

The Unburdening

by

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Mr. Tanazaki sat in his small, sparsely furnished home, barely more than a shack on the outskirts south of Tokyo, along a crowded lane in Omorihidashi near the waterfront, under the flight path of planes landing at Haneda Airport, and thought about what he could do.

“I will make a prayer,” he said. “And then, we will see.”

His son Jiguro, who lived with him, drove him the short distance to the local temple, a remnant of ancient Japan left in place while the great city of Edo grew up around it. It consisted of a single small square block of a few decrepit wooden buildings with thatched roofs and sloping eaves, facing inward and surrounding an interior courtyard that contained a lovely old garden. Mr. Tanazaki spent a lot of time here in his retirement. It was a place that brought him peace, but now his spirit was troubled, and he knew no peace.

Mr. Tanazaki shuffled haltingly up to the railing in front of the main temple building where devotions were made. He was a small man in his early eighties, with thinning, wispy grey hair and a perpetual look of slight distress on his face, the result of his protruding forehead and deep-set eyes. A vegetarian, he was even thinner than most Japanese men, wiry, and racked by arthritis, but he never complained. He clapped his hands so softly as to be inaudible, and fumblingly deposited a coin into the offering box. Then he selected a stick of incense and with shaky hands lit it from the candle set there

for that purpose, placed his incense stick carefully into the sand where hundreds of others are already burning in various states of being consumed, and uttered these words:

"Great Buddha, forgive me. I am an old man. I have lived a meaningless life. I was too young to participate in the defense of Nihon in the war. Only by my death may I achieve something for my country. We are burdening our economy by continuing to live. I am only one, but at least I can do this, end myself, so that my country may not have to support me in my lengthy old age. Banzai!"

And then he went home and took his afternoon nap, as he always did, which, at his age, lasted most of the afternoon. When he woke for dinner, he was famous. Unbeknownst to him, his son Jiguro had video'ed his prayer with a small but clear and professional quality handheld camera, and posted it on the Internet. Who knows why? Jiguro was a troubled young man, an *otaku*, overweight, pale, and pasty-faced, who spent most of his time in his bedroom watching *anime* and reading *manga*. The video camera was a recent purchase suggested to Mr. Tanazaki by his son's therapist, in an effort to draw the reclusive Jiguro into the sunlight. Mr. Tanazaki hadn't meant for his prayer to be anything more than a personal plea. Certainly he was not planning or plotting to be the leader of a movement. But his son had listened carefully, and in his father's words he had heard something profound. The faltering, quavering supplication quickly went viral.

His "Banzai!" was barely a croak, a few decibels louder than the whispered words that preceded it. His son had cleverly edited the video to include a streaming text of the nearly unintelligible words of his prayer, and had yanked up the volume on his last so that it came off as a defiant shout. The posting had struck a chord. It was timely. The country was in the throes of yet another recession, and a healthcare crisis was looming. The economy, never robust since those glorious years after the war, was again in disarray. The inflation rate was high, production flagging, unemployment rising, resources ever more scarce. The government was spending nearly a third of its revenue in support of the elderly. Mr. Tanazaki's humble prayer took on the quality of an entreaty. It was quickly labeled *jisatsu-ko* by the media. *Jisatsu-ko* translates roughly as "Suicide of the Old".

Soon reporters were besieging the door to his home. His prayer was shown and debated on the evening news, and Mr. Tanazaki was loudly both praised and severely reviled. Was he a reactionary trying to stir up nationalist fervor, or a humble man of peace who was making a small gesture of obeisance? The Japanese government issued a statement condemning the practice, but no one believed it. Twenty percent of the population was over sixty-five years old, and that percentage was expected to increase dramatically in the next thirty to forty years, until more than a third of the population would be elderly. They required a higher and higher percentage of the country's GNP to go to healthcare. Unlike American seniors, a great majority of these Japanese seniors lived with family rather than in nursing homes or assisted-

living centers. Still, many felt it was shameful. Mr. Tanazaki had shown them a way out.

