

Short Stories

By Morimi Tomihiko

Mochiguma Translations

Translator: koiabi

Editor: eerabbit

Little House on the Prairie

First published in the summer 2011 issue of Bungei magazine.

When Mugiko woke up that morning, she found herself in an unfamiliar place.

She was lying in a futon in a large room, surrounded by piles of boxes. Her big brother and her mother were sleeping next to her. Opening her eyes wide, Mugiko looked around. Through a great bay window with a lace curtain she could see an indigo sky.

Mugiko got out of her futon.

A strand of drool trailing from her brother's wide open mouth. Mugiko poked his cheek, but he didn't stir. He was in grade school now, but compared to her he was still a big sleepyhead.

Beyond the big glass-paned front door lay the outside.

Mugiko saw Pa standing outside. She opened the door and was surprised by a blast of chilly morning air.

"Awake already, Mugiko?" said Pa, turning and smiling at her. A puff of smoke rose from his pipe.

"Where are we?" asked Mugiko.

"We moved here yesterday. You haven't forgotten already, have you?"

"No." Mugiko shook her head, though truthfully until that moment she had.

Putting on sandals she went outside. She shivered, feeling the cold damp sandals beneath her bare feet. But she went out anyways. She felt pleased with herself, getting up early just like Pa.

There was a porch at the front of their house, but no plants or a lawn or trees yet in the small yard. There wasn't even a fence around the house. Beyond the yard, small empty lots of land were marked off, stretching out into the distance. Grass grew in patches in some of the lots, making it all look like a prairie.

There was a cluster of houses not far from Mugiko's house. Beyond it was a green hill, at the top of which stood a strangely shaped tower. Pa said that it was a water tower.

"It feels so empty," said Mugiko.

"The houses haven't been built yet. But they'll build them soon, and then lots of people will come and move in."

The sky was still dark as night, and Mugiko could pick out a handful of faint stars. But a glimmer of light was growing over the hill, indigo night giving way to watery blue. *It's not night anymore*, Mugiko thought to herself. *I'm watching the night end.*

Pa indicated with his pipe towards where the sky was darkest. "We came from the other side of the mountains, over the prefecture border."

"Is it a long way from there?"

"I suppose so."

Mugiko thought about how all her friends at kindergarten had given her a going-away present; one of her closest friends had cried. She could hardly believe that they were all so far away now.

She also thought about how Jack had gone missing. Jack was the little mutt that they owned. While they were out on a walk yesterday the leash had snapped, and Jack had bolted and not come back. Since they'd only just arrived in town, he must have lost his way.

"Is Jack back?"

Pa shook his head. "Not yet. But he'll be alright. He's a clever boy."

Mugiko thought about Jack for a while, staring off into the distance. How excited she would be when Jack finally came bounding home over those empty lots!

"It's still early, now. You should go on back to bed," Pa said to her. "Your Pa's got to go out."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to look for Jack."

Mugiko wanted to go with him, but Pa refused to let her go out so early in the morning.

If there was anyone who could find Jack, though, it was Pa. So she crawled back underneath the futon covers, and soon fell fast asleep.



Mugiko woke to the sounds of Ma making breakfast.

The room smelled like a Sunday morning. Some bread that Pa had bought at a bakery was sitting on the table, and the burbling sound of the coffeemaker filled the air. Her brother was carefully carrying a plate piled high with piping hot bacon and fried eggs to the table. It smelled delicious. Ma poured two glasses of cold milk for Mugiko and her brother.

Everyone sat down to eat.

Pa had walked through town that morning, though Jack was nowhere to be found. But he had stumbled upon the bakery.

"They've just opened up. A stroke of luck for us," said Pa.

"I hope Jack's alright," said her brother. "I think I'll go look for him too."

"Only around the house," Pa said. "Don't go across the road."

"Do you think Jack's at someone else's house?" Ma wondered.

"I ran into the chairman of the neighbourhood association while I was out today. Jack's got a collar with his name on it, so he said if anyone round these parts sees him they'll let us know."

Mugiko drank her milk quietly. She was worried about Jack.

They spent the rest of the day unpacking and tidying up from the move. It had been cool in the morning, but it got hotter as the sun rose higher in the sky. White cumulonimbus clouds gathered on the other side of the water tower. The sky was so blue it almost hurt to look at, so blue it felt as though it would suck you in. In the afternoon a hot breeze stirred up, rustling the grass in the empty lots.

Pa luggered great big boxes around, wiping his face with a towel hanging around his neck. His shirt soaked through with sweat, and his hair was slicked back on his forehead.

"Just look at you," Ma chided him.

"Sweating makes my head itch," Pa grinned.

For the first time in her life, Mugiko had a room of her own. In spite of that she still slept in her brother's room, scared of sleeping alone. In spite of that she felt very proud of herself.

Ma made supper that night as she always did.

"Tomorrow I'll go look for Jack again," said Pa. "Mr. Edogawa said that dogs frighten the fuzzy-wuzzles."

"There are fuzzy-wuzzles around here?" Mugiko asked, leaning forward.

"The chairman said that they've been showing up more and more often. They don't attack people, but they're always howling and making a fuss, and they can climb up and damage the roofs."

"That sounds awful," Ma grimaced.

"Can you keep fuzzy-wuzzles?" asked Mugiko.

"It'd be much harder than keeping a dog."

"But what about baby fuzzy-wuzzles? Couldn't we keep a baby—"

"Absolutely not." Ma put her foot down. "We've already got Jack, and he'd probably end up killing the fuzzy-wuzzles."



After supper, Pa went out into the yard to smoke a pipe.

Mugiko went with him. It was pitch black, and not a sound could be heard. The breeze was cool. Stars twinkled in the vast night sky. In the darkness the hill with the water tower loomed up like an enormous beast. On its slopes could be seen the lights of houses lined up in a row.

"Do people live there, too?"

"Sure. Maybe there are other little girls just like you. Why don't we go out to the woods over that way tomorrow and look for Jack?"

Mugiko nodded happily.

All of a sudden she spotted a small, glittering green light in the darkness across the empty lots. It was bobbing up and down, hovering just over the ground. Startled, she grabbed onto the side of Pa's trousers.

"What's the matter?" he asked, scanning the darkness. "Is it Jack?"

But it wasn't Jack.

A strange cry that sounded like a baby wailing rose up in the distance. It became shriller and shriller like a whistle, until abruptly petering out. Then it started up again, and again and again.

The hair on Mugiko's neck stood on end. Pa gathered her into his arms, and she clung onto him tightly. The air smelled like pipe smoke.

The screen door opened, and Ma poked her head out. "What's all that caterwauling?"

Pa squinted into the darkness. "It's the fuzzy-wuzzles. There must be a few of them prowling around."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Ain't nothing to be afraid of. Long as we leave them alone, they'll leave us alone."

His arms around Mugiko, Pa stared out at the gleaming fuzzy-wuzzle eyes. Seeing how calm he looked, Mugiko gradually became less afraid. No matter how she strained her eyes, the fuzzy-wuzzles wouldn't come into the light; all that could be seen of them were their glinting green eyes.

In a soft voice, Pa began to sing the fuzzy-wuzzle song.

Fuzzy wuzzle, fuzzy-wuzzy-wuzzle

Along came a car and hit the fuzzy-wuzzle

Poor old fuzzy-wuzzle

"Are there any baby fuzzy-wuzzles?" asked Mugiko. "I want to see a baby fuzzy-wuzzle."

"The baby fuzzy-wuzzles must be sleeping in the forest," said Pa, guiding her back inside the house.

That night Mugiko slept in her brother's room on the second floor. Occasionally she would hear the fuzzy-wuzzles howling outside. She wasn't afraid, but the sound made her miss Jack terribly.

Quietly she drew open the curtain. It was pitch black outside, and she could see countless stars in the sky.

"I bet Pa could go up and fetch those stars down," she whispered, imagining over and over Pa climbing up a ladder and reaching out to pluck out the stars.

She could hear her brother softly breathing in his sleep, but she didn't feel sleepy at all. All she wanted was to stay up looking at the stars.

Suddenly one of the stars grew big and round, and she could have sworn it seemed to wink at her.

Mugiko gasped.

Then she was waking up, next morning.



Pa took Mugiko and her brother out the next morning looking for Jack.

They walked through the quiet neighborhoods, and each time they came across someone walking their dog Mugiko would feel butterflies in her stomach, thinking that it might be Jack.

Eventually they arrived at the hill with the water tower. It was covered in trees. Behind the water tower was a concrete stairway that led to a little path through the woods. Sunlight sparkled through the leaves.

"This forest goes on for a ways," said Pa, confidently leading the way. "They're breaking for another neighborhood on the other side."

"Where could Jack be?" Mugiko's brother whispered to her.

At that very moment, something round and yellow came flying out of the trees to their right. Mugiko picked it up. It was a grubby tennis ball.

Mugiko glanced into the trees and was so startled by what she saw that for a moment she forgot to breathe.

A number of grey-furred creatures clung to the boughs of the trees. Some were the size of a fist, while others were the size of a dodgeball. Their little ears twitched and their black eyes blinked as they stared at Mugiko and her brother.

"What's the matter?" called Pa, coming back towards them. The moment he saw the creatures he scooped up Mugiko in one arm and grabbed her brother's hand. The creatures kept their eyes on the two children the whole time.

"Give the fuzzy-wuzzles back the tennis ball," he directed Mugiko.

Mugiko threw the ball into the trees, and Pa took them back the way they had come. The branches rustled as the fuzzy-wuzzles swung from tree to tree behind them, their black eyes fixed on Mugiko.

"Keep walking slowly. Don't startle them," Pa murmured. Mugiko's brother nodded.

As the strange pursuit continued through the forest, a dog howled.

Mugiko immediately understood. "Jack! It's Jack!"

When she looked back at the trees the fuzzy-wuzzles had all disappeared. The dog must have scared them off. They had vanished as quickly as they had showed up.

A man who resembled Pa came down the path, followed by a boy leading a dog. There was no doubt that the dog was Jack, because the moment he saw Mugiko he pulled the leash right out of the boy's hand and came hurtling towards them. "Hey!" the boy hollered.

Pa set Mugiko down on the ground. Jack leapt on her, and leapt on her brother, and rubbed himself all around Pa's legs, his tail wagging a mile a minute.

"Jack!" Mugiko cried.

"That's not his name," said the boy.

"Yes it is!" Mugiko replied, taken aback. She hugged Jack tightly.

"No, he's our dog," the boy insisted.

The man came up and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Now, you ought to be glad we've found his rightful owners."

"Thank you," said Pa. "We've been looking all over for him, ever since he got himself lost."

"Not at all," the man said, waving his hand. "I'm just glad he's back where he belongs."

Pa wiped away sweat.

"Something happen?" asked the man. "That's quite a sweat you've worked up."

"We ran into a swarm of fuzzy-wuzzles just now. Took us for quite a turn."

"You new around here? Can't blame you for being surprised. There's a whole troop of them living in these trees."

The man introduced himself as Mr. Andō; the boy's name was Yūta. They lived in a big house on the hill. Mr. Andō and Pa chatted warmly as they walked along the path.

They stopped at the Andō residence, where they thanked Mr. Andō once again for taking care of Jack. Yūta had a big brother and sister, both of whom were unwilling to give Jack up. But Mr. Andō gave them a big scolding, so they didn't have a choice. The older brother, Daichi, gave in quickly, but the sister, Kyōko, was more hesitant. It was only after Mugiko's brother suggested that they come visit Jack anytime they wanted that she finally agreed reluctantly.

How selfish of them! Jack's our dog! Mugiko thought indignantly.

At any rate, Jack was finally back home.

As they ate supper that night, Pa told Ma about everything that had happened. When she heard about the swarm of fuzzy-wuzzles in the forest, she clapped both hands to her face and gasped, "How horrible!"

"Well, Jack's back home, so let's just count our blessings," Pa said.

"They ought to catch all of those creatures. Awful little things!"

"That wouldn't be right."

Mugiko asked, "Why did the fuzzy-wuzzles come so close?"

"This neighborhood used to be a forest," Pa explained. "And that means that this all once belonged to the fuzzy-wuzzles. Once people started building houses, the fuzzy-wuzzles couldn't live here anymore. But the fuzzy-wuzzles still think it belongs to them."

"Are the fuzzy-wuzzles angry?"

