

Overall, the parts about the heroine's emotions are beautifully done, and although it is very close to the text at the same time there is an inventiveness about the language and a clarity that is compelling. Only a few tiny mistakes.

Translated by Adam Sutherland

To the Water's Edge

Kashimada Maki

For the woman, the day begins at a time when, for most, it may as well be over. She has a man to tend to; and so, for the simple reason that she must, for him, she sets about preparing a pot-au-feu or something similar, cutting the various vegetables, adding the sausages and the consommé. In truth, there is nothing taxing about dishes like ^{* 1} pot-au-feu; she is capable of preparing something more suited to her talents, something that might satisfy her own desires even—but think this though she may, it is the food the man demands, that leaves her own desires unfulfilled, that she prepares.

Staring fixedly at the ^{* 2} broiling concoction inside the pot, the woman realises that she recognises it from somewhere. It is the same turmoil she has felt since childhood, appearing to her now as déjà vu. As a child, she felt alienated by the other girls' gossiping, by their boastful talk, by their strange, febrile excitement born of excessive self-consciousness. Thus detached, the woman played the part of the young girl matter-of-factly, albeit in a vague fug of loneliness and depression. Her memory of her school days is that of slithering through them like a snake, feeling like she might choke on the classroom air that lay thick with the smell of madeleines, hair mousse and anti-perspirant spray; and yet, such was her inner tumult and anguish at being in the midst of it all, even this memory she is unable to vouch for.

That young teacher keeps leering at me, but I couldn't fancy him any less if I tried ... There's this singer I used to like, I was a fan back before he was even popular. But now that he's made it, I'm thinking I might not bother anymore ... Everyone always goes on about how cute she is, but her face doesn't do anything for me. Like, she's supposed to be more a girl-next-door type than a beauty, but that's just another way of saying she isn't all that pretty, if you ask me.

Conversations about nothing in particular, as quick to dissipate as freshly risen meringues. And yet, light on substance and, yes, meringue-like though they were, for the young girls engaged in them, these conversations represented a matter of utmost importance: namely, the extent to which they were able to give vent to their surplus of physiological sensations. As for the woman, she gobbled up these adolescent emissions like a goldfish gulping for oxygen, her stomach swelling like that of a pregnant woman until she feared she might burst.

*1

'pot-au-feu' is a simple everyday dish in French cooking but not in English, where it corresponds to stew.

*2

I hope 'broiling' is a typo for 'boiling.'

She remembers a remark one of her teachers once made to her: about how she was looking pale and under the weather, but was everything okay? *It's just, even looking unwell as you do*, the teacher went on, *you appear almost to be in some sort of daze, as if you were enthralled by something. What on earth are you thinking about? Are you managing to concentrate?*

But the woman already knew. She was aware already of the trance she was in, of how it was the prelude to some imminent seizure. It was in that same rapturous state that she would go on to become an adult, and in which she later met a man. Thinking how nice it would be not having to listen to those meringue-like grievances and complaints of her childhood any longer, she met a man, and before she knew whether she was in love with him or not, they were together.

But then one day the man turned to her and said, "There's no thread of logic running through anything you say. Listening to you speak is like watching bubbles float off into nothingness, or like grasping at clouds."

Bubbles and clouds. At the man's comment, the woman felt something click into place. *That's it*, she thought, recognising them immediately. For what else could he be referring to but those same meringues of her youth, those empty emissions of pent-up adolescence? The observation terrified her. The thought of those swollen air globules that had once so tormented and perturbed her, expanding inside her this whole time, and now she was vomiting them up...

She apologised immediately, ashen-faced the way she had been in front of her teacher. She didn't know what it was she was apologising for exactly, but she did it all the same, offering up her excuses lest the man who kept her concealed should leave her: "Sorry, I suppose I'm just, well, a little off today. But you're right: good speech ought to be logical, and of sound construction like a stone monastery. Do forgive me. I'm just feeling a little out of sorts, that's all."

In truth, the woman has been feeling out of sorts ever since was a child, but she acted as though it were a momentary lapse, nonetheless. *Whatever it takes for him not to leave me*, she thought. Whatever it took to keep her concealed.

At her utterance of the words 'stone monastery', the woman had felt a pang of guilt; for in fact, she'd long thought of the man as resembling a stone edifice of some description. Large, yes, but devoid of warmth. Cold even. She had hitched herself to him for the security he

provided; and yet, even in his presence, she couldn't let go of the nagging sense that she was afraid of something. Just who *was* this person? she wondered. And what to make of this vague anxiety despite his buttress-like presence at her side?

