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The Eggplant Legacy

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The Eggplant Legacy

I have been a rice farmer all my life in this village in the mountains of Okayama. Only four exciting things have happened to me in my sixty-two years of hard work and modest return. Strange to say they are all somehow related, though the third and the fourth happened years and years after the first and the second.

The first was the day in the year of Showa 19, during the Pacific War, when we eight friends, four boys and four girls, sat on the edge of a rice field overlooking the valley and watched the distant air battle above Okayama. It was, I guess, sometime in the spring. We were not supposed to be there, but hiding in the shelter next to our little school house. We eight had escaped and though we were frightened when the bombs exploded in Okayama City or an airplane exploded, we were happy to be there because of the sheer excitement. And what a sight to see! The bombs fell in long columns and went off with quick flashes and much smoke. A moment later we could hear their noise like a series of pop-pop-pops. The people bombing us were the Americans in B-29 bombers. Our army was shooting at them from the ground and filling the sky with little black clouds. Our air force was attacking them in Mitsubishi "Zero" fighters. Whenever a bomber was hit, a long black trail of smoke would come out of it and it would slowly turn over and over as it went down in a graceful spiral. Sometimes, if you squinted and looked hard, you might see little parachutes coming out of the falling B-29. But when one of our fighters was hit it just exploded and there'd be nothing left of it.

We were absolutely insensitive to the death and suffering we were witnessing. This was not because we were so young but because we were always hungry and because our clothes were rags and because each of us had lost family members in battle. My own father had died early in the Great Pacific War and my two elder brothers went missing in action. They never came back.

The second most exciting thing happened some time after the bombing of Okayama. It was when one of us, our leader, called the other seven into the ancient bamboo forest next to our village. It was summer then and the cicadas were screaming in the leaves of the giant bamboos. We went deep, deep into the forest where no one from the village would go because it was so dark and people said that a ghost, a *yurei*, with a flaming head haunted there. But somehow we children knew better. We weren't at all scared; to this day I have no fears of walking through a cemetery at night. We walked to where there was a small clearing, the remnants of an old and tiny rice paddy. Our leader ordered us to sit on the old rice paddy's bank and then he said he would show us something secret – something forbidden – but we must promise to never tell anyone, not even our mothers.

Though the war is long over and he is dead, I cannot bring myself to tell you his name. I'll call him "Eggplant" because that was what I had privately nicknamed him as a child. I never told a soul, but years later, after his death, I learned the *gaijin* teachers at his university had named him "Mr. Eggplant!" Imagine that! He did have a funny long misshapen face that makes you think of an eggplant. Maybe that is why he was so often in bad temper.

Anyway, Eggplant made us promise not to tell and we promised and then from inside his shirt he removed something wrapped in an old scarf. We all crowded around him as he carefully unwrapped his secret. It was a little book with strange writing all over it. We all immediately knew it was an enemy book. Eggplant said it was an English book – a collection of children's songs – and that he was going to teach us to read it!

It was forbidden to study English in those days; doing so carried the death penalty. Something like a bolt of lightning passed through my emaciated, half-starved body. It was not the fear of death but the excitement of being this close to another existence, a world beyond the village. To tell the truth, this is what I felt when we sat mutely watching the Americans bomb Okayama.

Everyone survived on roots and grass in those days. But when the local policemen's backs were turned, we villagers would steal the ripe shoots from around the edges of the bamboo forest. (It belonged to a very rich man in the valley, which is why it was never cut down for fuel by the authorities.) Going into the forest unnoticed was not easy, even if we could escape our many chores. We had to recite the English songs in hushed tones, no louder than the screaming cicadas, though our high voices somehow made us

sound louder than we really were. When he thought we were too loud, Eggplant would beat us on the head or shoulders with a bamboo stick. He also beat us if we made mistakes. I often left the forest with lumps on my head and wanting to cry. So did the others. But we eagerly returned when Eggplant gave our secret sign.

