

A FAMILY SUPPER

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Fugu is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan. The fish has held a special significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one. The poison resides in the sexual glands of the fish, inside two fragile bags. When preparing the fish, these bags must be removed with caution, for any clumsiness will result in the poison leaking into the veins. Regrettably, it is not easy to tell whether or not this operation has been carried out successfully. The proof is, as it were, in the eating.

Fugu poisoning is hideously painful and almost always fatal. If the fish has been eaten during the evening, the victim is usually overtaken by pain during his sleep. He rolls about in agony for a few hours and is dead by morning. The fish became extremely popular in Japan after the war. Until stricter regulations were imposed, it was all the rage to perform the hazardous gutting operation in one's own kitchen, then to invite neighbours and friends round for the feast.

At the time of my mother's death, I was living in California. My relationship with my parents had become somewhat strained around that period, and consequently I did not learn of the circumstances surrounding her death until I returned to Tokyo two years later. Apparently, my mother had always refused to eat fugu, but on this particular occasion she had made an exception, having been invited by an old schoolfriend whom she was anxious not to offend. It was my father who supplied me with the details as we drove from the airport to his house in the Kamakura district. When we finally arrived, it was nearing the end of a sunny autumn day,

'Did you eat on the plane?' my father asked. We were sitting on the tatami floor of his tea-room.

'They gave me a light snack.'

'You must be hungry. We'll eat as soon as Kikuko arrives.'

My father was a formidable-looking man with a large stony jaw and furious black eyebrows. I think now in retrospect that he much resembled Chou En-lai, although he would not have cherished such a comparison, being particularly proud of the pure samurai blood that ran in the family. His general presence was not one which encouraged relaxed conversation; neither were things helped much by his odd way of stating each remark as if it were the concluding one. In fact, as I sat opposite him that afternoon, a boyhood memory came back to me of the time he had struck me several times around the head for 'chattering like an old woman'. Inevitably, our conversation since my arrival at the airport had been punctuated by long pauses.

'I'm sorry to hear about the firm,' I said when neither of us had spoken for some time. He nodded gravely.

'In fact the story didn't end there,' he said. 'After the firm's collapse, Watanabe killed himself. He didn't wish to live with the disgrace.'

'I see.'

'We were partners for seventeen years. A man of principle and honour. I respected him very much.'

'Will you go into business again?' I asked.

'I am - in retirement. I'm too old to involve myself in new ventures now. Business these days has become so different. Dealing with foreigners. Doing things their way. I don't understand how we've come to this. Neither did Watanabe.' He sighed. 'A fine man. A man of principle.'

The tea-room looked out over the garden. From where I sat I could make out the ancient well which as a child I had believed haunted. It was just visible now through the thick foliage. The sun had sunk low and much of the garden had fallen into shadow.

'I'm glad in any case that you've decided to come back,' my father said. 'More than a short visit, I hope.'

'I'm not sure what my plans will be.'

'I for one am prepared to forget the past. Your mother too was always ready to welcome you back - upset as she was by your behaviour.'

'I appreciate your sympathy. As I say, I'm not sure what my plans are.'

'I've come to believe now that there were no evil intentions in your mind,' my father continued. 'You were swayed by certain -influences. Like so many others.'

'Perhaps we should forget it, as you suggest.'

'As you will. More tea?'

Just then a girl's voice came echoing through the house.

'At last.' My father rose to his feet. 'Kikuko has arrived.'

Despite our difference in years, my sister and I had always been close. Seeing me again seemed to make her excessively excited and for a while she did nothing but giggle nervously. But she calmed down somewhat when my father started to question her about Osaka and her university. She answered him with short formal replies. She in turn asked me a few questions, but she seemed inhibited by the fear that her questions might lead to awkward topics. After a while, the conversation had become even sparser than prior to Kikuko's arrival. Then my father stood up, saying: 'I must attend to the supper. Please excuse me for being burdened down by such matters. Kikuko will look after you.'

My sister relaxed quite visibly once he had left the room. Within a few minutes, she was chatting freely about her friends in Osaka and about her classes at university. Then quite suddenly she decided we should walk in the garden and went striding out onto the veranda. We put on some straw sandals that had been left along the veranda rail and stepped out into the garden. The daylight had almost gone.

'I've been dying for a smoke for the last half-hour,' she said, lighting a cigarette.

'Then why didn't you smoke?'

She made a furtive gesture back towards the house, then grinned mischievously.

'Oh I see,' I said.

'Guess what? I've got a boyfriend now.'

'Oh yes?'

'Except I'm wondering what to do. I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'Quite understandable.'

'You see, he's making plans to go to America. He wants me to go with him as soon as I finish studying.'

'I see. And you want to go to America?'

'If we go, we're going to hitch-hike.' Kikuko waved a thumb in front of my face. 'People say it's dangerous, but I've done it in Osaka and it's fine.'

'I see. So what is it you're unsure about?'

We were following a narrow path that wound through the shrubs and finished by the old well. As we walked, Kikuko persisted in taking unnecessarily theatrical puffs on her cigarette.