She was dimly aware of them: those dark clouds looming ominously over the stone monastery below. Sooner or later, they would pelt it with cold rain, or scorch it with lightning. *And when they do, she thought, who's to say the monastery won't collapse, leaving me exposed to the full brunt of the storm?* The thought chilled the woman to her bones. *Yes, he puts me on edge, and there's something undeniably cold about him. But what other choice do I have? To depend on him is all I know. At this point, he is my addiction.*

^{* 3}
It had all the hallmarks of a crime of passion. A woman laced the drink of the man she loved with poison, to lethal effect. It would appear she had intended on joining him, for afterwards she threw herself into the sea, only to be spotted before she'd had time to finish the job. The impulse seems to have announced itself unexpectedly one day. By all accounts, the couple had been close, the woman generally speaking the nervous sort, hardly the kind you'd peg capable of murder-suicide. She discharged household tasks with a conscientiousness bordering on the dutiful—the man's shirts unfailingly crisp and white; the saccharine smell of soy sauce wafting from the kitchen ventilation fan.

She had always seemed the picture of happiness: timid, yes, but never short of a smile, not even in the early mornings when she came to put the rubbish out, the lavender print apron her man had gifted her for her birthday tied neatly about her waist. “He bought me this apron as a gift, you know,” she often said, as if by force of habit. “I was over the moon. I've treasured it ever since.”

She seems to have had a soft spot for melodramas and breezy bestsellers. During conversations with the neighbours, she'd often ask, “Do you think something so sad and moving could ever happen in real life?” and she would come over all misty-eyed as she said it, on occasion even shedding actual tears, the indulgence in a world of fantasy invariably loosening the reins on her emotions.

And to think she always seemed so calm and sweet-natured, the neighbours said. *She loved that man with all her heart—what could possibly have possessed her to do such a thing? It just goes to show, you can never really know someone...* It was the talk of the

*3
'It had all the hallmarks, etc.' is not exactly what the J says, but it works very well, esp. in light of the later effort to figure out why the woman was driven to it.

neighbourhood, a topic returned to again and again as if mere mention of it were somehow pleasurable. Over and over. Like the waves that had lashed repeatedly at the woman after she threw herself into the sea.

“Isn’t it strange how the sea manages to remain so shapeless?” she’d once commented to a neighbour. “What makes the waves so restless, I wonder? All that jostling back and forth, and never any change to show for it. It’s quite bizarre if you think about it.” No doubt the neighbours must have wondered why she’d started talking about the sea all of a sudden.

“In and out the waves go, over and over, and to what end? Nothing ever changes. I suppose it’s a lot like our lives in that respect,” the woman went on. “I mean, there we are making dinner, doing the washing, every day it’s the same old thing. Day after day, going through the motions, and what does it ever amount to? Time passes and that’s it. I couldn’t tell you the last time I learnt something new. It’s like I don’t make discoveries anymore, or expand my horizons from one day to the next. My mind just stays the same, never growing. It’s enough to make you wonder whether, well, whether there shouldn’t be *more* to life.

“Still,” she said with a sigh, “I shouldn’t complain, not when there are people out there with real problems. Just look at men, for instance—now they’ve *really* got their work cut out. I dare say for them, every day must be like living through a revolution, that’s how I ought to think of it. In which case, I suppose I really should consider myself rather lucky, getting to live each day as it comes, free of all that revolution and upheaval.

“Though I have to admit, the sight of the sea does make me a little anxious,” the woman continued. “The thought of all those waves shifting endlessly back and forth, as if on a loop... Sometimes I wonder if that isn’t precisely what makes them so cold and drained of colour. Sure, it may *look* like nothing’s changing, but what if something’s actually stalking its way ever closer, little by little? Until one day, just like that, the entire sea suddenly buckles and collapses in on itself?”

To her neighbours, the woman’s ramblings were little more than idle fantasies. She had too much time on her hands, they thought, had seen one too many melodramas for her own good—it was no wonder she was imagining things. Besides, having husbands and children of their own, they were too preoccupied with their own grievances to give the woman’s nightmares much in the way of thought.

If at times she indulged in egregious fantasies, then it was also true that she always returned to everyday life. In this sense, she was just like the waves, breaking only to retreat

moments later. Not that any of the neighbours made the connection.

None of them knew; not the neighbours, not even the woman herself. Nobody noticed it stalking ever closer, little by little, something as large as it was undefined. Something on a scale comparable to the revolutions experienced by men every day at work. And not a single person noticed.

This was what lay behind the woman's crime: a set of circumstances so ordinary as to be perfectly banal. People could try to get at the truth all they liked, but it wasn't likely to come out any time soon. It was the same as asking what makes the waves so restless, after all.

