso and Tsukemono

Miso (味噌) is a fermented paste made from soybeans, salt, and a fermenting agent called koji. It is one of the foundational ingredients of Japanese cooking and is used in soups, sauces, marinades, dressings, and many other dishes. Miso varies significantly in colour, flavour, and intensity depending on region and production method: white miso is mild and sweet; red miso is stronger and saltier. Tsukemono are pickled vegetables — cucumbers, daikon radish, cabbage, plum, and many others — preserved in salt, rice bran, vinegar, or miso. They are a standard accompaniment to rice-based meals and are eaten in small quantities alongside the main dishes. Both miso and tsukemono are among the things the neighbours bring Charlie during the snowstorm.

Snow Country: Winter in Tohoku

The Tohoku region of Japan, and particularly the mountain areas of Yamagata, Niigata, and Akita prefectures, experiences some of the heaviest snowfall in the world. Annual snowfall in mountain towns can exceed five or six metres. The infrastructure and culture of daily life in these areas is organised around snow: covered walkways protect pedestrians, heating systems are adapted and communities have established practices for snow clearance that have been refined over generations. The scene Charlie witnesses after the storm, neighbours appearing at first light with shovels, working without apparent frustration, as if this is simply what happens, is an accurate portrait of how snow is managed in these communities. It is not heroic; it is ordinary.

The Hardware Shop (Kaimono)

The small, owner-run hardware shop appears briefly in this chapter — the place where Charlie buys something and laughs at a joke before she has processed it. Independently owned hardware shops, tool shops, and general goods stores remain common in rural Japanese towns, often run by a single family for decades. They sell practical items at practical prices, and the owners are often knowledgeable about local needs in a way that larger chains are not. The owner’s willingness to communicate with a foreign customer by pointing, nodding, and drawing diagrams is not unusual.

The Walk Home as Social Infrastructure

The walk home that Charlie and Kudo-sensei begin to share in Chapter 5 is established without announcement or invitation — it simply arrives as a pattern because they live in the same direction. In a small town, repeated proximity creates relationship without requiring any formal arrangement. This is different from the way urban friendships typically form, which often require deliberate scheduling and explicit social gestures. The walk home is not an event; it is a route, shared because it is convenient and continued because both people find it worthwhile. It is through this structure that much of what Charlie learns about Oguni — and much of what she learns about herself — will be communicated.

Chapter 6: Look Up

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 6 is quiet and precise. Three things carry it: the deepening friendship with Kudo-sensei (the walks, the exchanges of personal history, the conversation about belonging and return); the moment with the ume blossom, which is the chapter’s hinge and its title; and the classroom in February, where Charlie has stopped observing from a distance and started being present. The chapter ends with Charlie walking to school past the flowering plum trees and looking at them — a small action, unremarked. Exercises focus on the language of attention and noticing, the grammar of belonging, dialogue that means more than it says, and the ume as a cultural phenomenon introduced through lived experience rather than explanation.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever walked the same route every day and one day noticed something you had never noticed before? What was it?
- What does it mean to pay attention? Is there a difference between looking at something and seeing it?
- Think about someone you have become friends with gradually, over time, rather than immediately. How did that friendship develop?
- If a friend asked you “do you regret it?” about a big decision you had made, how would you answer?

1.2 The Title: Look Up

“Look up” is two words and a complete instruction. It is also the title of the chapter.

Before you read: Who do you think says “Look up”, and to whom? In what situation? What might they be pointing at? As you read, notice when this moment arrives and what effect it has.

1.3 Adaptation or Defeat?

Early in Chapter 6, Charlie reflects that she has stopped thinking about the snow:

“This was either adaptation or defeat and she hadn’t decided which.”

Discuss with a partner:

- What is the difference between adaptation and defeat? Is it possible to adapt to something and still be unhappy about it?
- Can the same action be both adaptation and defeat, depending on how you look at it?
- Do you think Charlie has adapted or been defeated, at this point in the story?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 6. The list is in alphabetical order.

ambient	background; surrounding; present throughout without being the focus
applicability	the quality of being relevant or appropriate to a situation
baffling	completely impossible to understand; confusing beyond reason
to board (school)	to live at school during the week; students who board are called boarders
to carry something faint	to hold a slight trace of something — here, a scent carried on cold air
cherry blossom (sakura)	the flowers of the cherry tree; Japan's most celebrated seasonal flower, blooming in spring; mentioned here as a contrast to the earlier, quieter ume blossom
compressed	squeezed or made smaller by external pressure; here, the children still slightly subdued by winter and the holiday
curriculum	the full programme of subjects and content taught at a school
deploying	using something deliberately and strategically; here, Kenji “deploys” his new vocabulary word as if it were a tool or a weapon
diverge	to separate; to go in different directions from a shared point
economy (of gesture)	an efficient, minimal system; doing the most with the least; here, two boys who communicate with very few words or gestures
to expand back into themselves	to return to one's full, natural self after being constrained; used here to describe the children becoming livelier in February
functional	working; adequate; sufficient for the task without being good or bad
grievance	a sense of complaint or resentment; the feeling that something is wrong or unfair
incremental	happening in small steps, gradually; built up little by little over time
melancholy	a gentle, quiet sadness; a mood of reflection and wistfulness
not nothing	a double negative used positively: not worthless, not without value; more than zero, even if not yet much
outpaced	gone faster or further than; here, Saki's English questions go beyond what Charlie has prepared for
practical reflection	thinking out loud about real problems and decisions, without drama or complaint
reconsidering its position	a humorous phrase meaning: showing any sign of stopping or changing; the snow shows no sign of this
to solidify	to become firm, fixed, or established; here, the walk home has solidified from a coincidence into a habit
ume (梅)	the Japanese plum or apricot tree; one of the first trees to bloom in late winter, before the cherry blossom; celebrated in Japanese culture as a sign that spring is approaching
Yonezawa	a city in Yamagata Prefecture, significantly larger than Oguni, where older students from rural areas go to attend high school

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. By February the walk home had _____ into a routine — unplanned but fixed.
2. He used the word “melancholy” twice in ten minutes, _____ it in situations that didn’t quite call for it.
3. Her mood was _____: not good, not bad, simply enough to get through the day.
4. The friendship had developed in an _____ way, built from conversations that accumulated over weeks.
5. Her answers were _____ but not the same as the right answers — they were close enough to be interesting.
6. The two boys had their own _____ of gesture and glance that substituted for speech.
7. It wasn’t much. But it was _____, which was further along than nothing.

2.2 Connotation: What Words Carry

Several words in Chapter 6 are chosen for their emotional weight as well as their literal meaning. Look at each word and answer the questions below.

Word	What it literally means	What it suggests or implies
melancholy	_____	_____
functional	_____	_____
modest (flowers)	_____	_____
grievance	_____	_____
not nothing	_____	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | By February, Charlie has stopped thinking about the snow. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Kenji greets Charlie each morning with a different English word. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Kudo-sensei grew up in Oguni and studied at university in Kyoto. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie tells Kudo-sensei she regrets coming to Japan. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The ume blossom appears in a small garden behind a wooden fence. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Charlie has walked past the fence every morning for two months. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Kudo-sensei says the ume comes after the cherry blossom. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Saki is twelve years old and studies English seriously. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie participates unexpectedly in a physical education lesson. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | On the last Friday of February, Charlie and Kudo-sensei take a different route. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Kudo-sensei says most students who leave Oguni do not come back. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie calls the JET office and is told her transfer has been approved. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

1. What does Charlie mean when she says she was “caught grumbling” by Kudo-sensei? What had she been doing as she walked?
2. What things has Charlie learned about Kudo-sensei through their walks? List at least four details.
3. Describe the ume blossom moment: what Charlie sees, what she smells, and what Kudo-sensei says about it.
4. What does Kudo-sensei say about the students who leave Oguni and come back? What two reasons does she give for returning?
5. How does the chapter end? What does Charlie do when she walks past the plum trees on Monday morning?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

1. Kudo-sensei says: “You have to know to look for them. After that you notice.” She says this “as a statement of fact about the flowers and also, possibly, about other things.” What other things might she mean?
2. Charlie thinks about Elephant and Castle and the Northern line after Kudo-sensei talks about people who leave and find they are from somewhere. She says: “I think you can know a place without understanding what it is to you. Until you’re away from it.” What is she really talking about?
3. Kudo-sensei responds to Charlie’s answer about knowing a place with: “Does it?” — not as a challenge, but with genuine interest. Then: “Yes. That is one way it works.” What does she mean by “one way”? What other way might there be?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Language of Noticing

Chapter 6 is built on the act of noticing — things Charlie has not seen before, things that were always there. Look at how the author describes the ume moment:

“small clusters of flowers had opened. Not white exactly. Not pink exactly. Something between the two, tight and modest, asking nothing.”

“The cold carried something faint that she had not noticed before and was now not sure how she had missed — a scent, very slight, clean and cool and specific, arriving only when she was still enough to catch it.”

Notice the precision: “not white exactly, not pink exactly”; “very slight, clean and cool and specific”. The author uses small qualifications and lists of adjectives to build a careful description of something subtle. The flowers are not dramatic. The scent is barely there. The attention required to perceive them is part of what makes them meaningful.

Write a short description (60–80 words) of something small, quiet, or easy to miss — a detail in a room, a moment in a day, a sound or a scent. Use precise, qualified language: “not quite”, “something between”, “very slight”, “arriving only when”.

4.2 Dialogue That Means More Than It Says

Several exchanges in Chapter 6 carry more meaning than the words themselves contain. Look at this one:

“Do you regret it?” Kudo-sensei had asked, in the flat tone of someone asking a practical question rather than an emotional one.

Charlie had considered this properly. “Ask me in April, you don’t want to hear my answer now,” she said.

“Kudo-sensei had accepted this as a reasonable answer and they had walked on.”

This exchange tells us: Charlie is honest enough not to pretend; her answer implies the current answer is “yes”; Kudo-sensei does not push; both respect the space. Neither character says any of this.

Now look at the exchange about plum blossom with Bryony:

“You’ve been still?”

“Don’t.”

“I’m just—” / “I know what you’re just. Don’t.”

Answer these questions about the two exchanges:

What is Bryony “just” about to say? Why does Charlie stop her?

What does Charlie mean when she says she “filed it under things she was also not saying”? What is she not saying?

4.3 The Grammar of Belonging

The conversation about leaving and returning contains one of the chapter's most carefully written passages. Read it again carefully:

"For some it is the place itself. They leave and find that they are from here in a way they did not understand until they were somewhere else."

"I think you can know a place without understanding what it is to you. Until you're away from it."

Study the grammar of these sentences:

- "they are from here" — the present tense of a past discovery: they learn something that was always true.
- "in a way they did not understand until" — understanding arrives at a specific moment, after the fact.
- "until you're away from it" — distance creates understanding that proximity prevented.

Now write two or three sentences of your own using this grammar of delayed understanding — about a place, a person, a time in your life that you understood differently once you were away from it.

4.4 Charlie's Mental Draft

Before the ume blossom moment, Charlie is composing a mental message to Bryony as she walks:

"Not the actual message, which would be shorter and funnier and leave out the parts that were harder to say, but the raw material of it."

The author distinguishes between the raw, honest version and the edited version that Charlie actually sends. This is a useful distinction for thinking about communication — and for writing practice.

Write the raw, unedited version of Charlie's message to Bryony (80–100 words) — the one that includes the parts that are harder to say. Then write the version she actually sends (30–40 words) — shorter, funnier, and missing the real content.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Kenji uses the word “melancholy” in contexts that “didn’t quite call for it but weren’t entirely wrong either.” What does this tell us about Kenji? What might he be observing?
- Charlie says she has not had many friendships “that could sustain silence without it becoming a problem requiring resolution.” What does this tell us about the friendship with Kudo-sensei that has developed? What makes it different?
- Saki’s questions “occasionally outpaced Charlie’s own preparedness.” What does this suggest about Saki, and what does it tell us about how Charlie is being changed by the school?
- At the end of the chapter, Charlie calls the JET office and says she will “check in again next month.” Compare this to the calls in Chapter 4. What has changed in how she relates to the transfer request?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The ume blossom was there every morning for two months. Charlie simply hadn’t looked up. What does this suggest about attention, habit, and the relationship between looking and seeing?
- Kudo-sensei says: “You have to know to look for them. After that you notice.” Is this true of things other than flowers? What else do we only see once we know to look?
- The chapter describes Charlie’s role in the school as the “ambient thing, the general purpose of existing.” By February, she is “less suspicious” of this. What has she understood about it that she didn’t understand in December?
- Charlie’s double negative “not nothing” is one of the chapter’s key phrases. It describes her relationship with the children, but it also describes her relationship with Oguni as a whole at this point. What does “not nothing” feel like, as a position to be in?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever noticed something for the first time that must have been there all along? What was it? What made you suddenly see it?
- Charlie thinks about whether she can know a place without understanding what it means to her until she leaves it. Is there a place that you understand differently now than when you were living in or close to it?
- The walk home with Kudo-sensei has become a comfortable silence as much as a conversation. Have you experienced this kind of friendship — one that can hold silence comfortably? What does it take to get there?
- Kenji’s vocabulary project — bringing a new English word each morning — is a small, self-directed act of learning. Do you have any habits like this, for learning a language or anything else?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Ume Moment

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- It is a February morning. Charlie is walking to school, head down, composing a mental message to Bryony.
- Kudo-sensei is already there, waiting at the edge of the road.
- She says: “Look up.”
- Play out the scene: Charlie turns, sees the flowers, the scent, Kudo-sensei’s explanation.
- Include Charlie’s awareness that she was “caught grumbling” and Kudo-sensei’s choice not to remark on it.
- End with Kudo-sensei walking on and Charlie standing a moment longer.

6.2 The Long Walk

Work in pairs. It is the last Friday of February. The walk home is longer than usual.

The Situation

- Kudo-sensei talks about the school: a curriculum change, a student she is watching, the older students who leave for Yonezawa.
- Charlie asks: “Do many of them come back?”
- Kudo-sensei answers. Charlie thinks about London.
- Charlie says: “I think you can know a place without understanding what it is to you. Until you’re away from it.”
- Kudo-sensei asks: “Does it?” — genuinely, not as a challenge.
- Play the rest of the conversation from there, ending at the junction where the paths diverge.

6.3 Kenji’s Word of the Week

Work in groups of three or four. One student is Charlie; others are students, including Kenji.

The Situation

- It is a morning in February. Kenji arrives with a new word: “melancholy.”
- He uses it. Twice. In situations that don’t quite fit, but aren’t entirely wrong.
- Charlie responds. She tries not to correct him directly, but she is curious about why he chose this word.
- Other students react — in Japanese, in gestures, or in the English they have.
- After the scene: discuss what Kenji might have been trying to say.

6.4 Mingling Activity: What You Notice

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What is something you notice that most people don't?		
Have you ever understood a place better after leaving it?		
Can you sustain comfortable silence with someone? Who?		
What word would you bring in, like Kenji, if you had to?		
Have you adapted to something that used to bother you?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: Something You Hadn't Noticed

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about something you suddenly noticed that had always been there — a sound, a detail, a person's habit, a feature of a place you know well. Try to describe the moment of noticing with the same precision the author uses for the ume blossom.

Useful language: I had walked past... every day for... • Not quite... not quite... something between • I was not sure how I had missed it • Arriving only when I was still enough • After that you notice

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei's Walk

We only ever see the walks from Charlie's perspective. Write a short interior monologue (100–130 words) from Kudo-sensei's point of view during one of the walks. What does she notice about Charlie? What does she think but not say? Why does she continue the walks?

Remember Kudo-sensei's character: she chooses her words carefully, she says one true thing rather than many, she prefers precision to warmth — though she is not without warmth.

7.3 Extended Writing: Knowing a Place

Kudo-sensei talks about people who leave a place and discover they are from there in a way they didn't understand until they were somewhere else. Charlie says she thinks this makes sense. Write 150–180 words exploring this idea. You might consider:

- Is it possible to truly know a place while you are living in it? What does distance give you that proximity doesn't?
- Is there a place you understand better now than when you were in it?
- Does understanding a place change your relationship to it?

7.4 Short Writing: Not Nothing

Charlie describes her connection with the children as “not nothing” — “a long way from something. But... further along than nothing.” Write 80–100 words about a relationship, a skill, or a situation in your own life that you would describe as “not nothing.” What does that phrase capture that “good” or “okay” does not?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 6.

Ume: The Plum Blossom

The ume (梅), often translated as plum or apricot blossom, is one of the most celebrated flowers in Japanese culture. It blooms in late winter — typically January to March depending on location — before the snow has fully melted and long before the cherry blossom that follows in April. Unlike the sakura, which blooms in dramatic, short-lived abundance and attracts large crowds, the ume is quieter: smaller flowers, a more subtle fragrance, a more modest presence. It has been celebrated in Japanese poetry and art for over a thousand years, appearing frequently in the *Man'yōshū* (the oldest anthology of Japanese poetry, compiled in the eighth century) as a symbol of resilience, early hope, and the arrival of spring before spring has arrived. Kudo-sensei's comment — “it comes before anything else” — is factually accurate and also culturally weighted.

Sakura vs Ume: Two Kinds of Blossom

The contrast between ume and sakura is worth dwelling on because it reflects something about different relationships to beauty. Sakura (cherry blossom) is Japan's most internationally famous seasonal flower: it blooms suddenly, covers the landscape in pink and white for approximately two weeks, and then falls. The Japanese concept of *mono no aware* is closely associated with sakura. Ume is the earlier, less celebrated alternative: it comes when the world is still cold, lasts longer, smells more strongly, and requires attention to find. Charlie, arriving in December and looking at the ground through January, misses it until she is told to look up. This makes the ume, in the novel, a figure for a different kind of attention — less spectacular, more earned.

Kyoto University (Kyodai)

Kudo-sensei studied at Kyoto University, known in Japanese as Kyodai. It is one of Japan's most prestigious universities, consistently ranked among the top academic institutions in the country and internationally. That Kudo-sensei studied at Kyodai and then returned to teach in a small rural school in Yamagata is noted by Charlie as something that has been thought about — not an accident or a failure but a considered choice. This is a significant detail about Kudo-sensei's character: she is someone who had options and chose this.

Rural Depopulation and the High School Problem

Kudo-sensei's reflection on students who leave Oguni for high school in Yonezawa touches on one of the most significant structural problems facing rural Japan. Because most rural towns do not have their own high school, children from the age of fifteen must travel to larger towns or cities to continue their education, often boarding during the week. This disruption frequently leads to a permanent departure: students settle in the larger town, attend university elsewhere, and find work in urban areas. The result is accelerating depopulation of rural areas. Kudo-sensei's quiet comment that those who return “usually have a reason” is a precise observation about a phenomenon that is deeply felt in communities like this one.

The Staffroom (*shokuinshitsu*) and Teacher Culture in Japan

The Japanese school staffroom functions as the shared workspace, rest space, and social centre for all teachers in the school. Teachers typically sit at their own desks in this communal room rather than having individual offices, which means that the staffroom is where relationships between teachers develop, information is exchanged, and the social fabric of the school is maintained. Charlie's desk is in this room. The children who come to find her there at break time — with their questions about London, the sea, the Queen — are navigating what is usually adult territory. That they come says something about how Charlie has come to be regarded.

Mono no Aware: The Awareness of Transience

Mono no aware (物の哀れ) is a Japanese aesthetic concept that can be translated roughly as “the pathos of things” or the bittersweet awareness of impermanence. It describes the particular emotional quality of beauty that is enhanced by the knowledge that it will not last: the cherry blossoms that will fall in two weeks, the summer that ends, the childhood that passes. The concept is not exclusively Japanese, but it is particularly central to Japanese aesthetics and has been articulated and refined in Japanese literature and art for centuries. The ume blossom in Chapter 6, which comes before anything else and will last only a few more weeks, carries some of this weight, even if the novel does not name the concept.

Chapter 7: The Onsen

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Teacher’s Note Chapter 7 is structured around a single event — Charlie’s first visit to the onsen — that the novel has been building towards without announcing it. The broken heater is the trigger; Kudo-sensei’s invitation the mechanism; the experience itself the pivot. The chapter’s emotional weight rests on a word the author withholds (the temperature is ‘the opposite of the classroom’) and on the two things Charlie notes but does not draw conclusions from: the nights she doesn’t call the JET office, and that she slept better. Language exercises focus on understatement, the body as narrator, and the grammar of things noticed but not examined. The onsen also carries significant cultural content.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever done something you were nervous about and found it completely different from what you had imagined?
- Think about a time when your body was very tired, cold, or uncomfortable for a long period. What did it feel like when the discomfort ended?
- When a friend invites you to do something unfamiliar, what makes you say yes? What makes you say no?
- Is there a difference between “saying” you are fine and actually being fine? When do people say they are fine when they are not?

1.2 The Title: The Onsen

The chapter is named after a place, not an event or a person. The onsen is not described to us before Charlie enters it; we experience it as she does.

Before you read: Based on what you already know about onsen from Chapter 4, what do you expect from this chapter? What might make this experience significant for Charlie specifically, at this moment in the story? Note your expectations here, and return to them afterwards.

1.3 Kenji’s Review

Kenji raises his hand during a lesson in the freezing classroom and says, in English: “Sensei. This is miserable.”

Charlie considers his sentence before responding. Discuss:

- What does Charlie mean when she thinks: “Grammatically correct. Contextually accurate. Deployed with appropriate emphasis.”?
- Why does she answer “Yes. It is.” rather than something more teacher-like?
- What does this small exchange tell us about how Charlie’s relationship with the children has developed??

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 7. The list is in alphabetical order.

all the bar needed to clear	all that was required to meet the minimum standard; here, the changing room only needed to be slightly warmer than outside for Charlie to feel relief
available as a point of reference	present and accessible if needed, but not intrusive; Kudo-sensei is there if Charlie needs her, but not watching
comprehensively	completely; in every possible way; leaving nothing out
the core	the central part of something; the deepest layer; here, the last part of the cold to leave her body
to deploy (instrumentally)	to use something for a practical purpose; here, Charlie uses the vocabulary game for warmth as much as for language learning
established	confirmed; settled; here, the parts situation is being investigated
functional plainness	a style that is simple and practical, with no attempt at decoration or impression; designed purely to do its job
glazed patience	the slightly dazed, enduring expression of people tolerating something difficult without complaining
gravity	seriousness; weight; the appropriate acknowledgement of how serious something is
institutional cold	the specific kind of cold found inside a building that should be warm but isn't; different in quality from outdoor cold
instrumentally	as a means to an end; for a practical purpose rather than for its own sake
locker (at the onsen)	a small lockable storage space for personal belongings; here, for clothes and valuables
to note something	to register or observe something mentally, without necessarily acting on it or drawing conclusions
not up for discussion	already decided; not open to debate or refusal
the parts situation	the question of whether the necessary repair parts are available; used here with bureaucratic vagueness
a personality change	used humorously here: Charlie says the cold has lasted so long and been so total that it feels like it has altered who she is
reconsidering her life choices	humorously: questioning whether the decisions that led her to this moment were wise
stale	not fresh; used air; the quality of air that has been in a closed space too long
systematically	in an organised, thorough, methodical way; here, used with comic hyperbole to describe how cold she is
thermal (clothing)	clothing designed to retain body heat; worn as a base layer under other clothes in cold conditions
unbotheredness	the quality of not being bothered, troubled, or made uncomfortable; here, the other women at the onsen are completely unbothered by Charlie's presence

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The classroom had a _____ cold — the kind that felt worse than being outside in the wind.
2. She registered the detail and filed it away, _____ it without drawing any conclusion.
3. Kudo-sensei had already paid for both of them. The matter was _____.
4. She was _____, professionally, _____ cold. Every layer. Every bone.
5. The building had the _____ of a place that has been doing one thing, well, for a very long time.
6. The twelve children sat with the _____ of people enduring something together without complaint.
7. “Better?” she said. “Yes,” Charlie said. There was no point _____ about it.

2.2 Cold: A Vocabulary Field

Chapter 7 describes cold in many different ways. Find words and phrases from the chapter that fit each category below.

Type of cold	Words / phrases from the chapter
Cold as physical fact	_____
Cold described through time (how long)	_____
Cold as emotion or mood	_____
Cold described through absence of warmth	_____
Cold compared to something else	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | The kerosene heater breaks on a Tuesday in March. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Mori-sensei apologises for the broken heater with appropriate seriousness. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Kenji says “This is miserable” in Japanese. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie can see her breath in the classroom. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The vocabulary game Charlie uses requires the children to sit still. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | By Thursday Charlie is wearing four layers. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Kudo-sensei invites Charlie to the onsen on Thursday. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Kudo-sensei pays for herself and Charlie at the counter. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie undresses immediately without hesitation. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Kudo-sensei is already in the bath when Charlie enters. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie calls the JET office the Monday after the onsen visit. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | The heater in classroom two is fixed by Friday. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does Charlie describe the quality of the cold in the classroom? What makes it different from outdoor cold?
- How does Kudo-sensei frame the invitation to the onsen? Why does Charlie describe it as not “an invitation offered for her benefit”?
- Describe what Charlie sees and experiences in the changing room before entering the bath. What almost stops her?
- What happens to Charlie’s mind and body once she is in the water? How does the author describe the departure of the cold?
- How does Charlie describe the onsen experience to Bryony? What does she say, and what does she not say?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie does not call the JET office on Monday. She notes this “without drawing conclusions.” What conclusions is the author inviting the reader to draw?
- The chapter ends with three observations: Charlie slept better; the heater was fixed; she went to the onsen again the following Thursday. These are stated as simple facts. What do they add up to?
- The word “Yes” — in a paragraph of its own, the body’s response to the gust of warm air — is unusual. Why does the author give this word its own line? What is being communicated that could not be communicated any other way?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Body as Narrator

Chapter 7 gives Charlie's body a narrative voice of its own. The body knows things before the mind does, and the author shows this through careful phrasing. Look at these examples:

“warm in the way that the body recognises before the mind does”

“it hit Charlie in the face and in the chest and in all the places that had been cold since November and her body said, without consulting her: Yes.”

“she could feel the muscles in her shoulders do something they hadn't done for some time: relax.”

In each case, the body acts before or without the mind's permission. The body says “yes” before Charlie decides anything. The shoulders relax without being told to. This is the author's way of showing that something is happening to Charlie that she has not yet allowed herself to consciously acknowledge.