"They've still got their own forest to live in, and as long as they stay there there won't be any trouble. But if one of them comes to town and starts making mischief, it'll have to be caught."

"What happens when a fuzzy-wuzzle gets caught?"

"I think that's *quite* enough about fuzzy-wuzzles," interrupted Ma, bringing the conversation to an end.



Once the short summer break was over Pa went to work. He would get up early in the morning and put on a suit before setting out for the office. Each morning when she heard the front door shut, Mugiko would get out of bed and look out the window, watching Pa's lone figure getting smaller and smaller among the empty lots before he disappeared from sight.

Since they didn't have any friends here, Mugiko and her brother played with each other every day. They'd go out exploring in the morning while it was still cool. Her brother put on a baseball cap, and Mugiko put on a straw hat with a yellow ribbon. Sometimes Ma would hang out laundry to dry in the yard.

They discovered a narrow path through the lots where someone had repeatedly tread over the summer grass. As Mugiko investigated it, she crossed paths with a rotund old man who very much resembled Santa Claus. It was the chairman, Mr. Edogawa.

"Hello there! You must be Suma Mugiko."

"Hello," Mugiko replied.

Mr. Edogawa pointed at the path through the grass with his walking stick. "That's an animal trail."

"An animal trail?"

"It was made by the fuzzy-wuzzles."

Startled by the revelation, Mugiko looked down at her feet. "You mean fuzzy-wuzzles walk through here?"

"That's right. But they only show themselves when they want to." And with that Mr. Edogawa walked off.

Mugiko followed the path, feeling that she had made a very important discovery. Maybe it led straight to where the fuzzy-wuzzles lived. And maybe that was where she'd find the fuzzy-wuzzles babies. She longed to have a fuzzy-wuzzle baby.

As she walked she suddenly became uneasy. It felt as though if she kept following the path she would turn into a baby fuzzy-wuzzle herself.

"Mugi! Mugiii!" she heard her brother shouting from behind her. Startled, she hurried back the way she came towards him.

The next few days, they kept watch on the animal trail together. When Mugiko told him about what Mr. Edogawa had said, he exclaimed, "Let's see if fuzzy-wuzzles really do use this trail!"

It was very hot, and keeping watch was grueling work. The fuzzy-wuzzles didn't show up, and soon enough Mugiko and her brother got tired of watching the trail.

"Maybe they only show up at night," her brother guessed.

Just then a boy came up the path through the empty lots. It was Yūta. Mugiko was surprised to see him all the way over here.

"Whatcha doing?" asked Yūta.

"Fuzzy-wuzzles use this trail," said Mugiko's brother.

"Everyone knows that," said Yūta. That seemed to annoy Mugiko's brother. *Yūta's a jerk*, Mugiko thought to herself.

"I'm gonna catch me a fuzzy-wuzzle," Yūta announced.

"How?" asked Mugiko's brother.

"Can't tell," Yūta answered, going quiet. Mugiko's brother did the same.

Mugiko was impressed by Yūta's idea. She'd never thought of catching a fuzzy-wuzzle herself. "If you catch a bunch of them, can I have one?" she asked.

Yūta waved a stalk of grass through the air and thought for a little while. "Nope," he finally said.

"Why not?"

"Cuz you guys have Jack."

Mugiko glared at him and thought, *What a jerk.*



Mugiko was awakened one night by a strange sound from the darkness outside the window. As she lay there motionless she heard it again. Her brother grabbed her hand and whispered, "What's that?" It sounded a little bit like the fuzzy-wuzzles' howling, but it was higher-pitched. The unnerving sound repeated again and again. Mugiko felt her heart thumping in her chest.

A light came on in the hallway. Mugiko and her brother came out from his room to see Pa with a coat on and a flashlight in hand.

"Don't you two worry about anything. Go on back to bed," he told them, before leaving the house.

Mugiko and her brother went back to the room, but they were too anxious to sleep. The sound came again and again. Her brother pulled aside the curtain and looked outside, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Bright moonlight shone through the window.

After a considerable amount of time had passed, Mugiko was starting to doze off, when she heard Ma and Pa's voices at the front door. She and her brother came down the steps, rubbing their eyes. Just by the door there was a cardboard box, and inside it was a little fuzzy-wuzzle, curled up on a bath towel. Mugiko sucked in her breath.

Pa said that it had been caught in a trap someone had set outside. He'd come outside to find that Mr. Edogawa had come out as well, flashlight in hand, to investigate the noise. Together they had discovered the fuzzy-wuzzle in the trap, crying plaintively for help.

"I can't believe someone'd do something like that." Pa's face was a thundercloud. "Mr. Edogawa reckons he's got an idea who done it. And I know it wouldn't be you two?"

They quickly shook their heads.

At that moment Mugiko remembered what Yūta had said: *I'm gonna catch me a fuzzy-wuzzle.* But she was too afraid to tell Pa about it.

"It's a little hurt, so your father brought it in," said Ma. "We'll have to dress the wound and feed it, poor thing."

"You mean we're going to keep it?" Mugiko exclaimed.

Pa shook his head. "Fuzzy-wuzzles aren't the kind of creature you keep for a pet. We're just going to treat its wound, that's all. It's still only a little fuzzy-wuzzle, and its mother must be worried sick."

That same night Pa took the little fuzzy-wuzzle outside and released it. A large fuzzy-wuzzle came to fetch it in the empty lots. Pa said that it watched him the whole time he was walking back home, its silver fur glinting in the moonlight.



As summer neared its end, the house began to resemble a home. New things arrived: a table, a sofa, a TV, a bed for Mugiko. On Sunday, Pa and Ma went out to the yard to discuss things. Pa said he wanted to build brick flowerbeds and pave out a path with cement blocks and gravel.

"One thing at a time!" Ma laughed. "You don't have to do it all at once."

"It's hard to sit still with all these projects locked up in my head. This yard would look a sight better with a lawn, trees, flowerbeds. Then we could set up a table and eat breakfast out here."

"What about camping?" asked Mugiko.

Pa nodded. "Sure, I don't see why not." He waxed on about building a simple firepit for barbecuing, like the one the Andōs had.

On Saturday the Andōs had invited them over for a barbecue. They took Jack along, of course. The Andōs had a firepit built from grey cement blocks in their yard, with a metal grate on top where they roasted meat and vegetables. Mugiko loved how it felt like camping.

The food was delicious, and Daichi and Kyōko were agreeable as could be when they saw Jack. But Yūta was grouchy and wouldn't say a word to Mugiko.

"I'm afraid it was Yūta who tried to catch the fuzzy-wuzzle," said Mr. Andō. "I'm awful sorry about all the bother."

After the food was gone, Mugiko drank barley tea. Her brother was drinking cola, but Mugiko didn't like the way cola tingled in her nose.

Yūta came up to her.

"You tattled on me," he said threateningly.

Mugiko's heart jumped into her throat. "I did not!"

Yūta thought that she had told on him, though it had been the mayor who saw him setting the trap.

"You shouldn't have set that mean trap!" she retorted.

"You were begging me for a fuzzy-wuzzle!"

"I was not!"

"You're a liar!"

Yūta grabbed her hair and pulled. Tears sprang into Mugiko's eyes, and she hit Yūta with both hands. Everyone else quickly separated the two. Mugiko burst into tears, but Yūta remained stonewashed and silent even when Mr. Andō was scolding him.

"Why did Yūta pull your hair?" Pa asked her after they went home.

"I don't know," Mugiko sulked.



One morning Pa went overseas for a business trip.

To Mugiko's disappointment (for she had wanted to see him off), by the time she woke up he had already gone. He didn't come home that night, and wouldn't be returning for another four days. The house felt a little bit empty without him.

Jack was restless that evening. Tied up in the yard he ran around and around, pointing his nose up at the sky and sniffing intently.

"Might be a storm brewing," Ma mused as she took down the laundry.

No matter how Mugiko stroked his back, Jack just wouldn't settle down.

"What's wrong, Jack? What is it, boy?"

A warm breeze was blowing, and the grass swayed in the empty lots like a living thing. Clouds steadily rolled in, smothering the sky. Jack let out a howl. Standing up, Mugiko saw several fuzzy-wuzzles in the grass, staring her way.

Jack wouldn't stop howling, so they let him inside the house. Even then he wouldn't stop pacing, his claws click-clacking on the floor, letting out the occasional howl just for good measure.

The fuzzy-wuzzles were still prowling around outside after the sun went down. Mugiko peeked under a curtain and saw their green eyes shining. Everyone was on edge.

Mr. Edogawa came after they had finished supper.

"I think we'd better do something about that pack of fuzzy-wuzzles, drive 'em off. I've got some sparklers with me."

"What good will sparklers do?" Ma asked.

"They're afraid of fire, you see."

Mr. Edogawa was right: once he set off the little sparklers in the yard, the fuzzy-wuzzles vanished into the night.

But the next night, and the night after that, the fuzzy-wuzzles came back to lurk around the house. Strange sounds could be heard all through the night, and come morning the yard would be covered with footprints.

"What do they want?" Ma fretted, her voice filled with apprehension. "We haven't got any food for them."

Poor Jack was at the end of his rope.

I just know that Pa would do something if he was here, Mugiko thought, wishing that Pa would come back soon.

On the fourth night, there was a storm.

Pa must have been back in Japan by then, but when Mugiko listened to the wind rattling the windows she felt that he still must be on the airplane somewhere up in the air. Frightful images of the plane crashing filled her head. But that wasn't so. She knew that Pa's plane had landed long ago and that he was on the train at this very moment heading home. Yet for reasons she couldn't explain she was worried all the same.

By the front door Jack would not settle down.

Mugiko and her brother tried their best to stay up waiting for Pa to come home. But the hours went by, and the knock on the front door never came. The dark wind lashed at the window panes, and occasionally the rain would come pounding down in sheets. And amidst the wind and rain, they could also hear the howling of the fuzzy-wuzzles. What could they be so riled up at on a stormy night like this?

Mugiko found it harder and harder to keep her eyes open, and she began to nod off on the living room floor. Ma brought out a thin blanket for her to lie on.

There was a sudden flurry of activity at the front door.

"Whoa, Jack, whoa!" came Pa's voice, followed by Ma saying, "You're home!"

Mugiko got up and went to the entryway to see Pa standing at the door, soaking wet. She raced up to hug him.

"You're getting soaked!" he laughed.

"I'm so glad you're back," Ma said.

"The flight was fine, but there was some trouble with the train," said Pa.

"Things have been awful here. The fuzzy-wuzzles have been on the prowl, and Jack has been so restless."

"I saw them as I was walking back. Took me for a turn, seeing them all howling in the rain."

"What do you think they're up to?"

"They've been riled up ever since that business with the trap. All we can do is hope they calm down," Pa replied, listening to the voices clamoring outside.



The fuzzy-wuzzles continued to show up every night. They would gather in the empty lots and howl, or climb onto the roof in great numbers and make eerie scratching noises. Everyone started to call these Fuzzy-wuzzle Jamborees.

The neighbourhood association held a meeting to decide what to do. Pa joined them as well.

Mr. Edogawa, the association chairman, apparently even went to city hall to ask what to do. Everyone had to work together to chase away the fuzzy-wuzzles when they came out of their forest. Mr. Edogawa said that they had to light bonfires on the fuzzy-wuzzle trail and catch a few to make an example out of, or else the fuzzy-wuzzles would keep coming to make trouble in town.

Pa looked troubled when he came back from the meeting. "I hope we won't have to resort to that," he said.

"Is it bad for fuzzy-wuzzles to come to town?" asked Mugiko.

"They have to stay in their forest. People live here, they can't just come as they please," Pa explained.

"But aren't people going to build more houses in the forest?"

When Mugiko had gone shopping with Ma the other day, she had seen clearings of reddish dirt where part of the forest had been felled.

"That's just the way of it. Otherwise folks wouldn't be able to move here."

"But if the forest goes away, where do the fuzzy-wuzzles go?"

Pa didn't answer.



A few days later, a fire broke out nearby.

It'd been started by Yūta. He'd cornered a baby fuzzy-wuzzle in the empty lots, but then a lot of big fuzzy-wuzzles had surrounded him. Knowing that fuzzy-wuzzles were afraid of fire, he lit a piece of paper that he was carrying, but ended up setting the dry grass ablaze.

In a panic Yūta ran to Mugiko's house, shouting, "Fire!"

