

LYNNE KUTSUKAKE

Mating

EVER SINCE HIS WIFE HAD planted the notion of Mitsuo's loneliness in his mind, Toshiyuki Nakai found that images of his grown son floated unbidden before his eyes with increasing frequency. These images came to him at odd times throughout the day, without any apparent reason or connection to what he was doing. He might be seated at his desk scanning the latest sales spreadsheet when he would suddenly picture Mitsuo trudging home to his dark, empty apartment. Or, in the middle of the weekly managers' meeting, when Yamakawa-san was reading the same monotonous business report he always did, Toshiyuki might close his eyes and see his son's head bowed over a bowl of instant noodles, which he ate in his blank, unadorned kitchen. Lately, while standing in the crowded Tokyo commuter train he took home every evening, Toshiyuki found he was repeatedly assailed by the image of Mitsuo lying in bed by himself, curled over on one side, his knees drawn up to his chin like a child.

But while Toshiyuki felt a growing heaviness in his heart each time he thought about his son, tonight's event filled him with a not inconsiderable amount of dread.

He left the office as early as he could—at the last minute a colleague had wanted to go over some details for a new marketing plan, but Toshiyuki managed to beg off until the next day, explaining without elaboration that he had an important appointment and promising to take the document home to read. By the time he arrived at the Dai'ichi Hotel and made his way to The Azalea Room, where the seminar was being held, there was a long lineup. He groaned inwardly, recalling how anxious Yumiko had been. "Try to get there early if you can," she'd urged repeatedly this morning as she helped him on with his raincoat and handed him his briefcase. "Remember, this is for Mitsuo. We want to get good seats."

Toshiyuki joined the line, and immediately two middle-aged women came and stood behind him. They were talking in loud excited voices, and

one of them pressed up so close he could feel her warm breath on the back of his neck every time she laughed. As they had arranged, Yumiko was to wait for him inside.

The Azalea Room was spacious and brightly lit, large enough to hold a good-sized wedding reception, the function it usually served on weekends and holidays. Round tables covered with white linen filled the room, and in the middle of each table was a slender silver stand holding a numbered card. Over to the far right, at “no. 24,” Toshiyuki saw Yumiko waving her arm at him. Normally his wife was not the type to flap her limbs with such abandon like an excited teenager, but these past few weeks Toshiyuki had noticed she was acting bolder and more direct, even at home.

“You made it just in time,” Yumiko murmured in a low voice as he sat down next to her. “Here, let me pin your badge on.”

He lowered his head in silent greeting to the couple sitting across the table and they bowed in return, their name badges—Mr. and Mrs. Yamaguchi—lightly grazing the top of the table as they bent forward. Through the doorway, Toshiyuki could see more and more people streaming into the room. The tables were filling up rapidly; it would be a big crowd tonight, a full house. The two women he’d seen in the lineup were on the opposite side of the room, yet even from here he could hear their loud laughter.



They were here because of something Yumiko had said one night several months ago just as they were about to go to sleep. “Lonely,” she’d whispered hoarsely, following this with a heavy sigh. “So lonely.”

At first Toshiyuki assumed she meant herself. Mitsuo was their only child and his decision to move to his own apartment almost two years before meant that the house was quieter than ever.

“It’s normal to feel lonely,” he said, trying his best to show sensitivity. “You need to get out of the house more.”

“No, not me. I’m talking about Mitsuo.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said: Mitsuo’s lonely.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No, of course not. Mitsuo doesn’t want us to see his loneliness, he’s trying to protect us.” Yumiko paused. “He needs someone.”

“He’s still got lots of time.”

“Thirty-four is not young. But it’s more than that.”

In the darkness Yumiko shifted her weight and turned over on her side. Toshiyuki heard her sigh several times, the last time a long, noisy rush

of air, almost as if she were trying to exhale all the disappointment she felt. After a moment, she said, “Do you really believe your son is happy?”



