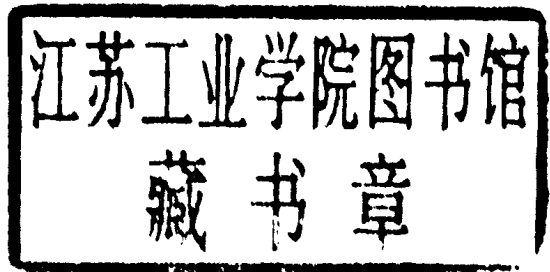


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and Other Stories

by Satoko Kizaki

Translated by Carol A. Flath

THE PHOENIX TREE



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BAREFOOT

It is evening now. The onset of twilight can be felt even here inside this old one-story house, sunk deep in its narrow gully between the tall buildings. An eight-mat room with a veranda and a six-mat living room look out onto a small garden; it is in this garden that the sun retreating from Tokyo leaves its first shadows. But even with the windows closed, the sensation of dusk reaches into the tiny three-mat room adjoining the front vestibule. My uncle told me to feel free to use any of the rooms—after all, I'd be living by myself—but it is here, with my head resting against the wall of this room that was allotted to me as a young girl, that I feel most at home. And I don't need a lot of space. Leaning against the wall I toy with the melancholy fragments of my memory, as a hand might idly spread and mix a deck of playing cards lying within reach. I pick one up at random between my thumb and finger and scrutinize it. There are plenty of fragments; I can spend all day and not get tired of it. At times I am suddenly startled to find myself sitting up formally, in the very depths of this house that is itself submerged deep in the twilight. I don't get bored, but when evening falls I start to feel hungry. Peeling myself away from under the twilight, with its scattered fragments of memory, I go into the kitchen. The kitchen is cramped and old, but when the lights are turned on, I can feel the still vivid presence of my aunt Tokie. During the two months between my return from France and Tokie's sudden death we used to prepare dinner together.

I take some green onions out of the vegetable basket. There comes a shrieking sound, and, holding the onions in my hands, I strain my ears. Someone is proclaiming: "Koito Takio, Koito Takio." A woman's voice: "Koito Takioooo!" The woman's ampli-

fied voice strikes against the walls of the buildings, echoing again and again, and finally strays into this old, worn-out house; then, as if finding a foothold in the little garden, it bounces up and dissipates in the sky like a flock of birds breaking out of a cage and noisily fluttering away. For a moment the sky is filled with the sound “Koito Takio.” From the kitchen I can’t see outside, but I can visualize the staccato sounds, released in a single burst and sparkling briefly in the dark blue of the evening sky.

I turn on the faucet and water gushes out. My uncle said that making improvements on such an old house was like throwing money away, but for Tokie’s sake he had completely replaced the water pipes. The old iron ones had gotten clogged with rust. It cost over 150,000 yen. I had wondered when the new ones would rust out, but he said they wouldn’t; they were made of plastic. He was of the older generation and believed all women were backward in their thinking. When he spoke about the pipes, something like a smile stirred in his wrinkled face. That’s when I realized that using iron pipes for plumbing was old-fashioned.

He’d gone and spent 150,000 yen on the new pipes, but shortly afterward Tokie died of a heart attack. Left behind by his second wife at the age of eighty-one, my uncle moved to Urawa to live with his son and daughter-in-law. The pipes were left to me—a gift for the caretaker. It’s a good memento; the gushing water reminds me of the diligent movements of my aunt’s hands. I peel a layer of white skin from the onion, and feel the slime on my hands. The onion is so clean it really doesn’t need washing. Those round onions you buy in the French markets—no matter how many layers you peel off, there’s still dirt inside. Henri used to say that it’s when onions keep building up the layers of dirt this way that they get mushy. Henri grew up on a farm, so he knew all about it.

I turn off the water, and from far away come the faint echoes: “Please . . .” Most of the scattered fragments of the name “Koito

Takio" are diluted now in the evening sky.

I take a pot from the shelf under the sink and fill it with water. My aunt Tokie had been a careful housekeeper, but the bottom of the pot is all black. French women scour their pots and pans until they shine, and sometimes a spasmodic urge comes over me and I, too, get out the cleanser and set to scrubbing, my torso shaking like a mad dog's.

