

SAYAKA MURATA, LIFE CEREMONY (2022)
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Two's Family

Yoshiko arrived at the hospital ward to find Kikue's bed empty. She must have gone to the bathroom or something. A women's weekly magazine, headphones, and various other items were strewn across the bed. Just the same as at home, Yoshiko thought drily and started putting them away.

"Visiting again today?" asked the woman in the next bed. "Coming every day must be quite a chore."

She must be in her fifties or so, thought Yoshiko. She herself was now seventy years old, and the woman seemed quite young to her. Yoshiko smiled at her, the corners of her eyes crinkling.

"It's not like I have anything better to do. It's boring being home all alone when you're elderly."

The woman didn't look any less impressed. "That's more than most people would do. Are you sisters? It's a

great comfort at times like this to have a sister you still get along well with at an advanced age."

"No, we're not sisters. But we've been living together for about forty years now, so we are family."

The woman suddenly looked confused. "Oh . . . is that so? I see . . ." she said vaguely, then clammed up and didn't speak any more.

She was probably thinking there must be some complicated family issues, or that they were an aging lesbian couple. Yoshiko couldn't be bothered to explain, so she gave her a smile and bowed, then got back to tidying up Kikue's bed.

"Oh, you're already here?" Kikue came back into the ward dragging a drip stand along with her. "It's such a pain going to the toilet. And I have to take a urine sample every damn time too," she grumbled as she lowered herself onto the bed.

"Here, some underwear and a towel," said Yoshiko. "I'll put them in this drawer for you. And you've been moaning for some time now about wanting earphones with a longer cable, haven't you? I dropped by the electronics store and got you some."

"Thanks. Sorry to put you to so much trouble," Kikue said, taking the plastic bag containing the earphones and listlessly turning on the TV. "There's nothing worth watching."

Yoshiko put a cardigan over her shoulders, catching sight of a notebook and ball pen lying by the pillow. "You've been writing again?"

"Yes, I have. I'll read it to you once it's finished."

"No thanks, it gives me the creeps. It's not like we're schoolgirls or anything." Yoshiko was frowning, but deep down she was relieved.

Just after the cancer had been discovered, Kikue had grown quite haggard and, between tests, had started writing her will in her notebook. Yoshiko kept telling her to stop being so gloomy, but she wouldn't listen.

Kikue had always been in the habit of keeping a diary and composing poems when she felt down. But the will was the most depressing thing she'd ever written.

Then she'd learned that she could be cured by an operation, and, her spirits clearly lifted, she started writing trashy poems to pass the time. She'd once shown them to Yoshiko, but they all appeared to be about her sex life, although it wasn't clear whether she was making fun of herself or being serious when she wrote lines like, "My wrinkled fingers traced the lines of your bones beneath your shirt before undoing the white buttons" and "I put on my reading glasses and looked up at you, to see your watery pitch-black eyes gazing down on me."

"Do you mind if I go to take my bath?" Kikue asked. "I'm sorry to go when you've only just arrived, but I reserved the bath for this time."

"Sure, no problem. I'll read a book or something while I'm waiting for you. Are you okay going alone?"

"Don't be silly, I'm not that weak," Kikue said with a frown. She called the nurse to remove the drip, picked up a change of clothes and a towel, and left the ward again.

Yoshiko and Kikue had been classmates in high school. They had made a promise to each other that if they hadn't married by the time they reached thirty, they'd live together. Lots of other girls said similar things, but they were the only two who actually went through with it.

With Yoshiko being too guarded and Kikue too promiscuous, it seemed unlikely that either of them would ever find a marriage partner. And so, on Yoshiko's thirtieth birthday, they had started living together.

The following year, Yoshiko was artificially inseminated with sperm she'd bought from a sperm bank, and she gave birth to their eldest daughter, followed by a second daughter the next year. Then, when they were thirty-five, Kikue gave birth to their third daughter. They bought a condo in a suburb of Chiba and lived happily as a family of five.

The children were a lot of work, but they were adorable. Yet everyone around them seemed uncomfortable with the arrangement.

"Ms. Yamazaki, um . . . you share an apartment with Ms. Kojima, don't you—Nana's mom, from class two, year

two, right?" said the homeroom teacher, looking uncomfortably around the living room on a home visit. Their eldest daughter had been in the final year of elementary school at the time.

"Nana is our youngest daughter. We raise them equally, regardless of who gave birth to them."

"Ahh . . . but children are easily confused by such complicated home environments. You should simply explain to them that you are two single mothers sharing a flat together. It'll be fine! Mizuho's a bright child, she'll understand."

"No, Kikue Kojima and I are family. We are raising our children equally, as sisters. Is there anything wrong with that?"

The teacher's expression alternated between wondering whether it was her responsibility to do something about this troublesome pupil or whether she could let it slide. "Ah, well . . . I guess there are all kinds of families . . . and Mizuho's grades are good," she answered evasively.

When Yoshiko told her daughter upon her return from cram school about the teacher's visit, Mizuho replied, unperturbed, "Well she's an ordinary person, after all. Of course ordinary people are going to respond like that."

Yoshiko pressed her, concerned. "Do other people at school say things too? You should tell me if they do."

But Mizuho looked untroubled and, sounding mature beyond her years, simply said, "Mom, do you really expect society to understand? As long as we're okay with things,

why should it bother us? If it does, I don't think we can carry on like this."