We studied the forbidden book with Eggplant all summer. It was written in both *romaji* and *katakana* and was accompanied by simple musical scores. It also had small pictures. I liked “Mary Had a Little Lamb” probably because of the picture showing a little girl in a clean white dress and wearing a big ribbon in her hair being followed by a fat white lamb. It was such a peaceful picture; I imagined Mary had more than enough to eat so that she did not need to kill the lamb for food.

It was only after the war that we dared ask Eggplant where he’d found the forbidden book. It was when he was about to start studying at the high school down in the valley and we seven were having a party for him. We had no high school up here in the mountains and most folks stopped their education early.

“What book?,” he said severely.

He meant, of course, don’t ask again.

So we never asked him again until the afternoon on the day he died.

We were all so old and bent, we farmers, and only three old ladies and I were still living by then. Eggplant had come to the village unexpectedly on a cold day in November. Oh, he was a famous professor at a university by then. We saw him for lunch and we talked of old times and we asked him about the book. He said he had forgotten about it; he had forgotten about how he had taught us.

“Well,” I said, “I certainly haven’t forgotten ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ and I sang it for him. His ninety-year-old mother and his sister, who was fifty-nine then, were with us and they hadn’t forgotten how they had learned that story years and years after the war. But Eggplant said he could not remember and so we ate the excellent sweets his mother brought us and then we went back to work. And there was work! An ice storm was coming.

That night his mother had a heart seizure and his sister drove her to the prefectural hospital in the valley. She told me later she was more worried about leaving her brother alone than about their mother’s heart trouble. When her car wouldn’t start she took a taxi home and, poor, poor woman, she found her brother dead.

That is not the third most exciting thing that has happened to

me. In this tiny isolated village of ours there are mostly old people; the young get away to the cities and soft lives as fast as they can. With mostly just old people around, someone suddenly dying is so common that we don't think so much of it. It is like the rain in the rainy season, the snow in winter. So when he died his sister knew immediately which number to call. By the time the ambulance arrived all the neighbors were there.

Eggplant had died rushing out of the house in his robe and bedclothes. Some folks say they had heard him crying, "Taxi!" He had fallen face-forward into the snow. A neighbor had already covered him with a blanket by the time I got there, but I could see his legs and robe and the pajama bottoms. He was also wearing his house slippers. Maybe I should not be mentioning this as it is shameful. Everyone saw the slippers and then people gossiped about Eggplant possibly being mad.

Then a rumor went around that he was very mad and that he had been causing trouble in the university and that he had been tricked into going home to our village so the university could be rid of him. Our village is always full of rumors and gossip. I don't really know how this one got started.

But let me tell you about the third exciting thing that happened to me.

You see, Eggplant's sister called his wife. I'm not quite sure what they said to each other, but very late that night she came to me and apologized for disturbing me so late – as if I could sleep.

"The widow said she was not coming to the village or to Okayama," Eggplant's sister said.

"That's unusual."

"Unheard of," Eggplant's sister said sharply; then she softened her voice. "She could barely make sense on the telephone. What I understand is that she did not want a Buddhist funeral but that I could have a Buddhist ceremony with the body if we wanted to. She will have a secular wake and funeral. She cannot bear to see my brother's body so she wants me to cremate him and have the ashes brought to her immediately. She is going to delay announcing his death by one day."

"It sounds difficult," I said.

"She's a difficult person. She grew up around here and she refuses to set foot in Okayama," Eggplant's sister said. "Anyway, the ambulance took my brother down to the morgue in the valley. There are papers to sign. Then I'll have to find some way to arrange a service, cremate him and take him to Kobe."

"My cousin is a Buddhist priest in the valley," I said.

"I know," she said.

"I'll call him now. It's late, but this is an emergency. I'm sure he can arrange everything for tomorrow down there."

"I'm grateful," she said and bowed deeply to me.

"My cousin owes me a favor from long ago," I said. "He'll be happy to do this for me."

She did not say she knew it but I knew she did. The whole village knew my cousin owed me a favor.

So early that morning Eggplant's sister and we old English students caught the first bus down into the valley and that afternoon we had a service for Eggplant's departed soul. His mother did not come, of course, because no one told her he had died as they were afraid the shock would kill her. Then he was cremated. My cousin had arranged that.

Eggplant's sister needed to go to the wake in Kobe the next day because she had Eggplant's ashes.

