Specimens of Families

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Naturalized Families

Accordingto a friend of mine, a freelance writer, about five thousand Korean residents of Japan get naturalized every year.

Sang Chung was a long-distance truck driver. When I was small, I used to enjoy getting into his oversized truck. With his strong shoulders, he would hoist me into the cab, and my heart would thump as if I were going on a ride in an amusement park. He eventually married the daughter of the president of the transport company and was naturalized as a Japanese citizen. Later, he came to hate his Korean name.

Once during a summer vacation, my mother and I visited Sang Chung's home in Hachioji and stayed overnight. There was a pond in the large yard. Standing on a bridge, Sang Chung would clap his hands, and colored carp worth several thousand dollars each would rise to the surface of the pond. My mother would heave sighs of envy, saying, "How wonderful!"

At dinnertime, seeing the cutlass fish being served, I said, "Oh, it's *kalchi*." Sang Chung put his forefinger to his lips, saying, "Hush."

"You should say *tachiuo*. You never can tell when someone might overhear you speaking Korean," he said, knitting his brows and spreading spicy Korean *miso* over his *kalchi*.

The day after we left, Sang Chung called, and Mother picked up the phone. "Did you speak Korean in public somewhere?" he asked. "People in our neighborhood have been passing me with a funny look in their eyes since you were here."

"We never did," Mother said.

"Ask your kid about it."

"My kids can't speak Korean—you know that," Mother retorted sharply.

Then Sang Chung said accusingly, "It's because you came to our place dressed like a barmaid."

I haven't visited Sang Chung's home since then.

No sooner had Japan's "bubble" economy collapsed than Sang Chung's company went bankrupt. He sold his home and moved into a one-room apartment smaller than nine feet square. In order to pay back his debts of nearly eleven million *yen,* he and his wife opened a *rāmen* stall.

Another story about a family that was naturalized:

I was attending a missionary school for girls from well-to-do families, and one of my classmates was the daughter of a friend of my mother's. All of her family members had become naturalized in Japan, so she was calling herself by a Japanese name. Her home was a love hotel near Yamashita Park in Yokohama. She was always dozing in class. When I asked my mother why, she explained that the girl and her younger brother worked at the hotel, changing linens, so her family could save money by not employing maids. She also had to take her turn sitting at the check-in desk, so she was not able to sleep regularly.

When I was kicked out of school and was getting my things together at my locker, this girl, who had never even spoken to me, suddenly began to cry. After I got home, a bunch of flowers arrived from her. A piece of memo paper fell on the carpet. On it I saw a couple of lines from a popular song, with a line about me added:

A poppy blooms in red.
A lily blooms in white.
May Miri bloom in Miri color.

Aunt Back from Paris

When I got out of the coffee shop and started to walk away from the station, I found that it was raining. I stopped and stood there for a while. The reason I hadn't noticed that my hair and shoulders were wet might have been because the rain was light, but it was probably more that I was tired from the succession of troubles I had been having lately.

Raising my hand, I hailed a taxi. Just as the taxi door was closing after me, I heard a female voice calling, "Miri! Hey, Miri!"

The woman, who had plastic bags labeled TOKYU HANDS STORE and fastened with cords to the handlebar and carrier of her bicycle, was my aunt.

"How're you doing, Miri?"

"I'm on my way to Kagurazaka—to work. How's yourself, Aunt?"

"I'm opening a grilled-meat bar in Yoyogiuehara. Don't tell your mom about it. Your mom would say I couldn't do that kind of work." My aunt let out a dry laugh.

At the age of twenty, she had gone to Paris without any money, and for several years she had trained studiously to become a beautician. After she returned from Paris, I often saw her strutting in Motomachi of Yokohama, wearing a charcoal-gray turtleneck and blue jeans and carrying a red paper bag of French bread. Even though I was a kid, she looked refined and impressive to me. So that image of my aunt and a grilled-meat bar didn't go well together.

According to my mother, my aunt used to say, "I will not get married; nor will I have children. So let me adopt Miri."

I remember going to the Isetan Department Store with her about twenty years ago to have a chocolate parfait.

"You feel sorry after impulsively buying an expensive dress, but you can't go wrong with a chocolate parfait," said my aunt, licking cream from her parfait with a serious expression. I couldn't help laughing.

When my aunt got married and had a baby, I felt betrayed, for we had promised each other that she would adopt me and we would live in Paris.

"When my Korean grill opens a week from now, do come and have a bite," she said to me. I remembered that her cooking was worse than bad. Once she served me thick slices of raw radish and carrot and a glass of black sesame seed and milk mixed in a juicer; I threw up.

"When I paid the concession fee," she told me, "my money was all gone. But I still needed to buy a lot of things, so I used a credit card. I bought a set of kitchen utensils just before my credit card hit the maximum."

She gabbed on about how she had sold her thriving beauty shop in order to pay off the debts incurred by her lover's business and how he had then collapsed with a cerebral blood clot and wasn't able to leave his wife's home.

