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THINGS REMEMBERED AND THINGS FORGOTTEN
(tr. I. McCullough MacDonald & G. Tapley
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Things Remembered and Things Forgotten

MASARU MASAOKA, in the passenger seat of the silver Lexus, sneezed nervously. His wife Yumi was driving, and they were on the western outskirts of Tokyo.

'Must be the autumn pollen – lots of ragweed out here in the sticks. Put up the windows, will you?' he said.

Yumi pressed the power window switch, and Masaru tilted his seat back, shutting his eyes.

'Are you going to take a nap?'

'I'm not sleepy. Anyway, we'll be there soon.'

'You know, dear, we haven't seen your brother in almost forty years. Not since our wedding. I'm feeling a little awkward.'

'You shouldn't. It's not like he's ever expressed any desire to see us. And, considering his condition' – Masaru paused and tapped his temple with his index finger – 'he probably won't even recognise me.'

They crossed a bridge and turned off the highway onto a narrow road. Soon they arrived at their destination: a single-family house remodelled to serve as a group home for the elderly. The Masaokas were shown through to

the lounge where a man sat watching television and four women were gathered around a table folding pieces of fabric. Two other women sat dozing, each in her own chair, their bodies slumped to one side or the other. Just then a thin elderly man came shuffling in.

'Takashi,' Masaru called out.

The man responded with a friendly salute and a bow. The women at the table stopped what they were doing and bowed politely.

'Takashi, it's me, Masaru. You remember Yumi.'

'I'm sorry we haven't seen you for so long,' said Yumi, bowing deeply to her husband's elder brother, who nodded his head and smiled.

Everything in the room – from the artlessly arranged cabinets to the kokeshi dolls and knick-knacks inside them – were of considerable antiquity, just like the home's human occupants.

'This really takes you back, doesn't it, Takashi?'

In response to Masaru's remark, a staff member volunteered that the home was equipped with all the latest modern conveniences, including an elevator and newly remodelled bathrooms. But, he said, the furniture, paintings and other items had been deliberately chosen to evoke an 'old-time' atmosphere.

'It makes our patrons feel at home,' explained the staff member. 'And, just between you and me, I picked these things up for a song at a thrift shop.'

Masaru took his brother's arm and led him over to the window, then pulled open the lace curtain.

'This takes me back, too,' Masaru said.

The window looked out onto a floodplain where children were playing baseball, the wide Tama River flowing by. Masaru's brother sat down in an armchair nearby. 'There's a bird,' he said to no one in particular.

'You're right. How unusual. Is it an egret? It is, isn't it? Hey, Takashi, doesn't it remind you of Tsukishima? Doesn't it?' Masaru felt a wave of nostalgia washing over him.

But his elder brother was absorbed in the graceful white bird that had alighted at the river's edge, seemingly uninterested in any distant memory. He moved his head up and down as though he were tracing the bird's movements with his chin.

Yumi broke in. 'I didn't know you and Takashi had lived in Tsukishima.'

'Yes. A long, long time ago.'

'You never told me that.'

'Didn't I? Maybe not. It was nearly seventy years ago.'

'We should have asked Takashi to come visit us there – for old times' sake.'

'That's a laugh. Nothing but high-rise apartment buildings there now. This place is more like Tsukishima was in those days.'

'I suppose you're right.' Yumi shrugged her shoulders.

'Are you getting tired, Takashi?' Masaru spoke, more loudly now, into his elder brother's ear.

'Yes. I suppose I am.'

TAKASHI SET OFF, leading his little brother by the hand. At the end of the narrow alley lined with flowerpots, they came to the grassy expanse alongside the Sumida

River. To their left they could see the huge Kachidoki Drawbridge opening and closing.

Beyond it, across the river, stood the hospital requisitioned by the Occupation Army and Hongan-ji with its Indian-style main temple hall. Straight ahead, across Mihara Bridge, stood the old clock tower building in Ginza that now served as the military PX. Takashi, who was eight, and Masaru, who was three, had heard that there were lots of American GIs there who handed out chocolates and chewing gum to children. But their mother had warned them: 'Don't go near the drawbridge or the GIs will grab you and line you up for target practice.' So they had never crossed the river.

The bridge was used by American soldiers going to the PX or GHQ from their barracks in Harumi, on the east side of Tsukishima ('where the World's Fair would've been if it hadn't been for the war', people muttered), and was said to be teeming with drunk GIs who caused all kinds of trouble. So whenever Takashi's mother suggested he take Masaru outside, they headed either west to the river to stare off towards Ginza, or north across the scorched grassland that Tsukuda had become, to sit at the foot of Aioi Bridge.