The woman wasn't the slightest bit different to any of the other women in the neighbourhood. They all carried within them the same sense of foreboding, in spite of which they kept themselves busy so as to get on with life. Every day, upon bumping into one other when taking out the rubbish or collecting the newspaper, they would say: *Good morning. Another lovely day by the looks of it.* If anything was different about the woman, it was the way she would say: *Another lovely day to be thankful for.* Thankful. But to whom, exactly? She couldn't say. She knew only that, whatever she felt grateful towards, it was something as large as the ocean. If nothing else, she had a vague awareness of the existence of something unfathomable.

The woman learns about the murder—^{* 4}the attempted murder-suicide—from the newspaper. “What's that you're looking at?” the man demands. “You've never taken so much as the slightest bit of interest in society or the world around you. What on earth could someone like you have to read about in a newspaper?” The woman, perhaps out of a sense of guilt, folds the paper hurriedly before concealing it from his gaze. “It's nothing,” she demurs. “There was an article about knitting so I thought I might take a look for once, that's all. What do you fancy for dinner?”

She is still clutching the newspaper. She can't explain it, but she feels like she is being drained of her body heat, as if it were being siphoned out from her by the newspaper in her grip. It's as though, in her agitation, all the blood had rushed to her head—albeit only momentarily—before suddenly and inexplicably draining away, sending her temperature plummeting along with it. *How curious*, she thinks to herself, *I've never experienced anything like that before.* As if in sympathy, the couple's black cat rubs itself up against the

*4
It's very good to add "the attempted" here, it's another example of how the translator has achieved such clarity.

woman's legs. Just then, the pressure cooker comes to the boil.

The woman lets out an audible gasp and rushes to turn off the stove. "Forgive me, I was a million miles away," she says. "I'm so sorry."

Sorry, I'm so sorry. She is forever apologising to the man like this. She apologises even when she hasn't done anything wrong. *After all, she thinks, if ever he were to leave me, that would spell the end of me. And if I come to an end, well, that's the same thing as the whole world going kaput. Of course, people say the world will continue without them, but I've never been one to buy it myself. As far as I'm concerned, the world begins and ends with me, which means that when I end, the world ends too. That's why I make my apologies: so that I can go on taking refuge beneath his wings. So that I can keep the end of the world at bay.*

Her grip tightens on the newspaper she is still holding. *It's no wonder this woman in the paper did what she did, she tells herself. Killing her husband, throwing herself into the sea: I can understand it all too well. Why, the idea of having to keep him in my thoughts for as long as I live, it hardly bears thinking about. So much so that I find myself wanting to put an end to it all. To my relationship with him, to the world, everything.*

I know full well I can't make his every concern my own. So instead, I'm destined to remain addicted to him, while suffering withdrawal from that which I crave the most. In which case, perhaps I'd be better off killing him, and taking my own life, too. Better that than the agony of withdrawal.

From that day on, the woman takes to carrying a clipping of the newspaper article around with her. Every day she thinks about the woman's crime, mulling it over as she stares down at the pressure cooker's seething contents. What kind of poison did the woman use? she wonders. How did she get her hands on it? And in what way did she go about serving him the drink once she'd poisoned it?

She thinks about other things too: like what it must have felt like when the woman plunged herself into the water. What made her choose to do it that way instead of any other method she could have used? Is the sea really as cold as it looks? How painful is it not being able to breathe underwater? How cruel and merciless will death feel when it comes?

* 5

"What's taking so long with dinner?"

The man's voice jolts her from her train of thought. He is speaking to her. She puts her musings on hold, listens as he talks: about his colleagues from the office, about how work is going, about the state of the economy. Later, as they sit eating the food that she has prepared

*5

The juxtaposition of all the heroine's musing inner questions with the husband's direct question about dinner works very well, making the Japanese even more pointed. It's small things like this that make this translation cohere so well.

for them, she murmurs noncommittally every now and then as if to show she is listening. But at the back of her mind, it is the woman's crime of which she is still thinking. A basso continuo running ceaselessly beneath everything else.

Then, one evening, the woman suggests that the two of them take a trip to the sea. "At this time of the year?" the man says, taken aback. "To do what? Stand around in the cold looking at the grey ocean, watching white waves break against the rocks? Because that's all there'll be to do, you know."

"That's fine by me," the woman replies. "I'm aware it's not the season for it, but I want to go all the same. Besides, it's not like I'm planning on swimming anyway, so a little cold doesn't bother me. I just want to go to the sea, that's all. To stand face to face with it."

