

〈翻 訳〉

‘My Father’s Letter of Apology’ by Mukoda Kuniko

C. J. A. Lister

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Only the other day while staying up late at night a gift of an Ise lobster was delivered. I’d finished doing one piece of work and had taken a bath. While I was thinking how nice it would be, once in a while, to go to bed at the same time as other people, lacking resolve, I opened up the evening paper and then the door bell rang. A person who my friend had sent, set down a bamboo basket containing an Ise lobster on the cement floor of the entrance saying that it had been brought from Izu by car. That it was an excellent Ise lobster might be expected from the fact that the person said it could serve three or four people if eaten raw. Of course it was still alive.

The person said before leaving that since it kicks and struggles, I should press down hard on the lid of the pot when cooking it. After this, I took the Ise lobster out of the basket. At all events since it didn’t have long to live, I thought I would let it do what it wanted for a while. While the splendid whiskers of the lobster were quivering searchingly, it moved over the cement floor, which looked difficult to walk on. What was it looking at with those black eyes? I wonder what the grey matter, which relishes how good we taste is now thinking?

Seven or eight years ago at the end of the year, a friend of mine brought up in Kansai got angry at the high price of Ise lobsters and proposed buying them wholesale where they were caught and dividing them up between ourselves. The friend left the basket, in which the newly-

arrived Ise lobsters were packed, at one side of the hall adjoining the entrance. In the middle of the night the lobsters crawled into the drawing room since the house had been built without a partition separating the hall from the drawing room. For some reason the lobsters seemed to have attempted to claw their way up the legs of the piano. When I came to visit the following day, the black-painted piano legs were covered with horrible-looking scratches and on the carpet there were many stains, which seemed like either saliva or the mark which a slug leaves. I remembered that I had a good laugh at how the lobsters had proved in the end to be expensive and, to be safe, I put the boots, which had been standing in a corner on the cement floor, away in the shoe cupboard.

In the back room three cats were being boisterous. I don't know whether they could catch the rustling sound or whether they could smell the lobsters. I had a momentary feeling of wishing to show the lobsters to the cats, but I thought better of it. It is painful for pet owners to watch the cruel actions of their animals even if they are merely acting by instinct.

I put the lobster back in the basket since I thought that if I looked at it anymore my feeling of compassion towards it might change. I put it into the bottom of the fridge and went into the bedroom but I had the feeling that I could hear it moving, so I was completely unable to get to sleep. On this kind of night I would be sure to have a bad dream.

It was also seven or eight years ago when I dreamt of a cat which became square-shaped. Right after my present Korat tomcat, Mamio, arrived from Thailand, it did not get along with my female Siamese, so I put him in a square pet box until they got used to each other. At that time I saw a scene on TV where there was talk of a square frog. From the previous day a showman on the main street had been stuffing frogs into square boxes. He then palmed off the square frogs with some spiel, which

was both interesting and funny. When the people who bought one returned home and opened the box, the creature inside had turned back into an ordinary frog, but they didn't mind. Although I laughed at that time because it was funny, probably some part of me still wanted to laugh more.

In a dream, Mamio turned into a square, grey cat. I was crying, holding the cat in my arms and shouting out 'Whatever has happened?' I woke up, startled by my own crying and found that the corners of my eyes were wet. I got up straightaway and peeped inside the box but the cat was curled up in a ball, asleep. I switched off the light and while I was looking at the ceiling, trying hard to think of anything but the lobster, the face of Marlene Dietrich unexpectedly came into my mind.

It was the last scene of a classic film of many years ago, 'Dishonored,' which I'd seen on television. In the guise of a prostitute, Dietrich was shot to death for high treason. The commanding officer gave the order to fire and the ten-odd soldiers, standing in a line, fired simultaneously, which was a clever way of doing things. The person who gave the order, thought that it wasn't him who did the killing. The soldiers who fired, justified their actions, saying that they were only following orders. Furthermore I heard that in such cases even the person who was given the gun, containing the live ammunition, was not informed.

If you follow this line of reasoning, it becomes inconvenient to live alone. It is I who decided that I wanted to eat a lobster and it is also I who must kill it. When I think of the large lobster, which must still be moving around in the fridge, I feel heavyhearted. While I was wondering whether I was asleep or awake, morning came. On that morning I took a taxi, carrying the lobster, which was still alive, selected a lively house belonging to a friend, where some young college students resided and gave the

lobster away.

The smell and what looked like the saliva stains of the lobster remained in the entrance. I burned incense. I got down on my hands and knees and washed the cement floor, reprimanding myself, saying,

“What are you going to do? I tell you, if you can’t cook a single lobster, you can’t possibly kill somebody in your play for television.”

