

Autobiographical story 2

There was no prospect of my finding a bridegroom at my father's house. I had the thought that, perhaps, if I help him out in our men's wear shop in Kobe, a man will occur who will propose to me. In the shop there were mainly western style suits, but just before the entrance to the fitting room, in a small square cabin, partly surrounded by a wooden lattice fence, a few Kimono, Haori and Obi, some of them really fine, in the old style, were hung. Their dark fabrics were quivering in a dim glitter coming from a small window high above. Few young men were interested in those, but they were the ones that appealed to me. Sometimes they came from nearby towns and even from Kyoto or Osaka. My father, in his excessive humility and his confused prattle, bowing time and again, cast a gray mundane shadow upon my sacred aspirations. The customers usually waited for him to wrap everything as fast as possible so they could leave, such a burden was he in his fuss.

Quietly, I tried to spin an oblique communication path of myself; I wanted them to notice how carefully I fold the sleeves, so that no creases would form in the armpits, gently inserting the tiny golden pins to attach them to the shoulders. To watch how I spread the silk paper in a light rustle, choosing a matching color – to a blackish wine red fabric I choose a paper the color of autumn leaves, to a blue one the color of sand. Wrapping while caressing, bowing my head, it feels pleasant to be considered gentle under their gaze, to look at myself as if they are looking at me. When you don't look, you may fancy that you are being looked at. Then you may become very peaceful, someone else guides your movements, responsible for them, you are floating lightly.

I made my best to show myself as an obedient daughter and not the rebel that I was, reluctantly sharp of tongue and against my will. But at the same time I wanted a subtle message to be transmitted, revealing my contempt towards my father. I mean, while being immersed in the delicate scents of new clothes, enjoying the lovely order that my father established in the shop, I simultaneously wished to demonstrate my superiority, my being above him, an awkward fellow, and remain apart.

My father laughed but it was not his own laugh, he lacked the internal strength to develop a laugh of his own, it was a laugh from the catalogue of laughs folded upon his chest. I had this assumed notion that my father's laughter and prattle stood between me and the awaited marriage. I lived then in a world of men alone that consisted of the customers and of my

father's two friends, his neighbours in the business, Mr. Zaburi the pharmacist and Mr. Zaburo the owner of the small Pachinko hall.

The awareness to the fact that there are women who attract the attention of men and others who do not, was creeping at me slowly since my youth, and the discovery that I belong to the second type alarmed my whole being, facing it, I stood astounded. Tender in years people have always complimented me, and I got used to be standing at the center of my world. Now I was chased outside and away of it. Up to the moment when I wished to be loved by a single man, I imagined to be the object of love to them all. My father didn't consider me in terms of marriage whatsoever. For his part I was not supposed to have a life of my own. And generally speaking, the width of his world was the size of a handkerchief, when retiring to bed, he spread a kerchief upon a kerchief and got shrunk.

When there are no customers, my father and his two neighbors, are walking about the back doors of their shops that open to a shared enclosed backyard, alert to the coming of a customer, but also taking pleasure in having a men's chat. From inside the shop I see them gathering to form a threesome, whispering and departing with their hands folded behind their backs, choking with a secret giggle, to have a peek into the dark interiors of their shops. Approaching again to form a triplet of crows in the sun, then departing full of satisfaction in a gesture of victory. From here, all this looks like a kind of a virile dance, a bit crude. It seems that Mr. Zaburo shows them another version of Fukutomi's scroll that he had acquired to his rich collection, and they are ready to get excited time and again from the illustrated story of Hidetake who gathered a big fortune while dancing at nobles' courts to the oboe sounds of his own farts. The three of them are dressed in suits and ties from our shop and their dark shoes glitter shinningly.

Merely owning a little shop, even then they plot together as if they were the leaders of the Empire. While fulfilling their everyday duties they are hovering above, not immersing themselves, or identifying with those tasks as women do. As if each of their acts has a deviate meaning, which is there only for them to understand, being a part of the universal manly weave of thought. Is this what you call Politics, this airy stew that hovers in their warm breath? Rare are the men who would say like Fujiwara-no-Teika: "My ears are filled with news of uprisings and killings...I care nothing about such matters". On the contrary, rumors are working tools for them, distant wars their daily bread.

