

Record of a Living Being

by Dominic Preziosi

I ran into Kurosawa on the corner. He wasn't wearing the sunglasses or hat I'd seen in photographs, but I knew it was him. We were outside a bookstore very much like the Strand in New York; there were the same steel carts of one-dollar cast-offs and remainders, and signs in the window promising miles of books within. He suggested we enter. I was on my way to an appointment and hadn't planned on stopping to browse, but given his achievements and stature I didn't think it was an offer I should pass up.

He preceded me through the doors, and at the bag check presented the simple canvass tote I only now noticed he carried. Inside was a compact folding umbrella and a short round thermos containing, he told me, some rice and cucumber. "I don't ordinarily bring food," he said apologetically, though why he adopted this demeanor I don't know. I told him it was all right, and that I didn't mind, and for this he seemed thankful.

I followed him into the stacks, which stretched out before us, row upon row, like freight cars in a coupling yard. The store was thick with customers, and their presence, combined with the bright lights hanging from the ceiling, made the place unpleasantly warm. I unbuttoned my jacket. Even in my discomfort, though, I felt no particular annoyance; it was hot and crowded and I might be late for my appointment, but I knew, following the great Kurosawa deeper inside, that this was where I should be.

We went down one particularly narrow aisle, where the high shelves on either side of us stretched upward toward the unseen ceiling; they might have climbed all the way to the sky, for all I knew, since no matter how far back I craned my neck I could not see where they ended. He stopped before a row of books shelved at roughly eye level. I watched as he extended a finger and traced the

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spines of each in turn, exhibiting the brusque attention of an experienced doctor unworried about a patient's condition, but who conducts a careful examination nonetheless.

To this point, something had been nagging at me, something I couldn't quite place or identify, and it was only now, as Kurosawa moved on down the aisle, that it made itself clear. All of the books were in Japanese. Not just those shelved in this aisle, but every book, throughout the store. Moreover, every one of the employees--each wearing a navy-blue tennis shirt bearing the store's logo on the right breast pocket--was Japanese, as were all of the customers. It struck me, then, that I had somehow been picked up and transported to the shopping district of a large city somewhere on the main island of Japan.

Kurosawa turned to me and smiled. "It's nothing you should worry about," he said, as if reading my mind. He beckoned me closer and indicated I should walk alongside him, not behind him, so that we might proceed as contemporaries, or even friends. I welcomed the gesture, which, in light of my unnerving discovery, put me immediately at ease.

We strolled on, side-by-side, hands clasped behind our backs, as customers and employees slid around us like passerby on busy city streets. At one point I did what he had earlier, stopping to drag my own finger down the spines of a series of closely shelved books. The precisely inked characters--foreign in every sense--seemed to speak to me through my skin, though I had no idea what they meant or were trying to say. I was about to confess this when I noticed a thin, dark rivulet of water coursing down the front of the shelf; I followed it to the floor, where a small pool of what looked like blood was forming.

"Heavy rains," Kurosawa explained. "The roof of this old building for the most part has held up fine, but it is patchy in places."

For some reason I knew we were next headed to the celebrated “basement stacks,” where big bargains on rare finds could be had. Descending the tilted, narrow steps, I realized the damage down here was catastrophic: No rivulet-fed puddles, but rather a full-fledged flood, the aftermath of which we were now arriving upon. Why was the situation so much worse down here?

Kurosawa was silent as we traipsed through the destruction, carefully side-stepping piles of sodden pages and heaps of swollen, broken-backed texts. Workers in coveralls used wide brooms to push standing water off toward a floor-drain located near what I understood to be the loading bay, back at the far end of the store. It really felt like we'd come to the scene of a disaster, and I fully expected to see splintered palms or pancaked dwellings or the tumbled and battered hulls of automobiles. Kurosawa, however, was strangely calm, even as the determined workers--some of whom, I saw now, wore breathing masks--continued their grim labors.

“How is the writing?” he suddenly asked, head bowed, hands still clasped behind his back.

I was flattered--not only by his apparent familiarity with my endeavors, but by his attention, especially in light of our surroundings. It was kind of him to inquire, in other words, and wholly unnecessary for a man of his accomplishments, but he waved away my protests. I shared with him news of some minor achievements of the past year: appearances in couple of small magazines, a reading hosted by an academic foundation, the completion of a larger project I had been working on for some time.

“Very good,” he smiled. “It's important to finish things.”