When the taxi driver gave us an annoyed cough, I said, "I should be going, Aunt," and put the window up. Her bicycle took off before the taxi. Blown back by the wind, her gray raincoat hood revealed her head of gray hair. Since she is three years younger than my mother, she must be forty-five.

When the taxi passed her on her bicycle, I peered straight ahead at the windshield wiper cleaning off the raindrops.

New House

My younger sister and I both have pocket beepers, which Father gave us. Father beeps us whether it's midnight or the crack of dawn.

My sister complained in a disgusted tone, "When I call him after getting a beep, he always asks me where I am and what I'm doing, and he insists that I may be using the beeper to make arrangements for a date with some man. It's so annoying."

We have decided to ignore it when Father gives us a beep and leaves his phone number.

When I got a beep from Father awhile back, I called him for the first time in several months.

"I'm going to build a home so that all our family can live together," he said, quite serious. "Today I want you to take a look at the house plans I've worked out with the designer."

"Sorry, Dad, I'm busy. Would you please fax the plans to me?" I said, but he insisted things could proceed more quickly if we talked in person.

I went to the *pachinko* parlor where he was working. Drawing invisible lines on the glass prize case, he explained like an architect, "The eight-*tatami* room for you and Eri is upstairs. The six-*tatami* room is for Haruki and Haruo."

"I wouldn't live in the house. Neither would Eri and Haruo."

"There's also a kitchen and a bathroom upstairs, so you can bring your friends over."

"Even if I lived there, I wouldn't need a kitchen, Dad. When I have meals, I'll eat with you in the room downstairs."

I was at a loss as to how to tell him without hurting his feelings that I couldn't live with him. His eyes brightened at my remark about eating with him in the room downstairs. It had just slipped out.

"OK, then I will have it made into your study instead of a kitchen. I'll ask the carpenter to install spacious bookshelves on the wall."

"Dad, but I . . . can't . . . because of my work."

"You'll need a bed, of course, won't you?"

"I don't need it. You see? . . . Dad . . ."

Suddenly I wondered if he was thinking of making a room for Mother. I knew that Dad and Mother had seen each other a month before. Mother had told me about it.

"Mr. Yu," she'd said to my father, "let's build a high-quality building, a five-story building, instead of a cheap home. On the first floor I will have my real-estate firm. You can rent all the rest of the rooms except the ones you use for your residence."

"You think you would do it over again with me?" Dad had replied.

"Why do you still talk such nonsense?"

"For ten years, I've kept the divorce papers you sent me in the safe, and now I've made up my mind to go ahead and sign them." Dad was furious, but the divorce notice has yet to reach Mother.

"The new home will be completed toward the end of May. So you and your sister will come over to help pack and move things, won't you?"

Dad held my hand tightly—the hand of one who had given him an ambiguous answer. I wondered if Dad was really hoping that, just by building a new home, he could resuscitate a family that had all but collapsed. Visualizinganemptyeight-*tatami* room with spacious bookshelves, I shuddered and started to walk toward the train station.

Several months later, the home was completed.

Dad bought a ruby ring worth 500,000 *yen* at the pawnshop in his neighborhood and rushed in his car to Kamakura, where Mother lived. To Mother, who answered the door, Dad said, "Let's do it over again. Please accept this as an engagement ring." But Mother wouldn't take it. That's what I heard from my younger brother. Surprised, I called Mother in Kamakura. Chuckling on the phone, she said, "Mr. Yu's ring didn't suit my taste."

My sister and I decided we would ignore Dad's signal on our pocket beepers because we thought that once we stepped in the new home, we would have to live there.

One day my sister called me and said, "Our older brother says all of us siblings should report to the ward office with Dad to get our foreign national registration cards reprinted with our new address."

"What? Why should we all go? It can't be true. Besides, I'm busy."

"I said the same thing, and Brother got angry. If you can't go, call him yourself and talk with him directly," my sister said, herself somewhat angry. So we made arrangements as to when and where to meet for our visit to the ward office.

Dad went right ahead and had our foreign national registration cards reprinted with the new address. My sister and I were planning to take a train home, but Dad pushed us into his car, saying, "I'll take you to Yokohama Station."

I happened to notice a copy of the *Weekly Asahi* stuck into a slot of the dashboard. Dad, who can't read or write Japanese, has to ask Brother to read the articles I write for the newspaper and magazines.

"Your articles about families are stereotyped, aren't they?" Dad said. "What people want to read most is lacking there. Unless you write about what these family members should do to save the family, they're just meaningless."

Brother, who was in the front seat beside him, cut in: "But if you write too much, the articles will start to get boring."

When Dad had seen my play performed on the stage, he had muttered, "What I call a 'revolution' is lacking in your drama. No one will be impressed by a play unless it gives us hope." Is the house Dad built a revolution? I wondered.

While my mind hovered over such thoughts, the car headed into an unfamiliar residential area. He'd taken us to the new home, not the station.

A New Religious Cult

Once I stayed at Ms. U's home when our theatrical troupe was on the road. She is an actress from Kyoto.

