

Tokyo Stories: On Family

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The suburb sat on the private train line running west from Shibuya. It was developed right at the beginning of the Showa era, when the area was still unmistakably the country, so its streets and plots of land, probably once fields, were expansive, and the trees in people's gardens grew stout and abundant, and if you went a short distance from the station you would barely see a figure even in the day. It had been thirteen years since I moved to these outskirts, and while I neither knew nor cared a thing about housing architecture, I could pick out, on my walks around the area, a Western-built room jutting out artificially among the Japanese-style houses here, a hedge of roses there, a brick chimney, an old greenhouse impeccably outfitted for both summer and winter, the figure one might take to be its master a rare sight. If by chance I laid eyes on him he would be gazing at the gardener working, supported by a woman of advanced age herself, likely his son's wife, and his clothes would be unexpectedly modern. Sometimes he could be seen with his wife taking photos amongst men and women thronging at the gate, a family gathering of some sort. Every last familiar-sounding name on the nameplates of the houses turned out, according to *Who's Who*, to belong to some past member of the Diet, or an Olympic equestrian rider, or a famous newspaper journalist—there was even a former chamberlain—and most were born at the end of the last century. Funerals were, of course, commonplace. Wreaths covered in plastic would line the road under the streetlights, lanterns printed with the family's name would hang at the door, and the street would be busy with the comings and goings of the funeral guests' cars—on my aimless strolls I often happened upon such vigils, little festivities in their own right of day-to-day life.

The old nameplates stayed as they were for a year or so after the funeral, and when they came off, the house would frequently be put into renovation. The ways of the world never run smooth: owing maybe to matters of inheritance, the plot of land would be divided into a modern detached house at the back and a vacant plot facing the road. White or brown Western-style terraced houses boasting pretentious names like “—Heights” and “—Villa” would spring up on the vacant plot, the houses narrow but each with semi-basement parking. It was not just houses with deceased owners either: even when old houses were demolished and rebuilt, such as when wooden houses exhausted their lifespan, and the construction tarpaulins were finally removed, it was almost always a prefabricated building that greeted

the eye—a phenomenon, especially virulent in the last four or five years, that made the yen grow strong but the town grow ugly. Once they were built there would no longer be anything to remind me of how the town looked before, and for all that my walks were just a way to pass the time—or so I told myself, when in reality I took them out of the perverse desire not to be at home—I would be filled with misgivings about what I had witnessed on them. There were always several vacant plots and construction sites along the less than ten-minute walk to the station, and while the town looked considerably different from when I first moved here, I had immediately become used to the changes, and felt nothing in particular about them.

There were three children's parks, ball games and dogs prohibited, and since their size was on a different scale from the tiny ones in the city centre, they must have been planned from the start of this area's development. Each had a sandpit, benches, dustbins, and public toilets installed. Zelkova, gingko, cherry blossom, and *shii* trees faced the road, young mothers took their children here to play while the sun was out, and aside from those crossing it for a diagonal shortcut, the centre of the park was normally deserted.

My walks were not long enough to tire me out, but there were times when I slipped in here to sit on the bench, usually with a can of beer purchased from the vending machine, keeping a good distance from the mothers and their children. Places like this, with a shrine precinct, a park, and the remnants of cabbage, taro, and leek fields, roughly planted and abandoned, were where molesters tended to lurk, warned the frequent notices from the municipal office. Doubtless my day-drinking made me an unwelcome presence to the mothers. The day I found myself sharing a bench with the woman, or rather sitting one seat apart from her, she was there before I knew it. It was early in autumn, and she was maybe halfway into her forties, wearing a grey suit and thick make-up incongruous to the surroundings. "Can you guess what I'm here for?" she had said—words that, said in another tone, could have sounded sinister. "You may not believe me, but that boy in the hat playing over there is my son." Over there were three mothers, with the same number of children. "I had to give him up, but I still can't help wondering how he is. It's a long story." Her tone had been detached. At a loss for a reply, I had nodded warily, and the woman had smiled and moved to my bench. "He's going to turn three. Next year he'll enter kindergarten, and, well, he seems to be doing fine." With her traces of bleached hair, green handbag, brown paper bag and overfamiliar attitude, I took her to be an insurance salesperson or a religious proselytiser, and a bit of a maniac, and as if to confirm it, the woman's tale was quite bizarre. "I've had