Write three sentences of your own in which the body acts as narrator — knowing or doing something before the mind has caught up. Describe a moment of relief, surprise, recognition, or emotion through what the body does.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4.2 Understatement and Hyperbole Working Together

Chapter 7 uses understatement and hyperbole in the same breath. Look at how Charlie describes her cold to Kudo-sensei:

“I am extremely cold. I am comprehensively, professionally, systematically cold. I have been cold since November in a way that I thought was just weather and now understand is a personality change. I don’t know if I’ll ever be warm again.”

This is hyperbole — deliberate exaggeration for effect. But it sits alongside understatement elsewhere in the chapter (“It’s warm”, “Better?”, “Yes”). Discuss:

- Why does Charlie use hyperbole to describe her cold but understatement to describe the onsen?
- What does each style tell us about how comfortable she is expressing those feelings?

Now write a hyperbolic complaint (3–4 sentences) about something minor — weather, transport, noise, food — in Charlie’s style. Then write the same speaker’s understated description of something genuinely good (1–2 sentences).

The complaint:

The good thing:

4.3 Noting Without Concluding

At the end of the chapter, Charlie observes several things but explicitly refuses to draw conclusions from them. Look at how the author handles this:

“She noted this the following morning... the way she noted things now — without drawing conclusions from them, just registering that they were true.”

“She did not call the JET office that week. Or the week after. She noted this also, in the same way, without drawing conclusions.”

The author is careful to show Charlie noticing change while resisting the pressure to narrate it. This technique gives the reader room to understand what Charlie is not yet ready to say.

Answer these questions:

What conclusions do you, as a reader, draw from Charlie sleeping better and not calling the JET office?

Why does the author show Charlie resisting conclusions rather than simply having her reach them? What effect does this create?

4.4 Register Shifts: Formal and Informal

Chapter 7 contains several register shifts — moments where the language changes from informal to formal or vice versa. Look at how Kudo-sensei and Charlie discuss the heater on the walk:

“The heater,” Charlie said. / “Still not working?” / “Still not working.”
Then: “I am comprehensively, professionally, systematically cold...”

The exchange begins in shorthand (two words each, barely a sentence) and suddenly expands into a long, semi-formal list of adverbs (“comprehensively, professionally, systematically”). This is comic: the formality of the adverbs applied to the absurd situation of being cold in a classroom.

Find two other moments in Chapter 7 where the register shifts unexpectedly, and explain what effect the shift creates.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie says she doesn't know if she'll "ever be warm again." This is an exaggeration, but is there a true feeling underneath it? What has the cold done to her beyond the physical?
- In the changing room, Charlie notices that the other women pay her no particular attention, and finds this "both a relief and slightly baffling." What had she expected? What does this expectation tell us about how she sees herself in Oguni?
- Kudo-sensei's invitation is not presented as an invitation: "On Thursdays I go to the onsen. Come with me." Why does the author frame it this way? What does it tell us about how Kudo-sensei looks after people?
- Charlie tells Bryony the onsen was "fine" and that she "might go again next Thursday." By this point, what does the word "fine" usually mean when Charlie uses it?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The novel has repeatedly shown Charlie noting things "without drawing conclusions." Is this wisdom or avoidance? Can it be both?
- Charlie's body says "Yes" before she has consciously decided anything. What does this suggest about how we know things — or how we change — before we are ready to admit it?
- The onsen is described as a place of "unbotheredness" — nobody minds, nobody watches, nobody comments. In Chapter 3, Charlie's Oguni apartment made her feel exposed and observed. What has changed?
- The chapter ends with a list of three plain facts: she slept better, the heater was fixed, she went again next Thursday. Why does the novel choose not to comment on these facts? What would be lost if it did?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever done something you were nervous about and found the reality was nothing like what you had imagined? What had you imagined?
- Charlie's body "reconsidered her life choices" in the changing room. Have you ever been in a situation where you wanted to leave before you had started? Did you stay? What happened?
- Do you have any rituals that restore you physically or mentally — a walk, a bath, a meal, a place? What makes them restorative?
- Charlie says the cold became "a personality change." Has a long experience ever changed the way you thought about yourself — temporarily or permanently?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Cold Classroom

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Charlie; one is Kenji; others are students and Mori-sensei.

The Situation

- It is a Tuesday morning. The classroom heater has broken.
- Charlie teaches an English lesson. Everyone is wearing everything they own.
- Kenji raises his hand and says: “Sensei. This is miserable.”
- Charlie responds. The lesson continues, with a vocabulary game that involves movement.
- Mori-sensei appears at the door to apologise. Play this scene.
- After: discuss what the children are actually thinking during the lesson.

6.2 The Invitation

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- Thursday afternoon. The heater still isn't fixed. They are walking home faster than usual.
- Charlie describes her cold: comprehensively, professionally, systematically.
- Kudo-sensei makes her non-invitation invitation.
- Charlie accepts with one word.
- Play the scene as written: minimal words, maximum subtext.
- After: each player says aloud what their character was actually thinking.

6.3 The Debrief with Bryony

Work in pairs. Charlie calls Bryony after the onsen.

The Situation

- Charlie tries to explain what the onsen was like without quite saying what it meant.
- Bryony asks questions. Charlie deflects.
- The exchange: “You’ve been still?” / “Don’t.” is still fresh in their relationship.
- Include the moment where Charlie says she might go again next Thursday.
- Bryony says “Good” and then: “I’m not doing anything.”
- End with Charlie “not mentioning” the JET office. Play it so the audience notices.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Warmth and Restoration

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Do you have a ritual that restores you — a place, a food, an activity?		
Have you ever done something nervous-making and found it unexpectedly fine?		
Has a long experience ever changed your personality, even temporarily?		
What is the coldest you have ever been? How did it end?		
Do you prefer to talk about feelings or show them through actions?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Physical Experience

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing a strong physical sensation — warmth, cold, tiredness, relief, hunger — through what the body notices and does, without naming the emotion directly. Let the body narrate.

Useful language: warm / cold in the way the body recognises before the mind does • her body said, without consulting her • she could feel [part of body] do something it hadn't done for some time • from the outside in, the edges first and then the core • she had not thought about [x] for a while

7.2 Creative Writing: The Other Women

The other women in the onsen changing room pay Charlie no particular attention. Choose one of them — the older woman drying her hair, the woman approximately her mother's age having a conversation, or one you invent — and write a short interior monologue (100–130 words) from her point of view. Does she notice Charlie at all? If so, what does she think?

7.3 Extended Writing: Noting Without Concluding

Charlie registers things “without drawing conclusions” from them — the better sleep, the missed phone calls. Write 150–180 words exploring this as a way of being in the world. You might consider:

- Is it possible to change without deciding to change? How does that work?
- Is refusing to draw conclusions a form of honesty (not claiming to know what you don't know) or a form of avoidance?
- Have you ever noticed a change in yourself only in retrospect — after it had already happened?

7.4 Short Writing: Kenji's Notebook

Kenji writes something in his notebook after Charlie agrees that “This is miserable.” What does he write? Write his notebook entry for that day (60–80 words) in Kenji's voice. He is eight. He has strong opinions and a growing vocabulary.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 7.

Onsen: Hot Spring Bathing in Japan

Onsen (温泉) are natural hot spring baths heated by geothermal activity. Japan sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire and has more than twenty-five thousand hot spring sources. The water varies in mineral content depending on the source, and different minerals are associated with different therapeutic properties — some for the skin, some for muscles, some for circulation. The onsen near the covered arcade in Oguni is a community facility — small, functional, frequented by local people rather than tourists — which is different in character from the large resort onsen found at famous destinations like Zao or Ginzan. Community onsen are a feature of everyday life in towns with geothermal water, in the same way that a community pool or public bath functions in other countries.

Onsen Etiquette

Onsen use follows a set of clear customs. Bathers wash thoroughly at individual shower stations before entering the shared bath — the bath is for soaking, not for washing. Bathing is done without swimwear; towels are used to move between areas but not in the water. Hair should be tied up or kept out of the water. Tattoos are prohibited at many establishments (though policies are changing). Bathers are expected to be quiet and to respect the shared space. The “unbotheredness” Charlie observes in the other women — nobody watching, nobody commenting — is the expected norm: the onsen is not a social performance.

The Kerosene Heater (Sekiyu Stove)

Portable kerosene heaters (石油ストーブ, sekiryu sutoobu) are common in Japanese homes and older buildings, particularly in colder regions like Tohoku. They burn kerosene fuel and provide direct, localised heat. Unlike central heating systems common in many European and North American buildings, Japanese homes traditionally relied on heating individual rooms rather than whole buildings, which means that rooms not in use can be extremely cold in winter. The breakdown of classroom two’s heater in March is therefore not a minor inconvenience but a significant problem, which is why Mori-sensei apologises with specific gravity.

Public Bathing in Japan: Historical and Social Context

The tradition of public bathing in Japan predates the domestic bathroom by many centuries. Sento (public baths using heated water, as distinct from natural hot springs) were the primary bathing facility for most urban Japanese people until the spread of home bathrooms in the latter half of the twentieth century. In rural areas and onsen towns, public bathing remains a regular activity rather than a novelty. The nakedness involved is not experienced as vulnerable or exposing in the way it might be in cultures where bathing is exclusively private: the bath is a functional space, and the “unbotheredness” of the other women is not indifference to Charlie but simply the normal register of the space. This is what Charlie finds both relieving and baffling.

The Community Onsen

The onsen Charlie visits is described as having “the functional plainness of a place that has been providing a service to the same community for a long time.” This is the community or neighbourhood onsen — a type of facility found in many Japanese towns and cities with access to geothermal water, distinct from tourist resort onsen in scale, atmosphere, and purpose. The price is low, the clientele is local and regular, and the facility is maintained because it is used rather than marketed. In Yamagata Prefecture, where geothermal water is widely available, facilities of this kind are part of ordinary weekly life for many residents, in the same way that Kudo-sensei goes every Thursday as a matter of course.

Warmth as Cultural Value

The specific quality of the warmth Charlie experiences at the onsen is worth noting culturally. Japanese bathing culture places a particular value on the concept of “dan-netsu” — the gradual, deep penetration of warmth into the body — as distinct from surface warmth. The experience of lowering oneself into hot mineral water is described in Japanese sources as affecting not only the body but the mood, the nervous system, and the sense of being restored. Charlie’s experience — the cold leaving from the outside in, the muscles releasing, the mind going quiet — is described in terms that accord closely with how Japanese bathers traditionally describe the effect. She experiences something real that has a name in Japanese culture, even if she does not know it.

Chapter 8: The Blue Tarp

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 8 is the novel’s most openly joyful chapter so far, and all the more effective for arriving without announcement. The sakura section earns its place because the novel has made Charlie earn her attention. The blue tarp scene is the chapter’s structural heart: Charlie sits down among neighbours she barely knows, drinks a beer she doesn’t recognise, and is part of something without being required to explain herself. The chapter ends with Kenji. His word — ephemeral — is the chapter’s hinge and its finest moment. Exercises focus on the language of sensory experience, the sakura as cultural phenomenon, hanami, and the gap between knowing something and feeling it.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever experienced something that photographs had not prepared you for? What was different about the real thing?
- Think about a public celebration in your culture where people gather outdoors with food and drink. What makes it special? Who takes part?
- Have you ever joined a group of people you didn’t know well and felt included without having to explain yourself? What made that possible?
- What does the word “ephemeral” mean? If you don’t know, make a guess based on the sound of the word.

1.2 The Title: The Blue Tarp

The chapter is called “The Blue Tarp” — not “The Cherry Blossom”, not “Hanami”, not “April.”

Before you read: What do you think a blue tarp might be, and what role might it play in the chapter? The title chooses the most ordinary object rather than the most beautiful one. Think about what this might suggest about what the author considers most important.

1.3 Knowing vs Feeling

Early in the chapter, Charlie reflects on how she understood the sakura before she saw it:

“She had known they were coming — she had known since January, in the theoretical way that she knew things here, established but not felt.”

Discuss with a partner:

- What is the difference between knowing something “established but not felt” and knowing it in a way that is felt? Can you think of an example from your own experience?
- Why does Charlie find photographs of the sakura inadequate? What do they fail to communicate?
- Is there something about Japan — or any other country or culture — that you know in this theoretical way? What would it take to feel it?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 8. The list is in alphabetical order.

at the administrative level	humorously suggesting that the change of season was decided by some higher authority and communicated officially downward
approximately oriented	roughly aware of what is happening; not fully understanding but not entirely lost
the blossom dense on the branches	a large, thick covering of flowers on the branches; dense means closely packed
carbonated	containing dissolved gas that creates bubbles; fizzy
a cardboard box with cans in it	a simple container for drinks; the author's deliberate use of ordinary language emphasises that this is an ordinary, unpretentious gathering
cherry blossom (sakura, 桜)	the flowers of the cherry tree; Japan's most celebrated seasonal flower, blooming for approximately two weeks in April
to draw a conclusion	to arrive at a judgement or interpretation based on evidence or observation
edamame (枝豆)	young soybeans still in the pod, boiled and lightly salted; a common snack in Japan, eaten by squeezing the beans from the pod
ephemeral	lasting for only a very short time; here used by Kenji with complete accuracy to describe a petal on the ground
established but not felt	known intellectually, as a fact, but not yet experienced or truly understood
hanami (花見)	the Japanese custom of gathering outdoors to view cherry blossoms, typically with food, drink, and company; literally 'flower viewing'
a light application of colour	a faint, thin layer of colour; barely visible; just noticeable
otsukare sama (お疲れ様)	a Japanese phrase used as a parting greeting among people who have shared effort or time together; approximately "you've worked hard" or "well done today"; used at the end of a working day, a gathering, or a shared activity
a petal	a single leaf-like part of a flower
perpetual small weather	a poetic phrase: the petals falling continuously create a kind of weather that is always happening but always small
picturesque	attractively arranged, like a picture; visually pleasing in an expected way
to recede	to move back or away; to retreat gradually from a former position
to rehearse	to practise something, especially speech or performance, before doing it for real
a tarp (tarpaulin)	a large sheet of heavy waterproof material, often blue or green, used as a ground covering or shelter
the thing (as opposed to photographs of the thing)	a direct, unmediated experience of reality; what something is like in itself, not as recorded or represented
upstream / downstream	in the direction from which the water comes (upstream) or towards which it flows (downstream); here, petals on the river move downstream with the current

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The snow began to _____ from the lower ground first, then the roadsides, then the gardens.
2. She had known it intellectually since January — _____, you might say, but not yet felt.
3. The photographs had made it look _____. The real thing was something else entirely.
4. He said the word with the careful delivery of someone who had _____ it.
5. She said _____ as the woman left, and it came out naturally, without thinking.
6. The petals created a kind of _____ — always falling, never finished, never urgent.
7. She understood the conversation only _____ — enough to know the general direction.

2.2 One Word, Many Meanings: “Fine”

The word “fine” appears at the end of the chapter in a specific way. Look at this exchange:

“no i don’t want to talk about it. it was fine”

Bryony: ““it was fine” she said” / “was it though”

Charlie: “yes. actually yes.”

Answer these questions:

How many times has Charlie used the word “fine” in the novel so far to describe something important? What has it usually meant?

What does “actually yes” tell us that “yes” alone would not? Why does the word “actually” matter here?

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | The snow disappears all at once in April. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie notices the first cherry blossom while walking to school. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | She stops walking the first time she sees the full blossom. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | The blue tarp is under the trees in the school garden. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Charlie recognises the neighbour from the snowstorm as one of the people on the tarp. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | The beer Charlie is given is a type she knows well. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie understands most of the Japanese conversation around her. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Charlie leaves before the light goes. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie calls Bryony immediately when she gets home. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | The cherry blossom lasts for about ten or eleven days. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie has not called the JET office for three weeks. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Kenji explains where he found the word “ephemeral.” | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the author describe the arrival of April? What metaphor does she use, and what does it suggest about how seasons change in Oguni?
- Describe the moment when Charlie first sees the full sakura. Where is she? What does she see, and how does she react?
- Who is on the blue tarp, and how does Charlie come to join them? Describe the gesture the neighbour makes.
- What does Charlie eat and drink at the hanami? What does she think of the beer, and why?
- Describe the end of the chapter. What word does Kenji bring? What does he point at, and what does Charlie say?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie compares the beer on the tarp to the six-quid pint at the Anchor, and concludes the tarp beer “tasted considerably better.” She says she did not examine this conclusion too closely. What would she find if she did examine it?
- Charlie texts Bryony but does not call. She types three drafts before sending. What does this sequence of drafts reveal about what she is trying to communicate, and what she is resisting?
- Kenji chooses the word “ephemeral” and points at a petal. Charlie says: “Yes. That’s exactly right.” Is she only talking about the petal?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Language of Gradual Arrival

The sakura does not arrive all at once. The author shows its progress in stages. Look at how this is written:

“there was something white in the trees... a light application of colour on dark branches...”

“Two days later there was more. Unmistakably more. The white had become pink-white...”

“the world had changed its proportions... Their presence occupied the whole park in a way that their actual size had no right to.”

Notice the progression: almost nothing → unmistakably more → a world changed. The author does not describe the blossom statically; she describes it arriving, accumulating, transforming. The final stage is described not in terms of colour but of proportion and presence — the trees have become something else.

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing something that arrives gradually — a season, a feeling, a realisation, a sound — in three stages: barely noticeable, unmistakably present, transformed.

4.2 The Thing vs the Photograph

Charlie makes a careful distinction between photographs of famous things and the things themselves:

“She had not been particularly moved by the photographs. They had looked, as photographs of famous things often do, exactly like what they were supposed to look like. Picturesque. Documented. She had been to enough places that photographs existed of to know that photographs were a different thing from the thing. This was the thing.”

Discuss:

- What is it that photographs of famous things fail to capture? What can only be experienced in person?
- The word “documented” is interesting. What does it suggest about photographs — are they a record of an experience, or a replacement for it?
- Think of something you have seen in a photograph that was different when you experienced it in real life. What was missing from the photograph?

Now write a short comparison (60–80 words) between a photograph of something and the experience of the thing itself. It does not need to be dramatic — it can be quiet, like the sakura.

4.3 Being Part of Something Without Explanation

The blue tarp scene is built around inclusion without language. Look at how it happens:

“He looked up at her and indicated the space again with a brief, pragmatic gesture that communicated: there is a space. You could be in it. This is an option.”
“She sat down.”

There is no introduction, no explanation, no social negotiation. The neighbour gestures; Charlie sits. The author then describes Charlie participating in the gathering through a series of simple actions: a can is handed to her, she opens it; a tray is passed, she eats from it. No words are required.

Find three more moments in the chapter where inclusion or connection happens without language — through gesture, action, or simply proximity. Write them below and explain what each communicates.

4.4 “Ephemeral”: Word Choice and Meaning

The chapter ends with Kenji producing the word “ephemeral” and pointing at a petal. This is the chapter’s final moment, and the author gives it considerable weight.

“Ephemeral,” he said, with the careful emphasis of someone who had rehearsed.
“Where did you get that one?”
He pointed at a petal on the ground.
“Yes,” she said. “That’s exactly right.”

Answer these questions:

1. Ephemeral means lasting only a very short time. What things in the chapter does this word describe, beyond the petal Kenji points at?
2. Kenji has been bringing Charlie a new English word every morning since February. This is his most significant word yet. What does his choice tell us about what he has been paying attention to?
3. Charlie says “That’s exactly right” rather than “well done” or “good word.” What is the difference? Why does the author choose this response?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie has spent eight chapters learning to notice things — the ume, the light, the mountains. The sakura stops her in her tracks. What has changed in her since December that makes this possible?
- On the blue tarp, Charlie “did not examine this conclusion too closely” — that the cheap beer tasted better than the Anchor pint. What would she find if she did? Why might she resist looking?
- Charlie drafts her text to Bryony three times. The final version is: “yes. actually yes.” What does each draft reveal about her state of mind? What is she working up to?
- Kenji has been bringing vocabulary words since Chapter 6. “Ephemeral” is the most sophisticated. What does the progression of his words tell us about him?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The chapter’s title is “The Blue Tarp” rather than “The Sakura” or “Hanami.” The blue tarp is the most ordinary object in the chapter. What does this choice of title suggest about what the author values?
- Charlie has been noting things “without drawing conclusions” since Chapter 7. In this chapter she draws one: the beer tasted better. What has changed? Or has something been accumulating?
- The sakura lasts ten or eleven days and then a rain comes and the trees are green. The green is described as “extraordinary” in its own way. What is the author suggesting about what comes after the famous, beautiful thing?
- Charlie’s greeting “otsukare sama” comes out naturally, without thinking. What does this moment — a Japanese parting phrase said without effort — tell us about where she is now?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Hanami — gathering with food and drink to view cherry blossoms — is a communal outdoor celebration. Is there an equivalent in your culture or country? What is the occasion, and what are the customs?
- Have you ever experienced something that photographs had not prepared you for? What was the difference between the image and the reality?
- Have you ever been included in a group or gathering without being introduced or explained? How did it feel?
- Kenji finds the word “ephemeral” for a petal. What word would you choose, from any language, for the cherry blossom?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Blue Tarp

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Charlie; the others are neighbours, including the man from two doors down.

The Situation

- The neighbours are sitting on the blue tarp under the cherry trees. Charlie is standing, looking at the blossom.
- The neighbour makes the gesture. Charlie sits.
- A can is handed to her. Food is passed.
- The conversation is in Japanese — play it in your own language or in Japanese if you can.
- Charlie follows “from the edges.” She eats, drinks, watches. A petal lands on her sleeve.
- Play the scene. Then discuss: what was each character thinking?

6.2 The Text Conversation

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Bryony. Play the exchange as a spoken conversation instead of texts.

The Situation

- Charlie comes home. She doesn’t call. She sits at the table.
- Then she picks up her phone. Play the exchange: the three drafts as spoken hesitations.
- Bryony receives the final message and replies.
- Charlie says: “yes. actually yes.”
- After: each player says what they were really thinking. What did Bryony hear in that “actually”?

6.3 Kenji’s Word

Work in groups of three or four. One student is Charlie; one is Kenji; others are students.

The Situation

- It is the morning after the cherry blossom party.
- Kenji arrives at the school gate. He has a new word: “ephemeral.”
- He says it. He points at the petal.
- Charlie responds.
- The other students react — with interest, confusion, or their own observations.
- Continue the conversation for two or three minutes. What does the class make of the word?

6.4 Mingling Activity: Ephemeral Things

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever experienced something that photographs didn't prepare you for?		
Is there an outdoor celebration or seasonal gathering in your culture?		
What is something beautiful that lasts only a short time?		
Have you ever been unexpectedly included in something? How did it feel?		
What word from any language would you use for cherry blossom?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Seasonal Arrival

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing the arrival of a season or a natural event — a first snow, the first spring flower, the first day of real heat, the first autumn leaves. Describe it in three stages: barely noticeable, unmistakable, transformed.

Useful language: There was something... barely visible • Two days later there was more • Unmistakably... • The world had changed its proportions • Their presence occupied... in a way that their actual size had no right to • And then it was gone

7.2 Creative Writing: The Neighbour Two Doors Down

He appears three times in the novel: the snowstorm jars and tins, the shovelling technique, the gesture on the blue tarp. Write a short interior monologue (100–130 words) from his point of view. What does he make of Charlie? Why does he include her?

You know very little about him from the text. Work with what you have: practical, without fuss, aware.

7.3 Extended Writing: Ephemeral

Kenji's word is the chapter's final note. Write 150–180 words exploring the idea of ephemerality — things that are meaningful partly because they do not last. You might consider:

- Is the brevity of something part of what makes it beautiful? Or does this make it harder to enjoy?
- The cherry blossom lasts ten or eleven days. Is that long enough? Is it too short?
- What ephemeral thing in your own experience has stayed with you?

7.4 Short Writing: Three Text Drafts

Charlie drafts three texts to Bryony before sending. Write all three drafts (20–30 words each) in full, and then write a fourth: the one she would have sent if she had decided to say everything.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 8.

Hanami (花見): Cherry Blossom Viewing

Hanami is the Japanese custom of gathering outdoors beneath cherry trees to enjoy the blossom, typically with food and drink. It is one of the most widely observed traditions in Japan, crossing age and social background: families, colleagues, school groups, neighbours, and strangers gather in parks, along rivers, and under school trees for the duration of the bloom. Blue plastic tarps are the standard ground covering and are a recognised signal that a hanami is taking place. Arriving early to secure a good spot under a popular tree is itself a social ritual, sometimes assigned to junior members of a workplace or group. The blue tarp Charlie finds herself invited onto is a neighbourhood gathering, informal and unannounced — the most ordinary kind of hanami.

Sakura: The Cherry Blossom

Sakura (桜) is Japan's national flower and one of its most powerful cultural symbols. The trees bloom for approximately one to two weeks, depending on variety and location; the peak bloom period moves north as spring progresses. Japan's meteorological agencies issue sakura forecasts, and the timing is followed with genuine public interest. The brevity of the bloom is inseparable from its meaning: the sakura is understood in Japanese culture partly through the concept of *mono no aware*, and its rapid fall is seen as part of its beauty rather than a loss. Charlie's experience, the petals falling into the food and the drinks and onto everyone, and nobody paying this any attention, captures something true about hanami: it is the point, not an inconvenience.

Edamame

Edamame (枝豆) are young soybeans harvested while still green and inside the pod. They are boiled or steamed, lightly salted, and eaten by squeezing the beans out of the pod with the teeth. They are a standard snack in Japan, found in restaurants, convenience stores, and at outdoor gatherings.

Otsukare Sama

Otsukare sama (お疲れ様) is one of the most common and culturally specific phrases in Japanese. It is used as a farewell or acknowledgement among people who have shared effort, work, or time together — at the end of a working day, after a meeting, after a shared activity. It translates approximately as “you’ve worked hard” or “that was hard work” but functions more broadly as a parting acknowledgement of shared experience. It is not used between strangers in formal situations, nor is it typically used with family. Charlie uses it naturally as the woman with the child leaves the hanami — it comes out without thinking. This is one of the clearest signs in the chapter that something has changed: she has not just learned a phrase; she is using it at the right moment, instinctively.

Seasonal Awareness in Japan

Japan has a strong cultural tradition of awareness of the four seasons and their specific qualities. Each season has associated foods, activities, colours, and aesthetic moods that are observed in art, literature, food culture, and everyday conversation. The sakura announces spring; the hydrangea announces the rainy season; the autumn leaves (*momiji*) announce the end of summer. This is not merely aesthetic, it is also deeply practical: the seasons determine what is grown, what is eaten, what is worn, what is done outdoors. Charlie's growing attention to the seasons, the different quality of the April air, the mountains in the morning, is, without her knowing it, an alignment with a deeply embedded Japanese way of paying attention to the world.