When she left her home in Kyoto for Tokyo, intending to become an actress, her mother, older sister, and younger brother remained at home. Ever since Ms. U was small, her father had worked for a dressmaking firm in Tokyo and lived apart from his family. At first he had meant to work in Tokyo for a few years. Then he and the company president developed conflicting opinions about how to manage the business; so he and a friend of his started a new business. With his workplace in Tokyo, he returns to Kyoto only once or twice a month.

I believe in the psychological theory that children raised in a home where there is no father tend to suffer emotional disorders of one kind or another. But as far as I can see, Ms. U shows no inkling of any unhappiness. She seems to have a cheerful, happy family. She now lives with her father, older sister, and younger brother in a condominium in Nakano, Tokyo. The older sister came to Tokyo three years ago to help her father with work in the firm. The younger brother played on his university rugby team and, after graduation, started working for a midsized stock company in Kyobashi.

Just a few days ago, Ms. U and I dropped in an *oden* bar on our way home from a stage performance. "I thought an unusual home certainly would turn out weird persons, but your home seems to be an exception, doesn't it?" I quipped just as she was picking up a piece of *konjak* jelly with her chopsticks. She put it back on her dish, saying in a sorrowful voice, "I'll tell you the truth."

She told me then that her sister had recently joined something called a self-realization seminar, which seemed to be a new religious cult, and was skipping work often, asking her friends to join the seminar, and donating a lot of money to it.

"Well, freedom of religion is guaranteed," I said.

"It's not that. Far from the truth. You don't know anything about it," she retorted, vertical wrinkles appearing on her smooth forehead. "You don't know what it's really like to have one of your family members involved in a religious cult." She told me that the seminar was conducting its business like a multilevel marketing plan and that her sister was helping.

"What is 'family'?" she asked in a weird tone, as if reading the title of an old TV movie. "What is 'youth'?"

"It may be opium," I said, laughing.

I remember her sister from when I stayed at Ms. U's home in Kyoto, how she prepared the meal wearing round-rimmed glasses and smiling cheerfully. She must have felt herself in need of something to keep her mind occupied, to compensate for a father who lived away from his family to support them, and to allow her to compete with a younger sister who became an actress and a younger brother who became a devoted company employee. When I consider the situation this way—though it's none of my business—I feel sympathetic to her. Everyone may need something to believe in, even if it seems odd and disturbing to others. Ms. U, still knitting her brows, kept poking at the *konjak* jelly with her chopsticks.

The Mother Disappeared

A friend of mine had four different mothers in the period of thirteen years between the death of his own mother when he was five and his departure for Tokyo. His father, who died the winter before last, changed his jobs and wives every few years. I've been told that at one time my friend's primary-school teacher prepared supper for him.

Toward evening one summer day, his third mother left home, saying only, "I'm going shopping for groceries." She never came back.

Since the time when the summer sun cast shadows, a smell of sorrow began to drift through the home. The older brother was the first one to grow silent. He began to look at his palms with gloomy eyes and started to snap the nails of other fingers with his thumbnail. The older sister and younger sister, who used to chat quietly with each other, became taciturn.

My friend's home was now the quietest one in the world.

The ticking of the clock sounded like waves lapping the shoreline. He trembled. Although it was hot in the house, his body grew cold. He says he still remembers that day from time to time. He chokes up when he thinks of the view of his mother's back as she disappeared while walking past the grocery store, fish shop, dry-goods store, and *tofu* shop, carrying a shopping bag in her hand.

My friend is now the head of a theatrical group and directs plays. He always says, "A dramatic group is like a family without blood relations."

When he gets drunk, he tells the same story. It's about a play that he thinks he would like to put on the stage someday.

"The stage is right in the middle of a huge, empty water tank. At the bottom of the tank there is a low dining table around which four children are playing. The mother, who had gone shopping for supper things, doesn't come home. Into the empty tank, water begins to flow relentlessly, like seawater leaking through a hole in a ship. The low dining table begins to float, but the children continue playing, waiting for their mother. The volume of water keeps increasing. The mother doesn't come home. The tank eventually fills with water, and the children are drowned. Then a letter from the mother arrives, carried on a bamboo-leaf boat. It says, 'I will certainly come home. So please wait a little longer.'"

When he tells this story, his eyes are fixed firmly, as if set at the bottom of his heart. And he always says, in an evasive tone, "I know it would take a lot of money, and not many people would come to see it, so I couldn't produce it on the stage."

I heard that after their mother had disappeared, his older brother would scowl at him and his sisters every time they made any noise while eating. If they talked while eating, he would shout, "Hold your tongue!" and then overturn the dining table.

His brother firmly believed that his father had killed his sickly mother; gradually he went insane, and then he disappeared. It is said that several years ago a bill for a down quilt, made out to this brother, arrived at the office of my friend's theatrical group. My friend thus knew that his brother was still alive.

My friend changed his wives twice and lived apart from his children.

He says that the smell of *miso* soup sickens him and makes him feel like running away.

Translation by Naoshi Koriyama and Edward Lueders