Kazuo Ishiguro

A Strange and Sometimes Sadness

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It was the year after we came to England that I gave birth to Yasuko. Perhaps it was the homesickness, I do not know, but it was a troublesome pregnancy. Then I was left so weak after the birth that when Yasuko was barely a few months old, I had to return to hospital. There in a strange bed, far from my daughter, troubled by pain, I slept little during the first nights. They gave me drugs and I drifted between sleep and waking. And at nights I would see clearly before me, as if gazing into a window, my baby girl crying in her bed, arms and legs waving. I would try to go to her but would not reach her and she would cry and cry, so hard I feared she would be sick. In the morning my husband would be at my bedside and I would ask about Yasuko. He would tell me she had cried all night.

But then one night the pain went away. I slept for long hours, through night and day. And once I saw before me, as vivid as before, a picture of Yasuko asleep silently. Her small mouth was slightly open, a tiny fist pressed against her ear. And in the morning my husband told me my little girl had for the first time slept peacefully. I am not by nature superstitious, but I believe we were united then, Yasuko and I, by forces little known to the scientists. And after all, what is so extraordinary in that? For over nine months we had been one and the same being.

I told Yasuko of these things when she came to visit me at the start of the summer. She seemed uninterested, perhaps a little embarrassed. Yasuko is now engaged to be married. She has for two years been living with her boyfriend and although I know such things are accepted these days, I am nevertheless relieved

she will finally marry. She stayed with me three days and I was pleased to see how relaxed she was with me.

While I was telling her of those days after her birth and of those mysterious forces that had linked us then, I was reminded of that other time, when once before in my life I had encountered something strange, perhaps supernatural. That was long ago, back in Nagasaki, and oddly enough involved another Yasuko. I began telling my daughter about that first Yasuko, but was quickly interrupted.

"You've told me before," she said, impatiently. "You named me after her. The one who was killed by the bomb."

"That's right," I replied. "You were so much trouble to me before you were born I gave you that name hoping you'd turn out as quiet as my friend. But then things rarely go as planned."

Yasuko laughed, but I had spoken quite accurately. The first Yasuko was as gentle and kind a person as any I have known. When we were children together in Nagasaki, there were many occasions when I tried to provoke her to lose her temper. But I was never to succeed. When my maliciousness became too much, Yasuko would simply walk away crying to herself. My daughter, however, bore little resemblance to her predecessor. She took after her mother—headstrong and aggressive. I saw she had little interest in hearing about the first Yasuko, so I let the matter drop.

We spoke mainly of little things and the three days went by quickly. At times, however, I was disturbed by her assumption that I was bored and had little to do. She suggested several times that I enrol in an evening class to do some painting. I thanked her for the suggestion and told her I would bear it in mind. We parted on good terms and I was glad to send my regards to her fiancé.

I have another daughter older than Yasuko. She was married four years ago, not long before my husband's death. I am hoping soon to be a grandmother. Neither of my daughters knows much of Japan and neither speaks more than a few words of Japanese. For them, Nagasaki is a place marked on the atlas, their mother's hometown, a place where a bomb once dropped. And why should

it be otherwise? England is their home now. When they grow to my age, they will chat and laugh like the grey-haired lady next door with whom I sometimes converse over the garden hedge. They both of them come and visit me from time to time.

It is almost three months now since Yasuko's visit. Yet my mentioning to her the first Yasuko has awakened many memories, and I have since frequently caught myself pondering over the past. These last few weeks in particular, I have turned my memories over and over.

Yasuko and I, we grew up together in the Nakagawa district of Nagasaki. As I have said already, she was a quiet girl who preferred to spend her time indoors. Unavoidably then, those years of the war were harsh times for her. She could not settle into factory life and the harder girls would tease her. Then her brother died during the early days of the war, a tragedy all the more cruel because she had lost her mother through cancer only three years earlier. And her agony had to continue, for her fiancé had been stationed in the Pacific, and she would wait each day for letters that would not come. During the war years she lived with her father in a house not far from mine, beside a winding mountain path that led towards the dormant volcanoes overlooking the city. I recall many a time finding her withdrawn and quiet when no news had arrived for weeks. Perhaps she would complain then of the way letters got lost or delayed, and I would sympathize, preferring not to mention other possibilities.

Her father was a man I had been fond of ever since childhood. There was always a gentleness around his eyes and he had the same kindly manner as his daughter. In particular, Kinoshita-San had something calm and reassuring about his presence, and I was always glad to be in his company.

