Home Burial

GEN DEL RAYE

Yashima Nobuaki died alone. Nobody liked him much except his daughter, who of course was obliged. He was the sort of old man you might not see in town for years at a time except occasionally, by the road, trimming the camellia bushes at the edge of his property, or lecturing some poor kid for climbing the fence. Other than family, only my grandmother went to his wake. Out of a sort of professional courtesy, my mother said. My grandmother had suffered a stroke that spring, and she was driven there and back by my mother, who had to place a stepstool on the driveway and guide her by her elbows into the back of the van. My grandmother wore a black kimono with a white and gold sash. I had never seen her dressed up before.

Years ago, in the war, she had worked for Yashima in the village hall. This was after she fled Osaka with her mother after they lost the house. The summer of 1945. She was fifteen years old. At that time, it was Yashima's job to recommend men in the village for the draft. My grandmother was his assistant. Her job was to lock the pale-red draft letters into a metal box on the back of a bicycle and deliver them one by one to each house.

A killer behind a desk, my grandfather said. He should have been strung up like a murderer.

This was after my mother had left with my grandmother in the van. My grandfather sat in the mudroom and let his fingers wander over the top of the bench. He used to smoke all the time but had stopped cold about a week after my grandmother's stroke. Having to leave the hospital room, I think, was partly what made him stop. We'd been on his case about it for years but never thought he would do it. Sometimes, when he was feeling down, I could see he missed having something in his hands. In those moments, he looked very old, even older than he was.

A murderer. I'd heard Yashima described this way, some time ago, by a stranger. An old friend of someone in town, she had tea with practically everyone and then left again for good. Your grandma was a cog, she'd said. A little girl. But old man Yashima could have lied. He could have protected someone.

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The next morning, my grandmother comes home from the wake and sits in the mudroom with her head very still. It's a while before I realize she's drunk, the way she speaks very little and doesn't want to be helped into her room to change. You smell of onions, my mother says, helping her pull off her sandals. My grandfather, looking startled, says: It was a wake, of course she drank. My grandmother is dignified, holding herself in, steadying herself against fixed objects with her hands. Ever since her stroke, when she lost fine-motor control on most of her left side, she tends to sit with her right shoulder raised slightly above her left, as if warding off some threat that is always in her peripheral vision. It's the beginning of January, and the blood seeps slowly back into her ears, over the crests of her cheekbones, around the base of her nose.

Of course I drank, she says. She forms the words carefully, her voice strangely loud. There are goosebumps on her wrists, over her very white knuckles.

You're freezing, my mother says, let's get you into the house. But my grandmother doesn't move, refuses to be pulled up by her arms.

Toshio, she says, using my grandfather's first name. Ordinarily they call each other "you" with a kind of gruff affection, but this is more direct, a question from a different time. Will you go to the funeral?

My grandfather, looking away, shakes his head.

And you? to my mother, who is still standing above her.

Come get some sleep, my mother says. I'll wake you in a few hours.

You? My grandmother looks to me.

Yes, Grandma, I tell her. Mom and I are both going.

Good, she says.

After she leaves, I find my grandfather in the hallway, staring at nothing on the walls. Behind him, my grandmother has shut the door to their room. They aren't showy in love, but love deeply, I think. The way he shadows her, within earshot, even through the closed door. The way she will sometimes laugh around the dinner table at a joke he hasn't yet said aloud. Back in May, when a blood vessel burst in her brain and flushed her eyes red, my grandmother spent two hours flat on the ground feeling spit slide down her cheek and puddle in her hair. The neighbors were out working and there was no one around. Halfway up the mountain, a little past noon, my grandfather tending to the farthest plot in their orchard put down his tools and came home early. He searched everywhere trying to find her. No one else could have saved her life.

In this town, even now, they only do home burials. It's the sort of place where you might stumble on a gravestone in the woods, or spot one through a car window in the middle of rice fields on its own little rectangle of grass. Of course, you can tell the soldiers apart from the date of death. My grandparents' family grave is fifty yards downhill from the house, between an empty barn and a ditch that marks the edge of the neighbor's property. In May it is buried in wild azaleas. In winter, snow. There are eight or nine relatives named there, including my grandfather's two brothers, each born a few years before him. They died in '45 when they were seventeen and nineteen years old. This is where my grandmother lay for two hours, blood in her eyes, and where my grandfather found her, moving as fast as his brittle legs could carry him to save her.

