

Obon

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The locomotive chugs away from Yamaguchi belching out black smoke. In the walled-in yard of the hospital, Arifumi hears the whistle blow down at the depot. He straightens. His mind slips back forty years to when, as a novice documentary filmmaker, he was seated aboard facing a Catholic nun and a Buddhist monk. The three strangers were traveling to their mountain homelands for the Obon holidays. At work on a documentary, he had posed to them its central query: Does God exist? How do you know?

“My husband was abusive,” the nun said.

“You were married?” he said.

Arifumi sits barefoot under a shade tree in the cotton robe of the mental ward. He closes an eye as he sees himself on the crowded train focus the heavy Deluxe camera on his shoulder upon the nun in black habit.

SISTER AI MARI: I was young and I'd foolishly married. My husband often beat me. He'd blame me for everything. That we had so little to eat. That I couldn't cook right anyway, nor clean. That I was childless. That I bore him no son. One night, he staggered in

drunk. Wavering about, swigging on sake, he blamed me when the bottle became empty. He busted it over my head. Made me sweep up the glass. Said I wasn't doing it right. Grabbed the broomstick and beat me till I collapsed.

ARIFUMI: Why didn't you leave him?

"Why stay?" he shouts out from under the tree. "Why?"

SISTER (*sniffing*): I was a young bride. (*a thicket of bamboo passing in the window*) I thought it somehow meant he loved me. Came to think I deserved it. No. Don't get me wrong. There were good times. Acts of kindness. He gave me a blouse. Once a pair of shoes. And the bad times, well, they served to make the good times—when they happened—feel all the better. And I became grateful. I saw the battering as a test of my devotion, whether I loved him in return, knowing—if he didn't want me, didn't care for me—I wouldn't upset him so.

Arifumi jumps to his feet and throws up his arms. "But all the pain! All the suffering!"

ARIFUMI (*adjusting the lens for a close-up*): But with all the pain and suffering—where is God in all this?

SISTER (*nodding*): One dreary, overcast day, I found myself deep in despair up on a cliff...the village far below...my knees bent and my arms swinging, ready to jump and end it all...when I happened to look at my shoes. The good leather. The solid fit. And the thought occurred that I wouldn't need them when I hit the bottom. "It's not like I'm going to walk away." I removed my shoes. Raindrops spotted the ground, and I realized I wouldn't be needing my clothes when I hit the bottom either. "Someone can surely make use of them." And I could spare them from the broken bones, the splattered blood. I took off my blouse and my skirt and my underclothes, flapping in the wind; and I neatly folded them into a pile. I stood there naked. The rain pelted my skin. Somehow, I kept looking down below at a cross atop a church steeple. How shall I put it? Something stirred in me. Called to me. I can't explain. I climbed back down the mountainside. The rain hardened. I was wet and resting in a pew. The wind howled. The windows exploded into shards of flying stained glass. Crashes and ripping noises lasted through the night. At daybreak, the altar upside down in a corner, I waded outside. The village lay in silent ruins. The church was the only building left standing in the flooded streets, the houses all down, the trees all

topped. The cliff where I'd stood, buried in a landslide.

A train attendant in cap and uniform came down the aisle stamping tickets.

"That typhoon," said Arifumi, "it happened in Tsuwano, what? 1960. Ten years ago?"

"1960, August the 12th," the nun said.

The attendant handed back their stamped tickets. He stuck the ticket of the monk, his eyes closed, between his fingers laced together on the lap of his brown robe.

Arifumi re-shouldered his camera.

SISTER: I was alive. The lone survivor. Amongst the anguish and the destruction, God had chosen to save me. A miracle. That's how I know there is a God. As I sat in the church, unharmed, I felt His presence, knew that He exists. And that He truly does care for me.

His second day of work at the Yamaguchi hospital, a college graduate arrives to observe behavior for the research team to come on Monday. His second day of work, the boy puts down his obento bako and looks out the office window. Nearly all the patients of the ward have been signed out for family outings over the Obon holidays. Only Arifumi has wandered out into the yard this hot August morning, mumbling under a shade tree.

"I don't know," Arifumi said to the nun. The train rumbled across a wooden bridge, a mountain stream sparkled past. "The potential of the initial marital conflict to develop diffuses. I take it your husband drowned. And we'll have to cut your inadvertent chuckle preceding your line, 'It's not like I'm going to walk away.' And anyway, the entire scene up on the cliff is gonna have to go."

"Why?"

"No suspense. We know you're not going to jump. Or you couldn't be here to tell about it. And all that crap about your God is gonna have to be dumped."

"What?"

"He sounds like your husband all over again. Only worse. He creates typhoons that murder people, and you're grateful that He didn't kill you. In fact, you love Him for it. That's like heaping praise

on your husband because he doesn't beat you, because he's out busy beating everyone else in the neighborhood. Which doesn't leave us with much usable footage left, just you sitting in a church pew...with the belated makings of a natural-disaster movie, once popular. I have to ask. Were you naked when you went back down into the village? Or had you put back on your clothes?"

"Why, of course clothed!"

"Which leaves us with you just sitting in the church again—and fully clothed." He reached out and poked the monk, whose eyes blinked open. "Just sitting, something he seems to know an awfully lot about."