If there is anything ^{* 6} ominous in the woman's suggestion, the man doesn't notice. Instead, he simply tilts his glass of chilled sake at an angle and, peering through its patterned surface, ventures to remark, "Well, I never. Look, the moon is reflected inside the glass. It's a beautiful night out." "So it is," the woman replies, then continues: "The world always seems so beautiful and serene come night-time." *It is during the days, she thinks privately to herself, that I find myself wanting to scream.*

"Darling," the woman says, her complexion ashen. "Do you really love me?" The man reels in surprise. "What sort of stupid question is that? I'd hardly be living with you if I didn't, now, would I?" "That's not what I mean," the woman mutters, before falling silent. That's not love, she thinks; at least, it's not the kind of love she's looking for. *I don't want you to love me the way you would any other woman. I want your love for me to be different somehow.*

^{* 7} Deep down, she realises, it isn't even the woman she has become that she wants him to be interested in, not really. No, what she wants is for him to look past her as she is now, back to who she was *before* she became a woman, to those suffocating years of her youth; to put the muddled, turbid thoughts of her younger self in order, to love the young girl she once was, to keep the child in her safe from harm. Oh, how happy she would be if only his love for her would extend back into her past!

"You don't love me, not really," she mutters under her breath, but the man doesn't hear her.

* * *

*6
"ominous" is just the right word here, better than "sinister" or "ill-omened", which a few other entries used.

*7
"Deep down...into her past." this whole paragraph is beautiful.

^{* 8}
Today like every other day, women in their multitudes will offer themselves up before mirrors: combing their hair, applying lipstick, spraying themselves with perfume. Not for anyone in particular, least of all for a man, but rather for themselves. Enchanted by what they see, they gaze upon their reflections in full awareness that, should ever a young girl appear before them identical to the one in the mirror, they would surely eat her up, devouring her whole. How satisfying it would be, they imagine, to get to be the sole and total consumers of their own projection, to complete themselves without being defiled in the eyes of a man or anyone else!

*8
"Today...anyone else!" this reads very well, beautiful flow.

Dressed in flowing, silk-like attire, these women bound and frolic about, sharing in laughter. They are at the height of bliss; it is as if they have never had cause to know pain or disappointment, and never will. They share pastel-coloured macarons and knowing glances, contemplating what mischief to get up to next. Like ^{* 9} that little band of girls along the seafront at Balbec, so uncanny is their resemblance to one another that they exist only as a girlish cluster, with no individual personalities to call their own.

*9
The phrasing "that little band of girls along the seafront at Balbec" makes it easy to recall that this is an allusion to Proust. Other translators used "beach" or "shore," but "seafront" includes both the beach and human interventions into it like boardwalks, cafes, etc. so it recalls the scene in Proust more easily.

This is how they will stay: as anonymous, frolicking little girls, never to decay. And if at times they are pawed at by hands filthy enough to turn their stomachs, they will respond to such provocations, and the men behind them, in the cruellest way they know how: by ignoring them and erasing all trace of them from memory. Then continuing on as if they were never defiled in the first place.

^{* 10}
Only a pure and sacred frigidity can violate them. Against everything else, even decay, they are impervious, for there is nothing to decay: they are unbearably inorganic, hard and unyielding as mineral. Untouchable, they float where life takes them as the shackles of some future portent, similarly adrift, gradually close around them. A melancholic, pitch-black shadow stalking its way ever closer. A passionless insanity rendering them something other than flesh.

*10
"Only...flesh." also excellent.

Once, long before she was driven to do what she did, the woman from the newspaper used to be one such little girl too, frolicking beneath the sun. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she'd one day end up throwing herself in the sea—but it came for her nonetheless, steady and unrelenting in its pace. The other woman senses it too: that's why, continuing in her own ambiguous relationship with a man who may or may not love her, the whole sordid affair from the newspaper feels, well, familiar somehow. She can imagine herself being driven to something similar: one last, violent gasp like the scream from her pressure cooker,

so quick to start seething after she sets it on the stove.

To actually go through with it, though... Most lack the nerve it takes to purchase the poison, the firmness of hand to take up the knife. And so, though filled with a sense of foreboding, most women will live out their lives regardless, never knowing peace of mind.

Today then, again, the woman will set her pressure cooker on the stove and fantasise about the woman's crime. As if the very thought of it brings her pleasure. Peering down into the cloudy, opaque mixture. Like something straight out of a melodrama. Nothing captivates her more; it occupies nearly all her waking thoughts, yet she knows she lacks the vigour to go through with it. So she settles for imagining it instead, only immediately to chide herself for being so macabre; tells herself she might actually go through with it someday, before shuddering at the thought, then stops herself thinking about it altogether.