Ma called the fire brigade. "Stay in the house!" she instructed Mugiko. Mugiko could hear Mr. Edogawa and the neighbors shouting urgently outside.

Thankfully, Yūta had raised the alarm quickly enough that the fire was extinguished before the fire truck even arrived. But he did, of course, get another severe scolding.

After that the fuzzy-wuzzles stopped showing up at night, perhaps startled by the fire. But Mugiko could still feel them lurking out there, somewhere. She went to look at the fuzzy-wuzzle trail with her brother, but now it felt different. It was as though there were things hiding all around, watching them. When she sat down on the grass, she could sense something slinking towards her through the grass behind her, but when she turned around there was nothing there. So the days passed.

Pa took Mugiko and her brother and Jack to cheer Yūta up. "Yūta's learned his lesson," he said.

When they arrived at the Andō residence on the hill beneath the water tower, Pa got to talking with Mr. Andō. Daichi and Kyōko played with her brother, while Yūta stood alone in the yard with his hands in his pockets, deep in thought.

Mugiko went up to him. He scowled at her.

"I won't try to catch any more fuzzy-wuzzles," he said. "Wish I could have gotten my hands on a baby, though."

"But you shouldn't be mean to the fuzzy-wuzzles."

"It's not like anyone cares."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Edogawa scares them with sparklers, and people from city hall come to catch them."

"But that's not being mean to them."

"Shows how much you know. When they catch the fuzzy-wuzzles, they kill them."

"That's not true!" Mugiko said in shock.

But this time Yūta didn't get mad at her. He just stood there looking down at the floor.

"Everyone's mean to the fuzzy-wuzzles," he declared.

"Pa's a good man. He isn't mean to them."

"Yes, he is."

"No he isn't!"

"All this land belongs to the fuzzy-wuzzles. But your pa and my pa drove them away. That's why the fuzzy-wuzzles are mad. All of the people here are mean to them." Yūta said all of this in one breath, a frightening glint in his eye as he glared at Mugiko. "Everyone's mean to them. So why can't I catch them, too?"



That night everyone was in pajamas and getting ready for bed when a rustling broke out in the front yard.

Ma looked out a window and let out a little scream. "Good gracious, it's a whole pack of them!" she gasped.

Pa took a glance outside and said, "I'll go take care of it."

"It's too dangerous!" Ma insisted.

Pa looked at everyone and grinned. "It'll be alright. You all stay right here."

He opened the curtain wide, letting the light spill out from the living room into the yard. The fuzzy-wuzzles retreated as if they were afraid of the light. Pa opened the front door, put on his sandals, and calmly walked into the yard.

"Shut the curtains," he instructed, so Mugiko had to peep out from the gap between the curtains. Multitudes of green eyes glittered in the empty lots.

Pa stood alone in the empty yard, smoking his pipe.

Before long a large fuzzy-wuzzle crept out from the neighboring lot and entered the yard. Its beautiful silver fur shimmered in the light which leaked out between the curtains. The silver fuzzy-wuzzle came right up to Pa's feet and sat still on the ground. Pa swayed back and forth a little, and the fuzzy-wuzzle did the same, as did all of the emerald eyes sparkling in the darkness.

Pa crouched down by the fuzzy-wuzzle and grinned at it. The fuzzy-wuzzle's ears twitched. When Pa offered it his pipe, the fuzzy-wuzzle opened wide and put its mouth on the mouthpiece. It inhaled deeply, then smoothly exhaled a puff of smoke. It was almost as if it was playing with Pa.

After a little while the silver fuzzy-wuzzle returned to the darkness of the empty lots, and as it did the emerald eyes all winked out, leaving Pa standing there alone.

Pa came back inside. "I wonder what they came here for," he said. As he went up the stairs he hummed a little tune.

"Good gracious," Ma said. "I just don't understand it."

Pa's voice came echoing down the staircase.

Fuzzy wuzzle, fuzzy-wuzzy-wuzzle

Along came a car and hit the fuzzy-wuzzle

Poor old fuzzy-wuzzle



August was almost over.

Mugiko and her brother were starting school in September. Her brother would be attending the same school as Daichi, and Mugiko would be going to a brand new kindergarten.

The fuzzy-wuzzles began their strange march on the last Sunday in August.

The sun sank behind the mountains near the prefecture border that day, a sun which was redder than Mugiko had ever seen before. It bathed the town in a dreamy, golden light. And in that light the fuzzy-wuzzles came marching through the streets. They walked

without making a sound, in an orderly, single line. The townsfolk looked on in wonder, though the fuzzy-wuzzle marched on as if they were not there.

Pa took the family to see them.

There were big fuzzy-wuzzles, and small fuzzy-wuzzles. The baby fuzzy-wuzzles clung onto their mothers' backs. That was the first time Mugiko had seen a baby fuzzy-wuzzle. They were as tiny as cotton balls, and they had tiny ears and tiny tails. One of them stared at Mugiko with its big black eyes.

Mugiko couldn't help herself.

"Please, Pa," she said, "Get me that baby fuzzy-wuzzle."

"Hush, Mugiko. The fuzzy-wuzzles are going far away."

"That's why I want it!"

"Why, Mugiko, what do you want a fuzzy-wuzzle for? We already have Jack at home," Ma exclaimed.

"I want a fuzzy-wuzzle too! I'll take care of it, I won't ever let it come to harm!"

Mugiko knew that she would never see the fuzzy-wuzzles again. That was why she couldn't help but be unreasonable now. Tears began to brim in her eyes.

A very large, stately fuzzy-wuzzle walked by. It was the silver fuzzy-wuzzle which had played with Pa in the yard. Pa said nothing as it passed before him. The line of fuzzy-wuzzles wound its way through the streets, onwards on the fuzzy-wuzzle trail towards the hill with the water tower. There were so many of them it was impossible to count.

"This was their road," Pa murmured. "That's why they wanted to pass by it one last time, before they go deep into their forest."

The line of fuzzy-wuzzles wound on for a long time, and everyone stood still and watched them go. By the time the line had pulled itself over the edge of the world the sun had sunk behind the mountains, and the sky was a velvet blue.

No one said a word.

The world felt very empty now. The music which Mugiko had always heard had gone quiet, and she would never hear it again.

"Come, let's go home," Pa said in a lonesome voice, beginning to walk across the empty lots.

From then on there was never another word of trouble with the fuzzy-wuzzles, and Mugiko never saw them ever again.

The Adventures of a Saintly Vending Machine

First published in SF Hōseki 2015 (Sci-Fi Gems 2015) in August 2015 by Kōbunsha.

I was working late at the office that night.

Time for a quick break, I thought, heading up the staircase to the roof.

The patent office at which I was employed was housed in an old five-story building, and whenever I needed a break from it all I retreated to the roof. There was a sense of post-apocalyptic melancholy about it all: the faded bench, the flimsy drying racks, the myriad bits of garbage scattered all around. Whenever I became fed up with slaving away at my desk (which was always) I would head up there alone to gaze at the sky and ponder where humanity was headed.

The rooftop of the adjacent building gave off a very different impression. It had a lush green lawn; a sparkling, futuristic vending machine; and white tables beneath rainbow parasols. "The grass is greener on the other side" doesn't begin to cut it; it was more like the difference between heaven and hell. It drove me wild with envy. Only a few meters separated this building from that one, but it was a maddening, insurmountable gap.

I wish our rooftop had a vending machine, I thought heading up to the roof that night, but no sooner had I stepped outside than I let out a gasp.

Sitting smack-dab in the middle of the rooftop was a vending machine.

When had they installed it? I hadn't heard so much as a whisper of it around the water cooler, and it hadn't been there at lunch. Perhaps some god had taken pity on my solitary overtime labours and placed it here on this barren rooftop. Come to think of it, there was something mystical about the pale light which it shed upon the surroundings.

"However it got here, I'm glad it's here."

I jauntily walked up to it, inserted a coin, and pressed a button. But rather than dispense a can, the saintly vending machine simply sat there silently shedding saintly light upon my face. Surely it didn't think it was going to get away innocently pretending that it hadn't just eaten my money.

"Come on, just work, will you?" I pounded it with both fists.

"Whatcha *doin'?*" said a voice from the other rooftop.

I glanced over and saw a lone woman languidly leaning on the handrail at the edge of the rooftop. I'd seen her a few times before on the adjacent rooftop, though we'd never spoken a word to one another.

She was always alone, and I didn't know where she worked or what she did. But she was beautiful in a sort of otherworldly way, as if her thin, spindly figure was only just held together by a delicate celestial balance. I'd racked my brain for weeks trying to decide who she reminded me of before settling on Mia Farrow. I rented a bunch of old movies starring Mia Farrow in her younger days—*John and Mary*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Follow Me!*—and in my head I started to call the woman from the other rooftop Mia. You can all stop snickering now.

*Whatcha *doin'?**

It was clear from the way she slurred "doin'" that she was sloshed. I walked over from the vending machine to the handrail. Laughter echoed from somewhere below in the chasm, likely a party being held in the other building. Perhaps Mia had slipped out of the soirée and come up here alone to sober up in the cool night air.

"Having a party? That must be nice," I called. This was my chance to finally get to know her.

But the response I received was not at all what I had expected.

"Thief!"

"Thief?"

I was so bewildered that I couldn't process what she had just said. As I stood there perplexed, Mia leaned forward, the look on her face saying, *You're not fooling anybody*. It was bewitching. She raised her arm and pointed at something behind me.

"That vending machine belongs to *us*."

It was only then that I noticed that the futuristic vending machine on the other rooftop which I had seen on their rooftop during lunch was no longer there. I turned around and looked at the vending machine. It did bear more than a passing resemblance, but I had no idea what it was doing over here.

"Look, I don't know anything about it. I'm not a thief..."

"So you're telling me that it sprouted wings and flew away?" she drawled unreasonably. "It ate my coin so I gave it a good kick, and then it just went *poof*. So I'm like, *Where did it go?* And I look around for it, and then I see you on your rooftop putting in a coin. Don't you think that's a *little* fishy? That's gotta be *our* vending machine."

At this point I was starting to get annoyed. For one whole year, fantasizing about this woman on the rooftop had been my escape from the tedium of my job. I'd secretly admired her from afar, I'd watched Mia Farrow movies on repeat, I'd gone out and bought Mia Farrow's autobiography, I'd even pored over all the lurid details of the court battle with Woody Allen. And now the first words out of her mouth were to accuse me of being a vending machine thief? That was just too much. From the deepest desires often come the deadliest hate.

"And how exactly am I supposed to have stolen an entire vending machine?" I spat, with a contempt which I had rarely heard in my own voice. "Unlike you, I'm on the clock. I don't have the time to waste talking to someone who's clearly hammered. If you want a soda so bad, you can come here and buy it yourself!"

I regretted the words as soon as I had said them. Mia's expression froze over, and she immediately climbed over the guardrail, apparently intending to jump the gap. But the space between her building and mine was over five meters wide; even a sober person would have been hard pressed to make the leap, let alone someone who'd spent the evening throwing back drink after drink.

"Stop! Don't do it!" I yelled, frantically gesturing with both hands. "You're going to fall!"

Her arms hooked around the guardrail behind her, Mia glared at me. "I thought you told me to come over and buy a soda myself!"

"Look, I didn't mean it, all right?"

"If you're really sorry, then bring that vending machine back right this instant!"

"That's crazy talk!"

"Then I'm coming to get my soda!"

Suddenly a man appeared on the other roof. The giant eggplant costume he was wearing made it pretty obvious that he'd just left the party himself. He was on the shorter side, and his thick black-rimmed glasses hung loosely off his scarlet face, which poked out of the costume through a hole. You could practically see the party mood steaming from his body

as he danced a suave little two-step. But the instant that Eggplant Man saw Mia on the other side of the guardrail, the grin was wiped from his face.

"What are you doing!?" he shrieked, the bulbous bottom of the eggplant bouncing up and down as he swiftly waddled towards us.

"Get your hands off me!" Mia said, slapping his hand away. "I'm going over to get my soda!"

"Hey buddy!" I called. "I keep telling her not to try leaping over here. You'd better do something quick before she falls!"

"M-my apologies," he stammered.

"You don't need to apologize for her!"