The special thing about Mr. Zaburo's slot machines is their being built like models of wars – battles close nearby as well as distant in time and space. Thus he succeeds to unite for his customers both aspirations of most men – fighting and money making. That's why so many of them sneak into Mr. Zaburo's hall, to cling to the Pachinko machines to the thunderous sound of military marches.

Sometimes on my father's errand, I enter Mr. Zaburi's pharmacy. I'm embarrassed by his excessive kindness. His wife is much younger than him and is considered a beauty, and he is as kind as one who owns a treasure. His happiness shines through the brown glass jars filled with colored liquids penetrated by sunlight, dazzling my eyes.

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From the street one should go three steps down to our shop, all of it decked with wood. Up to the waist the walls are covered with built-in chests of drawers. In the smaller ones, ties, silk and muslin shawls, white, red and tartan handkerchiefs, underwear, socks, woolen scarves, leather gloves, are all arranged in exemplary order. In blue velvet lining cufflinks and tiepins are fixed. In deeper chests one might find cotton, linen and silk shirts, knitwear, winter underwear, pajamas and nightgowns and tartan coat linings. Above the chests the suits are hung, arranged according to their countries of origin - English, French, Italian and local. Each suit is put in a thin nylon cover on which the shop's trademark is printed like a pattern. When a customer chooses a suit, my father takes it down with a hook attached to a long stick, and sometimes puts it on the tailor's dummy that stands erect by the far end of the sales counter.

As early as the age of eight or nine, in the afternoons, I used to leave behind our sleepy home and run away to the, for me incomprehensible, world of men in the shop. My father let me play with the wooden stamps, swinging on a revolving stand, to dip them in a flat metal box, its cushion suffused with purple ink and make prints upon cardboard sheets left behind from wrappings of shirts already sold. He didn't even hold back his scissors collection that was a kind of a secret mania of his - from ancient ones in the shape of a stork's beak to modern ones made of isosceles triangles. Fabric rims cut from too long trousers or sleeves I'd put like a bandanna around my head while twisting my face in front of the mirror. I used to measure my body and its different organs – arms, fingers, legs, feet and waist – with the measuring tapes made in pairs of colors, yellow and white, green and red, orange and brown. I loved rubbing my nose, incidentally, at the hems of the hanging suits and

breathing in the smells of different kinds of wool coming from distant countries, the smell of silk from China, linen and cotton, as well as peeping occasionally into drawers which I would open stealthily.

My father seemed to ignore my presence, though as five o'clock was approaching he never forgot to thrust a coin into my hand for me to buy a red bean sweet that I liked to lick. Nor did the customers pay attention to the thin-legged girl with her brush-like hair sneaking around in between the men's suits. I choose to play at the feet of the tailor's dummy, on whose constant presence and faithful gaze, which I added in my imagination to his absent head, I could rely. Me too, only with a child's veiled eyes it was that I noticed them, in absence of mind, but still a few images, those that were recurring time and again, are kept with me – the way they pull out their shirt sleeves from the openings of their jacket sleeves while tilting their head back, their performing a small leap while zipping up their trousers, or stroking their hair with the base of their palms while turning their head in a semi-profile and examining themselves in the mirror, the moving of their jaw back and forth while fastening a tie.

For playing a role of a headmaster in a show we performed at school, my father taught me the art of tying a necktie. And that's how you do it: you hang the tie from your nape, you hold the narrow edge in your left hand, it shouldn't be too long, and then with circular movements, and the skilled ones do it with a grouchy momentum, you coil it twice around the wider edge and insert it from your neck outward into the loop that was formed; then you pull the wider edge, that conceals the narrow one, and the loop, simultaneously, until the tie is fastened around your neck.