Once, when she was putting out the rubbish, she spotted a family she recognised getting ready to leave for a trip. The couple were lugging suitcases, and their young son was shouldering a backpack. "We're off to the seaside," the wife called out. "Hardly the season for it, I know—it's already chilly out—but try telling that to His Little Majesty here. He's got it in his head he wants a picnic at the beach, and we can't get him to listen to reason. So we decided we'd drive to the coast, just the three of us."

"Fancy that," the woman replied. "I'd have thought it was too brisk out, if not positively cold already. You will take care of yourselves, won't you? The last thing you want is to get swept away by the waves at this time of year."

"Is everything okay?" the husband chimed in. "You're looking a little worse for wear there. Your lips are ^{* 11}purple. Are you sure you're eating properly? Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Not really," the woman confessed. "I've been a little off-colour lately. One minute I'll be oddly flushed, then the next thing I know I'm practically shivering."

"Use a little tact, would you?" the wife said, chiding her husband. "A woman's body goes through changes when you get to be our age. Honestly, I can't believe the things you come out with sometimes." Then, turning to the woman: "Excuse him, would you?" As if to say: *You don't need to explain yourself to me.*

"Come on, let's go already," the boy said, pulling on his mother's skirt. "I want to go to the beach!"

"Listen to this spoiled little prince of ours! I don't know what to do with him sometimes.

*11 no, "murasaki" is not purple here, it's "blue."
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Right, we'd better be off."

"Have a safe trip," the woman said. And with that, the family bundled themselves into the car and they were off.

"Look after yourselves," she ^{*12}muttered after them as the car pulled away.

*12
wouldn't "whisper"
be better here?

In summary, this is very very good, though with some awkward language and a few (very few) mistakes.

Translated by Adam Sutherland

A Bow Among Family

Mukōda Kuniko

It's been ten years since I first hooked up my answering machine.

I can only assume the appliances must have grown in popularity of late, as these days it's become rare for me to find on my machine a message for whom I am not the intended recipient. Back in the early days, though, amusing mishaps of this sort were ten a penny.

“So-and-so Café, here. I'd like to order two kilos of Mocha Matari and one of Blue Mountain. For urgent delivery, please.”

“It's about —ko: she says she's movin' out no matter what. So it got me thinkin'—hm? ‘Lo? Are you there? Can you hear me, hello?’ *Huff, huff.* (The sound of the speaker blowing twice into the mouthpiece.) “Strange... Ahh, testing, testing, 1, 2, 3.”

Messages like these were mild compared to some of what I got. Once, upon hitting play, I found myself suddenly being yelled at.

“Think you can pull a fast one on me, eh?” the voice roared. Even over the phone, the ferocity was palpable. “I don't care how sick you are of making excuses—roping in some broad to make it look like you're not there is stooping pretty goddamn low. You've got till the end of the day to get us the thirty thousand. And don't even think about skimping.”

I had no idea what he was talking about of course; he'd dialled the wrong number, case closed. But as for how things could go so spectacularly wrong when I'd clearly given my name, before going on to explain that I was out right now and that this was an answering machine he had reached, so could the caller please leave their name and any message within one minute after the beep—and *still* here I was, receiving an earful—well, I haven't the faintest idea.

Occasionally there were those who, unable to get through whatever they needed to say in the allotted minute, would phone back to leave a ‘Part 2’. None, though, did so with such ^{*1}panache as a certain Ms. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi.

“Mukōda-san? It's Kuroyanagi,” she began, rattling through the words as if they were a necessary prelude to everything that followed. But then she picked up the pace further, saying, “I've never spoken to one of these machines before—I feel positively tongue-tied! It feels strange getting all worked up when there's no one there, but then again, it'd probably be just as odd to sound as if I were reading the news. What's a woman to do!” She'd been

*1
'panache' is a terrific translation for 面白かったのは and the whole Kuroyanagi Tetsuko saga is also wonderfully done.

carrying on like this for a minute when the machine abruptly cut her off.

Cue the next message.

“Mukōda-san? It’s Kuroyanagi,” it began, the same introduction as before. “Now, where was I? My, but doesn’t a minute just fly by! Do you mean to say everyone else manages to wrap things up in that short space of time? They must be terribly clever. Not like a certain you-know-who...” And so on and so forth in the same vein until another minute was up.

“Mukōda-san? It’s Kuroyanagi.” The by-now-familiar refrain. “I’m calling from the NHK studio control room, y’see, and, well, here I am nattering away like I’m talking to myself, so everyone’s looking at me with a face like ol’ Chuck’s lost the plot.” Alas, she’d got no further than this explanatory preamble when she was cut short yet again.