Of course these things are years in the past now and there must be much I have forgotten. And yet a handful of scenes come back to me quite vividly. I cannot remember their precise places in time, except that they all took place during the last year of the war, during that hard dry summer. I remember clearly, for

instance, that conversation with Yasuko's father one morning on my way to work. There was a small bridge leading out of Nakagawa where each morning he and I and several others would wait for the tram that would take us into the city. Before the war, Kinoshita-San had been a civil servant, but now he too worked in a factory, one not far from mine. Each morning he would be there on the bridge before me, a small briefcase from his office days clutched under one arm. He had become quite thin by then and his increasing years made him stoop a little. That particular morning, he greeted me with his usual bow and smile, then told me Yasuko had at last received a letter from Nakamura-San.

"He says he's well, although it's very hot out there and the insects have bitten him all over. He also tells us the war is lost."

"Oh? And what do you say, Kinoshita-San? Is the war lost?"

He shook his head a little. "All we can hope for now is that the men will come home safely. And the fighting won't go on so long that we have nothing left."

"Yasuko-San will be relieved the letter came at last."

"Ah yes, but it was seven weeks old. She'll go on worrying. You've been spared such worries, Michiko-San. Or is there perhaps someone you secretly wait for?"

"No," I said, laughing, "there's no one. But I worry about Nakamura-San."

"Ah yes, of course. You were always very fond of Nakamura-San."

"Yes, I'm fond of him. But mainly I worry for Yasuko's sake."

He bowed slightly. "It's good of you to worry for her sake."

He took a deep breath of the morning air. The sky on those summer mornings was always a pale blue, not yet fully day. And there were always crows perched along the tram-lines. They would all vanish with the first tremors from an approaching tram.

"I too worry on Yasuko's behalf," he continued. Then he turned to me with a curious look. "We both of us must worry selflessly, isn't that so, Michiko-San?"

Perhaps I coloured slightly then. "I'm not sure what you

mean, Kinoshita-San."

He continued to regard me with his curious expression, then looked up and raised a hand. "Ah, here's our tram."

The car was always crowded by the time it reached our bridge and invariably we had to stand.

"Kinoshita-San," I said, when the tram was moving again, "I thought you were happy about the match. You made much effort at the time to bring them together."

"That's true," he laughed. "Nakamura's family needed bringing round a little. But you, Michiko-San, you can't have been very happy about my efforts."

"What on earth do you mean, Kinoshita-San?"

He smiled again. "Perhaps it's time we shared our secrets. Of course you wished Nakamura-San to choose Yasuko. But another part of you wished them to remain apart, isn't that so?"

I cannot recall if I found the words of denial. I suspect not. I remember watching for several awkward moments the buildings going by outside. But then I heard him say: "And so it was for me too." He saw my look of surprise and laughed.

"Oh don't misunderstand me, I'm very fond of Nakamura." He laughed again, but this time a little awkwardly.

"But he will leave you with solitude," I said quietly.

He smiled once more and bowed a little. "Old men shouldn't get selfish. I pray with all my heart he'll return safely."

"And I will too."

"You're a good girl, Michiko-San. You deserve a happy life. Is there really no one you secretly wait for?"

This time I managed a denial. Soon his stop approached. He bowed and clutched his briefcase more tightly under his arm. And as on every other morning that summer, I watched his small stooped figure disappear into the morning rush.

One evening around that time—it may even have been that very evening—I had stayed behind in the warehouse to stack up sacking. I was in the basement when I heard a curious rattling noise, like the patter of hail on the roof. I thought it odd, but

carried on working. I became more puzzled when I came upstairs and saw the sunset streaming in through the windows at the far end of the building. It could not then have been hail.

But it was on the tram going home, I heard two men talking. A lone plane, it seemed, had carried out an air-raid that evening, dropping a single bomb somewhere to the east of the city. Apparently no one had been hurt. A curious mission, the man nearest me was saying. What were the Americans thinking of, sending a plane out here to drop one bomb? Perhaps the war was not lost after all. When the man left the tram, I noticed his shirt-sleeve flapping empty and useless. A chill went through me as I sat there in that car, and I stared out of the window at the lights going by outside.

We talked about it, Yasuko and I, about the air-raid I had mistaken for hail. It was one of those evenings we spent strolling in the gardens at Shingokko. Yasuko had been nearer to the spot where the bomb had dropped, yet she had not even heard hail on the roof.

"It seems no one was hurt," I said to her.

"I heard differently, Michiko-Chan. One little boy was killed. A boy of four years old."

"One bomb and one little boy gone," I said, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"No one else was hurt," she continued, "and hardly anything damaged. But the little boy's head was blown clean off him. They say his mother ran down the street holding his body, shouting for a doctor."

