

## Bamboo Forest

A Short Story by Michiko Itatani©

In front of me, I have a small yellowed photograph in which I am standing next to the front gate of a house. Behind the gate, I see a two-story building with a balcony. It is a rather large house. I am wearing a short thick wool dress and white apron. This is an old picture, which I rescued from one of the albums my father made for each of his children. The last time I visited my home, I took a dozen or so of the pictures from my albums. This was one of pictures I took. I seem to be around four years old.

My father was a serious amateur photographer, and took numerous pictures of his family. I have a vague memory of my father photographing me. The camera was a reflex type and I used to have a picture in which my father was photographing my very young mother with a box camera with two lenses, and he was looking down at the image in the box. I don't know who took that picture. It is possible that he had two cameras and used a self-timer to take a picture of himself taking a picture of my mother. In a series of baby pictures, I was sleeping with my arms spread out, and I was bold and looked like a boy baby. Later, when I asked my father why I didn't have hair, he answered that I had something developing on my head and he had to shave my hair while healing. I was sick a lot when I was small.

My family had accumulated numerous family albums that my father meticulously arranged and wrote down dates with some explanation. My father in his old age separated the family photos into several albums for each of his four daughters. When I returned home to bury the ashes of my father in his hometown cemetery in Kurashiki City, I threw out all my albums after taking out a dozen or so photographs from them. I brought back those photos with me to the States. I thought I might not need to keep all these albums since I am the end of the line with no descendent. All my sisters have their portion of family albums and they contain some images of me, I assume. I never asked my sisters about their albums. It was not true that I didn't have any hesitation, but I needed to make my life simpler.

I don't remember anything inside of the house that's in the photograph. I am not even sure my memory of the house is from the photograph or from reality. Behind the backyard of my house, there was a narrow passage through the woods. It was an adventure entering that passage. Walking through woods gave me a happy feeling, light came through the trees, bushes brushed my body. At the end of the passage, I reached the Bamboo Forest. Tall straight bamboo trees shoot to the sky, Kelly green color reflected onto the skin of my arms and hands. It seemed the place was an entrance to another world.

And I felt I was embraced by the soft and warm air, and felt lifted up through the trees. I saw things differently there.

I played with invisible creatures and talked to them there, until somebody came to fetch me. It was a different time when everything was safe and trustworthy. The back of the backyard was considered an extension of our house. It was our territory and nobody really worried about me at least for a while. When the afternoon snack was served, somebody always realized I might be in the Bamboo Forest and came to fetch me.

Anyway, I was a dreamy child when I was four in the Bamboo Forest. However, I never dreamed of anything fearful. The world was a delightful place and something hidden only meant more delights to discover. The darker side of the world didn't touch me until much later in my Junior High. Children were spoiled to death in my family. We were allowed to stay up as long as we wanted, but since we were so active in the daytime, we didn't last too long. We could eat as much as we wanted until everything was gone. Of course, the amount was well calculated. We could scream and shout, except outside of the house. We were so shy, and we behaved unreasonably well in public. I was loved, and I was secure. That is the feeling I retained all my life even in bad times. My happy early childhood is the foundation of my perpetual optimism. Whether the happiness I had was an illusion due to ignorance is a good question.

In the Bamboo Forest, I felt even happier and freer. I talked to everything around me: bamboo trees, insects, weeds and rocks. I talked to somebody not seen by me. I talked to somebody I didn't know. Everybody knew I talked to myself in the Bamboo Forest, but nobody was concerned that much. One of my sisters had an invisible friend all the time, and she talked to her. Another sister mixed up reality with her dreams. So, mine was another child's harmless imagination. Later I read, "Everything and every creature has 'Kaku', a nucleus at the center. Young children know and communicate only through 'Kaku'. If 'reality' doesn't spoil the ability, one should be able to relate to others through it". I had a real childhood.

But just one time, my father appeared in the Bamboo Forest and surprised me. I was in another world at that time. My father picked me up in his arms and raised me high. I cried with joy. He brought me home in his arms. It was getting dark. On our way home, he kept asking me who I was talking with. I had never stayed there until that late. My family might have been worried.