Toshiyuki didn't usually stop to think about things like happiness, but he definitely counted himself blessed in marriage and family. It had been an arranged marriage, nothing unusual for his generation, and it had worked out uncommonly well. Yumiko had been a good wife to him and a loving, tender mother to Mitsuo. Toshiyuki, in turn, felt comfortable in the belief that he was a solid provider. Even after so many years, he still enjoyed his job in the electronics firm where he had risen to a senior management position; he liked the invigorating stimulus of the workplace. Of course, work could also be subject to sudden shifts and unexpected changes—there'd been more than a few rocky times—but that was inevitable in the world of business. His marriage, on the other hand, had been a source of stability, like a thick heavy pole planted firmly in the water, against which he could measure the rise and fall of the tide, the tug of the waves left and right. Yes, marriage was a good thing. As a father, it was only natural to hope—to assume—that his son would eventually settle into a similar equilibrium.



After the lights in The Azalea Room dimmed and brightened three times in quick succession, the hum of conversation subsided and everyone watched a tall, trim woman enter from a side door and march toward the podium. The woman tapped her finger lightly on the microphone.

“Good evening, everyone, and welcome. My name is Aiko Mori, president and founder of Concerned Parents of Unmarried Offspring.” The woman spoke in the crisp confident manner of someone used to addressing large audiences. She wore a dark purple suit with a short fitted jacket that emphasized her narrow waist and slim hips, and her hair, which was cut very short, had a glossy sheen that reflected the light whenever she moved her head. Toshiyuki was reminded of the sleek head of a seal. “Tonight,” Aiko Mori continued, “is an important beginning for you and for your children. Tonight is the beginning of a journey toward happiness.”

A hush fell over the room, intensified by the dramatic pause in Aiko Mori's speech. Toshiyuki noticed several people nodding their heads. He stole a sideways glance at Yumiko but she was facing straight ahead, perfectly still, her neck stretched forward as if pulled by an invisible wire.

“Happiness is a right,” Aiko Mori continued, “a right enjoyed by every child, every human being. The bound duty of the good parent is to help your son or daughter find that path to happiness. All of you have taken the first step toward assuring their participation in the single most important passage of life: the transformative act of marriage.”

Aiko Mori had a great deal to say about marriage, or what she preferred to call “life partnering.” Many factors in contemporary society made it difficult for young people to engage successfully in “life partnering” on their own: the rise in the number of working women, the stagnant domestic economy, the high cost of living, increased sexual freedom, even changing dietary habits—all of these conditions were potential impediments.

Toshiyuki took the opportunity to look around the room more closely. Men were definitely in the minority here. He assumed that most of the men were accompanying their wives, like Mr. Yamaguchi, who was seated across from him, or like himself for that matter. One man a few tables over was staring blankly at the tablecloth in front of him and another had his eyes shut. But everyone else in the room—male and female—looked downright spellbound.

As soon as Aiko Mori stepped away from the microphone, a flock of attendants dressed in identical blue suits herded the participants into two groups: the “boys” and the “girls.” The rules were simple. The parents of daughters were handed a pink paddle with a number in the middle, and told to seat themselves at the corresponding table. Their counterparts, clutching blue paddles, were given envelopes containing a list of their table assignments. Each visit was timed; when the chime rang they were to move to the next table on their list.

For several minutes the pink and blue paddles bobbed unsteadily as the participants jostled into place, bowing each time they nearly bumped into each other.

Toshiyuki followed Yumiko as she crossed the floor toward the first table on their list. Instead of her usual handbag, she was carrying a large brown leather bag that he had never seen before. They bowed to the woman seated alone at the table, Mrs. Sato, who rose halfway and nodded solemnly in return. She had an anxious expression on her face, as if she were about to be interviewed by the police.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Yumiko produced a stiff document folder from her bag, and with businesslike briskness extracted the photographs of their son. She placed them on the table facing Mrs. Sato.

Toshiyuki had never seen the first photo. It was Mitsuo on an outing of some kind, maybe with his company. His son was wearing a red plaid shirt and beige alpine hiking pants. His arms were folded casually across

his breast, and he stood erect and tall in front of a signpost indicating fifty metres to the summit of Mount Hakuba. Mitsuo's normally pale face shone with an appealing mixture of health, satisfaction and confidence. Behind him the faraway ridges of the Nagano mountains looked like the furry backs of large sleeping animals.

