

Overall, this is very close to the Japanese original, especially in terms of keeping the similes, and for the most part flows well, with only a few awkward spots.

1 / 8

Translated by Grant Lloyd

To The Shore

Maki KASHIMADA

When the day is nearing its end and the world is calling it a day—that is when the woman's day begins. Her husband is the reason she begins her work, chopping the different vegetables and adding the sausage and the consommé to the pressure cooker for a pot-au-feu. It is an easy dinner to make, really, though she can make more elaborate things, too, things that would satisfy her more. She thinks this to herself as she cooks the meal that her husband demands, the one that does not satisfy.

The woman gazes steadily at the jumble of ingredients in the pot, sighing to herself at the familiar sight. It gives her a sense of déjà vu to see this jumble that she has felt since she was a girl. She remembers always hearing the other girls gossiping and bragging to each other, immersed in strange states of excitement brought on by excessive self-consciousness. The woman had never been able to understand them. She would act the part of the young girl with a cool indifference, but nevertheless she felt a vague sense of loneliness and dejection. She remembers having lived through that space, the one they called the classroom, slithering like a snake and feeling as if she could choke on the smell of spray-can deodorant and hair mousse and madeleines, but the memories are blurred by the confusion and suffering of the time.

That one teacher—the younger guy—he's always making eyes at me, but I don't feel a thing toward him... You know that singer I used to like? I was a fan of his before he was cool, but now that he's popular I'm thinking about moving on... Everyone says she's, like, so cute, but I don't know about her face, personally... She's not really beautiful... I'd call her cute, maybe, but either way that means she's just not pretty, right?

The conversations float to the surface and vanish, empty, like meringue. Light and empty, certainly, but to the girls these were matters of utmost importance, and importance, for them, hinged on how much they were able to vent their pent-up excess of spontaneous, visceral feelings. The woman would seek out these ventings like a goldfish in need of air and gobble them up, her belly swelling as if pregnant, her body threatening to split open and burst.

The woman remembers something that a teacher once said to her younger self. "Are you doing alright?" she had asked. "You're looking kind of pale. You look like you're in pain. Yet you're staring off, like you're not here. What's on your mind? Are you having trouble paying attention?"

*1
"jumble" is a better word than the "chaos" used in some of the translations.

*2
"slithering like a snake" is a good way to treat this simile.

*3
"like a goldfish in need of air" is good.

The woman knew. She knew that she was in the trance that came before a certain type of fit. And in that trance she grew up, became an adult, and met a man. Thinking this was her chance to escape having to listen to the other girls' meringue of gripes and frustrations, she got to know him, and, without knowing whether she loved him or not, married him.

Once, though, the man had made a comment. "The things you say," he had said, "It's like they're missing a common thread. It's like I'm listening to someone trying to catch a cloud, like I'm hearing sea foam fizzling away."

^{* 4} Suddenly, the woman remembered. Foam? Clouds? *It's the meringue from my childhood,* she thought. *He's talking about those empty outbursts of raw feeling.* The man's words had frightened her. It scared her to think that she, too, had those same nothings that had been the source of all her suffering and unease growing massive inside her like lumps of air, expanding, and that now she was vomiting them up.

*4

"Suddenly, the woman...vomiting them up." works very well to express the feeling the author is describing here.

The woman immediately apologized to the man, a look of pale discomfort on her face like the one she had worn in front of her teacher. She didn't know what she was apologizing for, but she apologized nevertheless. Her apology was like an excuse, made so that the man who sheltered her would not leave her.

"I'm sorry, I'm just feeling a little odd today. I don't know what it is," she said. "You're right. If I'm going to say something, it should have something holding it together. It should be structured, like a ^{* 5} stone abbey, shouldn't it? I'm sorry. I'm just feeling a little off."

In fact, this feeling was something that the woman had been experiencing since childhood, though she acted as if it were something temporary that she had only just noticed. If that was what it took to ensure that the one who kept her sheltered did not abandon her, then so be it.