The School Garden and the Wooden Structure

The grey wooden structure in the school garden that Charlie has noticed since Chapter 3 and passed without comment appears again in this chapter, “waiting for whatever came next.” In many Japanese schools, there are traditional outdoor structures associated with seasonal activities: small stages for performances, frameworks for training morning glory or other climbing plants, structures related to specific school ceremonies. Without knowing what it is, Charlie registers it as a fixture — part of the school's life that she has not yet understood. Its recurring presence in the novel is a small example of the way the novel handles things that are present but not yet explained: Charlie notices; in time, she will understand.

Chapter 9: Four Hundred Years

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 9 is the novel’s emotional summit before the turn. Three things carry it: the koinobori and their quiet arithmetic of scarcity; the wisteria and the four-hundred-year revelation; and Kenji’s observation — “Sensei looks happy today” — which Charlie receives without defence. The chapter ends with Charlie sitting at the window having decided to wait conclusions later, but the reader has already drawn them. Exercises focus on scale and time, the language of noticing across the arc of the novel, and the classroom scene, which is the chapter’s dramatic and emotional centre.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever looked at something every day without truly seeing it, and then one day suddenly understood what it was?
- Think about a place in your town or city that is very old — a building, a tree, a bridge. What does it feel like to stand next to something that has been there for centuries?
- Has anyone ever told you that you looked happy in a way that surprised you? How did it feel?
- What does it mean to “draw a conclusion” from something? Is it always possible to choose when you do this?

1.2 The Title: Four Hundred Years

Before you read: What might “Four Hundred Years” refer to? The title suggests a long period of time. Who or what might have existed for four hundred years? As you read, notice the first moment when the title becomes clear — and then consider whether the title might also refer to something else.

1.3 The Arithmetic of the Koinobori

The chapter introduces koinobori: carp-shaped streamers hung for Children’s Day, one for each child.

“Seventeen. Above gardens and shopfronts and the covered arcade, seventeen koinobori moving in the May wind, each one for a child, and the sky between them enormous and blue and full of space that the streamers didn’t fill.”

Before you read the full chapter, discuss:

- What does the number seventeen suggest about the town of Oguni, given that the streamers represent its children?
- Charlie notes that the town “had held hundreds.” What does this tell us about what has happened to Oguni over time?
- Why do you think the author describes the sky as “enormous” and “full of space that the streamers didn’t fill”?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 9. The list is in alphabetical order.

adjacent to (the lesson topic)	near but not quite the same as; related to but not directly about
animate	appearing to be alive; moving as a living thing would move
arithmetic	basic calculations; adding, counting, working out numbers
cascades	long flowing falls of something; here, the wisteria flowers hang downward in long, dense clusters
Children's Day (Kodomo no Hi, 児童の日)	a national holiday in Japan on 5 May, celebrating children and their happiness; part of Golden Week
committed (to warmth)	fully arrived at; made a definite, irreversible decision; the warmth of May is no longer tentative
completely	used here to emphasise total coverage: the wisteria covers the structure not partially but entirely
to do its arithmetic	to count instinctively; Charlie has developed a habit of doing the numbers on things she observes
equanimity	calmness; composure; the quality of being untroubled by things that might disturb others
established (in the 1600s)	already grown and settled; already present and rooted at that time
Golden Week	a cluster of national holidays at the end of April and beginning of May in Japan; one of the busiest travel periods of the year
incremental progress	slow improvement; movement forward in small steps
a koinobori (鯉のぼり)	a carp-shaped wind streamer; hung for Children's Day, traditionally one for each child in a family or community
a maintenance question	a practical issue; something that needs repair or attention; how Charlie initially categorised the wooden structure
moderately satisfied	reasonably happy with something, without being particularly pleased; an adequate result, not an inspired one
to not be in control of (one's face)	to have an involuntary expression; to show a feeling without intending to
on the whole	in general; taking everything into account
a particular shade of green	a very specific colour of green, unlike any other; not just green in general
paying attention to other things	occupied with something else; not noticing what is happening nearby
purple-white	a colour between purple and white; the colour of wisteria flowers
scarcity	the condition of being in short supply; not enough of something; here, the scarcity of children in the town
tentative	hesitant; not yet fully committed; the new-leaf colour of April is tentative compared to the deep green of May
wisteria (fuji, 藤)	a climbing plant with long hanging clusters of purple, blue, or white flowers; in Japan it blooms in late April and May and can live for centuries

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. By May the warmth had _____ — it was no longer something you hoped for, but something that was simply there.
2. The flowers hung in long _____ from every beam, dense and heavy.
3. She always _____ without deciding to. The numbers just arrived.
4. The wisteria had been _____ in the sixteen hundreds, and was already old then.
5. The record of seventeen children said nothing explicit about the town's decline, but the _____ was its own kind of speech.
6. Kenji raised his hand with the energy of someone whose comment was _____ to the lesson but not quite about it.
7. The lesson was competent. She had made her peace with _____. Average was what most days were.

2.2 Scale and Time: A Vocabulary Exercise

Chapter 9 deals with very large amounts of time and space. Match each phrase from the chapter with the idea it expresses.

Phrase from the chapter	What it expresses
"four centuries"	_____
"the sky... full of space that the streamers didn't fill"	_____
"established but not felt"	_____
"the school was built around it"	_____
"doing what it did in the light, which was simply exist"	_____
"the long list of things she was noting"	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | The rice fields in May are a shade of green Charlie has seen before. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie has stopped thinking about how many layers to wear. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | The koinobori appear in the second week of May. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | There are seventeen koinobori on the main street. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The wooden structure in the school garden had wisteria on it in December. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Hiroshi tells Charlie the wisteria is four hundred years old. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | The lesson Charlie planned was on describing places. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Kenji says in English that Charlie looks happy. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Hiroshi was reluctant to translate what Kenji said. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Kudo-sensei says the wooden structure is inspected every year. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie tells Kudo-sensei she felt embarrassed by Kenji's comment. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie studies Japanese for two hours that evening. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the author describe the arrival of May, and what has changed in Charlie's daily experience of the town?
- What are koinobori, and why is the number seventeen significant?
- Describe the wisteria: what it looks like, what it smells like, how it relates to the wooden structure Charlie has been passing since December.
- What happens in the classroom after Kenji speaks? Describe the sequence: Kenji's comment, the class's reaction, Charlie's request to Hiroshi, Hiroshi's response.
- What does Kudo-sensei say when Charlie asks whether she sees the wisteria in December? What does she mean?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie notes that the list of things she is noting has become longer than the list of things she is complaining about. She has not examined this development. Why has the author been building to this moment across several chapters? What does this reversal represent?
- Charlie is "aware, distantly, that something was happening in [her face] that she was not in control of." What is happening? Why does the author describe it this way rather than naming it directly?
- The chapter ends with: "May continued its project, warm and unhurried, not particularly concerned with whether she had caught up yet." What does this last sentence suggest about Charlie's relationship to the place she is in?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Arc of Noticing: A Review Exercise

The novel has been building a pattern of Charlie noticing things. In this chapter, the pattern reaches a point where she has to acknowledge it. Look at how it is described:

“The list of things she was noting had become, over the past weeks, considerably longer than the list of things she was complaining about.”

“She had not examined this development.”

Go back through the novel (or your notes) and find five things Charlie notices in Chapters 1–8 that she then returns to or understands differently later. Write them in the table below.

Thing noticed	Chapter first noticed	Returned to or understood in...
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

4.2 The Language of Overwhelming Quantity

When Charlie sees the wisteria for the first time, the author needs to convey something that cannot be measured. Look at how it is done:

“It covered everything. Not partially, not decoratively — completely, the way something covers something when it has been there for a very long time and has decided that this is its place.”

“There were hundreds of them. There were thousands of them.”

“The scent reached her before she had consciously registered the colour.”

Notice: the author does not count the flowers. Instead she uses: negatives (“not partially, not decoratively”), escalation (“hundreds... thousands”), and sensory surprise (smell before sight). Each technique communicates overwhelming presence without statistics.

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing something in large quantity or overwhelming presence — a crowd, a field of flowers, a market, a storm — using at least two of these techniques: negation, escalation, sensory surprise.

4.3 What Classrooms Sound Like

The classroom scene in Chapter 9 is one of the most carefully written in the novel. Look at how the author describes the class's reaction:

“The class produced a sound — not laughter exactly, more the sound of recognition, of something being identified correctly, the sound a class makes when a child says a true thing.”

This is a precise attempt to name a sound that is between laughter and silence — the particular sound of recognition. Discuss with a partner:

- Have you ever heard this sound in a classroom? What had been said?
- What is the difference between the sound of a true thing being said and the sound of a funny thing? Can they overlap?
- The author also describes Hiroshi going “slightly pink”. What does this tell us about what he understood that Charlie did not?

Now write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing a moment in a classroom, a meeting, or a group conversation when something true was said. Try to describe the sound and the atmosphere without naming the emotion directly.

4.4 Kudo-sensei's Answer

When Charlie asks whether Kudo-sensei still sees the wisteria in December, the answer is the chapter's philosophical centre. Read it carefully:

“Yes,” she said. “I think that is what it means to know a place.”

This is Kudo-sensei's most direct statement in the novel. She is not speaking only about the wisteria. She is offering a definition: to know a place is to see what is in it even when it is not visible — to carry the summer flower in the winter structure, to understand the potential of bare wood.

Answer these questions:

1. In Chapter 6, Kudo-sensei said: “You have to know to look for them. After that you notice.” How does her statement in Chapter 9 extend or deepen this idea?
2. Does Charlie know the wisteria now, in Kudo-sensei's sense? What evidence in the chapter supports your answer?
3. Apply Kudo-sensei's definition to a place you know well. What do you see in it that would be invisible to someone visiting for the first time?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie counts the koinobori instinctively, “without deciding to count, in the way she did arithmetic here.” When did she develop this habit? What does it tell us about how she has learned to inhabit the town?
- Charlie walked past the wisteria every day for five months and saw it as a maintenance question. What does this tell us about how we look at things we haven’t yet learned to see?
- When Kenji says Charlie looks happy, she does not know what her face is doing. What does this involuntary response tell us about her state that she is not yet ready to say herself?
- Hiroshi “had been waiting for a moment to prove his English and this was not... quite the moment he had been waiting for.” He says it anyway. What does this tell us about Hiroshi?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The wisteria has been in the school garden for four hundred years. The school was built around it. What does this inversion — the human institution adapting to the natural thing rather than the other way around — suggest about how Oguni relates to its own history?
- The koinobori represent the children of the town. Seventeen is not many. The novel does not comment on this beyond Charlie’s arithmetic. Why might the author have chosen not to comment? What is the effect of simply stating the number?
- Charlie thinks “possibly some conclusions were available, if she wanted them.” She decides to want them later. Is this avoidance, or wisdom? Does it matter? What do you think the conclusions are?
- Kudo-sensei defines knowing a place as seeing it in all seasons — seeing the flower in the bare structure. Is this a definition of knowledge, or of love? Or both?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Is there a place you know well enough to see what is in it when it is not visible — a garden in winter, a beach in autumn, a building under construction? Describe it.
- Have you ever had someone tell you something about yourself that you weren’t ready to hear? What happened?
- Koinobori represent the children of a community. Do festivals or traditions in your own culture or country reflect something about the community’s values or its relationship to children?
- Charlie decides to “want [the conclusions] later.” Have you ever deliberately delayed understanding something? Why?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Classroom Moment

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Charlie; one is Kenji; one is Hiroshi; others are students.

The Situation

- Charlie is explaining the lesson: describing places, adjectives, practising with a partner.
- Kenji raises his hand. He makes his observation — in Japanese (use your own language or improvise).
- The class makes its sound — not laughter, something else.
- Charlie looks at the class. Then at Kenji. Then at Hiroshi.
- Hiroshi translates, reluctantly.
- Play what happens next. How does Charlie teach the rest of the lesson?

6.2 The Walk Home

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- They are walking home. The rice fields catch the evening light.
- Charlie says: “A child said something to me today.”
- She tells Kudo-sensei what Kenji said.
- Kudo-sensei says nothing.
- Charlie asks about seeing the wisteria in December.
- Play the conversation. End with Kudo-sensei’s answer and Charlie thinking about it.

6.3 The Koinobori

Work in pairs or small groups. Discuss the koinobori as Charlie might discuss them with Kudo-sensei or Oda-sensei.

The Situation

- Charlie has counted seventeen koinobori on her walk home.
- She asks the teacher about them: what they are, who puts them up, why.
- The teacher explains Children’s Day and the tradition.
- Charlie asks: “Is seventeen a lot?”
- The teacher answers honestly.
- Continue the conversation: what does it mean to keep a ceremony for a diminishing number?

6.4 Mingling Activity: Seeing and Knowing

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Is there something you pass every day and rarely notice?		
What is the oldest thing you have ever seen or touched?		
Has anyone ever told you something about yourself that surprised you?		
What tradition or ceremony in your culture represents community values?		
What conclusions have you been avoiding? (Optional to answer!)		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: Something That Was Always There

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about something you passed every day without truly seeing it, and then one day saw properly. Describe what you saw when you finally looked, and what you had been missing.

Useful language: I had walked past... every day since... • I had filed it as... • Or it was still that thing, but now... • What the [object] was doing was... • There were hundreds... There were thousands... • The scent reached her before she had consciously registered the colour

7.2 Creative Writing: Hiroshi

Write Hiroshi's account of the classroom moment (100–130 words): what he saw, what he understood, what he felt when asked to translate, and why he did it anyway. He is fourteen and has been studying English with a particular seriousness. This was not the moment he had been waiting for.

7.3 Extended Writing: Knowing a Place

Kudo-sensei says: "I think that is what it means to know a place." Write 150–180 words exploring this definition. You might consider:

- Is Kudo-sensei right? Is seeing something in all its seasons — including when it is invisible — what it means to truly know a place?
- What is the difference between visiting a place and knowing it?
- Is there a place you know in this way? Describe what you see in it that a stranger would not.

7.4 Short Writing: The Koinobori

Write a short piece (80–100 words) from the perspective of the town — not a person, but Oguni itself — reflecting on the koinobori. What does the town "think" about putting them up year after year? What does the ceremony mean?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 9.

Koinobori and Children's Day

Koinobori (鯉のぼり) are carp-shaped wind streamers flown in May to celebrate Tango no Sekku, now observed as Kodomo no Hi (Children's Day, 児童の日) on 5 May, a national holiday. The carp was traditionally a symbol of strength and perseverance — a fish that swims upstream and was associated in Chinese legend with transformation and success. One streamer is traditionally flown for each child in a family: a large black one for the father, a red or pink one for the mother, and smaller ones in other colours for each child. In communities and schools, koinobori are hung collectively. The number Charlie counts is therefore a direct count of the children in Oguni, and the author trusts the reader to understand what seventeen represents without explaining it.

Golden Week

Golden Week is a cluster of four national holidays in late April and early May: Showa Day (29 April), Constitution Memorial Day (3 May), Greenery Day (4 May), and Children's Day (5 May). It is one of the three major holiday periods in Japan and one of the busiest travel times of the year, with millions of people returning to their hometowns. For Charlie, Golden Week coincides with the koinobori, the wisteria, and the deepening of May — a period of cultural density she experiences partly from the outside, as someone without family to return to.

Wisteria (Fuji) in Japan

Wisteria (藤, fuji) is one of Japan's celebrated flowering plants, blooming in late April and May with long hanging clusters of purple, violet, pink, or white flowers. Like the sakura and the ume, it is a marker of the seasonal calendar and has been depicted in Japanese art for centuries — in the Heian-period novel *The Tale of Genji*, the Fujiwara clan takes its name from fuji. Famous wisteria specimens in Japan can live for centuries: the most celebrated, at Ashikaga Flower Park in Tochigi Prefecture, is over 150 years old and covers nearly 2,000 square metres. A four-hundred-year wisteria, as described in the chapter, is extraordinary but not impossible. The detail that the school was built around it rather than the wisteria being planted by the school is historically and botanically plausible.

Rural Depopulation in Japan

Japan's rural areas have been experiencing population decline for decades, driven by urbanisation, low birth rates, and the migration of young people to cities for education and employment. Towns in Tohoku, Yamagata, and other rural prefectures have seen some of the steepest declines. Oguni in Yamagata Prefecture is a real place that has experienced significant depopulation. The koinobori in Chapter 9 — seventeen streamers for seventeen children, where once there would have been hundreds — is the novel's most direct acknowledgement of this reality. The author does not comment. She simply counts.

Rice Cultivation in Yamagata

Yamagata Prefecture is one of Japan's most important rice-producing regions, known for high-quality varieties including Tsuyahime and Haenuki. Rice paddies are a defining feature of the landscape: flooded in late April and May, planted with seedlings in precise rows, they create the distinctive green-and-water checkerboard that Charlie notices from April onward. The flooding and planting she watches from a distance in April happens within a specific agricultural window — the water regulates temperature, suppresses weeds, and prepares the ground for the seedlings. The rice paddies catching the evening light in gold at the end of the chapter's penultimate scene are a visual confirmation that the place has settled into its season.

The School as Community Institution

In rural Japan, the school is often the most significant community institution remaining as population declines: the place where remaining children gather, local teachers are often local people, and the rhythms of the school year structure community life. Oguni's school, built around a four-hundred-year wisteria, maintained with care so as not to disturb the roots, embodies a relationship between institution and place that is particular to communities with long memories. The school did not plant the wisteria; it came later, and was built around what was already there. This detail, offered without comment by Kudo-sensei, is one of the chapter's most resonant.

Chapter 10: The Shape of Things

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 10 is the friendship chapter: the AC breaks, Kudo-sensei offers her house, and Charlie spends four days in a space that is quiet, cool, and intimate in a way her apartment is not. The chapter also contains the language breakthrough at the hardware shop — the clearest articulation yet of the difference between process and outcome. These two threads (language, friendship) converge on the same insight: accumulation is gradual; arrival is sudden; both things are true. The chapter ends where it began — weather complaints to Bryony — but everything between has shifted. Exercises focus on the language of friendship, threshold moments in learning, and the Japanese summer.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever had a breakthrough in learning a language, a skill, or a subject — a moment when something suddenly became easy that had been difficult? What was it like?
- Have you ever stayed at a friend’s house unexpectedly? What did you learn about them that you hadn’t known before?
- Is there a difference between a friendship that feels close and a friendship that is close? How do you know when a friendship has moved from one to the other?
- How does your relationship to the weather change depending on where you are and what you are doing? Can you complain about something and still be happy overall?

1.2 The Title: The Shape of Things

Before you read: The title uses the word “shape.” Things have shapes — language has a shape, friendship has a shape, a day has a shape. As you read, notice which “things” in the chapter have shapes that are being described or discovered. What is the chapter trying to say about how we understand things — not by naming them but by tracing their outlines?

1.3 A Structural Symmetry

Chapter 10 mirrors Chapter 7 in an important way. Look at this comparison:

Chapter 7	Chapter 10
The classroom heater breaks in winter	The AC unit breaks in summer
Kudo-sensei invites Charlie to the onsen	Kudo-sensei invites Charlie to her house
Charlie is reluctant, then goes	Charlie packs a bag and goes
The cold leaves her body in the bath	The heat leaves the room at Kudo-sensei's
Charlie: "I might go again next Thursday."	Charlie: "I stayed at Kudo-sensei's for a few days."

Discuss: What has changed between Chapter 7 and Chapter 10? What is the same, and what does the difference tell us about where Charlie is now?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 10. The list is in alphabetical order.

AC unit (air conditioning unit)	a machine that cools the air in a room; essential in Japanese summers
acquired a density	developed a thickness or weight; the summer air has more moisture and feels heavier to move through
(carefully) calibrated	precisely adjusted; calculated to produce a specific effect; here, Bryony's tone is deliberately designed to sound casual
the edges (knowing where they are)	the limits; the boundaries; in a friendship, knowing the edges means understanding what is comfortable for both people
a construction (traditional)	the way a building is made; traditional construction uses thick walls and screens that allow air to move through the building naturally
invested (in something)	caring about the outcome; emotionally committed to how something turns out
inscrutable	impossible to read or understand; giving nothing away; here, the broken AC unit's expression
linguistic	relating to language; to do with how language works
limited purchase	not very effective; not able to do much; "helpfulness had limited purchase" means there was not much he could do to help
a low bookshelf	a short shelf, close to the floor; in traditional Japanese interiors, furniture is often low to the ground
a map vs a route	reading a map means working out where you are and where to go; knowing a route means understanding it directly, without calculation
moderate application	average effort; not lazy, but not particularly engaged; studying adequately
noteworthy	worth noticing; significant; something that deserves attention
proportionate	appropriate to the situation; matching in scale
shoji (障子)	traditional Japanese sliding screen doors or windows, made of a wooden frame covered with translucent paper; they allow diffused light into a room
a small iron pot	a tetsubin or kyusu; a traditional cast-iron or ceramic teapot used for brewing tea in Japan
to stand by something	to continue to support or believe in something even when challenged
thirty-two degrees	32°C; 89.6°F; very hot for a room with a broken AC unit
the thing itself	the direct experience of something, as distinct from knowing about it or being able to describe it
uncalibrated (sounding uncalibrated)	appearing to be spontaneous, unplanned, or casual; here, Bryony's carefully chosen tone is designed to sound as if no care went into it
underweighted	not given enough attention or importance; treated as less significant than it deserves
a want, specific and clear	a distinct, particular desire; not vague or general

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. She realised she was _____ in how the exam went — she cared, which surprised her.
2. Her tone was carefully _____ to sound as if she hadn't thought about it at all.
3. He looked at the unit with an _____ expression, as if it had no intention of explaining itself.
4. She had _____ the warning in the handbook — noted it, but not given it the attention it deserved.
5. This was the breakthrough: not reading the _____ of the conversation, but simply knowing where it was going.
6. The room had a _____ light through the screen that she had never seen in her apartment.
7. There wasn't much he could do. Helpfulness had _____ in the situation.

2.2 Register: Formal, Informal, and In Between

Chapter 10 contains several exchanges in different registers. Look at these three and match each to its description.

Exchange	Register / effect
"The parts," he said. / "The parts," Charlie said.	_____
"My house is cooler. Come if you want."	_____
"I stand by that. It was." / "But it's fine now."	_____
"It was fine." / "I know," Bryony said. "Call me tomorrow."	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | The air in June is warmer than Charlie expected in the mornings and evenings. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie's Japanese breakthrough happens in the covered arcade. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | The AC unit breaks at four in the morning. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Takeda-san arrives the same day Charlie sends the email. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kudo-sensei's message to Charlie says: "my house is cooler." | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Kudo-sensei's house is a modern building. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie stays at Kudo-sensei's house for four days. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Charlie asks Kudo-sensei about the photograph on the desk. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | The parts for the AC arrive on the third day. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Charlie tells Bryony she missed the cool room when she returned home. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie says the heat in summer is a different category of complaint from the cold in winter. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | At the end of the chapter, Glasgow is seventeen degrees. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

1. What is the language breakthrough Charlie experiences at the hardware shop? How does she describe the difference between before and after?
2. How does Kudo-sensei explain what happened with Charlie's Japanese? What distinction does she make between "suddenly" and "noticing suddenly"?
3. Describe Kudo-sensei's house. What details does Charlie notice, and how does she learn things about Kudo-sensei through the house rather than through conversation?
4. How does Charlie describe the experience of staying at Kudo-sensei's to Bryony? What does she say, and what does she not say?
5. What is the "different category of complaint" Charlie claims for the summer heat? How does Bryony respond?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

1. "It was fine," she said. Bryony, wisely, did not say what she was thinking. What was Bryony thinking? What does the word "wisely" tell us about Bryony?
2. Charlie packs a bag without deliberation. Compare this to the changing room scene in Chapter 7. What has changed in how Charlie responds to Kudo-sensei's invitations?
3. Charlie "found herself invested" in Hiroshi's exam preparation, "and then forgot to note it, which was itself noteworthy." What does this small, self-aware moment reveal about how her relationship to Oguni has shifted?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Process and Outcome: The Language of Learning

Kudo-sensei makes a precise distinction that Charlie, as a Business Management graduate, appreciates:

“Not suddenly. You notice suddenly. It is different.”

The accumulation of skill is gradual. The awareness of that skill arrives suddenly. Both things are true simultaneously.

Charlie uses a different metaphor to describe the same idea:

“More like the difference between reading a map and knowing a route.”

Answer these questions:

In your own words, explain the difference between “reading a map” and “knowing a route” as Charlie means it. What does each state feel like?

Have you ever experienced this shift — from following instructions to simply knowing? Describe the experience. Describe with two sentences for a skill you are learning or have learned — one describing the map-reading stage, one describing the route-knowing stage.

4.2 Learning Through Being Present

At Kudo-sensei’s house, Charlie learns things “not by being told but by being present.” Look at what she notices:

“The books. The tea preferences, which were specific and involved a small iron pot that lived on a particular part of the stove.”

“The fact that Kudo-sensei was awake before six every morning and quiet about it in the way of someone who had always been awake before six...”

“The photograph, which she eventually saw clearly enough to understand... and which she did not ask about.”

Each detail tells us something about Kudo-sensei without her having to say it. And Charlie’s choice not to ask about the photograph tells us something about Charlie.

Answer these questions:

1. What does each detail (the books, the tea pot, the early mornings, the photograph) tell us about Kudo-sensei?
2. Why does Charlie not ask about the photograph? What does this restraint tell us about the friendship?

4.3 Bryony Doing “The Thing”

The conversation between Charlie and Bryony about Kudo-sensei’s house contains one of the novel’s recurring communication patterns. Look at the exchange:

"That sounds nice," Bryony said, in a tone that was carefully calibrated to sound uncalibrated.
 "Don't." / "I'm not—" / "You're doing the thing." / "I'm not doing any thing."
 "I genuinely think it sounds nice. That's all. That she offered and you went."

Discuss these questions and then write your answers:

1. What is “the thing” Bryony is doing? Describe it as precisely as you can.
2. Why does Charlie not want Bryony to do it? What is she protecting?
3. Bryony’s final line — “That she offered and you went” — is the plain version of what she is not saying. What is she not saying?

