SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

BON-ODORI
(The Obon Festival Dance)

Marie Mutsuki Mockett

Once, there had been enough men. In fact, as a child Satomi had sometimes thought that there were too many. They scampered across the stone walkway in wooden *geta* clogs, clattering like hailstones. They ran along dirt pathways lining rice paddies, mouths wide open, lungs exultant, screaming childish jibes with the force of thunder. And behind Muryôji, the temple compound where they lived, they pretended to be samurai, whacking swords fashioned from twigs against an infinite army of dusky green bamboo.

When the youngest boy had just barely earned the right to be considered an adult, Satomi's brothers had plunged toward the sea, wings spread wide like swallows chasing flies, diving down, down, until steel met steel and their lives were instantly extinguished.

That was January of 1945. Four brothers died, nearly a week apart each, as though their deaths had been neatly calculated - the war allotted one Ogawa brother a week to consume. Satomi's older brother Hiro had avoided this fate. Being the eldest son in a family held some privilege and in the final hours of the war, his position in the family saved his life.

After the deaths of the four brothers, Satomi still hadn't worried too much. Hiro had three sons, any one of whom might have taken over the temple. So, Satomi had risen every morning, rung the bell in the courtyard, chanted sutras, given incense to the Buddha in the great hall, and lit incense to her dead brothers', mother's and father's spirits, partly to guide their souls into Nirvana and partly to pass the time.

Because all the while she was waiting.

She could not count on Hiro directly, for he was too old to take over the temple, and anyway he lacked the necessary training. Unlike the other boys, Hiro had not grown up at the temple with Satomi, and his mother and father. He had been a *yôshi*, a foster child, sent to live with his Uncle Yoshiro, who had had no boys of his own. The assumption had been that Hiro would eventually grow up to be a merchant like his uncle. This after all was why boys were occasionally shipped off to the home of a relative; if a family lacked boys, it could at least adopt a nephew or a cousin to make sure that the family business remained within the bloodline. As a last resort, an unrelated man could marry the daughter of such an unlucky family, change his name to his wife's and ensure proper

lineage. But this kind of *yôshi* was not encouraged. It was much better for family blood to be preserved through a man.

Hiro had been a bad merchant. He had found the exchange of goods to be a raw, unpleasant business, almost as disturbing as prostitution. Instead, he had preferred the elusiveness of ideas and had run away to Taiwan at the age of 18. There, he had studied English. When the war broke out, and the Japanese had become unwelcome in Taiwan, Hiro had slunk home, evaded both his families and become a teacher. He often told Satomi of the cruel irony that the war had benefited his life. “The old Japan is gone,” he would say. “Now I don’t have to be a merchant like our uncle.”

“If there had been no war,” Satomi would reply petulantly, “our brothers would be alive, and I wouldn’t be living here by myself, pouring buckets of water on our ancestors’ graves. You know how thirsty they become when we don’t give them any water.”

“I suppose I could’ve stayed in Taiwan indefinitely,” Hiro would sigh. “Although, I was lonely there.”

“It will take our ancestors thirty-three years from the day they die to reach Nirvana,” Satomi replied curtly. “It’s a very time-consuming process, and . . .”

“You know, this new Japan really is a freer place,” Hiro would interrupt.

Like a man, Satomi would grunt her disapproval. Her older brother was unable to promise that one day one of his sons would take over the temple.

In the end, all three of Hiro’s sons grew up to become businessmen. One was an executive at Nippon Steel, another a buyer at the Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo and the third a divorce lawyer in Osaka. This latter profession had disturbed Hiro and Satomi equally. It was a bad omen that a young man could actually believe enough in divorce to bank his future career on it as an institution. The brothers rarely came home, preferring instead to spend the few vacation days they had at hot spring resorts on the East Coast where, Satomi feared, they were entertained by low-class *geisha*. This, Hiro complained frequently, was what came of joining the merchant class.

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One suffocating day in July, nearly 25 years after the war had ended, Satomi awaited the arrival of Mr. Ikeda. He was a private detective with whom she had been in correspondence for most of the year. In the kitchen, Bappa-san the maid cursed the heat while preparing a little plate of fruit to feed the impending visitor. In the front room, Satomi sat perfectly still, only the wrist of her right hand rotating slowly as she fanned herself with an *uchiwa*.

The wooden door in the entrance whinnied open. She heard the light, tentative shuffle of footsteps. “*Gomen kudasai,*” a voice called. “Hello? Is anybody home?”

Satomi flexed her toes and stood up in one neat motion. She set the *uchiwa* on the table and glided across the *tatami* mat to the wooden hallway just

outside where she slid on a pair of slippers. She hurried to the entrance in tiny, whirring steps.

"*Irrashaimase!* Mr. Ikeda. Welcome." She knelt and bowed deeply. Mr. Ikeda returned her bow, and they repeated this exchange a few times. Then, Satomi stood up. "Please come in."

They exchanged pleasantries while Mr. Ikeda sat stiffly in his navy blue suit jacket and occasionally dabbed his forehead with a blue handkerchief. It had become hot early this year. The emerging heads of rice in the paddies dripped with grain. Mr. Ikeda had enjoyed the fireworks which the city had displayed the previous evening for the annual Tanabata festival. Satomi was especially fond of this event, which celebrated the reunion of two mythical beings, embodied by two stars separated by the Milky Way.

Bappa-san brought in a tray of iced tea and refreshments.

"*Dozo*. Please help yourself." Satomi held out a small blue and white plate covered with fruit. A miniature bamboo fork speared a slice of glistening, green melon.

Mr. Ikeda's eyes widened at the sight of this delicacy. "Perhaps just a little," he said, extending his arms across the table.

A half an hour later, Mr. Ikeda removed a large envelope from his briefcase and set it on the table. "Now then."

"Yes," Satomi replied. She had resumed fanning herself with a lazy, almost aristocratic flick of her wrist.

"Yes," Mr. Ikeda repeated. He removed his jacket, and pushed up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows like a mechanic. His earlier, deferential manner gave way to a flush of enthusiasm. "Maybe we should talk a little bit about the young man. About Mr. Tamura."

"Oh! Yes," Satomi politely feigned surprise at this turn in the conversation.