In the end, having rattled her way across nine messages in this same rapid-fire fashion, it was left that she’d wait to tell me her reason for calling when she next saw me in person. As I listened through the messages one after the other, I was struck by how together they formed the most delightful nine-minute performance. Thinking it greedy to hog all the enjoyment for myself, I’ve been known to play the tape as a special treat for producers during meetings, or when I’m otherwise entertaining company—though admittedly, I do feel guilty doing so without the permission of the performer herself. To this day, Ms. Kuroyanagi’s record of nine consecutive messages remains unbroken.

Speaking of records, the surliest message I’ve ever received has to be one my father once left me. For no apparent reason, it began with an almighty guttural “harumph”, followed by the sound of my father barking his own name—*Toshio Mukōda!*—and finally his message:

“Phone me at work as soon as you get this!”

He snapped at the words—including the number I was to phone him on—as he shouted them down the line. My heart skipped a beat: what on earth could I have done to make him so upset? When I phoned him back, however, his reason for having called turned out to be entirely pedestrian: he’d received some tickets to a Noh play which he wanted me to come by and pick up. My father passed away eight years ago now; this was to be the only time I would ever hear his voice on my answering machine.

As for my mother, she seems largely unfazed by the whole thing these days. But back when my answerphone was still a novelty, she too used to leave messages that were distinctive, to say the least.

“It’s your mother here,” one typical example began. “So it’s like that, is it? You’re not in, I

see.”

Evidently, she was not best pleased.

“If you’re not there, forget it. I’ve got better things to do than sit here talking to a machine. I’m hanging up now.”

I could practically see her pouting as she said it.

Over the past decade, I’ve had the pleasure of any number of unique messages winding their way to my answerphone, including the wrong numbers. My absolute favourite, though, was one left for me by a woman who sounded like she was in her sixties.

“I am nobody of any importance, I’m afraid,” she began, her voice soft and refined. Clearly mortified, she continued:

“Forgive me, I appear to have dialled a wrong number ... I’m not quite sure what the ‘done’ thing is in situations like these.”

She gave a quiet sigh, followed by a pause.

“Please accept my apologies. I’m terribly sorry to have bothered you.”

The message ended with a click as she gently replaced the receiver.

As I listened, it occurred to me that this must be precisely what people have in mind when they talk about proper etiquette. I tried to picture her, this woman on the other end of the line: her appearance and the sort of clothes she wore, and the kind of household to which she belonged. I felt certain that, when she bowed, she surely did so with impeccable grace.

About half a year ago, my mother experienced some heart trouble ^{* 2} by the name of paroxysmal tachycardia. For brief spells, her heart rate would exceed two hundred beats per minute. Despite assurances it wasn’t life-threatening in and of itself, it was nonetheless alarming both for my mother and the rest of us, so it was decided she’d be admitted to hospital for observation and routine tests. My mother, who will ^{* 3} turn seventy this New Year’s Eve, has always been a picture of perfect health—someone who, with the exception of childbirth, has never even been laid up in bed. A stint in hospital was thus to be a lifetime first. She’d be out in a month, we told her, so there was nothing for her to worry about, not that it seemed to make a difference: when it came time to depart, she appeared to do so with the grim resolve of someone embarking on their final journey.

For the first couple of days, she was a veritable riot of impressions. At night, her fist

*2
'by the name of' --
awkward

*3
'turn seventy this
New Year's Eve'
makes it sound like
her birthday in
Western style is on
December 31, but
actually it is just the
old-fashioned
kazoedoshi way of
counting, so this is
misleading.

stuffed full of as many ten-yen coins as she could find, she would call us from the public telephone in the corridor to update us with her daily reports: about what bliss it was not to have to worry about preparing food three times a day; about how much thought had gone into the catering, which was tailored to a senior's palate and nutritional needs; how attentive and kind all the nurses were... All delivered with a bright-eyed fervour that would put even a television reporter to shame. You got the impression she was putting on a brave face to keep her spirits high.

Then on the third day, her reports suddenly seemed ^{* 4} damped of their enthusiasm, and she hung up much more quickly than usual. The next day she stopped phoning altogether.

When I visited my mother later that week, having finally turned the corner on the last hectic stages of a job I'd been working on, I found her sitting up in bed, her expression pinched as if her whole face were shrinking in on itself. My siblings and I had arranged it so that all four of us would visit her that day, including my married younger sister, and the visit itself passed pleasantly enough. The only bitter note to proceedings came just as it was time to leave.

I had glanced at my brother's watch and was waiting for the right moment to begin saying my goodbyes when, with only a split second in it, my mother beat me to the punch.