4.4 Symmetric Complaints

The novel opens and closes this chapter with complaints about weather to Bryony. Look at the symmetry:

Chapter 1: Charlie on the Northern line, complaining generally about London and its cold and her situation.
 Chapters 5–6: Charlie complaining about the cold and snow to Bryony.
 Chapter 10: Charlie complaining about the heat to Bryony. Bryony: “You are never happy.”
 Charlie: “I was happy in the onsen.”

Discuss:

- Charlie has been complaining to Bryony about weather since Chapter 1. But the content of the complaints has changed. How?
- When Charlie says “I was happy in the onsen,” it is the first time she has used the word “happy” about herself in the novel. What does it mean that she can say it now, even as she is complaining?
- Bryony says: “It is always a different category of complaint.” Is she criticising Charlie, or describing her affectionately? Or both?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie sends an email to Takeda-san at four-fifteen in the morning. She notes that this is “an unusual hour” but feels it is “proportionate.” What does this tell us about how she is thinking and feeling at that moment?
- Kudo-sensei’s message is: “My house is cooler. Come if you want.” No ceremony, no elaboration. How does this way of offering reflect Kudo-sensei’s character?
- Charlie does not ask about the photograph. She does not mention missing the cool room to Bryony. She does not examine Bryony’s remark too closely. What do these silences tell us about Charlie in this chapter, compared to earlier in the novel?
- Hiroshi is studying “with the application of someone who had something to prove.” Charlie is invested in this. What has changed in her relationship to the school and the children?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Kudo-sensei says Charlie’s Japanese is “yours now.” What does it mean for a language to become “yours”? Is it the same moment as when you stop translating in your head?
- Charlie learns things about Kudo-sensei through the house — the books, the tea, the early mornings — without asking or being told. What does this way of knowing someone suggest about how deep friendships work?
- The chapter pairs broken equipment (heater in Chapter 7, AC in Chapter 10) with invitations from Kudo-sensei. Is this a coincidence in the plot, or is the author suggesting something about how intimacy develops? Does it require something to go wrong?
- Charlie says about the onsen: “I complained about getting into the onsen. The onsen itself was fine.” Is this a pattern in her life? What does it suggest about the difference between anticipating and experiencing?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever reached a moment in learning a language (or any skill) when you stopped translating — when the knowledge felt like yours? What was it like?
- Have you ever stayed at a friend’s house and learned something new about them from being in their space? What did you notice?
- Is there a difference between complaining about something and being unhappy? Can you complain freely because you are basically fine?
- Charlie says she was “inconvenienced,” not “dire.” Bryony says she sounded dire. Who is right?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Hardware Shop

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is the hardware shop owner.

The Situation

- Charlie comes in to buy something for a small apartment repair.
- The owner greets her in Japanese. She responds.
- He shows her two options. She asks a question. He answers. She decides.
- They exchange the standard departing phrases.
- Play the whole scene in English, but as if Charlie is using Japanese effortlessly.
- Afterwards: Charlie walks outside. Play her realisation that nothing required effort.

6.2 The Message and the Bag

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei (via message). Then switch to in-person.

The Situation

- Charlie sits in a thirty-two-degree apartment and messages Kudo-sensei.
- Kudo-sensei's reply arrives: "My house is cooler. Come if you want."
- Charlie packs a bag. She arrives.
- Kudo-sensei shows her the room: "The bathroom is there. Dinner at seven, if you want."
- Play the arrival. Then fast-forward to one evening of dinner together.
- Show how two people eat and talk when they know each other well enough to not need to perform.

6.3 The Bryony Call

Work in pairs. Charlie calls Bryony after returning home.

The Situation

- Charlie tells Bryony the AC is fixed. Then mentions she stayed at Kudo-sensei's.
- Bryony says: "That sounds nice." In a tone carefully calibrated to sound uncalibrated.
- Charlie says: "Don't."
- Play the full exchange, including what Bryony does and does not say.
- End with: "How's Glasgow?" / "Wet. Tell me more about Japan."
- After: each player says what their character was actually thinking.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Thresholds

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever had a sudden breakthrough in learning something?		
What have you learned about a friend by being in their home?		
Is there a difference between complaining and being unhappy?		
What temperature do you find unbearable? What do you do about it?		
What is a skill you can now do without thinking about it?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Breakthrough Moment

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about a moment when you suddenly realised you could do something that had been difficult. It could be a language, a skill, a task, or a social situation. Try to describe both the gradual accumulation and the moment of arrival.

Useful language: It had been improving steadily since... • More like the difference between reading a map and knowing a route • I was... before it occurred to me that none of it had required any effort • Not suddenly. I noticed suddenly. It is different. • The accumulation was gradual; the arrival was sudden.

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei Awake Before Six

Write a short scene (100–130 words) from Kudo-sensei's perspective: an early morning in her house while Charlie is still asleep. What does she do? What does she think about? What does she notice about having someone else in the house?

Remember: Kudo-sensei is precise, economical, and has been feeding herself alone for years. She has a system.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Shape of a Friendship

The chapter title is “The Shape of Things.” Write 150–180 words about the shape of the friendship between Charlie and Kudo-sensei as it exists in Chapter 10. Consider:

- What are the edges — the things they don't say, don't ask about, don't explain?
- What makes the friendship comfortable? What makes it unusual?
- How did it begin, and how has it grown? Can you trace the shape across the chapters?

7.4 Short Writing: The Complaint

Write Charlie's Tuesday evening phone call to Bryony in script form (60–80 words of dialogue). Include: the heat, the AC, the wet air. Include Bryony's response (“you are never happy”) and Charlie's admission (“I was happy in the onsen”). Try to capture both the complaining and the contentment underneath it.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 10.

The Japanese Summer

Japan's summer (June to September) is defined by two phases: the tsuyu (梅雨, rainy season) from roughly mid-June to mid-July, characterised by high humidity and frequent rain; and the true summer heat from July to September, when temperatures in many parts of Japan regularly exceed 35°C (95°F) with humidity that makes the air feel heavier than the temperature suggests. Tohoku, including Yamagata, has a more moderate summer than Tokyo or Osaka, but still experiences significant heat and humidity. Charlie's description of the air as "wet" and "something you moved through rather than in" accurately describes the humid Japanese summer. The air conditioning unit is not a luxury in this context; it is essential.

Traditional Japanese Architecture and Air Flow

Traditional Japanese domestic architecture was designed to manage heat through passive means: thick earthen walls that absorb heat slowly, shoji screens that allow diffused light and air movement, engawa (verandas) that shade walls from direct sunlight, and rooms that face inward toward a garden to capture shade and air movement. These features, developed over centuries in a hot, humid climate, often make older buildings significantly cooler than modern construction in summer. The specific quality of light through shoji screens — soft, diffused, slightly warm — is one of the most characteristic sensory experiences of traditional Japanese interiors and is reflected in Japanese aesthetics (wabi-sabi, for instance, values indirect, imperfect light).

Japanese Tea Culture

Tea (茶, ocha) is central to Japanese daily life in a way that goes beyond the formal tea ceremony (chado, 茶道). Ordinary tea drinking — whether green tea (sencha), roasted tea (hojicha), or others — is a daily ritual for most Japanese households, with specific preferences about preparation, temperature, and vessel. Kudo-sensei's iron pot is a tetsubin, a cast-iron kettle used for heating water; the specificity of its location suggests a settled, practised routine. Japanese people often have strong opinions about tea that reflect regional tradition, personal history, and aesthetic preference — details Charlie learns through observation rather than being told.

Air Conditioning in Japan

Air conditioning is widespread in Japan, where summers are genuinely extreme. Homes, offices, schools, and public transport all rely heavily on AC units (often the wall-mounted split type, with a unit inside and a compressor outside). The dependence on AC in summer is roughly equivalent to the dependence on heating in winter — it is infrastructure, not luxury. The breakdown of a domestic AC unit in mid-June is therefore a serious inconvenience, not a minor one. Charlie's email to Takeda-san at four-fifteen in the morning, which she herself acknowledges is unusual, reflects how genuinely unlivable a hot, humid Japanese night without cooling can be.

The Japanese Academic Year

The Japanese school year begins in April and ends in March, divided into three terms: April to July, September to December, and January to March. Summer holidays typically run from late July to late August. The academic year therefore has its own rhythms: June and early July are the final weeks of the first term, when students are preparing for end-of-term tests and reports. This is the context for Hiroshi's intensifying study in Chapter 10 — he is working towards something specific and visible. That Charlie has absorbed this rhythm, understanding that some weeks carry more weight, is another measure of how embedded she has become in the life of the school.

Language Acquisition: The Threshold Moment

Second-language acquisition research describes a well-documented phenomenon: learners often experience a period of apparent plateau followed by a sudden subjective sense of breakthrough — when language that was previously processed analytically (word by word, rule by rule) begins to be processed holistically and intuitively. This is sometimes called the "floodgate" or "threshold" moment. Kudo-sensei's description — "the ear adjusts, and then one day the mouth follows" — and Charlie's map/route distinction are both accurate descriptions of this process. The accumulation of language exposure is gradual and often invisible; the subjective experience of fluency can feel sudden. What has changed is not the knowledge but the access to it.

Chapter 11: The Sea of Japan

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 11 is structurally the most expansive chapter so far: a school trip, the sea, the summer holiday, and a late-August walk that ends the chapter without resolving anything — which is the point. The chapter’s emotional core is the moment the bus comes over the rise and the sea is there. But its deepest movement is quieter: Bryony’s message in August, Charlie’s realisation that she has not been calling, and the final lines where she means to call and doesn’t and does. Exercises focus on the language of missing without knowing, the school trip as a social space, and the novel’s final turn: the calls to Bryony thinning out as something else thickens.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever seen something that you hadn’t known you were missing? What was the experience like?
- Think about school trips you have been on. What made them different from ordinary school days? What do you remember most?
- Have you ever been landlocked — living far from the sea — for a long time? Or far from a landscape or feature you grew up with?
- What does it feel like to go back to a familiar place after being away from it? Is it always a relief? Is it ever complicated?

1.2 The Title: The Sea of Japan

Before you read: The title names a body of water. Charlie has been inland since December. Think about what seeing the sea might mean for her at this point in the story — not as a tourist experience but as something she hadn’t known she needed. As you read, notice the moment the sea appears, and notice how the chapter continues after that moment.

1.3 Trust Without Permission

When Charlie reads her responsibilities for the school trip, she notices something:

“She had not been asked whether she could swim. She could swim. This was not the point. The point was the assumption, which she had noticed before and which was, she had come to understand, not an assumption exactly but a kind of trust — the implicit understanding that people managed what needed managing and said so if they couldn’t.”

Discuss:

- What is the difference between an assumption and trust, as Charlie understands it here?
- Charlie has been included in school activities in this way since December. What does it tell us about how Oguni works?
- Is this way of operating familiar to you from your own culture, or does it feel unusual?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 11. The list is in alphabetical order.

to affect composure	to deliberately appear calm or self-possessed; to perform being relaxed when you are not
allocated (to specific locations)	assigned; placed in a particular spot; organised with a system
boneless trust	the complete physical relaxation of a sleeping child; no tension, no resistance; trusting the surface entirely
Brighton	a coastal city in the south of England, famous as a seaside resort, traditionally the destination of London school trips and day trips
to deploy (onto the beach)	to move into position, usually with purpose; here used with comic military flavour to describe children running onto the beach
designated area	a specific zone that has been officially set aside for a particular purpose; here, the area of water the children are allowed to swim in
dispatches	messages; regular communications; here, the frequent calls and messages Charlie sent Bryony in the early months
driftwood	wood that has been carried to the shore by water; found on beaches
to find new configurations of that knowledge	to discover new ways of being together when you already know each other well
immense	enormous; vast; much larger than expected
implicit	understood without being stated; not needing to be explained
infrastructure (of her life here)	the basic framework that supports everything else; here, the calls to Bryony were the structural support for Charlie's emotional life in Oguni
the Japan Sea (Sea of Japan)	the body of water between Japan and the Korean Peninsula and Russia; calmer and different in character from the Pacific Ocean on Japan's eastern coast
landlocked	surrounded by land; without access to the sea
a low-intensity argument	a mild disagreement; not serious or angry; the kind of children have about small things
managed exhaustion	a state of being very tired but still functioning; controlled tiredness
the outermost rows (of rice)	the rows at the edge of the rice field; the first to catch the changing light
a perimeter	a boundary line around an area; here, a ring of adult supervision around the children on the beach
to recalibrate	to adjust your expectations or responses; to reset
restless sociability	an active, energetic desire to interact; not being able to stay still socially
serene indifference	a calm, untroubled lack of interest; completely at peace with not participating yet
thinned out	become less frequent; reduced gradually. The calls had thinned
to warrant (engagement / further engagement)	to deserve; to be worth; Saki decides whether the trip or the sea warrants her attention
Yunohama	a beach on the Sea of Japan coast in Yamagata Prefecture; a real location, known for its long sandy beach

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The children ran onto the beach and _____ immediately, bags dropped, towels spread.
2. She _____ — trying to look like someone who wasn't nervous in front of the older students.
3. The daily calls had _____ without her noticing. Weeks had passed between them.
4. The sea appeared, _____ and blue, more right to exist than the land that had preceded it.
5. She stayed in the _____, keeping count of heads, not swimming far.
6. Kenji slept against Riku with the _____ of someone who had used up everything and was now entirely finished.
7. Those early calls had been the _____ of her life here. She hadn't noticed them becoming less necessary.

2.2 The Language of Children

Chapter 11 is the most child-centred chapter in the novel. Find words or phrases from the chapter that describe each of the following children, and write one sentence explaining what the detail tells us about them.

Child	Detail from text	What it tells us
Kenji	_____	_____
Hiroshi	_____	_____
Saki	_____	_____
Riku and Sota	_____	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | The school trip to Yunohama is to the Pacific coast. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie is responsible for the younger children in the water. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | The bus leaves at half past seven. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie has not been to the coast since arriving in Japan. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kenji leads Charlie into the water by taking her hand. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Charlie swims far from the group to be by herself. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | During lunch, Kenji tries to return to the water before an hour has passed. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Saki tells Charlie in English that her Japanese is better. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Kudo-sensei and Charlie talk extensively during the day. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Charlie feels glad to see Oguni as the bus returns. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | The school summer holiday begins the following week. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | At the end of the chapter, Charlie has not called Bryony for weeks. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the chapter describe the energy of the children at the school gate before the bus? Describe at least three children and what they are doing.
- How does the sea appear to Charlie as the bus comes over the rise? What does she say she had not known?
- What happens between Charlie and Kenji at the edge of the beach? How does she follow him, and why?
- What does Saki say to Charlie at lunch? How does Charlie receive the comment, and what does the narrator tell us about Saki?
- Describe the conversation between Charlie and Kudo-sensei in the late afternoon. What does Charlie say about the sea, and what does Kudo-sensei not say?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie “realises” as the lights of Oguni appear that she is glad to be going back. The word “realise” is important: she did not expect to feel this. What does this unrealised gladness tell us about how far she has come?
- The calls to Bryony were once “the infrastructure of her life here.” Now they have “thinned out.” Charlie did not notice them thinning. What does this tell us about what has replaced them?
- The chapter ends: “She meant to call Bryony that evening. She took a walk instead... She would call tomorrow. She did call tomorrow.” What is the author saying, in these last four sentences, about where Charlie is?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Missing Without Knowing

The most important sentence in Chapter 11 may be the simplest:

“She had not known she had missed it.”

This is the grammar of unconscious longing. Charlie did not know she was missing the sea because you cannot know you miss something that has always been part of the background — until it is no longer in the background and then suddenly appears.

Discuss:

- What had the sea always been in Charlie’s life? How does the author establish this in the paragraph before the sea appears?
- Is this the same structure as the ume blossom moment in Chapter 6? How are they similar, and how are they different?
- Can you think of something you didn’t know you were missing until you encountered it again?

Now write two or three sentences about something you missed without knowing you were missing it. Try to describe both the absence (which you didn’t notice) and the moment of return.

4.2 Shared Silence as Conversation

The late afternoon scene with Kudo-sensei is built on what is not said:

“sitting in the late afternoon light next to someone who had shared the same day was its own kind of conversation”

“Kudo-sensei said nothing. It was the particular nothing of someone who recognises something in what has been said and chooses not to point at it.”

Kudo-sensei has recognised that Charlie’s statement about the sea — “I didn’t know I was missing it” — is about more than the sea. She chooses not to point at this. Why not?

Answer these questions:

1. What does “the particular nothing of someone who recognises something” mean? What has Kudo-sensei recognised?
2. Why does Kudo-sensei choose not to point at it? What does this restraint tell us about her as a person and as a friend?

Now write a short exchange (5–7 lines of dialogue) in which two people discuss a small thing but are really talking about something much larger. Neither person names the larger thing. Include at least one silence.

4.3 The Thinning of the Calls

In the early chapters, Charlie's calls to Bryony were almost daily. By August, Bryony sends a check-in message: "u ok? haven't heard from u in a while."

"She tried to remember the last time she had called to complain and found she couldn't precisely locate it... the daily dispatches of the early months, the calls that had been the infrastructure of her life here, had thinned out and she had not noticed them thinning."

Go back through the novel and track the calls to Bryony across the chapters. In the table below, note what each call or message was primarily about, and what it tells us about Charlie's state at that point.

Chapter	Primary content of call / message	Charlie's state at this point
Ch. 1–2	_____	_____
Ch. 3–4	_____	_____
Ch. 5–6	_____	_____
Ch. 7–8	_____	_____
Ch. 9–10	_____	_____
Ch. 11	_____	_____

4.4 The Return Journey: Landscape in Reverse

The bus ride home reverses the morning journey. The author uses the same landscape but shows it differently. Look at the two passages:

Morning: "The mountains... shifted as the bus moved west and north through the passes — first beside her, then behind, then opening out into something flatter and wider as the road descended toward the coast."

Evening: "The mountains come back as the bus climbed through the passes — first appearing at the edges, then surrounding the road, then the familiar skyline of the valley reasserting itself..."

Answer these questions:

- Find two differences in how the mountains are described in the morning and evening journeys. What does each difference suggest about Charlie's state of mind?
- The evening passage uses the word "familiar" and "reassert." What do these words tell us about how Charlie now relates to Oguni's landscape?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Kenji takes Charlie's hand and leads her to the sea. Charlie says: "you followed Kenji when he had a conclusion, and because the water was there". What does this moment tell us about how her relationship with Kenji has developed?
- Saki describes her remark as a check rather than a compliment. What does this tell us about Saki? Is she right to call it a check?
- Charlie has been telling Bryony she is "fine" throughout the novel. In August, she types several responses to Bryony's message and deletes them all before sending "yeah sorry been busy." Why? What was in the deleted drafts?
- Charlie means to call Bryony that evening, takes a walk instead, and comes back when the mountains have gone dark. Is this avoidance? Or is she simply living?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie did not know she had missed the sea until she saw it. The novel has shown this pattern several times: the ume blossom, the wisteria, the onsen. What does this recurring pattern suggest about how we understand our own needs?
- The calls to Bryony were "the infrastructure of her life here." Now they have thinned. What has replaced them? Is this a loss, a gain, or simply a change?
- Charlie feels glad to return to Oguni. This is the first time in the novel she has felt gladness specifically at the idea of returning somewhere. What does this moment represent in the arc of the story?
- The chapter ends with: "She did call tomorrow." This is the first time the novel has confirmed that a deferred action actually happened. What does this small confirmation do for the reader?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever been landlocked, or separated from a landscape you grew up with? What did it feel like when you returned to it?
- Have you ever had a friendship where the calls became less frequent, and found this was not because things were worse but because they were better? How did you feel about it?
- Kudo-sensei sits beside Charlie in the afternoon light and does not say what she has understood. Have you ever done this for someone — known something but chosen not to point at it? Why?
- The rice fields are going gold at the edges. Charlie has been watching them since February. What has the rice represented in the novel, across the chapters?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 At the School Gate

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Charlie; others are children (Kenji, Hiroshi, Saki, Riku, Sota) and teachers.

The Situation

- It is 7:15. The children have been at the gate since before seven.
- Each child is doing something characteristic: Kenji's disputed claim, Hiroshi's composed performance, Saki's book.
- Charlie arrives at 7:20 and has to recalibrate.
- The teachers count. Charlie counts alongside and arrives at a different number.
- They get on the bus. Play the scene at the gate, then the first five minutes of the bus journey.

6.2 The Water

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kenji.

The Situation

- Kenji takes Charlie's hand and walks her toward the water.
- Play the scene: the edge of the beach, the cold water, going in.
- Lunch: Charlie tells Kenji to wait one hour before swimming again. In Japanese, approximately.
- After: Kenji asks "sensei, do you like the sea?" Play Charlie's answer.

6.3 The Afternoon

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- Late afternoon. The light has changed. The children are doing quiet things.
- Kudo-sensei sits down beside Charlie.
- "Good day." / "Yes."
- Include: Kenji and the seawater. The Japan Sea vs the Pacific. Charlie's missing the sea.
- Kudo-sensei makes her silence after: "I didn't know I was missing it."
- End the scene at the point where each character is thinking something they don't say.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Missing Things

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What landscape feature did you grow up near that you would miss?		
Have you ever been glad to come back somewhere after being away?		
Have you ever had a friendship change because things were going better?		
What do you miss without knowing you are missing it?		
What would you do alone on a summer afternoon if you had no plans?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Landscape Returned

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing the moment you saw a landscape, a place, or a feature of the world that you hadn't seen for a long time. You did not know you had missed it until you saw it. Try to describe both the appearance and the feeling, without naming the feeling directly.

Useful language: It was flat and very [colour] and immense in the way... • more right to exist than things that were merely land • She looked at it. She had not known she had missed it. • She had registered it without particular feeling. • This was the thing.

7.2 Creative Writing: Saki's Assessment

Saki has been “checking” Charlie's Japanese all year, according to the narrator. Write a short journal entry from Saki's point of view (100–130 words), the evening after the school trip. What does she think of Charlie? What has she been observing?

Remember: Saki is twelve, serious, and does not dispense observations carelessly.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Infrastructure of Connection

The calls to Bryony were “the infrastructure of Charlie's life here” in the early months. By August, they have thinned out. Write 150–180 words exploring what this change means. You might consider:

- What did the calls provide in December and January that they no longer need to provide?
- Is it a sad thing that the calls have thinned? Or is it a good thing?
- What has replaced them? And what does Bryony make of it — she notices, and asks.

7.4 Short Writing: The Last Four Sentences

The chapter ends with four sentences that carry a great deal:

“She meant to call Bryony that evening. She took a walk instead, longer than she had planned, and did not come back until the mountains had gone dark. She would call tomorrow. She did call tomorrow.”

Write 80–100 words analysing what these four sentences do. Why does the author confirm that she called? What does each sentence contribute to the meaning of the whole?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 11.

The Sea of Japan

The Sea of Japan (also known as the East Sea) is the body of water enclosed by the Japanese archipelago to the east and the Korean Peninsula and Russian coast to the west. Yamagata Prefecture has coastline on the Sea of Japan, and Yunohama (湯浜) is a real beach in the Tsuruoka area, known for its long sandy shore and warm, relatively calm summer waters. The Sea of Japan has a different character from the Pacific coast: calmer in summer, colder in winter, and with a different light quality due to its orientation. Kudo-sensei's observation that it is "calmer in summer" is accurate.

Japanese School Trips

School excursions (ensoku, 過足, or gakushu ryoko, 学習旅行) are a regular part of the Japanese school year. Day trips for younger students and multi-day trips for older ones are typically planned far in advance and involve detailed logistics, printed schedules, and clear adult responsibilities. Oda-sensei's document — the schedule, the list of what to bring, the safety section, the specific responsibilities — is a recognisable format. The involvement of all staff in managing the trip, including Charlie as a responsible adult for the younger children in the water, reflects a collective approach to school care that is characteristic of Japanese school culture.

Rice Harvest in Late Summer

In Yamagata Prefecture, the rice harvest typically begins in September, with the paddies going golden through August as the grain ripens. Charlie notices in mid-August that the outermost rows of rice are beginning to go gold at the edges — a precise observation that marks the beginning of the transition from the deep green of summer to the harvest gold of early autumn. She has been watching these fields since February, when they were empty brown rectangles. The slow transformation of the rice through the year — flooding, planting, growth, approaching harvest — is one of the novel's background rhythms, present in almost every chapter without being explicitly foregrounded.

The Summer Holiday in Japanese Schools

The Japanese school summer holiday is shorter than in many other countries: typically from late July to late August, roughly five to six weeks. During this period, many schools hold optional clubs and activities, and teachers continue to come in for administration and preparation. For ALTs, the summer break can be a period of significant unstructured time, which the chapter captures precisely: Charlie goes for walks, studies Japanese, and attends the onsen on Thursdays — the school's rhythm replaced by her own. This is both freedom and disorientation, as it was in the early chapters, but with a different quality now.

Yunohama Beach

Yunohama (湯浜) is a beach in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, on the Sea of Japan coast. It is a popular summer beach for families and school groups from the inland areas of Yamagata. The beach is long, the water relatively warm in July, and the July light as described in the chapter — brilliant, horizontal in the afternoon — is characteristic of the Japan Sea coast in midsummer. For a school in a mountain valley like Oguni, the annual trip to Yunohama would represent the one reliable opportunity for the children to see and swim in the sea. The sense that Charlie is witnessing something annual and established — that Kenji swallows seawater every year, that the logistics run smoothly because everyone knows them — reflects this.

Absence and Presence: What We Don't Know We're Missing

The moment Charlie sees the Sea of Japan is a version of a phenomenon described by psychologists as "contrast effects" — the intensification of an experience that comes from its absence. When something that has been part of the background of daily life is suddenly removed (the sea, in Charlie's case, through eight months of inland living), and then suddenly restored, it can be perceived with an intensity that was never possible when it was simply always there. Charlie had not known she missed the sea because it had always been a background element of her life in London, near enough to reach but rarely thought about. Its sudden reappearance on a Japanese horizon activates an awareness she didn't know she had. This is different from nostalgia; it is closer to the restoration of a sense she didn't know was absent.