I laughed a little. "I can imagine her, running and shouting for a doctor."

Yasuko smiled, but her eyes were sad and empty. "Yes. She thought she must find a doctor quickly or her little boy might die."

The gardens were always at their best at that time in the evening. Things were much cooler then and the sky would be very red towards the west. Summer insects were flying

everywhere in the gloom.

"Do you know," Yasuko said, "I've only ever left Nagasaki twice in my whole life? That was to visit my aunt in Fukuoka. Just think of that. War all around the world and I've hardly left Nagasaki."

"Would you like to have been a soldier, Yasuko-Chan?"

She laughed. Her laugh was always shy and apologetic. "I know it's wrong of me, but I can't pretend I would. There's a girl at the factory who's always saying she wishes she'd been born a man, so she could go out and fight. But I don't understand such things like fighting and war. They happen somewhere far away, in another world. Sometimes I even forget where Nakamura-San has gone, and I start wishing he'd hurry and finish whatever it is he's doing out there. It's wrong, I know, but sometimes I could quite easily forget the war out there."

"Except that bombs keep dropping and food gets scarcer."

"Sometimes I even wonder about the bombs. It's like they keep falling from somewhere strange, from wherever the war is. But you're right. The bombs keep falling and taking away little boys. So there must be a war."

We enjoyed those walks in the evenings. After a long day at the factory we found it a relief to be in each other's company. Sometimes, if the day had not tired me completely, I would walk back to Yasuko's house. On one such evening, we had spent longer in the gardens than intended and it was quite dark when we reached her house. I recall I was still taking my shoes off when I heard Yasuko's voice exclaim from within the house: "Why, Father, what have you been doing?" When I entered the room, I saw the table had been brought out and the cushions set in place. There was Kinoshita-San, sat in a loose kimono, busying himself with the teapot.

"Oh, Father, you've been cooking for us," Yasuko was saying.

"I thought you'd be tired when you came in. Come in and sit down, Michiko-San. What a hot day it's been."

I bowed and sat down, suppressing a smile at the amount of rice

he had cooked. There was enough to feed at least six.

"I bought this fish from Oshima when I passed by his shop this evening. He was out sunning himself and we got chatting."

"Really, Father, what's come over you." Yasuko laughed, covering her mouth with a hand.

We washed and settled down to the supper Kinoshita-San had prepared for us. I had taken but two or three mouthfuls when I noticed Yasuko looking over to me. Then I saw her father looking suspiciously from one face to the other. Yasuko burst into laughter, again covering her mouth with a hand. The fish had been salted so much it was quite impossible to eat. Although I did not mean to be discourteous, I too began to laugh. Kinoshita-San watched us both, then laid down his chop-sticks.

"It's a long time since I prepared fish," he said.

We both laughed freely then. Yasuko got to her feet and said she would prepare something if we would wait a few moments. She left the room still laughing to herself.

"It was kind of you to think of us, Kinoshita-San," I said, smiling at him. He bowed a little and poured me more tea.

"Even a few mouthfuls are enough to work up a real thirst," he remarked. "It's a long time since I prepared fish."

It was warm that night, and he got to his feet to open the large sliding windows that opened on to the garden. He remained standing there, his back to me, hands tucked into the sleeves of his kimono. Eventually I got to my feet to join him. He was looking out into the darkness, deep in thought. The insects were making their night noises amongst the trees at the end of the garden.

"What are you thinking of, Kinoshita-San?"

"I was thinking how it felt to be humiliated by you women. You spoil us, then leave us helpless to feed ourselves. When Yasuko marries, I'll have to eat at Yanagi's. His food is terrible."

"Oh, Kinoshita-San, you disappoint me. You weren't thinking of us at all. You were just practising your cookery."

He turned to me and bowed, his eyes crinkling with the smile.

"Like the rest of the world, I'm preparing for the end of the war."

I laughed, and the smile deepened around his eyes.

"Are you looking forward to the end of the war, Kinoshita-San?"

"What else is there to do?"

"But it may bring you loneliness."

"And happiness also."

"Happiness and loneliness." I gave a sigh. "You must remember to put less salt in the fish."

"Thank you, Michiko-San. You must come here often and teach me. Yasuko just laughs at me."

It was just at that moment Yasuko came back into the room and asked what we were saying about her.

"I was telling Michiko-San how bad you were to me," her father said, and we sat around the table once more.