Mr. Tanazaki drew the curtains shut on his ramshackle home, turned off the lights, refused all interviews, and covered on his tatami, covered only by a thin cotton blanket that he needed to keep warm even in the summer heat. His son Jiguro was not so shy. He entertained the mob with stories of Mr. Tanazaki's rather unremarkable life. The many years in the automobile factory, installing windshield wipers on Toyotas. His hobby of collecting stones from beaches around Japan, that had taken him as far north as Hokkaido, and even to Okinawa to the south. His meager meals--a piece of mackerel with egg and rice in the morning, miso soup and tofu in the evening. No, his father was not going to commit *harakiri*, he didn't even own a *washizaki*. Yes, his father was a devout Buddhist, but not a Zen priest, as some had begun to say. He was just a tired old man who didn't want to see his country burdened by debt. And how did he, Jiguro feel about his father threatening suicide? "My father has free will. If he wanted to go, I would not stop him." And the revulsion that had previously been directed at Mr. Tanazaki was now ladled onto Jiguro, the monster, the patricide, and he too quickly withdrew into seclusion. But what he had started did not subside so easily.

Mass suicide was nothing new in Japan. There had been a small rash of Internet inspired suicide pacts, lonely teens getting together (usually virtually) and poisoning themselves in groups of six, eight, a dozen. But this was

different. This had a purpose. All in one day, Japan would catapult over its competitors, none of whom would have the courage to do what Japan's seniors would do. The Zen monasteries helped with cremations, so that there wouldn't be any risk of cholera or other diseases spread by that many corpses lying around. Neither the United States nor China could ever match this magnificent gesture of sacrifice. A few half-hearted attempts to emulate Japan in these countries failed miserably. But in Japan, all was an oxymoronic orderly chaos.

Worried children chased after their elderly parents in ironic role reversal. There were long lines at temples, but they were peaceful, well-mannered lines. And fires, pyres, tremendous conflagrations some orderly, others so chaotic they threatened to undo the good by burning down the country. Animated debate raged about what was the minimum age for participation. Gradually (if anything could be described as such in that frenzied rush to *jisatsu-ko*) the term *kanreki*, 60, five times around the Asian zodiac, the age at which Japanese men in earlier times retired to enter the monastery, was accepted as the age at which *jisatsu-ko* was appropriate. The age of second babyhood, *akachan*, wearing red, starting over. Or ending one life and beginning the next.

On the morning of the second day, Sunday, Mr. Tanazaki read the *Shomiuri Shimbun* with chagrin and shame. Casualties from the incident had reached a million and showed no signs of abating. World opinion was uniformly condemnational—"those fanatic Japanese"—but the Japanese government was strangely silent. Sanctimonious left-wing groups gleefully pointed out that the

government would be the biggest beneficiary of the jisatsu-ko, if they could overcome the negative publicity.

Mr. Tanazaki threw the paper down and stood up. It was August, the heat was unbearable. “Take me to the temple,” Mr. Tanazaki demanded of his son. “I must speak to the priest.”

“Do you think that’s wise, father? The families of the jisatsu-ko might be angry with you. If any of them should see you...”

“Why? What have I done? It’s you they should be after, not me. Posting that video—an outrage!”

“But, all the reporters are still out there.”

“Then we will run them over. They can offer their bodies to the nation, just like the old ones. I must say my prayers for the dead. And I must talk to the priest.” Mr. Tanazaki was as agitated as his son had ever seen him, and he could not say no to his father.

Secretly, Jiguro was enjoying the notoriety his video had brought his family. As an otaku he was used to the scorn of society, but his Internet posting had made him the object of admiration as well as derision. Some old people had written to thank him before they hung or stabbed or poisoned themselves. *“I had long desired to do something noble for Nihonto. You and your father have shown me the way.”* Jiguro had even received a marriage proposal of sorts, among the death threats, from a grateful daughter who was newly released from her caregiver role. “I am unburdened,” she wrote. “You have freed me. After your father goes out—” a phrase that took Jiguro aback—he hadn’t

thought of his father actually going anywhere—“perhaps we can share our sorrow together.”

At the temple Mr. Tanazaki waited along the path between the Zen garden and the commissary. He knew that Renzoku-roshi had come down the walkway every evening at 5:15 p.m. for the past forty years, at the before-dinner break. There was no reason to think he wouldn't do so tonight. And here he came, smoking, his priest's robes brushing the gravel lightly.

Mr. Tanazaki stepped in his path. The priest halted abruptly. But he was kind to Mr. Tanazaki. The first thing he said when he saw Mr. Tanazaki was: “May I help you?”