'Well. I've got lots of friends now in Osaka. I like it there. I'm not sure I want to leave them all behind just yet. And Suichi – I like him, but I'm not sure I want to spend so much time with him.'

Do you understand?' 'Oh perfectly.'

She grinned again, then skipped on ahead of me until she had reached the well. 'Do you remember,' she said, as I came walking up to her, 'how you used to say this well was haunted?'

'Yes, I remember.'

We both peered over the side.

'Mother always told me it was the old woman from the vegetable store you'd seen that night,' she said. 'But I never believed her and never came out here alone.'

'Mother used to tell me that too. She even told me once the old woman had confessed to being the ghost. Apparently she'd been taking a short cut through our garden. I imagine she had some trouble clambering over these walls.'

Kikuko gave a giggle. She then turned her back to the well, casting her gaze about the garden.

'Mother never really blamed you, you know,' she said, in a new voice.

I remained silent.

'She always used to say to me how it was then-fault, hers and Father's, for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they'd been with me, and that's why I was so good.'

She looked up and the mischievous grin had returned to her face.

'Poor Mother,' she said.

'Yes. Poor Mother.'

'Are you going back to California?'

'I don't know. I'll have to see.'

'What happened to - to her? To Vicki?'

'That's all finished with,' I said. 'There's nothing much left for me now in California.'

'Do you think I ought to go there?'

'Why not? I don't know. You'll probably like it.' I glanced towards the house. 'Perhaps we'd better go in soon. Father might need a hand with the supper.'

But my sister was once more peering down into the well. 'I can't see any ghosts,' she said. Her voice echoed a little.

'Is Father very upset about his firm collapsing?'

'Don't know. You can never tell with Father.' Then suddenly she straightened up and turned to me. 'Did he tell you about old Watanabe? What he did?'

'I heard he committed suicide.'

'Well, that wasn't all. He took his whole family with him. His wife and his two little girls.'

'Oh yes?'

'Those two beautiful little girls. He turned on the gas while they were all asleep. Then he cut his stomach with a meat knife.'

'Yes, Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle.'

'Sick.' My sister turned back to the well.

'Careful. You'll fall right in.'

'I can't see any ghost,' she said. 'You were lying to me all that time.'

'But I never said it lived down the well.'

'Where is it, then?'

We both looked around at the trees and shrubs. The light in the garden had grown very dim. Eventually I pointed to a small clearing some ten yards away.

'Just there I saw it. Just there.'

We stared at the spot.

'What did it look like?'

'I couldn't see very well. It was dark.'

'But you must have seen something.'

'It was an old woman. She was just standing there, watching me.'

We kept staring at the spot as if mesmerized.

'She was wearing a white kimono,' I said. 'Some of her hair had come undone. It was blowing around a little.'

Kikuko pushed her elbow against my arm.

'Oh be quiet. You're trying to frighten me all over again.'

She trod on the remains of her cigarette, then for a brief moment stood regarding it with a perplexed expression. She kicked some pine needles over it, then once more displayed her grin.

'Let's see if supper's ready,' she said.

We found my father in the kitchen. He gave us a quick glance, then carried on with what he was doing.

'Father's become quite a chef Since he's had to manage on his own,' Kikuko said with a laugh. He turned and looked at my sister coldly.

'Hardly a skill I'm proud of,' he said. 'Kikuko, come here and help.'

For some moments my sister did not move. Then she stepped forward and took an apron hanging from a drawer.

'Just these vegetables need cooking now,' he said to her. 'The rest just needs watching.' Then he looked up and regarded me strangely for some seconds. 'I expect you want to look around the house,' he said eventually. He put down the chopsticks he had been holding. 'It's a long time since you've seen it.'

As we left the kitchen I glanced back towards Kikuko, but her back was turned.

'She's a good girl,' my father said quietly.

I followed my father from room to room. I had forgotten how large the house was. A panel would slide open and another room would appear. But the rooms were all startlingly empty. In one of the rooms the lights did not come on, and we stared at the stark walls and tatami in the pale light that came from the windows.

'This house is too large for a man to live in alone,' my father said. 'I don't have much use for most of these rooms now.'

But eventually my father opened the door to a room packed full of books and papers. There were flowers in vases and pictures on the walls. Then I noticed something on a low table in the corner of the room. I came nearer and saw it was a plastic model of a battleship, the kind constructed by children. It had been placed on some newspaper; scattered around it were assorted pieces of grey plastic.

My father gave a laugh. He came up to the table and picked up the model.

'Since the firm folded,' he said, 'I have a little more time on my hands.'

He laughed again, rather strangely. For a moment his face looked almost gentle.

'A little more time.'

'That seems odd,' I said. 'You were always so busy.'

'Too busy perhaps.' He looked at me with a small smile. 'Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father.'

I laughed. He went on contemplating his battleship. Then he looked up.

'I hadn't meant to tell you this, but perhaps it's best that I do. It's my belief that your mother's death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments.'

We both gazed at the plastic battleship.

'Surely,' I said eventually, 'my mother didn't expect me to live here forever.'