When we returned to the village, she said to me, "I would feel so much better if you would come with me. I'll pay your way of course."

"I'll come," I said. "But I always pay my way." And I asked: "How shall we get there?"

"By Shinkansen," she said. "Okayama and Kobe are just a breath away these days."

A thrill, like electricity, passed through me because I had never dreamed I would ride on a bullet train.

The next morning I put on my black suit, took some of the money I always keep hidden in the futon closet, and then I met Eggplant's sister at her house. It was 7:30. But we could not get ready to go until almost nine because she was in the kitchen on the telephone with the widow. I waited in the living room and tried not to listen.

"Forgive this delay," she said coming out and bowing hastily. Then she went down the hall to Eggplant's old room and returned carrying a box covered with a silky purple cloth. Inside, I knew, were Eggplant's ashes.

A neighbor drove us to the local train stop just in time to catch the little local train that only comes to us four times a day. Our other train connections were not good. By the time we got to the Okayama station it was already 3:30 P.M.

"Can we make it?" I asked as offhandedly as I could. I did not think it would look good if I seemed worried.

"Yes," she answered calmly.

She knew where the ticket machines were and she bought two tickets.

I managed to scratch a ten-thousand-yen note from my wallet when we were on the platform waiting for the train.

"Put it away: I said I'd pay for our trip," she said.

It was no good to argue. I figured I'd do something to make up for this.

I had seen *Shinkansen* trains on my color tv; but to hear them, to actually feel the air as they rushed past, to actually step into one of those things that looks like a rocket ship more than a train – that was another matter entirely. The *Shinkansen* ride was the third most exciting thing that happened in my life. It was more exciting than actually going to Kobe, which I had never seen.

As we sat in our seats and watched Okayama vanish behind us I asked: "How many times have you been on the *Shinkansen*?"

"This is the first time," she said.

"But you did it all so well, getting the tickets and all. I didn't know what was going on."

"Comes from working with farm machinery, I suppose," she said.

We were suddenly passing by the ocean and it occurred to me that I did not know if I had ever seen the ocean before. I certainly had no recollection of having seen it. It seemed strange, me living on an island. From television I surely knew what it looked like. But no – no I had never seen it, I realized.

"Have you been to Kobe before?" I asked.

"Twice," she answered. "Both times after my brother's children were born."

"I suppose it's changed some," I said.

"A great deal," she said. "I can find the way to my brother's house if that's worrying you. I checked everything before we left."

A girl pushing a cart with drinks and food came down the aisle.

"Beer? Some dried squid?" Eggplant's sister said. "I'm having some."

"All right," I said. "But I'm treating."

"Thank you," she said. "You were always the gentleman of my brother's group."

I drank and I remembered the bamboo forest and we children reciting our forbidden ABCs in hushed voices.

Then I remembered the picture in Eggplant's book of the blonde girl with pink cheeks and a white dress on this green hill in our

enemy's land. Japan was being bombed and we were starving and there she was – she was happy as could be with her little lamb. She had enough food so she could make the lamb a pet rather than eat it.

As a starving child eating only roots and grass and things I don't want to talk about or even remember, I often daydreamed of taking Mary's little lamb into the bamboo forest and killing it and then roasting it over a fire. As a rice farmer I never killed any animal bigger than the occasional mouse who tried to steal my rice. After the war farmers could get some money from the government for growing rice. I could eat well, but I had other hungers, so to speak, which I could never satisfy and which I never expressed to anyone.

I suppose all my life I wanted to meet Mary – I wanted to escape the village the way Eggplant had done. The first time I ever spoke to a *gaijin* was when Mr. Mike from Greenpeace came to our village to help us organize a protest against the company that was going to turn our mountain into a tourist resort. We were fighting the company tooth and nail when Eggplant came up and died on us.

When we arrived at Shin-Kobe station it was already getting dark. I volunteered to carry Eggplant for a while. His sister handed me the box.

"We'll take turns," she said. "We'll have to walk a little to the bus."