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It was an accident, is what I've heard—in the war, why they asked my grandmother to do it. The winter of 1945 was long and cold, with puddles freezing overnight late into the spring. Yashima, delivering the draft by bicycle, was the only one using the roads at night, and nobody could warn him of where there was ice ahead. At the beginning of April, when he crashed into a ditch, he snapped two ligaments in his knee and could hardly stand up, even with crutches. Ordinarily, it would have been a man who filled in for Yashima, but in the middle of planting

season, in the last year of the war, there were none to spare. Yashima would be the brains, my grandmother his legs, making the trips he could not. A city girl, they must have figured hers was a labor they could afford to lose. As for her, she just wanted to be useful. Moving from Osaka to this tiny village, running from bombs, she needed to get by.

So much was asked of her. The draft letters that always arrived at the village hall in the middle of the night. The death notices that arrived by day. This was the year that boys as young as fifteen were allowed to enlist. One of Yashima's jobs was to convince them. Fifteen years old—the same age as my grandmother. She was in school with their sisters, in their front yards chatting with their aunts and mothers. She walked them down to Yashima's office, and watched them walk out, would have seen their eyes filled with dread and hope.

This much is certain: If Yashima and my grandmother had tried less hard, fewer people would have died. Or if they died anyway, they would have come from someplace else.

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Two days after the funeral, my mother and I go home to Kyoto, promising to come back soon. This is how it is; years go by like this. My mother visits most often, on holidays or sometimes for the weekend, driving or taking the expressway bus five hours one way. My father and I go with her, or don't. It's a whole town of old people now, 二ちゃん農業 (grandparent farming) is what it's called, how they seem to be stranded in the past, how one orchard after another shuts down as the nursing homes in the nearest city fill up. In little ways, here and there, you can see how the seams pull apart. On our way out of town, at the bottom of the valley, we pass Yashima's old house. The front doors have been left wide open, his daughter must be out, and there is no one inside. My mother pulls the car over and I get out, let myself in through the gate. Yashima's front doors are weather-beaten wood with glass panes that rattle in the wind. They must have been left open overnight, and no one has noticed. In the mudroom there is frost weaving itself across floor tiles, over a small wooden tabletop, a mound of cashews abandoned in an ashtray, one cup, bath-ringed with old tea, left on a coaster.

Years go by.

My grandfather finally sells the orchard, and he seems lost without it. His hair, which had stayed black into his seventies, whitens in the space between one visit and the next, and for one whole second, across the distance of the driveway, when he opens the door, I don't know who he is. The next winter, my grandmother falls on her bad arm as she's pulling herself to the bathroom in the middle of the night. She needs two months in the hospital, and then, near the end of her stay, working herself along handrails in the corridor outside her room, she loses her grip and fractures a rib. I love the food too much, is the joke she chooses to tell: I couldn't bear the thought of going out into the world and tasting salt again.

In the summer, I leave for college, and my parents grow older through my computer screen. In the fall I am neck-deep in exams, hardly seeing the sun, calling no one. My first winter back, after unpacking my things, I make the drive out alone to my grandparents' house.

It's early January, my parents are already back at work, and I am looking for something to do. I borrow their old Gemini and stuff the hatchback full of junk food and clothes. A long, slow drive, and I am standing in the shadow of persimmon trees, looking up at the lights shining through the pebbled glass of their kitchen windows.

Look at you, my grandfather says, when I walk through the door.

The prodigal grandson, my grandmother says, beaming. She is wheelchair-bound now, but talks tough as ever. She makes a production out of ordering my grandfather around, pointing to things on high shelves and sometimes, at the last moment, changing her mind. My grandfather submits to most of this cheerfully, though from time to time a mood will close over him and he will refuse to hear a thing she says. Tomorrow I am driving her to Yashima's old place for his 三年祭 (the third anniversary of his death). This is part of why I'm here. When I called to say I was making the trip, my grandmother grabbed the phone and asked if I could do it two days earlier. My mother, who drove her to the fiftieth and hundredth-day ceremonies and the first anniversary, warned me to prepare for shouting. My grandfather refuses to go or even to drive her, and the fighting gets worse every time. She accuses him of being heartless, my mother tells me, and childish. And then he blames her for wanting to get drunk in public. I guess this is the easy response, the one that comes first to mind and slips out when he's not expecting it, and that must hurt them both when it does.

Over dinner, while my grandfather is changing the channel on the little TV, my grandmother says: Our grandson drove five hours just to take me fifteen minutes

down the road.

He's a young man, my grandfather says. What's the problem? He loves driving.

Later, he says: Why would anyone feel bad for that guy?

This is during the seven o'clock news. The camera crew is on location outside the home of a disgraced pop idol. From the far side of the road, a small group of his fans are chanting and holding signs to show their support.

My grandmother, turning to me: Your grandpa would send us all to hell if he could.

My grandfather, to her: And you would have us go to all the funerals.

Oh, Toshio, she says. You don't know what you've said.

On the news, the fans are chanting—stay strong, stay strong—and the reporters are recounting his crimes.

Would you send me to hell, Toshio? my grandmother says. Would you do that?

