

## Kiochi's Father

The monster wore Kiochi's father's face. We were skipping stones on the bridge behind Old Man Haru's house the first time we saw it. The six of us neighborhood kids, despite our parents' instructions to stay inside, had snuck out at the behest of Naru, the oldest and meanest of us. If Naru told you to do something, you did it. Otherwise, you might open your locker to a giant pile of stinking dog shit or open your bag to discover each pencil's head broken off and your textbook's pages missing.

The monster had arrived in our neighborhood a month before. We didn't panic. We had practice when it came to these things. The local newspaper ran a feature on it. So did the news station. They interviewed the mayor, Kiochi's father. His red lips shone like the blood of a freshly killed mammal. It was our first time seeing an adult look scared. He didn't tell us much besides that the monster was dangerous and its favorite food was steamed giant white radish. Nothing really changed remarkably in that first month except our diet. Our mothers decided it was probably safer to stop making anything with giant white radish.

We heard lots of stories about what the monster was like that first month. The old ladies who sold yams to our mothers at the market said that the monster had three pig snouts and five tiny eyes in the shape of a crescent moon. The school gossip, Yuka, whose outfits stunned the viewer into silence so she could talk without interruption, told us that she, too, had seen the monster. "It looks like a sweet old woman."

That day, she wore a wedding dress and children's sunglasses that were missing the lenses. The wedding dress was so white it stung our eyes, yet we didn't look away.

The only trustworthy source of information was Old Man Haru because he was incapable of lying. His family had been cursed at the end of the Meiji period. He couldn't even utter the littlest white lie, which, he said, was the reason he never married since "the only way to keep a woman happy is to lie to her." Haru was allergic to giant white radish and spent so much time in his house that it didn't surprise us at all when he told us that he had not crossed paths with the monster.

It wasn't clear what the monster's purpose was in our small neighborhood, but the adults were terrified for some reason. A layer of constant fear and paranoia settled onto our yards, sidewalks, the roof of the elementary school, and the mini golf course adjacent to the mayor's office. At night, the fear reached our ankles, so the mayor had salt thrown on the sidewalks to melt it away. It didn't work so well. It was mostly invisible until someone mentioned the monster, and then, out of the corner of your eye, you could see the fear harden and glitter. For the first time since the serial killer mermaid who had tormented the town's most successful fishermen in 1937, doors were locked. Our windows gained heavy-duty latches and blinds that made our rooms so dark that we became just voices, our bodies swallowed by light's total absence. Sometimes, we would wake up, our hands and stomachs and feet unseeable and unknowable, and wonder if we had died in our sleep.

It had been a little over a month when the mayor announced over the loudspeaker during breakfast that the monster could see us in mirrors. Our parents were hysterical, but before they could tell us no, we raced to our bathroom. We puffed out our cheeks, pulled at our ears, and stuck our tongues at the mirror. Naru went a step further and mooned it.

Naru and his parents were the only ones who didn't believe in the monster. They liked to brag that they weren't afraid of anything. We knew that they were at least partially lying because they were most definitely afraid of Naru.

When we came home from school, our parents had covered our mirrors with black fabric. That night, the town council spearheaded a community-wide effort to remove all mirrors and reflective surfaces. It was easy to sneak out. All the adults were too focused on removing all the mirrors to notice our absence.

The pebbles at the creek behind Old Man Haru's house were smooth and cold against our skin. We saw his shadow in the doorway, but he didn't bother coming out. Probably because Yuka was with us, and he didn't want to tell her that her outfit was hideous. The last time that happened, she didn't eat for two days.

The setting sun threw wonderful, strange shadows, more alive and silent than its casters. We punctured the water with the pebbles tossed by our bored fingers. The air was unusually damp and warm. Naru began to throw stones at us instead of the water. Keiko, who was already beautiful with long black hair and sad eyes, dodged Naru's stones expertly. Yuka hurled stones back. The rest of us bloomed welts on our backs and butts.

"Naru, truth or dare?" asked Kiochi.

He responded as he always did, his game of terror forgotten, "Truth."

"When was the last time you cheated?"

"Last Tuesday."

"During the math quiz?"

"Yeah."

“Oh, I cheated too,” said Koichi. “It was so hard. I got like a 75 even though I wrote all the equations on my thigh. I was so scared I was going to get caught. It’s always the math teachers who are the best at catching cheaters. Mr. Yuki especially.”

“Mm. I’m not scared. I always cheat, and he doesn’t notice. If only I were as good at math as I am at cheating.”

“ Being good at cheating sure is a skill.”

“You don’t need to be good at cheating, Kieko. You’re already good at math. And you’re pretty.”

“ Yea. But I suck at English.” Kieko responded.

“ At least Miss Ito’s your teacher.” Yuka chimed in brightly.

Miss Ito was considered the best teacher in the whole school, by the students at least. She had arrived shortly before the monster and knew everything. Our teachers were primarily middle-aged balding men, so you can imagine our excitement when pretty Miss Ito arrived in overalls and a Hawaiian shirt, looking not a day over twenty-five. She was pale, honest, and kind. She even complimented Yuka’s outfits. On the first day, she ditched all formalities with her students. On the second day, she taught her students to swallow swords. It was a popular act in the school talent show that year.