*5

Hard to say that "stone abbey" is wrong, but certainly "stone monastery" would be better.

The woman had felt guilty when she accidentally used the phrase "stone abbey." She had long since compared the man to a stone building in her mind. He was big, certainly, but not warm. Cold, actually. She had given herself to him for her own piece of mind, but whenever she was around him there was a part of her that still felt as if it were cowering in fear. *Just what is he?* she thought. *He's so big and so close, so what is this vague sense of unease I'm feeling?*

The woman understood, however vaguely, that there were dark clouds bearing down on the abbey, pouring cold rain upon it and ^{* 6} peppering it with flashes of lightning. Would the abbey collapse? If it did, would she be left exposed to the storm? The woman's fear grew. *He makes me anxious, and he seems cold somehow. But he's the only one I can rely on,* she thought. *I have no*

*6

"Peppering" : wonderful word choice here. The alliteration of "pouring" and "peppering" works well too.

choice but to cling to him. I'm addicted.

*

There was an incident involving a married couple. The woman loved the man, but she had spiked his drink with poison and killed him. She had apparently meant to kill herself, too: she jumped into the sea but was discovered soon after. The urge to do it seemed to have struck her suddenly one day.

Everyone said that the couple were close. They said the woman was timid, certainly not the type to attempt a murder-suicide. When it came to keeping house, she was dedicated to a fault: the man's shirts were always starched and white, and passers-by could smell the warm aroma of generously seasoned cooking wafting from the vent near their kitchen.

The woman had seemed happy. Though she may have been timid, she always had a smile on her face, and when she went to take out the trash (which she always did first thing in the morning) she wore an apron with lavender flowers on it that she said had been a birthday gift from her husband. "Oh, this?" she would say. "He bought it for me. I was so happy. I always make sure to take good care of it." It was something that she repeated daily.

The woman had liked soap operas and cheap novels, and she was said to have often wondered aloud to neighbors whether the sorts of sad, heartrending things that happened in her favorite shows could ever happen in real life. When she did, her eyes would be very red, and sometimes she would be crying. She always let her emotions go whenever she immersed herself in her world of fantasies.

The neighbors were astounded. Why would such a kind, quiet woman ever want to murder her husband and kill herself when she loved the man so much? I guess you never really *know* a person, they would say while exchanging gossip. As if talking about her gave them some sort of pleasure, they would come back to the topic over and over again. Over and over, like the waves that had washed over the woman when she jumped into the sea.

"Why is the ocean so formless?" the woman had said to a neighbor once. "Why do the waves wash up and recede, over and over? All that repetition, and no change. It's so strange...." The neighbors must have been puzzled as to why the woman had suddenly started talking about the sea.

The waves in the sea repeat the same movement over and over, but they bring about no change. "It's kind of like our lives," the woman had said. "We do the same things every day—we cook, we do the washing. But no matter how many times we do it, nothing remains. Time goes

by, that's all. It's like I've learned nothing lately. I haven't discovered anything or understood anything new. It's like I haven't grown at all. I wonder if it's really okay for me to live this way."

"But anyway," the woman had said with a sigh, "that's not really something to be worried about, is it? I mean, the men are working so hard out there. It must feel like they're experiencing a revolution each and every day. I suppose I should be grateful to be able to live each day without a revolution."

"But I still feel a little uneasy whenever I see the ocean," the woman had said, "the waves coming and going every day. I wonder if that's why they're so cold and blue. I wonder whether something isn't creeping up on me, little by little, and one day, when I'm by the sea, I'll just break down all of a sudden."

The woman's neighbors had passed off these remarks as nothing more than the product of a woman's overactive imagination. They assumed that it was because she had too much time on her hands and had seen too many soap operas. They were occupied with the frustrations they felt toward their own husbands and children and never stopped to think about the woman's nightmares.