terrible luck with my husbands. I'm actually on my third right now. Well, the first *was* arranged by my parents: I grew up in a strict family, you know, went to an all-girls school, had the engagement decided by our families while I was still a student; he was five years older and worked in a trading company, and we got married the moment I graduated. There I was making the home, while my friends were enjoying their youth." I am sure, as you would expect really, that I kept my expression cold, but the woman took no notice whatsoever and delved deeper into her confession. Drawing a cigarette from a plastic case, the kind you rarely see nowadays, and lighting it, she said, "Eighteen years ago he passed away on a business trip to Argentina. Car accident—do you know about it? Head-on collision, three Japanese, four locals dead. It was all over the news." As the woman spoke, her gaze followed the boy with the hat. "Help yourself." She put a bag of chips between us and took in hand a glass of *sake*. From the paper bag, I knew that she had purchased it from the store in front of the station. Drinking in the unseasonably strong early afternoon sun—by any standard it was a cause for concern, but then I too had a can of beer in hand, my third, in fact, having bought two at first and added two on second thought. Taking it that her circumstances were turning her into a closet alcoholic, I rather sympathised with her, and listened properly from then on.

She said that her husband's traffic accident had left her with a daughter of three, for whom she had absolutely no intention of throwing her life away. "I had only turned twenty-six, and many of my old classmates were still unmarried. My husband's family ran an old store dealing in safes in Shiba. Do you know them? My father-in-law was still doing well, but my brother-in-law had taken over, and even though safes sound outdated nowadays, they are apparently like household shrines—the demand only goes up. My husband's parents lived in Yoyogi, in a house with a large garden that had enough cherry trees for cherry-blossom viewing in spring, and ours was a condo in Daikanyama. After my husband's death I received the condo and gave up the child to be adopted by my brother-in-law; his two children were both boys, and they said they wanted a girl. Thanks to that she was showered with affection. Apparently she was good at maths for a girl, so—" Her daughter went on to study maths at a prestigious women's college and found a job at a large computer firm. "I spent only a little over four years with my husband, but at the end of the day that period is deeply etched in my memory. We went to America for our honeymoon. My husband had studied business at the University of Chicago, and we went to visit his alma mater from New York. It was the end of summer. In the cool breeze coming off from Lake Michigan, the Manhattan heat seemed like

it had been just a dream—” There was something of the air of a melodramatic tragedy play in her present circumstances—sipping a glass of *sake* in a park in broad daylight, keeping a careful distance from her own child while watching him play—but her story, told in the same monotone as before, gave the opposite impression, even if it kept only to the past: by the end of the year that they got married she showed signs of being pregnant, and her husband, who had been raised American-style in all things, told the company that he would refuse all long-term business travel. Not only that—“We might have been some of the first to follow the Lamaze method. Do you know about it? We took lessons on giving birth at I Hospital together. With my baby bump I went swimming; I went to dance parties, concerts. For the five days or so around the delivery, my husband went to work from the hospital: it was something they called an in-hospital home birth, and both my husband and my mother were allowed to stay overnight—” Even after the baby girl was born, her husband did his best to remain at home, which is to say he turned down every opportunity to socialise with his colleagues and went home straight from work. The woman was worried that this might harm his career prospects, but he told her that no business deal, be it worth billions of yen, was as valuable as his child, and thanked her repeatedly and seriously. “But still we were husband and wife, and we sometimes left our daughter with either of our parents and took trips for fun. When I was still in school, the song “Hello Sweetie” was popular, and it had the line “Please, sweetie, sometimes I want a quiet night just for Daddy and me,” right? I would think of it and feel deep down how lucky I was. But in the end I gave her away.” “Well, you know, I’m sure it was the right thing for your daughter’s sake...” I said. Until now I had only *hmm*-ed along with her story, but when at last something resembling words came out of my mouth, the woman suddenly pitched forward and gazed far away, where, when I followed her gaze, the boy with the hat and his mother were getting ready to leave. “Don’t I ramble,” the woman said, and tipped back and downed her second glass of *sake* before walking away, leaving behind the chips that neither of us had touched. While she had been a little unsettling at the start, and I had not been especially intrigued by her story, I nevertheless wanted to know more about what had led to the present. After all, if the woman’s third husband was the boy’s father, then what about the one in between, and if she had not only given up her first child but was in this sort of relationship with her last, then how bad was her luck with children? Although her speech was well-bred, she did not appear to be in particularly fortunate circumstances: her appearance had a patchwork quality to it, and more than anything there