Chapter 12: Didn't Think of London Once

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher's Note Chapter 12 is the novel's arrival: the moment Charlie discovers she has stopped arriving and started being somewhere. It earns its title at the very end, which is why the title is a spoiler but also the only possible title. The chapter is structured around three ceremonies — being dressed in the yukata, the matsuri itself, the fireworks — and around a series of encounters with the children that confirm how fully she knows them and is known by them. The year-two placement confirmation, mentioned once and set aside, is the chapter's quietest line. The closing scene — the frequency of August, and it being different from London's — is the novel's emotional resolution, which is why it is not Chapter 17. There are five more chapters to go.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever found yourself at home somewhere you had expected to feel foreign? What made the difference?
- Have you ever worn traditional or ceremonial clothes from your own culture, or from another culture? What was the experience like?
- Think about the festivals or celebrations you know. What makes a festival feel like it belongs to you, rather than something you are watching from the outside?
- Is there a difference between not thinking about something and having moved on from it? What does it mean to not think about your home?

1.2 The Title

The chapter is called “Didn't Think of London Once.” This is unusual — it is stated in the past tense, from outside the story, naming something that happens at the end of the chapter.

Before you read: Charlie has been thinking about London — directly or indirectly — since Chapter 1. What would it mean for her to go an entire day without thinking about it? When does this happen in real life — what kind of experience can take you fully out of your usual mental habits? Think about this as you read.

1.3 A Person Who Knows Things About Oguni

Near the start of the chapter, Charlie reflects:

“She was, she had come to understand, a person who knew things about Oguni. Specific, practical, local things. The kind of things you only knew if you had been somewhere long enough for it to stop being somewhere and start being here.”

Discuss:

- What is the difference between a place being “somewhere” and being “here”? How does this distinction work?
- What are some of the specific, practical things Charlie now knows about Oguni? Make a list from memory.
- At what point does a place shift from “somewhere” to “here” for you? What does it take?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 12. The list is in alphabetical order.

adequate (to the clothes)	equal to the occasion; up to the standard required; here, Hiroshi is determined to be adequate to the dignity of the yukata
approximate (the size is approximately right)	close enough; nearly correct; not exact but sufficient
a compressed form (of approval)	a very small, dense version of something; Ishida-san's approval expressed in the minimum possible gesture
faint praise	a compliment so weak that it barely counts as one; "good" from Ryuko is not faint praise because it is her highest register
a frequency	the particular rhythm or quality of a place's atmosphere; both London and Oguni have their own "frequency"
geta (下駄)	traditional Japanese wooden sandals, typically raised on two wooden blocks; they make a distinctive sound on hard surfaces
good intentions	things done with the desire to do good, even if the result is imperfect; here, used with gentle irony about a certain kind of London event
hai (はい)	yes, in Japanese; an affirmative response
Ishida-bachan (石田ばちゃん)	Charlie's way of referring to Ishida-san; 'bachan' is an informal term for grandmother or elderly woman
jinbei (甚兵衛)	traditional Japanese summer clothing for men and boys: a loose top and shorts, usually cotton; lighter and more casual than a yukata
a matsuri (祭)	a Japanese festival; typically centred on a local shrine or community tradition, involving food stalls, music, dancing, and fireworks
mulled wine	a warm drink made from red wine heated with spices and sugar; associated in Britain with winter markets and Christmas
non-negotiable	not open to discussion or refusal; a fixed requirement
Notting Hill Carnival	Europe's largest street festival, held annually in west London in August; a celebration of Caribbean culture, music, and food
an obi (帯)	the wide fabric sash tied around the waist of a kimono or yukata; its placement and tension are significant and require skill
a pace	the natural rhythm or speed of an event; the matsuri has its own tempo, not imposed from outside (the matsuri's own pace)
a placement confirmation (year-two)	an official document confirming that Charlie will continue in her role for a second year on the JET Programme
structurally incorrect	wrong in a fundamental way; not just aesthetically wrong but wrong in its construction
taiko (太鼓)	traditional Japanese drums; large, barrel-shaped drums played with heavy sticks; the sound carries considerable distance and is physically felt as much as heard
takoyaki (たこ焼き)	round savory snacks made from a wheat-flour batter containing diced octopus, cooked in a special moulded pan; a popular festival food
theoretical (knowledge of the matsuri)	known from descriptions or photographs, not from experience; understood intellectually but not felt
totemo ii (とてもいい)	very good; very nice (Japanese)

yakitori (焼鳥)	grilled chicken skewers; a common street and festival food in Japan, cooked over charcoal
a yukata (浴衣)	a lighter, informal version of the kimono, worn in summer at festivals, fireworks displays, and hot spring resorts; made of cotton rather than silk

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The package contained an official _____ for the following year. She read it twice and put it away.
2. He was wearing the clothes with the careful _____ of someone who takes their responsibilities seriously.
3. The word for “lent” eluded her momentarily, and she _____ instead.
4. The drums were very loud and she felt them in her chest — the _____ was physical as much as sonic.
5. Oda-sensei had said the festival was _____. The way she said it made this clear.
6. The old yukata was clearly well-kept and moved _____ in the way it was supposed to.
7. She realised that she had gone the whole day without thinking about London _____. Not once.

2.2 Traditional Clothing: A Vocabulary Map

Chapter 12 introduces several items of traditional Japanese festival clothing. Use the glossary to complete this diagram.

Item	Who wears it in this chapter	Description
yukata	_____	_____
jinbei	_____	_____
obi	_____	_____
geta	_____	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | Charlie had known about the matsuri since July. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Kudo-sensei invites Charlie to come on Saturday morning to get dressed. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | The yukata Charlie wears belonged to Kudo-sensei when she was younger. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | The process of being dressed in a yukata requires Charlie to stand still. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kenji is wearing a red jinbei and holding a goldfish when Charlie sees him. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Hiroshi is with his family near the taiko when Charlie sees him. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Ishida-san is wearing a pale yukata that is very old and well kept. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Charlie and Ishida-san have a full conversation about the matsuri. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Charlie has received confirmation that she will stay for a second year. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | During the fireworks, Charlie thinks about Bryony. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | After the fireworks, Charlie walks home with Kudo-sensei. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | The chapter ends with Charlie going to bed without thinking about London. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the author describe what Charlie has come to understand about herself, at the beginning of the chapter?
- Describe the experience of being dressed in the yukata. What does Charlie have to do, and what does she think of how it sits on her?
- Describe each of Charlie's four encounters with children at the matsuri (Riku and Sota, Kenji, Hiroshi, Saki). What does each encounter show about her relationship with that child?
- What does Charlie understand from her conversation with Ishida-san? What does she not quite understand? How does she respond?
- What happens during the fireworks? What is Charlie not thinking about? How does the chapter end?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Kudo-sensei says about the yukata: "She would have been pleased." Charlie does not know what to do with this. Why is this sentence "too true to answer"? What has Kudo-sensei revealed?
- The year-two placement confirmation is mentioned once and set aside. The novel makes almost nothing of it. Why? What does this restraint tell us about where Charlie's relationship to the JET Programme now stands?
- The chapter ends: "The frequency of August, and it being different from London's. She was aware of this." What is Charlie aware of, exactly? What has changed?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Theoretical and the Real

Chapter 12 uses the word “theoretical” three times in three chapters to describe Charlie’s relationship to things she knew about before she experienced them. Compare the three uses:

Chapter 9: “she had known... in the theoretical way that she knew things here, established but not felt” (about the wisteria)

Chapter 11: “She had not thought about [the sea] in the way that you do not think about the things that have always been there”

Chapter 12: “She had... approximately the same relationship to [the matsuri] that she’d had to sakura in December, which was to say: theoretical.”

Answer these questions:

1. What does “theoretical” mean when Charlie uses it? What is the opposite of theoretical knowledge in this novel?
2. The sakura was also theoretical until it wasn’t. Compare the sakura moment (Chapter 8) to the matsuri moment. How do they work differently?

4.2 The Ceremony of Clothes

The dressing scene at Kudo-sensei’s house is the most intimate scene in the novel. Look at how the author describes it:

“requiring a complete surrender of the usual relationship between a person and their own clothing”

“Ryuko’s hands were efficient and without ceremony, adjusting and folding and tying with the matter-of-fact competence of someone who had done this before”

“She stood still. This, she had learned, was the correct response to many things here.”

Discuss:

- What does “surrender of the usual relationship between a person and their own clothing” mean? What do we normally control about our own dress?
- “Without ceremony” means not making it into a big deal. Yet the scene has a ceremonial quality. How does the author create this?
- “She stood still. This, she had learned, was the correct response to many things here.” This sentence refers to more than getting dressed. What else has Charlie learned to stand still for?

Now write a short paragraph (60–80 words) describing an act of dressing or preparation that has a ceremonial quality, whether the ceremony is acknowledged or not.

4.3 Presence and Absence: What the Fireworks Replace

During the fireworks, the author lists what Charlie is not thinking about:

“Not the heat, not London, not the year-two placement confirmation she had received in April, that she had read twice and put away, not Bryony, not the things she was noting and not drawing conclusions from. None of it was present. The fireworks were present. The river was present. The sound the crowd made at each burst was present.”

This technique — listing what is absent so we understand what is present — is one of the most precise in the chapter. Answer these questions:

1. Each item in the list Charlie is not thinking about represents something she has been carrying across the novel. Identify what each one represents for her journey.
2. What does it mean that “The fireworks were present. The river was present. The sound the crowd made... was present.” How does repetition of the word “present” work here?

4.4 The Frequency

The novel began with London’s frequency. It ends Chapter 12 with Oguni’s frequency. Look at the two passages:

Chapter 1: “Outside, London continued at its usual frequency.”

Chapter 2: “London did not notice. It had things to be getting on with.”

Chapter 12: “Outside, August continued at its particular frequency. It was different from London’s frequency. She was aware of this.”

Discuss:

- The novel opened with London having its own frequency, indifferent to Charlie’s departure. Now Oguni has its own frequency. What has changed about Charlie’s relationship to place?
- In Chapter 1, London “continued.” In Chapter 12, August “continued.” The verb is the same. What is different about what it means?
- She is “aware of this.” She does not say what this means. Does she need to? Does the reader already know?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie has a different relationship with each of the four children she encounters at the matsuri. What does each encounter tell us about who she has become in Oguni?
- Ishida-san assesses Charlie's stance in the geta and offers an instruction. Charlie adjusts. Ishida-san makes a sound that is "marginally satisfied." What does this moment tell us about Charlie's relationship with Ishida-san, and about Ishida-san herself?
- Kudo-sensei says about the yukata: "She would have been pleased." Charlie does nothing with this. Is this the right response? What would the wrong response have been?
- Charlie received the year-two confirmation in April, read it twice, and put it away. The novel barely mentions it. What has Charlie decided, without making a decision?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- A place stops being "somewhere" and starts being "here." What is the difference? Is it something that can be decided, or does it arrive on its own?
- Charlie wore Kudo-sensei's mother's yukata to the matsuri. What does it mean, symbolically and practically, to be dressed in someone else's mother's clothes and walk through the town wearing them?
- The year-two confirmation is set aside without comment. What does the novel's silence on this detail communicate? Would it have been better to give it more space?
- The fireworks are the first time in the novel Charlie has been completely present — not noting, not complaining, not composing messages to Bryony. What made this possible?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever had a day when you forgot to think about something that usually occupies your mind? What was happening? What replaced it?
- Is there a festival, celebration, or ritual in your culture where wearing specific clothing is part of the experience? What does the clothing do to how you feel and move?
- Charlie knows specific, practical things about Oguni now — which drinks cabinet is coldest, which routes have shade, when the apartment cools. What practical knowledge do you have about a place that someone new would not?
- The novel has been building toward this chapter since Chapter 1. Looking back: when do you think Charlie actually stopped being a visitor and started being somewhere?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Dressing Scene

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei (Ryuko).

The Situation

- Saturday morning at Ryuko's house. The small back room.
- Ryuko produces the yukata and holds it up.
- "It was my mother's. The size should be approximately right."
- The process of being dressed. Charlie must stand still. Ryuko adjusts.
- Ryuko steps back and says: "Good."
- They step outside. Play the moment Charlie first walks in the geta.
- End with: "Your mother's?" / "Yes. She would have been pleased."

6.2 The Children at the Festival

Work in groups of five. One student is Charlie; others are Riku/Sota, Kenji, Hiroshi, Saki.

The Situation

- Play each encounter in sequence, across the matsuri.
- Riku and Sota: stall, toys, staring, recalibrating, waving.
- Kenji: goldfish, the bag, the thumbs up.
- Hiroshi: near the taiko, the nod, Charlie's nod back.
- Saki: family group, the pale green yukata, her unsurprised expression.
- After: each person says what their character was thinking at their moment of encounter.

6.3 The Fireworks on the Bridge

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- They are on the bridge over the river, waiting for the fireworks.
- The crowd goes quiet.
- The first firework goes up. Play the scene: the sounds, the light, the crowd.
- Kudo-sensei says something quietly that Charlie doesn't catch.
- Charlie says: "Yes."
- Play the silence that follows. Then the walk home begins.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Somewhere to Here

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever had a day when you forgot to think about home?		
Is there a festival from your culture where clothing is important?		
What practical knowledge do you have about a place that a stranger wouldn't?		
When does a place shift from "somewhere" to "here" for you?		
Have you ever received important news and simply put it aside?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: Practical Local Knowledge

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing the specific, practical, local knowledge you have about a place you know well — the kind that only comes from having been there long enough. It can be your hometown, a city you’ve lived in, a school, a neighbourhood. Write it in Charlie’s style: precise, specific, slightly understated.

Useful language: The kind of things you only knew if... • She knew which... and which... • She knew the precise hour at which... • ... and this information was worth having • a place long enough for it to stop being somewhere and start being here

7.2 Creative Writing: Ishida-san at the Matsuri

Ishida-san watches Charlie at the matsuri — in the yukata, at the taiko, saying “totemo ii.” Write a short piece (100–130 words) from Ishida-san’s perspective. What does she see? What was the second sentence she said to Charlie about Ryuko’s mother and the yukata?

Ishida-san does not speak English. She communicates by doing and by watching. She makes a sound when things confirm what she already expected.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Arrival

Chapter 12 is the novel’s emotional arrival. But there are five more chapters. Write 150–180 words reflecting on what it means for a novel to reach its emotional resolution before its final chapter. You might consider:

- What does Charlie’s realisation — that she didn’t think of London once — actually mean? Is it an ending, or a beginning?
- Is it possible to belong to two places? Does belonging to Oguni mean she has stopped belonging to London?
- What do you think the remaining five chapters might need to do?

7.4 Short Writing: The Fireworks List

Write the list of things Charlie is not thinking about during the fireworks (as the author gives it), and then write what she is thinking about instead (in 50–70 words), as if from inside her perspective rather than described from outside.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 12.

Matsuri: The Japanese Festival

A matsuri (祭) is a Japanese festival, typically centred on a local Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple and often tied to seasonal or agricultural cycles. Summer matsuri are the most numerous and the most festive: they involve food stalls (yakisoba, yakitori, takoyaki, kakigori), games (goldfish scooping, yo-yo fishing), music, dancing, and fireworks. Participants often wear yukata or jinbei. The matsuri is a community event in the deepest sense — it belongs to the place rather than to any individual or group. In rural areas like Oguni, the matsuri is also one of the few occasions when the whole community gathers and the size of the community becomes visible. The number of people at the festival, and the faces Charlie recognises, is itself data about belonging.

Yukata and Festival Clothing

The yukata (浴衣) is a light cotton garment, worn informally in summer at festivals, fireworks displays, and onsen resorts. It is simpler and less formal than the kimono, but still requires specific knowledge to wear correctly: the left side crosses over the right (the reverse is for the deceased), the obi is tied in a particular way, and the fit and posture are different from Western clothing. Being dressed by someone else is common and expected, particularly for those unfamiliar with it. Ryuko dressing Charlie reflects both practical necessity and intimacy: she is giving Charlie access to a ceremony that Charlie could not enter alone. The yukata having belonged to Ryuko's mother adds a layer of personal significance that the novel handles with appropriate restraint.

Taiko: Japanese Drumming

Taiko (太鼓) refers to a family of traditional Japanese drums, used in religious ceremonies, festivals, theatre, and more recently in ensemble performances. Festival taiko is typically played in groups, with large drums (odaiko) at the centre and smaller drums accompanying. The sound is percussive and loud, felt physically as much as heard — Charlie notices it in her chest before she identifies it. Taiko performance requires significant physical effort and is characterised by focused intensity; the players' posture and commitment are visible. Community taiko groups exist in many rural Japanese towns and are often composed of members who have been playing since childhood.

Hanabi: Japanese Fireworks

Hanabi (花火, literally “flower fire”) are an integral part of the Japanese summer. Fireworks displays (hanabi taikai) are held across Japan from June to August, drawing large crowds to riversides and coastal areas. Japanese fireworks are known for their precision and variety: specific patterns, colours, and sizes are associated with different moments in a display, and knowledgeable viewers respond accordingly. The word Kudo-sensei says quietly when the large gold-and-white firework goes up — which Charlie doesn't catch but understands as “the right thing to say” — is likely “tama ya” (玉屋) or “kagi ya” (鋳屋), traditional exclamations shouted by Japanese audiences at fireworks; they are the names of famous historical firework-making families.

Goldfish Scooping (Kingyo-sukui)

Kingyo-sukui (金魚すくい) is a traditional matsuri game in which players use a thin paper scoop to catch goldfish from a shallow pool. The paper dissolves quickly in water, making the game challenging; each fish caught is taken home in a plastic bag. Kenji's goldfish — held with both hands and presented as a significant achievement — is an accurate portrait of the experience. The game is a staple of Japanese summer festivals and is associated with childhood and summer memory. That Kenji has caught one himself, and presents it to Charlie as evidence of his ability, is consistent with his character throughout the novel.

The JET Programme: Year Two

The JET Programme contract is typically for one year, renewable annually up to a maximum of five years, subject to performance review and availability of a placement. Participants who wish to continue must apply for renewal during the year, and placements for the second year may differ from the first. The confirmation Charlie receives in April that she will continue for a second year in Oguni is, on the face of it, significant news. The novel treats it as almost nothing: she reads it twice, puts it away, and it is mentioned once more during the fireworks. This restraint is deliberate. The decision has been made; the novel is not interested in dramatising it.

Chapter 13: The Moon

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 13 is the novel’s most emotionally complex chapter after Chapter 12. Four things happen: the rice harvest (completing an arc begun in February); the imoni party (community, autumn, the right temperature for the cooling evening); the tsukimi scene (the chapter’s heart — Kudo-sensei tells Charlie about Kyoto, Charlie asks the question she has been holding since January, and both characters say something simply true); and Sendai, which tests the belonging that Chapter 12 established and finds it to be real. The chapter ends with Charlie walking home from the station in the good cold. Exercises focus on seasonal completeness, the tsukimi conversation as the novel’s deepest exchange, and the Sendai section as a structural test of what has changed.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever watched something grow or develop over a long period of time — a plant, a project, a relationship — and then seen it end or complete? What did you feel?
- Have you ever asked someone a question you had been holding for a long time? What made you finally ask it?
- Think about a time you left your home or your usual environment and found it different from what you expected. Did you miss where you came from? Did you miss where you had gone?
- What does it mean to belong somewhere? Is it something you choose, or something that happens to you?

1.2 The Title: The Moon

Before you read: The moon is mentioned briefly in Chapters 1 and 2 — Charlie could see four stars from London. Now the moon has its own chapter. Think about what the moon might represent in this novel, and what kind of experience might warrant it becoming a chapter title. As you read, notice the moment the moon appears, and what it allows.

1.3 The Arc of the Rice Fields

The rice fields appear in almost every chapter of the novel. Look at this timeline:

Chapter	Season	What the fields look like / what happens
1–2	November–December	Empty, brown; barely noticed
3–5	January–February	Snow-covered; registered as landscape
6–7	March	Beginning to change; Charlie starts noticing
8–9	April–May	Flooded; planted; pale green rows in water
10–11	June–August	Deep green; beginning to go gold at edges
12–13	September	Gold everywhere; the harvest

Discuss: Why does the author use the rice fields as a recurring thread across the whole novel? What do they represent?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 13. The list is in alphabetical order.

approximation (enthusiastic)	an imprecise version; close but not exact; here, Oda-sensei's English reaches the edges of its capacity as she explains the imoni party
bracing	invigorating; refreshingly cold in a way that wakes you up
brisk efficiency	quick, practical competence without any fuss
a chill	a slight coldness in the air; the beginning of cool
dango (山幸)	small round rice dumplings, often served on a skewer and associated with moon viewing; slightly sweet and chewy
diminished (the field)	became smaller; reduced; here, the field gets smaller as the harvester moves through it
a gas burner	a portable cooking device using gas canisters as fuel.
giving her truth a shape	finding the right words for something true and personal; forming a difficult truth into something that can be spoken
a good harvest	a large, successful crop; the rice has grown well this year
a harvester	a large agricultural machine that cuts and collects grain from a field
imoni (説煮)	a traditional autumn stew from Yamagata Prefecture. See cultural notes
making its peace with	accepting something, even if acceptance came slowly or was not the first response
malice	the desire to harm or cause difficulty; "heat without malice" means heat that is simply hot, not oppressively hostile
a mound of pampas grass	a tall, feathery grass used as a traditional decoration for tsukimi
the processing pause	Kudo-sensei's standard interval before answering; her thinking silence; previously used to describe her careful response time
refillable (bowls)	able to be filled again; the stew can be served a second time
resigned efficiency	the competent tiredness of doing something you have done many times and know will need doing again
Sendai	the largest city in the Tohoku region of Japan, in Miyagi Prefecture; about two hours from Yamagata by Shinkansen
stalks (cut stalks)	the stems left after grain has been harvested; what remains in the field after the rice is taken
a stew (imoni)	a thick soup cooked slowly with meat and vegetables; warm, filling, and associated with autumn and community in this chapter
taro (里訊物・里談)	a starchy root vegetable used widely in East and Southeast Asian cooking; the main ingredient of imoni
tsukimi (月見)	moon viewing; the Japanese tradition of gathering outdoors to observe the harvest moon, typically in September; associated with dango, pampas grass, and autumn contemplation
the Yonesaka Line	the local railway line that connects Oguni and the surrounding mountain towns to Yonezawa and the Shinkansen network; slow and rural, in contrast to the Shinkansen

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The air had lost its _____. It was still hot, but hot without intention.
2. She ate the stew and it was the right weight, the right temperature — a _____'s food for the cooling evening.
3. The field _____ behind the harvester, the gold giving way to pale cut stalks.
4. Ryuko was quiet for a moment that was longer than her _____. She was finding a shape for what she had to say.
5. The September air was _____.: cold enough to wake you up, not so cold as to be a problem.
6. Oda-sensei explained it with the _____ of someone whose English was doing its best.
7. She said it with the ease of something she had been _____ for a long time, and was now at peace with.

2.2 Seasonal Vocabulary

Chapter 13 is full of seasonal language. Match each word or phrase to the sense it appeals to — what you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel.

Word / phrase from Chapter 13	Sense (sight / sound / smell / taste / touch or feel)
the harvest moon enormous over the eastern ridge	_____
dark and rich and smelled of soy sauce and autumn	_____
the mountain quiet that was not absence of sound	_____
the chill in the air became a fact rather than a suggestion	_____
the sound the harvester made moving through the rice	_____
the flat rock at the top of the path, worn smooth	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | In September the air is still hot but has lost its humidity. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie watches the rice harvest on her way to school. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Kudo-sensei says it is a bad harvest this year. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Oda-sensei explains the imoni party using very precise English. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The imoni is made with taro and chicken. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Charlie eats two bowls of imoni without hesitation. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Kudo-sensei is at the imoni party but is talking to someone else. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Charlie and Kudo-sensei go to watch the moon alone. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Kudo-sensei tells Charlie she came back to Oguni because of family. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Charlie says she is glad Kudo-sensei came back. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | In Sendai, Charlie has a bad meal and an unpleasant day. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | At the end of the chapter, Charlie says she wants to go back to Sendai. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the author describe the change in September's heat compared to July and August? What is different about it?
- What does Charlie feel when she watches the harvest? Why does this surprise her?
- Describe the imoni party: where it is, who is there, what is happening. What does Charlie observe about Kudo-sensei from across the fire?
- What does Kudo-sensei tell Charlie during the tsukimi about why she returned to Oguni? How does she tell it?
- What happens in Sendai? What does Charlie realise while standing on a street in the late afternoon?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- "I know," Kudo-sensei says, when Charlie tells her she has been watching the rice fields since April. What does she know, exactly? What is the author saying through this short exchange?
- Kudo-sensei says: "Somehow it just worked out this way." She says it without bitterness. What does the author mean by "the thing that is the combination of sadness and acceptance when enough time has passed"?
- Charlie says she wants to go home to Oguni, not London. The chapter ends: "The night was cold... which was the good kind of cold... and had nothing personal about it." What does "nothing personal" mean here? Compare this to how cold was described in Chapter 7.

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Completion and Feeling

Charlie has watched the rice fields since February without planting or tending anything. When the harvest comes, she feels it in a way that surprises her. Look at how the author describes this:

“She had been watching these fields since the flooding. She had not planted anything. She had not maintained anything. She had simply been here, paying attention, and now here was the end of it, and she felt the end of it in a way that surprised her.”

Discuss:

- Why does watching something, without participating in it, still create a feeling of completion or loss?
- Is there a difference between owning something and feeling connected to it? Charlie did not grow the rice. Why does she feel the harvest?
- Have you ever felt the end of something you were watching rather than doing? What was it?

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) about something you watched or followed for a long time without participating — a sports season, a building under construction, a project someone else was doing, a garden that wasn't yours. What did you feel when it ended or completed?

4.2 The Tsukimi Conversation: Truth Given a Shape

The conversation on the hill during tsukimi is the most intimate exchange in the novel. Look at how Kudo-sensei speaks:

“Not the processing pause, something longer, giving her truth a shape she could speak.”
 “There was someone. In Kyoto. For some years. And then there wasn't.”
 “She said it the way you say things that are simply true, that you have made your peace with even if peace was not the first thing available.”

Answer these questions:

1. What is the difference between “the processing pause” and “something longer”? Why does Kudo-sensei pause longer than usual here?
2. “Peace was not the first thing available.” What does this mean? What was available before peace?
3. Why does Charlie say “I’m glad you came back” rather than asking more questions? What does this response tell us about how well she knows Kudo-sensei?

Now write the exchange in a slightly different version: Charlie, instead of saying nothing, asks a follow-up question. Write the question and Kudo-sensei's response (5–8 lines of dialogue). Try to write in both characters' voices.

4.3 Sendai: The Test

The Sendai section is a structural test. Everything is fine. Nothing is wrong. And yet:

“She was standing on a street in a city and it was fine and she wanted to go home.”
“Not home to London. Home to Oguni.”