I put the pot on the stove and light the burner. The blue flame flares up. Suddenly: "Narashima Yumiko!" The words drop from the sky, from right over my head. "Narashima Yumiko! For your district, Narashima Yumiko at your service. Narashima Yumiko at your service, Narashima Yumiko . . ." The campaign car must have stopped on the street right in front of the house. Were they addressing me directly? They couldn't be. It must be my uncle; his name is on the name plate. Waiting for the water to boil, I realize: The buildings on both sides of the house and across the street are all apartment houses. I don't know how many families live in them, but there must be quite a large number of people. Of course they wouldn't know about the woman whose husband had committed suicide, who had come back from France and was living here alone in this little old leftover house. . . . Certainly Narashima Yumiko doesn't know.

The water is boiling now; I put in a bunch of udon. Spaghetti is yellow and half-transparent. When you put it in boiling water it stays stiff for a long time, and no matter how roughly you stir it, it just bends a little, it won't break. But udon is opaque and whitish like flour, and it soon turns soft and clouds the water. If you accidentally stick your chopsticks in too soon, the noodles will break. So I'm careful. I stir gently, and when the water starts to simmer, I add some cold water and turn down the heat. Then I steal into the front hall and crack open the door. I want to see what Narashima Yumiko looks like. A white car is stopped in front of the house. On its roof is a large signboard announcing:

“Narashima Yumiko: the Communist Party Candidate.” I’d expected to see a truck carrying a lot of people, but here is this ordinary sedan with just one young man and two young women inside. The women are wearing matching white blouses and blue skirts, like a uniform, and they have white sashes across their chests. Both of them, the one gripping the microphone and the one with her hands resting on the steering wheel, are looking towards the large apartment building across the street. From my front vestibule, which is slightly elevated from the street, I can see the whole interior of the car. The man’s head is bowed; he’s writing something on a large piece of paper that’s resting on his knees. I don’t know what sort of person this Narashima Yumiko is, but evidently she’s not one of these two women. The young one at the wheel starts the engine and the white car drives off, so I close the front door. I lock it, too, and peer out through the peephole. Light shines from almost all the windows of the apartment house; in some of them television screens glow through the glass. The sliver of sky visible above the apartment house is strangely reddish, as if reflecting the color of the building’s brick walls. The area around the railroad tracks that Henri had jumped onto had been that color for a while. The engineer who ran over him had been a friend of his the whole time he’d worked for the National Railroad; it must have been a nasty experience for him—for the friend, I mean. There’s no way of knowing whether, before he jumped, it had crossed Henri’s mind that the man driving the oncoming train was his friend, but of course afterwards *he* couldn’t have felt disgusted at the sight—he was dead.

I remember the udon and hurry back to the kitchen. I had made a point of putting in plenty of water, but it has boiled down, and the udon is making an ugly squishy noise. The half-transparent white liquid has boiled over and spilled onto the stove around the burner. It is sticky and has started to thicken, and

the part closest to the burner is scorched and blackened. The air smells burnt. But it's not a bad smell; it smells like burnt rice stuck to the bottom of a kettle. I take the handles of the pot, one in each hand, and hurriedly—it's hot—dump out the noodles into the sink under the tap. The slimy white liquid continues simmering, and the thick strands of the udon twist around themselves. It's disgusting, like long white worms swarming and swimming in a thick paste. This wouldn't happen with spaghetti. Even if you leave it in the boiling water too long and it gets soft, the strands stay separate. I figure the udon is ruined, but hesitate. It's not that I regret having to throw it away, I just don't know what to do with it. Finally I put it in a colander. If I treat it like a liquid and try to wash it down the drain, the udon that is still solid will clog up the drain. But it's too slimy and wet just to dump into the garbage. Even in the colander, the congealed broth plugs up the holes, and when I try shaking it, the whole mass just quivers and nothing drains out. I turn on the faucet, and the water gushes out right into the colander. To my surprise, it washes the noodles clean. The white strands of the udon are strange-looking, ragged along the sides, but at least the slime is gone. I pick up one noodle and taste it, but it's too tough to eat. I drain off the water and empty the colander into the garbage can.

The sky echoes with a high-pitched whistling sound, like several sirens blowing together in a short burst, but I realize that it's the campaign car again, the microphone. It sounds like whistling. A woman's voice. Like screaming. I suddenly picture Narashima Yumiko, her hair disheveled, shrieking in a shrill voice, rushing barefoot between the tall buildings. Her long hair waves in the wind like Esmeralda's and the hem of her skirt is ripped. The concrete scrapes at her bare feet, and blood trickles out. Her face is gruesome, distorted like that of a witch mounted on a broom. Screaming her name, she begs, "Vote for me, cast

your ballot for me!” and rushes on through the streets under the russet-colored sky. The torment is unimaginable; no wonder the voice is shrieking.