"All right, you lot," she said cheerfully, "it's about time I got some rest." She then rose to her feet decisively, whereupon she began apportioning out to us various gifts she'd been brought by other visitors: floral bouquets, fruit baskets and the like. After a verbal tug-of-war in which my siblings and I tried to refuse, we were ultimately sent packing laden with a bigger pile of spoils than the gifts we'd come bearing in the first place.

"Some of the patients here haven't received a single visitor, you know," my mother addressed the four of us as she walked us back through the corridor, the smallest among us leading the pack. "Yet here I am with a constant stream of people descending on me. It's embarrassing. Please don't come again for a while."

As she bundled us into the elevator, she continued to press the point, saying, "I mean it. I don't want you coming anymore."

But then, just as the elevator doors were about to shut, she said "thank you". And in a manner quite at odds with her roughness of tone thus far—as though she were a different person, in fact—she bowed deeply and with formal courtesy, a bow just like those given by the female elevator attendants one finds on the ground floor of department stores.

*4
To my American ear, 'damped of' sounds very odd. Is it UK?

As the doors began to slide shut on the elevator—which was large enough inside to accommodate ^{*5} a stretcher—I took in the image of my mother standing there in her pyjamas, her shoulders draped in the olive shawl my younger sister had knitted for her, ^{*6} the white crown of her lowered head. She looked even smaller to me now than she had before. I felt the sudden urge to say something more; it was all I could do to resist pressing the button to keep the doors from closing.

None of us speaking, my siblings and I rode the elevator down the seven floors to ground level. It was my brother who broke the silence, muttering: “Puts you through the wringer, doesn’t she?”

“It’s like that every time,” my youngest sister added. She’d been visiting our mother every day, with my brother popping his head in a couple of times a week for good measure. Without fail, they explained, our mother would see them as far as the elevator, before sending them away with a bow the way she’d just done. And that wasn’t all: according to my brother, the angle of the bow even changed depending on how many people she was doing it to.

“Today all four of us were there, so we got her at her most polite.”

That sounded like Mum, all right. We chuckled and set out walking in the direction of the carpark, looking anywhere but at each other as our eyes filled with tears.

This was the second time my mother had bowed to me like this, with almost ceremonial formality. The first was two years ago.

I had taken the liberty of arranging a trip for my mother and younger sister: six days and five nights in Hong Kong, with my sister agreeing to act as chaperone. My mother was opposed to the idea, which she claimed would make our late father angry, calling it “extravagant” among other things. Yet considering her taste for fine food, not to mention a healthy curiosity for someone her age, I knew that if we could just get her onto the plane, she would end up having a great time. Suffice it to say, the departure wasn’t without its quarrels.

At the airport, my mother and sister were required to submit their carry-on baggage for inspection. I watched from behind a plastic partition as they opened up their bags for the attendant in charge.

“No knives or other hazardous items in your luggage, I take it?” the official enquired, his manner one of rehearsed protocol.

*5
Not a stretcher, but a gurney. You can't just put the katakana word into roman letters.

*6
"the white crown of her lowered head" for 'shiroku natta atama wo sageru' is wonderful.

Now, it probably goes without saying that here I was fully expecting my mother to respond with a simple “no”; but instead, she replied in a tone of perfect nonchalance, “Why yes, I do have something.” Startled, my sister and I looked on aghast as my mother proceeded to produce from her bag a large pair of sewing scissors.

“What on earth did you bring those with you for?” I shrieked.

“We’ll be gone for a week, so I didn’t want my nails getting long,” my mother said, in a way that seemed addressed neither exactly to me nor the attendant.

The official laughed and kindly waved us on. A short while later, in the waiting room beyond the inspection gate, I scolded my mother for her thoughtlessness.

“Why didn’t you bring your nail clippers with you?”

“The thought crossed my mind as we were leaving, but by then we were already halfway out the door. It hardly seemed like the time to start searching for them.” Despite her excuses, she was clearly crestfallen. “I can only imagine the hot water I’d be in if your father were still alive...”

Feeling slightly sorry for her, I stood up without drawing attention to myself and wandered over to a nearby flower stand where I asked the florist to fix me up an orchid corsage. But when I presented my mother with this gift—the price of which I’d managed to barter down from three thousand yen to two thousand five hundred—she completely flew off the handle.

“What do you take me for, royalty? Goodness, you’d think you were made of money!”