Mia and Eggplant Man started to argue back and forth across the guardrail. They didn't sound like coworkers; they were more like two lovers quarreling, or a talent manager trying to placate a spoiled starlet. Sweat dripped down Eggplant Man's ruddy face as he desperately pleaded with her, but it was no use: each time he tried to approach her she would release the guardrail and impetuously wave him off, coming dangerously close to falling.

Eventually Eggplant Man took a coin out from his wallet and leaned over the railing, seemingly defeated. "Use this to buy a drink, would you?"

He flung the coin over the gap. I caught it, thinking how ridiculous it was that I had to be the errand boy, but there wasn't much use trying to argue with someone who was sotted off her rocker.

"What should I get?" I shouted.

"Anything!" called back Eggplant Man.

"Don't be stupid!" Mia added. "Get me a cola, or else!"

I inserted the coin into the vending machine and pushed the cola button, but nothing came out. I scowled, only now remembering that the same thing had happened to me minutes earlier.

"Work, you slacker!" I said, prodding it. To my utter astonishment, the vending machine smoothly skidded backwards about 30 centimeters as if it was on ice skates, flashing its lights in seeming displeasure at my violent act.

To say I was startled would be quite an understatement. "What the hell? Why are you running from me?"

I approached and took a closer look at it. During the course of my inspection I discovered that despite the fact that it was glowing quite brightly it didn't seem to have any discernible power source. I got down on my hands and knees to look underneath and made an even more surprising discovery: the vending machine was floating ever so slightly above the ground.

"Now wait just one *motherloving* second."

Sprawled on the ground, I turned my head up to look at the vending machine. The beatific light it emanated almost seemed to be whispering profound epiphanies directly into my brain.

This is no ordinary vending machine, I realized.

The opening scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey* suddenly flashed into my head. A mysterious monolith descends without warning upon a shambling band of apes—a device sent by a vastly more advanced civilization of extraterrestrials, intended to advance humanity to the next stage of its evolutionary process. And just as fearfully as those apes approached that monolith on that blasted plain, so too did I now approach the vending machine on this desolate rooftop, this vending machine that had been sent in the year of our Lord 2015 to guide humanity to a higher plane of being. I, a humble patent office clerk, was about to become a being of astral ambitions. To paraphrase Sakamoto Ryōma, dawn was breaking over humanity.

I was so transfixed by these delusions that I completely forgot about the drama taking place on the other rooftop, until a high-pitched scream brought me back to reality.

"Who dares stand in the way of the dawn of humanity!?" I thundered, looking over to see that Eggplant Man had snuck up behind Mia and caught her in a bear hug. Surely he was attempting to keep her from falling. Then again, though I am loath to doubt the decency of my fellow man, the way his hands were fondling her chest seemed a bit suspect. Perhaps he was simply having trouble seeing out of that eggplant costume.

"Look out!" I shouted, looking on aghast as Mia flailed around trying to escape his grasp, but it was too late. As I'd feared, Mia lost her balance and went tumbling into the abyss.

"Oh no!" Eggplant Man shouted stupidly.

At that same moment, the vending machine disappeared.

I ran to the railing and looked over it to see Mia sprawled on top of the radiant vending machine, which was floating there without a sound.,

"Oh my God!" she gasped.

On the other rooftop Eggplant Man's jaw dropped to the floor.

The vending machine ascended smoothly and landed back on my rooftop. Mia took my hand and shakily hopped down. She looked at me, then at the vending machine, then back at me, completely sober now.

"What is that thing?"

"It's 2015: A Space Vending Machine."

"Meaning?"

"It must be something else posing as a vending machine. I suspect it was dispatched here by aliens."

Mia swallowed nervously. Bathed in the pale light of the vending machine she looked like a scared little girl.

"That's not good," she said. "I was just kicking it earlier."

"If it was mad at you, it wouldn't have saved you."

"Oh. Right." Mia let out a relieved sigh.

I watched the vending machine continue to cycle its lights on and off.

"Why are its lights blinking?" Mia whispered in my ear, though obviously I knew as much as she did. Maybe the saintly vending machine was trying to communicate something to us representatives of humanity. Maybe its lights operated on a special wavelength that was even now rewriting our DNA. When I said this to Mia, she took a step backward, looking creeped out.

The vending machine continued to blink silently.

"It's Morse code!" I heard Eggplant Man shout. "SOS! SOS!"

SOS? I thought blankly.

Suddenly Mia screamed and grabbed my arm, pointing upward into the night sky. A bright object was blazing through the clouds at tremendous speed. It wasn't a bird. It wasn't a plane. It was an enormous vending machine, made up of countless smaller vending machines. In no time at all the colossal mecha-vending machine was hovering over our heads. Our surroundings were as bright as a summer day at the beach.

"What the hell?" Mia gasped. I only just kept myself from exclaiming the same thing.

The bottom of the flying titan was made up of hundreds of vending machines, each shedding pale light upon us. It looked so close I felt as if I could reach up and touch the rows of drink samples displayed above us. I even spotted an old-fashioned vending machine displaying Cheerio soft drinks.

The vending machines started to shift in orderly fashion like a sliding block puzzle, revealing a gap the size of a single vending machine.

Without a sound the vending machine on the roof began to rise upward towards its flying brethren, docking almost happily in the gap like a lost lamb returning to its flock. The vending machines all started to blink in an undulating wave of saintly light that swept over the body of the giant Megazord. Perhaps they were singing in vending machine-ese, welcoming their prodigal son home.

The colossus zoomed off, and in the blink of an eye it was gone.

After a second of stunned silence, I rubbed my eyes. Everything was plunged into darkness again, as if we hadn't just made contact with aliens, as if we hadn't just glimpsed a new dawn for humanity.

"Hey," croaked Eggplant Man. "So I'm not dead, am I?"

"Kitsune udon," I heard Mia whisper, her voice no louder than a sigh.

"Come again?" I said.

"I saw this vending machine in that giant swarm that sold hot kitsune udon. I just thought that humans are kind of funny. All that futuristic technology gathered together, and all it does is sell hot udon."

"I could go for a bowl right now."

"I wonder if that vending machine is still out there..."

We stared off into the distance after those flying vending machines.

It seemed that humanity had been left behind, and I would have no choice but to go back to work.

Child Peering into Goldfish Bowl

First published in the September 2004 issue of Shōsetsu Shinchō by Shinchōsha.

Over the Obon break I decided to visit a friend of mine who lived in Kyoto.

We were pretty good buddies in high school, and usually walked to school together in the morning, but once we hit college we completely stopped talking, as though we'd never been friends at all. Two years ago I heard he dropped out; apparently he'd apprenticed to a potter, of all things, somewhere around Iwakura. I'd learned this all second-hand from my old classmates, whom I met up with maybe once a year. It was all just ghostly rumors floating around, the kind that no one really bothers to double check for themselves.

During the summer rainy season, my parents received an invitation addressed to me, which they forwarded to my company dorm in Tokushima. It was for a small solo exhibition my old friend was holding at a gallery in Shijō. Obviously I didn't exactly have the time on my hands to be traveling all the way to Kyoto for an art exhibition. But seeing the proof in my hands that he was out there somewhere making something of himself made me a little misty for the old days, so I sent him a postcard congratulating him and telling him what I'd been up to. Then I forgot about the whole thing.

In August I got a reply from him, saying how glad he was to get my postcard and inviting me to come visit over Obon. He was living by the Takase River at the foot of a small mountain in Takaragaike. No need to be shy, he said, he was renting a little house all to himself. He seemed very anxious that I come.

I supposed it wouldn't hurt to stay for one night and then swing by to see my parents.



In the morning I rode the ferry to Osaka and then took the train to Kyoto.

It was past noon when I arrived in Demachiyanagi, where I transferred to the Eizan Railway going up towards Kurama. Houses began to fill the windows as the train entered the residential parts of town. As I gazed out the window, a sort of melancholy came over me; it felt as though I was going to visit someone I had never met in my life. Maybe that feeling had to do with the phone call this morning.

I hadn't seen him once since graduation, and though it didn't feel quite satisfactory for our first conversation in such a long time to be over the phone, I gave him a call before I departed from Tokushima. But as we talked the conversation started to feel suffocating, and I let him know when I'd be arriving before quickly hanging up. I was quite taken aback, but the cause of it seemed to be that his voice had changed. I'd been expecting him to sound the way he had in high school, so it was a shock for me hearing the huskiness of age in his voice. Perhaps he felt the same way. I told myself that was what had made things feel so disjointed.

I disembarked the train at a deserted station with three platforms. The other people who got off the train departed into the bright afternoon sunlight. I remained on the platform, listening to the cicadas trill in the trees at the edge of the station, which for some reason put me in a traveling mood.

I sat on a bench and called my friend, but he didn't pick up. It was a little surprising since I'd been expecting him to come meet me at the station. I knew where his house was, but wandering aimlessly around town looking for it in this scorching heat was not an idea that appealed to me.

After sitting there for a while just looking at the shimmering heat haze rising from the tracks, I tried calling him again. But the phone just kept ringing. For some reason this conjured up the image of the dark interior of an old house in my mind. It was probably from when I'd visited his grandpa's house in high school. I imagined him standing in the corner, standing there motionlessly listening to the phone ring again and again, yet making no move to pick it up. I don't know why I thought about that.

I gave up and left the station.

Walking through the dusty summer air felt like walking through a sauna. The station opened up to a broad thoroughfare, with a pedestrian bridge spanning above the cars zooming by below. The sound of water rushing over steps filled the air, which I assumed must have been coming from the Takano River. Across the river was a lush forest, and though the cries of cicadas pierced the air, that only made it seem even more quiet. The sun was going down in the west behind the trees, and the instant I entered their shade the air became cool.

Maybe he'd just gone out to buy ingredients for dinner. There wasn't any point in ruining this long-awaited reunion just because I was feeling vexed at the heat. I decided I'd wander around the mountain a little longer, letting my feet take me where they would, and call him again later.



My friend lived in a quiet residential neighbourhood. It was a long way from the tourist spots, but that was probably perfect for someone who had lived in Kyoto as long as he had. There wasn't much point living in a tourist hotbed if you weren't going to do any sightseeing, something I knew well from my time living in Nara. I didn't know much about making pottery, but I imagined that living in these serene surroundings nearby flowing water and trees probably helped him focus on his craft.

The neighbourhood wrapped around the base of the mountain, in the shadow of which I made my way through the quiet streets. The narrow path threaded between timeworn residence walls and waterways. A cool, damp breeze flowed from the woods to the right. There was hardly anyone else around; the only sound was the trilling of the cicadas.

As I wandered down the road I encountered a girl, who wore a bright red yukata which shimmered like the scales of a goldfish. Perhaps there was a festival nearby. But I found it strange that anyone would change into a yukata this early in the afternoon when the sun was still beating down so intensely.

She was sitting in front of the gate of an old, apparently abandoned house, swinging a wind chime from her hand, seemingly having nothing better to do. She glared at me intently as I passed by wiping sweat from my forehead. I had intended to ask her the way to my friend's house, but the fierce look in her eye made me think better of it.

A little further on I came across a vending machine by the road, from which I bought a can of iced coffee. As I stood there drinking I glanced back down the road. The girl was standing in the middle of the path staring at me, the wind chime still dangling from her hand. I found her doggedness somehow irritating, and taking another gulp of coffee I looked away deliberately and walked on.

The houses gave way to green fields, and across them was a row of gravestones that seemed to hold up the forest. I called my friend again, but as I'd expected the phone just kept ringing.

At the foot of the mountain I saw the entrance to a shrine, surrounded by a number of worn crimson banners. The path into the shrine went through a copse of cedar trees and ascended leftwards on a slope, before being swallowed up by darkness. Thinking that I might be able to sit down and rest at the shrine, I followed the path through the trees.

As I walked towards the shrine, I suddenly had the feeling there was something behind me; wildly I wondered whether that creepy girl had followed me. I nonchalantly turned around, but there was no one there.

The shrine appeared to be dedicated to the god Daikoku. Here the trees were sparse and the sun shone brightly, a haven of light amidst the gloom of the forest. I tried calling once more, but of course there was no answer.

In high school my friend had been a little uptight, which the rest of our otherwise irresponsible, devil-may-care circle found slightly off-putting. I'd let him know that I'd be arriving in Kyoto sometime in the morning, and I'd even told him that I'd call once I reached the station. It didn't seem like him at all to leave me hanging like this.