When I was a child, my father once scolded me at the entrance just inside our house. My father, who was the branch manager of an insurance company, came home late one night, tipsy, probably from a business dinner function, bringing some people with him. Since my mother was busy doing things like taking the visitors’ coats, showing them into the drawing room and greeting them, as the eldest daughter it had been my job, since I was in primary school, to arrange the shoes. After that I would run to the kitchen, boil water to heat the sake, get out the necessary number of small individual dining tables and arrange the chopstick holders and sake cups. Then I would return to the entrance, clean the mud from the visitors’ shoes, and, if it was a rainy day, I would crumple up newspaper and stuff it into the shoes in order to remove the moisture.

As I recall, it was snowing that evening. I was putting the footwear in order in the entrance as I had been told that my mother would prepare the small dining tables. There was snow on 7 or 8 of the visitors’ shoes. By the light of the snow on the other side of the glass entrance door, I could see a white blur. I don’t know whether it was because of the draft, but on this kind of evening even the newspaper was pleasantly cold. Since I had been scolded before for stuffing shoes with old newspaper with the Emperor’s picture on it, I was taking care over this job, rubbing my hands together, which were numb with cold. Then father came out of the toilet

and was returning to the drawing room, humming a song.

Father was tone deaf and the sort of person whose rendering of the song 'The Hakone Pass is Impregnable' became a Buddhist chant without him being aware of it. At home he used to hum a tune once every six months, if at all. Against my better judgement, I was taken in by this humming, as I thought it indicated that he was in a good mood and asked,

"Father. How many visitors are there?"

All of a sudden he yelled,

"Idiot. What is the point of you putting the shoes in order? Do you think we have any guests with only one leg? If you count the number of shoes then you will know how many visitors there are, won't you? Don't ask stupid questions."

"Oh!" I thought. "Now I understand."

Father stood behind me for a while and watched my hand movements as I stuffed the newspaper into the shoes, one at a time, arranging them and then making sure they were lined up with the others. He said that on a night like this with many guests, it couldn't be helped, but if there were only one or two people, my way of arranging the shoes would be no good.

"Place a woman's shoes together so one shoe touches the other. A man's shoes should be arranged so that there is a little space between them," he said.

Father sat down on the step separating the hall from the entrance and arranged the visitors' shoes so the tips of the toes pointed outwards slightly, with a space between them, saying,

"This is how men's shoes should be arranged."

"Why?" I asked reflexively, looking at his face.

I think at that time father was just a little over thirty. I don't know whether it was to look more dignified, but he was training his beard and at

that moment he looked really annoyed. He fell silent for a short time and then, looking angry, said, "Get to bed," after which he went into the drawing room.

Even now I cannot forget the lesson that I learned, to count the number of shoes before thinking about inquiring about the number of visitors. However it wasn't until much later that I learned the real significance of why a man's shoes should be arranged so that there is a little space between them.

Father kept himself neat and tidy and was a precise person and only in the manner of removing his shoes did he become rough, like he was a different person. On the stone part of the entrance where you take off your shoes, he kicked off his shoes as if he was flinging them away. When father was not at home and I complained to mother how he was so particular about the manner in which members of our family should remove and arrange our shoes, as we had many visitors to our home, and yet he didn't practice what he preached, mother told me the reason why.

Father had an unhappy childhood. He didn't know his own father and was brought up single-handedly by his mother who made a poor living doing needlework. For as long as he could remember, they had always rented a room in the house of a relative or friend. Father told mother directly after they married that since he had grown up being told over and over by his mother to arrange his shoes properly and as far as possible to remove them in the corner of the entrance, he thought that he wanted to quickly get on in life, live in his own house and make his importance felt by taking off his shoes in the middle of the entrance.

Ten, no twenty years of bitter feeling and trying times were revealed in the way he removed his shoes. Only once did this man take off his shoes in low spirits. It was on another winter night at a time when the war was

intensifying and it was said that air raids would probably soon begin on Tokyo. Dressed in khaki civilian uniform with puttees and wearing a field service cap, father had, unusually, come home drunk, late at night. Since it was a time when alcohol was rationed and unavailable for such occasions as business dinner functions, it was most likely black market liquor. Father, who was taking off his shoes by the light of a lamp covered by a black cloth because of the blackout, was only wearing a single shoe.

He was passing by the side of a nearby munitions factory when army dogs, which had been left to run freely inside the grounds of the factory, began to bark furiously at him. My father, who disliked dogs, shouted "Quiet!" When he made as though he was going to kick them, his shoe flew off and fell into the ditch inside the factory grounds. When my mother asked, "Didn't you tie your laces," he yelled, "I put on somebody else's shoes by mistake." Puffing out his chest, he swaggered inside and went to bed. It was undoubtedly a pretty large shoe, belonging to someone else.

The following morning, walking over the frosty ground, I made my way to the place where it had happened. With the dogs barking at me, I shinned up a telegraph pole, peeked inside the factory grounds and was able to see something that looked like a shoe by the kennels. As good luck would have it, someone appeared, to whom I explained the situation.