In the end a quarrel ensued, with my mother angrily demanding that I return the corsage to wherever it was I’d bought it. Thankfully, my sister managed to smooth things over by convincing our mother that, as it was a one-off, the purse strings could surely stretch just this once. Her temper finally quelled, we’d no sooner managed to pin the corsage to our mother’s chest than the boarding announcement rang out over the airport Tannoy. I hung back as the two of them took their place in line. They were heading through the ticket gate when, all of a sudden, my mother stopped and turned to face in my direction. Fully expecting her to wave, I raised my right hand—but instead, she gave a deep bow. Finding myself following her lead, I lowered my head, although with my hand still raised mid-wave the gesture probably looked more like something the emperor would do.

Shortly after, I purchased a ticket and made my way out onto the terrace atop the finger pier. It was a picture-perfect day, clear and unseasonably warm for winter, and I stood watching the aeroplanes as they took off and landed, tiny specks of mica glistening against

the cerulean sky.

Down below, the plane with my mother and sister aboard began to turn slowly on the runway. I felt a sudden tightness in my chest.

Please don't let them crash, I felt like praying. Not on the way there, at the very least.

The aeroplane finished its ascent and began to bank gently at altitude. *Everything's fine. They're on their way.* Out of nowhere, my eyes welled up with tears. I had to smile—I was being ridiculous, it was only a trip to Hong Kong, for goodness' sake—but when I put it all together in my mind, the sewing scissors, the orchid corsage... I stood there laughing out loud as the tears kept coming, like rain falling from a cloudless sky.

My grandmother died just before the war ramped up in intensity—thirty-five years ago now, I suppose that would make it. I was in the second year of my all-girls secondary school at the time.

On the evening of her wake, there came a sudden stir from over by the front door. “The company president is here to pay his respects,” I heard a voice saying.

My father leapt up from his seat beside my grandmother's coffin and flew in the direction of the entrance, scattering guests as he went. A man who looked to be in his sixties ^{*7} was crouched over in the hallway, his hand perched on the wooden entrance step as he made his way up and inside the house. My father bowed to him.

*7

This is backwards--
it's the father, not
the man, who is
being described.

I say ‘bowed’—‘prostrated himself’ might be closer to the mark. These were already the days of gasoline rationing, so civilians couldn't just come and go in their cars as they pleased. And even if they could, back then my father was still only a section manager working for a huge industrial conglomerate; I dare say it never occurred to him that the company president himself might make an appearance at our family wake. At any rate, it was a side of my father I was witnessing for the very first time.

As far back as I can remember, my father had always been domineering. Around his family, he was a shouter, someone who raised his voice even to his own mother. He also held the job title of local branch manager, in keeping with which I never knew him to sit anywhere except in the seat reserved for the ‘head of table’, with his back to the alcove post. And yet here he was now, bowing with a deference that seemed almost obsequious.

I'd always hated the way my father threw his weight around.

He'd never bought my mother so much as a ring. Who was he, I thought, to go swanning off to work each day in his crisply starched, white hemp suit? Or to go to such extravagance whenever his subordinates came to visit, entertaining them quite beyond his means? And if ever one of my siblings or I came down with something—the measles, whooping cough—would it really have killed him to stay off work or arrive late just once, instead of heading out the door without the slightest consideration for our wellbeing?

^{* 8}
On that evening, though, I felt like I'd witnessed something: namely, how it was that my father, having entered the company as an errand-boy with only a senior elementary education, could have gone on to reach the position he was now in—a rise in ranks supposedly unprecedented in the company's history—and all without the patronage of a well-connected friend or family member. I was at my grandmother's funeral, a woman with whom I once used to share a room at night, and all the grief I was supposed to be feeling had dissipated, leaving only the image of my father bowing engraved upon my mind. *So that's how he did it*, I thought. Away from our eyes, *this* was how he'd fought his way up in the world. And in that moment, I felt ready to forgive him—for all those evenings that he got to have one more side-dish with dinner than the rest of us; for the fists he'd let fly to vent his anger at not meeting his insurance sales quotas... To this day, my chest aches whenever I recall the way he looked that night.

*8
This whole paragraph, from 'On that evening' to 'that night', is so good!

My mother saw fit to bow before her children, but the same could never be said of my father; he died suddenly of heart failure at the age of sixty-four, not yet retired, having never once lowered his head to us. Though in the last years of his life he seemed to soften slightly, in the end he went to his grave much as he had lived: as a disciplinarian and a shouter, someone we bowed *to*, never the other way round.

It's a complicated old thing, seeing your parents bow.

There's the embarrassment of it, or perhaps it's closer to ^{* 9}disconcertment. It's also comical and sad, not to mention ever so slightly maddening.

It's only inevitable that we should end up lowering our heads someday to the children we have raised—that's what it means to grow old, after all. And yet, for the child being bowed to, knowing this doesn't make it any less painful.

*9
'disconcertment' -- this sounds a bit awkward. How about 'unsettling'?