I visited their house quite regularly during that summer. I cannot recall all the things we talked of, but I remember I always felt comfortable and welcome there. But it was also around that time that I came close to quarrelling with Yasuko. It never developed into an open quarrel, but remained with us for some weeks, somewhere just beneath the surface of things, and it had an uncomfortable way of colouring almost everything we said to each other. It is odd to think now that I felt so involved. After all, it had little to do with me. It began one night after Yasuko and I had got off a tram together. I do not recall where we had been. It must have been fairly late, for as we descended our mountain path, lights were coming on in the city below us. Eventually we found ourselves talking of the war and of Nakamura-San. Then suddenly Yasuko said:

"Sometimes, Michiko, I don't know what to wish for. Sometimes I even wish he wouldn't come back."

I was astonished but said nothing. Yasuko kept her eyes on the ground while we walked. Eventually she said: "I decided the other day. I decided Nakamura-San and I wouldn't marry until

. . . until Father dies."

"Why? But why?"

"Father won't hear of living with us. He says it will hurt his pride to become a burden to us."

"But you may have to wait years. Perhaps another twenty."

"Father's healthy, thank God. But Nakamura-San will have to wait."

"And what if he doesn't choose to wait?"

"Then it must be so. I can't leave my father." She coughed clumsily. "He'll have to choose someone else."

"But how can you sacrifice yourself so stupidly? Your father will manage on his own."

"But don't you understand? There'll be nothing left in his life if I leave him. Mother gone, Jiro too, I'm all he has now."

"But, Yasuko, that's his problem, not yours. Your father has no right to do this, to make you the sole meaning of his existence. If he hasn't found anything else in his life, then he's only himself to blame."

"Oh, but he's lost so much. His friends, his family, his career . . ."

"Then he'll need to find something else. He can't rely on you to sacrifice yourself."

Perhaps my tone had become too harsh. Yasuko fell silent then. We walked to the bottom of the hill without speaking. Once I asked her what she was thinking and she said quietly: "I can't leave my father, Michiko-Chan."

We must have parted rather coldly that night, for I remember our next few meetings had a reserve about them quite foreign to us. We did not openly discuss the matter of her marriage for a long time.

One morning I was waiting on the bridge as usual with Kinoshita-San, when I noticed his right hand bandaged quite heavily. I asked him what he had done to it, and was surprised to see how embarrassed he became. He giggled a little and said it was just a small accident he had had. That made me a little curious,

and my curiosity grew when once we had boarded the tram I noticed his efforts to conceal the hand from me. I resisted the urge to question him further, but I remembered his bandaged hand the next time I saw Yasuko. We were in the Shingokko gardens again, and we had sat down on a small wooden bench to watch the sunset. Like her father, Yasuko showed embarrassment at my mentioning the subject. This time, however, I was determined not to let the matter drop, and eventually Yasuko said:

"It was all my fault. He cut his hand trying to pick up the pieces of a glass bowl. You see, I threw it against the stove."

I was astonished. I do not recall what I said then.

"Father came in quite late," she went on. "I'd prepared a meal, but he said he wasn't hungry and wanted to go to bed." Yasuko laughed nervously.

"So you got angry with him and smashed the bowl?" I still could not believe it.

"I just lost my temper and threw it. Wasn't that silly of me?" She was looking down at her clasped hands as if she were being scolded. "It was an old bowl too. Mother used to use it."

I must have made some more bewildered remarks. Yasuko sat there quietly, and I thought she would say nothing more of the incident. But eventually she said: "I was thinking then about what you said the other night. It seemed then as if you'd been right and I became angry with him. I was angry because he'd put me into this position and because he had nothing left but me and because everything was his fault and he'd become so useless and so helpless and I became angry and threw the bowl." She laughed again.

I did not reply then. I think I was searching for something suitable to say. And it was then that it happened, that strange thing, just then as I glanced towards my friend. The sun had fallen behind the skyline, and yet afterwards I felt certain it could not have been to do with the fading light we sat in. I saw Yasuko staring towards me with an expression so ghastly it completely distorted her face. The eyes were staring so frantically they

trembled with the tension. Her jaw was quivering, her teeth starting to bare. A cry of alarm escaped me then and I grasped her shoulders. Perhaps I shook her quite roughly.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Michiko, what's wrong?" And when I looked again, apart from a puzzled look, the face was gentle, beautiful, Yasuko's face once more.

"Michiko, why are you looking at me like that?"

"But just now you looked so . . . so ill." I laughed, for I think I had become quite confused by then. "I thought you were having some sort of fit."

"Michiko, don't be unkind. I know I'm no beauty."

I decided to let it drop and merely laughed again. But the experience had quite unnerved me. Yasuko started to talk about her factory, but I was hardly listening. Then I heard her say:

"Once the war's over, we won't have to work in factories all day long. I'm looking forward to that. What will you do after the war, Michiko? Will you teach again?"