Soon we returned to the main floor. Since neither of us was making a purchase, we went straight to the bag check for him to

reclaim his tote. Outside, a fresh breeze had come up, and bright white clouds were traveling across the sky like sails on a lake. He suggested we prolong our outing--if it was all right with me--and when I assented he told me of a park nearby that would probably be peaceful at this time of day, and would I mind if that is where he took his lunch?

Now, when we'd first come across each other, it was on a familiar corner, and it was this same corner to which we returned upon exiting the store. So how to account for the books and customers and employees inside, where it had not simply *felt like* but where it *really was* a different world? Kurosawa smiled and said he did not have answer for this, only that I must keep watching--as if this were one of his films, and that only by concentrating all the way through would I arrive at some kind of understanding. This seemed fair to me, as well as inviting--a provocation, in other words, and I knew now that I had no choice but to follow him to the park he had mentioned.

* * *

We went down some side streets and then came to one that dead-ended at a stone wall, over which the tops of trees were visible. Once more I was de-linked from my surroundings. Surely I had been down these streets before. Looking over my shoulder, I recognized the buildings behind me, with their awnings and stenciled addresses and tasteful commercial signage. But where had this forest in front of me come from?

Kurosawa seemed amused at my puzzlement--in a kind way, of course; he was not one to ridicule or revel in another's discomfort. He waited for a lumbering bus and its coterie of attending taxis to pass, then embarked on a stiff-kneed trot to the far side of the street, eschewing the crosswalk and traffic lights just several yards

away. I hurried to keep up. When we arrived he asked me to hold his tote while he fumbled with the ornate handle of a small steel door--more like a hatchway--that was apparently the entrance to the park. It opened with a welcoming moan of old but well-oiled hinges, and he indicated I should go first.

“Please,” he smiled.

Fearing the missed appointment, I hesitated, then realized I could probably reschedule it. When, if ever, would I again be in the company of the great Kurosawa?

“Please,” he repeated, still smiling. I returned his tote to him and did as he asked.

The park was not in any obvious way remarkable. We found ourselves on a hard, well-worn path, which wound its way up through a grove of trees with delicately twisted trunks and leaves that had the general shape and color of basil but were of a shade far less deep. It was not a strenuous hike, as the path climbed very gently, but it was also clear that we were ascending to a great altitude. A full orchestra of birds accompanied us, and the air was cool and clean. We adopted the pose of our earlier stroll in the bookstore--heads bowed, hands clasped behind our backs, like a philosopher and his student contemplating how stone, bark, fresh air, and animal flesh might illuminate the imponderable alleys of our souls.

At an outcropping marked by a house-sized boulder, Kurosawa stopped to unscrew the cap of his Thermos. He offered me some of his rice and cucumber, but I wasn't hungry, and as I watched him eat I noted the easy, graceful flutter of his polished chopsticks, which opened and closed like butterfly wings in his hand. He belched softly, then, from a second thermos I hadn't noticed earlier, poured some green tea. Soon he was returning everything to his tote, and

when he stood up he clapped his hands once, like a scoutmaster summoning his charges. Perhaps five minutes had passed.

Though Kurosawa had promised serenity, it was soon apparent we were not alone in the park. I sensed the approach of a crowd from behind the hill ahead of us; there was singing, and chattering, and the noise of a celebration. Presently they were upon us, and for the second time I found myself in the midst of a group that was exclusively Japanese. They seemed to be my age or younger, a couple of dozen men and women in their twenties and thirties still dressed as if for work, but obviously liberated to enjoy the fine afternoon. Some carried banners bearing what might have been slogans, but I could only guess, since they were penned in the same delicate Japanese characters I'd seen on the books in the big store. Some wore oversized hats or had stuck flowers behind their ears. Others carried thin plastic bags through which were visible six-packs of beer and cylinders of chips, while the two men taking up the rear tapped out a rhythm on toy-like snare drums slung across their chests.

We stopped to let them go by, and I could see Kurosawa was smiling. I was reminded then of a scene from one of his films, of an elaborate funeral procession through the woods--women in ancient robes beneath delicate parasols, men with pointed white beards crashing cymbals, dancers laying flower petals along the route.

"Yes," he said. "I remember that scene. It occurred to me too. But this is no funeral."