Outside I saw rows of taxis waiting to pick up *Shinkansen* passengers and, never having taken a taxi before, I must have looked at them with my mouth open, a bad habit my late wife often scolded me for. I guess Eggplant's sister saw it.

"We are not taking any taxis," she said. "Kobe taxi drivers cheat people from the countryside. They are notorious."

I didn't agree because my wife's favorite nephew used to drive a taxi in Kobe. But I didn't argue.

She took a small notebook from her old black cloth purse, opened it and read out the number of the bus we had to take.

"If my brother becomes too heavy for you, tell me," she said.

I had carried my mother, my wife, and my two sisters in their urns. It was nothing new to me and I said I was fine, adding that she needed both hands free to read her directions.

We changed buses until we got to a place on the side of Mount Rokko in Okamoto Ward. It was an area with big houses and high walls and lots of trees.

Before I realized my mouth was open and closed it, Eggplant's sister said, "My brother was far from rich. They bought the house here long before the land prices went up."

It had been dark for some time and I knew we were late. We had tried to watch our time but we were slow, waiting for buses, changing buses. A thought passed through my mind that there might be no one there when we got to Eggplant's house.

"We're late," Eggplant's sister said. "But we have done our best for the devoted widow. Is he getting heavy yet?"

"I am amazed how light this is," I said. "It makes one think about life."

"We are mostly water and air," she said. "After they finish burning us, there's not much left. Here let me take him, please. He's my brother and I'd better be the one to deliver him. You hold the map and give directions."

"We walk past the two-story house with the blue tile roof --"

She was leading. She had memorized everything.

My thoughts were on my departed teacher as a boy with the misshapen face that made him look like an eggplant. I thought of him hitting and hitting me about the shoulders with the bamboo stick because of some mistake I made. Then I thought of him as a professor, and then as the old sad man I had seen the day he died. No matter how many times I have to carry someone's remains, I always start wondering if the ashes really are the person I knew. Of course they are, there's no mystery about that. They cremate you down in the valley and then put what's left in an urn. But you know, it never seems real. And then I start wondering if I really knew that person after all. And then I think about how short life really is and how much of it we waste when we should be appreciating every moment with each other. At that point I usually reach for a nice bottle of sake and that usually puts all those philosophical questions into the proper order of things.

"That's it up the street," Eggplant's sister said. "But wait a moment. There's something I have to explain." She stood in front of me holding the box with Eggplant against her chest. "My brother was a professor and so all we are going to see in there are these professors. He didn't know anyone who wasn't a professor. Now listen. Professors look down on country people. I might as well say it directly. They say we're uneducated and ignorant and stupid. That's how they see us. They think they are better than anybody. So if someone says something offensive don't take it personally. That's just how professors are. And another thing. The widow

is a scholar in her own right, though she never went to university. She and I are not really friends. She kept a distance from me and my late husband. She never visited our farm when we lived in the valley. In all these years, if you ever saw her in the village you will have forgotten it; my brother usually came alone. She's as much of the countryside as you and I but she doesn't like to be reminded. I just have to say this. You are my friend and you are my guest and I'll look after you. If those professors get offensive we'll just leave."

"You don't have to worry about me," I said. "I've met all sorts of folks in my time."

"I just had to warn you. I've met some of his English department colleagues once. They can be difficult."

"Plenty of difficult people in this world," I said. "I've met my share."

"I know you have. Shall we go?"

The house was old, wooden, and rather small, much like a house in the country. It was different from all the other big houses around it.

There were people still there when we walked in, but if there had been any formalities they were over and everyone was drinking in the living room. It was Eggplant's wife who greeted us at the door. She was drunk. She was no doubt pretty in her youth, I thought. She spoke with this soft voice that would have probably sounded pleasant were she sober: "Ah, the guest of honor has arrived. *Mr. Eggplant*," she said in English. Because of our English lessons with Eggplant, I understood her.

Eggplant's sister bowed deeply to the widow and muttered the condolences that you are supposed to mutter in these circumstances.

"You have to drink," she said. "I will give you something to drink. Follow me!"

She wobbled into the kitchen. We exchanged looks and followed, Eggplant's sister still holding the box with the urn with Eggplant's ashes.