As Takashi and Masaru returned to their neighbourhood dotted with the skeletons of burned-out houses, a sudden gust of wind knocked over the washboard and bucket that had been left out to dry. The bucket came hurtling towards the smaller boy. Takashi jerked his brother out of the way, and Masaru spun, pivoting on one

foot with his arm above his head like a young woman in a dance hall twirling in the arms of her beau.

Masaru was wearing baggy trousers, hand-me-downs from his big brother. Takashi's were too short and had been worn for so long they were tattered and threadbare.

'Back so soon?' said the old lady who lived on the first floor, peering over spectacles perched on her nose. 'Well, come in and sit with me, boys. Your ma's not home yet.'

Takashi nodded, urging his little brother forwards, and together they went in and plopped themselves down in a corner of the small sitting room.

The old lady turned to the gasman who had come about a leaky valve. 'You lied to me last month,' she said.

'How so?' replied the man, fiddling with the rubber hose.

'You said since Japan surrendered "unconditionally", the Americans wouldn't take our land or force Japan to pay reparations. Because it was "unconditional". That's what you said. Now look at all that land across the river they've gone and taken.'

'It hasn't been *taken*,' said the man, who was in his late fifties. 'It's just been requisitioned.'

The old lady tilted her head to one side, repeating *rek-we-zish-und* under her breath. She didn't understand the meaning of the word any more than she knew what 'unconditional surrender' meant, and in truth the gasman didn't either. He replaced the old gas hose with a new one and left the old lady frowning at the receipt.

'My,' she said, clicking her tongue, 'what things cost these days!'

No sooner had the gasman left than the boys' young mother slid open the front door.

'How'd it go?' asked the old lady.

'Bad – really bad,' Tomiyo replied, waving her hand emphatically over her head. 'It wasn't what I expected at all. I couldn't believe it.'

'In what way?'

'In every way. I was completely floored.'

Kneeling down on the tatami, Tomiyo reached over and gave each of her sons a pat on the head. 'Did you two behave yourselves?' she asked. 'I'll steam some sweet potatoes for you later.'

'This is what I went to see about,' she said, seating herself on a cushion at the low dining table and smoothing the curled edges of something she'd cut out from the newspaper.

She read aloud to the old lady:

URGENTLY SEEKING QUALIFIED FEMALE STAFF

Excellent pay and benefits – food, clothing and lodging provided; salary payable in advance upon request. Will reimburse applicants' travel expenses from anywhere in Japan.

'Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Well, when I told them I had two kids they told me this work was unsuitable for married women.'

'Smells fishy if you ask me,' said the old lady.

'Yeah, *real* fishy!' Tomiyo replied, pinching her nose. 'I should've consulted you before going. Want to know

what they asked me? "Are you prepared to serve as a sexual breakwater to protect and nurture the purity of our race for the next hundred years?" Imagine!'

The old lady – comprehending this even less than she understood 'unconditional surrender' – gave the younger woman the blank look of a Noh mask.

Tomiyo frowned and shook her head. 'In other words, you know...' She paused and glanced at her two boys. 'Doing it – with American GIs. Can you believe it? I was in shock. I ran straight out of there.'

'Did they pay your travel expenses at least?'

Tomiyo shook her head again. Just then she noticed a small child with a runny nose standing outside the front door.

'Who's that boy?'

'No idea. He's been hanging around since morning.'

'Looks about the same age as Masaru.'

'WELL, SO LONG, TAKASHI. We'll come again.'

Masaru Masaoka rested a hand on his elder brother's shoulder. Takashi patted it several times.

'Take care of yourself, Takashi.'

Together Masaru and Yumi walked towards the front door. Takashi, shuffling from the lounge, softly called out Masaru's name.

'What is it?' Masaru asked, turning around.

Takashi just smiled and waved.

The Masaokas bowed to the staff and walked to their car. 'Your brother remembered you, dear. He said your name.'

'Some things you remember, others you forget.'

Masaru took the car keys from his wife and climbed into the driver's seat of the Lexus.

'Well, well. This is a change.'

'What is?'

'You driving – and taking a day off, for that matter. I never expected you to be so busy in your retirement.'

'What did you think? I'm learning a new job. It takes time to get up to speed.'

'Is it going well? It's so different from what you used to do.'

'Yeah, well, I was in the wrong field before. After all, I studied humanities, remember?'

'So why did you stay at the power company for forty years?'

'Back then the best and brightest were all going into nuclear energy, even if you didn't have a science background. That's just the way things were.'