After each of her occasional fits of outrageous imagination, the woman would always return to her daily routine the same way a wave after approaching the shore returns to the sea. Her neighbors were not aware of this cycle; they were oblivious. So was the woman, for that matter. None of them had noticed what was drawing ever closer, looming over them with a scale to rival the revolutions the woman's husband experienced at his job every day.

Thus, the circumstances leading up to the incident were as ordinary as they could be. Try as they might to uncover the reason behind the woman's actions, it seemed like no one could know the truth. To solve the mystery would be like trying to explain the ebb and flow of the waves.

The woman had seemed no different from the other women in her neighborhood. Even as disturbing signs of what was to come grew within her, she had busied herself with the tasks of * 8 maintaining a lifestyle. Each day when she would take out the trash or go to pick up the newspaper, she would bid her neighbors good morning and comment on how nice the weather was. The only odd thing, if there was one, was that she would always say how thankful she was for the good weather. Thankful. Toward what? Or whom? She was thanking something that was as vast as the sea. She had sensed only the presence of something massive looming.

*7
no--she's not worried about herself breaking down, it's the sea she means.

*8
"maintaining a lifestyle" could stand redoing.

*

The woman learned of the incident in the newspaper. “What are you reading?” the man asked. “You’re not interested in society or the world at all. Why in the world are you reading the newspaper?” The woman must have felt guilty, because she closed the newspaper and hid it.

“It’s nothing,” she said, “There was an article on knitting that caught my eye, so I felt like reading the newspaper for a change. What do you want for dinner?”

The newspaper was still in the woman’s hands. For some reason she felt as if it were sucking the heat from her body. Why had she felt so excited? Why was her face hot? It was only for a moment, and then the blush had receded. Now it was as if her body temperature was dropping lower and lower. What was this feeling? She had never felt anything like this before. The couple’s black cat rubbed its body up against her legs as if to sympathize with her. The pressure cooker began to boil. The woman jumped at the sudden noise.

“Sorry,” the woman apologized, turning off the burner under the pot. “I think I might have zoned out just now.”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. The woman was always apologizing to the man. Even if she had done nothing wrong, she apologized. She understood that if she were to lose him, she would be ruined. And if she were ruined, it would be the end of the world. It would mean nothing to the world if she were to leave it, but it would mean everything to her. Her greatest concern, her “matter of utmost importance,” was none other than herself. When she ended, the world would end with her. *That’s why I apologize, she thought. I want to stay in the shadow of his wings forever. I want to make sure the world does not end.*

The woman clenched the newspaper in her hand. *I can understand wanting to kill your husband and throw yourself into the sea like that. It hurts to be constantly worrying about others. I just want it all to end. My relationship with him, the world, everything.*

I know that I can’t make myself interested in the same things he’s interested in. That’s why I’m addicted to him, but also why I’m going through withdrawals all the time, she thought. Suffering through withdrawals hurts—which was why she wanted to kill the man and herself once and for all.

After that, the woman carried a clipping of the newspaper article with her wherever she went and began to think about the incident with the husband and wife. The woman was deep in thought as she stared at the red-hot pressure cooker on the stove. *What was the poison she fed him? she wondered. How did she get it? How did she get him to drink the wine she put it in?*

What does it feel like to throw yourself into the sea? the woman thought. *What made her choose the sea? How cold was it? How painful was it to suffocate under the water? How harsh, she wondered, is death?*

“Is dinner ready yet?” The man’s voice intruded on her thoughts. The woman stopped thinking and listened to the man as he began to talk about work, his job, and the economy. The woman nodded and smiled as she ate the meal that she had made. In one corner of her mind, though, she was thinking about the incident. It was like a ^{* 9} constant drone beneath her thoughts.

“How about we go to the beach some time?” the woman asked suddenly.

The man was surprised. “At this time of year? It’s so chilly out, if we went to the beach now all we would be able to do is stare at the gray water and the whiteness of the waves crashing on the rocks.”