We waited there as the sounds of the group faded, and we would have once more been alone except for the very strange thing that happened then. A variety of creatures whizzed past us, as if caught up in the slipstream of the celebration. I recognized them as characters from Japanese animation: wide-eyed and furry, round and lipless, and all making their familiar noises--chirps and peeps and

whirs and clicks. There might have been hundreds of them, as brightly colored as confetti, and as unpredictable in their progress. Some batted harmlessly off our heads and arms, while others avoided collision only by darting around us at the last possible moment. It was like being caught in a snow squall; I felt the same surprise and giddiness, and soon I heard myself laughing, and Kurosawa too.

This second, much more entertaining procession finally petered out, ending in a trickle of tag-alongs and stragglers, which seemed to wait for directions from us before whisking away to catch up with their brethren. I was not sure what to think about anything at this point, only that I was glad to have spent my afternoon like this, rather than as planned. When it was plain that we again had the path to ourselves, I asked Kurosawa what he thought of what we'd witnessed, and whether the anime characters of Miyasaki or Kishimoto or others like them could ever stack up to the flesh-and-blood heroes and protagonists he'd created. I tried to sound as knowledgeable as I could.

He squinted as if in concentration, then slowly rubbed an open palm over his bristly scalp. I laughed to myself in recognition of the gesture: It's just what Takashi Shimura, playing the war-weary samurai, does as he tries to think his way through the mission thrust upon him. Kurosawa smiled up at me from under his eyebrows.

"I think," he said, answering only the second part of my question, "that many already do."

This struck me as a gracious answer, and very much in keeping with this gentle man's character. We resumed our walk. The cry of birds grew faint, a rapid decrescendo to something less than a whisper. The air was colder now, and the trees more distantly spaced, shorter and stunted. It wasn't long before we came to a bare

precipice overlooking a wide, snow-covered valley. I was about to remark on the view when Kurosawa hurled himself over the cliff.

Now, this was the last thing I expected. I was horrified, immobilized, and speechless. The moment immediately transformed itself into an eternity, though barely a second had passed. All was silent, and I found myself completely alone on what I realized was a bleak promontory extending like a ramp into nothingness. For a time my lungs refused to work. Then I saw the canvas tote at my feet, the blunt handle of the compact umbrella sticking out like the tip of a thumb. I gradually regained my senses and forced myself to move, bending down to pick it up, and in so doing peered over the side of the cliff to what was below.

Kurosawa's body, crumpled up on itself, lay in a field of snow. It was hard to believe that only minutes earlier we had been talking together, sharing an enjoyable afternoon. A feeling like grief welled up inside me, replacing the shock. How could this have happened, and why couldn't I have stopped it?

At that moment, though, I noticed a slight movement as Kurosawa's limbs twitched. One of his arms raised itself slightly, then fell on his chest. The fingers moved. He was, I could see, reaching into his breast pocket, from which he pulled what obviously was a fountain pen. Was he trying to leave some sort of message? Some dying words, which he'd trust me to deliver to a devastated public? He removed the cap and somehow squirted its ink. It fell in red swaths on the snow around him, and I understood this to be an effect—blood--like something he might have done in his movies. His laughter drifted up to me, where I stood on the precipice.

“Are you all right?” I called, finding my voice, which rang out over the snow-covered valley.

He seemed not to have heard me correctly. "It's easy," he shouted. "Just put your body into the shape of a ball."

I did as I was told.

"That's right," he called encouragingly. "Now, grasp your knees, tuck your head--"

I let myself fall, and as I descended through space I felt myself entering that colder air above the field of snow. It would be only a second, maybe less, until I hit the ground, but at that moment the shriek of a jet tore open the sky. There was no way to see where it was. And strangely, the sound seemed to catch me there, right in mid-flight. I sought out Kurosawa's face below me. His eyes were following something and his mouth was stretched in obvious fear.

It was another moment that seemed to last both forever and no time at all. Because soon (eventually?), I fell. Though I hadn't landed as softly as he, I knew I was alive.

"You see?" he said, peering down at me from his sitting position. The frightened expression on his face was gone.

I got up on my elbows and shook out the cobwebs.

"But I left your bag up there," I said sheepishly, for suddenly it seemed to me that the least I could have done was to bring it down with me when I jumped.

"I left it there," he corrected me. He cast his eyes upward again, whether searching for the bag or a sign of whatever it was that had made that sound, I couldn't tell. It was, however, a position he held for a very long time, as if by simply looking he would induce something to reveal itself. Who was I, at this point, to think otherwise?

