The Strangers’ Apparel

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It was a little cold for late winter. The dark sky cast a heavy gloom that practically pressed upon one’s face. Japan’s especially humid climate saturated everything and everywhere with dampness. Even one’s exposed hands would appear to be wet.

Pulling off my mask and breathing heavily, I hurriedly hopped onto the Osaka-Kobe train as the final bell rang. The car was packed full of people. I knew it would be hard to find a seat in the chaos of a Saturday afternoon. I leaned against the train door and covered my face with the newspaper I was carrying.

The train began to move. Kansai’s famous “Osaka Express” rail line only took twenty-five minutes to get from the smoke of Osaka to the quiet seafront of Kobe.

The train sped along. Outside the window, some places had already harvested their perfectly square rice paddies. Clear water flickered with a strange light under a leaden sky, making me think of the sea. On the contrary, I knew the ocean to be dark, with white waves blooming atop the black water. Waves do not shimmer—it’s just the pearls below bursting and scattering about, their light cryptic. I would rush to see them. I wanted to take off my shoes and dash across the wet sand. I’d let the ocean breeze blow around me and take shelter in my hair. The sharp scent of the wind. An overcast sky. There wouldn’t be any people at the beach on a cloudy spring day. I could go listen to the tidal waves—that majestic music of nature—all alone. If it rained, I could hide out in the old lifeguard’s small shelter. He’s never discriminated against me for being a foreigner. I thought of the charcoal stove in that room and the worn-out straw mat with holes in its weave. I vaguely noticed the train slowing down.

I took my eyes from the window to the newspaper on my face. I wanted to doze off. No, I wanted to cry. Oh, the loneliness of the sun setting on the water! On a day like today, I don’t think I’d be in a pleasant enough mood even to hear an old friend recite the fairytale of Urashima Taro, who rode a turtle to visit the Dragon Palace under the sea. Such a moving underwater romance. Why shouldn’t he have gone to the sea? Should he have stayed in the city, only to squeeze through a sweaty crowd to buy a ticket to see a triple feature about the joys and sorrows of some American girls?

Someone jarred me with their elbow. I lowered the newspaper down from my face. A tall figure stood behind me. His face was a ruddy red color, and he wore a black overcoat. Looking me in the eyes, he pointed to one of two seats across from him, which was not, in fact, empty. A Korean woman in white was sitting there. He called out to her, saying something I couldn’t understand. The woman stood up, nervously holding up the edge of her long dress. He motioned for me to take the seat.

What did he mean by this? I did not understand. The train had already been going for nearly five minutes—why offer me the seat now? I didn’t appear to be tired. I only had a newspaper, which could easily be folded up and put inside my pocket. I was also holding a sad bag? of candy in my hand. I really didn’t have a reason to take that woman’s place. I didn’t move. Looking at him, I replaced my newspaper as before.

His already rust-colored face burned redder with embarrassment. He offered a stiff bow and mouthed something with his lips. The woman, still standing, looked at me with apprehensive eyes, which then glanced over at the red-faced man. She fidgeted with the pull ties on her dress for a while.

I went and sat down without any more hesitation.

After a while, the woman bent forward to stand in front of me, grabbing onto the strap above her head.

*“What strange people!”* I thought. I started to observe this couple. *“Was it because of my clothes?”*

My clothes weren’t all that refined. My black overcoat was only slightly cleaner than his, and there was a tear about one inch long in the left pocket. *“Then it’s because I’m a woman, isn’t it!”*

Perhaps. I didn’t have any other women with me. When I got on the train, there had been two other beautifully dressed women standing where I was, but they had covered their mouths with delicate white handkerchiefs and moved to the part of the car where the other well-dressed people stood.

I put the newspaper over my face again. I could feel the woman looking at me stealthily, like a mouse waiting to come out of its hole. Pretending not to notice, I lifted the paper a little higher. From underneath I could see the floor.

She was wearing Korean-style reddish-brown open-toed slippers with white socks, also Korean made. I thought, *“She must be new to Japan.”* The Korean women I had seen all wore wooden Japanese sandals and the men wore rubber split-toed *jika-tabi* socks, like other Japanese laborers. *The markets here don’t sell these kind of pointed-toe Korean rubber shoes.*

Her shoes made me think of the man. What about him? I looked up from the floor and sought him out. He was wearing leather shoes and they weren’t too worn out. Even though there was a little patch, it didn’t take away from the whole appearance. The shoes were very shiny. Obviously, they had been carefully polished. Leather shoes were hard to get in Japan. *Such precious leather shoes!*

I put the paper down to measure him up more naturally.

Over the shoes was a pair of cheap trousers with little grayish-white dots. The hem was rolled up slightly, perhaps to keep them from getting wet. Underneath were socks with thick gray stripes. His suit jacket was hidden inside of his coat, so it wasn’t visible, but it definitely had not come with the trousers. One of them seemed to be dark blue while the other appeared to be black. There was a pair of dazzling red cufflinks on the white cuffs. A small sweat stain could be seen where it touched the wrist.

The collar. Oh, the collar looked so uncomfortable! That wide, white material was thick as cardboard. Crude, thick starch formed small spots that, from afar, looked like a sandy beach that had just been pummeled by a heavy rain.

As he felt my attention on him, his expression immediately constricted. His face became unnaturally red and he covered it with the hand holding tightly to the sleeve that was an inch shorter than his jacket.