Discuss:

- What was slightly wrong all day in Sendai? The coffee was good. The ramen was excellent. The bookshop was a bookshop. Why was none of it quite right?
- What does it mean that she thought of the restaurant in Oguni while eating excellent ramen in Sendai?
- She tells Bryony Sendai was “nice.” Bryony says she doesn’t sound convinced. What does the phone call not say?

Write the version of the Bryony call that does say everything (80–100 words) — the conversation where Charlie describes Sendai honestly, including what she realised on the street.

4.4 Heat as Character: A Seasonal Journey

Across Chapters 1–13, the temperature has functioned almost as a character — shaping Charlie’s mood, her movement, her relationship to Oguni. Look at this progression:

Chapter 1: “November in London smelled like exhaust and fried chicken and someone’s forgotten umbrella.”
Chapters 4–7: Cold as a personality change. “Comprehensively, professionally, systematically cold.”
Chapter 10: “The air had acquired a density... something that pressed slightly.”
Chapter 13: “Heat without malice.” The cold at the end: “the good kind of cold... nothing personal about it.”

The language of temperature has shifted from complaint and hostility to acceptance and even appreciation. Find one more example of temperature language from earlier chapters and write it below. Then explain how the language of temperature in Chapter 13 is different.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- When Kudo-sensei says “I know” in response to Charlie’s comment about watching the fields since April: what has she been observing all year? What does this small exchange tell us about their friendship?
- Charlie has been wanting to ask why Kudo-sensei came back since January. She finally asks during the tsukimi. What made the moment right? Why not earlier?
- Kudo-sensei answers the question simply and completely, without self-pity. What kind of person does this suggest? How does this response change what we understand about her?
- Charlie stands on a street in Sendai wanting to go home to Oguni. This is the moment Chapter 12 pointed toward. What does she do with this realisation? Does she tell anyone?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie felt the harvest even though she had not grown the rice. What does this tell us about the relationship between attention and belonging?
- Kudo-sensei says that in Oguni “the things that are old are the mountains. The river. The scale is different.” What does she mean? How is scale related to belonging?
- The tsukimi scene is the deepest exchange in the novel. Why does the moon make it possible? What does the moon provide that conversation alone does not?
- Sendai is fine. The coffee is good. And yet it is not right. Does this mean the city is wrong, or that Charlie has changed?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever returned to a city or place you thought you wanted, and found it was not what you expected? What had changed — the place, or you?
- Have you ever had a conversation that could only happen in a specific place, at a specific moment? What made the moment right?
- Kudo-sensei says there was someone in Kyoto, and then there wasn’t. She says it without bitterness. Have you ever talked about something difficult in this way? What does it take?
- Charlie has been watching the rice fields for seven months without growing them. What have you followed or paid attention to over a long period that wasn’t yours?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 Watching the Harvest

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- They are walking home past the harvested fields.
- Charlie says she watched the harvest that morning.
- Kudo-sensei says it's a good harvest this year.
- Charlie says she has been watching since the flooding.
- "I know," Kudo-sensei says.
- Play the silence that follows. Then: what do they say next?

6.2 The Tsukimi

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- They are on the hill above the old shrine. The harvest moon is enormous.
- Kudo-sensei talks about Kyoto. About the scale of things.
- Charlie asks: "Why did you come back?"
- Kudo-sensei gives her truth a shape: the person in Kyoto, and then not.
- Charlie says: "I'm glad you came back."
- Ryuko says: "Yes. I am too."
- Play the scene. Include the dango, the tea, the moon.

6.3 The Bryony Call from the Platform

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Bryony.

The Situation

- Charlie has just got back to Oguni from Sendai. She calls from the platform.
- Play the conversation as in the chapter: Sendai was "good," the ramen was excellent.
- Bryony says: "You don't sound convinced."
- Charlie says: "I'm fine. Just tired."
- They move on.
- After: each player says what their character was actually thinking.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Seasons and Completions

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Have you ever watched something grow and then end, without participating?		
Have you been to a city for a day and found it wasn't what you needed?		
What question have you been holding for a long time but not yet asked?		
Is there a community food tradition in your culture like the imoni party?		
What is the right kind of cold — cold that is good, not bad?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Cycle Completed

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about watching something complete a cycle — a harvest, a building being finished, a school year ending, a person recovering from an illness — something you followed without doing. What did you feel at the end?

Useful language: She had been watching since... • She had not planted / built / done anything • She had simply been here, paying attention • Now here was the end of it • She felt the end of it in a way that surprised her

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei on the Hill

Write a short interior monologue (100–130 words) from Kudo-sensei's perspective, during the tsukimi. She has just told Charlie about Kyoto. What is she thinking now? What does she feel about having said it? What does she think of Charlie's response?

Remember: Kudo-sensei chooses words carefully. She has made her peace with things, though peace was not the first thing available.

7.3 Extended Writing: Scale

Kudo-sensei says: "Here the things that are old are the mountains. The river. The scale is different." Write 150–180 words exploring what she means by scale, and what scale has to do with belonging. You might consider:

- What does it mean to live somewhere where the oldest things are also the largest things?
- Is there a place you know where the scale is right — where the landscape makes you feel properly sized?
- Kudo-sensei missed this in Kyoto, even though Kyoto is full of beautiful old things. Why was it not enough?

7.4 Short Writing: The Street in Sendai

Write Charlie's internal monologue (60–80 words) as she stands on the street in Sendai and understands what is slightly wrong. What is she thinking? What does she feel about feeling it?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 13.

Imoni: The Yamagata Autumn Stew

Imoni (説煮) is a traditional stew specific to Yamagata Prefecture, considered one of the most locally distinctive foods in the Tohoku region. It is made with sato-imo (taro root), beef, konnyaku (a gel made from konjac), leeks, and other vegetables, cooked in a soy sauce broth. It is traditionally made and eaten outdoors in autumn, beside rivers, in large groups — the party format Charlie attends is the authentic one. Imoni gatherings are a fixture of Yamagata autumn life; the season for them runs from September through October, and communities gather at river parks to cook in large pots over gas burners. The version Yoshida-san from the hardware shop is tending is the Yamagata variety; different prefectures make different regional versions with different broths and proteins.

Tsukimi: Moon Viewing

Tsukimi (月見, “moon viewing”) is the Japanese tradition of gathering outdoors to observe the harvest moon, typically in September or October. The tradition dates back to the Heian period (794–1185) and has been influenced over centuries by both Chinese moon-viewing customs and distinctly Japanese aesthetics. Traditional tsukimi offerings include dango (rice dumplings), sato-imo (taro), and pampas grass (susuki), which is placed in a vase or bundle as a seasonal decoration. The harvest moon is called the “juugoya” (十五夜, the fifteenth night of the eighth lunar month) and is celebrated for its size and brightness. Kudo-sensei’s preparation — the dango she makes that afternoon, the pampas grass from the riverbank, the flask of tea — is exactly right.

The Rice Harvest in Yamagata

Yamagata’s rice harvest typically begins in early to mid-September, depending on variety and elevation. The process is now almost entirely mechanised: combine harvesters (known in Japanese as konbain) move through the paddies, cutting, threshing, and bagging the rice in a single pass. Before mechanisation, the harvest was a community effort requiring many hands. The man operating the harvester in Chapter 13, who does not look up, who has done this before, who will do it again — is a figure of settled, seasonal competence. Charlie’s feeling of completion at watching the harvest is genuine: she has tracked these fields through an entire agricultural cycle.

Sendai and the Shinkansen Connection

Sendai is the largest city in the Tohoku region, the capital of Miyagi Prefecture, with a population of just over one million. It is a significant commercial, cultural, and educational centre. From the Yonezawa area (where the Yonesaka Line connects to the national rail network), Sendai is reachable by Shinkansen in approximately one and a half to two hours. For someone living in a rural mountain town like Oguni, Sendai represents the nearest large city — the place where things that are unavailable in small towns can be found. Charlie’s day there — a shopping street, a department store, ramen, a bookshop — is a recognisable urban day in a Japanese city. The fact that it is unreservedly fine and yet she wants to go home is the chapter’s quiet pivot.

The Harvest Moon

The harvest moon is the full moon that falls closest to the autumn equinox, typically in September. Because the moon rises shortly after sunset for several nights around the full moon nearest the equinox, it appears large and low in the sky, often orange or amber in colour due to the atmosphere. This is the moon Charlie and Kudo-sensei observe during tsukimi. The visual effect is a real optical phenomenon (called the moon illusion) combined with the genuinely lower angle of the autumn moon. Kudo-sensei’s response to Charlie’s “it’s very large” — “it’s always this large. You just don’t usually see it” — is one of the chapter’s most precise observations about the difference between noticing and seeing.

Pampas Grass (Susuki) as Seasonal Symbol

Susuki (芦, pampas grass) is one of the symbolic plants of Japanese autumn, along with the harvest moon and chrysanthemums. Its long, feathery plumes, which ripen in September, are used as traditional decorations for tsukimi, placed in vases or bundles alongside the dango offering. In classical Japanese poetry, susuki growing at the edges of a field or riverbank is associated with the end of summer and the approach of winter — with loneliness, autumn light, and the passing of things. Kudo-sensei’s pampas grass, cut from the riverbank that afternoon and brought up the hill for the moon viewing, is both practically correct and aesthetically resonant.

Chapter 14: Koyo

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 14 is structured around two events held in tension: the beauty of the koyo (confirmed by the chapter’s first line and maintained throughout) and the Osaka call, which arrives in the middle of the chapter like a stone dropped into still water. The chapter’s emotional precision lies in what is not said: Kudo-sensei’s silence after the call, Charlie’s “so lucky” coming out flat, and Kudo-sensei’s response about the koyo. The school festival provides the chapter’s warmest section — Charlie helping collect chairs, Kenji’s mother’s expression, Ishida-san’s nod. The chapter ends with Charlie deciding to look at the mountains a great deal between now and December. Exercises focus on the call, the silence, and what each character understands.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever received news that should have felt like good news but didn’t quite feel that way? What happened?
- Have you ever stopped wanting something that you had wanted for a long time without quite noticing you had stopped? How did you realise?
- Think about a school performance or ceremony you participated in. What was it like to be on stage, or to watch others perform? What made it meaningful?
- Is there a natural phenomenon in your country that is particularly celebrated? What makes it significant?

1.2 The Title: Koyo

Before you read: Koyo (紅葉) means autumn leaves — the seasonal colour change of deciduous trees in October and November. Japan is famous for its koyo, which is celebrated in the same way as the sakura. As you read, notice how the koyo functions in the chapter: is it only beautiful, or does it do something else? Notice also the structural tension: what other major event occurs in this chapter, and how do they exist alongside each other?

1.3 The Pattern of Stopping

Charlie reflects on her stopping during the walk to school:

“She had been stopping on walks to school since February. This had become, she was aware, a pattern — the world presenting something and her stopping for it, which was different from the person who had walked to school in December with her eyes on the ground and her mind cataloguing complaints.”

Before you read, discuss:

- Look back at the moments across the novel where Charlie stopped during walks. Can you list them? What did she stop for each time?
- What does it mean to change from someone who catalogues complaints to someone who stops for what the world presents?
- Is this change something Charlie decided to make, or something that happened to her?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 14. The list is in alphabetical order.

audible	able to be heard; here, a note in Charlie's voice that she didn't intend to be heard but was
cataloguing complaints	mentally listing things to complain about; creating an inventory of grievances
a continuous conversation	an ongoing discussion or relationship that does not start and stop but simply continues from one instalment to the next
descending (the colour)	moving downward; the koyo moves from the mountain peaks down toward the valley floor as autumn progresses
dignity (careful dignity)	a composed, serious manner; behaving with self-respect, especially in a formal or difficult situation
flat (the word came out flat)	without the expected enthusiasm or feeling; emotionally empty; here, the word "lucky" does not sound lucky
fond (the nature of the talking was fond)	affectionate; warm and caring in tone
genuinely good news	news that is actually positive, as opposed to news that should feel positive but does not
instalment	one part of something that continues over time; an episode; here, the school festival is one instalment of the ongoing community relationship
koyo (紅葉)	the seasonal colour change of deciduous trees in Japan's autumn; leaves turning red, orange, and gold; celebrated nationally, like the sakura
the Namba area	a central district of Osaka, known for entertainment, shopping, food, and nightlife; one of the most urban and vibrant parts of the city
a noticeboard	a board on a wall for displaying notices, announcements, and information
Osaka	Japan's third-largest city, in the Kansai region; known for its food, nightlife, commerce, and direct, warm local culture
patience (patient respect)	the willingness to wait or endure something without complaint; here, the audience listens to a long speech with polite tolerance
peaks	the pointed tops of mountains; the highest points
pride	a feeling of satisfaction in the achievements of someone connected to you; here, Charlie feels this about Hiroshi's English performance
proportion (a meaningful proportion)	a significant share or percentage of a total; here, the proportion of the town's population at the school festival
a representative	a person chosen to speak or act on behalf of a group
self-consciousness	an uncomfortable awareness of being observed or judged; Charlie's early stops on walks were accompanied by this feeling
slopes	sides of mountains; the angled surfaces between the peak and the valley floor
so lucky	a phrase used here with intentional irony; said without the enthusiasm that the words would normally carry
thorough (thoroughness of organisation)	very complete and careful; leaving nothing out; the school festival food is organised with complete thoroughness

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. The word came out _____. She hadn't meant it to, but the flatness was there regardless.
2. She felt something she recognised as _____: his English had been precise and careful and it had worked.
3. The colour moved _____ from the upper slopes, arriving at the valley floor in the second week of October.
4. Kenji's mother said something whose _____ communicated that he spoke of Charlie at home, and warmly.
5. She had stopped with _____ in February. By October she stopped without thinking about it at all.
6. She helped collect chairs at the end, which nobody had asked her to do and which felt like part of the _____ she was now in with the school.
7. The administrator said it was _____ news. The word "lucky" came out of Charlie's mouth without the feeling that should have accompanied it.

2.2 Colour in the Chapter

Chapter 14 is full of colour. Find a word or phrase from the chapter for each colour description below.

Colour description	Word or phrase from the chapter
The overall colour of the autumn mountains	_____
The specific colour Charlie had no name for	_____
The colour of the river reflecting the trees	_____
The colour of Saki's yukata at the matsuri (Chapter 12)	_____
The light in the staffroom during the call	_____
The mountain slopes after the koyo has descended	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | The koyo begins in the valley floor and moves upward to the peaks. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Charlie takes photographs of the koyo that she knows will not be adequate. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Kudo-sensei says she did not know what the koyo would look like in October. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | The school festival takes place on the second Saturday of October. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kenji performs in the English play. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Hiroshi has a speaking part in the English play. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie helps collect chairs at the end of the festival without being asked. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | The JET office calls Charlie on a Friday afternoon. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | The position offered is in a school in the Namba area of Osaka. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Kudo-sensei comments on the Osaka offer when Charlie returns to the staffroom. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Oda-sensei is enthusiastic about the Osaka news. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | The chapter ends with Charlie deciding not to go to Osaka. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does the author describe the koyo when Charlie first properly sees it? What word does she use, and how does she qualify it?
- Describe the exchange between Charlie and Kudo-sensei about knowing what the koyo would look like. What point does it make about their earlier conversation about the wisteria?
- Describe three moments at the school festival that show how embedded Charlie has become in the community.
- What does the JET administrator tell Charlie? What does Charlie say, and how does she say it?
- What does Kudo-sensei say after Charlie announces the Osaka news? What does she not say? What does Charlie reply?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- "So lucky," the word came out flat, with a note underneath it that she hadn't intended to be audible and that was, she could tell, audible. What does the flatness tell us about how Charlie actually feels about the Osaka offer?
- Kudo-sensei does not say anything about the Osaka call. She says only: "The koyo will be at its best this week." What is she really saying? Why does she say it this way?
- The chapter ends: "She would look at them a great deal, she thought, between now and December." What does this tell us about what Charlie is thinking about and what she is not yet saying?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Conversation About Knowing

The exchange between Charlie and Kudo-sensei about the koyo completes the arc begun with the wisteria in Chapter 9. Look at both:

Chapter 9: “When you walk past it in December. When it’s just the wooden structure. Do you still see it? The wisteria.” / “Yes. I think that is what it means to know a place.”

Chapter 14: “You knew it would look like this.” / “Yes.” / “And in December, when it’s all grey and bare, you still know.” / “Yes.” / “That’s the thing. Isn’t it.” / “Yes. That is the thing.”

Answer these questions:

1. What has Charlie understood between Chapter 9 and Chapter 14? How has her understanding of “knowing a place” changed?
2. Why does Kudo-sensei say “Yes. That is the thing” with “something in her expression that had become familiar”? What has become familiar?
3. If Charlie now knows the koyo will be there in October, and knows it will be grey in December: what does this tell us about how she now relates to Oguni across time?

4.2 The Mechanics of “So Lucky”

The word “lucky” carries a great deal in this chapter. Look at how the narrator describes it:

“The word came out flat, with a note underneath it that she hadn’t intended to be audible and that was, she could tell, audible.”

This is one of the most precise sentences in the novel. Discuss:

- What does it mean for a word to “come out flat”? What is missing from Charlie’s delivery of “lucky”?
- She hadn’t intended the note to be audible. But it was. Who heard it? What does each person now know?
- The novel tells us this through the narrator, not through dialogue. Why might the author have made this choice?

Now write the moment from Kudo-sensei’s perspective (50–70 words): she is reading her book. She hears Charlie say “so lucky.” What does she hear in it? What does she decide to do, and why?

4.3 Pride as a New Emotion

At the school festival, Charlie feels something she identifies as pride:

“Charlie, watching from the side, felt something she recognised after a moment as pride, which was not an emotion she had expected to feel about a fourteen-year-old’s pronunciation.”

Discuss:

- Why had Charlie not expected to feel pride? What does feeling it tell us about how her relationship to the children has changed?
- The novel earlier gave us Charlie feeling the rice harvest. This is a similar kind of feeling — connected to something she has not made herself. What is the pattern?
- “She would always be this person.” What does Charlie mean about Saki? Is this a compliment? How is it different from how Charlie thought about Saki in Chapter 4?

Write a paragraph (60–80 words) describing a moment when you felt unexpectedly proud of someone else — a sibling, a student, a colleague, a friend. What made it unexpected? What did it tell you about your relationship to them?

4.4 Kudo-sensei’s Response: The Art of Not Saying

After the Osaka announcement, Kudo-sensei does not comment on the news. She says only: “The koyo will be at its best this week. On the path above the shrine, particularly.”

This is Kudo-sensei at her most precise. She has heard everything — the call, the news, the flat note in “lucky.” She responds by telling Charlie where the most beautiful thing available to her is, this week, while she still has it.

Answer these questions:

1. What is Kudo-sensei not saying? If she had said what she was thinking, what might it have been?
2. Why is telling Charlie about the koyo path the right response, rather than any of the things she might have said directly?
3. The chapter ends with Charlie deciding to look at the mountains “a great deal between now and December.” This echoes Kudo-sensei’s suggestion. What has Kudo-sensei’s response done for Charlie?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie stops for the koyo “without embarrassment and without the slight self-consciousness that had accompanied the early stops.” What does this evolution in how she stops tell us about who she has become?
- Kenji’s mother’s expression tells Charlie that Kenji talks about her at home, fondly. What does Charlie do with this information? What does the novel’s description of her reaction tell us?
- Charlie receives the Osaka news and says “so lucky” with a flat voice. Oda-sensei receives it as genuinely good news. Kudo-sensei receives it in silence. What does each response tell us about each person?
- The chapter ends without a decision. Charlie will look at the mountains between now and December. Is she deciding, or deferring?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The koyo and the Osaka call exist in the same chapter, side by side. What does the author achieve by placing the most beautiful thing in the novel alongside its most difficult moment?
- The school festival is described as “an instalment” of an “ongoing conversation.” Charlie is now part of this ongoing conversation. What does it mean to become part of a continuous conversation with a community?
- The chapter title is “Koyo.” Not “Osaka.” Not “The Call.” What does this choice of title tell us about what the author considers the chapter’s centre?
- Kudo-sensei tells Charlie where the koyo is best. Is this advice, comfort, or something else? What is she offering?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever received good news that felt flat? What made it feel that way? What had changed in what you actually wanted?
- Is there a seasonal natural event in your country that is particularly celebrated? What is it, and what makes it worth celebrating?
- Have you ever felt pride in someone else’s performance or achievement? What was your relationship to them?
- Kudo-sensei tells Charlie where the koyo is best, this week. Can you think of a time when someone pointed you toward something beautiful at the right moment?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Walk and the Koyo

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- They are walking home. The koyo is on the mountains.
- Charlie says: “You knew it would look like this.”
- Play the full exchange: the yeses, the December question, “that’s the thing.”
- Then: the river below, reflecting the trees, the mountains continuing.
- After: each player says what their character was thinking beyond what they said.

6.2 The School Festival

Work in groups of five or six. One student is Charlie; others are Kenji, Hiroshi, Saki, Kenji’s mother, and Ishida-san.

The Situation

- The festival is over. People are milling around, talking to teachers.
- Kenji’s mother finds Charlie. They communicate in Japanese, English, and gesture.
- She says something about Kenji that communicates he talks about Charlie fondly.
- Charlie receives this. What does she say? What does her face do?
- Ishida-san sees her from across the gymnasium. The nod. Charlie returns it.
- Play both encounters. Then: Charlie helps collect chairs without being asked.

6.3 The Staffroom After the Call

Work in groups of three. One student is Charlie; one is Oda-sensei; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- Charlie has just returned from the corridor. She sits down.
- Oda-sensei notices. “Good news? You were called?”
- Charlie tells them: Osaka. The Namba area. Very well regarded.
- “So lucky.” Flat.
- Oda-sensei is enthusiastic. Her colleague agrees that Osaka is exciting.
- Kudo-sensei says nothing. Play the silence.
- Then: “The koyo will be at its best this week.”
- Play it. Every beat counts.

6.4 Mingling Activity: Knowing and Stopping

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Has good news ever felt flat to you? What had changed?		
Is there a seasonal event in your culture that people celebrate outdoors?		
Have you ever felt unexpectedly proud of someone else?		
What is something beautiful that happens every year that you look forward to?		
When did you last stop during a journey to look at something?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: Something Beautiful and Difficult

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) describing a moment when something beautiful and something difficult happened at the same time or in the same place. Try to hold both without letting either cancel the other out.

Useful language: The mountains were still there, still doing... • She noted this. And also noted... • The koyo continued... with complete indifference to... • Both things were true at the same time • The world continued at its usual...

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei Hears “So Lucky”

Write Kudo-sensei’s interior monologue (100–130 words) in the moment she hears Charlie say “so lucky” with the flat note in it. She is reading her book. What does she hear? What does she think? What does she decide to do, and what does she decide not to do?

Remember: Kudo-sensei chooses what to say with great care. She also chooses what not to say with great care.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Stopping Pattern

Charlie has been stopping during walks since February. Write 150–180 words tracing this pattern across the novel — what she stopped for, what each stop represented, and what the change in how she stops (from self-consciousness to ease) tells us about her journey. You might consider:

- What did she stop for in February? In May? In August? In October?
- What has changed about the act of stopping between the beginning and the end of the novel?
- Is stopping a form of paying attention? Is paying attention a form of belonging?

7.4 Short Writing: The Last Line

The chapter ends: “She would look at them a great deal, she thought, between now and December.” Write 60–80 words exploring what this sentence means. What is Charlie planning? What is she not yet saying? What does “between now and December” imply?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 14.

Koyo: Autumn Colours in Japan

Koyo (紅葉, also written 紅葉) refers to the seasonal colour change of deciduous trees in autumn — maples, ginkgos, cherry trees, and others turning red, orange, gold, and yellow before losing their leaves. Japan's koyo season typically runs from October to November, moving from north to south as temperatures drop. In mountainous areas like Yamagata, the colour change begins on the high peaks in late September and descends to the valley floors through October. Koyo viewing is celebrated in Japan in much the same way as the spring sakura: forecasts are issued, famous viewing spots are crowded, and people make deliberate trips to see the best displays. The same appreciation for seasonal transience — *mono no aware* — applies to both. Charlie's description of the mountains catching fire is not hyperbole; autumn in Yamagata's mountains can look exactly like this.

The School Festival (Bunkasai)

The bunkasai (文化祭, school culture festival) is one of the major events of the Japanese school calendar, typically held in October or November. Students and teachers prepare for weeks: performances, exhibitions, food stalls, and art displays are all part of the event, which is open to families and community members. Smaller schools like Oguni's may have simpler versions — performances, speeches, food from parent volunteers — but the format is recognisable across Japanese schools. The bunkasai is one of the clearest expressions of the Japanese school as a community institution: it is not only for the students but for the town.

Osaka: City of Contrast

Osaka is Japan's third-largest city and the economic and cultural heart of the Kansai region, with a population of about 2.7 million in the city proper. It is known for its food culture (the phrase “*kuidaore*” — “eat until you drop” — is associated with Osaka), its direct and warm local character (Osakans are known for being more openly talkative than, say, Tokyoites), its entertainment districts, and its general urban vitality. The Namba area is Osaka's main entertainment and shopping district, one of the most densely urban spaces in Japan. The contrast with Oguni could not be more complete. That the administrator presents this as obviously good news reflects a standard assumption about what people want; that Charlie receives it without enthusiasm reflects something about what she has become.

The JET Programme Placement System

JET Programme participants in their second year or beyond can express placement preferences, including requests for specific regions or types of placement (urban vs rural). However, as with the initial placement, decisions are made by the programme administration rather than the participant. The Osaka offer — a well-regarded secondary school in a vibrant urban district — is exactly what Charlie had been requesting for most of her first year. The fact that it now arrives, in October, when she has been watching the koyo and the rice harvest and has a friendship with Kudo-sensei and a rhythm with Ishida-san and a nickname from the children, is the novel's most carefully timed structural moment.

The Noticeboard as Community Memory

When Charlie stands in the corridor after the Osaka call and looks at the noticeboard, the author notes that it has “layers of notices” and a small decorative thing that has been there so long it is simply part of the wall. This is a precise observation about the noticeboard as an object: in any institution that has been operating for a long time, the noticeboard accumulates. Old notices are not always removed; decorations stay long past the occasion that prompted them. The noticeboard in Oguni school's corridor is, in miniature, what the wisteria is in the garden: something that has been there for a very long time and has become, simply, part of the place. That Charlie stands and looks at it after the call is not accidental.

