

Bob Heller

HANGING UPSIDE DOWN

“My dad was very upset when he died. Really upset,” I told the young man, Ono, sitting next to me. We just met at an eight seat counter in a tiny traditional Tokyo Okonomiyaki shop. We were eating, talking and watching the master chef take the orders, prep, cook and make jokes with his customers. When I finished eating a seafood pancake my new friend asked if I would like to taste his pork belly Okonomiyaki.

“Arigatou, thank you for sharing.” I bowed my head slightly and pinched a piece with my chopsticks, “Very delicious.” I motioned to the chef for okonomiyaki like Ono’s. Ono ordered a second round of sake and then we poured for each other as is the custom.

Ono confided, “My cousin, after graduating from university, took a low, but upwardly mobile position with a Japanese international corporation. After a year he became depressed. Nothing interested him.”

“That happens in America too. Higher expectations than reality.”

Ono nodded, “My cousin could not focus. His work habits became sloppy and unpredictable.”

“Did management fire him?”

“No, they followed the traditional Japanese business model. The company recommended he take a six month break with full pay.”

“Lucky son of a bitch.” I said. “Back home his ass would be grass.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Ono, quizzically still contemplating what I was talking about. “And the six months stretched out to two years.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“He got more and more depressed. He couldn’t rally himself to go back to work. He constantly worried about being fired. A major disgrace in Japanese society.”

I asked, “Then what?”

“He killed himself!”

“Really. Wow. Sorry about your cousin.” I said as I contemplated the enormity of such action.

“It happens here more than you would think. Too much go, go go. Kids have big dreams reading comics and watching videos about superheroes. And, as you said, at some point they must enter the real world.”

“Ono, why’d you tell me about your cousin? It has nothing to do with my dad.”

“You said your father was upset. So was my cousin.”

“But your cousin was upset and killed himself. My dad was cheerful, had plans for the future and only became upset when he died. Big difference.”

The chef was hovering around us. He brought out a bottle of sake and poured each of us a cup, plus one for himself, “Such sad stories. Drink down your sorrow and smile. Be thankful you can share your experiences.”

We raised our cups and toasted, “To life.”

“Would you mind if I shared my experience about death?” asked the chef.

“Please do.”

“I was born and raised in Mikasayama on the island of Hokkaido. A small coal mining village. Most days, my father worked deep in the mine shafts scooping up the coal onto carts. It was a tedious backbreaking job for a few bowls of rice. Just enough to feed my mother and me. It was after the war and he was fortunate to find any work. He was a rural, uneducated rough man. The work was sporadic and my father took to drink, at times binge drinking for days. One day, when I was seven, he stumbled home after three days of drinking and cursed and punched my mother. I hid under my bed covers and tried to shut out the screaming. My mother shouted, “put down that knife!” I could hear them moving about our small living quarters turning over tables and breaking dishes. Then a silence that seemed to last for an eternity until my mother let out a mournful cry. I ran over to her to see my father with a kitchen knife piercing his belly, which was pumping out blood that formed an ever-widening red puddle over the floor. My mother stuttered, “He stumbled, he stumbled and miraculously fell onto the blade.” My father was dead and it was the happiest moment of my life. Since then I often have dreams of blood flooding my room and waking up right before I’m drowned in my father’s blood.”

I said, “Master chef, such a heart wrenching story! I can’t imagine an experience like yours. How do you endure?”

“It’s not easy. I work here through the night and try to sleep when the sun rises.”

“But tell me,” I asked as I filled three cups with sake, “what does this have to do with my dad?”

“They’re both fathers!”

“Fathers you say. Sorry to be blunt, but the only thing they had in common was they both produced sperm. And, at that, swimming with different DNA.” I paused, slowly finished my sake and continued, “My dad was an educated man. He was extremely

careful and meticulous in his behaviours and thoughts. He made to-do lists and by the end of each day every line was crossed off. He was kind, caring, loving and empathetic. He was successful. He was fastidious in what he ate and made a daily routine of exercise. All with the expectation of a long and happy life. Nothing like your father.”

Ono said, “He should have lived to 120!”

“Yes, we all thought that!”

A whisper of a voice arose from the dimly lit end of the counter, “I’m so sorry to hear these tragic stories of your families,” said a middle-aged man whose large frame glasses sparkled. He was dressed in the traditional corporate blue suit, white shirt, and conservative blue tie. It seems to me you are talking about loss, sadness and grief. The constant state of missing someone.”

The master chef said, “I don’t give a fuck about my father. I’m happy he’s dead. Good riddance.”

“The awareness of loss, even though it is not always part of our consciousness, is continually gnawing at our hearts, ”said the blue suit. “Our dads will always control and influence our behavior.”

“Possibly, and a curse on him,” said the master chef.

“Grief is strong. Let me tell you about my older brother,” said the corporate suit. “I hardly knew him, as we were fifteen years apart. His name was Uni. We lived in a small fishing village on the Cato peninsula. My dad would get up right before the crack of dawn and have a quick breakfast of rice porridge. My mom would pack him lunch and with a thermos of hot tea he would go to his small rowboat and set out with his fishing gear. My parents worked hard in order to send Uni to Tokyo University. He excelled in all his subjects. He was a popular figure on campus. At graduation he was recruited as a junior executive at the Panasonic corporation. We rejoiced at his fortune. After five years he

was promoted to managing director of marketing in the United States. It was a big deal. My family was so proud of him and appreciated the money he sent us every month. One day, in San Francisco, he stepped onto the street, a messenger bike hit him, and since then Uni's mind did not function properly. He now lives back in our village, like a vegetable, and fortunately Panasonic sends a generous pension."

I said, "What has this to do with my father's life?"

"My brother had many of the same wonderful qualities your dad exhibited. He used those attributes to move up quickly in the corporate world. We will never know what path he might have taken."

"He sounds like a fine man who might have become president of Panasonic." said Ono.

"Prime Minister of Japan." said the master chef.

"Possibly a husband with children who become respected and innovative scientists saving the world from a viral pandemic." Ono countered.

"Or could have made a bad business decision that cost his company millions of yen because an economic recession, a tsunami, or a pandemic hit the world. No fault of his but the company might have blamed him. I'm truly sorry for your loss." said the master chef.

"Unfulfilled potential, but one never knows the future. It could be a great success or catastrophic failure...." Ono said.

"But my father's path was a fact," I said with pride.

At that moment an old man dressed in a light cotton, indigo kimono sitting at the end of the counter interrupted us, "Gentlemen, and Master chef, you have all told such

distressing tales.” His clear eyes focused on me, “And your father had a right to be upset when he died. Death is upsetting but it brings with it a better understanding of what is important in life.” At that he lowered himself off the stool and when his wooden sandals touched the floor he began the Bon dance, the traditional Japanese dance to *free and upright one's dead ancestors from great suffering*. And as his movements increased, each of us, one by one, formed a line behind him, parted the noren curtain, and flowed onto the dark Tokyo streets in this dance of joy.