



ASAKUSA PARK

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA

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THE SAKE BUG

This heat had not been seen in recent years. Wherever you looked, the roof tiles of the houses fixed by mud dully reflected the sunlight like lead. In this situation, some thought the baby chicks and eggs would die from the steam in a swallow's nest beneath the tiles. And in the fields, whether hemp or millet, all heads drooped from the steam rising from the ground. There's nothing that had not withered, even the still green plants. Were the skies visible above the fields affected by the muggy heat at that time? The atmosphere near the Earth, although clear, was murky and overcast. What resembled peaks of clouds floated in scattered lumps, like rice cakes baked in an earthenware pan. This story of *The Sake Bug* begins with three men going out to a threshing floor under the scorching sun.

Mysteriously, one of these men was naked and lying face up on the ground. And for some reason, a thin rope wrapped around his hands and feet. The man himself didn't appear to be suffering from an illness. This man was short, had a good complexion, gave off the impression of clumsiness, and was fat like a pig. A handy unglazed

bottle was placed near the man's head. However, he didn't know what was inside.

Another man wore a yellow priest's robe and small bronze rings in his ears. At a glance, he was a curious, old Buddhist monk shaped like an elephant. Judging from his extraordinarily dark skin tone, curly hair, and beard, he probably came from the exotic western regions of the Silk Road. He had been patiently swinging a *hossu* brush with a bright red handle to chase away the horseflies and other flies trying to swarm the naked man, but he looked a little worn out. He went over to the unglazed bottle and squatted with an air of importance, but his posture resembled that of a turkey.

The last man was a distance from these two. He stood under the eaves of the thatched hut in a corner of the threshing floor. This man grew a scraggly beard like a rat's tail at the tip of his chin. He arranged a tea-brown sash in a loose knot over a coarse black robe long enough to hide his heels. Sometimes, he manipulated a fan made from white bird feathers as if it were precious. Perhaps, he was truly a Confucianist.

As if all three had agreed, they kept their mouths shut. They didn't even move their bodies. Had all of them quieted their breathing because of great interest in what was about to happen?

The sun probably marked noon. Did dogs also take afternoon naps? Not one bark could be heard. The hemp or millet surrounding the threshing floor was quiet and peaceful. Sunlight illuminated their green leaves.

The sky visible in the distance was stifling hot in all directions. The blazing heat made one drunk. The cloud peaks may have labored to breathe in the drought. In a sweeping view, no one other than these three men breathed. These three maintained silence like the figurines of unfired clay installed at the Temple of Guan Yu.

Of course, this is not a story from Japan. This incident occurred one summer on the threshing floor of the Liu clan in a place called Chōzan in China.

The one lying naked under the blazing sun was the owner of the threshing floor. His family name was Liu, and his given name was Taisei. He was the preeminent wealthy landowner in Chōzan. This man's sole hobby was drinking sake. It could not be said that he was ever far from a sake cup from the morning on. He always said, "Every time I drink alone, I empty a whole sake-brewing pot," because the quantity he drank was far from ordinary. As I said earlier, half of the eight acres of fields near the castle walls were sown with millet. Thus, he never worried about the strain his drinking placed on the family finances.

Why was he lying naked under the blazing sun? There is misfortune in this.

That day, Liu and his usual drinking buddy, Son-sensei—the Confucianist holding the white fan—reclined on bamboo body pillows and waged a battle in a game of Go in a breezy room. A servant with an elaborate Y-shaped hairstyle entered.

"A priest who says he's from Hōdō-ji Temple has come. He insists on seeing the proprietor. What should I do?"

"What? Hōdō-ji Temple?"

Liu blinked his small eyes, as if they were dazzled. As his chubby body rose in the heat, he added, "Well, show him in." Then, he peeked at Son-sensei's face and said, "It's probably that priest."

The priest at Hōdō-ji Temple was a foreign priest who came from the western part of China. He also provided medical treatment, practiced the traditional bedroom arts, and was highly regarded in the area. For example, he reduced Zhang San's cataracts and instantly cured Li Si's impotence. Rumors abounded about near miracles.

Both men heard these rumors. Why did that foreign priest deliberately come out to Liu's estate? Of course, Liu had no recollection of ever going to see him.

As an aside, let me say Liu was not a man who enjoyed guests. If a new guest arrived while another guest was already there, he was usually pleased to see the new arrival. In front of the guest, he could

be said to be proud of having a guest there because of his childish vanity. These days, this barbarian priest had become well-regarded all over. This was not a guest he would be too embarrassed to see. His motive was primarily to meet Liu.

"I wonder what he wants?"

"First of all, it's not begging. You should call it an act of charity and faith."

