

«Translation»

“Poor Little Mites Worse-Off Than Me”
by Sakashita Yūsuke & 2 Other Essays

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“Poor Little Mites Worse-Off Than Me”¹⁾ by Sakashita Yūsuke²⁾

One day in the spring of 1940, when I had just become a fourth year primary school student, I was in the school hallway by the entrance just about to go home when I noticed that they’d gone. The brand new, shiny, black rubber shoes, which had just been bought for me the previous day, had gone. Frantically I searched for them. I searched every inch of the shoe cupboard. After all I was unable to find them.

My mother had bought these shoes for me with the money she’d earned doing needlework at night. Father had gone to Manchukuo³⁾ and since there were three of us, my mother, elder sister and I, family finances were by no means easy.

Even though it was a new school year, when everything should have been new, I had been going to school wearing the same rubber shoes with holes in them that I had been wearing throughout the winter. This had probably weighed on mother’s mind. Assiduously applying herself to her needlework, she took advantage of the receipt of a good sum of money to buy me a new pair of rubber shoes.

That night I was so happy that I went to sleep with the shoes next to my pil-

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- 1) Originally published as 「もっとかわいそうな子」 in the magazine *Rajio Shinyabin* No. 116 in 2010.
 - 2) Sakashita Yūsuke (坂下勇輔) was a former principal of a primary school.
 - 3) Manchukuo, the puppet state in Northeast China established by the Japanese in 1932, consisted initially of the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang.

low. When I tried them on, they fitted me perfectly. I had intended to walk to school as usual but I spontaneously broke into a run.

When the shoes disappeared, the very first thing that came to mind was mother. Rather than the loss of my precious shoes, I felt so sorry for mother, having worked for all she was worth day after day, that tears welled up in my eyes.

When I got home I said, "My shoes have been stolen." Mother replied, "There was some poor little mite, worse-off than you, who needed them more. I'll buy you another pair." Then she fell silent and returned to her needlework.

As the war became increasingly severe, less goods were available, rationing was introduced, and in time even rubber shoes disappeared from shops.

Once or twice a year some shoes were distributed to our class, however children living far away were given preferential treatment so I never got another pair as I lived in town.

In the late autumn of 1943 the war situation became more intense than ever and we middle-schoolers became earnest in performing our military drills. That day the weather had been bad since the morning including sleet. We had been marching in this weather. Since the wellington boots, which we wore, had been repaired over and over again, before we knew it the melted snow had soaked into our boots and our socks became wet through. We all wanted to warm our feet in front of a stove as soon as possible.

Only N's footwear was different. They were new straw boots, which still had the pleasant smell of new rice straw. Everyone looked at them enviously, probably thinking that they would like to wear them as they looked warm. However the march out, which was five kilometres was, as might be expected, tough, but on the march back our feet were cold, we were hungry and we simply walked without speaking.

Before long I noticed something strange about N. He was crying while he walked. I called out, "What's up?" However he continued walking in

silence. When I looked more closely, I saw that the soles of his straw boots had worn very thin. After all, the straw was no match for the march in the sleet. Two more kilometres remained before we arrived back at school. We marched on, all of us spurring him on saying, "You must be cold." "I hope the sole doesn't come off." "It's just a little further." "Don't give up."

Several weeks later a single pair of wellington boots was supplied to our class. These were the boots of my dreams. When I caught myself hankering after them, I recalled mother's words, "There's some poor little mite, worse-off than you, who needs them more."

When I said, "Give them to N," all my classmates agreed.

The shiny, black wellington boots flashed in N's hands.

"Mending Your Relationship with Your Wife"⁴⁾

by Arashiyama Kouzaburō⁵⁾

When my wife, who for a long time had been a nag, suddenly became meek and mild, things had become critical. Full-time housewives are especially dangerous. The wife who becomes submissive and obedient has already made up her mind to divorce in three years, and has begun her preparations.

While the couple are still quarreling, the marriage is still O.K. The husband will get angry when he encounters indifference in the way that his wife speaks to him. When he says one thing, she will answer with another. When he says something, she will answer back using women's logic, that such a thing is not possible. Damn idiot.

If this situation continues for more than a year, the husband will stop talking to his wife. When he hasn't spoken for one year, he will grow obstinate and one year will turn into two. He will be seized again with anger and it

4) Originally published in the book 「妻との修復」 by Kodansha in 2008.

5) Arashiyama Kouzaburō (嵐山光三郎) (1942~) is a writer and editor.

will become three years. In order to achieve a record he will make that into four years. With resignation the five year mark will be reached without him having spoken to her. If it has reached this point, a late-life divorce will just be a matter of time.