Yoshiko's friends had also said things to her. Are you two actually lesbians? Why don't you just come out and say that you're only sharing an apartment because you can't afford to live on your own? She could hit them! Hadn't they themselves always said they would live together if they didn't find partners in good time? She and Kikue had simply carried through on that promise. Yet hardly anyone understood this.

There were nights when she wept silently, worried that they were burdening their children with the arrangement. Kikue's self-assured attitude never wavered, however. "Having two mothers makes for a fantastic family environment, doesn't it? The children are super happy, you know," she would say, but Yoshiko knew that she sometimes secretly wrote about her fears in her notebook.

They had been encouraging and supporting each other for forty years now. The three daughters had grown up to be mutually supportive sisters. The eldest had married and had moved to Oita, in Kyushu, when her husband was transferred there for work, and now had two children. The second had moved to France and was studying to be a translator, while the youngest had gone to university in Kyoto and upon graduation had found a job in the city. Each was living happily in her own way.

When Yoshiko informed the daughters of Kikue's illness, the eldest said, "Shall I come and stay with you for a

while? I'm worried about Kikue Mom of course, but I'm also worried about you." Yoshiko had replied, "It's okay. Your children are still small, so don't go out of your way. It might be cancer, but the operation will cure her. It's really just like having your appendix out, you know."

The second daughter, always a crybaby, had been ready to jump on the next plane home, so Yoshiko told her firmly that the plane ticket would cost more than the hospital charges. The youngest came on the bullet train at the weekend to see them but immediately rushed back home again.

"In the end it's just the two of us, isn't it?" Kikue had murmured faintheartedly in the hospital ward after their youngest daughter left, saying she had to catch the last train.

"But it always was, wasn't it? That's what family is. Children always leave the nest," Yoshiko said, trying to make her feel less discouraged, but Kikue had plunged into her second notebook, probably depressed by that remark.

Kikue was wildly promiscuous and had always had lovers, but when she informed her current lover (a man fifteen years her junior) that she had cancer, he'd apparently made himself scarce. This had likely depressed her even further.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," Kikue said as she came back in, drying her hair with a towel. "Ah, that feels better! I swear I'm going crazy from boredom. Going to the hospital shop is the only entertainment I have."

"How about chatting up some charming man in the hospital? That's what you're good at, right?"

Kikue pulled a face. "Men at death's door are not my type." Then, after a moment, she added, "But there is a guy in the surgery department next to us who isn't bad-looking," and blushed.

"Now that's more like it. If he's in surgery, he should be okay, shouldn't he? How about sneaking into his ward at night?"

"I've only spoken to him a little in the lobby, and I don't know which ward he's on. Look, won't you go get me some lipstick from the shop downstairs?"

Kikue looked more cheerful as Yoshiko started drying her hair. She had always been proud of her thick black hair, but now she had a lot more gray mixed in, and it was beginning to thin on top.

"Okay. Lipstick, right?"

"Yes, please. And you know what? They've set the date for surgery. It'll be next week."

"Oh, I see . . ."

"It's on a weekday, so please don't tell the children. Especially Mizuho. She has such a strong sense of responsibility and will drop everything and come if you tell her. She frets too much, and it gets tedious."

"Okay, I won't," Yoshiko said. All of a sudden she wondered just what Kikue meant to her. If she were to

lose Kikue now, what would become of her? Her parents were already dead, and the children were all following their own life paths. She was the one most affected by Kikue's hospitalization.

"Oh, and could I ask you to buy me another notebook too? I'm about to finish this one."

Kikue looked happy. Despite having seemed so depressed earlier, now she was absorbed in writing her stupid poetry.

"Oh, do stop wasting paper!" Yoshiko exclaimed loudly to dispel her feeling of melancholy.

"Want to read the latest one?" Kikue asked mischievously.

"Leave it out! Why would I want to read your cheap porno stories?"

"How do you know it won't be a poem dedicated to you?"

"Then I definitely don't want to read it."

"You're so spiteful. Oh, look!" Kikue said, pointing outside.

Yoshiko followed her gaze and saw that it was snowing.

"I'll write about this in my poem. *The hand of my family dries my wet hair, a snowy scene on the opposite bank . . .*"

"Awful," Yoshiko said as she turned off the hair dryer and gazed at the falling snow. "I wonder what our lives would have been like if we hadn't lived together."

"Hmm. We would have been the same, I guess. Talking about trivial things, saying nasty things to each other, yet still getting by in our own way."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

Had anything developed between them as a result of their living together? Yoshiko didn't know, but if Kikue died, she had decided she would be the chief mourner at her funeral. It was absolutely clear to her that she was the one who would play that role, not any of Kikue's former lovers.

"If the snow settles, you'll have your work cut out for you shoveling a path outside the apartment."

"You're right. So hurry up and come home."

Kikue laughed. Maybe she'd heard how Yoshiko's gruff voice had broken slightly as she said this.

"I'll be home before you know it. It's *our* house after all. I can't let you get used to doing everything the way you like it while I'm away."

The snow grew heavier, painting the world white outside the window. "It's so beautiful, isn't it?" Kikue said, leaning forward like a child. In that moment, the indigo notebook slipped from her wrinkled hands and, as though slowly flapping its wings, fluttered under the bed.