On Bowing

Mukoda Kuniko

It's been ten years since I bought my answering machine.

Nowadays, what with the seeming ubiquity of these devices, I get fewer accidental messages than before. Still, I can recall many delightful ones from those early days.

"Hello, this is so-and-so Coffee House. Could you send over two kilograms of your Mocha Mattari and one kilogram of your Blue Mountain beans right away?"

"So A--ko says she's gonna leave home for sure. And y'know what? Huh? Hello? You there? Hellooo? [*Blows into receiver*]. Huh. That's odd. Testing. Testing..."

But such are just the tip of the iceberg.

Once I got yelled at.

"Goddammit!" shouted a voice from my machine. "Don't treat me like a fool! What are you, too much of a wuss to even make excuses about the money you owe? You have to hide behind some woman and pretend you're not home? Now get me my 300,000 thousand yen by the end of the day—*or else*!"

Of course, these were merely innocent misdials. But in my recorded greeting, I had given my surname, added that I was unable to answer the phone and left clear instructions for callers to leave their name and message on the answering machine within one minute of the tone, so I have no idea why this sort of thing should have happened at all.

Finding one minute to be too short, some people would call back to leave a "Part II". Miss Kuroyanagi Tetsuko provided me with a particularly amusing example.

"Mukoda? It's Kuroyanagi."

Seeming to think that if she didn't start with these words, the rest would not follow, she said them quickly.

"This is my first time speaking to one of these machines," she went on with even greater rapidity, "so bear with me. I'm finding it hard to talk. I mean, it would be weird to speak to it with any sort of emotion, yet just as odd to speak like I was reading the news..."

And just as she was expressing how she was at a loss over what to do—*Click.* A minute passed, and she was disconnected.

There followed another message.

"Mukoda? It's Kuroyanagi," she began again, just like before. "This is a continuation of my previous message. Gosh, a minute isn't very long, is it? I wonder how everyone manages..."

And just as she was expressing how exceedingly smart everyone must be, and how stupid she felt in comparison—*Click.* A minute passed.

Again.

"Mukoda? It's Kuroyanagi. I'm calling from a control room at NHK Studios. And since I'm the only one talking here, everybody's looking at me funny, as if I'd flown the coup or something..."

But as soon as she had finished describing the circumstances in which she found herself, she was disconnected yet again.

And so in this manner she babbled on, her words flowing like water from a tap, for the length of nine voicemail messages, before she finally changed her mind and decided that she would just wait to tell me what it was that she had to say in person. Taken all together, her messages made for a most delightful nine-minute sketch.

Now I am of the mind that a good thing should not be kept to oneself. So I have played this tape for the entertainment of every director and guest who has come to visit me, though I feel sorry about not getting Miss Kuroyanagi's permission first. Needless to say, her one-woman-nine-minute-serial-voicemail is a record yet to be broken.

As for the coldest voicemail I have ever received—that would be from my father.

"Hmph!"

The message begins with a loud and inexplicable grunt.

"This is Mukoda Toshio!" my father barks out. "You are to call my office right away. Our telephone number is XX-XXX!"

Thinking I had done something wrong, I called him back in a panic, only to discover that he had been trying to reach me for a perfectly banal reason: that is, to tell me

that my Noh tickets had arrived, and that I could pick them up. My father passed away eight years ago, and this was the only time I ever heard his voice on my answering machine.

By way of comparison, my mother, who is now well acquainted with answering machines, had her own peculiar understanding of them when I first got mine.

I remember one message in particular.

"Kuniko? This is your mother. I can see you're not in..."

She sounded terribly upset.

"Well that's fine," she went on in a huff, "but what good is my speaking to a machine going to do? All right, I'm hanging up now."

To be sure, I have had many unique messages over the past ten years, some intentional and some not, but my favorite message of all is the message I received from what seemed to be a middle-aged housewife.

"Good afternoon," the woman began in an elegant whisper that hinted at a great embarrassment. "I fear I am not worthy to give you my name. However, I appear to have misdialed, and am not quite sure what to do about it."

There was a thin sigh, a pause.