As I stared at a statue of Daikoku and pondered the situation, I heard the sound of light footsteps on gravel behind me, and turned around to find him standing there.

"Don't scare me like that!" I said.

One corner of his mouth curled upwards in a smile.



We made sporadic small talk as we walked towards his house.

I'd thought the awkwardness of our conversation in the morning had been because it was over the phone, but even now that we were talking face to face the odd stiffness remained. His lopsided smile was the same as I remembered, but where it had once been bashful, now it seemed somehow insincere. Once his face had been pale and thin, and now it was podgy and tinged with an unhealthy yellow; his laboured breathing was rather alarming.

"You can't expect someone to stay the same for a decade," he said, wiping his sweaty face with a handkerchief.

"Most of the guys at the alumni meetups haven't changed too much."

"Well, that's them."

We retraced the path that I had earlier taken alone. Maybe it was the fact that we'd just met up, but I found it frustratingly difficult to find things to talk about.

When I asked him what he'd been doing at the shrine he claimed that he was simply out for a walk. That seemed strange to me, considering that I'd let him know when I'd be coming, and also because it was the hottest time of the day. But I decided not to pursue the matter

further. He began to babble on about the Obon dance that had been held at the nearby shrine the other day, and how the temple we'd just left—Matsugasaki Daikokuten—was part of the Seven Lucky Gods pilgrimage, and so on, as if to fill in the silence between us.

We walked down that narrow path in the shade of the trees, between the walls and the waterway. Apparently I'd walked right past his house. We eventually came to a halt right in front of the old house which I'd previously assumed was abandoned. The girl was nowhere in sight.

"What a charming residence," I said politely.

"Yep," he grunted, sliding open the door.

A sudden uneasiness came over me as I watched the back of his sweat-stained shirt disappear inside, and regretting having accepted his invitation to stay here, I started to think up excuses I could use to return to Nara tonight.



It was a small house with two floors. On the right side of the hallway that led in from the door was the dining room, and on the left was a spacious tatami room. There was an acrid scent in the air that reminded me of incense.

"Make yourself comfy," he said, beckoning me into the tatami room and opening a large glass-paneled door that faced out onto a garden before returning into the hallway. I listened to his footsteps recede deeper into the house, towards what I would later learn was a room that he'd remodeled into a pottery studio.

The trees in the garden pressed in threateningly as if they were about to swallow up the house, and the air buzzed with the chirruping of cicadas outside. Perhaps it was only the shade that made the narrow garden feel so dreary. The only saving grace was how cool it was here, making it seem as though I had only hallucinated the burning afternoon sun. *You probably don't even need an air conditioner*, I mused.

Setting my luggage to the side I sat down on the floor, gazing out into the shaded garden. A few small trees were scattered around, from the looks of them rarely trimmed, and a large blue pot sat out exposed to the elements.

My friend returned with teacups which looked like he'd made them himself, then went into the dining room across the hall and clattered around for some time before coming back with a plate of watermelon and cold barley tea.

"It's so nice and cool here," I commented, but that was all I could think of to say. We sat there eating watermelon in silence.

"What do you think?" he suddenly asked, indicating the teacups on the tray.

"I don't really know how to judge pottery," I answered.

"I suppose you wouldn't," he said with a wry smile.

"Where do you make your pottery?"

"I remodeled the room at the end of the hall into a studio."

"Why'd you start making pottery anyways?"

"It's complicated. It's a long story; I'd rather not get into it."

"Alright, if that's how you feel."

Out of nowhere he asked a question I found rather cryptic. "How did you know I was making pottery here?"

"What do you mean? I got your invitation."

"My invitation?"

"Yeah, the one about your solo exhibit at the gallery in Shijō. I'm sorry I couldn't attend."

He exhaled through his nose, then sat there silently. I couldn't tell whether or not he believed me. The room was cool, and yet he was constantly taking out a white handkerchief to dab away his sweat. The topic of pottery seemed to be a dead end, so I decided to change the subject.

"Remember how we used to walk home together in high school?"

"Did we do that?"

"What do you mean, did we do that? We used to go around to the temple, killing time talking about all sorts of stupid stuff. I don't even remember what we used to chat about anymore."

"Right, we used to talk about all sorts of things. Those were good times."

"I miss those days."

"Sure do."

HIs responses were so tepid that there really was no continuing the conversation, and for a while I sat there in silence eating watermelon.

"It must feel a little uncomfortable with the forest so close," I ventured at last as I spit out watermelon seeds, settling on what seemed to me a bland topic. "What with all of the bugs."

"Yep. There are creatures around here, too. They're quite noisy," he said, gazing aimlessly out over the veranda.

"Creatures?"

"Weird little things. And long, extraordinarily long."

"What do you mean, long?"

"I mean their bodies, their torsos. They come slipping in and out from the garden as they please."

"Weasels, maybe?"

"Sometimes they run around below the flooring. I can't stand the noise."

"Huh."

The conversation died again. Things just weren't flowing like they used to in the old days. More to the point, it felt like I was trying to talk to him just like we used to, but he wasn't putting any effort into doing the same.

"You've worked up a sweat, why don't you take a shower?" he suggested. "I'll go out and buy dinner while you're in there,"

"That's alright, I think I'll just head home for the night."

"Don't be like that. Come on, just go rinse yourself off. The bathroom's right in front of the studio. Use any towel you like. I've already prepared a yukata for you to change into," he said, suddenly quite insistent.



He showed me to the bathroom.

"There's the yukata. Do make sure not to let any strange people in while I'm out," he said, before hastening out of the bathroom.

This all seemed very odd to me, but for the present I decided to shower off the sweat.

The bathroom was covered in old-fashioned tiles. I opened the small frosted glass window only to see, as I had been expecting to see, the dark trees outside. As I stared out from that chilly bathroom into the depths of the forest, I was reminded of the long creatures I had just heard about. I imagined it must be rather unsettling to go to bed in an ancient house like this with those things creeping around.

I didn't feel like lounging around in a yukata, but when I looked on the floor in front of the sink my clothes were no longer there. I swear I'd put them right there, and I hadn't been in the shower for much more than ten minutes. It didn't make sense.

Covering my privates with a washcloth, I peeked into the hallway, but all was quiet, and there was no sign of my clothes on the long floorboards. "Damn," I said out loud, and with no other choice I put on the yukata.

"Hello?" I called as I padded down the hallway, thinking he might still be in the house, but there was no reply from any of the rooms. I supposed he must really have gone out shopping.

I returned to the tatami room and sat down cross-legged on the floor again. Fickle as it was, wearing that cool, comfortable yukata I felt myself getting into a traveling mood again. Just a moment ago I'd been so eager to go back, but now I began to feel there was no need to be in such a hurry. Even if the conversation was a slog, I'd only be there for one night, and a bit of alcohol might loosen his tongue. I wondered if he could hold his liquor.

In the room there was a wooden bookshelf and a traditional Japanese cabinet. On top of the cabinet were many figurines of the Seven Gods of Fortune. I found the scrutiny of that miniature multitude slightly unnerving. Come to think of it, the shrine on the mountain was dedicated to one of the seven gods, Daikoku, as my friend had been quite thorough in explaining. The bookshelf was lined with a large assortment of old books; I flipped through a few of them, but none of them were terribly interesting, and I soon grew bored.

I lay down on my back and was staring at the ceiling, when suddenly I heard quite close to me a fluttering sound, as if something was skittering about right next to my ear. The sound seemed to be coming from below the floorboards. Perhaps one of those creatures he had been talking about had come in from the forest, gotten stuck beneath the floor, and was

thrashing about. It would certainly be difficult to fall asleep hearing things go bump in the night.

I slid open the screen door into the garden, leaned my torso over the wooden floor, and peered beneath the veranda. But it was pitch black and impossible for me to make anything out.

I stood up and looked into the garden. There was a cool breeze, and a narrow white object fluttered above me. It reminded me of some sort of long white parasitic worm, and I instinctively recoiled. But on second glance, it was just a white string hanging from the eaves. I frowned at it for some time, deciding in the end that it must once have held a wind chime which had fallen off.



In my boredom I decided to sneak into the pottery studio for a look around, but the door was locked, and the doorknob wouldn't turn. I couldn't blame him for being cautious, seeing as it was where he did all his work, but having my mischief foiled so brazenly made me a bit annoyed. The new-looking door was fitted with a frosted glass pane.

As I returned to the tatami room in defeat, I turned around halfway down the hallway for no particular reason, and fancied that I saw a flicker of movement, a flash of reddish colour, on the other side of the frosted glass.

Curious, I approached the door once more and rapped upon it. "Are you in there?" I pressed my ear to the door, but there was no reply. From within I could hear a faint sound like fingernails tapping on metal, but it must have been some kind of machine.

I waited for some sort of sign, but as none was forthcoming I resigned myself to returning to the tatami room. Whatever had been thrashing about beneath the floorboards had become still.

Lying down once more on the tatami I looked at the ceiling.

I searched my memories in an attempt to recall how we had become friends, but came up with nothing. He had been the dependable, quiet type, and his grades had been on the higher side, though not enough to make him stand out. As a student I had been much the same, so to an impartial observer perhaps we seemed rather alike.

At some point we'd become inseparable, and I'd always considered us to be close friends, though when I thought about it I didn't really know him that well at all. Perhaps it had only

been coincidence that we had spent so much time together; perhaps we weren't really friends at all. Maybe that was why we'd completely lost contact after we graduated, and why we seemed to be on such different wavelengths now. It was an extreme possibility, but thinking about it made me rather sad.

Rolling over on my side, I breathed in the nostalgic scent of the tatami mats and banished those painful thoughts out of my head. Maybe once he returned, we'd have a calmer conversation, and this feeling of being out of sync would go away.



After over two hours with nary a sign of him, I was starting to get fed up. I hadn't the slightest idea where he was or what he was up to. It was getting dark, but the fluorescent light must have been broken because it wouldn't light up when I pulled the cord.

I took out a pack of cigarettes, and as there wasn't an ashtray inside I went out to the veranda to have a smoke. Above the mountains the sky was still smeared with the bright hues of sunset, but dusk had already claimed the narrow garden down below.

As I stood there puffing away with my hands in my pockets, I suddenly realized that the girl in the yukata I had passed in the afternoon was standing in a corner of the garden. She must have come around from the front. The colour of her yukata was so dazzling, like a sudden blossom of flame, that I almost cried out. Even assuming she lived in the neighbourhood, it was disquieting to see her suddenly appearing in someone else's garden unannounced.

This time she wasn't glaring at me. She was peering intently into the blue pot that was sitting in the garden, the wind chime still dangling from one hand. Her gently swaying hair was so neatly trimmed it made her look like a doll. Her lips were puckered as if she was sucking on something in her mouth.

"What's the matter?" I called, feeling rather uncomfortable just standing there watching her. She looked up from the bucket at me, her cheeks bulging. I had the strongest feeling that I had seen this exact sight somewhere before, but I couldn't pin down where. It felt like breathing in the mire of dusk.

"It's late, you ought to go home now," I said.

The girl stared at me for a moment, then without any warning approached me coquettishly as if she was coming in for a kiss. As I stood there taken aback, she suddenly spat out whatever was in her mouth as if it was a watermelon seed. I scrambled out of the way as

what appeared to be a bright red gumdrop came flying at me, tumbling down to the floor in the middle of the room.

"Hey!" I exclaimed angrily, but she whirled around, her red yukata fluttering, and fled the gloomy garden. I heard the windchime tinkling faintly. It was all so bizarre that for some time I could only stand there in shock.

When I went back into the room, the wet red thing that the girl had spat out was flopping around weakly on the tatami like a living thing. On closer inspection that was only natural, for the thing turned out to be a small goldfish. I couldn't just leave the poor thing there, so I scooped it into my hand, and looking for some water to put it in went out into the garden. I looked into the large blue pot and, discovering that it was full of water, tossed the goldfish in for the time being. The scarlet blob began to drift through the murky depths.

It all felt as though I was in a dream.



The sky grew steadily darker, but the light in the tatami room would not turn on. I tried the light in the dining room, only to be met with the same results.

I was struck by how oddly unused the dining room seemed to be. Perhaps as a single man living alone he simply ate out every day, but it was strange indeed that there wasn't even anything to drink in the refrigerator. Where had the barley tea he had served me earlier come from? I glanced into the trash can, but even that was empty, and the watermelon rinds were nowhere to be seen. I certainly hadn't hallucinated myself eating the watermelon, and I'd definitely heard the sound of him throwing the rinds away. It didn't seem very plausible that the long creatures had snuck in while I was in a daze and polished them off.