Mr. Ikeda began to remove various documents from the envelope. "I have to tell you, ma'am, that I've been a private detective for fifteen years now. I've learned that my clients get agitated sometimes by what I tell them. More agitated than they think they will."

"You must not worry about me," Satomi replied primly. "I am quite prepared." She leaned forward eagerly, forgetting her earlier reserve. "What can you tell me about Mr. Tamura?"

Mr. Ikeda regarded her gravely. "You're sure you're ready? All right, then. I did warn you. It appears that you were right, about Mr. Tamura. About him being your youngest brother's son."

"Ah," Satomi exhaled and sank back on her heels, wilting over the fan clenched in her hand.

Mr. Ikeda waited for a moment until he was sure it was all right to continue. Then, he nodded emphatically. "*Zettai desu*. Most definitely. He is the son of your youngest brother, Masao. He died during the war. Isn't that right?"

"*Mmm*," Satomi murmured noncommittally, and cast her eyes to the side.

Mr. Ikeda read this cue, and not wishing to cause his client any further discomfort, carried on the conversation in a slightly different direction. "I couldn't learn a lot about your brother and his . . . relationship. He was a student when he met . . . your nephew's mother. I believe he rented a room in her family's home."

"Yes, that's right."

"Some people remember that they claimed to be in love."

Satomi turned her head to the side. "What can you tell me about him? About the son?"

"Well, *ano* . . . I think you would be impressed, actually. He is twenty years old, and has a good job in the city bureau. He actually scored the second highest ever score on the civil exam. The second highest score recorded for the city!" Mr. Ikeda beamed. "He still lives at home with his mother. They are very close."

Satomi nodded curtly. "Is he aware of his family history?"

"His mother told him he was related to a temple family. That's about it." Mr. Ikeda giggled. "I'm afraid I did most of the talking."

"Yes."

"But I have to say, I was impressed by his maturity. And his . . . sensitivity."

"Sensitivity," Satomi echoed.

"Yes. He was a very sensitive young man. Unusual for one so young. Particularly these days."

"I see."

"Well. All the documents are here," Mr. Ikeda pushed the packet of papers across the square table. "Mr. Tamura was quite a student. It's too bad he didn't get to go to university. Oh well. It's a new Japan now, isn't it?" He giggled again.

Satomi gingerly touched the papers. "Should I read all of these?"

"Yes, please," Mr. Ikeda recovered his composure. "Copies of birth certificates, health records, school report cards...it's all there. And when you're ready, I'll arrange a meeting for you and Mr. Tamura. That is, if you decide you want to meet him."

"He can come here?"

"If you want. Or we can choose a more neutral place."

"I will start reading the papers today."

"Yes. Well," Mr. Ikeda sat silently for a moment. "You have a nice place. There must be fireflies in the summer time. I remember catching fireflies when I was a young boy."

"Yes. We do have many fireflies."

"The rice paddies and the bamboo forest are very pretty. Like old Japan. And you know, no matter what they say, I like dark wood. It's much prettier than those new houses they are building now."

"Thank you."

"Don't you get lonely up here sometimes? Or scared? I mean, there were all those bandits on the valley floor right after the war!"

Satomi tilted her head to the side. "I have Bappa-san. We keep each other company."

"Well." Mr. Ikeda chewed on the last piece of melon. "Well, then." He began to put on his jacket. "I guess it's time for me to be going."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't you like another cup of iced tea?"

"No, no. I have to get back to my office."

Mr. Ikeda and Satomi stood up. They thanked each other all the way to the entrance of the house.

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Bappa-san took considerable time preparing the bath that evening. She burned a pile of logs in a small, fireplace-like incision under the bathtub and heated the bathwater to a scalding temperature. Satomi discovered how hot the bath was after she finished washing herself on the tile floor. She stepped into the wooden bathtub, square shaped like an enormous sake cup, and felt the sting of hot water rippling against her thighs. She sat down very slowly, a centimeter at a time. Eventually she adjusted to the temperature, and began to relax in the heat.

Satomi thought over her conversation with Mr. Ikeda. Such a gossipy man. He had seemed to delight in relaying details about her own family - details that she did not know. And all that un-manly giggling! Then again, what could you expect from a private detective?

In her youth Satomi had had her own earlier encounter with a private detective. She was 50 now, but remembered the incident as though it had just happened. The young man of a banking family had inquired, via his parents, about the possibility of marriage. She had been secretly thrilled. Prior to the marriage talks, she and the young man had "accidentally" run into each other in town when she was doing errands. They had discussed books (history), music (Mozart), and summer festivals (Tanabata and Obon). She had found him to be intelligent, yet gentle.

As was the custom, a private detective had been hired to vet out Satomi's health, background and character. She had passed the tests except for one; a doctor discovered that she had a small hole in her heart. The banker had regretfully withdrawn his interest, though he still sent small donations to the temple even after he married a schoolteacher from a neighboring town. After that, there had been no more offers of marriage.

Satomi had resigned herself to remaining at the temple and caring for her father and mother until they died. She did not consider her actions to come from love. She thought, in her private, bitter moments, that a woman with a hole in her heart might not be able to love. Instead, she viewed her life as a matter of destiny, unquestionable and final as the war, as the deaths of her brothers.

Twenty-some minutes later she climbed out of the bath, dried herself and put on a *yukata* summer kimono. She began to walk slowly through the rooms of the house, absorbing the atmosphere. What was it Mr. Ikeda had said? He had called the building “dark” and “old-fashioned.” Satomi didn’t think the building was particularly dark. She loved the way the large rooms fit together like incongruous puzzle pieces, rectangle after rectangle separated only by sliding *shoji* doors. She was particularly fond of the *nure-en* apron that zigzagged around the perimeter of the temple and the house like an elevated, wooden sidewalk. After the war, she and her father had locked the heavy wooden doors between the *nure-en* and the interior of the house to discourage bandits from sneaking in. But now Japan had enough food to eat, and there were no bandits.

Satomi crept out onto the *nure-en*, and lit up a cigarette. In the moonlight, the wood gleamed like slick, black oil. Satomi rarely smoked, and only when she was certain Bappa-san had gone to bed. She followed the *nure-en* around the house till it came to a little bridge suspended over a pond filled with *koi*. She crossed the bridge up to the temple, finally sitting down on the wooden steps just outside the main door.