"Please accept my apologizes for any inconvenience I may have caused you."

And the sound of the receiver being gently put down.

Ah, so this is modesty, I thought, and tried to visualize the person at the other end: how she looked, what clothes she wore, what sort of family she had.

I concluded that she must have a graceful bow.

About six months ago my mother's heart began acting up. *Paroxysmal tachycardia*, we were told, which means that her heart rate will abruptly exceed two-hundred beats per minute. While not life-threatening, it was enough to give her and the rest of our family a good scare, so she was admitted to a hospital for testing. Now my mother, who is turning seventy this New Year's Eve, has always been blessed with good health. And aside from the times when she was in labor, she has never been off her feet. So her stay at the hospital

was a novel experience for her. Naturally, she told us not to worry, that she'd be out in a month, but I later found out that she had gone in prepared to make her journey to the other side.

Her first two days at the hospital were full of excitement. In the evenings she would take a handful of 10-yen coins to the hallway payphone to report to the family on the day's events.

She told us what a thrill it was to live without worrying about regular meals; how the food was made with ample consideration given to the tastes and nutritional needs of the elderly; how thoughtful the nursing staff was. Indeed, her reports were as lively as those you would expect to hear from a seasoned news reporter.

However, on the third day, her report saw a dramatic decline in energy and length. On the fourth day, she stopped calling entirely.

After a week had gone by, I took a day off work to visit the hospital.

I found my mother sitting in bed, her face looking smaller than I remembered it. On that day, my four siblings were present, including my sister who was married and no longer lived at home. When it came time to go, I found it terribly hard to leave.

I glanced at my younger brother's watch.

But before I could suggest we get going, my mother spoke up.

"I think I'd like to rest now," she said cheerfully; and hopping out of bed, began to divide the flowers and fruits she had received from well-wishers.

After some squabbling, we were sent packing with more loot than we had brought with us in the first place.

"Now look here," my mother lectured. "There are people at this hospital who don't get any visitors whatsoever, which makes things awkward for me when you all show up at once. So please don't visit for the time being."

The tiny woman led her four adult children down the hospital corridor.

"I mean it," she said firmly as she shuffled us into the elevator, "don't bother."

But just as the doors were about to close, she added, with a low bow:

"Thank you for coming."

Up to this point, she had been speaking to us rather brusquely. Now it seemed as though she had become an entirely different person, bowing to us deeply, like an elevator girl on the first floor of a department store.

As the doors closed on the large hospital elevator, I watched my mother lower her pale face, the matcha-green stole my sister had knitted her draped over her nightgown. She seemed to have become even smaller than she looked when I had arrived. In the end, I fought back the impulse to open the doors and call to her.

My siblings and I rode down from the seventh floor in silence.

Before we reached the lobby, my brother let out a groan.

"She's too much," he said.

"She's always like that," my youngest sister chimed in. Apparently, even though she visited everyday, and my brother checked in every three days, our mother would unfailingly walk each of them to the elevator and bow, the angle of which, my brother alleged, changed depending on the number of people present.

"That's why her bow was so deep today. Because we all came."

How like her, we laughed and walked towards the parking lot, taking special care not to look at each other's tear-filled eyes.

That was the second time my mother made me a formal bow.

The first time was two years ago. I had decided to treat my sister and mother to a six-day vacation in Hong Kong.

"Father will be rolling in his grave," she protested. "It's bad karma!" However, I knew that she would be happy as soon as I had gotten her out of the house, despite her leaving it kicking and screaming. After all, she had always been an appreciator of delicious foods and was still very curious for her age.

At the airport I watched from behind a plastic partition as my mother and sister opened their carry-on luggage for the security officer.

"Any knives or sharp objects?" said the officer mechanically. Naturally, I expected my mother to answer in the negative.

She did not.

“Why, yes,” she said matter-of-factly, and pulled out a large pair of sewing shears.

My sister and I nearly fell over from shock.

“Mom!” I shouted. “What’d you bring that for?”

“What?” said my mother, her words directed at no one in particular. “I figured that since we’d be away a week, I’d need to cut my nails.”