While the two were discussing this matter, they noticed the guest being escorted in by the servant with the Y-styled hair. He was a wandering priest, tall, with eyes like amethysts, and a slightly odd appearance. He wore a yellow robe. His curly hair annoyingly hung down to his shoulders. He carried a red-handled hossu and stood in the center of the quiet room. No greetings were exchanged, and no one said a word.

For a short time, Liu hesitated but as an uneasiness developed, he asked, "How may I help you?"

The barbarian priest said, "You enjoy sake, don't you?"

"I do," said Liu. As he shakily answered the unexpected question, he looked at Son-sensei, as if seeking help. Son-sensei pretended to be concentrating and lowered a stone onto the game board. He paid no attention.

"You are suffering from an unusual disease. Are you aware of that?" said the barbarian priest with emphasis. Liu heard disease and looked perplexed as he stroked his bamboo body pillow.

"A disease."

"Yes."

"No, since infancy—"

Liu was about to say something, but the barbarian priest interrupted.

"Even when you drink sake, you do not get drunk."

Liu was speechless. His mouth stayed shut as he looked at his companion's face. No matter how much this man drank, he never got drunk.

"That is proof of a disease."

Wearing a thin smile, the barbarian priest said, "You have a sake bug in your stomach. If you don't rid yourself of it, this

illness will not be cured. This humble monk came to cure your disease."

"Cure it?" said Liu without thinking. He sounded doubtful and was embarrassed.

"I came because I've been cured."

Silent until now, Son-sensei heard the exchange and promptly interrupted.

"How? Do you use medicine?"

"No, I don't use any medicine," answered the barbarian priest curtly.

Naturally, Son-sensei held unjustified contempt mostly toward the teachings of Taoism and Buddhism. Therefore, even when with a Taoist or Buddhist monk, he rarely spoke. Now, however, he felt compelled to speak. He was intrigued by the words *sake bug*. When the sensei, who likes sake, heard this, he was a little worried that he may also harbor a sake bug in his stomach.

But when he heard the barbarian priest's restrained answer, he suddenly worried that he was being made a fool. He frowned slightly and, as before, gently started to lower a stone. At the same time, he remembered thinking the proprietor Liu was a fool for seeing this arrogant priest.

Of course, Liu was not concerned.

"Well, are needles used?"

"What? It's not so complicated."

"Then, it works by incantation."

"No, no incantations."

After this conversation was repeated, the barbarian priest briefly explained the treatment. You strip naked and bask in the sun. Liu thought that was an easy task. If that were the cure, then nothing surpassed being cured. Moreover, he was not consciously aware of this, but he was a little intrigued about being treated by the barbarian priest.

Finally, Liu lowered his head and said, "Well, I'll try one cure."

Liu was instructed to lie naked on the threshing floor under the blazing sun.

The barbarian priest said he must not move his body, so a hemp

rope was wrapped around Liu. Then he called to a young manservant and had him bring an unglazed bottle of sake to his bedside. In this situation, Son-sensei, a good friend of sake dregs and, needless to say, struggled with this mysterious treatment.

What is this creature called a sake bug? If it is no longer in his stomach, what will happen to it? What did he intend to do with the bottle of sake at his pillow? No one knew except the barbarian priest.

Liu went out naked to bask under the blazing sun and seemed fairly thoughtless. This was similar to the way an ordinary person receives an education at school.

3

It was hot. Sweat resembling balls speckled his forehead and flowed in warm, smooth streams to his eyes. Unfortunately, with his hands tied by a rope, he couldn't wipe the sweat away. So he shook his head to change its path. He instantly got dizzy. He reconsidered this plan. Sweat freely wet his eyelids and flowed around the sides of his nose and mouth to beneath his chin. This was quite unsettling.

Until then, his eyes were open and gazed at the sky scorched white and a field of hemp with hanging leaves. The cascading sweat made him give up. Now, for the first time, Liu realized the sweat had penetrated his eyes and stung.

While his face resembled a slaughterhouse sheep, he meekly shut his eyes as the sun beat down on him. Not his face, not his body, but the skin in the areas on top gradually ached. Forces for moving in all directions worked over the entire surface of his skin, which had lost most of its flexibility. The best explanation was that he tingled all over. This was not the pain of sweating. Liu became irritated by the dearth of treatment given by the barbarian priest.

However, when he thought about this later, some areas did not ache. Meanwhile, his throat had dried up. Liu also knew that Cao Cao or someone else once said, "The plums in a plum orchard up the road will quench the soldiers' thirst." However, no matter how much their minds thought about the sweetness and bitterness of

plums, their thirst remained unchanged. They moved their jaws and bit their tongues, but their mouths still held heat.