“That’s fine,” the woman answered. “I want to try going to the beach when it’s cold out. We wouldn’t be going there to swim, so the weather wouldn’t matter. I want to go there because I want to face the sea.”

The man did not suspect anything sinister in the woman’s suggestion. Instead, he swirled the wine around the glass tumbler in his hand, saying that he could see the moon reflected in his cup. “It’s a beautiful night out,” he said offhandedly.

“Yes, it is,” the woman answered. “Nights are always beautiful and peaceful.” *Because it’s always daytime when I feel like I want to scream,* the woman thought to herself.

“Honey?” the woman began, blanching. “Do you really love me?”

The man was taken aback. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I do! If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be living with you.”

“That’s not what I meant...” the woman muttered and fell silent.

It’s not enough for you to just love me normally, she thought. *I don’t want you to love me like a regular woman. I want the way you love me to be special.*

In truth, the woman did not care whether he was interested in her as a woman or not. She wanted him to look back on the time before she was a woman, on that suffocating time when she was a girl; she wanted him to settle her muddled mind, to love it, and swear to protect it. She thought how wonderful it would be if only his love could reach as far as her past.

“You don’t really love me,” the woman said quietly, but her words did not reach the man.

*

Today, as always, there are many women looking at themselves in mirrors. They comb

*9
"a constant drone" is good, better than translating it as "basso continuo" as someone else did. In general, people seem to have had trouble with the Japanese here.

their hair, put on lipstick, and spritz perfume. These things they do for no one but themselves, and certainly not for any man. Their reflections transfix them. Each woman knows that were a girl to appear who looked like herself she would devour her ravenously. The women imagine how satisfying it would be to consume their entire image on their own and become whole without being defiled by any man.

Women clad in soft, sheer fabric skip and play, laughing to each other at the height of joy. It is as if they have never suffered and never will. They share pastel macarons and exchange mischievous grins as they think of what their next prank will be. Like the maidens on the shore at ^{* 10} Balbec, they are all so similar, a flock of maidens each without individuality.

The maidens will frolic eternally, never decaying, their individuality nonexistent. If they are touched by tainted hands, the kind that make a girl want to vomit, they will respond by ignoring and forgetting, the cruelest treatments a maiden can give. Then they will go on playing as if they had never been defiled in the first place.

The only thing to violate them will be the sacred affliction known as frigidity, and they will never decay because they are, like minerals, thoroughly inorganic. As they float along, the maidens are gradually taken in by premonitions, members of their own kind that hover around them. Melancholic, black shadows creep toward them, and they are overcome with an unfeeling madness that transforms their bodies into something other than flesh.

Like them, the woman who was driven to murder her husband had begun as a maiden in the sun. She had never imagined that a future awaited her in which she would throw herself into the sea, and yet that future had arrived with swift certainty. Likewise, for the woman who carried on an ambiguous relationship with her husband, unsure whether she was loved or not, a crime of passion was never a distant possibility. It seemed as though the urge might overcome her as suddenly as the scream that had escaped her lips when the pressure cooker boiled immediately after she set it on the stove.

For most women, however, buying poison takes far too much determination, and a knife is far too heavy a weight to carry. Though they may feel the sinister premonitions, most of these women will live out the courses of their lives with the feelings clamoring in their chests.

Today, as always, the woman daydreams about the ^{* 11} botched murder-suicide while she heats her pressure cooker, as if the thought gives her pleasure. She peers into the pot at the white, cloudy froth as if she were a character in some soap opera. The murder is no doubt a matter of utmost importance for her, but the energy that might have driven her to do the deed has long

*10
Balbec--preserves the Proustian allusion. Several other translations did not catch it.

*11

Addition of "botched" here is good--not everyone made that clear. A small point, but seems important in the context of the story. The rest of this paragraph is very well written, especially the last sentence; as she stops imagining, boom, the flow stops. Excellent fusion of meaning and form!

since deserted her. She only imagines, and then fear overtakes her as she wonders whether she, too, might someday do as the other woman had. Fear again. She stops imagining.