'Where was it your brother worked?'

'Why do you always make a point of asking me that?'

'Do I?'

'You do. He dropped out of school after junior high and got a job in a factory. I don't remember where he ended up. A small book bindery or someplace like that.'

'I can never remember – not unless I have a name to latch on to.'

'Not everyone works for a blue-chip company like in your family.'

Feeling slightly chastised, Yumi shifted her gaze out the window. They were stuck in a traffic jam on the

Chuo Expressway and had only got as far as the turn-off for Chofu Airport.

'When did you and Takashi live in Tsukishima?'

Yumi took a sip from a bottle of green tea and placed it in the cup holder behind the gearstick. Masaru reached over and grabbed the bottle.

'Want a sip?' She took the bottle from him and unscrewed the cap, then handed it back to her husband.

'Let's see. Not that long. We went there to stay with a family friend when the air raids got really bad. I must've been two at the time, not that I remember. Then the year after the war ended, we moved to Chiba.'

'Your father fought in the South Pacific?'

'Yeah, but he never came back – not even his ashes.'

'You were twelve when your mother died, right? So Takashi would have been seventeen.'

'Sounds about right.' Masaru took a sip of tea, then muttered, 'An accident – so that's what it was.' Once they passed the scene of the crash, the traffic started to flow again.

'I suppose he looked after you most of the time growing up.'

'Are you kidding? I looked after *him*. Takashi was kind of a screw-up. He did badly at school. Always near the bottom of his class.'

'And I suppose you were near the top?'

'Not *near*.'

'What? Oh, meaning you were *first* in your class? You shouldn't brag, dear – that's what annoys Masato.'

'I guess Masato takes after Takashi, then.'

'Really, dear. Don't start!' said Yumi. 'So how long did you and your brother live together?'

'He moved into the factory dormitory the year I graduated from junior high.'

'And you lived with your aunt and uncle in Chiba while you went to high school ... I know the rest by heart.'

'Those were the good old days. It didn't matter if you were poor. So long as you had brains, there were plenty of opportunities.'

'Please don't go into that all over again,' said Yumi, rolling her eyes. 'Did you see Takashi often?'

'From time to time.'

'Such as when?'

'Weddings, death anniversaries – that sort of thing.'

'He didn't come to either your aunt's or uncle's funerals.'

'Didn't he? Well, brothers are like that.'

'You know, I don't think Takashi is as senile as you think, dear.'

'How so?'

'He knew exactly who you were.'

'Memories come back when you see someone face to face.'

'He's been alone all his life.'

'Since his wife died, anyway. That was before you and I were married. Look, I'm not as heartless as you make me sound. I chose that home carefully after talking to the long-term care manager.'

'Which way are you going, dear?' asked Yumi, glancing at her husband. They had come to the Hamazakibashi Junction and he had headed off to the right.

'Darn. I didn't mean to do that. It's because I haven't driven for so long.'

'I'm glad even you make mistakes sometimes. Isn't this fun!'

'Fun – how so?'

'It's a nice day. Let's take the Rainbow Bridge over to Toyosu and go home that way. It's not much longer, anyway.'

'Wow, this area has completely changed.'

'Has it?'

'None of these buildings were here before.'

'You mean when you lived in Tsukishima with your brother?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, things change. Anyway, do you really remember? You were so little at the time.'

'I remember. Better than Takashi, anyway.'

'Do you? You've forgot a lot of things. Things from before we were married.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Some things you remember, others you forget – isn't that what you said?'

ON ANOTHER DAY, Takashi took his little brother to Aioi Bridge. It was autumn and the tall grasses along the riverbank were turning brown and smelling wonderful. Takashi took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the

cool air, and ran through the grass with his arms spread wide, making a droning sound. 'Brrrrrr.'

Masaru ran along behind, mimicking him. He copied everything Takashi did.

'Brrrrrr,' he droned in his high voice.

The next moment Takashi cried out in alarm. Masaru was no longer running behind him. He'd tripped and was rolling down the embankment. Takashi broke into a cold sweat as he imagined his brother ending up in the water. But just then, with a thud, Masaru collided into another child.

It was the same little boy who had been hanging around outside their house all morning. Takashi looked fiercely at the boy but gave up and went back to running around with his arms outstretched, droning like an airplane. Masaru started running again, too, in imitation, and then the other little boy took up the game as well, until all three were running around and going, 'Brrrrrr.' The boys played like that until the sun went down. There was nothing else for them to do.

At dusk the two brothers returned to their cramped neighbourhood of ramshackle terraced houses to find that the old lady's granddaughter had dropped by with some canned meats and fruits.