At the kitchen table sat an old man whose hair and face were so white that he startled me. This was her brother, also the new English department head. He too was drunk. His seemed a dark melancholy drunkenness which, I'm happy to say, I have never known. He spoke to us in an old fashioned formal Japanese as I had not heard in years and years. I detected the country accent underneath it.

We all bowed to each other.

Abruptly the widow said: "I'd better take the guest of honor out of the box and put him on the family altar."

I felt like Eggplant's sister did not want to let go of the box.

We were introduced to all the professors of the English department. They bowed to us and seemed cordial enough. But then they ignored us. They were too busy talking to each other about I don't know what. Something about promotions. They weren't talking about poor Eggplant. They did not even seem to care that his ashes were now on the altar next to his photograph.

I looked at the photograph of my childhood friend and English teacher. His long twisted face seemed to look back at me, scolding. I felt for a moment that he was trying to speak to me with those severe thin lips of his. And then I thought of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and how we children used to sing it softly together in the bamboo forest, our little children's voices sometimes almost washed away by the screaming cicadas around us that summer in the war.

I felt a tug at my sleeve. It was the widow. She whispered, "Come into the kitchen with me. There is some of *his* favorite sake I want you to try."

I glanced at my traveling companion. She was sitting on her knees by the altar and talking to her brother-in-law.

"Come," Eggplant's widow whispered. I followed her.

"It's sake that a student's parent gave to him last year," she said as she poured this very expensive stuff from a pale blue porcelain bottle into a wooden cup. "The student was not going to graduate. She was very lazy. But her parents were rich. They bribed my husband and he saw to it that all her professors passed her."

I mumbled my thanks for the sake, for I did not know how to respond to what she said.

"You were one of the children to whom he taught those English songs during the war, weren't you?" she said. As she said this she poured herself some of the same sake.

"Yes. I was," I said.

"He often spoke of your little group," she said.

"I thought he had forgotten all about it. He said so – " I paused. "He said it the last time we saw him."

"The night he died. The night he ran into the snowy night hailing a taxi in the village as he would have in Kobe." She drank. "Those people, those so-called English teachers, tricked him into going to the village. I mean they tricked his mother into believing he was causing trouble at the university and asked her to request

that he come to the village." She paused. "Those people are monsters, but they were right. He was quite irrational the last year of his life, I'm afraid. He was raising havoc. I knew it. I knew it because he was always justifying himself to me and I saw he was making no sense."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," I said.

"He spoke of your group at odd moments in his last year. Sometimes he would be very drunk and he would get into these crying fits. He was a successful university professor but he saw himself as a failure."

"No, no!" I protested.

"I'm afraid he was," she said. "I wrote all his academic papers. Somewhere his English failed him. He could learn no more. I think it was because he was not a good thinker in Japanese. Somewhere in his twenties his wiring went wrong. Maybe it was over-study. I don't know. I am the one who knew English. Languages come easily to me. I would have gone to university and studied abroad, if only my family had money. If only they had money – My father was a poor local school teacher. But he had friends on the Board of Education and they introduced me to my late husband, who was finishing graduate school. I learned that he was in fact doing poorly. So I began to write his papers for him. I began to study English at night school and soon I was able to comprehend more than he. I finished his M.A. for him. His advisor disliked him and so he could not start working in a good university in Kansai. We had to go to Kyushu. I continued writing his papers. He was drinking heavily. We finally got back to Kansai. Thanks to me he got a prefectural scholarship to study at Harvard University. We lived in Boston. He didn't study a thing. He just drank. I took care of him. I am the one who knew English. He did not. Are you shocked?"

"Yes I am," I said. I remembered to close my mouth and keep it closed.

"You are a man of the countryside. That is why you speak so honestly," she said. "But actually you haven't said much. Tell me, which of the songs that my husband taught you did you like best?"

"Mary Had a Little Lamb."

She threw her head back and laughed. It reminded me of the way vulgar women on tv behaved. I wanted to leave. I did not like talking to a drunk woman.

"You are looking away from me," she said. "I am embarrassing you."

"Oh no," I said. "I am sorry."