Once, when the woman was taking out the trash, she saw a couple and their son. The parents were carrying duffle bags, and the son had on a backpack.

“We’re going to the beach,” the wife said. “I know it’s cold out and it’s not the season, but our little prince here is insisting on having a picnic by the water and won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. So, we decided to take the car down to the beach together.”

“Oh, really?” the woman replied. “It’s a little chilly—actually, it’s pretty cold, isn’t it? Be careful. It would be awful if you got swept out to sea this time of year.”

“Are you feeling all right?” the husband asked. “You look like you’re feeling sick. Your lips are ^{* 12} purple. Have you been eating and sleeping all right?”

“No, I actually haven’t,” the woman confessed. “I’ve been feeling a little off lately. One moment I’m overheating, and the next I’m freezing.”

“Hey!” said the wife to the husband. “Be a little more considerate! When women get to be our age, their bodies go through all sorts of changes. Leave it to you to bring it up!” She turned to the woman. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I know what you’re going through.”

“Mommy, hurry up!” said the son, pulling on the wife’s skirt. “Hurry up so we can go to the beach!”

“Oh, he’s just so spoiled, isn’t he?” the wife said to the woman fondly. “We’ll be back!”

“Have a nice trip,” the woman replied, and the family climbed into the car.

“Be careful,” ^{* 13} whispered the woman toward the car as they drove away.

*12

Translating 'murasaki' literally here does not work. In English, we would say your lips are 'blue.'

*13

"Whispered" is good, much better than "muttered," which some of the entries used. And I like that she whispers it "toward the car."

Overall, this is very very good. Specifically, it has excellent word choice, good flow, only a few mistakes.

1 / 7

Translated by Grant Lloyd

The Bow

Kuniko MUKODA

I've had an answering machine for 10 years now.

This ^{*1} gadget, like so many others, appears to have become commonplace as of late, and as a result I get fewer stray messages now than I used to. At the start of the answering machine age, though, there were plenty of odd messages to enjoy.

*1
gadget, stray
messages :good
word choice

Like this one: "This is such-and-such coffee shop. I need two kilos of Mocha Matari and one kilo of Blue Mountain ASAP, please."

Or: "So-and-so keeps saying she's going to move out, and she won't take 'no' for an answer! So I was—huh? Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? Hello?" This was followed by the puff-puff sound of someone blowing on the receiver. "That's strange.... Testing, testing, one, two, three..."

These were only the beginning. Once, no sooner had I pressed 'Play' than I was getting yelled at. "Don't you make a fool out of me!" the voice shouted. Someone was obviously very angry. "What the hell are you doing using a woman's voice on your answering machine? And all because you want to get out of making excuses for why you can't pay me back. Well, I want all 300,000 yen by the end of the day today!" This was, of course, a wrong-number call from someone whom I'd never met before in my life.

I have no idea why the calls kept coming. For my part, I had made sure to give callers my name, tell them that they had reached my answering machine, and explain that I was "out of the house and unable to take your call at this time; please leave your name and a message of one minute or less after the beep."

Sometimes there were people who still had unfinished business after the one-minute time limit expired who called back with ^{*2} a second installment. The most enjoyable of these extended sagas came from one Ms. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi:

*2
a second
installment, these
extended sagas:
good word choice

"Hello? Kuniko? It's Tetsuko!"

It seemed like she couldn't get the rest of the message out without saying this first. After introducing herself at top speed, she went on even faster about how it was hard for her to speak normally because this was her first time talking to a machine like this over the phone.

"It wouldn't be right if I sounded too emotional, but it would also be weird if I talked like I was reading the news, so really I'm just not sure what to do," she said, and as she said it, her

one minute was up. So, she called again.