If the unglazed bottle hadn't been near his head, it definitely would have been a little easier to endure. However, the powerful aroma of sake from the bottle's mouth constantly assaulted Liu's nose. It might have been his imagination, but he felt the scent of sake intensified minute by minute. Liu thought, at least, he could try to see the bottle and opened his eyes.

He glanced up and saw only the bottle's mouth and half of his torso swelling rhythmically. At the same time, however, Liu imagined the usual state of golden sake filling the dark interior of the bottle. Without realizing it, he tried to lick his cracking lips with his dry tongue. Nothing triggered saliva to well up. Dried up by the sun, sweat no longer flowed.

The awful dizziness happened a couple of times. The earlier headache never stopped. Finally, Liu resented the barbarian priest in his heart. He wondered why he was fooled by that man's smooth talking and endured this foolish suffering. Meanwhile, his throat grew drier. His chest became strangely irritated. He couldn't endure even a little more. Then, Liu gathered the resolve to tell the barbarian priest beside him to stop the treatment. While wheezing, he opened his mouth.

At that moment, Liu felt a mysterious lump creeping bit by bit from his chest to his throat. It was like a worm. He wondered whether it was wriggling or crawling like a gecko. The supple object was softening, squirming, and climbing up to the top of his esophagus. Finally, he thought it had forced its way to below his Adam's apple, slipped out a warm, dark place like a loach, and flew out with force.

At that moment, he heard what sounded like a plop into the sake in the unglazed bottle. The barbarian priest quickly raised his buttocks that had settled down and began loosening the rope tied around Liu's body. He said, "Calm down. The sake bug is out."

"So it's gone," Liu groaned. While shaking his head, he was fascinated by the novelty and had forgotten about the dryness in his throat. Still naked, he crawled to the side of the bottle. Seeing this,

Son-sensei used his white feather fan to block the sun as he hurried over to the two men. The three men peered into the bottle. A small salamander-like creature with flesh resembling red clay was swimming in the sake. It was about three and a half inches long. It had a mouth and eyes. It seemed to be drinking while swimming. When Liu saw it, his chest was seized by a horrible feeling.

4

The impact of the barbarian priest's treatment was immediate. From that day on, Liu Taisei never drank sake again. He said its odor was repugnant. Since then, however, mysteriously, Liu's health slowly deteriorated. This year, three years since he vomited the sake bug, his chubby, round face of years gone by was nowhere to be seen. Dull, pale, and greasy skin wrapped his sharp facial bones. Little of the thick hair invaded by frost remained at his temples. He didn't know how many times he had been sick in bed over the years.

But since then, Liu's health was not the only thing that weakened. Liu's family fortune gradually worsened. Even now, most of the eight acres of millet fields had passed into the hands of others. Liu also spent miserable day after day plowing with hands unaccustomed to that task.

Since vomiting up the sake bug, why has Liu's health deteriorated? Why has his family fortune declined? Vomiting the sake bug and Liu's later downfall are in a cause-and-effect relationship. This suspicion easily arises in anyone. This suspicion was repeated by all the tradesmen living in Chōzan. Their mouths provided every variety of answers. The three answers presented here were selected as the most typical ones.

1. The sake bug was Liu's good luck and not an illness. By chance, he met the foolish barbarian priest and lost a Heaven-sent blessing.

2. The sake bug was Liu's illness and not his good luck. If you ask why, downing a bottle in one gulp would never be conceived by a normal man. Therefore, if the sake bug had not been eliminated, Liu would not have lasted much longer and surely died. Poverty and

illness affect each other. But for Liu, it should be called good fortune.

3. If the sake bug was not Liu's illness, it was also not Liu's good luck. For a long time, Liu only drank sake. After sake was removed from Liu's life, nothing was left. Liu was surely the sake bug, and the sake bug was surely Liu. Therefore, Liu getting rid of the sake bug was the same as killing himself. In other words, from the day he stopped drinking sake, Liu became Liu and was no longer Liu. When Liu himself suddenly disappeared, the health and family fortune of Liu in the old days were lost. This may be the most reasonable story.

Which of these answers is the best, the most correct? That I don't know. Following the *didacticism* of a Chinese novelist, I end this story with this list of moral judgments.

(April 1916)

EARLY SPRING

Nakamura, a college student, mulled over his body temperature under his light spring overcoat as he climbed the gloomy stone stairs to the second floor of the museum. At the top of the stairs on the left was the reptile specimen room. Before Nakamura entered, he glanced at his gold wristwatch. Fortunately, the watch hands did not yet point to two o'clock. Nakamura thought, I'm not late. That was a surprise, but he felt closer to being at a loss than relief.

