

〈翻 訳〉

‘My First Lie’ by Tougou Tokiko & 3 Other Essays

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‘My First Lie’¹ by Tougou Tokiko²

Every year spring comes around and then it’s over. Mugwort, Japanese parsley and horsetail begin to appear. When the time comes for buds of the angelica trees in the mountains to grow, without fail, I recall the happy days of my childhood. At this time my young mother suddenly began to be enthusiastic about various things. One day she said, “Let’s all go and gather mountain vegetables tomorrow.”

As a result the following day, which was a Sunday, the whole family spent an enjoyable time hiking over the fields and mountains. We took large rice balls wrapped in seaweed containing pickled plums with us. The pure whiteness of the rice, the deep crimson of the pickled plums and the yellowness of the Japanese-style omelette and pickled radish were striking to the eyes. In the Hodogaya ward of about 1950 or 1951 it was still possible to do such things, as there were many fields and mountains nearby.

When we returned, mother was very busy. She had to blanch the vegetables we had picked to remove the harsh taste. That evening we had deep fried, fresh mugwort and buds of the angelica tree, all full of seasonal aromas. With our appetite from walking around for a long time, the large dish piled high with deep-fried mountain vegetables³ soon became empty before our very eyes.

The following day, on returning from school, *kusamochi*⁴ full of boiled mugwort had already been made and put on the dining room table. During my primary school days, I was brought up with the utmost love by my parents, in poor circumstances, but since everyone else was leading a simple life, a little frugality and suchlike was not at all embarrassing for me. We played together, on good terms with each other, romping around full of energy. However notwithstanding the *kusamochi*, which I loved, for a long time I retained a slightly bitter memory and prejudice from those days.

In the spring of 1948 our family moved to Tochigi prefecture. I understand that my

father, who as the second son hadn't had such a hard time of it, was not good at the way of life amongst the post-war damage and so it seems that this was the time when our family was worst off. The following year I entered primary school in Tochigi and went on my first excursion.

Mother used the only few remaining adzuki beans and sugar and made *kusamochi* for me. I don't remember now whether at that time sweets were being sold or whether it was not possible to buy them, but I believe that these *kusamochi* had been made for me as a result of mother's kindness, wanting me to take something on the excursion, apart from rice balls. Although there were only five *kusamochi*, they were excellently made.

"Look. Don't they look delicious. Give two of them to your teacher," said mother with a sweet smile, softly slipping the package into my rucksack so that my younger brother would not find it. I knew that my mother loved sweet things. I also knew that my brother would want the *kusamochi* if he found them. I left for school, deciding to give two to my teacher, eat only one myself and bring back the two remaining ones.

Wondering whether my teacher would be happy with the *kusamochi* and whether she would tell me that they were delicious, I wanted to set off on our excursion as soon as possible and spontaneously broke into a run. I felt like a very enjoyable thing was awaiting me. The rucksack on my back was being shaken around and was making a noticeable sound. We climbed a hill with a gentle slope called Mashiko's Hakusan and then the time that I'd been eagerly waiting for arrived. Lunch. The opened lunchboxes of my friends revealed food of various colours. Some children had vinegared rice rolled up in dried seaweed, others just rice balls like me and one boy had only sweet potatoes. And there were rich children who had even brought fruit. Since little by little everyone was taking some of their food to the teacher for her to try, she had no more room for food on her lap. I too should give some food to my teacher and so opened my package in high spirits. "Eh. What's this?"

Inside there were no longer five *kusamochi*. They had all become stuck together to form a large dumpling. But since mother had made it, it would be sweet and delicious. I wanted my teacher, who I was very fond of, to try some so I pulled the dough-like lump apart into two pieces. And then I said to my teacher, "Please Miss, the small *kusamochi* have become stuck together and have become a large dumpling."

My teacher replied, "Thank you. It looks delicious. Please say thank you to your mother." After all my teacher was kind and I thought that I loved her. But afterwards I

saw what she did. She gave the large dumpling to a slightly dirty, smelly girl, who always sat in a corner of the classroom. I felt bad for my mother. I had been bouncing around so much in high spirits that the *kusamochi* had become a large dumpling. My teacher was only able to see the lump as something unappetizing. The fact is that although my mother had wanted to eat one of the cakes, she had denied herself. I had also wanted to let my older sister and younger brother have a taste. I knew that when I returned home I could not possibly tell my mother what had occurred.

