

The Woman with The Flying Head

(Kubi no Tobu onna (1985))

by KURAHASHI YUMIKO (倉橋 由美子)

My father had a high-school classmate who was a little out of his mind. I never met him in person, only heard stories. Let me call him Mr. K for now. It was several days before my father died of a stroke that he told me about Mr. K's secret. (I wonder if the timing was pure coincidence.) This is not to say that Mr. K himself had hidden something from people; all his acquaintances knew about this "secret." It is just that my father had kept it secret from me till then.

This is a rough outline of the story.

I heard that since he had come home from China after the Japanese retreat, K had been repeatedly admitted to a mental institution and discharged. One day I ran into him in the street, and somehow or other it was decided that he should come to visit me

at home someday. There is a legend that a scholar of the old school called Hyakken posted two verses at the entrance of his house. One was Ota Nanpo's "Receiving guests is what troubles me most / But not if the guest is you." The other was a spoof of the first: "Receiving guests is what delights me most / But not if the guest is you." Well I don't quite have the nerve to post the latter poem, but honestly, a visit from someone like K was about the least delightful thing I could think of. I did try to convey to him how unwelcome he would be, but K, a rather abnormal man, soon came for his visit. I remember this was before you were born.

Let me make it clear that K did not at all appear to be mad; there was nothing unsettling about his gaze, for example. It is true that he was gaunt and dressed like a vagrant, but that was not unusual in postwar Japan. But one could not help noticing the big, expensive-looking leather club bag he always carried in town. He had it with him when he came over to my house.

We talked about nothing in particular for a while, then he abruptly changed the subject.

"Do you know about the people with fantastic shapes described in the Chinese Classic of Mountains and Seas (山海經) and The Account of Seeking Spirits (搜神記)?"

“The only ones I know about are the tribe of three-headed folk, the hairy people who were forced to work on the Great Wall, the giant who could swallow three thousand ogres—”

“You know them well. I am impressed! Among those strange tribes were the Aborigines with flying heads.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Their heads would leave their bodies and fly around in the middle of night.”

“What a peculiar affliction.”

“It was not an affliction that particular individuals suffered from. Everyone in the tribe, old or young, male or female, was like that. By the way, are you still single?”

“I got married last year. My wife has been out since yesterday, visiting her parents on some family business.”

“I lived with a woman too.”

“Why in the past tense?”

“This ‘woman’ was actually a seventeen-year-old girl. You know the one, the Chinese-looking girl, the one I brought home — or who followed me.”

“I remember. Once you washed off the dust, she turned out to be an unearthly beauty.”

“Well, eventually she grew up.”

“That’s only natural. I see, you became a Prince Genji, who slept with Murasaki, whom he had adopted and raised.”

I made this joke having forgotten that K was out of his mind. But K did not seem offended; he just kept smiling, his indescribably sorrowful eyes like the winter sun. “We couldn’t get married. Li was my legally adopted daughter. Still, I sneaked into her bedroom one night. For some reason, she had wanted to sleep alone ever since she had been little, so we had always slept separately. Imagining what a sweet expression would be on her face while she slept, I couldn’t resist the desire to visit her. Telling myself that I would be just looking at her face, I peeped into the chamber — to find she had no face.”

“No face?”

“She had no head. I went completely pale, assuming that she had been murdered. Then I realized there was no blood. Moreover, even without a head her body seemed alive; her well-shaped breasts moved up and down, though I didn’t know how she could

breathe without a head. Between her breasts she was shiny with sweat. But still, she had no head."

"So she was one of the Aborigines with flying heads."

"You don't seem too surprised."

"Of course I am."

I was careful to try not to excite this mentally unstable man, for his story seemed to be coming to its climax. "I was astonished. I was confused. All the same, I knew feelings beyond all morality had been aroused. My head felt overheated. Li was alive without her head, without consciousness or intellect. I touched her hand, which was warm and soft. It grew sweaty while I was grasping it. Beneath the quilt her legs were slightly parted. Li's legs were different from any Japanese woman's, long and straight, with feet as exquisite as ivory carvings.

"Nothing happened that night. Li was as good-humored as ever in the morning. There was nothing to suggest the extraordinary incident of the previous night. The next night it was the same thing — no development. Apparently, Li herself did not know that her head would leave her body and fly away. If she had known, she could have tied it down so that it couldn't fly away."