I returned to the tatami room, but the darkness only continued to close in. Eventually I'd be reduced to sitting there alone helplessly, trying not to breathe too loudly. The sound from beneath the floorboards was back, and it seemed to be louder than before. I supposed it was the darkness that was heightening my senses.

Normally I wouldn't just wait around so patiently in such an eerie place, but I couldn't leave without my clothes. Thankfully my wallet was inside my suitcase, but I could hardly make an appearance at home clad only in this yukata.

While I paced back and forth, I began to hear a scraping noise coming from the second floor. I assumed the creature must have burrowed in somehow and gotten upstairs, but

the noise soon died away. I imagined a lithe shadow threading through the darkness. Unable to suppress my curiosity I decided to go up and take a look.

I made my way back to the front hall, where a dark staircase stretched up to the second floor. I fearfully tread up the stairs, but I was only halfway up when a mask-like face suddenly loomed from the darkness.

"Whoa!" I flinched, before my fear was replaced by indignation. "Don't scare me like that, dammit!"

It was my friend who, despite supposedly having gone out to buy dinner, was now coming down from the second floor. A smile was plastered on his face, and yet somehow it didn't look to me like he was smiling at all.

"I thought you'd gone out. Do you know how long I've been waiting here?"

"I'd just come back, you see."

"I didn't *hear* you come back."

"No? You probably weren't paying attention."

I didn't find his answer very convincing, but he insisted that was what had happened.

"What were you doing on the second floor?"

"Looking for this." He showed me a bundle of candles. "The lights are out, if you haven't noticed."



He prepared dinner by candlelight. Saying that he "prepared" it was pretty generous though, considering that all he did was put what appeared to be convenience store food onto plates. If I'd known this how it was going to be I would have suggested that we just go out somewhere nearby.

"The creatures must have dragged them away," he said matter-of-factly when I told him that my clothes had gone missing while I was in the shower. His apparent lack of concern infuriated me.

"Come on, this isn't funny."

"They come in rummaging for food. Happens all the time."

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Are you telling me to go home wearing nothing but a yukata?"

"All right, I'll lend you some of my clothes later, you can wear those."

I didn't see another way out of it.

"Hey, look at that," he said, picking up a bottle of shochu that was sitting at his feet as if to make me feel better.

Guiding us by candlelight he carried the ready-made meal to the tatami room. By now night had fallen, and the meager light of the candles was hardly enough to penetrate the darkness outside, where I could sense the forest stirring uneasily.

"These creatures that keep coming into your house," I remarked as I sat down. "Isn't there anything that can be done?"

"I set out poison a few times, but it doesn't seem to work on them at all. They just come and go as they pleases."

"How do you fall asleep at night?"

"Once, they crept up and gnawed at my hair as I slept. At this point they might as well own the place."

"That's insane!"

"A while back, a kid was napping on the veranda of a house not too far from here. The creatures came up one by one to take turns nibbling. By the time the kid's parents discovered what had happened there was only half the kid left."

"Come on!" I recoiled, as he laughed. Apparently it was just an off-colour joke.

"Do you remember the park you passed on the way here from the station? Once I saw a bunch of kids all making a fuss, shouting that they'd seen the creatures. I guess kids find those kinds of things more interesting."

By the orange glow that surrounded us he seemed even less like the boy I had known in high school. Perhaps it was only the flickering of the candles that made his eyes gleam. Though cool night air flowed through the screen door, sweat glistened on his forehead.

"You're sweating," I told him as I took a swig of shochu. He grimaced. I continued, "I've never seen you sweat like that, you used to be so easygoing. Are you feeling alright?"

"I don't want to talk about the past."

"Well, if you don't want to talk about the past, what do we talk about?" I scowled.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it that way. What are you up to these days?"

I filled him in briefly on how things were going, just the same few things I'd told countless times to my old classmates when we met. Occasionally he would interject with questions, but they were all rote and perfunctory which ticked me off.

I decided to ask how things were for him instead. His answers were just as perfunctory as his questions: some café in Kyoto had decided to use his pottery; he was teaching at a pottery studio run by his mentor; and so on. His mentor seemed to be something of an eccentric who was difficult to deal with, but he would only dance around the details, never offering anything specific. I was curious as to why he had taken up pottery after dropping out of college, but he refused to touch the subject. He must have been quite passionate about it once, to have dropped out of college in order to take it up, yet you would never know it listening to how indifferently he spoke of it tonight.

"Where do you fire your pottery?" I asked.

"Right here."

"So you set up your own kiln? That's pretty impressive."

"It's an electric kiln, not one of the big ones you're thinking of."

With that the conversation died again. I kept bringing up whatever came to mind, not wanting to just sit there in silence, but each topic was dead on arrival. It felt as if the halfhearted words were simply piling up on the tatami. I'd expected the alcohol to lubricate our tongues, but on the contrary things were only becoming stranger and stranger.

"See that?" I pointed at the dangling white thread at the top of the veranda, which was swaying ever so slightly. He frowned uncomprehendingly as he looked at where I was pointing, but when he saw the thread his expression froze.

"That used to be a wind chime, didn't it?" I asked.

"What's it matter to you?" he asked roughly, staring at the thread.

"Nothing, really," I answered, startled.

But he didn't seem to take any notice of my befuddlement at this odd exchange, instead taking a swig of shochu before answering my question in an agitated tone. "You're right, it was a wind chime. But it's gone now."

"I'm sure it was very elegant."

He grimaced and shook his head. "I don't like wind chimes. I find them frightening."

"Really?" I said. But when I imagined him coming out to the empty tatami room after spending all day cooped up in his studio, only to be greeted by the solitary sound of the wind chime, I could sympathize with his animus. It was a damp wind which tinkled the wind chime, a wind which came whistling out from the darkness of the forest to sound softly within the sitting room. When you put it that way, I'd probably find the wind chime creepy too.

"Someone gave me it not too long ago, but to be frank, I was relieved when it vanished."

"Maybe one of the long creatures came and snatched it away," I joked, trying to take the edge off my annoyance at losing my clothes.

To my surprise he laughed quite loudly. "Perhaps so," he said. "Sometimes I still hear a wind chime from somewhere. Those creatures must be running around it carrying it in their mouths. They must think it's some sort of exotic toy."

He let out another peal of raucous laughter.

But I didn't find it funny at all.



As I looked on silently, he abruptly stopped laughing as quickly as he had begun and went back to drinking from the bottle without a word. It was like seeing a turtle snap its head back into its shell.

It was all so strange.

We sat there drinking shochu in silence. Cicadas sang out leisurely into the night.

I studied him closely and noticed that for some reason his hand shook each time he brought the bottle to his mouth. He kept wiping his brow, yet there always seemed to be sweat beading at his temple.

The alcohol began to make its way to my head (or so I thought), for it began to look to me that his hunched form was hovering ever so slightly off the ground. I squinted hard at him, but he just looked less and less like himself. When you write a word over and over it seems to lose all meaning, and that feeling is very close to what I felt then.

I suddenly thought to myself: what if he was someone else entirely?

When we'd first met up we hadn't waxed nostalgic over the good old days. That feeling of unease that I'd first experienced when he was standing behind me back at Daikokuten had never gone away. And we'd hardly spoken a word about the old days since we'd been here at this house. He simply fed me whatever vague platitudes he thought I wanted to hear, never once bringing up those days of his own accord. He clearly didn't want to talk about them. And his inexplicable burst of laughter just a moment ago had felt more and more uncomfortable as it went on.

Now that I think about it, those misgivings were clearly wild flights of fancy. But sitting there in that dark old house drinking mindlessly, they seemed so plausible.

"You're not an impostor, are you?" I asked jokingly.

He froze in horror and looked at me. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Well, I just have this feeling. I don't remember you being like this at all back in the old days."

For a long moment he was silent, then took another sip of shochu.

"Yes," he finally grunted, one side of his mouth curled up in a smile. "You and I have never met."



I heard the things scuffling below the floorboards, but he didn't pay the sound any attention. The candlelight flickered on the walls.

I had no idea why he would say such a thing. Unsure of how to reply, I instead took a sip of shochu and smiled back at him weakly. He grinned back uncertainly. Feeling creeped out at what I had said, I decided that he probably meant it as a joke, and said nothing in hopes of dropping the matter. He continued to stare at me for some time, probing me with his gaze, but as I showed little reaction he returned to the alcohol again.

"You don't seem like yourself, either," he suddenly interjected. "I don't trust you."

"All right, all right."

"What's all right?"

"I think we've had enough to drink for the night."

He scowled and went quiet. After clearing away the mostly empty plates, he brought out a large castella, carefully slicing it and offering me a piece. Not having much of an appetite for castella, I nibbled just enough to be polite, looking on as he devoured slice after slice as if in a trance, washing each mouthful down with shochu, until he'd polished off the entire thing.

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, but he seemed to be drinking faster and faster. Continuing to watch him carefully, I noticed that his hand was indeed trembling and he was sweating quite profusely.

It was still summer, but the night breeze that came in from the veranda was quite cool and damp. Considering how he lived in this old house by himself, drinking alone and being kept up at night by creatures scurrying beneath the floorboards, perhaps it should have been no surprise that he seemed so different.

I stared at the flickering candle flames for a moment before turning my gaze outside. Looking at the garden through the red afterimages burned in my vision, I was reminded of the girl who had come into the garden while he had been out shopping.

"Is there a festival today?" I inquired.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Earlier there was a girl wearing a yukata in the garden. She came in without asking, so I was quite surprised. A neighbour of yours?"

He looked back at me, seeming quite surprised. "A girl wearing a yukata, you said?"

"And she spit a goldfish out of her mouth at me." When I told him this, I felt a tingle go up my spine, for reasons that I don't understand. Perhaps it was the horrible expression on his face. The eerie sensation I had felt earlier at sunset returned.

"I don't know anything about that," he said, taking a swig. "Nothing at all."

Following this he grew more and more uneasy, taking searching glances at my face. Sometimes it seemed to me that there was an anger in his eyes. Maybe he was just a bad drunk, but all the same I felt very uncomfortable. I wasn't sure if it was only my own

intoxication that made me think back to the glare the girl had given me earlier that afternoon, standing in the middle of the road.

I was dimly beginning to understand that he was deathly afraid. But not of the sound of wind chimes, nor of that strange little girl in the yukata, nor of the long creatures that crept around beneath the floor, nor of the singing of the cicadas in the forest. No, there was something else.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

He looked back at me, an expression of fear on his face, almost as if he was about to cry.



The alcohol must have made its way to my head all at once, for suddenly everything seemed to be expanding and contracting as if it were breathing. My friend merely sat there silently, not even bothering to wipe the sweat from his face. I felt something cold and distant in the space between us, but thanks to the shochu I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

He began to talk about the pot in the garden, slurring his words. There'd been a test of courage one summer in high school. It'd been held in a nearby temple, he said, and the goal was to circle clockwise around the main building; there was a large pot behind it, filled up with black water, and we'd looked into it together. I didn't know why he was telling me this. I didn't know why he was putting so much force into his words, as if he was exposing some crime that I had committed.

"I'll never forget it. I *couldn't* forget it," he mumbled, his torso swaying from side to side. "I saw it. It was in a room just like this one—no, maybe a little larger.

As he spoke he glanced behind himself at the top of the cabinet. His eyes widened.

"Now I see," he muttered. "It was the faces of the Seven Gods of Fortune that I saw back then."

There was a strange look in his eyes. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I said.

"You were with me then," he said. Without warning he stood up. "You looked, too."

Taken aback, I watched him stride over to the cabinet, each footstep heavy on the tatami. Picking up a figurine, he walked over and slid the screen door open, then proceeded to toss each of the figurines out into the garden one by one.

"Stop that!" I said, but he didn't listen. The miniature gods flew out one after another, disappearing into the darkness where the light from the room did not reach.

Once all of the gods were gone, he sat down across from me as before.



I traced the fuzzy strand of memory, trying to keep the alcohol at bay.

Next to our high school there had been a small temple. It was on the road between school and the station, so we often hung out there after school. For some reason there were a number of cylindrical stones set out in a circle. I remember we used to hang out on those stones and shoot the breeze, whiling the time away. I never saw a single monk or visitor, which now that I think about it was pretty strange.