Alone in the dark, she wondered what Kenji was doing now. Did he feel the tug of destiny? Did he know that he would be lifted from obscurity, and granted a family and a history from which, in the old Japan, he would have been barred?

Lights from the few other buildings in the valley winked at her through the darkness. A breeze ruffled her *yukata* and she was surprised by how light and cool she felt. The hot water, she thought, had done its trick in deceiving her body. Despite the heat still trapped in the house, she would sleep well tonight.

*

She called Hiro, her older brother, not long after meeting Kenji Tamura for the first time. At first, Hiro’s voice crackled with indignation over the long distance connection. “How do you know that this . . . this *Kenji* is our relative?”

Satomi sighed, then lapsed into a casual manner of speaking. “You know there was a lot of gossip about our brother and that girl. It’s not impossible they had a child.”

“Maybe she’s just a loose woman. If she was willing to sleep with one man before getting married, maybe she slept with another.”

“I thought about that. Her behavior is definitely shameful. Then again, there was a lot of that kind of thing during the war. You remember what it was like - everyone dying all the time.”

“Have you met her?”

“No, of course not. I only met him. And I am convinced that he is our nephew.”

“How?”

"There are records. His blood type. His birthdate is almost exactly nine months after our brother went to war. His voice is like yours, when you aren't yelling over the phone at people. And . . ."

"Yes? What? I don't yell at people."

"He has a small hole in his right ear. From birth. The way that you do. The way that our father did."

Hiro was quiet.

"Someone must take over the temple," Satomi continued matter-of-factly. "I won't be alive forever. Besides. Kenji is willing to go to Eiheiji."

"You're going to send him to *school?*"

"Yes. After I adopt him. I told him he can't go to school unless he agrees to be my son."

"What about his mother?"

"Well obviously he'll have to renounce her. A man can't have two mothers."

Hiro made a small, gargling sound on the phone.

"What was that?"

"I said, you know as well as I do that adoption can be very . . . upsetting. Difficult."

"Weren't you listening to me? I just told you that he's agreed to be my son, which is entirely different than it was with you. And anyway, he'll have a much better life here than he had before. His mother will be grateful."

"I don't know. Men who have been raised without fathers tend to be soft, you know. Weak. That's what happens when a man grows up around too many women."

Satomi sighed. "Really, Hiro, you can be so disagreeable sometimes."

"That *is* what happens, Satomi."

"Now listen to me. When you meet him, don't talk to him about his family history. That would only shame him. Talk to him like he's my son, which he will be soon."

"Of course! What do you think? That I have no manners?"

"I wonder sometimes."

Hiro let out a long laugh that reverberated out of the yellow, plastic phone, and down the long, wooden hallway where Satomi sat. "Father would be proud of you. Of all of us, you are the strongest."

"Perhaps."

"I have to warn you though," Hiro said seriously. "You are taking a risk."

"What are you talking about?"

"Kenji won't be a normal *yôshi*. He wasn't raised in our family. He won't be viewed as one of us by the community. It will be difficult for him to find a wife. And it will be difficult for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You will never accept him like a real son. You will always know his past history."

"I'm getting tired," Satomi complained. "I know you scholarly types like to ramble on and on about things and make them sound more complicated than they are. But I'm a more practical kind of person. I think you should be grateful."

"I am grateful," Hiro said gently. "I just don't want you to be disappointed when things do not turn out exactly the way you planned."

"I have to go now. Bappa-san is calling me. The bathwater is ready."

"Good-bye, Satomi."

"Good-bye."

*

Kenji came to stay permanently at Muryôji one day in October of 1977 when the temperature was cool, and the mountain colors fiery. Below the temple, the orderly rice paddies gleamed like bleached gold, as the farmers, dressed in indigo blue work-clothes, carefully snipped the rice stalks and laid them sideways to dry. Higher up on the hillside, watchful clusters of scalded maple and gingko flamed up around the temple and cemetery grounds.

Satomi had legally adopted Kenji six years earlier, snapping up his soul into the pantheon of her family. In exchange, he had gone to Eiheiji monastery and sat outside the gates for a week before being allowed in by the monks. He had endured cold, hunger, and the vague claustrophobia of teachers who alternately ignored him, and berated him to subject his will to the Buddha. During that time, he and Satomi had kept in touch through letters, and the occasional phone call. If Kenji ever contacted his real mother, Satomi knew nothing about it.

The years passed quietly on the mountaintop. Still, Satomi frequently wrestled with herself. Some days she woke with a feeling of triumph pressing up against her rib cage, threatening to fly out of her lungs. On those days, she was certain that she would not have found Kenji if he hadn't been fated to save the temple. He certainly seemed devoted. He had eagerly relieved her of her duties, rising each morning to ring the gong and to lead *zazen* meditation for the few members of the congregation who remained. He was kind to the parishioners, performing funerals for pets, sitting for hours with senile war veterans and watching as the other town priest, Reverend Tanaka, became drunk on his favorite Scottish whisky.

Other times Satomi felt unsettled, as though the ghost of an ancestor were nearby, frowning on her attempts to cheat death. Then she would feel that there was something wrong with Kenji, that he had some defect of character that she needed to identify and correct. She asked him to re-polish the altar, or re-dust the gallery behind the main hall, claiming that the initial cleaning had not been sufficient. She gave him explicit instructions on how to trim the azalea bushes and grew angry if he clipped them too short. Despite the fact that he finished each of her requests without complaint, Satomi was unable to shake off a vague, pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction.

She became disturbed by the parishioners he attracted. While most of the congregation in the town continued to visit the other Zen temple of the Sôtôshu sect, a few new worshippers began to visit Kenji regularly. In general, the people who came to see him were suffering in an acutely personal way. Their hearts were broken. They missed their children who had died in the war. They were afraid the ghosts of their ancestors were angry at them for some discretion. It was an odd congregation he started to build, a group bound by immense suffering. Satomi had never seen anything quite like it. It was true that the basic tenets of Buddhism proclaimed that life was full of suffering, and that release could be found through the Buddha's teachings. But there was something eerie about the way that Kenji seemed to attract the most heartbroken of the town's residents. Something improper. She wondered if perhaps he weren't unnaturally accustomed to those who suffered, if growing up in the shadow of his mother's shame had not given him a distorted perception of what was and what was not acceptable.

