

Kabuki

I was invited to go and see a Kabuki performance.

I don't really know all that much about Kabuki. Even with the most well-known performances, I couldn't begin to tell you what the stories are about. It's sad when you go to see something and you have no idea what's happening in it. Like when I watched "The Godfather" as a child. As it was, I didn't like mafia movies. I could never remember who was on what side or what they were fighting about. And added to that, the Italians in the movie all looked the same to me, so people kept popping back up when I thought they were supposed to be dead. The only thing I really understood was that the mafia used horse heads for revenge.

To avoid another experience like that, before the kabuki performance I studied the plot of the story I was about to see. And I pounded the names of the actors into my head. Kabuki actors change their names a lot, so you can't let your guard down.

When I sat down in the theater, I noticed that there were two young white men sitting a few rows in front of me. The two of them both had short-cropped hair and, even though it was the middle of winter, were wearing short-sleeved white tee shirts. The bare arms peeking out of their sleeves were as big around as most people's thighs.

Soon after that the performance started. A country merchant comes to the entertainment district of Yoshiwara and falls in love at first sight with a high-ranking courtesan. He becomes her regular client, and finally manages to pay off her debt and free her, but then she betrays him. That's the story. The courtesan was played by the most popular up-and-coming young actor, and he looked beautiful as a woman.

As I was watching, I found myself worrying about those two white guys, and whether or not they were understanding the story. The theater offered an audio guide where you could listen to an English description of the story through an earpiece, so they were probably fine. But, for instance, how would you explain paying off a courtesan's bond price in English? As a test, in my head I tried explaining it to the two of them.

"Okay, so an *oiran* is a high-class prostitute . . . Oh, but even though they were prostitutes they were kind of more like rock stars, and they worked in places called tea houses, but of course selling tea wasn't actually what they were for, and then there was this thing called '*nenki*,' which is like a period of indenture . . ." It was useless. There was no way they could keep up with the story this way. In my mind, the two of them shrugged at each other with confusion.

I tried to turn my attention back to the performance, but now that I had started, I couldn't stop thinking about how everything would look through their eyes. "Hey, Bob, look at that. Is she wearing boxes on her feet?" In my mind, one of them pointed at the *oiran*'s high platform sandals. "Now that you mention it, Sam, what's with all those rods sticking out of her hair? Has she got a battleship on her head?" the other replied. "Plus, why do all the men have the middle of their heads shaved? Is that a religious thing?" All the time while the *oiran* was harshly jilting the country merchant, and while the merchant was stabbing her to death in revenge, the two of them were so loud I could barely concentrate.

The first performance ended and, after an intermission, the next act was a dance. The two men who had been sitting a few rows in front of me had left at some point, but it was already too late. Bob and Sam had climbed inside of me and taken over my eyes and brain. The dance performance of "Yakko Dojoji" as seen through the eyes of Bob and Sam was an ultra-avant-garde ballet. A person with their face painted all white turns into a woman, then a man, then dances the jitterbug with some people in white robes with shiny blue heads, but suddenly gets ambushed by an attack squad of people wielding cherry blossoms and knocks them all down without touching them, and then a giant—Bell? Pot?—comes down from above and the main character climbs on top of it and for some reason stands there looking triumphant and then it ends. "Mysterious!" "Fantastic!"

All that aside, what's worse is that even now, several months after the Kabuki performance, Bob and Sam still refuse to leave. Every once in a while I spot something out of the ordinary, and—"Wow! What's this?"—they demand an explanation. It's a pain in the neck to have to explain everything about the rice cakes used as New Year's decorations, or Japanese-style toilets, or the Onbashira Festival at Suwa Shrine.

Plus, I want them to do something about those short sleeves. It's snowing out. If they're dressed like that now, what are they going to do when summer comes?

Peach Season

1.

When peaches are in season, one must eat peaches. One must eat nothing but peaches.

Peaches are delicious. I can't think of any other adjective to describe them. Deliciousness is their only reason for existing. They are so purely delicious, it's almost unsettling.

In general, aren't peaches almost too perfectly geared towards humans? Beyond their thin skin, they're completely packed with nothing but delectable, juicy fruit, as if to say, "Come on, eat me!" It's too good to be true. I can't help thinking there has to be a catch.

Of course, there are other fruits that also seem to be optimized for tastiness. Take strawberries, for instance. Strawberries are delicious, too. Plus, by omitting the peel and reducing the size of the troublesome seeds, they've made themselves easy to eat, and their bright red color advertises their flavor for all to see. They are enthusiastic about being eaten. Even the stem and leaves, which are usually a liability, seem as though they're designed to be used as a convenient handle to hold onto while you eat the rest.

In spite of that, peaches still seem more suspicious. Perhaps that is because they are a bit human-like. The color, the shape, and the downy hair that covers the surface, all somehow bring to mind a human infant. Eating them feels immoral.