One autumn, we threw a party to celebrate the success of the campus festival. The festivities went on late into the night, and after parting from the rest of our friends the two of us went walking down the road. Eventually we passed in front of the temple.

Behind the main hall was a pot which had seemingly been set out and then forgotten, which had become the subject of a silly high school urban legend. The story was that if you went to the temple at night, circled clockwise around the hall to the pot, and looked inside, "something good" would happen. People always said it was "something good", though no one ever actually meant it literally. Some people said that you'd see a reflection of yourself from the distant future, while others said that you'd see a ghost staring back from the surface of the water. I'd even heard someone claim that whichever showed up depended on who was looking, which struck me as pretty sketchy. Of course, I didn't believe either of those apparitions really existed, but I figured that if I ever found myself at the shrine in the middle of the night I might start to believe after all.

There was a crisp autumn chill in the night air. The temple must have been quite eerie that late at night. But still flushed with the lingering excitement of the festival we were feeling pretty daring, and decided to go see this infamous pot for ourselves.

We circled clockwise around the hall just like the rumour said, proceeding along the chill shadows that lay between the hall's outer walkway and the enclosing wall. The pot was behind the hall right where people said it would be. My friend was first to boldly look inside. I apparently waited beside him; in the darkness we couldn't see one another's faces. After he stepped back from the pot, I took my turn to look inside.

After some time he dragged me away, out from behind the hall. We left the temple and headed up the road towards the station.

I asked him if he'd seen anything, but he didn't reply.



Even after hearing him speak of those memories, I had no recollection of being there with him in the scenes he described. It all *seemed* plausible: the temple, and the urban legend, and the two of us going to look into the pot. Yet it was all so foggy and blurred.

Here I'd thought he was finally willing to talk about a shared memory, but in this short span of time he'd dug an even deeper rift between us. The more agitated he became, the more convinced I was that he was a stranger who just happened to bear an uncanny resemblance to my friend. But the odds that this was just someone who happened to have the same name, who happened to have gone to the same high school, who happened to have become a potter like all the rumours I'd heard from my old high school classmates. But if he really was the same person, then who was I?

"What did you see in the pot?" he demanded, glaring at me.

But I could hardly answer his question when I didn't recall any of this. "I don't remember," I told him plainly.

"You must!" he snapped.

"Enough of this," I groaned. "This is ridiculous."

"You can't fool me!"

"I said enough!"

We glowered at one another. I noticed that my own back was now drenched with sweat.

"You're going stir-crazy cooped up here all alone. Why don't you leave here for a while, go see your parents for a little while. We can both head out tomorrow," I said. Seeing that he remained silent, I continued, "Don't you know any of your neighbours? That girl I saw in the garden earlier, she must live around here?"

For a moment his mouth worked soundlessly. He sucked in a breath, and his eyes flashed with an even fiercer light than I had seen before. "So you *do* know."

"Know what?"

"You know the master's daughter, don't you?"

"You mean the girl in the garden was your master's daughter?"

My question was met with a hoarse caw of laughter. He shook his head from side to side, a hideous grin on his face.

"She couldn't possibly have been in the garden. She burned long ago," he cackled. "You know that just as well as I do. And now you have come—"

Among his ravings was the insinuation that the girl and I were connected somehow. I knew nothing of the matter, and there was no purpose in attempting to unravel the threads of this illogical fantasy. All I could think of, the sole thought which occupied my mind, was that living in this house was a bad thing.

"I don't understand your meaning," I told him.

"But I know yours." He pierced me with his gaze. "You have come to kill me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I see through it all. That is why I called you here."

My thoughts fought to break through the alcoholic haze as I watched him rant and rave.

He had been the one to invite me here to this house, and yet he had not met me at the station or answered my calls. At the station I imagined that he stood by the ringing phone, not deigning to answer; it seemed that my imagination had, if only by chance, been on the mark. Why had he been standing behind me so stealthily at Daikokuten? And why had he been hidden upstairs instead of going out to dinner as he had told me?

What was going through his mind now as we stared at each other? As my mind raced trying to figure out what he was planning, the situation seemed less and less detached from reality.

My body had broken out into an unpleasant sweat. I felt the night air whisper over me. My friend wiped his sweat with his long white handkerchief then began to fidget with it in his hands.



My head was pounding like there was a gong ringing inside it, but the rest of my body was cold. My legs felt heavy and sluggish as if they were waterlogged. My friend kept stretching the handkerchief out as if to see how it felt.

"Let's just chill out," I said. I'd set down a cigarette earlier, but now it was nowhere to be seen. I knew I'd stashed another one in my bag, and when I turned around to search for it I found that my entire bag was missing.

"Hey, what happened to my bag?"

"They must have dragged it away," he replied, his expression unchanged.

The noise from beneath the floorboards was gone now. The room was still, so still I could almost hear the candle flames flickering. A sudden blast of wind came in from the forest, rattling the fusuma that separated the room from the hallway. They were slid shut most of the way, but there was just enough room between them for a human to slip inside, or out, from the darkened hallway.

"Look!" I cried, pointing at the gap. "There's something there!"

There was a twinkle in the dark, followed by a long, black *thing* slithering from the front door down the hallway towards the pottery studio. Its body was incredibly long. The sheen from its dense fur told me that it wasn't a snake.

But my friend continued to fidget with the handkerchief, not so much as shifting his gaze towards the hallway.

"I suppose it headed towards the studio," he snorted. "I roast them in the kiln till there's nothing left. That's why they keep coming."

The thing disappeared down the hallway. I felt another presence approach, the air growing tauter and tauter.

Just before it arrived, a memory slid out from the hazy depths of my mind.

I was behind the main temple hall. I caught a whiff of mud, and the trees rustled in the wind. My friend must have been standing off to the side in the darkness, staring intently at me.

I was crouched down gazing into the black water that had collected in the pot. Something red flashed before my eyes, perhaps a goldfish that resided in the depths. But no goldfish

could possibly live in such a place. The water grew still. Only my face remained, reflected on its surface.

But the longer I looked, the less the face in the water resembled my own. Its jaw was working, though my own mouth was doing no such thing. Its hair seemed long, and in fact it looked like it belonged to a little girl. *Strange*, I thought to myself, and I continued to stare until my friend at last pulled me away.

Here my memories turned to the little girl I had seen in the garden. She had also held a goldfish in her mouth, looking into that rainwater-filled pot in the garden: a curious parallel indeed.

It was only then that I finally realized that she had been the one who had been peering out from the waters at my high school self those many years ago.



The forest rustled, and the wind moaned. My friend sat there frozen and unmoving, the handkerchief stretched to its breaking point. His face, so drenched it looked as if he had poured a bucket of water on his head, was pointed at me.

I glanced once more at the trembling fusuma. Through the gap I spied a flash of colour, red as a goldfish, pass by like a phantom. Though it appeared only as a flutter, I could hear heavy footsteps tromping to the end of the hallway. It seemed to be headed towards the studio, as if it were pursuing the long creature. I heard the wind chime tinkling, the wind chime which my friend had supposedly lost.

"I roast them in the kiln till there's nothing left," my friend repeated.

And the wavering candle flames went out.

The last thing I remember seeing before the room went dark was my friend beginning to get to his feet, his hungry eyes fixed on me.

The Clunker Manifesto: Dawn Breaks over Japan!

Bonus short story distributed with movie tickets to Tatami Time Machine Blues. (1/2)

A special roundtable discussion to commemorate the completion of *Samurai Wars: Slayers of the Bakumatsu*.

Moderator: Welcome to our roundtable for *Slayers of the Bakumatsu*.

Ozu: Woohoo! [applauds]

Moderator: Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to attend. *Slayers of the Bakumatsu* is a sci-fi period drama about Ginga Susumu, a Kyoto college student who has a superpower which turns anyone he comes into contact with into a complete slacker. Ginga slips back in time to the Bakumatsu era, where he inadvertently slacker-izes a number of major historical figures, brings about a time paradox, and destroys the universe. Now that Akashi has finished the editing process, we're holding a no-holds-barred conversation about the inside story of the shoot. Please keep in mind that this conversation will be printed in a pamphlet for distribution at the campus festival.

Jōgasaki: ...So how come you get to be the moderator?

Moderator: Because I came up with the original concept for *Slayers of the Bakumatsu*.

Aijima: You're not even part of the film circle, are you? You're just an outsider.

Moderator: What does it matter?

Jōgasaki: And how come we're doing this in your room?

Moderator: This was the green room for the shoot, and since it's been over two months I thought it would help stir up some memories.

Jōgasaki: You realize how many of us there are? We're packed like sardines in here!

Hanuki: Oh, stop complaining. Forget about Jōgasaki, let's go go go!

Jōgasaki: You had even less to do with the movie than him, Hanuki! You weren't part of the cast or crew!

Hanuki: What, so you're saying I shouldn't be here?

Jōgasaki: No, that's not what I...

Hanuki: I was running around helping with the catering and a bunch of other stuff.

Moderator: Let's begin with the shoot. It started on the morning of August 11th behind this apartment building, at the landlady's place. It was a scorching day, and the shoot was plagued with all sorts of issues.

Hanuki: You wanna talk about inside stories...

Moderator: Yes?

Hanuki: There's only one story that matters.

Ozu: You mean the time machine? Man, that was a blast.

Moderator: I don't think that's worth discussing here.

Hanuki: What do you mean, not worth discussing? Not worth discussing? What could be more interesting than a time machine?

Moderator: Yes, but this roundtable is supposed to be about Slayers of the Bakumatsu. Let's drop the time machine for now.

Hanuki: Are you serious!? Then what else am I supposed to talk about?

Jōgasaki: Okay, I'm just going to be straight with you, I hated this movie. The source material was garbage, the structure was all over the place, the social themes were nonexistent, and the ending was a pile of shit. Movies are fundamentally a critique of society, you all need to get that into your heads.

Akashi: Thank you for your critique. I'll take it into careful consideration.

Moderator: Please refrain from critiquing the movie, this is not the venue for that.

Aijima: I agree completely with Jōgasaki. The story was obviously ridiculous, and the characterization of the protagonist was flimsy at best. This contrived nonsense about "turning people into slackers" clearly exhibits a lack of care. You could hardly consider him an actual human being, though my performance was certainly able to cover some of those flaws.

Moderator: Look, we're here to talk about the behind-the-scenes stories from the filming.

Jōgasaki: It was like no one was in control of the set.

Aijima: It was like a barnyard. Now, if Jōgasaki had been the director, that would never have happened.

Hanuki: You really thought it was that bad? I thought the crazy atmosphere was a lot of fun.

Ozu: Yeah, all those little fires that kept breaking out really heated things up...

Hanuki: Remember that couple in sound and lighting that had that giant fight?

Ozu: Yeah, I kept trying to help them out with advice between takes, and then outta nowhere they just blew up! I guess love really does make people act crazy...

Moderator: By advice, you mean you were fanning the flames.

Ozu: But I hear they're doing hotter than ever. You hear about the crew member who left a letter and quit? They were already unhappy with how the circle was running, so I just gave 'em a little nudge.

Moderator: So you were behind that too!

Ozu: I hear they joined some rockhounding club called "Friends of the Stone". There was all sorts of trouble going on that day, I couldn't get enough. The *piece de resistance* was when I tried to climb up that statue of the kappa lord and knocked it over...

Akashi: It's a good thing no one got hurt.

Moderator: But the landlady didn't let us hear the end of it.

Ozu: Okay, okay, maybe I did put a little too much hustle into things. I'll be careful next time. But those Shinsengumi boys were wild. Who knew that you could get so worked up over lunch? They were really swinging those swords, you can't blame me for trying to take refuge with the kappa!

Hanuki: I still can't believe what the real deal with that kappa was.

Jōgasaki: Don't start. I wish I could forget that ever happened...

Hanuki: Hehe. You really got shafted there.

Jōgasaki: It wasn't my fault! That was all Higuchi!

Moderator: I'd like to remind all participants to refrain from talking about the time machine.

Hanuki: Come on! That was the most interesting part! And if not for the time machine, I wouldn't have been able to see the shoot for myself. It was so much fun. Ozu's Iwakura Tomomi was nightmarish. I think Higuchi performed really well. He fit Sakamoto Ryōma to a T.