Those days I was still dreaming of growing up to be one of the Takarazuka revue girls, the bold and charming virgins, playing men's roles. In our family occasionally someone made a remark about my being fit for it, but nobody took it seriously and nothing was done about it. Sometimes the theatre's directors were visiting our shop to order extra small men's suits for their young actresses.

As time passed, it was expected of me to help with easy jobs like ironing a sleeve that got crumpled; I would stretch it on the small upholstered ironing board mounted on a bigger one, spread a piece of thin wet cotton upon it, while a white vapor cloud, suffused with the typical smell, would rise with a hiss from the iron's touch, leaving its shape imprinted as a dry patch. Or for sewing a loose button, I would thread a long thread folded in two in the eye of a needle, pull it in order to get an

especially thick thread whose edge I would then tie between my thumb and index finger. Two stitches in the tiny holes are enough, but you should fasten them by turning the thread around underneath the button, and stick the needle once again in the fabric through a loop to make a knot. Later on I would be of assistance in preparing the bills. Mine was a head filled with numbers. When still a child, while playing, I used to shout at my father the total sums of his calculations, as he, with much effort, was scribbling numbers on paper notes, making mistakes time and again. Though in the beginning he pretended to be deaf, a day arrived when he came to expect the sum total to be emitted from my mouth, deep in his heart bearing a grudge against me for it.

When I grew up my father insinuated that I should conceal myself in the process of choosing, trying on and making decisions, lest I would embarrass the male customers in my presence. And so as time passed, under a silent agreement, the small Kimono room has become a hiding place for me, and a corner in the shop under my responsibility. There, on a black lacquer box with a painting of flying wild geese, with a five line poem by Murasaki Shikibu

That the first wild geese
 Raise sad voices as they wing
 Through travel skies -
 Might it be through friendship
 With the one for whom I yearn?

I used to pass my time in reading and daydreaming, hidden among the manly silk dresses, suspended and caressing my cheeks. The dark suits standing aligned in a long straight line in the other room, some of which I could see from my corner, seemed to me like a group of suitors waiting in a queue in front of my room to have a look at me. I reject them all, of course, shaking my hair contemptuously. I'm waiting for Genji, keeping the most beautiful Kimono for him, black with a pattern of blue leaves. In the same time I would like to wear it myself, be like Ariake who was raised as a man and was the object of desire for men and women alike, a man who carried in his belly the emperor's son. For a moment I'm as delicate as Lady Murasaki, tilting my head, so my hair would smoothly fall on my face, the other moment I imagine myself as a man in a fine Italian suit leaping on his horse, by way of courtship, after Genji mounted on a gazelle.

The small room makes me return to an old fantasy of mine inspired by the children's magazine "Ko-Otoko" that recommended to its young

readers to organize in small groups and build a hut or a shack or a tiny house on a tree for children alone, a place to paint and draw and fold papers, make puppets from crossed sticks and chains of pine needles, dry flowers between newspaper pages, write compositions and read about strange families from different places.

The book that lays open on my knees starts with the frank and poignant words: "Mine was a life of much shame." These I wish to throw at my father, that's how the story of his life should have begun, but he stayed innocent, knows nothing, nothing at all. Instead, the shame landed on my head like a frog onto an ancient pond. I'm neither pretty nor good and humble, jumping ahead when not asked. A devil twits from inside me, I have an opinion about any subject, and I'm not of the restrained type. While sitting alone I'm delicate but in the presence of others the devil inside me is awakening, emitting those unwelcome sums of numbers. From time to time Mr. Zaburo speaking to my father would hint at a possible *Miai* for me, but my father pretends not to understand and the whole thing is forgotten. I don't feel sorry about it, it is clear to me that in such a matchmaking meeting I could not avoid voicing my brusque, non-conventional opinions and would laugh a lot, not in my favor, my teeth are crooked, and the whole business would end up in a scandal.

The sun stands now in the high window above me, whitens my face, my clothes. The rustle of the fire carriages carrying my bridesmaids, is heard. Standing erect, I'm ready to be taken.

Translated from Hebrew by the author.