For Kenji never seemed troubled by anything. He always had a little half-smile on his face, as though even the worst of life's tragedies was not really such a serious matter. Had he gone through Eiheiji the same way, Satomi wondered? Had he just sat there, smiling when his instructors had smacked his shoulders with a *kyôsaku* during *zazen?*

She wondered, privately, if his apparent selflessness was an indication of weakness. Would he have been able to fight back against hardship, just as she had when the temple had seemed on the verge of disintegration? Could she be sure that he would fight for the temple's future? She was not certain.

And yet, there was something in his sonorous voice that hinted at a cavernous, unexplored lair within his body. Once she caught him straining to look at a bird high up in the bamboo through a pair of binoculars. When he saw her, he slipped the glasses in his pocket, and smiled sheepishly, as though ashamed to have been caught indulging a personal passion. Sometimes she would catch him gazing at the Buddha in the temple hall with such intensity, that Satomi was momentarily frightened. In those moments, she caught a glimpse of something familiar. She could not trace what it was.

Then, walking to the cemetery on the top of the hill one day, she saw a small tuft of grass hugging a shaft of white stone, oval-shaped like an ostrich egg. It was the statue of Jizô-bosatsu, a bodhisattva in the form of a monk. As a child, Satomi had not been particularly attracted to the Jizô, even though he was supposed to be the protector of children. She had preferred the massive, gilded Buddha in the main hall, or the smaller sculptures in the gallery of the temple - the defiant Fudô, with his impenetrable sloe-eyed gaze, his sword and fiery nimbus. The weaponless Jizô, with his understated monk's dress and childlike smile, had seemed about as interesting as a puddle. Looking at Kenji now, she was struck by how much he looked like a Jizô. His oversized ears looped

delicately against his head like ornate abalone shells. His lips, so full they nearly pouted even when he slept, arched in a permanently fixed smile.

*

One evening, Satomi could no longer contain her dissatisfaction. She decided to call her brother.

"I don't know what to do," Satomi complained. "The temple is making a little money. But it's not doing as well as when our father was alive."

"You mean *your* father," Hiro corrected. "*My* father was a merchant."

Satomi sighed. "Don't be ridiculous. You know we had the same father. Anyway. About Kenji. I can't stand the way that he just nods and smiles like a little girl trying to please me."

"He does that because he's adopted. Being an adopted child is much worse than being a legitimate son."

"But it's almost like he has no character. No will!"

"If he did exhibit any will, you'd just call me up and complain that he is ungrateful or opinionated. You are always saying those things about me."

"Be serious. I'm talking about Kenji! He's over thirty, but he still looks like a shaved turnip."

"He just needs a wife, Satomi. He looks like a turnip because he's with you all day and all night."

Satomi sighed, and there was a long silence. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps marriage will make him more of a man."

Satomi proposed the idea to Kenji the next day. His eyes widened. "What does mother think?" he asked.

"You are old enough to marry," Satomi replied. "If you feel that you are ready, then perhaps we should ask the matchmaker to find us some candidates."

Kenji nodded slowly. "I think I am old enough."

"There's no real hurry," Satomi added quickly. "It's very important that we find the right woman. The kind of woman who will help the temple succeed."

"Of course," Kenji said, and smiled.

*

This was how Satomi and Mr. Ikeda became reacquainted nearly 14 years after their first meeting. They sat sealed inside the comfort of the front room, *shoji* doors firmly closed, while an air conditioner churned out a stream of cool air. Bappa-san had passed away, and so Satomi herself carried in a tray of her favorite *Castera* sponge cake.

"So. Kenji is ready to get married. That's wonderful!" Mr. Ikeda beamed.

"Yes," Satomi smiled. She was sitting high up on her haunches, like one of the little prayer cats found in restaurants or shops. "The matchmaker has found five candidates for us. But we want to make sure the woman we choose is the right person. We are looking for someone young enough to have children. But responsible. Also, her children will all need to go to college. So it's important that she herself is a good student."

"Naturally. Now." Mr. Ikeda held up one finger, gently flexed. A soft admonition. "You understand that there may be some . . . complications."

Satomi squinted. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Kenji is an unusual *yôshi*."

"He is my son. I adopted him."

"But as far as the public knows, he's not related to you by blood. Of course, his future wife and her family will ultimately need to know his family history. And then, they'll learn that his mother was unmarried. And that right there narrows down possible candidates for him."

"Mr. Ikeda. I just need to find a wife for Kenji. I need to know that Kenji has a son. Before I die."

"Ma'am! Please! There's no reason to talk about . . ."

"Nobody knows how far away death is. It can sneak up on you. Now, please. Find out all you can about these five women." Satomi did not like this wishy-washy behavior. Once upon a time, private detectives had not contradicted their clients.

"I will do my best." Mr. Ikeda bowed humbly before taking a sip of iced tea.

*

There was something wrong with all five of the candidates. One had a twin sister who had committed suicide. Another had a brother in Tokyo rumored to be gay. Yet another, more promising prospect had a cousin who had been born mentally retarded. A fourth inexplicably withdrew her candidacy partway through negotiations. Despite all the talk of "new Japan" on TV that summer, Satomi found that her adopted son's unusual past ruled him out as a possible spouse for the most choice brides.

In the end, they settled on Mai Yamada, the daughter of a shopkeeper. She had been an average student, but had received good grades in housekeeping and sewing. Her family members were all healthy, but her younger sister had done something unusual; she had married an American. In fact, the younger sister was now living in Los Angeles. Her husband worked on movies. Something to do with sound and editing. Fortunately the sister seemed to have a respectable job. She taught piano, and worked for an organization called the "Planned Parenthood," which Satomi vaguely understood had to do with children.