Jōgasaki: Are you shitting me? Literally the only line he had was, "Dawn breaks over Japan"!

Hanuki: Well it was more convincing than your Saigō Takamori.

Jōgasaki: Hell no! And how come Higuchi been so quiet this whole time?

Hanuki: He's been dozing off this whole time. Apparently he didn't get much sleep last night.

Jōgasaki: This guy...

Akashi: Hanuki, what was your favourite scene?

Hanuki: Hmm, I'd have to say it was the end, the part where the imperial patriots and Shinsengumi and Bakufu officials get in a ring and start dancing and chanting "Party on, dudes!" It felt really joyous. I mean, of course the universe gets destroyed right after that, but if it's all going to come to an end you might as well party, right?

Aijima: That was merely a ripoff of Fellini. I thought it was cheap.

Moderator: That was the last scene we filmed, wasn't it? I think everyone was surprised to find out that was the end of the shoot.

Akashi: [surprised] Were they?

Jōgasaki: After all the crap that happened, what else would you expect?

Aijima: I thought that the film had been destroyed with the rest of the universe.

Akashi: I see. I never thought about it that way.

Hanuki: That was a day I'll never forget. That's how it is a lot of the time, isn't it? Like, you go on vacation, and you run into all sorts of problems, and it sucks while you're going through it, but afterwards when you're telling the story you just laugh about all the crap that happened. I think that's how it'll be for *Slayers of the Bakumatsu*.

Jōgasaki: Well, I won't forget it, that's for damn sure.

Aijima: Yes, and I hope I'll never step foot on such a horrible set ever again.

Akashi: [sighs] That was a lot of fun.

Ozu: When you're making a clunker, you might as well enjoy the ride.

Moderator: Don't call it a clunker!

Ozu: But it is a clunker.

Akashi: That's alright. Clunker's fine by me.

Hanuki: Akashi, why are you so into clunky movies?

Akashi: Because they're free. Clunkers are freedom, freedom is clunkers. That's why clunkers will never die.

Hanuki: Whoa, that's clever! It's like, the clunker manifesto!

Moderator: Sounds like we've got a title for this roundtable. And with that, it's time to wrap things up.

Ozu: One last word from the Master!

Jōgasaki: Higuchi gets to take us out? I don't believe this.

Hanuki: [taps Higuchi's shoulder] Higuchi? Higuchi! You gotta say something before the roundtable ends! Hurry up so we can hit the bar!

Higuchi: [sits up abruptly] Ladies and gentlemen, dawn breaks over Japan!

The Tale of the Strange Stone

Bonus short story distributed with movie tickets to Tatami Time Machine Blues. (2/2)

This story takes place at the beginning of October, when the lingering heat of summer had subsided at last and the A/C was allowed to rest.

Higuchi Seitarō, Ozu, Akashi, and I boarded the Eizan train at Demachiyanagi Station. It was a weekday afternoon, and we were the only ones to disembark at Iwakura Station. As we followed the Iwakura River upstream, we began to come across white-walled storehouses and buildings with thick-shingled rooftops.

We had come in search of a researcher who resided in Iwakura village. He had formerly been in the employ of Yanmar Co. designing agricultural machinery, but his love for rockhounding had grown to such that he had taken early retirement and now made his living as an independent researcher. However, his disquieting theory that rocks and the earth transformed their own properties in appreciation of the human psyche had apparently made him a pariah in the academic community. He had remodeled his storehouse into a laboratory, where he stored the enormous collection of rocks which he had spent half a lifetime accumulating. We had been introduced to him by an acquaintance of Higuchi, and he was only too eager to show us his pride and joy.

"I suppose this is what you're here to see," he said, pointing out a black, jagged stone which sat on a shelf. "Ah, but I wouldn't touch it if I were you,"—this to Akashi—"Any woman who touches it will fall under its spell. It's a devil stone, see. It's been known to cause bloody catfights between even the closest of friends. It may look like an ordinary rock, but I suspect it gives off unknown energies which affect the human psyche."

He dropped his voice. "Now, as we discussed..."

Akashi undid the *furoshiki* she was carrying, and from the cookie tin within produced a stone. It was about the size of a closed fist, and the shape of a swollen *magatama*. It was pretty enough, whitish and glossy, but there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about it.

But, like its black counterpart before us, this was a devil stone.

Let us step one week back in time.

I returned to Shimogamo Yūsuisō after conducting a lab experiment on campus to find the door to neighbouring room 210 flung wide open, a lively exchange audible from within. No doubt the disciples of Higuchi Seitarō were once again wasting the prime of their youth, and indeed I poked my head inside to find Higuchi, Ozu, and Akashi seated in a circle.

"Well hello there," Higuchi said to me. "You've arrived just in time."

"What're you doing?"

"We were just about to embark upon a course of training."

"Come on in," Akashi urged me. "It sounds like fun."

Exam season was in full swing, and I was so busy with my studies that I barely had time to sleep. I was engaged in a manful stand against the harsh currents of reality, polishing myself into a socially useful man that I might become worthy of Akashi. What cruel irony, then, that the very same Akashi for whom I was pouring in these efforts was so avidly interested in Higuchi's so-called "training", which was nothing more than a headlong flight from reality.

I reluctantly lowered myself to the floor.

"Oh ho!" Ozu cackled. "So you think you've got what it takes, eh? This ain't your average training we're talking about here!"

I noticed that in the middle of the room was a worn *sanbo*. A vermillion cushion with gold tassels at each corner sat on top, and placed upon it was a white stone, about the size of a fist. It was a common looking stone; you could find any number of similar rocks simply walking along the bank of the Kamo.

Master Higuchi's "training" was simply this: to empty your mind and gaze at the stone.

Simple it may have been, but for laypeople like us it was no easy task. After a few seconds all sorts of intrusive thoughts would begin to buzz through your head: *this looks a lot like a daifuku mochi, and man, I could go for a bowl of fried rice right about now*. So you deal with these unwanted visitors into your mind one after the next, and once both body and mind are exhausted, you arrive in the state of no-mind...and that is when the stone shall bestow upon you a great revelation! Higuchi claimed that the ability to educe truth from this common stone would certainly come of use in the rapid currents of modern society. I'd never heard such poppycock in my life.

"The fewer earthly desires you have, the better, see?" Ozu grinned. "Knowing how insatiable you are, I'd say you're gonna be sitting here for the better part of a century."

"Yeah, as if you're not the avatar of greed itself!"

This all seemed like a waste of time, but since Akashi was looking forward to it I didn't have a choice. "Let us begin," Higuchi hummed, and so we all settled down and stared at the stone in silence.

An evening breeze whispered through the still room. As I concentrated upon the stone, it slowly dawned upon me how pretty it was, with its slick surface, its pale luster, its cool sense of refinement...in some ways, it bore a strong resemblance to Akashi. I glanced furtively to my side. Akashi was sitting on her knees, leaning forward with her hands placed upon the tatami, gazing solemnly at the stone. Her bangs swayed slightly in the breeze. How unjust, I mused, how unfair it was that life could not be filled solely with lovely things, like Akashi. Why did it have to be contaminated with impurities like Ozu?

Get it together, I thought. The desires were already rushing into my brain. I looked at Higuchi and Ozu, who with their hooded eyelids reminded me of two weatherbeaten statues of the Buddha. I suspected neither of them was concentrating at all.

In any case I didn't want to give Ozu more ammo to ridicule me with, so I summoned all my energy to concentrate. But earthly desires are not so easily tamed. They rose up in a constant stream like the spring water bubbling from the earth at Arima, and as I threw them back time and time again my eyelids began to droop. Having spent the previous night locked in mortal combat with my chemistry textbook I was desperately short on sleep.

As I fought to stave off my drowsiness, fantasies began to blossom forth in my head. In one of them I found myself walking on the surface of a smooth stone that resembled the arid landscape of another planet. As I walked along I came to the edge of a large lake. It reminded me of Lake Usori, near Mt. Osore; a strange colour shimmered on the surface, and far off on the other side I could make out a forest. Not far away I discovered a jetty, so I took a boat and crossed to the other side. The boat was captained by Higuchi.

From this point on my fantasy began to blur into a dream.

Entering the forest on the other side of the lake, I came across a magnificent Chinese palace. Behind its snow-white walls, grand pavilions rose up into the sky. I passed beneath a massive vermilion gate into a garden, smothered in riotous bloom. The inhabitants of the palace seemed to have been aware of my coming, for a company of ladies-in-waiting came out to gaily greet me, though for some reason they all had Ozu's face.

"Hue hue hue!" laughed the Ozu-faced ladies. "We've been waiting for you! Come, come! This way!" Grasping my hand they led me into an arbour in the corner of the garden.

Awaiting me there was Akashi.

"You've come at last. How I've longed for your arrival..." she whispered, filling the air with an exquisite perfume as she nestled against me. She wore a delicate garment like an angel's plumage, and an opulent ornament glistened in her hair.

Though I could feel myself falling under her spell, I couldn't help but feel that something wasn't quite right. There was something not very Akashi-like about her. But I couldn't tear myself away from her, for she had already coiled herself around me.

"Stay here with me, forever..." she whispered sensually into my ear, her grasp growing ever tighter around me.

Suddenly a cold shiver went through my entire body, and immediately everything vanished: the Chinese palace, the Ozu-women, the bewitching Akashi. When I came to, I found myself sitting in the 4½ tatami room, drenched in water from head to toe, while Higuchi and Ozu peered at me with great amusement.

"Are you alright?" asked Akashi anxiously, standing in front of the sink with a second bucket of water.

They told me that I'd been sitting motionless there for nearly an hour like I was hypnotized, not responding when they called or shook my shoulder. At last Akashi was forced to resort to drastic measures, and dumped a bucket of water on me. We were all baffled at what had occurred.

"Guess there was something funny about that rock after all," said Ozu. And only then did he tell us the lurid history of the stone.

That summer, a rockhounding club called "Friends of the Stone" had become embroiled in a bloody civil war revolving around a stone which one of them had picked up on Mt. Ibuki. The once mild-mannered enthusiasts had overnight turned into a pack of ravening beasts, wasting the precious summertime of their youth in a vicious tug-of-war over a rock. The strangest thing was, the only ones who fell under the spell of the stone were, to a man, men. It was a summer of betrayal, of thievery, of mortal combat, and at last one of the members, fearing that the circle would fall apart, tried to hurl the stone into the Kamo. He did not succeed, for he too was possessed by the stone. The evil could only be driven out

with a greater evil, and so he entrusted the stone to someone whose wickedness outstripped even that artifact's foul powers: Ozu.

"Why the hell did you bring it here?"

"Cause I thought it'd be fun. Why else?"

"So this is a devil stone," mulled Higuchi. He picked it up and peered at it with great interest, then tossed it into the cookie tin and replaced the lid.

"What're you going to do with it?" asked Akashi.

Higuchi stared into space, scratching his chin.

"...Come to think of it, I may have heard of another such stone."

And so it was that a week later we found ourselves in the village of Iwakura.

The researcher took the cookie tin from Akashi, removed the stone, and placed it on the shelf beside the black one.

"I can only hope it will slumber peacefully here," he remarked.

This was Higuchi's grand design: to reunite the stone with its counterpart¹.

Looking at the rocks nestled side by side, I felt a sudden rush of envy. Why should I allow that precious stone to part from me? I could simply seize it now and elope...

I paused in horror, aghast at the thoughts which were going through my mind. What had come over me? Yet even after we left the storehouse and headed back to Iwakura Station, I still felt that grotesque urge stirring within me. Perhaps, like the members of Friends of the Stone, I too had fallen under the spell of the stone.

"There are many tales in this world which revolve around a simple stone," Higuchi declared as we walked along the Iwakura River. "Kiuchi Sekitei, the renowned rock collector of the Edo period, recorded in his famous treatise the *Unkonshi* anecdotes of strange rocks that glowed at night, or poured forth an endless stream of water, or wept tears of blood when you struck them with a chisel. At Fushimi Inari-taisha there are the *Omokaruishi*, stones which portend your success or your failure by the weight you feel when you lift them. You may doubt the stories if you wish, but our ancestors believed in them, and so they have passed on through the ages to us."

¹ *Meoto-iwa*, or husband-and-wife-rocks.

I haven't heard a peep about those stones since then, so by all appearances Higuchi's plan was a success. And I suppose that the devil stone and its counterpart are still sitting side by side on that shelf to this day.