He had started out an ambitious documentary filmmaker. Young, and having read the novels of Endo Shusaku, he had sought to forgo fiction and delve directly into real-life characters and actual experience to capture spiritual truths. But he soon discovered such a film demands a strong and compelling narrative, combined with substantial financial backing; or it would never get made, never get shown, never recover costs. So when an offer arose one summer to do an action-packed thriller, he did so, to huge box-office success—followed up by a second smash hit he penned and directed, with all the requisite car chases, squealing tires, and rapid gunfire. He told himself at best a documentary—no matter how good—draws a small audience, appeals to only a select, interested few; and he told himself, what good is truth, if nobody sees it. And so he succumbed, and surged on, becoming a successful director of such magnitude that beautiful actresses say such glorious things about you that you start to believe them, and everything they say to you later in bed. But soon enough, the cocaine parties and the marriages took him for all he was worth. And he quickly fell from favor and soon lost his way. Found two decades later, aimlessly wandering the streets one day.

And now the boy watches him gesturing under the tree, conversing with somebody not there.

ARIFUMI (*poking the monk Mabuushi*): You just sit there. What's your story?

MONK: I have no story. I live wholly in the present.

ARIFUMI: You call that living? (*shaking his head*) It looks an

awful lot like sitting to me.

MONK: I seek to rid myself of desires.

ARIFUMI: So, that's a desire of yours.

MONK: Desire is the root of all suffering.

SISTER: So I shouldn't desire not to be beaten?

ARIFUMI: I don't know.... Hard to do a story without desire. With no desire, there's no motivation; with no motivation, no action; without action—there's no conflict—no plot. You'd end up with a bunch of characters and everybody's getting along just lovely, thank you.

Yes, he had once been an award-winning director, who using a Tokyo Film Festival trophy as a paperweight, penned his own scripts on his desk at his mansion window opened wide for the ocean breeze. But now the man's head was shorn to keep him from tearing his hair out, and the boy first took him for a monk. And he was to be kept from sharp objects and so his pens were taken away, and now the boy is thinking maybe he's an ex-convict. He takes a binder down from the shelf, sagging from thick books on schizophrenia, bipolarism, and multiple-personality disorder. He removes an observation form to fill out. He flips on the switch of the monitor that connects to the surveillance cameras aimed around the yard. Arifumi appears on the screen.

ARIFUMI: ...I just don't want to get to the end of this life having done entertaining action-packed movies, with nothing more to say about life than "Try not to get shot." I want to delve into the truth of having been cast into this godforsaken world. Yet at the same time, I want it to be compelling. If only we could splice in a love interest—you sure you weren't naked in that church? Okay, okay! I'll find something to pizzazz it up with. Give it that oomph. See, that's the catch about moviemaking—they can be about boredom, but they can't be boring. They can be about too many things happening in life, but they can't have too many things happen in the story.

SISTER: And it can be about truth. But it can't be truthful?

(The boy watches the man stay mum then ramble on again.)

ARIFUMI: Let's try another angle. Let's have you talk about...offer insight...on Christ's relationships. There must have been glamorous women galore. *(He begins pacing.)*

SISTER: Well, there's the story when the villagers bring Jesus an adulteress.

ARIFUMI: Go on.

SISTER: And He says, "Those of you without sin cast the first stone." They leave, and Jesus is alone with the loose woman.

ARIFUMI: Alright. (*turns and paces the other way*)

SISTER: And He tells her, "Go and sin no more."

ARIFUMI (*stops*): That's it? (*throws up his arms*) You've done wrong. Now don't do it anymore?

SISTER: Just try and do better the next time.

ARIFUMI (*resumes pacing*): What else you got? A young man on the go, surely there were opportunities.

SISTER: There's, uh, Mary Magdalene. She takes off His sandals, kneels with expensive oil, and massages His tired feet.

ARIFUMI: Lead to anything?

SISTER: Nothing higher than His ankles.

ARIFUMI: Who else?

SISTER: There's the woman at the well.

ARIFUMI: Does she fall in and He saves her?

SISTER: No.

ARIFUMI: She tries to push *Him* in.

SISTER: Nothing like that.

ARIFUMI: What's she doing at the well?

SISTER: Getting water, I'd suppose.

ARIFUMI: And?

SISTER: And He goes up and He talks to her.

ARIFUMI: That's it? They sit and talk? (*He flings a pebble across the yard.*) And now we're back sitting again.

COSTUME DESIGNER: It's all in the costuming. It's all what you wear.

ARIFUMI: Where'd you come from?

(*She steps into the shade of the tree, begins removing the nun's makeup.*)

COSTUME DESIGNER It's all in what you wear (*undressing Sister*). With no black habit, with no veil—there's no nun. And the same goes for him. (*stripping the monk*) Take away the brown robe and the string of prayer beads, you no longer have a monk. You have a bald fellow sitting naked—eyes shut—mumbling to himself, whom the authorities won't hesitate to grab and lock up.

ARIFUMI: They're both naked.

COSTUME DESIGNER: The narrative's over, your story's kaput. You should have been more careful, or your imagination wouldn't have turned on you.

ARIFUMI: Hey, there's nothing wrong with having a multiple-personality disorder if we all get along.

COSTUME DESIGNER: Living in your imagination at ten-hour stretches, day upon day, with a pen at your desk, the outside world held at bay—it's just not healthy.

SISTER: Even God, after six days of creation, had sense on the seventh day and rested. And it never does say on the eighth day, or any day thereafter, He ever went back to work.

ARIFUMI: So that's it. With all the pain and misery in the world, there is a God after all. It's just that He's resting?

(The costume designer, Sister Ai Mari, and the monk Mabuushi walk off.)

The boy gets up, flips off the monitor, and sits at the office window. For the longest time, way into the afternoon, the man just sits, his back against the tree, his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle, his eyes shut. It was nothing the boy could see. At a window you can only look up so far. But a serene silence seemed to hover over the sky, the mountains and valleys, the train tracks, the man in the yard. And it felt to the boy, though nothing he could prove or write up in a report, that someone besides the man was out there, much like the boy himself; watching, sitting, observing.

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