The wedding was expensive and formal, with two changes of dress for the bride. At the beginning, Mai wore a traditional red *uegaki* embroidered with felicitous silver and gold cranes. Her face was powdered white, her hair a stiff wave of obsidian beneath a starched, white headdress. During the reception, she changed into a long-sleeved pastel blue kimono, and the guests whispered about her mother's good taste. But the final outfit was an expensive white silk gown, embroidered with pearls, lace and ribbons, a replica of something Mai's sister had seen in an American fashion magazine. The white headdress had been

replaced by a wig of Scarlet O'Hara corkscrew curls. Mai smiled at the guests as she walked, waving an enormous white ostrich feather fan.

"I told you Kenji should not marry a merchant," Hiro growled when he saw the ostentatious costume.

"She was the best candidate," Satomi sighed. "I'll just have to teach her how to behave. Just like I taught Kenji."

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Bursts of color bloomed like weeds after Mai and Kenji returned from their honeymoon. Fluffy pink towels and pink shampoo bottles sprouted up in the bathroom cupboards. Yellow and black underwear peppered the laundry line. Amid the drawer of somber, wooden chopsticks lay one pink pair, with a white and blue cartoon of Hello Kitty on the end. Satomi tolerated these minor irritations. After all, they were the natural outcome of a young woman entering a house. But soon there were other, more troubling signs that Satomi worked quickly to correct.

During the brief courtship that had preceded the wedding, Mai had meticulously curled her hair, and worn billowing, ankle-length skirts. After the honeymoon, however, she had declared these rituals of grooming impractical for a housewife. So, she clipped her hair short like a boy and began wearing tight, pastel-colored pants that showed off her calves.

Satomi had no choice but to retaliate. One day she rounded up the laundry and insisted on doing it alone. Then she burned the offensive clothes along with a pile of tree trimmings. That evening, she sat stoically in the front room reading the newspaper while Mai hunted through laundry bins and chest of drawers looking for her clothes.

Satomi was also disturbed by Mai's inability to understand the value of food, for the girl had missed the hunger of the war and had grown up spoiled on sausages, cookies and ice cream.

"May I have another piece of fish, Mother?" Mai would ask at mealtime.

"That's all there is," Satomi would reply. "You know, during the war, all we had to eat was rice and *miso*-soup. We were lucky to have any fish at all." And she would turn her attention to a small plate of pickles on the table, feigning oblivion to Mai's look of shock, eyes as round as silver coins.

But every time Satomi thought she had eradicated the essential roots of Mai's poor behavior, another bad habit shot up, as though the young woman herself were a fundamentally poorly pruned plant. In fact, it was almost as if Mai did not appreciate Satomi's efforts at grooming, as if the young woman found the instruction incidental and even mildly humorous. Occasionally Mai even found ways to force her own desires upon the family.

"You probably don't realize this, Mother," Mai said one day, "but that *futon* is so hard! I'm getting calluses!" She rubbed her rear suggestively.

Satomi pretended not to notice this gross gesture. “Kenji had to sleep on the floor at Eiheiji. Isn’t that right, Kenji? I’m sure that was very painful. But he learned not to complain.”

“Is that true?” Mai looked at her husband with wide, startled eyes. “That’s crazy. No wonder you have back problems.”

“Is there something wrong with your back?” Satomi asked her son.

“Of course there is!” Mai declared. “All he needs is a new *futon*. Or a chiropractor.”

“A what?”

“A chiropractor. A special back doctor. My sister goes to one in Los Angeles.”

“Hmm,” Satomi replied. “Mai, you are cutting the carrots too thick. My mother used to be able to cut carrots as fine as paper.”

“Too thick? Haha! I’ll need glasses to cut the carrots any thinner. You know, Mother, we should get a food processor. That way, I can cut the carrots as fine as you want. How’s that?”

“Please just cut the carrots into smaller pieces.”

Mai put the knife down on the counter and looked at Satomi gravely. “You know, Mother, it’s going to be a lot harder for me to get pregnant if I’m uncomfortable at night. Right Kenji?”

The mother and son were silent.

“I mean, that’s only practical, isn’t it?” Mai insisted. Then, she picked up the knife and made a great show of measuring each piece of carrot to make sure it was thin enough. “Really,” she murmured at intervals. “A food processor would make this much easier.”

*

After the birth of Mai and Kenji’s first son, something fundamental in the house seemed to shift position, as though the very atoms were rearranging themselves. First, everyone changed bedrooms. Kenji and Mai took Satomi’s old room, and the young baby moved into his parents' old room. “I need to be closer to the baby,” Mai explained, “in case he cries at night.”

Satomi was moved to a smaller, windowless room in the northwest corner of the house. “This is the direction dead spirits travel to,” Satomi whispered when she was shown her room.

“Oh, that’s just superstition. Anyway, it’ll be quieter here for you,” Mai declared.

“I never thought my room was particularly noisy.”

“*Eh?* All those crickets at night?” Mai laughed, a toothy, flashy grin. “They would keep me up! Really, Mother, you’ll be happier in the back of the house.”

“I can hear the crickets no matter which room I sleep in,” Satomi replied. But Mai did not answer.

Late at night, Satomi could hear the couple talking in low, urgent whispers which would climax with a shrill outburst. Then next day, Mai would speak to Satomi about a small detail in the house; the old bathtub should be replaced with faucets that conducted hot water. The toilets should be replaced with a flushable toilet.

"There isn't enough money for all the things you want to buy," Satomi said to Mai sharply one day.

"*Eh?*" Mai held four or five clothespins in her mouth as she hung up an array of brightly colored underwear and socks.

"You always want to buy things," Satomi repeated. "And there isn't enough money. We have large debts to pay. If you want more money, tell Kenji to work harder. I wish he would just have a little more energy with people! Be more *genki*. All he does is sit there and smile!"

"Haha!" Mai laughed. "Kenji's not the problem, Mother."

"What do you mean?" Satomi asked.

"Kenji is very popular. He makes people feel good," Mai said, seriously. "But that's not enough to build up the congregation." Then, she added slyly, "I have an idea that'll get us more money than you can imagine."

Satomi looked at her daughter-in-law suspiciously.

"Land development!" Mai exclaimed. "My sister says that's what they do in California. In Los Angeles. See those rice paddies?" Mai gestured with a jerk of her head. "If we converted that land into cemetery space, we'd definitely attract more people. Think of all the money we could charge for the plot, and the service."

