

The Bow

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

This 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.

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 a second installment. The most enjoyable of these extended sagas came from one Ms. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi:

"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 almost hear the look of indignation on her face.

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 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.

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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, 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

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 she shooed us into the elevator, "don't come see me anymore."

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 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.

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.

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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.

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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. 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.

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 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.

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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.