"I am Mary," she said. "He was my little lamb. Wherever I chose to go he followed me. I know he was a terror when he was department head. The foreign teachers hated him. They are the ones who gave him the nickname 'Mr. Eggplant.' But it was natural that they should hate him. He hated them. He used to shout at them, 'Speak Japanese! This is Japan.' He got some of them fired. Finally his mental state got to be very bad. But he was always my little lamb."

I nearly said that I had secretly nicknamed him "Eggplant" but stopped myself.

"Do you understand about universities?" she asked me.

I shook my head.

"They are stupid," she said. "Those pompous idiots in the other room – I know English better than any one of those fools. Of course I cannot teach even a little university class. So all these years I've suffered in silence. Writing my stupid husband's papers. And I suffered sexual frustration with that man. He thought a penis was only to pee with."

I wanted to leave but the woman put her hand on my wrist and poured me more sake.

"I should not be hearing this," I said.

"Forgive me. I have to tell my tale to an honest man or go mad with grief. Please listen to me."

"All right," I said. I sipped just enough sake to be polite. But I would drink no more.

"I am an immoral woman," she said. "First I foisted an absolute imbecile onto innocent students. Then I had affairs. Oh, please listen, shocking as this is. Mr. Eggplant's daughter was by the mailman. He is now an old man and he still brings our mail. He is still a friend; a self-educated man, unappreciated, a *Jude the Obscure*. Oh, excuse me."

"I saw the movie on tv," I said. "Then I read the novel in Japanese. I wish I could read Thomas Hardy in English."

"Mr. Eggplant wished he could too," she said. "My firstborn was the product of a rape. He should have been born retarded, I think. Children of incest usually are. But actually the department chairman is my half brother."

I wanted to run away, but I sat still. I sat still and said nothing and kept my mouth closed.

"Forgive me for shocking you," she said. "I want you to know there is a happy ending. My beautiful son is a professor in Amer-

ica. He is on his way here now. My daughter has divorced her husband, my late husband's colleague, and is living with a foreigner. She was here earlier. But she couldn't stand those stupid English department people."

"Is there anything I might do for you in this painful time?" I said.

"You have. Thank you for listening. Please, have some more sake."

"I think I have already had more than enough," I said.

"I am not going to weep," she said.

"I did not think you were," I said.

Her brother, the department head, came in. I wanted to turn my face away from him. But I knew if I did I would give away that I knew his secret. I stood and bowed to him.

He silently returned my bow. He said to his sister, "I wish to talk to you." He had forgotten himself and spoken in Okayama dialect.

"Thank you for the sake," I said.

I got up and left the kitchen. Yet my ears could not leave. They strained to hear a trace of even a muttered conversation. But all I could catch was silence. Only silence. And then Eggplant's sister came up to me and said we had to go.

We did not speak as we walked down to the bus stop. We said nothing on the way to the station. Only on the *Shinkansen* did Eggplant's sister say, "Thank you for coming."

I suddenly felt as if I had forgotten something. But I realized I had only thought of Eggplant's urn.

"It was difficult for you," I said.

"Professors," she said and slowly shook her head.

They had been decent enough to me so I did not reply.

We said no more to each other. As it turned out, we could catch the last local train back. We called our neighbor and he gave us a lift.

All this happened in November. In January there was the terrible earthquake in Kobe. A day later Eggplant's sister came to my door and told me that Eggplant's house had gone down and his widow was buried under it.

We took the *Shinkansen* again. This time we could only get to Akashi because Kobe was all broken down. So all I saw of the earthquake was a lot of blue vinyl on roofs where tiles had fallen down and a few houses that had collapsed. Akashi is where the daughter lived. At the funeral I also met the son, the professor

who taught in America. The foreigner lover of the daughter was also a professor, but at a university in Kobe. A foreigner at a Japanese university, a Japanese at a foreign university. Under other circumstances it would have seemed amusing to me. Knowing what I knew, I couldn't look at those two nice young people. If I looked at them I knew I'd start speculating about their facial features. And that might lead to more problems. I bowed a lot and kept my face down, acting like more of a bumpkin than I think I am.