was her day-drinking. I stayed a little longer on the bench—this was to sober up before I went home, so as not to displease my wife. On the way back, I happened to pass the mother in question, who was holding her boy's hand as before and appeared to have come out again from home. Wearing a doting mother's utterly carefree expression, she looked astonishingly young, and it seemed to be far too early to assume that either she or her husband was infertile.

From then on, whenever I passed by the edge of the park I would look out, through the shrubs and the trees, for the park bench and the sandpit, but even if I had seen the woman, I doubt I would have gone to the trouble of talking to her. She had certainly been quite eccentric. Two months later, I was in one of the five temples that lined the old street five minutes from my home. While I am no tombstone enthusiast, I do find something poignant in deciphering the era name on the faded surface of a headstone and converting it to Gregorian years, or in finding a mass of names carved on a single stone dated 10 March 1945. When I had threaded my way through the maze of graves and exited the temple's main gate, this too renovated in a way that looked prefabricated, I spotted the woman. She stood out preternaturally among the passers-by, and if I wasn't imagining things, she was walking in my direction. "Good day," I said reflexively. She remained expressionless as she noticed me, but I had the feeling that she was taken aback. "It's good to see you again." No more words came to me, and I started feeling awkward too. "It's gotten cooler," the woman said, her gaze directly on me. "My house is just nearby." "Oh, is that so." "Shall we have some tea? Are you free?" "Well, thank you kindly." My words could have been interpreted as an invitation to my house, but I led the way to a café between two temples, and when I opened the door, the woman, who was following behind me, murmured, "The flooring here's the same as in my kitchen." "I'll have a beer. I don't know if they have *sake*." "I'll have the same." As before, I could not gauge how to start the conversation. The woman was in a purple lamé turtleneck with a brown skirt, and had a red handbag on the large side. Delicately supporting her glass from below with her left palm and finishing her beer in two gulps, she said, "We are going to move away presently." As if she could tell how I was feeling, and as if emboldened by the presence of a listener, she continued, "I'll miss how convenient the shopping is at our place now, but we don't have the money to keep two houses. It's a bit far away, and it's hard sending my daughter to all her lessons. Do you know her? She goes on TV from time to time." She told me her daughter's name, but I did not know it. She appeared to be in the habit of asking people if they knew what she was talking about. While the daughter born to her first

husband had gone on to do maths, this girl that the woman mentioned, who to all appearances aspired to become a performer, was the offspring of her second husband, a man from the Tohoku region whose forbearance and hard work had made him an internationally qualified jeweller. “There are many jewellers in the area between Ueno and Okachimachi. Did you know that? We started out by renting a small place too, but later, in the third year after we got together, we had a four-storey place built. He also went overseas a lot—Israel, the Union of South Africa, the Netherlands—and specialised not in diamonds but in things like cat’s eyes, sapphires, alexandrites, and rubies. I was so worried because of how I’d lost the one before that I became a little neurotic. I went shoplifting and stuff. Isn’t that silly?” Although the woman had started out of order, she now went back to telling her story from after her first husband’s death, when she rented out the Daikanyama apartment and moved back with her family. While she was spending the days enjoying her freedom, she received an invitation to play golf in Karuizawa and met her second on the course. “My first impression of him was that of a small-town stick-in-the-mud, but since he’d been going all around the world from when he was young, of course he could talk about everything, and by the time I was introduced to him, his business had taken off, and apparently one of my friends from back when I was in school liked him, well, I’m sure it was for his money, so you could say I had stolen him away—” I thought, a little nastily, that she was trying too hard to bring up her school days whenever she could. “Maybe it’s not such a problem when it comes to gentlemen as when it comes to ladies, but he was a little too old to be marriage material: I was twenty-seven and he forty-two, and it was his first marriage. Later I understood why. He was the youngest of four siblings, all sisters, and their mother was in good health. None of his sisters’ husbands had been particularly successful and expectations were high on their youngest brother. We lived between Kudanzakaue and Idabashi, and there wasn’t a day when his relatives weren’t around, so once the place in Okachimachi was finished, we moved to its third and fourth floors. My daughter had been born by then, and, would you believe it, my mother-in-law and a divorced sister-in-law weren’t letting me touch her. My husband couldn’t just stand by. Kudan would have been a better environment to raise a child in, though.” The third floor had a living room big enough to host a ball in, along with a dining room and kitchen, and the fourth floor had the bedrooms and their personal rooms. Her second husband liked listening to classical music and collecting art, though not oil paintings: from early on he had had his eye on lithographs, and owned some of Chagall and Buffet’s

