Wedding up in Heaven

Chapter 1

The Village I don’t know the name

It is already years ago that I encountered that young boy and his mother in a village I don’t know the name of in my dream.

I was at the bottom of the Hill/small Mountain when I realized there was a boy aged about 9 or 10 years old and his mother looking at me.

The boy’s skinny brown legs were showing under denim shorts. He was wearing a knitted vest and underneath it was a light yellow shirt.

He was holding both hands close to his face. His black hair was fine and shiny.

The mother - yes I could tell that it was his mother from the resemblance of their face shape and the expression of their subdued eyes and thin colorless lips - was standing still next him. She had more hair than him but this was probably an effect caused by her 80’s style permed hair and was a slight contrast from her subdued look.

They seemed to have secretly agreed with each other to guide me up the mountain.

There were narrow uneven old stone steps leading straight up to the top of the mountain. The steps were right in the middle of a perfect pyramid shaped mountain.

There was a long queue of old ladies all wearing Japanese white Kimonos, each of them putting their palms in front of their closed eyes were walking down the left side of the pathway.

Maybe that side was in the complete shade, and for that reason the old ladies all looked pale blue gray.

Strangely, behind those old ladies, I could glimpse the surface of the lake hit by full sunlight. Under the sunshine I could see the shapes of some women swimming as if that side of the mountain was in a different season from where I was standing.

I heard the boy’s voice saying, “Please, this way” to get my attention back to going up the mountain just following the middle steps.

The boy and mother were walking swiftly up the steps as if they were the wind.

As I nearly reached the top a Buddhist female statue appeared in the flame of the candlelight, standing elegantly putting her middle fingers on her light cheek. Her body seemed curved as she was wearing delicate silk gowns.

I could identify her closed eyes and slightly smiling lips in the shaking flame of the candle in the darkness of the deep night.

I understood that this statue was standing there to protect the souls of stillborn babies and dead children.

The boy and his mother were ahead of me again. They seemed already to have been standing there for a while.

Without saying anything he was inviting me with his right hand as he was opening the Japanese paper sliding door; Shouji.

The light of the fluorescent light was already on and what I saw there was a little shrine for a young girl who seemed to be a similar age to that boy.

In the little wooden photo frame, this shorthaired girl with huge round eyes was sitting in the Japanese style on the Tatami mattress wearing a light peppermint green kimono. A white round chrysanthemum hair accessory looked beautiful against the black thick hair and dark round eyes and her kimono.

In front of the photo Japanese multi coloured origami paper clay, which we call the Thousand Swans (many people do origami together as a form of tribute to someone. It is a symbol of prayer for the person) had been laid.

Packages of sweets and the sweets inside were scattered around.

More likely to be a boy’s toy, but a Japanese plastic robot was laid out too.

Probably a boy from her class left his favorite toy to her assuming she would also like it?

I understood that the boy and his mother’s purpose for guiding me through to the top of the mountain was just to visit her and pray for her.

They waited for me long enough for me to finish the prayer.

Then I realized we were already at the bottom of the mountain where more people were strolling around. There was an amazing oak tree; the season seemed already to be May from the greenness of its leaves.

For a minute I thought it was still daytime, but suddenly it was already the time for the sun to go down.

“What is the name of this village? It seemed very nice, I wish to come back here.” I asked the boy. There was a slight silence and the boy said,

“You don’t have to know such thing, it doesn’t matter, anyway you’d better not miss last the bus now, otherwise you can’t go home”.

I said, “Can you tell me your name please? Because when I visit here again I would like to see you again, as both of you were very kind to me.”

“My name is Yamazaki, anyway do not worry just jump on the bus,” he said very rapidly.

I was slightly dissatisfied as I couldn’t get his full name but assumed that here was a small enough village to find him again by knowing just his family name.

Without me realizing I was barefoot. Before I said anything he said

“ Oh no you barefoot is no good, I assume your shoes are over there…”

He pointed out the huge temple’s spacious gate where the thousands of people who were inside the temple joining the monk’s ceremony had left thousands of shoes in one line.

I was puzzled how he could find my shoes among all those, but he came back swiftly with my pair of black shoes.

I certainly remember up until I put my feet back into my shoes, but then I don’t remember if I caught my bus or not.

Chapter 2

Goshogawra

So that dream took place 8-10 years ago, but it was so vivid that sometimes I even wonder if my body and soul escaped to that village and mountain one night and really experienced it all.

When I first visited Goshogawara / Tsugaru in county Aomori, I was going to visit an old shrine which was built for the purpose of healing the spirit of dead children and still-born babies in winter of 2009.