“Couldn’t she tell if she had been molested while her head was away?”

“Her head couldn’t tell, of course. Her body must have known, though. One night I finally lay with the headless Li. After that I had sex with her every night. Her headless body was like a sleeping body; it reacted vaguely when I touched it. In time, it seemed to learn a sense of pleasure; the movements of our bodies became well coordinated. One night Li’s body shuddered in a different way, and her limbs coiled around me, clasping me terribly tightly. I nearly screamed in terror; I wondered if her head had come back and Li’s pleasure was completed, or if some monster of carnal desire was trying to squeeze me to death. But I came back to my senses to find she still had no head. As always, the surface of her neck felt like a wet lip. I discovered that the headless body would surge with pleasure if I licked the wet part. Li’s head never seemed to know anything about this. Her body was unable to inform her head of its nightly experiences.”

“Where did her head fly every night?” I cut in. I could not bear to let him go on like this.

“Speaking of her head” K snickered weirdly.

It is not pleasant to hear a lunatic snicker that way.

“Her head didn’t by chance visit a secret lover through the passage of dreams every night?” I said, trying to get him to finish the thought.

“You won’t believe this. One day, with a serious expression, Li confessed to me, ‘Father, I have fallen in love with someone. I dream of secretly visiting him every night.’ Of course it wasn’t me she was in love with.”

“And you were overwhelmed with jealousy?”

“It’s not that simple. I felt like any father of a grown-up daughter, or like Prince Genji when Tamakazura, one of his adopted daughters, was taken away by General Hiteguro.

But honestly, I felt like saying to her, ‘Is that so? Well, you’ve grown up and now you love someone. Go, get out of here and marry him. But leave your body here. Only your head is allowed to go.’ ”

“That’s terrible.”

“I didn’t actually say that to her. All the same, Li began to cry. ‘I can’t marry him,’ she said. ‘He’s already married.’ ”

I felt I couldn’t stand to listen any longer. Once more I urged him to finish the story.

“You are right,” he concluded. “I was as jealous as anyone in such a position. One night, in a fit of jealousy, I did a terribly stupid thing. Toward dawn, Li’s head came home from meeting its lover. For the first time I saw it fly: it flew like a big bee, using its ears as wings — I hear that’s how the heads of the Aborigines with flying heads flew. Her head looked excited and joyful, and this enraged me. In an instant, I covered her body with the sheet so her head couldn’t reattach itself. Her head looked distressed and fluttered about, but it did not ask me for forgiveness. It seemed in agony. ‘Look at yourself — you deserve it!’ I thought. Before long, Li’s head stopped breathing.”

“How could you be so cruel!”

“I know, but by the time I felt regret for what I had done, it was already too late. Almost instantaneously, Li’s head grew dry, wrinkled, and shrank to an incredibly small size. Here it is.”

So saying, K opened that bag that was so ill-suited to his shabby clothes and took out the head — I didn’t have time to stop him. I almost screamed. It looked like an earthenware head. Once one looked at it, it was hard to look away. It was especially hard for me — before my eyes was what remained of the unforgettable face that made its flight to see me every night

it was alive.

That, of course, is what my father did not tell Mr. K. The head of the beautiful Li flew to my father every night. The first time, he heard something like a bird brushing the windowpane, and a sound like a kitten mewling sweetly. Though my father spared me details I can imagine how they conversed, when he'd let it in and stroked the chilled hair strewn along the desktop. I could not look my father in the face while he was telling me this. "Your mother never knew about this. I thought I should tell you someday, because," My father hesitated.

"Let me finish with K first. After K 'killed' Li's head, her body remained alive for several days. Before it withered and died, a baby girl was born from the headless body. K was arrested for raping and beheading his adopted daughter, but he wasn't prosecuted because he was diagnosed to be schizophrenic. I adopted the girl and raised her as my own daughter. That's all I have to tell you. I haven't dared examine you to see if you've inherited the disease."

After my father's sudden death, I repeated this story to myself time and again. For now I have no lover, nor have I met one in a dream. I don't think my head has yet begun to fly. It shall not fly — until the day I fall in love.