"Haha! *Omoshiroi dessune!*" Satomi laughed dryly. "That's very interesting, Mai."

"I'm very serious, Mother," Mai said gravely. "If we could offer more cemetery space, it would give the townspeople more incentive to join our temple. Everyone dies. And everyone needs a burial plot."

"We have rented those rice paddies to the same farming family for years. We can't displace those poor people! It would be disrespectful."

Mai pulled a peg out of her mouth and hung up a pair of Kenji's socks. "I know that farmers used to be more important than merchants. But that was a long time ago. That was feudal Japan."

"That wasn't so long ago."

Mai shrugged, a fleeting, disrespectful use of her shoulders. Where, Satomi wondered, did young people learn such bad manners? Had they invented them on their own?

The conversion of rice paddies to cemetery space was the first of the large changes. There were many more. Kenji bought a white Mercedes. The boys (there were four) wore Levi's jeans, and with the onset of puberty, sported a new pair of flamboyant, high-tech running shoes every six months. They bought a computer and learned to play video games. They called their grandmother "Bâ-

chan," in what Satomi found to be affectionate but somewhat disrespectful nasal voices. When she tried to correct their grammar or suggest that they study harder, and play computer games less, they laughed at her and pantomimed funny skits involving characters from movies which, despite her best efforts to stay serious, made her laugh. And the pets! Every week one of the boys showed up with a new caterpillar, or a beetle, or a kitten. These one-week fascinations were the center of attention for a brief time before the boys switched loyalties to a new puppy or a tank of fish. In the end, Satomi advised Kenji to discipline his children. But he merely smiled, and she took on the duty of feeding the abandoned animals every morning and every evening.

During the *Obon* festival one year, Mai drove the Mercedes into town to have a few drinks at the local *snakku* pub. When she returned, she amused her family with impersonations of the clientele.

Satomi was appalled.

"Why don't you do something about your wife!" she chided Kenji. "She laughs too much."

Kenji returned the criticism with his irritating, understanding smile. "It's good for the children to hear laughter. Don't you think? Childhood is a precious time."

*

The family portrait developed into a lopsided triptych with Mai confidently confronting the world from the center frame, crossed arms belying her attempt at a shy smile. Satomi sat off to the side, increasingly listless and withdrawn, every now and then voicing her objection to one of Mai's particularly ostentatious displays. Kenji was often hidden in the temple, focusing mainly on the needs of his parishioners and occasionally emerging into view to offer an opinion about the day's menu or evening television program.

Satomi did win one significant battle. Mai had decided one New Year's that it would be a good idea for her sons to meet Kenji's mother. "Their real grandmother," she explained.

"Absolutely not," Satomi replied. "Anyway, I don't know what you are talking about. *I* am Kenji's mother."

"Really. Enough time has passed, Mother." Mai laughed and danced across the kitchen to pull a plate of steaming sausages out of the microwave. "We all know about Kenji and his mother. It would be nice for her to meet her grandchildren."

"I forbid it."

"Ha-ha! You know you don't mean that. Here. Have some sausages."

"Isn't there any fish?"

"No. No fish."

"Then I would like a bowl of rice. And *miso*-soup. That's all we ate after the war you know."

"Yep. So you've told us. Aren't we lucky that we can eat sausages now?"

"You don't fool me. I know you are trying to change the subject."

"And I know that you are hungry!"

Satomi grunted. "Actually, I don't feel well. I'm going to go lie down."

"Okay. Well, come out when you feel better."

"Hmm," Satomi grunted again. She stayed in her *futon* for ten days, refusing to eat anything but a small helping of rice and *natto*. Each time Mai woke her mother-in-law for a Tylenol or drink of water, Satomi would ask, "You haven't taken the children, have you? I dreamt about the ancestors. They were angry." And Mai would pat her on the head and assure her that no one had gone anywhere.

The doctor insisted that there was nothing wrong. "Although," he said, "if she does not start eating soon, we may have to take her to the hospital."

Finally, Kenji himself visited Satomi. He carried a small vase of irises which Hiro had sent via a messenger. "I've been thinking, Mother," Kenji said, "about Mai's silly idea that she should take the boys for a . . . trip."

"Oh?" Satomi opened one eye.

"It's such a silly idea, don't you think? The boys will take many school trips when they are older. There is no reason for them to go all the way to Tokyo to meet some strange person."

"Hmph." Satomi closed her eyes.

"Yes. That's what I have decided. I will tell Mai that there will be no trips. You don't need to worry." His voice reverberated as though he were uttering an incantation.

She opened her eyes. "I don't feel well. I think it's all the rich food we've been eating."

"I'll bring you some rice," Kenji replied. "How's that? A little rice and maybe some dried fish." Then he smiled at her, and she felt as though his smile were actually on her face, as though she were expressing the same warmth and reassurance. For a moment she could understand why so many of the young women and men in the congregation felt compelled to talk to him when their hearts were most in danger of breaking. Then she turned her head to the side, and pretended to fall asleep.

Soon after, Satomi got out of bed, and resumed her daily activities of chanting in the temple, writing letters to her brother and visiting friends.

*

After the fourth son was five years old, Kenji, Satomi and Mai sat in the front room and studied the bank records. Mai argued that there was enough money in the bank to build a new house. "Running water! Toilets that flush!" she enthused. "It can be a two-story house. Still traditional, but with new wood. Won't that be nice, Mother?" she smiled at Satomi.

"New wood is expensive. Japan doesn't have a lot of wood."

"Oh, we can afford it. Don't worry."

"I like the old wood."

"Oh, sure, it's nice. The old wood is very pretty. But it's so dark and depressing."

"It matches the temple."

"Oh, don't worry about the temple! We won't change that! But these old *shojis* are yellow! And that *nure-en!* I've scrubbed and scrubbed and that dirt won't come out. Think of building a new house as a kind of cleaning! My sister says all the houses in California are clean because they are new."

"I like the old house."

"We'll get a big new bathtub," Mai sang. "It'll be big enough for two people!" She winked at her husband.