“Kuniko? It’s Tetsuko!” she began. “A minute sure does go by quickly, doesn’t it? I wonder if anyone else has trouble saying everything in a minute. They’re all so smart, though, so I guess not. But I just can’t seem to do it!” she said, and the next minute came to an end.

Then came another message that began, yet again, with the same introduction. This time she explained how she was “calling from a control room in a studio at the NHK and all the people here are looking at me like I’ve gone nuts because I’m standing here talking to myself” before the recording ended again.

She continued nonstop like this for nine whole messages before finally she concluded by saying that she would give me her message the next time she saw me. When I played the recordings back one after another it was like I was enjoying a single, nine-minute performance.

Knowing that it wouldn’t be right to keep something this interesting to myself, I sometimes played the tape as a form of entertainment for guests or whenever I had meetings with directors. To this day no one has broken the record set by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi for the most messages left by a single woman on my answering machine.

The bluntest message I’ve ever received, meanwhile, was one from my father. For whatever reason, he began his message with a tremendous grumble.

“Hmm...”

Then, he yelled his name into the phone.

“Toshio Mukoda!”

Then he snapped, “Call my office right away! The phone number is XX-XXX!”

Worried that I’d done something to offend him, I called him back as fast as I could. The reason for his message was as ordinary as could be. He had received some tickets to a play, and he wanted me to come pick them up.

My father died eight years ago. This was the only time I ever heard his voice on my answering machine.

My mother, meanwhile, is mostly used to the business of leaving messages by now. When I first had the machine installed, though, her reaction was quite unique.

“This is your mother calling. But I take it you’re not there, are you?” she said, obviously offended. “But that’s fine, I suppose. Anyway, there’s no point in me talking to a machine. I’m hanging up now.”

I could ^{* 3} almost hear the look of indignation on her face.

<p>*3 almost hear...the look: love this</p>

There have been plenty of standouts among the various messages and wrong-number calls that I've received over the past decade, but my personal favorite was from a woman who sounded ^{* 4} like she was getting on in years.

"My name is hardly worth mentioning," she said quietly. She had an air of poise about her voice and was ever so humble. "It seems I must have dialed the wrong number. I'm not sure what the proper thing to do would be in a case like this..." There was a small sigh followed by a brief period of silence. "My apologies," she said. "Excuse me." The message ended with the quiet click of the woman hanging up.

She had sounded like the very picture of grace and refinement. I tried picturing what the owner of the voice must have looked like. What was she wearing? What was her family like?

I thought she must have a lovely bow.

*

There was a time, about six months ago, when my mother was having heart trouble. Her condition, called paroxysmal tachycardia, meant that her heart rate would sometimes exceed 200 beats per minute for brief periods. The word was that the condition posed no immediate threat to her life, but she ended up staying at the hospital for tests anyway after she and everyone else voiced their concerns. My mother, ^{* 5} who will be 70 years old this December 31st, is a healthy woman who has never been confined to bed except to give birth. Hospitalization was a new experience for her. Although I tried to tell her that she would be out in a month or so and that there was nothing to worry about, when she left for the hospital she looked like she was prepared for this journey to be her last.

The first two or three days of her hospital stay were full of excitement. At night she would take as many 10-yen coins as she could hold out to the pay phone in the hallway, where she would report on the day's happenings.

She would tell me how wonderful it was not to have to worry about eating three meals a day, how the food options were made with the tastes and nutritional needs of the elderly in mind, and how kind and attentive the nurses were. Her lively reporting could have given even the best news anchor a run for their money. At times, it sounded like she was doing it for her own encouragement.

On the third day her report had suddenly lost its energy. Not only that, but it was shorter as well. On the fourth day, the calls stopped coming.

Having found a stopping point on a job of mine that was nearing its deadline, I went to

*4

'like she was getting on in years.' is excellent word choice for a tricky to translate phrase.