I raised the newspaper again, silently wondering what kind of person he was. He could be a foreman! He could have been promoted from laborer. He might have worked diligently for a long time, saving up money and winning the trust of his superior. Then, he would have been promoted and could bring his woman back from his hometown.

But today? Are they out to enjoy the weekend? No, they weren’t that ostentatious. I again eyed the woman before me. She evidently wore her best, most presentable clothing, a painstakingly white cotton top and a wide silk skirt. Through the white top, one could see a jacket with blueish-gray patches stitched on.

*Maybe he let me have his seat because he saw who I am.* Yes, someone who gets a monthly salary doesn’t need worker friends. He’d be higher up than them. He could be in charge of them. Upper level people can’t fraternize with those a little beneath them. *Was he even higher up the pay scale?* That couldn’t be it. He had received a scornful stare just now from those two elegant women. Even though the quality of those women’s Japanese coats could not have been much better than mine, they were still quite far away from him, so he found me, a person wearing a torn overcoat with no money to buy a new one.

I withdrew my gaze. He became much more relaxed. His face assumed the indifference and prestige often found in noble people who try their best to pretend. I folded my hands on top of both knees, like the most sophisticated and courteous Japanese woman.

The wife furtively glanced at her husband on occasion, awkwardly studying his appearance and anxiously fondling her clothing. At times she looked out the window. It was hard to tell whether she was uneasy or depressed.

The train raced ahead; the clouds were ready to pour. A light, soft rain blew in from a distance. I folded the newspaper and stuffed it into my pocket. I scrunched up the sleeves of my overcoat a little and looked at my wristwatch. Four thirty-five. In another five minutes we would reach Kobe. As I looked at my watch, the man inclined his eyes sideways to see it.

*“He definitely doesn’t have a watch, otherwise he’d slide his sleeve up and look at it, too,”* I thought. It occurred to me to give him my watch. It would look good on him. Its big round face didn’t quite suit a woman’s slender wrists. I couldn’t count the number of times I had cried humiliated tears over this watch, like when my flat mates had showed off their delicate and exquisite timepieces.

If I gave it to him, it would really complete his look. It’s doubtful he uses his hands to do much of anything anymore. Holding his baton while making inspections, the watch could reflect the light, which would raise his status even higher. He would certainly be happier and more excited than he was after reluctantly buying the cheap clothes he was wearing.

Yet me? I depended on this sizable thing to crawl out of my thin quilt on time; to walk down the long road to the train station—where the train didn’t always arrive promptly and there were too few of them anyway—all to get to my job on time. And, when I did stenography, I used the watch to keep track of my work hours. Because it’s always slow, I set it a little faster than other clocks, so I’ve never been late or delayed to anything because of it.

Would I have the money to buy another one? The small, lovely timepieces I coveted laid out at the department store were at least twenty yen.

And him? How would he take a gift from a stranger? Would he suspect me of some ulterior motive? Surely, he would. He would have just recently come to know a bit of the craftiness of people, as it turns out. He’d be positively fearful of any little thing hindering his dreams for the future. Even if he accepted the gift, it would give those jealous of him yet another reason to make up rumors, steal and not file a report, or worse, to mug him. Any of these could ruin his prospects and bring him misfortune. I started to realize that sometimes it’s harder to give someone else a little happiness than it is yourself. Depressed by the weight of my fantasy, I bit my lip.

The train passengers started to move about. The train entered the station marked with the characters “Kobe.” The man stood up, and as I was thinking about whether or not he had anything to carry, he sternly barked an order at the woman, who hastily reached for a box in flower-patterned wrapping from the rack above her head. She busily began to rearrange the loosened knots tied around it. He watched her, impatiently wrinkling his brow. From his lips came another command. Her hands shook, and she could not do up those simple knots no matter how hard she tried.

He grabbed the package from her, undid it altogether, and forcefully shook the wrapping towards the floor as if something dirty had gotten stuck to it. He laid it out again and re-wrapped the box, then covered it with a piece of white paper with “gift” written on it and imprinted with red and silver string.

The train stopped and people started to alight. He swung his head forward and walked off with big steps. The woman grabbed the box he had flung on the seat and followed him timidly.

I inexplicably raged at him. He had just risen to a new status and he had already learned how to trample over others. I recalled my own hateful overseer with his scowl and wooden baton. Whenever I walked behind him, I wanted to jump up and rip off his stiff collar.

Large raindrops unexpectedly began to fall outside the station platform. The couple didn’t have an umbrella, nor did I. My handkerchief could shield my hair from the rain. It didn’t matter if my coat became wet.

And him? He went from doing his utmost to appear reserved to showing some frustration while watching the rain from the exit. The woman stood behind him petting her precious clothes.

I walked past them, and she turned her eye to me. I expressly walked toward the taxi stand, even though I didn’t have change for the fare. I got in the middle of a queue with a group of well-dressed people and walked toward a taxi that had just stopped. At the same time, I thought about how I could sneak out of the line where the customers usually disembarked.

I noticed them from the corner of my eye without fully turning my head back. I saw him hurriedly take the woman and turn to go in the direction of the small port next to the station.

I left through an opening in the rope barrier beside me and made my way back inside the station as if I had forgotten something. Then I left through the other exit. I wiped my hair with my handkerchief. The cold rain hit my face. In place of that pitiful woman, it was me who retaliated against her husband, fearing yet again that the rain would soil her treasured outfit. I wished that her husband would spend the six cents for her to ride the tram.

*Xin Manzhou (*New Manchuria) March 21, 1941

See also:

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