An acquaintance of mine's case started in the divorce court and was appealed all the way up to the Supreme Court. This person had re-married but was having one argument after another with his wife and called her bad names in court. He was a lawyer of renown and his wife also belonged to the same profession. Since both of them had legal knowledge, they went to extremes in competing with each other in their use of abusive language.

Even details of their sex life were laid bare. They called each other such things as "sexual deviant," "abnormal," "fiend," "devil," "stingy," "heartless," "uncultured," "stupid" and "stinky breath." During the trial they hurled both fact and fiction at each other without discrimination and human dignity was torn to shreds in the quagmire of hate. The fight became pitiful. Although the Supreme Court ruled in favour of my acquaintance, he had grown weaker both physically and mentally and three months after the ruling had been handed down, he died in a one-room apartment.

Divorce is not good for your health. In particular, a late-life divorce will leave a man completely in tatters.

If you're going to behave so disgracefully, even if your wife has turned into a witch, it would have been better if you had divorced. A wife, who turns into a witch is something one can find in Japan's traditional culture and so it is originally part of our DNA. From the outset a man is coming together with a complete stranger and after he loses sexual interest in his partner, he will simply fall out of love with her. The husband is also to blame if the wife turns into a witch. I understand this only too well. I understand it, but when a marriage ends in divorce, physiological loathing trumps reason.

There was a politician called Kuroda Kiyotaka⁶⁾ in the Meiji era. Kuroda admired women and advocated their social advancement. However he became furious with his wife for bossing him around and kicked her to death. Kuroda's wife, Sei, was the daughter of his superior. She underrated him, treating him with contempt. Apart from Kuroda, no other prime minister has kicked his wife to death. Kuroda's action of kicking his conceited wife to death did not end up in court thanks to Ōkubo Toshimichi⁷⁾, who hailed from the same hometown. However rumours spread and a husband only had to say, "I'll do the same as Kuroda," to strike terror into his wife. The fact that brutal husbands like Kuroda existed, was immensely reassuring for weak husbands.

Now we are in an age when wives of celebrities club their husbands to death with wine bottles, cut up the corpses and throw away the pieces in a busy part of town. Since the husband's dead body amounts to a large quantity of raw garbage, chopping it up prior to dumping it is a matter of practicality. Possibly there are warning labels pasted on wine bottles instructing purchasers to take care not to use the bottle to strike their husband on his head.

Unlike in a workplace, personnel changes do not occur in a family. In order to escape the tyranny of one's wife, the only option is divorce, but the divorce process is more troublesome than the formalities for marriage, leaving one both mentally and physically exhausted. The problem is that men do not get along with their wives as well as a company man gets along at his workplace. Of those around me, it is only the husbands who have ability in their jobs, who are living like divorced people under the same roof - so-called in-house separation.

6) Kuroda Kiyotaka (黒田清隆) (1840~1900) born in Kagoshima prefecture (then known as Satsuma) was a Meiji era politician, who served as second prime minister of Japan (1888~1889).

7) Ōkubo Toshimichi (大久保利通) (1838~1878) was one of those who brought about the Meiji Restoration and thus one of the founders of modern Japan.

The corporate warrior becomes frightened of when his wife will propose divorce and the cases in which the wife requests her husband for a divorce when he reaches retirement age are increasing. No matter how hard the husband works, the wife will endlessly presume upon his good nature.

There are four kinds of wives:

- (1) Good wives and wise mothers⁸⁾. (A man's ideal type.)
- (2) Good wives and foolish mothers. (Lazy wives, who are parasites on their husbands.)
- (3) Bad wives and wise mothers. (Generally regarded as intelligent and beautiful.)
- (4) Bad wives and foolish mothers. (Self-centred and wilful wives.)

(1) A good wife and wise mother is an image of the ideal wife, which is the product of men's imagination and as might be expected of such a general idea, does not in fact exist.

(2) Good wives and foolish mothers. Most wives belong to this category. It appears that they are serving their husbands, but in fact they are foolish wives. There are many cases in which women, who are thought of as good wives by people around them, are exposed as outrageous imposters, when seen at home.

(3) As for bad wives and wise mothers, in cases of women like Socrates' wife⁹⁾ and Sōseki's¹⁰⁾ wife¹¹⁾, their husbands attained greatness. Since the hus-

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- 8) This ideal of a wife should have mastered cooking, sewing and household management and be prepared to devote her life to her husband and to raising their children. This role for women was included in primary school ethics textbooks from 1911 onwards.
 - 9) Xanthippe (5th C ~ 4th C, BC) Despite there having been various portrayals of Socrates' wife, including as a devoted wife and mother, the term Xanthippe has come to mean a shrewish wife.
 - 10) Natsume Sōseki (夏目漱石) (1867~1916) is considered one of the greatest modern novelists.
 - 11) Natsume Kyōko (夏目鏡子) (1877~1963) The evidence for Kyōko being a bad wife seems less than compelling, so it should be borne in mind that the allegation was made at a time when the status of women was much lower.

bands were eminent to a fault, people took satisfaction in merely labeling the women as bad wives. Moreover some husbands are proud of their bad wives, comparing theirs to others asking one another, "In what way is your wife bad?" Husbands are apt to believe that having a bad wife demonstrates their magnanimity. This kind of mistaken thinking leads some husbands to pass off wives as being infinitely bad.