That place is not so well known as Osorezan (Fear Mountain), which is nowadays quite touristic. even though Goshogawra is the origin of that practice of praying for dead children. Osorezan is located over the sea from Goshogawra / Tsugaru in the county of Aomori.

“No way are you going to visit such a gloomy spooky place, how scary!”

The local shop lady said so to me with fearfulness on her face.

I asked “why?”

“Oh don’t you know there are the separate shrines called Bridal shrines, where parents donate mementoes of the bride or groom once their lost child or dead child reaches the age to be able to get married. There are thousands of dolls and the dead children’s photos and belongings are kept there. Oh such a terrifying place, a gruesome place.”

It made me even more curious about the place as all I knew was their original shrine where they keep Buddhist stone statues called Jizo, not the Bridal Shrine.

I also immediately remembered the event of the dream years ago.

An old man who drove me to the shrine in the snow was checking my face in the front mirror. He seemed to be a kind old man.

He eventually asked me “ Are you going there because you have troubles…?”

I just said, “ Not to worry.”

I first entered the Stone statues shrine.

Here there were thousands of stone Buddhist statues that all had shaved heads though each had a different face in the same way as humans do.

Some of them looked more adult and much taller than others, some of them were as tiny as just born babies. Some of their lips were painted bright red and that made their sex ambiguous.

Each of them was wearing triangle shaped baby bibs, and mismatched hats just in case they felt cold with their bald heads.

An old lady who seemed to be looking after the place came in. I thought I might be told off for taking photographs but she didn’t seem to even notice.

She seemed to be busy unfolding a cloth and folding it back up again.

Above her head there were hundreds of suits. Japanese Kimono Dresses were hanging on a rope stretching from corner to corner of the huge shrine.

It looked as if dead men and women were promenading towards the lights, invited by the sudden sharp winter light, which reached through a little window of the cold shrine.

“I am changing Mr Jizo ‘s costumes from time to time, at least once a year otherwise they look a little tired and untidy. I mixed all sorts of materials to sew them together to make new hats and bibs. Some families make these themselves, but after years they stop coming so that someone has to look after them.

All those clothes here have been left here by the families of those dead adults and children who were commemorated with a memorial service here.

They said they felt guilty throwing the dead’s clothes in a bin so that they brought them here. Look! Here is filled with their belongings! But apparently they feel better just to know someone is looking after their lost one’s belongings.”

“It’s like playing changing clothes for dolls! I always try to make them prettier!

They do look happier though when I give them a new outfit! “

“I come here every Monday. Kindly they pay for me.

People say here is spooky but I feel very peaceful here. There is nothing to be afraid of here…”

I replied, “ I agree with you, but some people looked at me as if I am a strange person who will visit here from far away in the middle of winter and warned me that this is very spooky sad place”

“ Who said that” Her eyes were suddenly clouded by a hint of sadness.

“Local people who live at the bottom of the mountain”

“I see, I knew they were still thinking of here as a dirty poor place which will invite bad luck!

People who say that this place is spooky must be hiding something unfaithful in themselves! “ She raised her voice when she said this then fell silent, mumbling to herself as she kept busy folding back clothes.

“ Its not spooky at all, it’s a very peaceful gentle place…”

I slightly regretted that I had mentioned to her what local people were saying about the shrine.

“ Oh well life is full of events! Living, dying, all sorts! “

As she was saying this she gave me a big smile.

Chapter 3

The Bridal Shrine

As I left the main shrine I went in to the Bride Shrine.

As soon as I stepped in to the Shrine, the coldness of the stone shrine ran through from the back of my shoes to my spine.

I wanted to run away.

There were a few long corridors, which were packed with glass cases containing Brides and Grooms were laid on the shelves.

I smelt the death. I felt can’t breath there, but I decided to look into each glass case. All the glass cases contained the dead person’s photographs. Behind the photographs a portrait of a perfect looking Japanese Bride and Groom was standing.

The Brides’ silky ivory textured face showed under the Japanese veil which was of a silky white material wrapped around their hair in Geisha style, which has volume on the top. The veil is called Tsunokakushi , which means hiding horn. *Tsuno* means 'horns' and the purpose of wearing this headdress was to veil her horns of jealousy, ego and selfishness - attributes that should not be displayed at a wedding in front of the groom and his family. It symbolized her resolve to become a gentle, obedient wife.

But the black eyes of those Brides in the shrine which looked up or down from just under the veil looked so seductive it was as if they were seducing every guest at their wedding. The Shiny black eyes were extra round & big in western style just like Manga’s schoolgirl characters’ eyes.

But in contrast, their lips were very red and thin just as if a thin brush had painted them.

And all of them for some reason had almost no chin and no definition for the chin and neck line which looked as smooth as a white snake. The jaw was extremely small, as they had never opened their mouths once in their life.