Satomi pretended not to hear. She hoped that the ancestors had not heard either. Still, she realized with resignation, there was little she could do about these changes. After all, she had willed them.

*

The new house was completed at the end of spring. During the construction phase, Satomi spent most of the time at Hiro's, where the two of them lamented the destruction of their ancestral home.

"How could you let them do this?" Hiro moaned.

Satomi shrugged. "They own the temple now. I turned everything over to Kenji after his second son was born."

"Why couldn't they just leave the house alone?"

"Why couldn't your sons have taken over the temple?" Satomi retorted.

The lines of the new house were neat and sharp as knives. The structure gleamed, the blond wood shining a little like Ginkakuji, the golden pavilion rebuilt in Kyoto after a madman had burned down the original two decades ago in the seventies.

Despite Mai's attempts to rein in the expenses, it became clear that the temple had overspent its budget. That winter, Mai did not go to the *snakku* pub so often. Instead, she sat in the front room, legs crossed Indian style like a man, and read through the newspapers and magazines and bank statements while the television loomed overhead, buzzing with the chatter of 24 hour news. She wrote letters to her sister in Los Angeles, and shrieked whenever a letter came back in response.

Satomi grew increasingly frail. Some days, she did not leave her *futon*, but lay there in her small bedroom, whose dimensions had been faithfully reproduced to match the original small room she had occupied. The rich food Mai brought her mother-in-law to eat made Satomi sick, and she frequently requested rice and *miso*-soup instead.

One day that fall, Satomi felt well enough to take a tour of the old temple. There was no *nure-en* to transport pedestrians around the house and over the fishpond into the temple. So, she had put on her shoes and climbed up the main steps. She had to admit to herself that despite all the changes on the property, the main hall still looked regal. The new paper in the *shoji* gleamed brightly, white

teeth against the dark skin of the wood doors. The hall itself smelled of grass from the tatami, and incense from the altar. The old Buddha regarded her solemnly, dignified under his nimbus. He was cleaned almost every week by some of the novices who had come to study with Kenji. The altar was never short of flowers, cakes and fruit. Even now, a large bouquet of chrysanthemums rose up from a blue and white vase, like miniature clouds from a Buddhist paradise.

Satomi strolled slowly through the gallery behind the Buddha. Here were smaller statues of other deities. Kannon-bosatsu, the goddess of mercy. The altar of Monju-bosatsu was covered with coins from local students who had come to pray to him before taking college entrance exams. She passed her old favorite, Fudo-Myo-ô, the wrathful god who fought illusions. He scowled at her, his grimace *s*-shaped, one canine carelessly biting his lower lip. He wielded his sword in his right hand. Behind him, the flames of his nimbus licked the air like a hundred thirsty serpents. Beside him stood a large statue of a Jizô. The wood was young and unvarnished, but judging from the grain and level of detail, had cost quite a great deal. When had Kenji purchased this?

She rounded the corner. A haze of pink caught her eye. What was this? Satomi scuttled down the hallway. It was covered with tiny, plastic replicas of the larger Jizô. Each was dressed in pink, and accompanied with a small bottle of milk, a plastic pinwheel, pink stockings or a hat. A breeze wafted through the hallway, and a few of the pinwheels whirred lazily. Satomi shivered. It was not unusual for a temple to have a few stone Jizôs dedicated to the souls of deceased children - there was the stone one outside, for example. But here were dozens of Jizôs, all plastic. Some had little notes attached to them. “I’ll see you next time” or “Please come again in three years when we are ready.” What was going on?

At dinner that evening, she asked Kenji, casually, if he would explain to her the significance of the statuettes.

Kenji finished chewing a piece of his T-bone steak. “I will explain later,” he said in a low voice.

Satomi did not miss the brief, sharp glance that Mai sent her husband.

After dinner, Kenji and Satomi walked together to the gallery to look at the new wooden Jizô in the temple.

“It’s very funny,” Satomi commented. “I used to think that you looked like a Jizô.”

Kenji smiled indulgently.

“This is a handsome sculpture,” Satomi said.

“Thank you.”

“But what about all these . . . these little Jizôs? Surely you can’t have administered over so many funerals for children.”

“They are for *mizuko-kuyô,”* Kenji replied. “Abortions.”

Satomi started.

"It's a new practice. It's increasingly popular. Women are waiting longer and longer to get married, you know."

"I watch the news," Satomi snapped.

"I discussed this with my teachers at Eiheiji. They approved the ceremony. Birth control would probably make most of this unnecessary, but for the time being . . ." His voice trailed off.

Satomi snorted. Listen to the way Kenji was speaking! As though he were some kind of doctor who had learned of a new medication or had recently mastered a new surgical technique!

"It is very popular," Kenji repeated.

"How . . ." Satomi stammered. "How did you hear about this?"

"It's very funny, actually." Kenji fingered one of the plastic pinwheels, which gave way under his touch and whirred a few times. "Mai's sister heard about it. In the United States. She saw a program on television and wrote to us."

Satomi exhaled.

Kenji folded his arms and continued to walk down the hallway, his back to his adopted mother. "It's been very good for the temple, Mother. And we've been able to help those poor women."

So this is how it will be, Satomi thought. The north side of the temple gallery would soon be full of hundreds of Jizôs. They would all be plastic, as though they were every bit as disposable and replaceable as laundry-pins or pens. One by one, the rice fields below would be turned into graves. And Kenji and his sons would minister over the funerals of the townspeople, their unborn children, and their pets. The area surrounding the temple must be thick with ghosts and spirits. How would there ever be enough room for them all? And what, she wondered, would the older ghosts make of having to share space with dogs and cats?

"*Ah so.* I see," she replied.

"Perhaps you should go indoors now," Kenji said. "It is getting very hot. Mai can make you a cup of iced tea. You should have a little sponge cake too. That's your favorite, isn't it?"

*

Satomi died in her sleep that winter, eyes open and face turned toward the northwest corner of the room. Her body was dressed in a soft white *kimono* that she had chosen herself a few months before, and her head covered in a small white hat embroidered with flowers.

"She looks like she is twelve years old!" Hiro said with wonder when he saw her.