- (4) Bad wives and foolish mothers have become in vogue amongst the idiot newly-rich of Roppongi Hills¹²⁾. Models, TV personalities and former TV announcers marry so-called young city men, whose well-paid jobs do not require real work, and hold hot-pot parties. Nouveau-riche men or wealthy sons of pachinko parlor owners are accompanied by women with expensive tastes. Since the wives are for men to show off like honours bestowed by the emperor, the more foolish they are and the worse their character is, the more they are valued.

Noguchi Hideyo¹³⁾, whose face appears on the ¥1,000 note, made a huge mistake when he married the frivolous Mary Dardis, who he had met in a New York bar. Noguchi was a research assistant at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, earning an annual salary of \$3,000. This is what Mary had set her sights on. Mary was an unbelievable spendthrift and after running through all Noguchi's money, she became hysterical, grabbed him by the collar and threw him to the floor while they were at home. Her manner was so shameless and Noguchi was so utterly unsuccessful in dealing with her that he never allowed her to meet other Japanese residents of New York. Mary did not follow her husband to Africa, where there was

12) Roppongi Hills is a ritzy Tokyo development housing high-price apartments, businesses e.g. foreign investment banks as well as a variety of other facilities, whose residents have included Horie Takafumi (堀江貴文) and Murakami Yoshiaki (村上市彰) both convicted in high-profile cases of securities fraud.

13) Noguchi Hideyo (野口英世) (1876~1928) was a bacteriologist who isolated the syphilis bacterium and was nominated for a Nobel Prize on three occasions.

yellow fever. Noguchi died at the age of fifty-one during his stay in Africa.

The idea that bad wives promote growth in their husbands is nothing but a big lie. A man does not become great because of his bad wife, but in spite of her, he overcomes the concomitant problems and advances in the world through his own effort.

Be that as it may, the present problem for husbands of middle age or older is mending the relationship with your wife. Divorces of young couples involve concrete reasons such as a husband's infidelity or incompatibility of character i.e. sex not being provided. However divorce late in life is the result of the accumulation of various small complaints.

If your wife says to you, "I have borne things up until now to the best of my ability so I have many years' worth of grudges against you," what are you supposed to do?

We husbands have all been making efforts. We do things like giving our wives roses on their birthdays. We take them out to dinner at a pufferfish restaurant. We serve them champagne at home. We take them to stay at inns at hot-spring resorts. We try to prepare a gourmet dinner for them, the ingredients for which we have procured by mail order. There is also a husband who cancelled all his plans in order to stay at home to look after the house, while his wife went out to attend her school reunion.

For every hundred couples there are a hundred different ways of mending the relationship with your wife. Even if you decide on a trip to a hot spring, it should be for no more than three nights. Anything longer than that will end up in a quarrel.

Don't bring your work home or invite your colleagues to your house. There are examples of husbands, who found success by discovering what their wives were gifted at and then singing their praises. As for me, I live half of my life separately from my wife and have given up my role as head of the family. I try to remain outside of my wife's orbit. Even when I have a quarrel with her, I don't reflect

on everything I have or haven't said or done. Having said all that, my wife is my precious partner.

And however did our predecessors mend the relationship with their wives? I have investigated the truth of this thorny problem, which seems like an insignificant matter, however after all I have discovered no answers. As your wife gets older, relations between you and her become increasingly ripe for an explosion like a land mine, so become the best of companions and watch out!

“Husbands’ Terrible Secrets”¹⁴⁾ by Nakano Kyōko¹⁵⁾

Following up on the fearful thing that I found concealed on the back of a masterpiece of Western painting, I published a book entitled “The Frightening Painting.” And then, not as a result of the book, I think, recently I find myself in the awkward position of being told strange tales one after another. All of them concern the terrible secrets of husbands with whom the wife has been living for many years.

This is the case of Mrs A, who had an arranged marriage. Her husband had been born in the provinces. He has been living in Tokyo since he came up to university and is currently working at a major company. I suppose that he could be said to be to an ordinary, middle-aged man, family-oriented and a devoted father by people around him. However he was not on good terms with his younger brother. When asked about his sibling, the younger brother, who had stayed in his hometown and inherited the farm, said contemptuously, “The guy’s got no self-respect.”