Tanazaki poured out his tale of woe.

“Yes, I had noticed the crematorium was quite busy the last two days. But we've been sequestered away in *sesshin*. What is this, Old Tanazaki? You think you've caused the murder’—“

“Suicide—“

“No distinction. You think you've caused a million human beings to give up their lives?”

“Yes.”

The roshi, a squat, round-face fellow with eyes pushed close together by his rotund jowls, seemed almost ready to applaud Tanazaki. Instead he sat down on a nearby bench and gestured to Tanazaki to sit next to him. “Come, sit down, I will tell you a story.” Mr. Tanazaki hastened to kneel before and just

to the right of Renzkoku-roshi, and bow as deeply as his stiff old body permitted. And this is the story the roshi told him:

The Emperor asked the Zen Master, "What is hell and what is heaven?" The Zen Master looked at the Emperor and said "You son-of-a-bitch! Have you looked at your face in the mirror lately? I have never seen such a dirty-looking fellow before!"

The Emperor was enraged! He had not expected such a thing from such a great saint...The Emperor was so angry that he pulled his sword out of its sheath. He was going to cut the head of the Master.

Just as the sword was coming closer, the Master said, "Wait! You are entering hell. This is the gate to hell." The way the Master said "Wait!" was so powerful that the Emperor's hand was stopped in the middle, and he understood — "True!" He threw the sword away, fell at the feet of the Master, and the Master laughed and said, "This is the way to heaven! You have already experienced both within a single moment. The distance is not far."

The roshi fell silent for a moment, then added "*The distance is not far,*" indeed. This is what you can learn from this action of yours."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Tanazaki.

"It's simple," said the roshi. "Which gate have you opened for all these people? The one to Heaven, or to Hell?"

"And as for you--" the roshi turned to Jiguro, who was day-dreaming and caught off guard, as the roshi intended, "--You'd better not cause any more trouble, ever."

Jiguro trembled and bowed. He took his father by the elbow and led him away. The roshi smiled at the receding figures, and continued his walk toward the commissary, and dinner.

Mr. Tanazaki, amazed at the furor he and his foolish son had created, disappeared from view and was quickly forgotten as the news story leapt from his small start to the monumental event it became. For three days, the people of Japan, at least those on the east coast, were forced to stay indoors as a pall of ash hung over the main island as if Fuji had erupted. Cremation fires all over Japan fueled the cloud. China put its air force on high alert, but the prevailing winds carried the plume eastward over the vast Pacific, away from the Asiatic mainland. You might think that it would be difficult for three million people to kill themselves on a weekend. The sheer logistics of that much death would seem overwhelming. Where would all the bodies go? What about ambulances? And the heat, the terrible heat, the stench, the risk of cholera, etc? But "where there's a will, there's a way" and Japan's old people had found the will. Some of them took poison. Some jumped off buildings. Others shot themselves. A few even committed harakiri. Like any viral outbreak, it gained momentum as it occurred. At some point a bright senior suggested a cutoff time, three days after Mr. Tanazaki's posting, on the theory that this would both hasten and put an end to the episode. On the Monday after the event, the Nikkei average shot through the roof, and futures on anything Japanese-related rose commensurately.

Then, miracle of miracles, Fujiyama did erupt, spectacularly, for the first time since 1707, breaking its longest period of dormancy in recorded history. The cataclysmic event lasted only a few hours, a savage explosion that shot straight upward and left its perfect conical summit unchanged. Only a few

hundred climbers and the summit hotel and restaurant were lost in the eruption. Everyone in Japan attributed the eruption to the jisatsu-ko, who became even more venerated as their ashes mingled with the sacred volcanic dust. The ash cloud from Fuji subsumed the human ash cloud. Then a terrific storm blew both far out to sea within three days. On the fourth day a glorious rising sun greeted the dawn. Japan, unburdened of its senior population, quickly regained its place of financial leadership in Asia and the world. The heroic sacrifice of the jisatsu-ko became a wonder of history.

Mr. Tanazaki, who had lost his nerve and never did go to the temple to be cremated, lived another three years in anonymity, and finally passed away forgotten and alone, at the fine old age of eighty-seven. His son Jiguro married a life-size plastic sex doll named Saucy Sora and never left his room again.