'Obviously you don't see. You don't see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don't understand.' He spun the battleship in his fingers. 'These little gunboats here could have been better glued, don't you think?'

'Perhaps. I think it looks fine.'

'During the war I spent some time on a ship rather like this. But my ambition was always the air force. I figured it like this. If your ship was struck by the enemy, all you could do was struggle in the water hoping for a lifeline. But in an aeroplane - well - there was always the final weapon.' He put the model back onto the table. 'I don't suppose you believe in war.'

'Not particularly.'

He cast an eye around the room.

'Supper should be ready by now,' he said. 'You must be hungry.'

Supper was waiting in a dimly lit room next to the kitchen. The only source of light was a big lantern that hung over the table, casting the rest of the room into shadow. We bowed to each other before starting the meal.

There was little conversation. When I made some polite comment about the food, Kikuko giggled a little. Her earlier nervousness seemed to have returned to her. My father did not speak for several minutes. Finally he said:

'It must feel strange for you, being back in Japan.'

'Yes, it is a little strange.'

'Already, perhaps, you regret leaving America.'

'A little. Not so much. I didn't leave behind much. Just some empty rooms.'

'I see.'

I glanced across the table. My father's face looked stony and forbidding in the half-light. We ate on in silence.

Then my eye caught something at the back of the room. At first I continued eating, then my hands became still. The others noticed and looked at me. I went on gazing into the darkness past my father's shoulder.

'Who is that? In that photograph there?'

'Which photograph?' My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze.

'The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono.'

My father put down his chopsticks. He looked first at the photograph, then at me.

'Your mother.' His voice had become very hard. 'Can't you recognize your own mother?'

'My mother. You see, it's dark. I can't see it very well.'

No one spoke for a few seconds, then Kikuko rose to her feet. She took the photograph down from the wall, came back to the table and gave it to me.

'She looks a lot older,' I said.

'It was taken shortly before her death,' said my father.

'It was the dark. I couldn't see very well.'

I looked up and noticed my father holding out a hand. I gave him the photograph. He looked at it intently, then held it towards Kikuko. Obediently, my sister rose to her feet once more and returned the picture to the wall.

There was a large pot left unopened at the centre of the table. When Kikuko had seated herself again, my father reached forward and lifted the lid. A cloud of steam rose up and curled towards the lantern. He pushed the pot a little towards me.

'You must be hungry,' he said. One side of his face had fallen into shadow.

'Thank you.' I reached forward with my chopsticks. The steam was almost scalding.

'What is it?'

'Fish.'

'It smells very good.'

In amidst soup were strips of fish that had curled almost into balls. I picked one out and brought it to my bowl.

'Help yourself. There's plenty.'

'Thank you.' I took a little more, then pushed the pot towards my father. I watched him take several pieces to his bowl. Then we both watched as Kikuko served herself.

My father bowed slightly. 'You must be hungry,' he said again. He took some fish to his mouth and started to eat. Then I too chose a piece and put it in my mouth. It felt soft, quite fleshy against my tongue.

'Very good,' I said. 'What is it?'

'Just fish.'

'It's very good.'

The three of us ate on in silence. Several minutes went by.

'Some more?'

'Is there enough?'

'There's plenty for all of us.' My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves.

'Here,' I said to my father, 'you have this last piece.'

'Thank you.'

When we had finished the meal, my father stretched out his arms and yawned with an air of satisfaction.

'Kikuko,' he said. 'Prepare a pot of tea, please.'

My sister looked at him, then left the room without comment. My father stood up.

'Let's retire to the other room. It's rather warm in here.'

I got to my feet and followed him into the tea-room. The large sliding windows had been left open, bringing in a breeze from the garden. For a while we sat in silence.

'Father,' I said, finally.

'Yes?'

'Kikuko tells me Watanabe-San took his whole family with him.'

My father lowered his eyes and nodded. For some moments he seemed deep in thought. 'Watanabe was very devoted to his work,' he said at last. 'The collapse of the firm was a great blow to him. I fear it must have weakened his judgement.'

'You think what he did - it was a mistake?'

'Why, of course. Do you see it otherwise?'

'No, no. Of course not.'

'There are other things besides work.'

'Yes.'

We fell silent again. The sound of locusts came in from the garden. I looked out into the darkness. The well was no longer visible.

'What do you think you will do now?' my father asked. 'Will you stay in Japan for a while?'

'To be honest, I hadn't thought that far ahead.'

'If you wish to stay here, I mean here in this house, you would be very welcome. That is, if you don't mind living with an old man.'

'Thank you. I'll have to think about it.'

I gazed out once more into the darkness.

'But of course,' said my father, 'this house is so dreary now. You'll no doubt return to America before long.'

'Perhaps. I don't know yet.'

'No doubt you will.'

For some time my father seemed to be studying the back of his hands. Then he looked up and sighed.

'Kikuko is due to complete her studies next spring,' he said. 'Perhaps she will want to come home then. She's a good girl.'

'Perhaps she will.'

'Things will improve then.'

'Yes, I'm sure they will.'

We fell silent once more, waiting for Kikuko to bring the tea.