Strangely there was no trace that the nose did exist as it was swallowed up by the winter snow landscape of the skin.

Some Brides were holding Japanese small drums on their shoulders and making a gesture of hitting it.

One struck her signature pose of Japanese dance by showing her a wrist and hands from the sleeve of kimono, and tilting her neck appealingly.

The shoulder lines were at a very gentle angle making it seem as if the silk gowns could almost slip down to the floor.

There were slight variations in movement of the Brides if not on their face expression, but every Groom seemed to be just standing still with his huge eyes which you could say may be of a caring husband to be, in his Black and Grey colored Japanese Groom’s Kimono. But maybe never mind that the craftsman put less effort into making the Grooms, as long as he could keep the brides happy as I assume the wedding is more the day of the Brides.

On the corner of the glass case there was a Japanese paper, which contained each groom and bride’s imaginary name -even the bride’s maiden name- and wedding dates were noted with beautiful Japanese calligraphy.

The dead’s life continues up in heaven in the logic of us, the living ones; after their dead child managed to get married by God’s hand, a year or 2 later they gave birth to their first, even managed to get a second child, and they have been also given the name of their mother.

Tiny western looking baby dolls were showing their face underneath the hem of the Japanese wedding dress. Never mind if the nationality of mother and baby was mismatched.

Most of the dolls must have been made by the same craftsman. They were almost the same looking but strangely, by being given a different name, if I looked at the doll with the name they were given they did look like Kyoko is Kyoko, Hitomi is Hitomi.

As it indicates the date at which they died, also from the condition of the dolls, and what that person was wearing with which hairstyle in the photograph, you could guess which era they lived in.

Some young men never came back after they were sent to war.

They were still in the military uniform in their photo.

Next to many of the young men’s photos, there were shiny toy cars and motorbikes displayed. A picture of some teenager proudly posing on the 750cc bike. You could tell they were bad boys from their slicked back quiffed hairstyle with plenty of gel and thinly shaped eyebrows.

Some of them were just newborn babies when they died.

Some children were smiling from the hospital bed. Maybe they never had the chance to to play outside the hospital?

Some girls and boys were from 60 years ago.

Their dead mother and father’s photos were added to the glass case later.

Most of the men aged 20- 50 years old ‘s portraiture looked their best in their suits. But some of them looked odd as head was badly stuck/collaged with separate photographs of suits. Then they looked uncomfortable.

One man had a happy smile another one had a sad smile.

One lady looking as if she was enjoying her life with her smile on her round face , and another one looked painfully shy.

Here seemed too quiet for even for the dead.

I wondered after they have been stacked there for many years day after day, do they know each other a bit more than when they first kept in those glass boxed council flats? They probably wait until the night gets deep to whisper to each other.

Do they invite each other for the wedding?

Even if they do so it’s probably not necessary they become close friends, as they soon find out that they have only one thing in common which is they are dead.

Then I remember thinking what a thrill it would be if I could find that green kimono girl with chrysanthemum hair accessory, the one who appeared in my dream.

Unfortunately I couldn’t find her there.

Maybe her mother changed the photograph of her when she visited her daughter here last time.

After I left the Bridal shrine. I was invited to have tea by a young monk.

He asked me if I am a university student travelling or something?

I said I am 39 years old! And he suddenly seemed more relaxed saying

“ Oh! that means nearly 40! I am the same. We are classmates then! “

A bald old man with a round pair of glasses opened his silver tin lunchbox, after he served me green tea. And the way he shoveled the white rice from it with chopsticks made the cold rice look tastier.

He was facing TV, which was screening this season’s Sumo wrestling, and every now and then I could hear the cheering noise of the audience.

I began to feel as if this old man and the Monk were my family, as if we always had been sitting here drinking tea.

I eventually started to tell him about the son and the mother who appeared in my dream, and my 2 dead aunts who lost their children many years ago.

My upbringing was not Buddhist so that I was not sure if I was entitled to ask him to say a prayer for them.

But he suggested it and I was taken to the Jizo shrine.

He kindly suggested “ Here is cold so that you sit down here near the fire.”

His deep voice echoed in the empty shrine.

Tall Jizo little Jizo, young and old people in the photographs, men’s suits, ladies kimonos, high school boys’ and girls’ uniforms, children’s baseball hats, small shoes, wellington boots, all of them seemed to be listening to the prayer and being pulled under the soil by its power.

In a way it felt humorous when he started praying for the spirit of the son, mother and the girl who was in the green Kimono in the photograph of my dream.

Probably another Wedding up in Heaven was held as planned even on the day of the blizzard that took place on that winter day I visited the Shrine.