Eggplant's sister had arranged everything with her brother-in-law. But that department head wasn't there. If he had given an excuse she never told me what it was.

On the *Shinkansen* back, she asked me what I and the late widow had discussed in the kitchen.

"Her husband's career. The children," I answered.

She nodded.

Did she know what I knew and did she think I knew? I dreaded that there would be a long silence between us.

"It was the first time for me to meet the children in so many years," she said. "I liked them both. I like the foreigner. Though I was surprised he was so much older than she. But there are stranger things I suppose."

"I suppose," I said.

Then we were silent again. Then both of us pretended to sleep.

All that was part of the fourth most exciting thing to have happened to me.

We lost our fight against that company that was going to turn our mountain into a resort. But then we thought we won too. The company decided that our village with our irregular little rice paddies was picturesque. We were all going to be subsidized! The company was going to pay us to put thatched roofs on our houses – which was strange as the government paid us to put on tin roofs because thatch is a fire hazard. We would do our farming as usual but the company would buy our rice for more than we had ever gotten and sell it in their restaurants as exotic local rice. Funny thing is that because of the rains up here, the taste of our rice had always been officially downgraded. We were also to get uniforms that we would wear when we had our festivals. And the company was going to help us with our festivals, which had been dying out because of all the young people leaving our village.

There was only one catch. They would cut down our ancient bamboo forest, the forest where Eggplant taught us English and where I learned "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

I think a lot about Eggplant these days. I think about the man I knew all my life, from when we were little boys to when we were old men. I think about what his late wife said to me.

One night in August I felt so confused that I drank my sake until I was good and drunk. Usually this makes me feel better, but I only felt worse. I went out, thinking to go to Eggplant's sister's house, but my feet took me off to what was once our beautiful bamboo forest.

A full moon was out. I could now see the distant lights of Okayama from the spot I had known all my life as the darkest part of the forest. I was drunk, so very drunk that I tripped over the bleeding stumps of what were once the tall bamboo trees I'd known all my life like old friends. The cicadas were still there screaming their lives out. I was drunk, and a drunk man is free to do as he wishes and is forgiven everything. I sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and danced. Finally I fell over a stump and I was so tired that I didn't get up. I lay on my back and looked at the stars, the beautiful stars no company could take away from us, and I sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb" until I fell asleep. I dreamed of the ghost, the *yurei*, with the flaming head who was said to haunt this spot. Its face was twisted like old Eggplant's and it was weeping tears of flame that made little puffs of smoke when they hit the ground. It was the best dream I ever had; I awoke laughing.

In the early morning I walked home through the tepid mountain mists and got into my own bed before a single light had come on in the village. I had a sore head and a sore back, but somehow all that confusion that had troubled me had gone away.

That darned company went bankrupt and we never got our thatched roofs and our uniforms. Our rice is still downgraded and our festivals are more dull than I had ever known them to be. Every day Eggplant and his wife haunt me like ghosts. Getting rid of them from my mind is like flinging stones at the crows who peck at your grain and mock you from the trees above.

Once I was drinking with Eggplant's sister and his old, old mother who had recovered from her heart seizure and was smoking Camel cigarettes and drinking with us as if she had never been sick. There was this moment when the three of us looked at each other and I knew I would confess to knowing what I sensed we knew about Eggplant if someone did not break the silence.

I guess for the first time in my life it was I who broke the silence. I said, "You know what I think. I think there is no truth in the

world but only people's voices. I think those voices are like those airplanes we saw fighting when we were children. Sometimes an American plane would shoot down a Japanese plane and sometimes a Japanese plane would shoot down an American plane. But who was the real winner? Who really knows the truth?"

"The Americans won," Eggplant's sister reminded me.

"I'm drunk and not responsible for what I say," I said.

"You should drink more," Eggplant's mother said. "You should take up smoking too."

She had been treating me like a son since Eggplant's death. I liked it.

The company went bankrupt and it left us with only our ancient bamboo forest cut down. One April morning I walked through our old forest and beheld the young bamboo shoots coming out. There were so many of them that I had no qualms about digging up one with my spade for supper. Some day the forest will be as it once was. But I'll be long gone and no one will remember what I told you here.