The reptile specimen room was hushed. Not even a watchman patrolled today. Only the scent of insect repellent wafted through the chilly interior. After scanning the room, Nakamura stretched his body as if taking a deep breath. He stood in front of a large tropical snake coiled around a thick, withered tree in a large glass cabinet. Since the previous summer, they had settled on this reptile specimen room as the place for Mieko and him to meet.

They did not select this room because they had a fondness for the morbid. Rather, they felt the need to avoid people's eyes. Given their timidity, locations like parks, cafes, and stations would only embarrass them. Mieko, in particular, would only drop her shoulders and feel more than embarrassment. They felt the gazes of

numerous people focused on their backs. Actually, they felt their hearts were keenly reflected in the eyes of others. If they came to this specimen room, no one would see them other than the mounted snakes and lizards. Although they may encounter the occasional watchman or visitor, the stares at their faces lasted mere seconds.

The rendezvous time was two o'clock. The wristwatch hands showed exactly two. Today, his wait should not even be ten minutes. While he thought about this, Nakamura gazed at the reptile specimens. Unfortunately, his heart didn't leap with the slightest bit of joy. Rather, it was filled with something comparable to surrendering to some obligation.

Like all men, was he bored with Mieko? He had to face the same thing repeatedly to be bored. Today's Mieko, happy or unhappy, is not yesterday's Mieko. Yesterday's Mieko was a truly graceful coed who exchanged greetings with him with her eyes on the train on the Yamanote line. The Mieko who first went with him to Inokashira Park still harbored a tender loneliness.

Nakamura glanced at his watch again. It said five past two. He briefly hesitated and entered the adjacent room, the avian specimen room. He gazed through the glass at a variety of beautiful stuffed birds—canaries, golden pheasants, hummingbirds—both large and small. Like these birds, Mieko remained nothing more than a stuffed figure but had lost the beauty of her soul.

He clearly remembered. During their last meeting, Mieko only chewed gum and sang opera songs. What particularly surprised him was the Mieko he met a month ago. After a merciless teasing, she called a pillow a football and kicked it toward the ceiling.

His watch said quarter after two. A sigh escaped as Nakamura returned to the reptile specimen room. Mieko was nowhere to be seen. In a lighthearted mood, he said, "Excuse me," to the monitor lizard. This lizard had been eternally devouring a small snake since some year during the Meiji era.

Eternally ... but he is not eternal. After the watch says two-thirty, he intends to rush out of the museum. The cherry blossoms had not yet bloomed. The trees in Ryōdaishimae framed the red buds on the branches cast against a cloudy sky. This walk through

the park provided greater happiness than going off somewhere with Mieko.

Two-twenty! Maybe I've waited long enough. He wanted to go home but walked around the specimen room. The lizard and snake specimens, lost to the tropical forest, strangely radiated transience. This may be an abstraction. Maybe his abstraction of love lost passion over time. He was faithful to Mieko. But she was an unknown delinquent for half the year. His lost passion was entirely Mieko's responsibility. He ended up slightly disillusioned but never bored.

Two-thirty seemed to come quickly to Nakamura. He left the reptile specimen room. However, before he reached the door, he abruptly returned to the shoe locker. Mieko may have entered this room and just missed him. That would be pitiful for Mieko.

Pitiful? No, it's not pitiful. He was troubled more by his sense of obligation than by sympathy for Mieko. He had waited long enough to ease his sense of obligation but was sure Mieko wasn't coming. Whether he waited or not, he should enjoy a pleasant afternoon alone.

Of course, the reptile specimen room was quiet. The watchman still had not made his rounds. Only the faint, chilly scent of insecticide drifted in the room. Nakamura felt a creeping irritation. In the end, Mieko is just a delinquent girl.

However, his love may not have gone completely cold. If not, he would have left the museum long ago. Most of the passion was lost, but the desire remained. Desire? But there was no desire. Now, he is certain that he loves Mieko. She kicked a pillow. Her leg was pale, and her toes bent elegantly. Her laughter at that time was special. He recalled Mieko's laughter with her head tilted.

Two-forty. Two-forty-five. Three o'clock. Three-o-five. Threeten.

While contemplating the biting cold that penetrated his springtime overcoat, Nakamura descended the stone stairs, always gloomy, like sunset, behind the deserted reptile specimen room.



Asakusa Park

WHEN THE ELECTRIC lights burned that day, Nakamura was talking to a friend in a corner of a cafe. His friend was a college student named Horikawa who hoped to become a novelist. Before cups of tea, they discussed the aesthetics of automobiles and debated the economic value of Cezanne. After they had tired of this, as he lit the golden tip of his cigarette, Nakamura brought up today's events as if talking about a stranger.