“My teacher said they were extremely delicious and you’re a very good cook,” were the words, which I thought up on the way home to say to mother. I also thought that if I told her about the *kusamochi* becoming a huge dumpling, she would be unhappy, so I decided to say nothing about it. Although I had been warned never to tell a lie, I was able to do so without hesitation.

However I have felt scared for a long time wondering whether, even now Enma, the King of Hades⁴ will angrily call out “Liar,” and come to pluck out my tongue. I ate the remaining lump of *kusamochi* with my friend Matchan, our hands sticky, both bent over with laughter. So in fact it was Matchan, not my teacher, who said that the *kusamochi* was delicious.

Nowadays we can have *kusamochi* at any time and when I notice them my heart droops and I feel pained. I have a sister five years older than me who has hearing difficulties. The other day I was served *kusamochi* at her house. I brought up in a casual manner the subject, which I had not mentioned to anybody until now. My sister suddenly said, “But if it hadn’t been for that teacher, I wouldn’t be able to read or write as well as I can. She was a kind teacher.” For a moment I was unable to understand her meaning. When I inquired, it seems that there was not yet any school for children with hearing difficulties near our house in Tochigi at that time and mother didn’t know what to do, so she asked my teacher for advice. My teacher, who as an educator was seemingly unable to leave matters as they stood, put several books into my school knapsack, saying, “Have your sister read these to you.” I understand that she lent me books every day. My sister, who loved books, was happy and said that she had looked forward to my returning home. The books became increasingly difficult and my sister had tears in her eyes, even now feeling gratitude for having been allowed to study with her younger sister.

I was astonished at myself for having completely forgotten that such a thing had occurred. I had a feeling that the grudge that I had harboured for such a long time had

all of a sudden melted away. I have come to believe that in the case of those *kusamochi*, my teacher must have wanted to let that girl eat something soft and sweet.

I am ashamed that for almost half a century I have misjudged my teacher. I have an overwhelming feeling of wishing to beg my teacher's pardon. I wonder how her life is going now.

- 1) Originally published as 「はじめての嘘」 in *Bashamichi* Vol. 30, 2000
- 2) Tougou Tokiko (東郷時子) was a housewife in 2000.
- 3) *Sansai ryori* (山菜料理) means cooking with mountain vegetables. The Japanese associate this with spring. Deep-frying is only one of the possible ways of preparing these vegetables.
- 4) *Kusamochi* (草餅) Sweet, green rice cakes flavoured with mugwort
- 5) Enma (閻魔) according to Buddhism, is the King of Hades, who judges people's actions when they die and decides appropriate punishments and rewards.

'Mother's Caramel'¹ by Nishio Ichirou²

On leaving for school, the boy's morning greeting, "I'm off now," to his mother lying sick in bed in the annexe of the farmhouse had grown into a habit. On the morning of May 13th 1945, on greeting his mother in the usual way, he was called back and entered the annexe.

He hadn't seen her for ten whole days and involuntarily a smile appeared on his face. When his mother called him back he always received a caramel. However on that day she looked different and by her sick bed were his grandfather and aunt. Calling him by his name, Ichirou, to her pillow-side, she held out her thin, weak, white hand, which appeared almost translucent, and clasped the boy's in hers. She then gave him instructions regarding his future course in life, in her feeble, yet clear voice. He had heard these same things repeatedly, many times before. "Do you understand? If you don't hurry up, you'll be late for school," she said nodding, once more gripping his hand. "I'm

off now," he said with a smile. His aunt was crying.

One reason that the boy and his mother had evacuated from Osaka Port to the farm in Okuizumo in Shimane prefecture was because it had become dangerous when the Greater East Asia War had entered a violent stage and air raids had begun on Osaka. The other reason was that his mother's illness had become more serious. His father had been called up four years earlier and had been sent to fight in the south. Two years later he had been killed in action.

The boy had transferred to the village primary school two years earlier and was now in the sixth form. In his school, apart from him, there were thirteen others who had been evacuated from the cities.

The house in Okuizumo belonged to his mother's family and after his uncle had gone off to the front, his grandfather and aunt had been left to look after the place. In the normal course of things he would have shared a room with his mother but she was suffering from tuberculosis and was sleeping alone in the annexe. A nurse slept alone in a different room.