When, he wondered, had he last seen his son looking so happy and carefree?

"This is Mitsuo on a hiking trip," Yumiko began.

"Ahhh, hiking is a nice hobby, very healthy," said Mrs. Sato. She fanned herself rapidly with her pink paddle.

"Mitsuo has many hobbies," Yumiko continued. "Reading, for instance. American mystery novels are a big favourite of his. And going to the movies. He is especially fond of French films."

"Ahhh, foreign films."

"French films," Yumiko corrected emphatically, her mouth set in a tight smile.

Toshiyuki wondered how on earth she could feel so confident that Mitsuo went to French films. How did she know? Did Mitsuo call her up to discuss books and cinema? It struck Toshiyuki that, as adults, he and his son had never sat together in a movie theatre.

"What about Tomoko? What kind of hobbies does she have?"

"Tea." Mrs. Sato stopped fanning herself and drew her shoulders back smartly. "Of course, tea ceremony is more than just a hobby."

Mr. Sato, it seemed, had wisely decided to stay away this evening, and Toshiyuki couldn't help envying him. Although Yumiko had been insistent on Toshiyuki's participation, she was doing quite well on her own. She and Mrs. Sato talked for several more minutes before the chime rang signaling them to move to the next table.

"What a waste of time," Yumiko whispered into Toshiyuki's ear, tugging his jacket so he was forced to bend closer. "I wouldn't let that Tomoko within ten yards of our Mitsuo. Did you notice that one of her eyes is slightly smaller than the other? Shouldn't they screen participants better?"

At their next table they were greeted by a frail-looking elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Iozumi, who Toshiyuki at first thought were grandparents. No. They had come in the hopes of finding a husband for their daughter, who, despite a girlish pageboy and the best efforts of a professional photographer, looked old enough to be Mitsuo's aunt. To make matters worse, the poor thing had a prominent mole on the side of her right nostril. Without looking at Yumiko, Toshiyuki knew that she had her lips set in a "waste of time" grimace.

Over the next two hours they traveled from table to table, exchanging name cards and showcasing their son. Yumiko had quickly perfected her patter, introducing Mitsuo's vital statistics as smoothly as a saleswoman promoting a new line of kitchenware. Toshiyuki listened with not a little admiration. It was disappointing, however, that so few of the female candidates met with Yumiko's approval. Too old, too tall, too immature, too little education, too homely. While some of the other parents had expressed interest in Mitsuo as a potential son-in-law, Yumiko didn't like any of the daughters.

At ten o'clock they approached their final table, where an elegant woman wearing an expensive-looking burgundy jacket sat alone. She rose to greet them, bowing politely, and introduced herself as Mrs. Honda. Around her throat, she had tied a bright yellow scarf that accentuated the graceful curve of her long neck. Her smooth, unlined skin made it hard to believe she was old enough to have a grown daughter.

As soon as they took their seats, Mrs. Honda wasted no time in pushing the photographs of her daughter across the table. Keiko Honda smiled over and over in a series of large-format glossy prints that featured her in different poses and a variety of expensive fashion attire. She was a striking young woman with large brown eyes, deep dimples and high sculptured cheekbones. Toshiyuki noticed that Yumiko lingered over each photograph in a way she hadn't with any of the other candidates.

"I think everything you need to know is in Keiko's resume," Mrs. Honda said, pointing her finger to a sheet of paper encased in clear plastic that was displayed on the table. "I'd be happy to answer any questions."

"What a lovely girl," Yumiko began.

"Not at all," Mrs. Honda murmured modestly.

"I see she attended Keifu College. What did she study there?"

"English Literature mainly, but she also studied some French and German. Keiko really enjoys foreign languages."

"Mitsuo, too!" Yumiko's voice shot up a notch. "He likes American novels and French movies."

"My goodness, that sounds like Keiko!" Mrs. Honda's yellow scarf fluttered like large soft petals. "She wrote her senior essay on Hemingway. And, of course, she loves anything French. Where did Mitsuo learn his French? In university?"

"He hasn't really studied it. Not formally."

