

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?”

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."

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.

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 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.

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 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*

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

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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 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.

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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 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.

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

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 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 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

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 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,” whispered the woman toward the car as they drove away.