The mother would sometimes call her son and from a yellow box take out two square caramel cubes, the size of the tip of a thumb, wrapped in waxed paper, and hand them to him. The highly nutritious Morinaga³ caramels were sent in occasional packages from Osaka, by those who were worried about her illness. They probably took a lot of trouble to obtain with the food shortages during the war.

He always said the same thing when he hesitatingly accepted them, "I don't need them. You should eat them, mother." He had never seen her eating one. When she handed him the caramels, she said to him affectionately, "Don't tell anybody else about the caramels. Don't chew them. Lick them." The boy told no one but he was not able to stop chewing the caramels over and over. Peeling off the paper carefully and stuffing the hard square caramel into his mouth, before long when the square had become soft he could no longer contain himself and bit into the caramel with his back teeth. When he did so, an indescribable sweetness gradually spread through the whole of his mouth.

"You'll be late for school," his mother said and he set off running with his bag on his bag. Just before noon his teacher told him to go home and a gardener came to collect him and took him back on his bicycle. When he went into the annexe he found his mother dead, her hands folded together and a white cloth covering her face. Beside her there was only his grandfather who said, "This evening we'll put your mother in a coffin.

You stay with her until then. Also if there's something of your mother's that you want, go and get it now." Then his grandfather left the room.

The boy drew back the white sheet and stroked the cheek of his smiling, sleeping mother. It seemed that at any moment she might get out of bed. He thought again about how she had given him advice about his future more persistently than usual only that morning. Claspng her hand, her voice was brought back to life, "Your father is no longer here so find your own way to Tokyo."

The boy opened his mother's wicker trunk. Right on top of everything was a lacquer-ware box for letters. Inside were letters and under them three unopened boxes of Morinaga milk caramels. With the feeling of having discovered treasure, he broke open the seal, took out a caramel and stuffed it into his mouth. Tears welled up. He placed a caramel by her pillow and called out "Mothersrrr." He read the letters sitting beside his mother, who would never reply, and continued eating the caramels until it became dark, suffering his grief. Three months later the war ended.

I, who was that boy, spent my middle and high school years in Matsue city during those chaotic times after the war when it was difficult to get food. In accordance with mother's instructions, in 1952 I went up to Tokyo and entered university. The capital had an abundance of energy. Having lost my parents, I had to support myself and so looked for a place to work. The father of a school friend, who I had just become acquainted with, found one for me. I began to work as a waiter in a cabaret for the exclusive use of troops stationed in Japan, which was on the top floor of Matsuya⁴ in Ginza. It was tough working until late at night day in, day out but I enjoyed it and was proud to work in Ginza right in the heart of Tokyo. Above all, my greatest pleasure was in the chewing gum, chocolate and caramels, which the American troops distributed. For all that, the caramels tasted different in some way.

At this time on the rooftops of buildings in the 4th district of Ginza, which was trying to resurrect itself from the ruins, two-storey high advertising towers, with huge globes of the world on them had been erected. These were a symbol of Tokyo's revival. I thought that these were advertising towers, which were worth boasting to the world about. The dearly loved characters for Morinaga milk caramels shone brightly in neon lights as they slowly revolved around the middle of the bright blue globe, which appeared to be floating in the night sky⁵. I looked up at it from the shade of a willow without growing tired of it. Before long the neon characters caused me to remember my mother. The sweet taste of

that caramel simultaneously came to mind. I burst into a sweet shop, found the yellow box with the angel design and bought it. The caramel, which I stuffed in my mouth, transported me back to the days of my youth, when I was evacuated to that village.

That time, when I accompanied my mother along the riverside, when she was feeling well. I desperately tried to recall the image of my mother when she was instructing the primary school student, who I still was, repeatedly about my future mission in life and her expectations of me, as we sat on the grass by a brook listening to its murmurings. From that day on, the thing that caused me to recall mother and made me feel closest to her was Morinaga milk caramels.

Having lived now for more than twice as many years as mother who died at the age of thirty two, although there are times when I wonder whether I have in fact fulfilled mother's expectations, I am in good health. I believe this is thanks to what my mother taught me about the caramels.

- 1) Originally published as 「母のキャラメル」 in *Muffin* in April 2000.
- 2) Nishio Ichirou (西尾威智朗) was a company chairman in 2000.
- 3) Morinaga is a large confectionery manufacturer, incorporated as a limited company in 1910, having origins dating back to 1899.
- 4) Matsuya is a department store, incorporated as a limited company in 1919, having origins dating back to 1869.
- 5) The availability of so much archived material on the internet always strikes me as utterly wonderful: with a couple of clicks, you can be transported back to 1950s Tokyo and see what those Morinaga globes looked like – in motion no less. <http://www.morinaga.co.jp/museum/graphics/>

‘The Best of All Possible Gifts’¹ by Kimura Erika²

On a shelf in the kitchen there was a new chopping board, which had not been used. When I inquired about when we would begin to use the board, my mother told me that we

could not use it yet.