"Keiko doesn't like formal study, either. We sent her to Paris for a summer when she was in college, and since then she's been back three times. She'll probably go again this summer. We enrolled her in French language

school, but she tells me that most of her learning is outside the classroom. My husband grumbles that it's too expensive, but he can't refuse her."

"It sounds like she has a wonderful life."

"No, it's not wonderful. Not at all." Two little frown lines briefly marred Mrs. Honda's smooth brow. "She needs to settle down and have children. You can't go traipsing off to Europe your whole life."

Mrs. Honda reached across the table and picked up the formal shot of Mitsuo taken last New Year's in a professional studio. She held it at arm's length, studying it in silence, and then picked up the hiking picture and did the same. Toshiyuki was conscious that he was holding his breath, waiting anxiously for her assessment.

"A nice-looking young man," she said finally. "You say he likes France?"

"Oh, very much."

Toshiyuki glanced at Yumiko. Shouldn't they explain that Mitsuo had never actually been to France? He'd never been outside of Japan. But as if reading his mind, Yumiko refused to let him catch her eye. She focused her gaze intently at Mrs. Honda.

"Young people think nothing of traveling half-way around the globe," Mrs. Honda said, sighing softly. She continued to stare at Mitsuo's photograph, which she still held in her hands. "They're all spoiled, don't you think?"

"Oh." Yumiko looked bewildered.

"Spoiled and selfish. Just look at what we do for them, coming to events like this. Keiko is simply impossible. You have no idea what a terrible time I had getting her to pose for the photographer." Mrs. Honda paused. "What about Mitsuo? Did he cooperate?"

"Mitsuo? We haven't told him what we're doing."

There was a moment of silence before Mrs. Honda began laughing. She brought her hand up to cover her mouth. "He doesn't know!"

"No, I thought it might be upsetting." Yumiko stuck out her lower lip a fraction of an inch, a look Toshiyuki had often observed, a defensive pout she unconsciously assumed whenever she thought she was being attacked.

"That's certainly one way of handling things." Mrs. Honda laughed even harder. "I see you're the practical type."

Yumiko tensed her jaw.

"Well, I believe in being practical, too. I told myself I'd come tonight and gather as much data as I can. Aiko Mori has such a good reputation, I was very hopeful. But I must say," Mrs. Honda bent forward across the table and whispered, "quite frankly, some of the candidates here are a big

disappointment. Given the fees being charged, I expected to find more doctors and lawyers, dentists even, you know, a higher class of candidates.”

She suddenly turned to Toshiyuki. “Where did you say Mitsuo works?”

“Kita Chemical.”

“You’ve heard of it, haven’t you?” Yumiko said quickly.

“I’m not sure. The pharmaceutical company?”

“They mainly make agricultural applications,” Toshiyuki explained.

“They’re Japan’s leading producer of fertilizer,” Yumiko added. “With overseas offices throughout Asia and even one in Europe.”

“Fertilizer.” Mrs. Honda wrinkled her nose. “I see.”

Yumiko began speaking faster. “Mitsuo has done very well. Salaries at Kita Chem are excellent, you know, with generous bonuses twice a year.”

“No doubt.” A faint smile rose on Mrs. Honda’s lips. “I’m sure he’s very good at what he does.”

Around the room some of the other groups had started to break up and were getting ready to leave.

“Oh, it’s time to go.” Mrs. Honda gathered Keiko’s photographs and slid them into her carrying case. “It’s been nice meeting you. Good luck with Mitsuo.”

Toshiyuki began doing the same, picking up the photographs of Mitsuo that lay scattered across the table. He turned to hand them to Yumiko to put in her bag, but she was glaring at Mrs. Honda.

“Such an attractive young woman!” Yumiko’s voice was loud enough that several women nearby turned around. Mrs. Honda cocked her head slightly and gave Yumiko a puzzled look. Her lips were puckered as if she were uncertain whether she should smile or not.

“A beautiful girl! No, *gorgeous!*” Now Yumiko was shouting. At the surrounding tables all conversation had stopped and the room was suddenly very still. “But you can’t help wondering what’s wrong with her, can you? I mean, there must be *some* reason she isn’t already married.”