Chapter 15: Burioni-san

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 15 is the warmest chapter in the novel and also the most structurally complete: Bryony arrives and Oguni receives her, and in receiving her it shows Charlie, through Bryony’s eyes, what she has become. “Burioni-san” is among the chapter’s great comic gifts, but the chapter’s deepest movement is in the platform goodbye, where Bryony asks the Osaka question and Charlie gives the most honest answer she has: “I don’t know.” The final paragraph completes the novel’s arc: she knows what the year holds, and she does not yet know what her part in it will be. Exercises focus on what Bryony’s visit reveals about Charlie, the platform conversation, and the chapter as a structural mirror to Chapter 3.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- When someone who knows you from before visits the place where you live now, what do you hope they will understand about your life there?
- Have you ever had a visitor from another country or culture who saw your ordinary life as something unusual? What did they notice?
- What is the best way to say goodbye to someone you won’t see for a while? What makes a good farewell?
- Have you ever not been able to answer a question honestly because you genuinely didn’t know the answer?

1.2 The Title: Burioni-san

Before you read: The chapter is named after a mishearing or mispronunciation. Think about what this might involve: the Japanese phonological system and English names, and who “Burioni-san” might be. As you read, notice how the chapter uses humour and how that humour works alongside more serious moments.

1.3 Bryony and the Novel

Bryony has been present in almost every chapter of the novel, but always at a distance — through calls, messages, and Charlie’s thoughts. Now she arrives in person.

Before you read, discuss:

- What do we know about Bryony from the previous chapters? What kind of person is she?
- What do you think Bryony will make of Oguni, based on what you know about her character?
- What do you think Bryony will notice about Charlie that Charlie might not notice about herself?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 15. The list is in alphabetical order.

to assess (with a practical eye)	to look at something carefully and evaluate it based on experience; to judge its usefulness or quality
Burioni-san	the name Oda-sensei gives Bryony; a phonological transformation of “Bryony” after giving up on “Struthers” via Japanese sound patterns, with ‘-san’ as the polite honorific
calibrated (expectations)	adjusted to a specific level; here, Bryony’s expectations of the Shinkansen had been set low and were then exceeded
a carriage	one section of a train; the Yonesaka Line consists of a single carriage
to commit to something	to decide fully to do something, even if you are uncertain; to give yourself over to it
considered (a considered distance)	thoughtful; deliberate; not by accident or carelessness
enunciation	clear pronunciation; careful articulation of sounds and words
infrastructure (for conversation)	a developed system; here, the established patterns and habits of a long friendship
intelligence network	the system by which someone gathers information; used humorously here to describe Ishida-san’s apparently independent knowledge of events
jet-lagged	suffering from the physical and mental effects of travelling across many time zones
to link arms	to put your arm through someone else’s arm and walk beside them
mandatory	required; compulsory; not optional
phonological outcome	the result of applying the rules of one language’s sound system to a word from another language
the platform after someone has left it	a precise observation about the particular quality of emptiness that remains on a platform after a train has gone
practiced ease	the smooth, natural manner of someone who has done something many times and no longer needs to think about it
a proper concourse	a large, functional railway station concourse; here contrasted with the Yonesaka Line’s single-carriage local train
a register (visiting a register)	a way of operating or being; a level or mode of existence; here, city life is a register Charlie is visiting rather than living in
reluctant admission	something you acknowledge or admit, but not enthusiastically; saying it was beautiful despite not wanting to
the Struthers question	the “Osaka question” Bryony asks at the platform; the question Charlie has been avoiding
to steer (toward a bar)	to guide someone in a direction; to lead with intention
translated charitably	interpreted more positively than the literal meaning; giving a kinder version of what was said
Yamagata-ben	the local dialect of Yamagata Prefecture; distinct from standard Japanese in vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation; Ishida-san speaks it

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. She said “it’s good you came,” which was _____ accurate but entirely the right thing to say.
2. Charlie changed with the _____ of someone for whom this was simply a Thursday.
3. Bryony committed to the onsen without showing it — she had decided and was not going to _____ in her decision.
4. She was aware, underneath the good time, of the valley and the quiet — awareness of a different _____.
5. The onsen was _____, Charlie said. In November. And that was that.
6. She stood on the platform and felt the _____ quality of it after the train had gone.
7. Bryony had _____ the Shinkansen from research on the plane and was now discovering that it exceeded them.

2.2 Japanese Phonology: Why “Struthers” Becomes “Burioni”

The transformation of “Struthers” into “Burioni-san” happens because Japanese has a different sound system from English. Answer the questions.

1. Why do you think the author chose this as the chapter title? What does “Burioni-san” tell us about the experience of being in a foreign country?
2. Think of a name from your own language that might be difficult for Japanese speakers to pronounce. What might it become?

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | Bryony arrives at Sendai on a Thursday afternoon. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | Bryony says Charlie looks exactly the same as before. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Bryony is ready to go out twenty minutes after arriving at the hotel. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Charlie finds the city more tiring than she remembered. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | The Yonesaka Line has three carriages. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Bryony says the landscape is actually quite beautiful. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | At the school, Mori-sensei says Bryony's name correctly. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Kenji tells Bryony he is going to become an English teacher. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Ishida-san says something about Charlie that Charlie doesn't fully understand. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Bryony goes to the onsen under protest but eventually finds it acceptable. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Bryony says Charlie is "doing good here." | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie tells Bryony at the platform that she is going to stay in Oguni instead of going to Osaka. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- What does Bryony notice about Charlie at the station? What does she say, and how does she say it?
- How does Bryony respond to the Yonesaka Line? What does Charlie observe about the journey through the mountains?
- Describe three moments at the school that show how the community relates to Charlie.
- What does Ishida-san say to Charlie about Bryony? What does she say about Charlie at the end? What does Charlie tell Bryony, and why?
- What is the exchange on the platform? What does Bryony ask, and what does Charlie answer?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie is having a genuinely good time in Sendai but is aware of the Yonesaka Line and the valley underneath the good time. What does this awareness tell us about where she actually lives now?
- Ishida-san says something about Charlie — a fact she has established some time ago. Charlie catches perhaps fifty percent. Bryony asks what it was. Charlie says she doesn't entirely know. What do you think Ishida-san said?
- Charlie's final paragraph: "She knew the mountains would be there. She knew the wisteria would come in May... She did not know yet what her part in any of it would be." What is the author saying about the difference between knowing a place and knowing what you will do?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Mirror of the Visitor

When someone from your past visits the life you have built elsewhere, they function as a mirror — showing you things about yourself that you can no longer see because you are too close to them. Look at what Bryony observes:

“You look different.” / “Different how.” / “I’ll tell you when I’ve slept.”

“You are different. I’m not complaining. Just. You are.”

“Less —” she started. “More —” She stopped. “I’ll tell you when I’ve figured it out.”

Answer these questions:

1. Bryony can see that Charlie is different but cannot yet name how. Based on everything you have read, how would you complete her sentences? “Less...” / “More...”
2. What does it tell us about Bryony that she notices the change but waits to articulate it?
3. “You’re doing good here.” This is Bryony’s complete assessment, delivered at the end of the visit. What does it cover, in four words? What does it not say?

4.2 Experiencing vs Explaining

When Bryony says Charlie could have told her about the onsen, Charlie responds:

“You have to experience it. Telling doesn’t work.”

This is one of the novel’s most precise observations about the limits of language. Compare it to earlier moments in the novel:

- Chapter 8: “Photographs were a different thing from the thing.”
- Chapter 10: The difference between reading a map and knowing a route.
- Chapter 11: “She had not known she had missed it” — until she saw the sea.

Answer these questions:

1. What do all four of these moments have in common? What is the author saying about the relationship between language and experience?
2. Is “telling doesn’t work” always true? Are there things that can be told effectively? What is the difference?

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) about something you tried to explain to someone that could only really be understood by experiencing it. What happened when you tried to explain?

4.3 The Platform Conversation

The platform scene is the last major dialogue in the novel between Charlie and Bryony. Look at it carefully:

"Last question. And you don't have to answer." / "Go on."
"Osaka. Are you going to be alright with it?"
"I'll be fine. It's a city. I know how cities work." / "That's not what I asked."
"I know what you asked. I don't know."

Answer these questions:

1. What is the difference between "will you be alright with it" and "will you be fine"? Why does Bryony correct Charlie's answer?
2. "I don't know." This is the most honest thing Charlie has said about Osaka. What does it mean? What is she not certain about?
3. Bryony's goodbye is described as "complete and brief and left nothing unsaid that needed to be said." What had needed to be said? Had it been said?

4.4 The Final Paragraph: Knowing and Not Knowing

The chapter's final paragraph is one of the novel's most important:

"She knew the mountains would be there. She knew the wisteria would come in May. She knew the onsen would be a Thursday and the imoni party would be in September and the koinobori would go up in May with however many there were, each one for a child, regardless. She did not know yet what her part in any of it would be."

This paragraph lists everything Charlie knows with certainty, and then names the one thing she does not know. Answer these questions:

1. Why does she say "with however many there were" about the koinobori? What does this phrase carry?
2. What is the distinction between knowing the place and knowing "what her part in it would be"? Has the novel answered this question?
3. The word "regardless" appears at the end of the list. What does it mean here? Regardless of what?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Bryony says Charlie is “different” twice but cannot specify how. What would you say she is? What has actually changed?
- The city in Sendai is tiring in a way it was not before. Charlie is “visiting a register” rather than inhabiting one. What does this shift tell us about where her centre of gravity now is?
- Charlie translates Ishida-san’s comment as “she says it’s good you came.” Ishida-san is aware of being translated charitably and does not object. What does this moment tell us about both women?
- Bryony’s visit brings the onsen scene full circle. In Chapter 7, Charlie did not want to go. Now she goes with authority. What has changed, and how does Bryony’s experience mirror Charlie’s?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The chapter is a structural mirror to Chapter 3: someone arrives, is taken somewhere new, experiences a place for the first time. What is the same, and what is reversed?
- Ishida-san’s final statement about Charlie is something “she has established some time ago.” What might she have established? When?
- “You’re doing good here.” This is the human summary of what the novel has shown. Does “doing good” mean the same as “being happy”? What is the difference?
- Charlie does not know what her part in Oguni’s future will be. Is this a loss, or an open question? Does not knowing feel different at the end of this chapter than it would have in Chapter 1?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Has anyone ever visited you in a place you had built a new life and seen something about you that you hadn’t noticed?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you wanted to give an honest answer but the only honest answer was “I don’t know”?
- Charlie says “telling doesn’t work” about the onsen. Is there something in your own life that you have found impossible to explain to someone who hasn’t experienced it?
- Think about the people Charlie has connected with in Oguni across the novel. If you had to choose one relationship that surprised you most in how it developed, which would it be?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 Sendai: The Bar

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Bryony.

The Situation

- They are in the bar in Sendai on Thursday night. The drinks are good.
- Bryony talks: Glasgow, Carl, the man she has been seeing for six weeks.
- Charlie talks: the onsen, the harvest, the koyo.
- Bryony says: “You are different.”
- Play the conversation. Include the moment Charlie is aware, underneath the good time, of the valley.
- After: each player says what they were thinking but not saying.

6.2 The School Visit

Work in groups of five or six. Charlie, Bryony, Mori-sensei, Oda-sensei, Kenji.

The Situation

- Mori-sensei bows and says “Struthers-san” with careful enunciation.
- Oda-sensei says “Burioni-san” confidently.
- Bryony looks at Charlie. Charlie looks at the middle distance.
- Play the scene. Then: Kenji arrives and conducts his English assessment of Bryony.
- Include Kenji’s vocabulary. Include Bryony’s reaction.
- After: what does Bryony make of Kenji?

6.3 The Platform

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Bryony.

The Situation

- The Yonesaka Line platform. November. They are waiting for the train.
- Bryony says: “Last question. And you don’t have to answer.”
- Play the exchange: the Osaka question, the two answers Charlie gives, the one honest one.
- The train arrives. The hug. The doors close.
- Play the silence after the train has gone.
- Charlie stands on the platform. What does she do next?

6.4 Mingling Activity: What Others See

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
Has anyone ever said you look different and been right?		
Is there something in your life that you can't explain, only show?		
Have you had to answer a question honestly with "I don't know"?		
What would a visitor from your past notice about your life now?		
What things in your life happen "regardless" — with or without you?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Visitor's Eye

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) from the perspective of someone visiting a place that is completely normal to you but unusual to them. Try to capture what the visitor notices that you have stopped noticing.

Useful language: [Place] received [person] in its usual manner... • “It’s actually quite beautiful,” she said, in the tone of someone making a reluctant admission • She assessed it with the practical eye of someone who... • acknowledged... not nothing

7.2 Creative Writing: Bryony's Answer

Bryony says she'll tell Charlie what's different about her when she's figured it out. Write Bryony's interior monologue (100–130 words) from the train back to Sendai — what she is figuring out. “Less...” / “More...” What is Charlie less of? What is she more of?

Remember: Bryony is direct, affectionate, and sees Charlie clearly.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Last Paragraph

Write 150–180 words analysing the final paragraph of Chapter 15 (and of the novel as we have read it so far). Consider:

- What does “she knew...” followed by “she did not know yet...” tell us about the difference between belonging to a place and knowing your future in it?
- What is the significance of the word “regardless” — the koinobori will go up regardless?
- Is this a hopeful ending? A sad one? An honest one?

7.4 Short Writing: Ishida-san's Sentence

Ishida-san says a final sentence about Charlie that Charlie catches about fifty percent of. Write what you think Ishida-san said, in full (30–50 words), and then write Charlie's full honest translation to Bryony (20–30 words, including the parts she didn't catch).

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 15.

Japanese Honorifics: –san

The suffix “-san” (さん) is the standard polite honorific in Japanese, attached to a person’s family name (or given name in informal contexts). It is used regardless of gender and is the equivalent of “Mr/Ms/Mrs” in English, though it is used more broadly — in professional settings, between colleagues, and between people who are not close friends. “Burioni-san” is therefore not a mistake in form — Oda-sensei is using the correct honorific with what she believes to be the correct name. The joke rests entirely on the phonological transformation of “Struthers.” For learners of Japanese, understanding the –san system is essential; it is also one of the first things visitors to Japan notice and one of the last things they fully understand.

Japanese Phonology and Foreign Names

Japanese has a syllable structure that differs significantly from English: most syllables end in a vowel, consonant clusters are rare, and several English consonants (like “th,” the “v” sound, and “l”) do not exist in the standard Japanese sound system. When Japanese speakers encounter foreign names, they adapt them to Japanese phonological rules — a process called “gairaigo” (borrowed word) adaptation. This produces forms like “Macudonarudo” (McDonald’s), “Kofii” (coffee), and, in this case, “Burioni” (Struthers). The adaptation is systematic and consistent — it is not random mispronunciation but the application of one language’s rules to another’s sounds. For language learners, this is a genuinely interesting window into how phonological systems work.

The Yonesaka Line

The Yonesaka Line (米坂線) is a real rural railway line in Yamagata Prefecture, running between Yonezawa and Akayu through the Okitama region. It is operated by JR East and serves a series of small towns and villages in the mountain valley. The line uses small, often single-carriage trains, and the journey is slow and scenic. For someone accustomed to the Shinkansen (which connects Yamagata city to Tokyo in about two and a half hours), the Yonesaka Line is a different kind of experience entirely. Bryony’s reaction — “it sounds like a bus” — is a recognisable response from someone encountering it for the first time. Charlie’s settled familiarity with it, and the specific feeling of “settling” that the train’s entry into the valley produces, is one of the novel’s most precise registrations of how a place becomes home.

Yamagata-ben: The Local Dialect

Yamagata-ben (山形弁) is the regional dialect of Yamagata Prefecture. Like many Japanese regional dialects (hougen), it differs from standard Japanese (hyojungo) in vocabulary, intonation, and some grammatical forms. In Tohoku particularly, the regional dialects can be quite distinct, and even Japanese speakers from other parts of the country sometimes find them difficult to understand. Ishida-san speaks Yamagata-ben, which adds another layer to Charlie’s language challenge — she is not just learning Japanese but is hearing a specific regional variety of it. That Charlie understands approximately fifty to eighty percent of what Ishida-san says in this chapter — up from essentially nothing in December — is itself a measure of how much she has learned.

The Onsen Revisited

Bryony’s experience of the onsen in Chapter 15 mirrors Charlie’s in Chapter 7, deliberately. Like Charlie in March, Bryony goes under protest, changes with the manner of someone committed despite uncertainty, and enters the water to find that the water simply defeats all objections in about forty seconds. The parallel is structural: we see, through Bryony’s first experience, what Charlie’s must have been like. And we see, in Charlie’s ease and authority at the onsen, how far she has come. “I know that,” Charlie says, “with the authority of someone who had been going to the onsen on Thursdays for eight months.” This is knowledge acquired through presence, not through telling.

Chapter 16: The Tsutsuji

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 16 is the penultimate chapter and the departure chapter. It is structured around gifts and goodbyes: Ishida-san’s azalea (a plant for someone staying), the yukata Kudo-sensei tells Charlie to keep, the ceremony in the gymnasium, the walk to the station. The chapter’s emotional architecture is precise: earned grief arrives when expected, as earned grief does; the departure is not dramatised; the final image is Charlie on the train, watching. The last paragraph — Oguni continuing without her — is the novel’s fullest statement of what belonging means: the place goes on. Exercises focus on the plant as symbol, the farewell speech in Japanese, the goodbye walk, and the closing image.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever had to say goodbye to a place you had come to love? What was the hardest part?
- What makes a gift meaningful? Is it the object itself, or what it represents?
- Have you ever been given something that said, without words, “I think you’re going to be here for a while”? What was it?
- When you leave a place, what do you take with you? What do you leave behind?

1.2 The Title: The Tsutsuji

Before you read: Tsutsuji (鶯) is the Japanese word for azalea. It is a flowering plant that blooms in spring. Think about what a flowering plant given in January might mean in this novel, which has been so concerned with what things are in winter and what they become in spring. As you read, notice every layer of meaning the plant carries.

1.3 Returning to December

The chapter opens:

“December arrived and Charlie understood it differently.”

This is the same December that opened the novel. Discuss:

- What is different about how Charlie understands December now? What does she know that she didn’t know last December?
- The chapter says she understands December as “the month the wisteria was already, invisibly, preparing.” What does this understanding represent about what she has learned?
- What does it feel like to return to the beginning of something when you know how it ends?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 16. The list is in alphabetical order.

adequate (two Decembers)	sufficient; good enough for the purpose; the coat that Bryony told Charlie to buy has been adequate for two winters now
accumulated knowledge	information built up gradually over time, without particular effort, through repeated exposure and experience
approximate (she agreed approximately)	close to; roughly; not precisely, but close enough to be practically true
azalea (tsutsuji, 鶯)	a flowering shrub that blooms in spring; the plant Ishida-san gives Charlie in January
bare and patient	without leaves or flowers, but alive; waiting for spring without impatience; a quality shared by the azalea, the wisteria, and the sakura trees in winter
a declaration	a formal or clear statement; here, the plant is the visible expression of a decision Ishida-san made long ago
earned grief	sorrow that is appropriate to a real loss; the opposite of self-pity; grief that has been deserved by genuine attachment
functional (Japanese)	good enough to perform the basic tasks required; working Japanese, not perfect Japanese
a frame, waiting	the grey wooden structure in the school garden; described as a frame that is waiting for what it will hold again in spring
Golden Week	the cluster of national holidays at the end of April and beginning of May; Kudo-sensei suggests Charlie return for it, when the wisteria will be flowering
hatsumode (初証で)	the first visit to a shrine or temple in the new year; one of the most widely observed Japanese new year traditions
the inadequacy (letting it stand)	the insufficiency of language; here, Charlie cannot find words adequate to thank Kudo-sensei and so accepts that no words will be
inventory (the quick inventory)	a rapid assessment of the contents or state of something; Ishida-san performs this on every visit
liveness (the specific liveness)	the quality of being alive; here, the ability to perceive that the plant is not dead but waiting
a moderate size (ceramic pot)	medium-sized; not too large, not too small
to orient inward (the town)	to turn attention toward family, home, and internal community; away from the outside world
penultimate	second to last; the day before the last day
a plant is for staying	Charlie's understanding of what the gift means: a plant requires ongoing care, so it is given to someone who will remain
sayonara (さよなら)	goodbye in Japanese; a formal farewell, often used when the parting will be for a significant period
tsutsuji (鶯)	azalea; a spring-flowering shrub common in Japan; the plant Ishida-san brings
the wisteria was already... preparing	the metaphorical understanding that the wisteria in January is not simply bare but in the process of becoming

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. She looked at the plant and understood its meaning: a plant is for _____. It was a _____.
2. She tried to thank her properly and found there were no words _____. She let the _____ stand.
3. The goodbye in the gymnasium was not dramatic but _____: real in the way of things done by people who mean them.
4. She knew the town would _____ during Oshogatsu. This time she knew what that looked like from the inside.
5. She walked the routes she knew on the _____ day, which was not the last day but the day before.
6. In the pot was a small tsutsuji — _____, bare in January, but alive with the _____ of something waiting for spring.
7. She said goodbye in Japanese that was _____, genuine and hers.

2.2 The Objects of Departure

Chapter 16 contains several significant objects. For each one, write what it is and what it represents in the novel.

Object	What it is	What it represents
The tsutsuji	_____	_____
The yukata	_____	_____
The book	_____	_____
The signed card	_____	_____
The coat	_____	_____

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|--|------------|
| 1. | Charlie marks the exact anniversary of her arrival in some way. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | This year Charlie can hear the temple bell from her apartment on New Year's Eve. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Charlie goes to the shrine for hatsumode on New Year's Day by herself. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | Ishida-san brings Charlie a tsutsuji on the third of January. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Ishida-san tells Charlie to put the plant in the south-facing corner of the balcony. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | The JET confirmation letter has arrived by the time Ishida-san leaves. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie asks Kudo-sensei to keep the yukata. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | Kudo-sensei says "Keep it. I have no one else to pass it on to." | T / F / NM |
| 9. | The children's farewell in the gymnasium is Charlie's idea. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | The children say "Sayonara, Spicer-sensei." | T / F / NM |
| 11. | Charlie takes the tsutsuji with her on the train. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Kudo-sensei tells Charlie to come back for Golden Week. | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How has Charlie's understanding of December changed? What does she understand now that she did not understand last year?
- Describe the tsutsuji scene: what Ishida-san brings, what she says, and what Charlie understands beyond the words.
- What is the significance of the Osaka letter arriving on the same day as the tsutsuji? How does Charlie respond?
- What happens in the exchange about the yukata? What does Kudo-sensei say, and why does Charlie accept?
- Describe the farewell in the gymnasium. What does Charlie say, and how does it end?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Ishida-san gives Charlie a plant. Charlie understands: "a plant was for staying." But Charlie is leaving. How do these two facts coexist? What is Ishida-san actually saying?
- Charlie says "Thank you. For —" and cannot finish the sentence. She "let the inadequacy stand." Is this failure or wisdom? What does it communicate that words could not?
- The final paragraph of the chapter describes Oguni continuing without Charlie: the ume, the sakura, the wisteria, the summer. Why does the novel end with this image? What is it saying about the relationship between a person and a place?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 Understanding December Differently

The chapter opens with one of the novel's most precise grammatical constructions:

“She had understood December once as the month she had landed... She still understood it as those things. But she understood it now also as the month before January, which was before the ume, which was before the sakura and the wisteria... The month the wisteria was already, invisibly, preparing.”

Notice the structure: “she had understood... she still understood... but she understood now also.” The new understanding does not replace the old one; it adds to it. The old understanding remains true (December was dark and lonely) and the new understanding is layered on top (December is also the month before everything).

Answer these questions:

1. What does it mean to understand something “also” as something new, while still understanding it as the old thing? How does this apply to Charlie’s relationship to Oguni as a whole?
2. Write the same construction for a place or season in your own life: “I had understood [place/month] once as... I still understand it as those things. But I understand it now also as...”

4.2 A Plant Is for Staying

When Ishida-san gives Charlie the azalea, Charlie’s understanding arrives in a single, direct sentence:

“A plant was for staying. A plant was for someone who was going to be here to water it, here to watch it come into flower, here to know it. You did not give a plant to someone passing through.”

This is the clearest statement in the novel of what Ishida-san has decided about Charlie. It is also, immediately, complicated by the fact that Charlie is leaving.

Discuss:

- If Charlie is leaving, why does Ishida-san give her a plant? What does Ishida-san understand that she is not saying in words?
- Charlie decides to take the plant to Osaka: “The plant was hers. It was going with her.” What does this decision mean?
- Is the azalea a statement about staying in Oguni, or about staying somewhere? What is Ishida-san’s gift ultimately about?

Write a short paragraph (60–80 words) about a gift you received (or gave) that meant something beyond the object itself. What did the object communicate that words did not?

4.3 The Farewell Speech

Charlie's speech in the gymnasium is the only extended piece of Japanese communication in the novel that we hear reported. Look at what she says:

“she stood at the front and said, in Japanese that was functional, genuine and hers, that she was grateful. That this year had been something she had not expected. That she would not forget them, or Oguni, or the school with its four-hundred-year-old wisteria that she had mistaken for a maintenance issue.”

Answer these questions:

1. The author describes the Japanese as “functional, genuine and hers.” What is the significance of each of these three adjectives?
2. Why does Charlie mention the wisteria specifically in her farewell? What has it come to mean in the novel?
3. The children laugh when she says she mistook the wisteria for a maintenance issue. What does this laughter tell us about the relationship Charlie has with the children?

4.4 The Walk and the Window

The chapter ends with two journeys: the walk to the station and the train through the valley. Both describe the same landscape from different perspectives. Look at the final paragraph:

“Outside, Oguni continued. It would continue. The ume would come in February and the sakura in April and the wisteria in May, and somewhere in May Kenji would look at something and say a word he had found for it, and the koinobori would go up above the town with however many there were, and the rice fields would flood and plant and grow and the summer would be hot and the autumn would catch fire and the temple bell would ring at midnight in December and the world would be what it was, going about its business, available to whoever was paying attention.”