When I asked why not, mother gave me an awkward look. I was mystified at why we were not able to use the board. Mother's explanation was merely that there were reasons why we could not use the chopping board yet.

I heard that granny gave mother this board at the end of summer. Granny had gone into the university hospital suffering from malignant lymphoma and after treatment had been discharged to recuperate at home, not knowing when the cancer would return. In the event that she had to be hospitalized once more, since she might not be able to return home again, she gave mother a present in advance of such an eventuality. The chopping board was this present.

I wondered why the present had been a chopping board. However I subsequently understood the reason. When granny gave mother the chopping board, she said, "When I die, before long, all of you will probably begin to forget me, because you are busy with your own lives. However when you are in the kitchen using the chopping board you are sure to remember me."

On hearing this I understand that mother wound up crying and was unable to say anything in response. Granny, knowing that she had cancer did not voice a single complaint but instead always said, "Now I'm the happiest I've ever been."

Granny said, "Bequeathing money is to sow the seeds of discord so I'm not going to hand down anything. When the cancer returns, if the pain becomes acute, I'll just tell my doctor frankly about it since he will be able to alleviate the pain. As a result I don't feel anxious at all about such things." Granny had no fear of cancer.

It suddenly occurred to me what might be best for a person to leave to their family at the end of their life. I suppose, depending on the person, some will leave money, while others will leave other things. When Mother Theresa died, she left only insignificant things like two simple saris, the bucket used for washing them and a cloth bag. While she was alive Mother Theresa gave away all her belongings to the poor.

The thing that my granny, while she was alive, wanted to leave us was a humble chopping board. However our family considered it to be the best of all possible gifts.

- 1) Originally published as 「最高の贈り物」 in *Asahi Shougakusei Shimbun* on November 9th, 1997.

- 2) Kimura Erika (木村恵利香) was a fifth year student in Aramachi Elementary School, Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture in 1997.

'Unanticipated Tears'¹ by Mikuni Ichirou²

I don't remember which autumn it was but I was walking along a side road by Aoyama Gakuin³ and it was still early evening when I came to a house where they were holding a wake. An altar had been erected in the room adjacent to the entrance, lamps and flowers had been arranged in the prescribed order and it appeared that up until that very minute, a Buddhist mass had been held. I think that the main part of the ceremony had come to an end, as I was unable to see a single person. It was probably just chance that brought me to the front of the house at this instant. I don't know if it was because the road at this point was dark and there were no pedestrians, but I was struck by the brightness of the altar and its surroundings and instinctively I came to a halt. Without meaning to, I happened to look at the several baskets of flowers, which had been given as offerings. As might be expected, given that it was autumn, chrysanthemums stood out. On one of these baskets was the message, "From all your grandchildren."

Normally such things never happen, but on this occasion something like a haiku occurred to me.

"I feel moved by the many yellow chrysanthemums given as a floral offering to their grandfather by all his grandchildren."⁴

And then many years passed. Since that time I haven't written a single haiku but recently the haiku of that time frequently occurs to me. The fact that it comes to my mind is all very well, however when this happens, tears well up like a dam breaking.

On reflection it seems that my haiku, "By all his grandchildren" was not good after all since it had this unwelcome effect on me. I had forgotten that I too would soon be an old man and had reached the age at which it would not be unusual for me to have my own grandchildren.

I heard from one of my older friends that there are many men of middle age and older who enjoy attending primary school sports days. They do not attend these events because a child of one of their family members is participating. They like to find a school sports day at which they have no family connection whatsoever and slip in to watch the events wearing the same expressions as parents. In fact I heard that the aim of these

men, most of whom are, after all, of advanced years, or close to that age group, is to have a cry. I understand that the events in primary school sports days, which are most likely to induce tears are after all the races between those in the lower forms. From a distance, the schoolchildren seem like separate white beans lined up on the starting line. On hearing the signal, a bang, they scamper off all together. Their way of running is the very definition of cuteness and the tear ducts of the appreciator soon begin to weaken. However when one of the children trips up and falls down, their way of tumbling down enhances the cuteness, and the appreciator breaks down in tears.