“What are you driving at?” Mrs. Honda’s scarf had come undone, one end hanging untidily at the side of her neck.

“Nothing.” Yumiko picked up her brown bag and headed straight for the exit, brushing past the two blue-suited assistants who were rushing toward their table.



They walked to the train station in silence. The wind was cold and Toshiyuki turned up his collar and dug his hands deep into his pockets. He glanced at Yumiko from time to time, but she gave no indication that she felt like talking or that she even noticed him looking at her. She had pulled her scarf up to cover her cheeks and mouth, so all he could see was half her face. Bending her head, she sliced into the wind with brisk, determined strides. The clicking of her heels on the cold pavement echoed inside his head, a steady tap tap tap that made his thoughts bounce like hard loose beads. He considered what words of encouragement he should offer. The evening had not been good, but maybe they could sign up for another session or go to a different company. He thought about saying these things aloud to Yumiko, but decided in the end that silence was better.

As soon as they reached the entrance to the station, they were surrounded by people again. Toshiyuki slowed his pace as they headed for the ticket turnstiles, and reached into his pocket for his commuter pass. Yumiko would have to purchase a ticket. They stopped and faced each other.

“We shouldn’t have come,” Yumiko said quietly. She was looking past his shoulder, not at him.

“We can try again,” he said.

“No,” she repeated firmly. “We shouldn’t have come. We should never have come.” Then without waiting for a reply, she walked over to the automated ticket machine and took her place in a long line behind a young couple. The boy, who was tall and skinny, held his girlfriend in a tight embrace and every so often he would tickle her under the arms and make her giggle. “Stop it!” the girl said, squirming excitedly. Although the couple bumped into Yumiko several times, she didn’t step back or even flinch. Toshiyuki could feel the stiffness in her short thick back.

As expected for this hour of the night, their commuter train was packed, and they had to stand for the first several stops before a seat finally opened up. Yumiko sat down and Toshiyuki stood in front of her, hanging on to the overhead strap with both hands. She closed her eyes and let her head hang forward heavily. Soon her body was swaying rhythmically to the steady motion of the train. Toshiyuki envied her. He didn’t know if she was asleep or only pretending to sleep, but he admired her ability—her determination—to shut out the rest of the world.

The brown leather bag containing Mitsuo’s photographs was on the floor under Yumiko’s seat, tucked between her legs, held firmly upright by her muscular calves. Even at rest, it seemed to Toshiyuki, she protected the bag’s contents.

He looked down at Yumiko’s head, and located the whorl near the back of her crown, a slightly flattened spot the size of a small coin. Un-

like the rest of her hair, which she dyed a uniform black, the short strands that spiraled out of this spot were grey, as if they had stubbornly refused to conform to her wishes. He felt an inexplicable tenderness for this secret spot, a sudden urge to protect it with the palm of his hand.

It was not easy to be a mother. Or a father.



For a brief period in high school, Mitsuo had scared them half to death. One day in the middle of term during the crucial year leading up to the university entrance exams, he abruptly announced that he wasn't going to school anymore. There had been no hint of problems, of any particular difficulty or distress. His grades were less than stellar, it was true, but perfectly satisfactory nonetheless. If anything, Mitsuo struck them as better adjusted than he had been in middle school. But the situation quickly grew worse. He didn't want to see his friends, he didn't want to talk to anyone. Eventually he refused to come out of his room at all. Behind his locked bedroom door, he withdrew into a private world of music and computer games, inexplicably curling further and further inward like a snail retracting its soft, dark head.

As Mitsuo would not leave his room even to eat, Yumiko left his meals on a tray outside his bedroom door. In the morning she would find the tray in the same spot neatly piled with empty dishes and a "thank you" note written in Mitsuo's small cramped script, as impersonal as if he were addressing a maid. From the telltale signs he left, they knew he came out after they had gone to sleep. Toshiyuki imagined that in the stillness of night, Mitsuo roamed freely through their house like a ghost.