very first works. As part of his business he often held soirées, hiring chefs on each occasion for the food. “They were like little social occasions, with chamber music. But even though he seemed like a frivolous man, my husband treasured us. Maybe it was because he grew up poor—he said his family sold futons, though apparently business was good during the war—that he ended up a bit of a *nouveau riche*. I got him to indulge my interests too: oh, how I dabbled, decoupage, paper crafts, the *shamisen*; he was delighted even by my terrible strumming. But that was nothing compared to when my daughter played the piano. My husband said that he’d always dreamed of waking up in the morning to his daughter playing Chopin.” Even though he was from the countrified Tohoku region, he was infatuated with urban Edo-style cuisine like soba noodles, grilled eel, and tempura, and often went around trying different restaurants, as well as going to the movies and the *rakugo* theatre. “Maybe he had an inferiority complex from growing up in the countryside, or maybe his trips abroad made him gravitate toward things that were culturally Japanese.” The bleached parts of her hair were not as prominent as before, but she looked so dowdy in her lamé sweater that, even as I told myself not to judge by appearances, I found it bizarre to hear her talking about Chagall and culture. Although she probably was not trying to show off, she said that, aside from the piano, she also had her daughter learn ballet and Japanese dance. In time for her performances, her husband would come back to Japan to join the meagre audience of close family and people obliged to be present. “Was your daughter your only child?” I asked. “No, we had twin boys right after that, but one passed away. Blaming it on my negligence, my mother- and sisters-in-law swooped in and took the remaining boy, who had to inherit the family business, back to Kudan.” In shock over the death of one of her twins, the woman had lost faith in herself and yielded her son to her husband’s family, who sent him to a renowned boys’ school in Kudan. She had hoped to put her daughter through the prestigious Gakushuin school system, but her daughter was rejected at the interview for the kindergarten. “Maybe they didn’t like the fact that we were a jeweller’s in Ueno. My husband was furious and opened a store in a building in a downtown area. He was thinking of targeting the popular market for jewellery, rather than gemstones, and struck gold, but—” The extra work took its toll, and by the time her husband, who had always been confident of his health, complained of exhaustion and developed jaundice, the cancer in his bile duct had already spread to his liver, and his days were numbered. “Apparently the doctor in charge thought I was too empty-headed to be told the news—my in-laws knew the truth, but I was just told that it was