"I hope so."

"And will you paint? You mustn't ever give that up."

"Yes," I said, smiling, "I look forward to painting again. And what about you, Yasuko? What will you do?"

"I'd like to have a family. I love children."

"And is that all?"

"That's a lot, Michiko. And that's all I ask for. To have children, and that bombs won't come and take them away."

We sat there silently while the evening grew darker. "So you've changed your mind about not marrying," I said.

"I don't know. Oh, I don't know." She smiled tiredly. Then she looked down at her hands again and spoke in a rather forced voice: "I know you and Nakamura-San were very close. It's good of you not to be jealous."

We sat a few moments longer in silence. Finally, I said:

"I wish all the best for you, Yasuko, but I don't envy you. I don't want to marry yet. To be able to paint again, to be a teacher again, these things are important to me now."

"And will you never have a family?"

"Perhaps. One day. But there are other things that are important to me."

"I wish the war would end soon," Yasuko said.

I think we talked on for several more minutes. Perhaps we discussed things of importance, I do not remember. Eventually we got to our feet, ready to go home. I thought then of the way I had seen Yasuko's face, and a shudder went through me. I looked at her again, but I could find no trace of that ghastly expression I had seen earlier.

"What's wrong, Michiko?" she asked, noticing my look. "You don't seem very well."

"I must be tired," I said. "I've hardly slept these last few days."

She expressed concern about my health, but I just laughed, thinking it rather ironic. I did not go back to her house that evening and we parted there in the gardens.

I was never to see Yasuko again. The next day the bomb fell. The sky was strange, the clouds were huge, and there was fire everywhere. Yasuko died and so did her father. Others died. The man who sold fish on the corner, the woman who used to cut my hair, the boy who delivered the newspapers. I told no one of my experience the night before in the Shingokko gardens. It was not until several months later I learned Nakamura-San had been killed in combat, perhaps two weeks before the bomb fell on Nagasaki.

The bomb gave me no serious injury and I bear no scars from it today. My daughters were born healthy, not handicapped. I have no bitterness for those who dropped it. For it was war, and war is a strange affair. So much is impossible to ever understand.

About a year ago, Yasuko—that is, my daughter—came to visit me with a petition to sign against nuclear weapons. She mentioned various facts and figures, but never mentioned Nagasaki. I suspect she had forgotten I was there. I gave her my signature

and she took it away with her somewhere. I never discovered what became of it. Perhaps it went out and entered the world out there where such decisions are made. Perhaps it made some difference, who knows? I have little to do with such things now.

It quite suits me to live alone in my pretty English house. This is a quiet area and the neighbours are pleasant. A tall grey-haired woman lives next door, and she tells me her husband is a banker. I often see her from my window, moving around her garden. Just lately, the apples have been falling from her trees and each day I see her examining the fallen apples and taking some away in a basket. Once we were talking across the hedge, and she went into her house and returned with a large Chinese vase. There were inscriptions on it she wanted me to read. Although I told her several times I did not read Chinese, she did not seem to understand and continued to point out the characters to me.

Until my daughter's visit at the start of the summer, I had not thought about Yasuko—the first Yasuko—for many years. But since then she has crossed my mind often. My memory of her is not clouded with nostalgia, nor does it bring me pain. Rather, it brings me an oddly disturbing kind of sorrow, a strange and sometimes sadness I find hard to place. I often recollect her face, the way I saw it that night, and I think perhaps it was a premonition not just of the atomic bomb, but that Yasuko had seen something at that moment—something in my own face. I often wonder what she would be doing now had she lived.

I find myself thinking also of her father, and I feel ashamed at the way I judged him then. How could he be blamed for the situation he found himself in? Such things are beyond our control and it is futile to apportion blame.

I spend a lot of my time reading here at my table. It is good for my English and should I return to Japan one day, I will perhaps teach English. But then I have no immediate plans to go back. I have grown quite fond of this country, despite its cold and drizzle. And besides, my daughters are here. I have even thought

at times of taking up painting again. Indeed, I have gone so far as to buy some brushes and paints. It is many years since I have felt the urge to paint, but I am sure it will come back to me.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are due to *Bananas* for "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Biographical Notes

KAZUO ISHIGURO was born in 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan, and came to Britain in 1960. He attended the University of Kent at Canterbury, then took an M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Previous occupations include community work in a problem area of Glasgow, and working in a Cyrenian house for homeless people in London. He plays various musical instruments, and enjoys the cinema and travel.