The security officer smiled and waved her through. In the departures lounge I scolded my mother for not bringing a nail clipper.

“I thought about it when we were leaving,” she said in her defense, “but you were in such a hurry to go!”

She sighed.

“Your father would have scolded me too.”

Feeling a little sorry for her, I quietly stepped away to a flower stall to have an orchid corsage made up. After getting the florist to knock off 500 yen from the 3,000-yen fee, I handed the corsage to my mother.

“Really!” she exclaimed, indignantly. “Who do you think you are, wasting your money like that?” And she demanded I send the corsage back.

“Mom,” interceded my sister, “just let her treat you for once.”

So my mother calmed down, and I fastened the corsage to her lapel, at which point the boarding announcement for her flight was made.

My mother and sister joined a line of other passengers. Then, just as they were about to enter the gate, my mother stopped and turned round to face me. Certain that she was going to wave, I raised my right hand.

But my mother made a low bow.

So I bowed too, my right hand still raised, like the Emperor.

After my mother had boarded her flight, I bought a ticket for the observation pier and went outside. Although it was still winter, the sun was warm and bright. Beneath the deep blue sky, one point of which was sparkling like a piece of mica, planes could be seen taking off and touching down.

My mother's plane slowly began to reorient itself on the tarmac.

I felt my chest tighten.

Please don't fall, I felt like praying. *And if you must fall, do it on the way back.*

A moment later, the plane had made its ascent, and was circling the high air. There was no more cause for concern. Yet for some reason, my eyes were filling with tears. She is only going to Hong Kong, I chided myself. And recalling the shears and the corsage, I let out a loud laugh, while my tears rained down like a sudden sun shower.

My grandmother died some thirty-five years go, just before the war got serious. I was in my second year of girls' secondary school.

At her vigil I remember somebody shouting from our front hall:

"The president of the company is here!"

My father, who was seated by my grandmother's casket, jumped to his feet and rushed to the door, brushing past all the mourners as he went. Then, pressing his palms firmly to the front step of the entrance hall, he bowed to a middle-aged man.

Perhaps *bow* is not the right word. Rather, he *made himself prostrate*. You see, back then, gasoline was being rationed, and ordinary citizens did not use their cars for non-essential travel. Moreover, the company my father worked for was a large one, affiliated with an influential family; and as he was but a mere section chief at the time, he probably never imagined that the president himself would attend his mother's vigil. At any rate, that night my father revealed to me a side of him I'd never seen before.

For as long as I can remember, my father was a bully. The kind of man who shouted at his wife and kids, who raised his voice even at his own mother**.** And while I have always seen him as the proud branch manager who occupied the head of our table, his back to the family alcove, on that night he bowed in a manner that seemed almost servile to me.

How I hated my father's despotism.

He who had never bought a single piece of jewellery for my mother—why was it that he alone left our house each day in a starched white-linen suit? Why, when his subordinates came to visit, did he treat them with such disrespect? How is it that whenever

my siblings or I came down with measles or whooping cough he never cared to stay home, even for a few hours?

Indeed, on that night I felt I had glimpsed the reason for his self-made success at that company he had entered as an office boy with a middle-school education. Although I had been close with my grandmother, having shared a room with her for a time, the sadness of her all-important vigil disappeared, leaving me with only the image of my father, his head bowed low. It was a side of him he'd never shown us—the side with which he'd fought through life. At that moment I decided I would forgive him for always taking an extra side-dish for dinner, and for the times he beat us whenever one of his contracts fell through. Even now, when I picture the way my father looked that night, I feel a throbbing pain in my chest.

My mother bowed to her children. But because my father died of a sudden heart attack at the age of sixty-four, prior to his retirement, he never got the chance to. To be sure, he softened somewhat in his later years, but he managed to keep our heads bowed down to his scolding and shouting to the very end.

It's a complicated thing, seeing one's parent bow.

It's not so much awkward or confusing as it is funny, sad and a little bit infuriating.

Even if a parent knows that to bow to one's offspring is, like growing old, an inescapable fact of life, how sad this fact is for the child!