gallstones and liver disease.” Of course, her husband did not know a thing. After a month in hospital he returned home briefly—“My husband was in his fifties after all, and said that he would take it easy from now on. That, and the doctor had banned him from going abroad.” Since the firm had been almost synonymous with her husband, his promising protégés, like rats sensing danger on a ship before it founders, took his customers and broke off to form their own businesses. Even so, had her husband only lived on, she would have had no cause for concern, but he was hospitalised again for edema in his legs—six months later than the doctor had predicted, as she was told afterwards. Three days after that he had a large haemorrhage in his abdominal cavity. The woman remained unwitting of what this meant, and it was only just before his final moments when the husband of one of her sisters-in-law delivered the fatal news. With the death of the most promising of their family’s stock at hand, her husband’s kin plotted and schemed, and “By the end, made it seem like I should be grateful that I could keep living in Okachimachi with my daughter. They had gotten the store’s accountant on their side, and I’m not sure about the details, but apparently they were signing documents with the company stamp. My husband’s inheritance was all gone, and even the building was mortgaged—” In exchange for a token sum the woman vacated Okachimachi and moved back to Daikanyama. “I didn’t want my daughter to have a hard time, so I went out and got a job—” substituting in for the proprietress of a bar in Shinjuku through the good offices of an acquaintance of her husband. “My husband often took me to luxury clubs in Ginza, but this was a whole new world.” At this time she was forty. Her daughter was all she had left, and in order to keep her from being judged by the world—child of a single-parent family, her mother in a bar job—the woman worked hard. “I’m stronger than I look, and I don’t give up. Maybe it was actually because of how empty-headed I was that I could throw myself into the work.” Her daughter, who entered a middle school attended by many people in the show business, also grew up rapidly, and—“Handled all the chores, which I couldn’t help neglecting. On top of all the lessons she already had outside of school, here she was taking on the role of a housewife. Single-parent families tend to be seen as tragic, but we were always there for each other, and maybe I shouldn’t be saying this as the parent, but she was a great help to me. On the mornings when I came back a little drunk from work, there would be a thermos of coffee and stomach medicine by my pillow. Although this is probably the mother in me speaking, I think there is such a thing as natural talent. Her ballet troupe gave their assurance that she was a *prima ballerina* in the making, and even in

Japanese dance, she was praised among the geisha, who said that her good carriage was something you had to be born with.” Small as they were, the two of us had finished over a dozen bottles of beer, and the woman continued to speak, dispassionately but without pause. A year later, the woman married her third husband, the present one, a Taiwan-born Japanese twenty years her senior. He ran a restaurant near the final stop on the private line running from Shibuya. “I wasn’t trying to run away from my responsibilities. An acquaintance of my previous husband introduced me to his restaurant and recommended him strongly—said that although he was getting on in years, he was a good man with a stable livelihood. Right now I might be able to keep myself going by sheer force of will, but I wouldn’t last forever in a bar job—wasn’t it stressful, the acquaintance said, and what would my daughter do if I collapsed from overwork?” “Did he have any children?” “Three, all of them grown up and independent, one a doctor, the others office workers. He had lost his wife three years before...” Mature beyond her years, the woman’s daughter gave her wholehearted support so long as her mother was happy with it, and—“As you know, Daikanyama had gotten considerably expensive to live in, and I was on the point of selling the apartment, but I decided to rent it out again because it was dear to my heart.” She moved with her daughter to the Taiwanese man’s house, four stations along the Chūō line after changing from the private line’s final station, and became pregnant right away. “I wanted to have an abortion, but my husband was against it. Yet when I thought of my age I had no confidence that I could raise the child. My husband knew a couple, many degrees removed but still part of the family, who fervently wanted to adopt a baby: the wife had had her womb taken out at a tender age because of a myoma and could no longer bear children, my husband said, so how about we give the child to them? I think the woman was my husband’s grandmother’s sister-in-law’s grandson’s wife’s younger sister, both she and her husband Japanese nationals—” “So the woman you were watching the other day—” “Yes, my husband arranged it all, brought the baby to them in the third week after he was born. They know nothing about me.” “And from time to time you come here and—” “No, very rarely. Even if I went all the way to their home there’s no telling that I’d be able to see him, right? The other day it really was coincidence.” Her daughter’s Japanese dance lessons were in Akasaka, her ballet lessons in Aoyama, piano in Nerima, and her high school in Shinjuku—“It’s gotten hard on her now that she’s in the higher grades, and I try to pick her up at night as much as I can. But even though my husband said he’d buy me a car if I got a driver’s license, you know my first husband died in a traffic