I think about things like that all the time, but when I find myself with a peach in front of me, those kinds of rational thoughts instantly evaporate. When I am eating a peach, the only thoughts in my mind are the taste, smell, and texture of the peach, along with my own inner voice yelling, "A peach! A peach! A peach!" and "Muahahahaha!" Peaches are unbelievable.

2.

First, you cup the bottom of the peach in both hands, gently lift it up, bring it close to your nose, and smell it to your heart's content. Sniff, sniff, sniiiff. After that, you tilt your hands this way and that, as

though you were admiring a fancy teacup, and appreciate its color and shape. Savor the exquisiteness of its seam, the velvety feel of its downy fuzz. Finally, after lifting the peach up to Heaven and offering thanks, carefully put it back in its place and offer a light bow. Repeat this several times a day.

Here I must caution beginners that, no matter how soft the peach fuzz may look, you must strictly refrain from rubbing it against your cheek. When I was a child I had a friend who unthinkingly rubbed a peach against her cheek and her face swelled up. By the way, she also once got her bottom stuck in one of those big round cans of sugar that people used to give as summer presents.

3.

I wonder if there isn't a religion somewhere called Peachism where they worship peaches. In fact, when I am eating a peach, inside my brain there are a thousand native people, who are all me, shouting "Hooray!" and bowing down in worship around a giant peach.

In my various investigations, I came across an interesting fact about the fairy tale "Momotaro." In the modern version the main character, Momotaro, is supposed to be born out of a giant peach that comes floating down the river, but in the version from the Edo Period, in the 1600s, he's born when an old man and old woman eat peaches, become young again, and lie together, producing a child. I discovered this shocking fact, but I could not find any evidence of the existence of Peachism.

4.

Peach season is almost over.

To gradually habituate myself to the eventual parting, I place a peach in front of me and try saying to it, "It's almost time to say goodbye." I cling to it and say, "Don't go!" I tell it, "I'll protect you for the rest of my life!"

I wonder what I intend to protect it from.

Perhaps from cashiers at the supermarket who carelessly stack other groceries on top of packs of peaches.

I ate another peach again today.

A Selection of Three Quotes From My Father

1. "Why do you always ruin people's plans like that?"

At my parents' house, there is a narrow path from the carport to the front yard, and there is an iron gate in between. One day I found the lid of a plastic storage box leaning against it. This was when I was still working at an office. I assumed the lid was garbage, and I removed it. That was when my father said the above to me.

Starting a few years before that, a large toad had taken up residence in our garden. It was so enormous that it would take two hands to hold it, and it was tan-colored with black and white stripes in its armpits. Gross. But every year in the spring the same toad reappeared from somewhere—I guess it must have spent the winter someplace in the garden—and on summer evenings it would sit still in the darkness, every once in a while flicking out its tongue to catch a bug, and, watching it, somehow we all got a bit attached to it. My father was especially fond of it, and he called it "our toad" and things like that.

My father's number one worry was, "our toad will get out from under the gate and be hit by a car" (In the past, when we had a cat, he was worried that "If there was an earthquake, the cat might panic and run away and get lost," so he suggested that we keep the cat tied up on a leash all the time, but the rest of the family rejected this plan) and the aforementioned storage box lid had been put in place by my father to prevent this outcome. Hence, the above quote. It's not that I completely can't understand his feelings, but I still don't get it.

By the way, the toad lived for about three more years after that, until it was found dead in the middle of a puddle in a small depression in the ground. My father said he was "too afraid to touch it," so I scooped it up in both hands and buried it in the garden. Its skin was slimy and it was disgusting. I still don't get it.

2. "It wasn't Kotaro's fault."

Our dog bit me once. When I was still living at home, I was sitting at the table eating something, and the dog came and sat down by my feet. He was a greedy dog, and any time anybody was eating anything, he would always come up to them and stare at them longingly while drooling all over. While I was ignoring him and eating my food, I accidentally stepped on his tail. He yelped, jumped into the air, and bit down hard on my knee.

The next day the two distinct fang marks he had left on my knee were weeping pus, and my whole right leg was hot and swollen. My father said the above when he saw me come down the stairs, limping like a wounded soldier. Kotaro was the dog's name.

In addition to having to get a very painful tetanus shot at the doctor's office, I was lectured about not brushing the dog's teeth properly.

When Kotaro died, my father put a portrait of him up in the living room, and for precisely 49 days he lit incense and chanted the heart sutra in front of it.

3. "This is a bit pappy."

When stewed vegetables or things like that were too soft, my father would always say, "This is a bit pappy." But to this day I have still never met any person other than my father who uses that word. I thought it might be vernacular, but I asked relatives from his hometown, and they all said, "Nope, never heard of it."

Even so, my younger sister and I kind of like it and, even now, when he's not around anymore, we use that word all the time. "Isn't this kind of pappy?" "I like my squash boiled until it's pappy." "My skin right here is getting a little pappy." "Pappy." "Pappy." "Pappy."

(By Sachiko Kishimoto, from the book of essays *Secret Questions*, published by Chikuma Shobō, 2019)