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Michael Austen
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The past and the future*

The train was really flying along now. The buildings, fields and trees all seemed to race by. A bridge shot past the window. Then a station. Hiro put his face nearer the glass to see the name, but they were travelling so fast it was impossible to read. Hiro wondered if they were travelling faster than the *Shinkansen*, the world-famous Bullet Train of Japan. He looked up at the small screen above the door, which showed the speed – 294 kilometres per hour! He watched the numbers as they slowly increased. 296 ... 298 ... All of a sudden, they were there: 301 kph! Well, that was something exciting to tell ...

And then it hit him all over again. Yes, but who would he tell? If it had been a month ago – even two weeks – he would have sent Akiko a text. But since their break-up she didn't want to hear from him. 'Don't send me any messages, because I won't reply,' she had told him angrily. 'If you'd rather have a photo of Yuki than me on your phone, that's fine. Just don't expect me to be your girlfriend any more!'

Hiro looked sadly out of the window again. Where were they? He knew they'd left Belgium and were in Germany now because he'd seen a sign just before the last station. But what city came next? Was it Köln? In Köln, Hiro had to change trains. He wondered if he should ask the middle-aged woman sitting opposite. But just when he had decided not to, the train flew past a village and the woman suddenly spoke to him in English.

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‘Ha!’ she said. ‘There’s my village! I’ll be home in an hour. It’s only ten minutes to Köln!’

Hiro smiled politely. The woman was a little bossy-looking and never seemed to sit still.

‘But *you* are a long way from home ...’ she went on. ‘Are you Japanese?’

Hiro nodded. He didn’t feel much like chatting, but it was clear the woman did. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but I’m studying in England. I’m on a Study Year Abroad programme. This is my summer holiday.’

‘Very good! And where are you going?’ she went on.

‘Berlin. I have an InterRail ticket,’ Hiro answered, then seeing the confused look on her face, guessed he’d better explain. ‘That means I can use my ticket to travel anywhere in Europe. Berlin is my first stop.’

‘How exciting! But you’re travelling alone. That’s very brave.’

Hiro paused. ‘My friends ...’ he began. ‘My friends ... couldn’t come.’

‘Oh, that’s too bad,’ the woman answered. She was about to say something else when her mobile phone rang. She searched excitedly in her bag, then began a loud conversation in German on her phone.

Hiro picked up his book. It was an American thriller – he’d brought it with him to practise his English – and with two violent murders already it was quite exciting. But Hiro couldn’t read now. He thought sadly about what he’d just told the woman. It wasn’t really the truth. The truth was that he and Akiko had planned to have a holiday together, but after their argument everything had changed. They’d been so happy all the time they’d been together. She was on

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the same course in England and they'd met in the first week. And they'd never argued at all. So, then to get jealous about a dog! That was just crazy!

Hiro reached into his pocket and took out his own mobile phone. With one easy movement, he opened it and watched the screen come to life. For a moment or two he looked at his screensaver – the picture that appeared when he turned on his phone. It was a photo of Yuki, his beautiful twelve-year-old golden retriever, the most wonderful dog in the world. Then he chose 'My photos' from the menu on the side of the screen. Almost immediately, a picture of Akiko appeared. It was his favourite photo of her – the one at the restaurant where he'd taken her for her birthday. She looked so happy and so pretty! Hiro shook his head and quickly went back to the picture of the dog.

The argument had come out of nowhere. They'd been planning a beach holiday in southern Spain. When he'd invited his friends Ayumu and Daijiro and their girlfriends, Akiko had seemed happy enough. But then something had changed. He said he wished they could take Yuki as well, and all of sudden Akiko had got angry. After that everything Hiro said seemed to make her angrier. She'd started talking about his screensaver, and the next thing he knew she was shouting that she didn't want to see him ever again. It was just unbelievable. One moment he had a girlfriend, the next he didn't. Now, apparently, she'd gone off to Scotland with a couple of her friends. But he wasn't even sure of that. Their eight-month relationship had just exploded like a bomb.

All of a sudden Hiro realised a tear was running down his cheek. Angrily, he brushed it away. The woman opposite was still talking loudly into her phone, so she hadn't seen

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the tear. But this was no way for a twenty-year-old Japanese man to behave. Hurriedly, he got out his InterRail map and pretended to study it closely. He'd left London that morning very early and taken the Eurostar to Brussels in Belgium. From there he'd caught this train going to Köln, and in Köln he would get the train to Berlin. But where would he go after that? Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, was only five hours by train from Berlin. Then, he could go to Vienna, maybe. If there was time he might even get to Budapest. How many new countries would he visit this trip? If he went to all those cities, it would make five!

Hiro began to feel more cheerful. He sat up and looked out of the window again at the countryside flying past. It seemed different and new all of a sudden. 'Yes,' Hiro thought, 'I will have an exciting and adventurous holiday. I'm not going to be sad. From this moment, Akiko is part of history. No more looking back; I will only look forward from now on.'