accident; it's been a good twenty years since, but I'm still too afraid to touch the steering wheel—" Her giving up the son for adoption had initially sounded self-centred, but as the woman also realised afterward, it was the result of the prudence her husband had gleaned from a difficult life in a foreign country, second-generation migrant though he had been. A kind-hearted man, he showed understanding for the daughter's lessons, and, taking in consideration the range of her commutes, decided to move to Yotsuya. "I'm humbled by his kindness. He's old by now. On top of that, he must have been attached to his garden, and our new house is a condo." "The other day you said that you had bad luck with husbands, but isn't it quite the opposite? After all, you weren't stuck with one man all your life, and they were all unique, and more importantly, good men—" "Exactly; they're almost too good for me. Maybe it's because our ages are far apart, but my husband now indulges me; the showbiz costs money, you know, and with everything added up it costs over a million yen to perform Japanese dance in the National Theatre's small theatre. But thanks to him my daughter's now even making appearances on TV." "You've been blessed with wonderful children too. Even though you don't have them all with you, they're undoubtedly your flesh and blood—" "I suppose that's true. Please watch my daughter perform some time," she said, and gave her daughter's name again. "Apparently she'll be an instant hit if she appears on a commercial with a big sponsor." She said the last bit like a stage mother, and then, without showing the least influence of the alcohol, left as abruptly as she had before. As for me, I was fatigued by her monotonous and relentless manner of speech. She was probably what you would call a "nice woman." From the high-flying businessman, to the assiduous and ambitious jeweller, to the Taiwanese restaurant owner, she had accustomed herself to life with each of her husbands, built reasonably happy families, and given birth to their children, and while it was pitiable that she now only had her daughter by her side, the remaining three were being raised by loving, if adoptive, parents. For that woman at least, though maybe not for all women, it seemed that the family was something that could be torn down and rebuilt as many times as needed be, and presumably, like a demolished house, a family that had disappeared into the past took with it every last thing by which it might be resurrected. From the way that she had talked about the flat in Daikanyama and about her first husband's accident, she seemed to have some lingering feelings for him, but clearly they only went so far. For that woman, family meant living together with a husband of some means and giving birth to his children. Even though I did not believe the entirety of her story, she had essentially enjoyed three

happy and diverse terms in the seat of a wife, and I could see how her being involved in the show business as a stage mother could explain her slightly strange attire, how the drinking could be a habit she had fallen into from her days at the bar. She must have been somewhat depressed, if her day-drinking and her tone were anything to go by, and the way that she had grabbed me, a complete stranger, to regale me with her life story must also have been because, in her current situation, there was no one with whom she could safely embellish the facts. While I did feel sorry for her on this point, it did nothing to change the impression she left me with, that a woman is never too old to learn new tricks.

I went on to forget all about the woman.

But maybe she remained on my mind without my realising it. I would catch myself gazing at the mother and the child when I occasionally spotted them at the park, and I even had a good idea of where they lived—an area with a row of terraced houses, residences that you could call high-end for a young couple. In April this year, when the plump blossoms on the *yaesakura* cherry trees had taken on a slightly worn-out tinge, that is to say, in late spring, the most elegant of the residences in the area was torn down in a day, and on its estate of at least 10,000 square feet sprang single-storey corporate dormitories, the very definition of cheap construction, which were raucously occupied by young evangelists of some new religion. Passing by this area always put me in a bad mood. It was there that I ran into the mother and her child. The mother was wearing a maternity dress. Her belly was swollen and protruding, and she walked with her back arched, each step evidently cumbersome. For an instant, as I stared, she met my gaze head-on, before lumbering away. Her womb should have been removed; it should have been impossible for her to be pregnant.

Catching on her shoulder some cherry blossom petals, which had been beginning to fall, the pregnant woman vanished around the corner. Although I knew she had nothing to do with it, I could not help feeling as if I had been hoodwinked, and at the same time, I could tolerate it. I took a good, hard look again at the broad road leading to the station and the mixture of new and old houses that lined it. The weather had turned better, so by now the woman was probably in another park somewhere, accosting another man sitting dully on a bench and telling him, “Can you guess what I’m here for? You may not believe me, but...” An elaborate story like hers didn’t come on the spot; it had to be polished over innumerable

retellings. I only hoped that she found someone who would be attentive the way that I had been.