This is the novel's fullest statement of its central theme. Answer these questions:

1. The paragraph describes the entire year Charlie lived in Oguni, in one sentence. What effect does this compression create?
2. “Available to whoever was paying attention.” This is the novel's closing idea. What does it mean? What has paying attention given Charlie?
3. What does Charlie's final act — sitting on the train, watching — tell us about what she has learned?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie does not mark the anniversary of her arrival. She teaches her lessons, walks home, eats lunch. What does this restraint tell us about how she relates to her own year?
- Ishida-san gives Charlie a plant that is for staying, knowing she is leaving. How do you interpret this? What does Ishida-san believe about the relationship between Charlie and Oguni?
- Charlie says “Thank you. For —” and cannot finish. She lets the inadequacy stand. Is this a failure of language, or is it the right response? What would completing the sentence have done?
- The children say “Sayonara, Suppai-sensei.” Charlie knew it was coming. It was still its own particular grief. Why does expected grief still arrive with full force?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- Charlie understands December differently. The new understanding does not replace the old one — it adds to it. Is this the novel’s model for how we grow? We do not leave behind what we were; we carry it.
- The tsutsuji is for staying. Charlie takes it to Osaka. What does this tell us about what belonging means — that it is not tied to place but to practice?
- “The world would be what it was, going about its business, available to whoever was paying attention.” The novel has been about learning to pay attention. Has Charlie learned? What has she learned to pay attention to?
- Kudo-sensei says “Come back for Golden Week. The wisteria will be good this year.” This is an invitation and a promise. What does it say about the possibility of return?

5.3 Personal Response

Connect the chapter to your own experience.

- Have you ever said goodbye to a place that had become home? What did you take with you?
- Have you ever been given a gift that meant something beyond the object itself? What was it?
- Is there a place that goes on without you — that continues its seasons and its rhythms whether you are there or not? How does this make you feel?
- Charlie’s Japanese is “functional, genuine and hers.” What would it mean to say a language is “yours”? At what point does a language become yours?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Tsutsuji

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Ishida-san.

The Situation

- Ishida-san arrives at Charlie's apartment on the third of January.
- She carries the ceramic pot with the azalea.
- She sets it on the table. She says what she says about the balcony and the spring.
- Charlie understands most of it. She also understands the thing beyond the words.
- "Arigatou gozaimasu," Charlie says, differently.
- Ishida-san makes her sound. Play the scene.

6.2 The Yukata

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- Charlie has brought the yukata to Kudo-sensei's house.
- She puts it on the table. "It's yours. It was your mother's."
- Kudo-sensei looks at it for a moment. She does not touch it.
- "Keep it. I have no one else to pass it on to."
- Charlie looks at the yukata. She picks it up.
- Play the silence. Then: the tea, the book, the conversation about Osaka.
- End with: "Get some sleep before the journey." / "I will."

6.3 The Gymnasium

Work in groups. One student is Charlie; others are children and Mori-sensei.

The Situation

- The gymnasium. All fifty children. Mori-sensei has arranged the ceremony.
- There are speeches. A card is presented.
- Charlie stands at the front and says, in Japanese, what she says.
- Include the wisteria line. The children laugh.
- Mori-sensei says the formal closing.
- The children say, together: "Sayonara, Suppai-sensei."
- Play the silence after.

6.4 Mingling Activity: What Places Leave Behind

Walk around the class. Ask three different classmates these questions and note their answers.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What is a place that goes on without you?		
What have you taken with you from a place you left?		
Has a goodbye ever arrived exactly when expected and still hurt?		
What would you say in a farewell speech to a place?		
What does it mean for a language to be “yours”?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: Understanding Something Differently

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) using the structure “I had understood [x] once as... I still understand it as those things. But I understand it now also as...” Apply it to a place, a season, a person, or an experience in your own life.

Useful structure: I had understood [x] once as... / I still understood it as those things. / But I understood it now also as... / The [x] that was already, invisibly, preparing...

7.2 Creative Writing: What Oguni Knows

The final paragraph describes Oguni continuing after Charlie leaves: the ume, the sakura, the wisteria, Kenji finding a word for something, the rice fields, the summer, the koyo, the temple bell. Write an expanded version of this passage (100–130 words) from Oguni’s perspective — as if the town itself is the narrator, aware of its own continuity.

The town does not mourn. It continues. It is available to whoever is paying attention.

7.3 Extended Writing: The Tsutsuji

Write 150–180 words exploring the significance of the tsutsuji in Chapter 16. You might consider:

- What does the azalea mean as a gift? Why this plant, in January, from Ishida-san?
- What does Charlie’s decision to take it to Osaka tell us about how she understands belonging?
- The plant is “bare and patient, doing what bare patient things do in January, which was wait.” How does this description connect to other things in the novel that wait in winter?

7.4 Short Writing: The Farewell Speech

Write Charlie’s farewell speech in full (60–80 words), as if translated from the Japanese she actually said. Include: her gratitude; that this year was something she had not expected; that she will not forget the children, Oguni, or the wisteria she mistook for a maintenance issue.

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 16.

Hatsumode: The First Shrine Visit

Hatsumode (初詣で) is the first visit to a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple in the new year, typically made in the first three days of January. It is one of the most widely observed Japanese traditions: millions of people visit shrines and temples across the country, with famous ones drawing enormous crowds. The ritual involves washing hands at a purification fountain, approaching the shrine, throwing a coin as an offering, bowing twice, clapping twice, bowing once more, and making a silent prayer or wish. Charlie performs this correctly in the chapter — she has learned, from a year of watching people do things correctly, what correctly looks like. Her choice to go this year, and to ask rather than to be asked, is the chapter's quiet marker of change.

Azaleas (Tsutsuji) in Japan

Tsutsuji (躑躅) are azaleas, one of Japan's most widely cultivated flowering shrubs. They bloom in April and May in a range of colours — pink, red, white, orange, purple — and are a common feature of gardens, parks, and temple grounds. Japan has its own azalea-viewing tradition, less celebrated nationally than the sakura or koyo but deeply established in local communities and gardens. A tsutsuji given in January is bare and appears dormant, but is alive: it will bloom in spring if given light and water. This is precisely what Ishida-san means by giving it. The plant's invisible liveness in winter mirrors the wisteria, the ume, and the sakura — all the things Charlie has learned to see in winter as the preparations for spring.

Sayonara: Goodbye in Japanese

Sayonara (さよなら) is the Japanese word for goodbye, but with a specific emotional weight. Unlike more informal farewells (ja ne, mata ne, bai bai), sayonara is used for significant or extended partings — when someone is leaving for a long time, or when the goodbye is of real importance. It carries a sense of finality. The children's collective "Sayonara, Suppai-sensei" is not the casual see-you-tomorrow of a normal school day; it is a formal farewell, delivered collectively, and the novel is right to call it "its own particular grief." That the children know to use sayonara rather than a more casual goodbye reflects their understanding of what the occasion is.

The JET Programme: End of Placement

When a JET Programme participant's placement ends, the farewell rituals depend entirely on the school and community. At smaller schools and in rural areas, the departure of an ALT who has become part of the community is often marked with genuine warmth: ceremonies, cards, gifts. The school festival scene in Chapter 14 and the gymnasium farewell in Chapter 16 both reflect the particular relationship that Oguni School has developed with Charlie — a relationship that would not have been possible if she had been in a large urban school with many teachers and many students. The intimacy of a small school in a small town is both the novel's setting and one of its subjects.

Golden Week and the Wisteria

Kudo-sensei's invitation to come back for Golden Week is precisely timed: Golden Week falls at the end of April and beginning of May, which is when the wisteria in the school garden — four hundred years old — will be in bloom. "The wisteria will be good this year," she says. This is both a factual statement and an invitation of a deeper kind: come back when the thing you didn't know was there is most itself, when the frame you mistook for a maintenance issue is doing what it has been doing for four centuries. The wisteria has been a thread running through the novel since Chapter 9; Kudo-sensei ends by pointing toward it again.

The Penultimate Walk

On the day before her departure, Charlie walks the routes she knows. She passes the vending machine, the fence where the ume was, the covered arcade, the shrine path, the river, the sakura trees, the school. This is a farewell walk — a deliberate passage through the geography of the year. In Japanese culture, such walks have a name: "miyage-aruki" or "sakumichi", the habit of walking familiar routes before a departure to fix them in memory. The act of walking the same routes that have appeared throughout the novel one last time is the author's way of giving the reader the same experience: a final passage through the year, before the train.

Chapter 17: Inaka

Teacher Resource Document | B1–B2

Teacher’s Note Chapter 17 is the final chapter, and it earns everything. Osaka is good. The city gives things. But Charlie is looking for Yamagata options in January, before she has even arrived, and by September she is looking seriously. The call comes in November: Ryuko has Mori-sensei’s position; a role will open at the school; and the question — “Do you know anyone who might want to live in the inaka?” — is asked as if the answer were not known. The Gion Matsuri section, with Zara and the woman on the street and the yukata, is the chapter’s warmest passage and its most elegant exchange. The final line is five words. Exercises focus on the ending, the word ‘inaka,’ and what the novel has been building toward.

1 PRE-READING

1.1 Before You Read: Discussion Warm-Up

Talk to a partner or discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers.

- Have you ever known you were going to do something before you admitted it, even to yourself? How did you know?
- What is the difference between a place being good and a place being right for you? Can a place be both good and not right?
- Have you ever gone back to a place after being away? What was it like?
- The novel is called Inaka — the Japanese word for the countryside or rural areas. What do you think this title means now that you have read the whole story?

1.2 The Title of the Chapter and the Novel

Before you read: The last chapter has the same title as the novel: “Inaka.” Think about why the author might have made this choice. What does the word mean? What has it come to mean over the course of the story? The word appears in the final chapter in a specific context — notice where it appears, and who says it.

1.3 Osaka

Chapter 17 begins: “Osaka was a city.”

“It was fine. She was fine in it.”

We have heard these words before. Discuss:

- How has the meaning of “fine” shifted across the novel? What did it mean in Chapter 1? In Chapter 7? In Chapter 12? Here?
- Why does the author open the final chapter with “Osaka was a city” rather than something more expansive? What does this restraint communicate?
- Charlie is good at cities. She has always known how cities work. Why is this not enough?

2 GLOSSARY

These words and phrases appear in Chapter 17. The list is in alphabetical order.

a calibrated interest	a measured, controlled level of interest; not too much, not too little; learned rather than spontaneous
colloquial	informal; the everyday spoken form of a language, rather than the written or formal form
considered (a considered space)	thoughtfully arranged; where things have been placed with intention
continuously interesting	interesting all the time, without stopping; as opposed to interesting in moments
diffuse (warmth)	spread out; not concentrated; warmth that has no single source but comes from everywhere
genuinely enquiring	asking as if she did not know the answer; sincerely asking, not rhetorically
Gion Matsuri (祇園祭)	the most famous of all Japanese festivals, held in Kyoto in July; one of the three great festivals of Japan, dating back over a thousand years
inaka (田舎, 郊下)	the countryside; rural areas; places that are not cities; used in Japan to describe towns and villages away from urban centres, sometimes with connotations of quietness, community, and natural beauty
infrastructure (building the infrastructure for a decision)	the underlying systems and structures that make something possible; here, the practical preparations Charlie makes for a return before she has announced the decision
a main parade (yoiyama)	the main procession of the Gion Matsuri; the yoiyama are the evenings before the parade, when the floats are lit and the streets are open to pedestrians
navigating	dealing with; managing the complexities of; here, managing a new relationship in Glasgow
Nishiki (錦市場)	Nishiki Market, a famous covered shopping street in central Kyoto, known as “Kyoto’s Kitchen”; near Zara’s apartment
old work	craftsmanship from an earlier era; here, the yukata’s fabric and construction are recognisably of a higher and older standard than modern garments
the Osaka dialect (kansaiben)	the regional dialect of the Osaka and Kansai area; faster, more direct, and with different vocabulary and intonation than standard Japanese; famous throughout Japan for its expressiveness
practically (talking about Osaka practically)	in a practical, matter-of-fact way; focusing on details and logistics rather than emotions
reverential	showing deep respect, almost like worship; here, Zara’s relationship to Kyoto is knowledgeable but not reverential
savouring	taking time to fully enjoy something, especially a smell, taste, or experience
a ward	an administrative division of a Japanese city, equivalent to a borough; cities are divided into wards (ku, 区) for administrative purposes
Yamagata options	the practical steps Charlie is taking to return to Yamagata Prefecture; a job, a visa, a place to live
yoiyama (宵山)	the evenings before the main parade of the Gion Matsuri, when the floats are lit and Kyoto’s central streets are closed to cars and filled with people

2.1 Vocabulary in Use

Complete these sentences using words or phrases from the glossary. You may need to change the form.

1. Osaka worked like a city: loud and dense and lit, with the _____ of urban life.
2. She had been building the _____ for the decision since January, quietly, before announcing it.
3. Her Japanese improved _____ in Osaka — faster, more varied, more _____.
4. She asked Bryony what “Yamagata options” meant. There was a pause that had the shape of Bryony not being _____.
5. The woman on the street looked at the yukata more carefully. “This is _____ work,” she said. “Not often seen now.”
6. Ryuko asked the question as if she were _____, as if she did not already know the answer.
7. Charlie breathed in, _____ the smell of yakitori and summer and said: “Yes. She is.”

2.2 The Word “Inaka”

The word “inaka” appears once in the chapter, in a specific moment. Before completing this exercise, re-read that moment carefully.

“Do you know anyone who might want to live in the inaka?”

Answer these questions:

1. Who says this, and to whom? What are the circumstances of the question?
2. What does “inaka” mean? Why does Kudo-sensei use the Japanese word rather than saying “the countryside” or “Oguni”?
3. The question is asked “as if the answer were not already known.” Is the answer known? Why does Kudo-sensei ask it this way?

3 COMPREHENSION

3.1 True, False, or Not Mentioned?

Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) for each statement.

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | Charlie's new school in Osaka has thirty students per class. | T / F / NM |
| 2. | The tsutsuji is put on the west-facing side of the Osaka balcony. | T / F / NM |
| 3. | Charlie tells Bryony she is looking for Yamagata options in March. | T / F / NM |
| 4. | The tsutsuji flowers in April. | T / F / NM |
| 5. | Kudo-sensei tells Charlie the wisteria is already blooming when the tsutsuji flowers. | T / F / NM |
| 6. | Zara has been in Kyoto since the previous December. | T / F / NM |
| 7. | Charlie changes into the yukata at the station in Kyoto. | T / F / NM |
| 8. | A woman on the street compliments Charlie on the yukata. | T / F / NM |
| 9. | Mori-sensei is retiring at the end of the school year. | T / F / NM |
| 10. | Kudo-sensei is taking over as principal from Mori-sensei. | T / F / NM |
| 11. | The call from Kudo-sensei comes on a Thursday evening in November. | T / F / NM |
| 12. | Charlie answers Kudo-sensei's question with: "Yes, I might know someone." | T / F / NM |

3.2 Short Answer Questions

Answer these questions in full sentences.

- How does Charlie settle into Osaka? What does the city give her? What does she take from it?
- What is happening with the tsutsuji? Track it from Osaka in February through to April. What does each stage represent?
- What does Charlie say to Bryony about "Yamagata options"? How does Bryony respond, and what does Charlie say about Bryony's response?
- Describe the Gion Matsuri scene: what happens, who Charlie meets, and what the exchange about the yukata means.
- How does the phone call from Kudo-sensei unfold? What does Kudo-sensei tell Charlie, and how does she ask the final question?

3.3 Reading Between the Lines

These questions ask you to think about what the author implies but does not say directly.

- Charlie takes the tsutsuji to Osaka and puts it in the corner with the most light. "Patient, bare in the February way, waiting for whatever came next." What does this image tell us about what Charlie is also doing in Osaka?
- Zara helps Charlie dress in the yukata "with more care than she had brought to her own, handling the obi and the collar with the attention of someone who understood what they were working with." What does Zara understand, beyond the physical fabric?
- Charlie's final answer is: "Yes, I might know someone." This is the last line of the novel. Why does the author choose this form of words rather than something more direct? What does it give us?

4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

4.1 The Arc of “Fine”

The word “fine” has been Charlie’s most used and most complex word throughout the novel. In Chapter 17 it appears in the opening section:

“It was fine. She was fine in it.”

Go back through the novel and find five key moments where Charlie uses the word “fine” or describes something as “fine.” Write what it meant each time.

Chapter	The “fine” moment	What it actually meant
1–2	_____	_____
4–5	_____	_____
7–8	_____	_____
10–11	_____	_____
17	_____	_____

4.2 A Different Kind of Good

Charlie tells Bryony: “It’s just — a different kind of good.” This is the most honest thing she says about Osaka. Look at the surrounding exchange:

“Good,” Charlie said. “The students are good. The city is good.” / “But.” / “No but.”
 “There isn’t a but.” She looked at the balcony... “It’s just — a different kind of good.”

Answer these questions:

1. What is the difference between “good” and “a different kind of good”? What is Charlie acknowledging that she was refusing to acknowledge a moment earlier?
2. She looks at the tsutsuji while saying it. What does the tsutsuji represent in this moment?
3. Bryony hears the full meaning. She says “good” simply, twice. What does she understand, and what does her restraint tell us about their friendship?

4.3 The Yukata in Kyoto

The Gion Matsuri scene is built around the yukata — specifically, what the woman on the street understands from looking at it:

“It is not new. It is old work. Very good quality. Not often seen now.”
“Your friend has good taste. Or good family.”

Answer these questions:

1. What does the woman understand about the yukata that Charlie did not fully understand when she received it? What does “old work” imply about its history?
2. Charlie bows gently in response to the woman’s final remark. Why does she bow rather than answering?
3. Zara says: “Your friend must be a very good one.” Charlie says: “Yes. She is.” This is the chapter’s warmest moment. What has the yukata communicated, across the whole evening, that words alone could not?

4.4 The Final Line

The last line of the novel is:

“Yes, I might know someone.”

This is the answer to: “Do you know anyone who might want to live in the inaka?” Consider everything the novel has built before this line, and answer these questions:

1. Why does Charlie say “I might know someone” rather than “Yes, I want to come back”? What does the indirection give us?
2. Both Kudo-sensei and Charlie are pretending, slightly, that this is a professional enquiry and a professional response. Why? What does the pretence preserve?
3. The novel ends here, without telling us what happens next. Is this the right ending? What has it left open, and what has it answered?

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Character

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- Charlie is good in Osaka. Her colleagues say she is very good with students. She takes this as information. What does it mean to take a compliment “as information” rather than with pride or pleasure?
- She was looking for Yamagata options before she arrived in Osaka. The decision had been made, or was being made, without being announced. Is this self-deception or self-knowledge?
- Kudo-sensei asks the question as if she doesn’t know the answer. She knows the answer. Why do both of them choose this form of the conversation?
- The final thought before the last line is a list: the wisteria, the koinobori, the onsen, the walk home, the imoni, the bell, and Kenji, Hiroshi, Saki. What does this list tell us about what Charlie is choosing?

5.2 Theme

Think and talk about these broader ideas.

- The novel is called Inaka. The word appears in the last chapter’s title and in its final question. What has the word come to mean across the course of the story? Is it just a place, or is it a way of being in the world?
- The city is good but is a different kind of good. The novel does not say cities are bad or that the countryside is better. What is it saying about the relationship between a person and a place?
- Charlie’s Japanese is described as “correct and careful and hers” when she writes the emails looking for work. The same three words were used for her farewell speech in Chapter 16. What does it mean for language to be “yours”?
- “Available to whoever was paying attention.” This phrase from Chapter 16 echoes through the final chapter. What has paying attention given Charlie? What has she become?

5.3 The Novel as a Whole

Now that you have read the complete novel, discuss these larger questions.

- The novel begins with Charlie on the Northern line, eating chips, looking at the ground. It ends with her in Osaka, answering a phone call from Oguni, about to choose to return. What has changed? What has stayed the same?
- Which moment in the novel surprised you most? Which stayed with you?
- Which character — other than Charlie — had the greatest effect on the story? Why?
- The novel’s title is Inaka. Having finished it, what do you think the title means?

6 ROLE PLAY & SPEAKING

6.1 The Balcony

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Bryony, calling from Glasgow.

The Situation

- March in Osaka. Charlie is on or near the balcony.
- Bryony asks: “How is it?”
- “Good. The students are good. The city is good.”
- “But.”
- Play the full exchange, including the tsutsuji and the “Yamagata options.”
- After: each player says what their character was not saying.

6.2 Gion Matsuri

Work in groups of three. One student is Charlie; one is Zara; one is the woman on the street.

The Situation

- The streets of Kyoto. July. Lantern light. Gion music.
- Charlie and Zara are at a food stall.
- The woman looks at the yukata. She speaks first in Japanese to her companion. Then to Charlie.
- Play the exchange: the fabric, “old work,” “good taste or good family.”
- Charlie bows. The woman nods.
- Zara turns to Charlie: “I was going to say...”
- Charlie: “Yes. She is.”

6.3 The Phone Call

Work in pairs. One student is Charlie; one is Kudo-sensei.

The Situation

- Thursday evening. November. Osaka.
- Charlie is making something she learned to make in Oguni.
- Her phone lights up with Ryuko’s name.
- Play the call: Mori-sensei retiring, Kudo-sensei’s new position, the opening at the school.
- Ryuko: “Do you know anyone who might want to live in the inaka?”
- Play the pause before the answer.
- Charlie: “Yes, I might know someone.”

6.4 Final Discussion: The Novel

As a class or in small groups, discuss these final questions.

Question	Classmate 1	Classmate 2
What moment in the novel stayed with you most?		
Which character did you find most interesting?		
What does “inaka” mean to you now?		
Would you go to the inaka? What would you look for?		
What have you learned about Japan from this novel?		

7 WRITING TASKS

7.1 Guided Writing: A Different Kind of Good

Write a short paragraph (80–100 words) about a place, situation, or period in your life that was “good” but not the right kind of good for you. Try to convey the distinction between something being fine and something being what you needed, without making either sound bad.

Useful language: It was fine. It gave things. • She let it. This was the correct approach. • It was its own version of something. • Both of these facts could be true simultaneously. • It was just — a different kind of good.

7.2 Creative Writing: Kudo-sensei’s Call

Write Kudo-sensei’s interior monologue (100–130 words) during and after the phone call. She has just asked the question. She is waiting for the answer. She already knows the answer. What is she thinking?

Remember: Kudo-sensei says things once. She chooses her words with precision. She is glad to be talking to this person.

7.3 Extended Writing: What the Novel Is About

Write 150–180 words describing what you think the novel *Inaka* is about. Not what happens, but what it is about — its themes, its concerns, its central questions. You might consider:

- What does it mean to belong somewhere? Can you choose to belong, or does it choose you?
- What is the relationship between paying attention and belonging?
- What is the difference between knowing a place and knowing what you will do in it?

7.4 Short Writing: The Last Line

Write 60–80 words analysing the final line of the novel: “Yes, I might know someone.” Why is this the right ending? What does it give us, and what does it leave open?

8 CULTURAL NOTES

These notes provide context for cultural references in Chapter 17.

Gion Matsuri: The Festival of Festivals

Gion Matsuri (祇園祭) is Kyoto's most celebrated festival, held throughout July. It is considered one of the three great festivals of Japan (the others are Tenjin Matsuri in Osaka and Kanda Matsuri in Tokyo). It originated in the ninth century as a ritual to appease the gods and stop a plague, and has been celebrated annually ever since, with the exception of a period of civil war in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The festival's centrepiece is the procession of enormous, elaborately decorated wooden floats (yamaboko) on 17 and 24 July. The yoiyama are the three evenings before each procession, when the floats are displayed in the streets, lit by lanterns, and accompanied by traditional music. The streets around Shijo, Kawaramachi, and Karasuma are closed to traffic and filled with people in yukata, food stalls, and the energy of a very old, very alive festival.

The Osaka Dialect (Kansai-ben)

Kansai-ben (関西弁), also called Osaka-ben or Naniwa-ben, is the dialect of the Kansai region of Japan (including Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe). It is one of the most distinctive and well-known regional dialects in Japan, with different vocabulary, different verb endings, different intonation patterns, and a general reputation for being more direct, warm, and expressive than standard Japanese. The comedian stereotype of the loud, funny Osakan is partly a product of this dialect.

Inaka: The Word Itself

Inaka (田舎 or 郊下) is a Japanese word for the countryside, rural areas, or one's hometown, often used in contrast to the city (toshi, 都市). It carries several layers of meaning: it can mean the physical place (mountains, rice fields, small towns), the way of life associated with that place (slower, more communal, seasonally aware), and a kind of relationship to belonging — the inaka as the place where one comes from or returns to. In recent decades the word has gained new currency in discussions of rural revitalisation (chiiki kasseika, 地域活性化), as Japan grapples with the depopulation of rural areas. The novel's title is not only a geographical description; it is a word about belonging, about return, about the relationship between a person and a place that is not a city.

Kyoto and Zara

Kyoto was Japan's imperial capital from 794 to 1868 and remains one of the best-preserved historical cities in the world, with over 1,600 Buddhist temples, 400 Shinto shrines, and seventeen UNESCO World Heritage sites. It is a city that rewards sustained attention: the longer you live there, the more you find. Zara's description of becoming "knowledgeable in a specific and practical way" after months of living in Kyoto is accurate to how the city works. Her invitation to Charlie for the yoiyama of Gion Matsuri, and her instruction to "wear something good," is the invitation of someone who has learned what Kyoto asks of the people who live in it.

Old Yukata: Fabric as History

The woman at the Gion Matsuri immediately recognises that the yukata Charlie is wearing is "old work" — craftsmanship of a standard and era that is "not often seen now." The quality of textiles and garment-making in Japan declined significantly in the postwar period as industrialisation replaced handcraft. A yukata made by skilled hands from high-quality fabric in an earlier era is visibly and physically different from modern department-store examples. That the woman recognises it immediately tells us about her own knowledge and background. Her remark — "your friend has good taste, or good family" — is the most accurate summary of who Kudo-sensei is: a woman whose family carried something worth carrying, and who gave it away to someone worth giving it to.

Returning to the Inaka: A Growing Movement

Japan's rural areas have lost population steadily for decades, but in recent years a counter-movement has emerged: urban residents, particularly younger people disillusioned with city life, choosing to relocate to rural towns. This movement, sometimes called the "U-turn" or "I-turn" movement (U-turn for returning to one's hometown, I-turn for moving to someone else's), is supported by government programmes offering financial incentives, housing subsidies, and job placement in rural areas. The position at Oguni school that Kudo-sensei describes is exactly the kind of role that might be filled through such a programme. Charlie's return to Oguni would be one version of this story: someone who came as a foreigner, found herself at home, and chose to stay.