"I am a dummy," blandly added Nakamura when he finished.

"Uh-huh, the dumbest dummy."

Horikawa easily formed a sarcastic smile. He immediately said this as if it were a recitation.

"You already went home. The reptile specimen room is empty. How much time did you waste there? About three hours and fifteen minutes. The coed with the pale face entered alone. Of course, there is no watchman or anybody else. How long did the coed stand motionless among snakes and lizards? It probably got darker faster than you think. Meanwhile, the light fades. Closing time is approaching, but the coed still stands there motionless. Huh, that's a novel but not a clever novel. Forgetting about Mieko, on the day you're made the leading man..."

Nakamura grinned broadly.

"Unfortunately, Mieko is getting fat."

"More than you?"

"Shut up. I weigh 195 pounds. Mieko is probably around 140."

Ten years passed. Nakamura worked at Mitsui in Berlin doing something. He heard Mieko had married. By chance, the novelist Horikawa Yasukichi spotted Mieko in an illustration in the New Year's edition of a women's magazine. Mieko was behind a large piano in the photograph. She and three children were smiling happily. She looked like she hadn't changed much over the last ten years. Her weight, Yasukichi inwardly feared, may have slightly exceeded 165 pounds.

(January 1925)

THE TIGER STORIES

One December evening, a father hugged his son, who was about to turn five. They sat together at a *kotatsu* heating table.

Son. Daddy, tell me a story!

Father. What story?

Son. Any ... uh, I like tiger stories.

Father. A story about a tiger? Well, a tiger story. That's a hard one.

Son. Tell me a tiger story.

Father. A tiger story ... All right, I'll tell you a tiger story. Long ago, a military bugler in Korea was dead drunk and asleep on the side of a road. Because his face was wet, he woke up wondering what had happened. All of a sudden, a huge tiger stroked the bugle soldier's face with water on the tip of its tail.

Son. Why?

Father. Because the bugler was drunk, the tiger was getting rid of the smell of the sake before he ate the soldier.

Son. Then what happened?

Father. The soldier readied himself and, with all his might,

shoved the bugle into the tiger's butt. That hurt. The tiger was surprised and sped toward the village.

Son. Did he die?

Father. When he reached the center of the village, the tiger finally collapsed because of its wounded butt and died. The bugle stuck in his butt blared doo-doo-dooo until the tiger died.

Son (laughing). What happened to the bugle soldier?

Father. Well, the bugler was highly praised and given a reward for killing the tiger. The End.

Son. Do you have another one?

Father. This time, the story won't be about a tiger.

Son. No, tell me another tiger story.

Father. There aren't only tiger stories. Let me see, what did I miss? Okay, I'll tell you one more. This one is about a Korean hunter who hiked deep into a mountain to hunt. Right below him, at the bottom of a valley, a lone tiger was walking around.

Son. Was the tiger big?

Father. Yeah, it was a big one. The hunter thought it would make a great trophy and quickly loaded the bullets into his gun.

Son. Did he shoot it?

Father. Well, when he tried to shoot it, the tiger suddenly scrunched its body and leaped up to a large boulder on the other side. But right after it leaped into the air, unfortunately, before it could land on the boulder, it fell onto the hard ground.

Son. Then what happened?

Father. Then the tiger went back to where it was and leaped onto the huge boulder.

Son. This time, he jumped better?

Father. This time, he fell down again. He hung his long tail, looking embarrassed, and left.

Son. So the hunter didn't shoot the tiger?

Father. Right. At that moment, the tiger seemed almost human. The hunter felt sorry for him and quit.

Son. That story is boring. Tell me another tiger story.

Father. Another one? This time, I'll tell you a cat story. A story about a cat who wears high boots.

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Son. No, tell me another tiger story.

Father. If I must ... so long, long ago, there was a big tiger. It had three or four cubs. The tiger played with the cubs all day long. At night, it took the cubs to a cave where they all slept ... Hey, don't fall asleep.

Son (sleepy). Okay.

Father. One autumn day at sunset, the tiger was shot by a hunter's arrow. It didn't die but went home. The cubs who knew nothing started playing right away. The tiger played, jumping and leaping as always. Then they went into the cave as they did every night and slept. But when dawn came, the tiger lay down surrounded by the cubs and died. All the cubs were shocked ... Hey, are you awake?

Son (asleep and not answering). ...

Father. Hey, is somebody there? The little fellow is already fast asleep.

From a distance, he could hear the reply, "Yes, I'm back."

(December 1925)