"Are you the daughter? I can see you're having a hard time of it, like me."

Saying this, he tossed the shoe over to me. It had bite marks on it but since it was originally fairly scuffed, I thought it would probably be O.K. and returned home. For two or three days after, even if father's eyes met mine, he acted as if nothing had happened.

It was the time when the song 'Don't Cry, Baby Dove' was popular so it

was probably either 1947 or 1948. Father was transferred to the Sendai branch office. My younger brother and I were attending school in Tokyo and living with our grandmother there, only returning to our parent's house in Sendai in the summer and winter vacations. In Tokyo there were extreme food shortages but even though Sendai is a region known for growing rice and producing other kinds of food, at times when I went home, things were so plentiful, it was like a different world. In the market in the first block of the East district were a row of shops selling things like grilled plaice and sea clams broiled with soy.

At that time, the best way of extending hospitality was with alcohol. Many insurance salesmen liked to drink. It was unlikely that rations alone would suffice so mother made home-made sake, which she had learnt to make by watching other people. You steam the rice, put in the yeast and leave it in a pot to ferment. You cover it with an old quilted gown or futon and watch the appearance of the sake. In summer while being bitten by mosquitoes, you turn over the futon and if a bubbling sound strikes your ears, you have been successful, but if there is no such sound it means that the sake is on its deathbed. You get the foot warmer out of the storeroom and wash it roughly at the edge of the well. The foot warmer, which has been sterilized with boiling water, is then filled with hot water, some string is attached to it and then it is suspended inside the sake. If you wait about half a day, it will revive and begin to bubble. However if you overheat it, the home-made sake will boil and turn sour. Since you cannot offer it to guests if it gets like this, you can use the liquid to pickle eggplants and cucumbers or give it to children as a substitute for a lactic acid beverage called 'children's home-made sake'. I like to drink, so this sour beverage, which made me a little tipsy, was a great favourite of mine. I conspired with my younger brother and sister to throw the foot warmer in

unnecessarily. Father would reprimand me saying,

“You did this on purpose, didn't you?”

Since there were many visitors, it was also a lot of work to make the side-dishes to go with the sake. When the end of the year came, I would return by the night train and go straight to the kitchen. I peeled the skin from the squid until my fingertips went numb, chopping the squid up finely and preparing it in a tub full of salt. In spite of our straightened circumstances arising from conversion to the new yen, I was sent to school in Tokyo and because of this felt a sense of indebtedness towards my parents and so I really worked hard in those days. I was not bothered about working but I hated helping drunks.

Winters in Sendai were harsh. The salesmen and agency staff had walked to our house on snow-covered roads from the suburbs, in a wind carrying sleet. Father thanked them and in a rush, they downed three cups of home-made sake at a draft. People who didn't get drunk were a rarity. On the evenings of the closing of books and the like, the whole house stank of alcohol.

One morning, when I got up, the entrance was bitterly cold. Mother had left the glass door open and was pouring hot water over the doorsill. I saw that the vomit, which the blind drunk visitors, who returned home at daybreak, had carelessly deposited, had frozen all over the doorsill. I don't know whether it was because of the snow on the outside, which had frozen solid, but the wind sweeping through the entrance was so cold that it made my temple ache. When I saw mother's swollen-red, chapped hands, I suddenly became angry. “I'll do it,” I said. When mother said that she would do it because it was a dirty job, I shoved her so she went staggering back. I then started to pick off lumps of vomit, bound closely together on small areas of the doorsill, with a toothpick.

Would the branch manager of an insurance company as well as his family be unable to live without putting up with this sort of thing? I got angry both with my mother for her silent endurance as well as my father who made her do this. I became aware that father was standing right behind me on the step separating the hall from the entrance. He had probably woken up in the toilet and stood barefoot in his nightclothes holding a newspaper, watching me as I worked. I supposed that now, for the first time he would show appreciation, saying things like ‘sorry’ and ‘forgive me’. I hoped he would, but he didn’t utter a word. He stood silently in his bare feet in the drafty entrance until I had finished.

Three or four days later, the day arrived for me to return to Tokyo. On the evening before I left, mother gave me my pocket money for the following term. Since I had helped out on that morning, I counted it thinking there might be a little more than usual but it was only the customary amount. As usual, father saw my brother and I off at Sendai Station but before the train left he looked sullen and said only, “Bye”. There were no extra words. However upon returning to Tokyo my grandmother said,

“There’s a letter for you from your father.”

Written by brush on rolled letter paper with a more formal tone than usual, it urged me to study hard. One line at the end of the letter, which is the only part, which I can remember even now read, “On this occasion you performed extra work.” Only this part was underlined in red. This was my father’s letter of apology.