There was a funeral in his hometown and Mrs A attended on behalf of her husband, who was busy, and was seated next to the aforementioned younger brother at the dinner at the wake. I don’t know whether it was a result of the alcohol but the younger brother began to tell his story with frequent pauses. “When my

14) Originally published as 「夫たちの怖い秘密」 in the magazine *Bungakukai* in February 2008.

15) Nakano Kyōko (中野京子) is a scholar of German literature.

older brother was a child, he kept a dog, which he beat to death with a stick, when the dog bit a neighbour. He then burned it in the stove used to heat the bathwater. When I cried, he called me a coward. Once when he was swimming underwater in the sea, he found a human skull. He got a kick out of displaying it on his desk and when I expressed a dislike for it, he mocked me, saying, “I’ve never come across such a sissy as you.”

She could not believe that the younger brother was telling her lies. However she could not possibly believe that the older brother, who his sibling had described, and her husband, were one and the same person. On returning home, her husband at times appeared to her as the kind husband he had been up to this point, but at other times, he seemed to be a different person. She is as yet unable to establish the truth of the matter.

The following is the case of Mrs B. She fell in love with an extremely rich man from the provinces, who was an only child. This was a typical example of a woman marrying into money. His father lived on the income from vast land holdings, which had been passed down from generation to generation. He had never worked a single day in his whole life. (This is not meant in a bad sense.) The young couple lived a life of refinement on the money received from his father and their children in turn became adults.

However when they had been married for twenty-five years, his father suddenly died. Up until then the husband’s job had merely consisted of demanding payment of land rent, doing the rounds of several apartment blocks and cleaning the car parks! From now on, this would no longer suffice and it turned out that he would now have to look over documents. Then she was appalled to find out that he couldn’t even read the word “register” written in the Chinese characters, which have been adopted into the Japanese language.

At first she could only think of this as some kind of joke. For example when he saw the singer Gō Hiromi’s surname on the TV screen, although he was able

to read it correctly, he did not know any other way to read the Chinese character apart from “Gō.” Thus he was unable to assign the correct reading to the same character as it appears in the commonly used word “*kokyō*” (hometown) in which the character is pronounced as “*kyō*” not “*gō*.” Since he was able to pick the readings up to some extent, when he was told how to read the Chinese characters, he was not dyslexic. It seemed to be simply the result of many years of insufficient study. Now that she came to think of it, since they had married, she had never once seen him with a book in his hand. He used to leaf through only the pages of magazines, which contained photos. He had never been to see a foreign film. However he read a newspaper every morning. When Mrs B approached her husband to ask what he was reading, and then got him to read news of a crime out loud, she guessed that he had stopped studying in his third year of primary school.

Since his family had connections both to the high school and private university, which he had attended, she guessed that he had got in by the back door. He had the appearance of a rich man, who had had a pampered upbringing, looked good in a loose-fitting cashmere sweater and was the type who could sit silently for hours on end in front of a stove, smoking a pipe. She had liked this about him, but now understood that after all he was not thinking about anything. She resented having been deceived by his taciturnity, which signified no more than the fact that he had nothing to say. However since for the time being it was not a suitable time for her to become angry, she got around the difficulties by making copies of all the documents, writing the Japanese phonetic syllabary beside the Chinese characters in order that her husband could read them, looking up the meanings of the words in a dictionary and explaining them to her husband. In any case all of the office work was bound to come her way and this was a heavy load for a full-time housewife.

Mrs C’s case is even more serious. She and her husband work together as researchers and have been married for seven years. They have no children. They share the housework equally and she believed all along that they were happy

together. One evening as usual the husband came out of his study, but this time he was wearing a flower-print skirt and lipstick. Then he announced, “From now on I want you to treat me as a woman.” Far from being able to answer him back with, “O.K., so shall I be a man from now on?,” she was struck dumb with astonishment seeing how natural he looked, dressed as a woman, obviously the result of many years of practice. She knew immediately that whatever she said would be to no avail. From now on the two of them would live as fellow women at home and outside they would be the same man and wife as before, apparently living their lives as usual.

A couple with no secrets lacks sexiness. I’m sure that it is the mystery surrounding each of the partners, which sustains the love. After long days and nights spent together, at some point, all of a sudden one becomes aware of just how much of a mystery one’s partner is, and I think that sometimes this is the beginning of a new love.

Be that as it may, with these three tragicomedies, when a section of the veil of mystery, which you didn’t even know existed, all of a sudden becomes torn, the world that is visible through the torn section is really alarming. These women are now standing on a tragic stage with the scenery collapsed all around them. However considering that they have become able to talk about their situations, they might be regaining strength as well as a desire to build a new life. All three women still have a long future ahead of them.

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