*5

This doesn't work. She is using kazoedoshi, but this makes it sound like December 31 was her birthday as calculated in Western style. Very few of the translators got this right.

visit my mother after the first week. When I came in, her face as she sat there on the bed seemed like it was a size smaller than it had been before. All three of my siblings were there that day, including my sister, who had married and left home to live elsewhere. The only painful part of the experience was when we were about to leave.

I glanced at my brother's watch and was debating whether to say that we should get going, but my mother was just a split second quicker.

"Well, I think it's about time for me to lie down," she said cheerfully. She stood up energetically from the bed and began to distribute the flowers and fruit that she had received from well-wishers. Despite our objections, when we were finally sent out of the room we were carrying armfuls of spoils that were larger than the care packages we had initially brought.

"It doesn't sit right with me having so many people coming to visit when some of the other patients don't get any visitors," my mother declared as she set off down the hallway in front of the four of us. She was the smallest one. "So don't come see me for a while, all right?"

"Seriously," she said, her insistence bordering on the excessive as ^{* 6} she shoosed us into the elevator, "don't come see me anymore."

*6
she shoosed us: great word choice

Then, as the doors began to close, she said, "Thank you for coming to visit me." The tone of her voice took on a formal quality that made her previous abrasiveness sound like it belonged to a different person, and she bowed deeply like one of the girls you might find working the elevators on the first floor of a department store.

The doors of the oversized hospital elevator, which was built to accommodate ^{* 7} a stretcher, began to close from both sides. My mother seemed even smaller than before as she bowed her head. Her hair was white with age, and over the shoulders of her pajamas she was wearing a leaf-green shawl that my sister had knitted for her. I only barely managed to overcome the urge to press the 'Door Open' button and call out.

*7
Not a stretcher, but a gurney. Many of the translators made this mistake. (Stretchers don't have legs, gurneys do and are used to transport patients in hospital.)

The four of us descended from the seventh floor to the lobby in silence.

"I can't believe her," my brother said in a flat, choked voice.

"She's always like this," my youngest sister said.

My sister used to visit my mother in the hospital every day, and my brother would stop by once every three days. Each time, my mother would walk them to the elevator and bow. Not only that, but according to my brother, the depth of the bow would change depending on how many of us were present.

"That was her most polite one. It's because we were all there today," he said.

As we walked out to the parking lot, we laughed about how it was just like her to do something like that and tried not to look at each other's teary-eyed faces.

*

That was the second time I saw my mother's ceremonious bow.

Two years ago, I got my sister to take my mother on a five-night, six-day trip to Hong Kong.

My mother had protested, saying that it was bad karma and that "your dead father wouldn't be happy about this," but seeing as she loved good food and was more than a little adventurous for her age, I knew she would enjoy it if only we could just get her to go. This led to a rather contentious start to the trip.

We came to the carry-on bag check at the airport. I watched through the plastic partition as my mother and sister opened their bags in front of one of the officers.

"You're not carrying any knives or hazardous materials, right?" the officer asked, following protocol. I expected her answer to be 'no.' Instead, she answered, "Yes, actually, I am," as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

My sister and I were dumbstruck. My mother, meanwhile, took out a large pair of sewing scissors.

"Mom!" I yelled without thinking. "What are you doing bringing something like that on the plane!?"

"I just thought, since I'm going to be away for a week, I would hate it if my nails got too long," she said, speaking neither to me nor to the officer in particular. Fortunately, the officer simply smiled and waved them forward, but when we met up again in the waiting area, I demanded to know why she didn't just bring a pair of nail clippers.

"Well, right as we were leaving, I realized I didn't have them, but I didn't want to make a fuss trying to find them, either," she said. Still, even as she made excuses, she sounded crestfallen. "Your father would have scolded me if he were alive," she said, ashamed.

I felt bad for her after what had happened, so I got up quietly and went to a flower shop, where I had them make a corsage out of some orchids. After bargaining the price down from 3,000 yen to 2,500, I went to hand it to her. Now it was her turn to be furious with me.