The fact is that among my acquaintances there is this kind of enthusiastic appreciator, who often invites me along. Since I can understand how he feels, I would like to go along with him if possible, however I've never accompanied him yet. The reason is that from my primary school days I myself was overweight and was extremely weak at running races. I was always the very last, finishing well behind the child in front of me. You can never know how ashamed I felt. I understand that recently there are many overweight children in the world. When I think of how emotionally painful it must be for these overweight children to participate in school events like sports days, I do not feel any inclination whatsoever to attend them as an appreciator.

Someone said, unlike in the past, overweight children now throw out their chest with pride at their size, to the extent that if one were to throw a stone they would probably be hit by it. I wonder if that's true? I am one of those who does not believe it.

While I'm talking about crying, recently I cried at an unexpected thing. Because of the violent eruption of Mount Mihara⁵ on Oshima Island⁶, the islanders started to evacuate. I was moved at the detailed way in which the news was covered, seeing the islanders full of spirit, as if they wanted to say, "We have been waiting for the TV reporters to arrive." However if I were asked whether my tears were brought about by seeing the situation of the islanders and their dilemma, I would say no. Subsequently with the end of the year approaching, the islanders decided to return home. One by one the boats set off. Seeing the groups of islanders boarding the boats, disembarking and setting foot on the land where their homes were, none of these scenes induced me to cry. I just thought, "Oh. O.K." However, after all, the time came when I did cry. Indeed the feeling came over me when I least expected it.

A bus for people returning to Oshima from Tokyo appeared. It was waiting at the harbour in Oshima. This bus appeared on TV. You could see lines of people on the

gangway disembarking, looking glum and tired. Right after this, it happened. The bus was on standby. Naturally it was empty. First the picture of the bus appeared and as soon as that occurred, the young bus driver appeared and with an agile movement sat down in the driver's seat with a practiced air. Then still facing forward, he donned his company's cap also with a quick, fluid movement. Seeing the way in which he smoothly donned his cap, I broke down in tears. I have no idea why.

However I am overcome by tears only when they are least expected and always at a scene one step removed from that of pathos itself.

- 1) Originally published as 「思いがけない涙」 in *All Yomimono* in March 1987.
- 2) Mikuni Ichirou (三國一朗) (1921~2000) was a television personality and essayist.
- 3) Aoyama Gakuin is a Christian university in Tokyo established in its present form in 1949, but originally founded by missionaries in 1874.
- 4) I regret that I have no confidence to attempt to render this as a haiku.
- 5) Mount Mihara is a volcano on Izu Oshima Island which is still active. It last erupted in 1986.
- 6) Izu Oshima Island lies about 100 km south of Tokyo and is administered by the Tokyo Metropolitan government.

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Translator's Note

In choosing which essays to translate, I am usually governed almost wholly by the title, when judging what will appeal to me. In other words I rarely read any of the text itself before I start. Inevitably this can lead to some disappointments on occasion, however there is always something to be learned from any translation and needless to say, I only have myself to blame, since it does make more sense to skim through a text to get some idea of the content before committing to translate. This time, apart from the title, I've also been guided to select three of the essays on the basis that they have been chosen as subtitles for the annual collection of essays from Bungei Shunjuu. Strangely enough though, of the four essays I have selected, it is the one, which was not chosen as the subtitle for the essay collection, 'My First Lie' which most appeals to me. I'm not sure whether this simply means that different people like different things or that it shows that, unlike the editors of the collection, I am focusing almost entirely on the story, not having the necessary skill to evaluate the writer's command of language, style and technique in constructing a good essay. Some of the reasons that I like this essay are:- (1) the truth contained in it that we human beings, both children and adults alike, are prone to jump to conclusions, and perhaps more significantly, judgments, on the slimmest of what we *perceive to be* evidence (2) another truth that shame can follow us through the rest of our lives and it only takes a small trigger such as the *kusamochi* in this case for our conscience to be pricked. Moreover, paradoxically, we can be subjected to this feeling of shame even if the person, who we believe to have wronged has no knowledge of our misjudgment and therefore no feeling whatsoever of being wronged, like the teacher in this story (3) the picture painted of the child as a moral being, wishing to save some of the *kusamochi* to share with her family members (4) the opportunity to learn some small things about Japanese culture e.g. Enma, which I would likely not otherwise come across.