I've had about enough of this, my grandfather says. He looks stricken, how he fumbles his arms through his coat sleeves, how slowly he walks into the hall. My grandmother doesn't move her gaze from her lap. The kitchen door slides open, and then closed.

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I've never heard my grandfather talk about his brothers. But I know that their graves are empty. They came home in 1946 in two wooden boxes each about the size of a head. Inside, there were papers with their dates of death, their final ranks in the army. But of their bodies, there was not even a hair or a tooth—there was nothing but air.

They would have still held a full funeral. The priest would have blessed an empty box. Someone, maybe my grandfather, would have walked at the head of the procession with an empty urn in his arms. They would have buried the emptiness, which is the sort of thing, I think, that must be ignored and confronted, confronted and ignored, and never dies.

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My grandfather is gone the next morning. When I wake up, I walk through the whole house looking for him. My grandmother, who acts as though nothing is

wrong, combs the knots out of her hair, tells me which things to pack in her bag. In the driveway, when I have to lift her from the wheelchair, I stop.

What's wrong? she says.

I don't know if I'm macho enough, I say, and she laughs, but I can see it's forced, how she recognizes the exaggeration and, a second later, tells her muscles to move.

Lift me up, kiddo, she says, and I do.

I take her to Yashima's. The drive feels almost instant: the bright sun, the bare branches of the persimmon trees flitting past, the high mountain ridges above the valley on either side. Two hours later, I pick her up again. There's no one on the road, no one parked in front except the priest who has come up from the city. There should be a group of mourners, some friends and relatives. I had thought that someone, in all these years, would have forgiven him. The house looks the same as ever, nothing has changed, except my grandmother, who waits on the asphalt, unable to hide the exhaustion on her face.

Look at me, she says, I can't make it through the days.

In the back seat, after I settle her in, she holds one hand over her eyes, lets it slide to her chin. A minute later, pulling out of the first turn in the road, I hear it thunk into her lap.

She sleeps.

In the rearview mirror, she is a ghost of herself. She looks pale in the mottled light, and afraid in a way she will never let herself look while awake. I asked my mother once what had brought my grandparents together, and she said she thought it was safety—how my grandmother arrived in the village after having nearly died in the city, bombs crashing down around her, and decided to marry the most dependable man for miles around—and for my grandfather, possibility—how years after the war, in the new world that seemed to be beginning, my grandfather chose the one woman he could find who knew what it was like to leave a place. It could have ended them, these different needs, how each one misunderstood the other, but there was something about their patience for each other that made it work. In my grandparents' bedroom there is a conch shell from Hawai'i, a diorama from Vietnam, and a fur hat from Kamchatka; they really did leave, in their fifties and sixties, if only for a little while each time, my grandfather wide-eyed, holding the camera, my grandmother obliging, pulling their bags behind. And each time they came home to the safety they had built together, the dependable persimmon trees, how they put up half the buildings on the property themselves, starting from dragging logs up the

mountain, the way my grandfather could rustle up friends to help him in anything, in shaving bark off the pillars of their house, in raising them true. It must be that they have had to hold so much that seems contradictory in their minds for so long, having been kids in the war, and through the end of it, and the famine that followed, and the boom years after that, how they can gauge things in two ways, even when it comes to Yashima: the fact that my grandfather has always blamed and not blamed my grandmother, and that she blames and forgives herself.

All these decades, and my grandmother has always been the one to tidy up the family grave, even on the day of her stroke.

Halfway up the road, we drive under a highway bypass that the prefecture is constructing over the valley. In a few years, strangers in fast cars will be able to look out over the town on their way between two minor cities and notice the houses dwindling, farms turning to brush, the whole place swallowed, bit by bit, by trees. For now, the two halves of the bridge are bone-white fingers pointing from the hillsides to the place in midair where they will someday meet. There must be ice on the concrete, how the bottom edge of it is lacquered in the sun, a silver knife. The road is winter-white, then shadowed, then bright. At the top of the road I turn off into my grandparents' drive.

I help my grandmother into the house. I walk through the rooms. On the phone, by the bottom of the stairs, my mother tells me to wait. Trust me, she says, he always comes back.

Always? I say.

Don't worry, she says.

And she's right: I wait and wait, and he comes home at six, just before dark.

We are sitting in the dining room. My grandmother is trying her best to laugh and I am trying my best to make her. The kitchen door rattles open, and my grandfather walks into the hall. He unlaces his boots. He takes off his coat. He must be cold: in the kitchen, he puts on the kettle. In the dining room, he pulls up a chair.

Mutsuko, he says, I wouldn't send you to hell.

That's it? she says.

That's it, he says.

Okay, she says.

Okay.

When the kettle boils, he gets up. He comes back with tea for all of us.