"Why do you always waste your money on things like this?" she fumed. "It's not like I'm some kind of celebrity."

This led to a mother-daughter fight that culminated in her telling me to "go return it."

Eventually my sister stepped in and convinced her to accept the flowers, telling her that “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime special occasion,” and my mother finally came around after that. Just as she was pinning the bouquet to the breast of her jacket, there came the boarding announcement for her flight. Standing in line with the other passengers to pass through the gate, my mother suddenly stopped and turned back toward me. I thought she was going to wave, so I raised my right hand. Instead, she made a deep, respectful bow. I instinctively followed suit, and the result was that I ended up lowering my head with one hand in the air so that I looked like I was doing the emperor’s famous wave.

I bought a ticket and went out on the observation deck. It was a wonderfully clear winter day and warm out considering the season. The cloudless, blue sky sparkled like mica at a point in the distance, and an airplane alighted on the runway.

The plane carrying my mother began to turn slowly onto the runway. I felt a sudden tightness in my chest. “Please don’t crash,” I wanted to say, “but if you must crash, let it be on the way back, please?”

The plane finished its climb and entered into a turn high beyond the airport. She would be fine now. I don’t know why, but tears were spilling from my eyes. I laughed at myself—she was only going to Hong Kong. Then I remembered the sewing scissors and the incident with the bouquet and laughed out loud; but though my mouth was laughing, the tears kept falling like a sun shower.

*

It was immediately before the fighting got bad during the war that my grandmother died, so it must have been around 35 years ago. I was in my second year of girls’ school.

The night of the wake, there was a sudden commotion at the entrance to the hall.

“The President is here!” they said.

My father, who had been seated by my grandmother’s coffin, hurried to the door, scattering the crowd of visitors as he went. ^{* 8} There, he planted his hands on the floor and bowed to the middle-aged man who entered.

The bow he made was closer to total prostration. At the time gasoline was already rationed, and civilians had to use cars sparingly. My father, a mere lower-level manager at a company in a large, national conglomerate, must never have imagined that he would receive a personal visit from the company president at his mother’s wake. It was the first time I had seen him like this.

<p>*8 This sentence is not quite right.</p>

My father had been a domineering figure for as long as I could remember. He would yell at his family and even raise his voice toward his own mother. I knew that he held the title of Regional Branch Manager, and I had never seen him as anything other than the provider, the leader who sat at the head of the table. That same man was now bowing on the floor in a way that was almost servile.

I hated my father's despotic attitude.

Why did he get to leave for work in crisp, white suits while my mother didn't get so much as a single ring from him? Why did he treat his subordinates so extravagantly—almost too extravagantly—when they came to visit? Why, when my siblings and I were sick with measles or the whooping cough, did he leave without so much as a glance in our direction, never missing a day and always on time?

I felt like I had caught a glimpse of the reason why, despite having joined the company as an errand runner with no more than a middle-school education, he had risen unassisted through the ranks like no one else in the company's history. I once used to sleep in the same room as my grandmother, but even the sadness of having lost her was blown out of my mind, and all that was left was the scene of my father's bow. I understood then that he had fought ^{* 9}for us like this all along, only that he had never let us see. I resolved to forgive him from then on whenever he was the only one who got an extra helping at dinner, or whenever he lashed out at us with his fists when his performance on his insurance contracts fell short ahead of deadlines. My heart still aches whenever I remember how my father looked that night.

<p>*9 for us? not sure where that comes from.</p>

*

My mother has shown us her bow, but my father died suddenly of heart failure at the age of 64 without ever having lowered his head to us once. Although he lost some of his fire in his later years, he never retired, and he had continued to scold us and yell. He had us bowing to him right up to his death.

It's a strange thing to see your parents bow.

Perhaps you could call it embarrassing, or upsetting, or ridiculous, or sad, or maybe a little irritating.

As much as I understand that aging is inevitable, there is something heartbreaking as a child watching your parents bow to the people they've raised.