They suspected he was the victim of bullying at school. From the time he was small, Mitsuo had been a nervous boy, with a tentative, wide-eyed look, as if he was waiting for someone to poke him with a sharp pencil tip or stick a dead cockroach in his lunch box. In adolescence he'd grown into a tall, broad-shouldered young man, but that look in his eyes had never changed. His teachers, however, claimed they had witnessed nothing unusual. The district school psychologist was no help at all, merely reciting a litany of pat phrases: "hormones," "adolescent angst," "panic attacks," "fear of growing up."

No matter how late Toshiyuki returned home from the office, he would find Yumiko sound asleep at the kitchen table, her head cradled in her arms. He knew she was waiting not for him but for Mitsuo, hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of his shadow when he emerged after darkness. Afraid to disturb her, Toshiyuki sometimes stood for as long as twenty

minutes staring at his wife, memorizing the curls of hair that fell forward over her arms, listening to her soft breathing. It was then that he noticed the whorl, the spot where her hair swirled like a tiny ferocious eddy. When Yumiko did wake up, he could tell by the dark shadows under her eyes and the long creases on her cheeks that she had cried herself to sleep. At those moments, though he knew it was wrong, his feelings about his son verged on hate.

“You never talk to your son.” He heard Yumiko’s reproachful voice. “That’s why this happened.”

Nonetheless it was his own voice that reverberated loudest in the dark chambers of his head, chastising him, chasing him down. You don’t deserve to be a father. You don’t deserve to be a husband. Not only was he unable to reach his son or comfort his wife, he didn’t even know how not to be a stranger in his own house.

Almost ten months to the day, Mitsuo emerged from his room and began taking steps to reintegrate into the outside world. He lost that year, although in the long run repeating an extra year of high school probably helped him get accepted into Reimei University, a place that a few years earlier they had assumed was beyond his reach. Toshiyuki often wondered what had really happened during that brief, strained period, that interlude of utter unhappiness. What had happened to all of them? Mitsuo never talked about it, and Yumiko and Toshiyuki never asked. They couldn’t ask. It was as if a heavy oak door had clicked firmly shut.

Toshiyuki felt sure that eventually Mitsuo would find his own way, just as he’d managed to pull himself out of his depression. Just as he had summoned the will to return to school and pick up his life where he had left off. It had taken courage, Toshiyuki knew that.

It wasn’t easy to be a son.



When the seat beside Yumiko finally became free, Toshiyuki sat down.

“Are we there yet?” Yumiko’s eyelids fluttered open sleepily.

“Almost. Two more stops.”

With that she shut her eyes again.

Toshiyuki closed his eyes, too. The steady clickaty-clack of the train wheels over iron tracks, the long ride home. He recalled a night over thirty-five years ago when a much younger Yumiko had sat with her shoulder pressed against his, sound asleep. They had spent the whole Sunday at the zoo, standing in line for over two hours to get a glimpse of the newly ar-

rived pandas, then racing off to see the lions, the giant gorillas, the hippos, the giraffes. They had wanted to see everything. By the end of the day they were dizzy with exhaustion, and on the train going home, Yumiko had fallen asleep instantly. At the time they had been married less than a month, and Toshiyuki, tired as he was, had been unable to sleep, feeling bound by duty to stay awake and watch over her. He had marveled at the sight, the touch, of the young woman—his wife!—leaning against him. If only they could ride the train forever, he remembered thinking, shoulder to shoulder, the scent of Yumiko's hair filling his nostrils.



He felt a poke in his ribs. Their station was next. Yumiko had pulled the brown leather bag containing Mitsuo's pictures onto her lap and was sitting poised on the edge of her seat ready to get up. She looked refreshed—her brief nap had done her good it seemed—and oddly expectant, like a schoolgirl clutching her book satchel. As soon as the train began to slow, Yumiko got up and stood at the doors. Over the PA system the conductor's nasal voice announced the name of their station.

Yumiko suddenly turned her head and gave Toshiyuki a quick, shy smile. It lasted only a second, then other people wanting to get off at the station crowded behind her. The train shuddered to a stop, a bell rang and again the conductor's voice cut through the air.

Toshiyuki leapt to his feet and pressed his body through the crowd, like a swimmer pushing through surf toward the shore.