No one liked Mr. Yuki. He taught algebra and calculus. He always slapped students with the back of his books when they missed homework. His breath stank of fish, though he was constantly popping mints in his mouth. It was rumored he had a relationship with one of his previous students. Our parents scolded us when we asked them if it was true. Kieko was even hit. You’d think they were defending god, not a middle school math teacher.

Our reflections wavered on the water and bled between the rocks in the stream.

“Truth or dare,” Kiochi asked again.

“Truth,” Keiko answered this time.

As soon as the word left Keiko’s lips, our ears popped, and the air fizzed. We could feel the fear gathering at our ankles and see it glittering at the edge of our peripheral. It was so quiet we could hear the sun setting.

“Do you think the monster can see us in the reflection of the water?” Yuka whispered.

She never whispered.

“Why so quiet, Yuka, afraid of that silly monster?” Naru sneered.

Yuka’s mouth remained in a firm line, but her chin trembled. Naru rubbed his ear.

“It’s getting colder because it’s getting dark out. If there really is a monster, I’ll kill it. It wouldn’t want you anyway; Your outfit would scare it.”

“You’re just too immature to recognize style.”

Yuka rolled her eyes, and we breathed a sigh of relief.

And that’s when the monster showed up.

It split forth from the tree. Reminiscent of the birth of Athena. It was large. Its long white body was smooth beside its stomach, which had fibrous strands sweeping the floor. Maybe if we saw the monster now, it wouldn’t have looked so big, but because we were kids, it looked huge. It still surprises us that not one of us screamed. Not that it was too scary. It was just shocking.

It was Kiochi's father's face, after all, on the thick white neck of the monster. Strangest of all, Kiochi's father's face was smiling at us. The mayor never smiled. Not even when elected, he always had a serene look of blankness masking his teeth.

Actually, it wasn't so much that the monster was smiling at us but rather into us. Like it wanted something from us. Its hands, three times the size of our own, started grabbing at the pebbles. It took fistfuls of grass from the pliant earth and uprooted a small tree. All this time, Kiochi's father's face moaned *What a greedy, greedy, greedy man* through the thin-lipped smile.

Then it went back to collecting various things from the ground until it had made a large pile of nature and trash it stood in front of like a dragon guarding its gold.

The monster hugged its pile with long white arms. Kiochi stared at his father's face while Naru squeezed his fist around a heavy stick. None of us had moved forward or away, so strange was the scene.

Finally, after around ten minutes, the monster threw us a terse look, dove into its trove of whatnots, and disappeared.

Naru prodded the pile with the stick, but it was gone.

The next time we saw the monster, we were at school on the soccer field. It was a dark and gloomy day, so everyone had walked in early. However, Yuka had left her most crucial accessory of the day, a headband made of fox hair, in the grass, so we were still out there, searching for it. Once again, the monster climbed out of a tree, this time a large maple.

It was no longer wearing Kiochi's father's face. But Keiko's father's. Keiko's face drained of blood until she was paler than the smooth white of the monster. She tried to run, but the monster was too large and swift. It tore off her school jacket, the one she loved so much she even wore it on hot days, to reveal horrible bruises on her arms and chest. It began to hit and slap

those same places with its arms, but the arms became transparent and passed through her shaking frame. It moaned.

*What an awful, awful, awful father.*

We began to yell.

“Stop! Just go away!”

The monster ran back into the old maple. But not before dropping a fluffy hairband at the feet of a pleasantly surprised Yuka.

Kiochi helped Kieko put on her jacket.

We knocked on the old maple tree and scratched at the bark but found no answers that afternoon.

Except one.

We knew who made beautiful Kieko’s eyes so sad.

The monster showed up a few more times in the next few months. Mr. Yuki’s face was one of them. It never wore the same face twice and never a child’s. We learned it knew our parents better than we did. There wasn’t much we could do but go about our daily lives and wait for the monster to show face again. We stopped being surprised by the faces the monster wore. Except for the last one. Miss Ito’s.

It was the last day of school, and we were about to walk to the park to watch Naru fight one of the older boys. Naru and Yuka were arguing over who the best sword swallower in the

grade was when we saw the monster exit the school building. It didn't see us, so we walked closer. When we were about a foot away, we yelled.

"Hey, you!"

It turned, wearing Miss Ito's face. The air fizzled. Our ears popped. Miss Ito's face grinned.

We stood there, not moving, our mouths opening and closing like freshly caught fish. Miss Ito winked, and it was gone before we could take a single step. All that remained was a Hawaiian shirt. Naru missed his fight. We were relieved. We didn't want the older guy to get hurt.

We told everyone we knew what we had seen. The rest of the kids in the neighborhood believed us. Old Man Haru, too. Our parents didn't. Figures. It's always liars who don't believe the truth.

Keiko's parents got divorced that spring, and she moved in with her mom. She stopped wearing long jackets in the summer. Mr. Yuki didn't return to school the following year. The mayor was kicked out of office. He had been using the donations for the school to build up the golf course. He didn't go to jail, but he had to do a ton of community service.

Miss Ito still works at the school. We don't see her much now that we're in high school, but the town is small, so we bump into her now and then. We give her a wave and a smile, and she winks.

As for the giant white radish industry, it never quite recovered, even after the monster left.