Maybe the wind has changed, or it may have something to do with the configuration of the buildings: Suddenly the whistling is clear and distinct. I strain my ears and distinguish the words “Aikawa Masaru.” A man’s name. Not Narashima Yumiko. Is it his wife who’s shouting out his name? Once, long ago in a distant land, a man’s wife mounted a horse and rode out into the streets naked, to save the citizens from her husband’s violence. Her long hair completely covered her body, and she paraded through the streets like the grand duchess she was. The people, not wanting to embarrass their kindhearted duchess, retreated into their houses and shuttered the windows. One man peeked out of his window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her naked body, and got his just punishment: He was struck blind. And if I encounter Aikawa Masaru’s wife in her shrieking car, I will lower my eyes so as not to see.

It’s been raining all day. The rainy season. Here I am back in Japan for the rainy season, after six years away. A puddle has formed in the hall outside the bathroom. A leak in the roof. I toss a rag on the puddle. The walls and the tatami floors in the three-mat room are starting to get damp. I guess I ought to gather up all those scattered fragments of memory from there and move over into the living room.

The phone rings, startling me. I’m still not used to hearing the phone ringing in my home. Of course there was a phone in the Maruichi Shoji office in Paris, but Henri hadn’t allowed one in the little house where we lived in F-. I had wanted to have a phone in case Henri should go into convulsions, but he didn’t like it when people called. He was unsociable to begin with, but mainly he couldn’t stand the sound of a ringing phone. Even when I

suggested we could adjust the noise level of a phone so it would ring at the lowest possible setting, Henri still didn't want to get one. When I looked at his snow-white hair and his red face, I realized how much it bothered him, and I gave up. I guess people with such delicate skin pigmentation are sensitive to all kinds of stimulation. That's why he had to get drunk all the time.

Henri's parents still farmed the land and lived in the house in the Brittany countryside where he had grown up. The only time I visited I was surprised to learn that they didn't even have gas or electricity, much less a telephone. The little house, built with mortar and pieces of stone from the nearby mountains, was divided into three parts: one for the animals, one for storing their fodder, and one for the people to live in. The smell of pigs, goats, and chickens that permeated the house was so intense that it overwhelmed the other smells—the oil lamps and the smoke from the fireplace. Henri's parents' home was insulated from the irritations of human progress and civilization, but that didn't mean that Henri was content there. Even when he was with his aged, placid parents, all he did was sit and drink in silence. But the French National Railroad betrayed an overly casual attitude when it hired this man who, though seemingly calm, was frightened by the ringing of a telephone. And Henri was epileptic and an alcoholic to boot. It may have been just a small suburban town that saw only one train an hour, but still, they ought to have been concerned.

The phone keeps ringing. I have no choice but to get up and answer it.

"Hello?"

"Oh, you're in after all. Seiko? It's me."

"Uncle."

"I'll be coming by tomorrow."

"All right."

"It's election day. The registration came, didn't it?"

“Some kind of postcard?”

“That’s it. I’ll stop by your place to pick it up before I go to vote.”

“‘Your place.’ It’s your house, you know.”

“As long as you’re living there it’s your place. But now that you mention it, are you registered as a resident yet?”

“Well . . .”

“Did you get a form?”

“There were a couple of forms, but I didn’t really look at them. They were both addressed to Kubota, so I figured they were for you and Aunt Tokie.”

“That’s ridiculous; she’s dead. Once you die you lose the right to vote.”

Funny: “You lose the right to vote”—as if you still keep your other rights. Are there some rights that you keep after death? Maybe the right to be resurrected suddenly in the mind of another person . . .

“One of them must have been addressed to Kubota Seiko.”

“I guess so.”

That was just like Tokie; methodical as usual, she would have notified the office when I came back from France.

“The polling place is the N- elementary school. You come along with me.”

“But I don’t know who to vote for.”

“That’s right, you’ve been out of the country for so long. Anyone but Narashima Yumiko is all right.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s a woman, and a Communist too. And she’s one of the front runners. It’s a close race, the only one that’s not already decided, so at least vote against the Communists.”

“What time will you be here?”

“Some time in the morning.”

“All right, I’ll make some lunch.”