The first night after Satomi's death, the family participated in a *tsuya*, a 24 hour wake. Reverend Tanaka and nine other priests sat around her body chanting sutras, while Kenji, Mai, Hiro and the boys sat in an outer ring. The priests went home after a few hours, but Kenji and his family continued to sit. The littlest boys grew sleepy and were finally allowed to go to bed. However, Mai set

the alarm clock in their bedroom to ring every hour. The boys took turns lighting a new stick of incense and sticking it in the burner placed just at Satomi's head.

At the funeral, three days later, the air grew thick and tense as though the Memorial Hall was enveloped by a sudden, high-pressure front. A soporific cloud crept out from three incense burners, tendrils of spicy smoke weaving around the bodies of each of the guests. Hundreds of people queued up in three lines to pay their respects to Satomi's spirit, while her ashes sat in a heavy urn on the altar. Nine priests dizzily chanted through sutras, till the building bellowed with the force of a primordial organ.

"It's hard to believe they are all dead. All my siblings," Hiro sighed to Kenji afterwards.

Kenji smiled at the older man. "You must come visit us anytime. The boys need to know their great-uncle."

"From time to time. Yes." Hiro nodded. "Perhaps I can come for a visit."

"We are your family," Kenji insisted.

Hiro nodded sadly, but did not answer.

Kenji faithfully continued to recite sutras for Satomi. He was particularly vigilant on the forty-ninth day after she had died. This was the day that her soul would have the chance to pass over to the afterworld. Which level she was sent to would ultimately depend on the judgment her soul received. Kenji could not imagine that his adopted mother would be sent anywhere other than Heaven. But he'd read plenty about souls who had been Heaven-bound, only to have their journey aborted when their family members neglected to read sutras as tradition dictated. So, he sat beside the altar and recited sutra after sutra, pausing only to have an occasional sip of water.

*

At the Obon festival the next summer, Muryôji was busy. This was the festival of the dead, when all the ancestral spirits came home to visit their families. In preparation, the congregation of Muryôji cleaned up the tombstones, decorated them with lanterns and candles and offered prayers. They also stopped at the temple to give Kenji and his wife small gifts. The backrooms of the house soon filled up with boxes of cakes, cookies and bottles of *sake*. The altar of the temple was gloriously adorned with immense apples, melons and pears. After dinner, the boys begged their mother for dessert, and the family would collectively decide what to eat. One of the boys raced to the altar, bowed his head and thanked Buddha for having supplied such a bounty. He plucked the melon, or crate of peaches, or *Castera* cake off the altar and ran back to the kitchen where his father scolded him for having run in a temple in the first place.

"*Yukkuri*. Slowly. You know you can't run in the temple."

"*Gomen*," the boy laughed. "Sorry, Dad."

Kenji had decided to hold an Obon dance at Muryôji. One of the abandoned rice paddies which had not yet been turned into a cemetery was mowed neatly, and a tower was erected in the middle. Large outdoor speakers

were hung on this tower, and all afternoon, a sound crew tested the speakers to see if music would project appropriately. The area surrounding the temple soon twanged with the earthy music of Obon. Mai left during the preparations, claiming that the Obon crew did not need her help, and anyway, she had an errand in town she needed to run.

That evening, the townspeople arrived by the carload. The younger girls wore *yukata* made out of white fabric and printed with morning glories, firecrackers or goldfish. Many of the older women wore more mature colors, navy blue with red, or purple and black. The men wore short, blue, *happi* coats and shorts. When it was suitably dark, the music began, and the dancers began to move counterclockwise around the tower in the center. They moved slowly, hypnotically, as if to assert that once there had been a time when the slow, fluid gesture of a hand sweeping across space had been enough to suggest elegance. For some dances a flock of colored fans wafted through space, a stately procession of butterflies. And yet the dancers were not at all serious. They smiled and laughed as they danced. Many of the men were drunk and later, a few of the women confessed that they too were tipsy.

Halfway through the evening, the Mercedes pulled up and Mai got out with a small, elderly woman. They skipped over to a row of metal chairs where Kenji sat with his oldest son, who was too embarrassed to dance. The younger ones were dancing, their heads wrapped with white towels in the manner of peasants.

"Hello, Kenji!" the older woman announced.

Kenji started. His placid face drew taut with surprise. "*Okâsan?* Mother?"

"Hello, Kenji. My goodness. How big your boys are from the last time I saw them!"

"Surprise!" Mai squealed.

"Mai has kindly been sending me pictures. And, we've managed to have a couple of secret visits." Mrs. Tamura smiled broadly at her daughter-in-law.

"Mai! When did you . . .?" He looked at one woman and then at the other. How similar they looked with short, cropped hair, slim bodies like cats and eyes gleaming with mischief.

"I didn't tell you, Kenji, because I knew you'd feel too guilty. Anyway, there's no reason for secrets now," Mai shrugged.

"I think you've gained some weight." Ms. Tamura pretended to inspect her son's waistline.

"Too much dessert," Mai explained. The women burst out laughing.

Kenji shook his head. He wrapped his arms around his chest and rocked back and forth. Then he turned away.

"Dad? Are you okay?" his oldest son asked.

The two women looked at each other, stricken. They had not intended for their little game to cause pain. Mrs. Tamura walked hesitantly to her son's side.

"Mother. Please understand that I could not contact you," Kenji said quietly. Then he clenched his teeth as though to trap in the hundreds of exclamations that rattled around inside of his chest and threatened to fly out in gasps of air. When he had quieted the words and harnessed the phrases, he murmured, "It was not possible for me to see you."

The older woman's eyes began to water. "It's all right, Kenji. We have plenty of time to talk. *Arama!* Look at the dancers! Aren't they lovely!"

"This is the first year we have hosted the *Bon-odori*," Mai said, proudly, resting her head on Kenji's left shoulder.

"I'm glad to see that everyone still knows the dances," Mrs. Tamura replied, looking over her shoulder, as she clutched her son's right shoulder.

The dancing continued, circling around the tower, a bright spot on the valley floor. Nearby, the graves were marked with small, white candles. Their flames were capped by smoke, dark gray like a stroke of ink. Small, dancing shadows on the tombstones wove back and forth, gently, little flags set out to guide the spirits of the dead