'I've applied for a job as a maid in one of the requisitioned houses,' said the young woman, who was wearing a bright-coloured dress.

'Are you crazy?' said her grandmother angrily. 'You mustn't take a job like that. What will you do if something happens? "Science for boys, etiquette for

girls" – that's the motto these days. A woman has to guard her virginity.'

'Don't worry, Grandma. It's for a married couple. They've even got kids.'

'But don't you have to be able to speak English?' asked Tomiyo, a bit childishly.

'Not really. All I need to do is keep saying "Yes, sir" and "Yes, ma'am". It's a great big mansion in Ookayama. I met the husband today. He wants me to start next month after his wife and kids arrive. Then I'll be able to bring you jam and canned food all the time, Grandma.'

'Sounds too good to be true if you ask me.'

'It isn't. You'll see,' said the girl smugly.

Tomiyo sighed. 'Perhaps I should take English typing lessons or something,' she said uncertainly.

'What for?' asked the girl.

'Every day the newspaper's full of help-wanted ads for people who can type in English.'

'Don't bother with lessons – just go ahead and apply.'

'But nobody will hire me unless I can type.'

'Just act like you know what you're doing. You'll pick it up as you go along, even if you have to hunt and peck at first.'

'I suppose so.' Tomiyo stared down at her fingers dubiously.

From the entryway came the sound of the front door opening, and in stepped the upstairs lodger. He was leading a little boy by the hand.

'And what do we have here?' asked the old lady suspiciously, a proprietary tone in her voice.

'I found him wandering around outside,' the lodger said. 'Since it's late I thought he could stay here tonight. In the morning I'll take him over to the police station.'

'I've seen him before – he's been hanging around here a lot.'

'I can't get much out of him. Maybe he's lost or maybe his parents are dead.'

Just then the two brothers, noticing the boy, called out to him.

'Do you know him?' asked the lodger.

The boys nodded.

'Where's he live?'

They both shook their heads. The little boy rushed over to his new playmates.

'All right, he can stay,' said Tomiyo, on behalf of the old lady. 'But just for tonight.'

'Hey,' said the lodger, changing the topic, 'about that job you were just talking about – I think you should give it a go.'

'You see?' said the girl, pleased with herself.

'As a matter of fact, I found something in the newspaper too. Take a look.' The lodger slipped his hand into his trouser pocket and took out a clipping for Tomiyo to read.

The editors of *Bungei Shunju* request that anyone who has ever contributed a story to our magazine contact our offices and let us know your current address. We would also be glad to receive news about how you are doing.

'Their records must've been destroyed in the war,' explained the lodger. 'I was thinking of contacting them and trying to sell them a story.'

'Ha!' interjected a second lodger, an ex-soldier, who was standing in the entryway listening to the conversation. 'Good luck with that. Records or no records, a magazine editor can tell the difference between a writer and a wannabe.'

'But,' protested the would-be writer, 'it says "anyone who has ever contributed a story" to the magazine.'

'Yeah, it doesn't say "anyone who has never contributed a story".'

'There isn't much difference between "ever" and "never".'

The ex-soldier didn't bother replying. He lowered a sack from his shoulder and placed it before the old lady.

'You're too kind!' The old lady beamed.

'It's just some sweet potatoes. A contact got them for me,' he said.

'So how's business?'

'Not bad.' He massaged his shoulder. 'Things have picked up since I started selling those pictures of Mount Fuji.'

'That's great,' chimed in Tomiyo. In addition to her work sewing clothes by the piece, she made paper fans, which the ex-soldier, a struggling artist, painted with scenes of Mount Fuji and sold to souvenir shops catering to American soldiers.

A strong gust of wind buffeted the front door, rattling the glass.

'Lot of typhoons this year,' said the would-be writer.

'Yeah, but where was all that "divine wind" when we needed it?' the ex-soldier said sarcastically.

'But it did come. They say the divine wind delayed the Americans' arrival by two or three days.'

'Really? A lot of good *that* did.'

'It bought the authorities enough time to destroy a bunch of documents they didn't want the Americans to get their hands on.'

The old lady nodded seriously. 'That's what all that ash was,' she said.

TOWARDS THE END of the year in which the war ended, Masaru died.

He caught a cold that turned into pneumonia, and he was too malnourished to recover.

It was something Takashi remembered but Masaru had forgotten.

Takashi and his mother cried all winter long. They were still crying when the little boy, the playmate of the two brothers, reappeared at their door.

Takashi quietly slipped his hand into the little boy's and led him inside.