A Bow Among Family

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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 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

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 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 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

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 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.

As the doors began to slide shut on the elevator—which was large enough inside to accommodate 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, 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.

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 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.

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?

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.

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 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.