Bamboo trees were straight, pure, just and beautiful. They looked elegant but strong. Every so often, we heard a voice selling cut bamboo, "Sao-dake, sao-dake". We had several poles in our backyard for drying clothes. They are strong, and two poles could hold a heavy

futon to dry. A futon should be under the sun everyday if the weather permits. When I moved to the States, I realized there was no place to dry a futon, and nobody did. A futon was a fashionable bed when I moved to the U.S., but the futon in the U.S. is totally different from one in Japan. Here, the cotton is heavier and not treated to be fluffy. The futon I bought in the States was not as comfortable. Also, a futon should be on a Tatami, which is a cushion itself.

Bamboo is a beautiful material for making baskets. There was an exhibition of Japanese bamboo baskets in the museum. They were preciously displayed as artwork, but they were made to be used rather. They should be touched. A basket is discreet and quiet enough to give a single flower the focus in the Tokonoma, the alcove of a room for displaying artwork. In the tea ceremony, the Tokonoma play an important role. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Rikyu perfected the tea ceremony to the highest art form. In preparation to have guests, he picked and removed from sight every flower in the garden along the passage to the teahouse, and put a single white camellia in the Tokonoma for emphasis. When I read about him, I thought how cruel it is to sacrifice all flowers except one for the effect. Art often is a cruel practice, especially in Japan.

I hate to exist in the time of the Nation/State civilization, which has only a short history and is destined to disappear someday. I don't want to be identified with the nation I was born in nor the present nation I live in. They are just political territories. Every time somebody tries to identify me as Japanese, I feel some resistance. However, I am attracted to the simple, cruel, severe Japanese Aesthetics. I try to deny the reason that I am attracted because of the fact that I was raised in the culture. I have many friends who lean toward similar aesthetics, who were not born in Japan.

I sat in the Bamboo Forest, looking up. Light came through the trees. My father used to read us the story of "Kaguya-hime". A lonely old couple found a baby girl when they cut down a bamboo tree. They took care of her as their child. The baby grew up to be a beautiful girl, but she would cry as she looked up at the moon. She was a princess who had come to earth from the moon to console the lonely old couple. But the time came for her to go back to home to the moon, and she explained this to the old couple. She was lifted up to the moon waving "good bye". The old couple wept but eventually realized they had had a fortunate fate to raise her. It was a sad, but warm story. We should all appreciate what we have at the moment. Nothing is forever.

I dreamed about finding a baby there. I dreamed about what I would do with her. I dreamed about giving my best dress to her, giving my favorite toys to her, sleeping next to her etc. etc. My father went

to Tokyo often on business. He brought back "Nihon Ningyo", a Japanese doll. The face, hands and feet were made of well-crafted ceramics and she could close her eyes. She wore a meticulously sewn silk kimono. It was a big doll, very expensive. I was not allowed to play with it. It was fragile and too precious. By the time when I went to school, we had several dolls like that. We put them in a glass case and admired them, but we were not allowed to play with them. That was one of our few restrictions and it was fully understandable for all us sisters. The dolls were convincingly precious. I thought a real baby must be more accessible. Later that year, we actually got a real baby in the house. It was my youngest sister. We all adored her. Especially, I got along very well with her when we grew up a little more. We were the most similar. We were a little darker and skinnier. We were both comical, and made everybody laugh. We were mischievous. We were tomboys. We often appeared in our family pictures together. My father treated us a little differently than the other two sisters.

My father was a handsome young man. I have several photographs of him now, one of him standing in the ocean with two daughters clinging to both his arms, me and the youngest. His head is covered with a white cotton towel. He is looking at the shore where there might have been other family members. He was a father who always thought about the whole family; he even sometimes ignored a family member's benefit for the family welfare.

All his life, he took care of his appearance. The colors of ascot ties always matched the socks he wore. Even in his 80's, he shaved every morning with an electric razor and looked at the result in a small hand mirror. When I was around, I helped him by pointing out where he has missed. My father had an expensive taste in his clothes: cashmere sweaters and silk ties. I wore several of his beautiful wool scarves and even his silk shirts that he said he didn't want any longer and I brought some home to the U.S. I wore them from time to time with admiration for his taste. His general taste was "batakusai", which means "smells of butter" in direct translation. People used the term to tease the Modern and Westernized older generation. My father listened to extravagant symphonies. He preferred cinema to Kabuki Theater. When I visited from the States, he made coffee for me by grinding "Blue Mountain". I would suffer from a craving for a good strong coffee after returning to the States. Now, we have Starbucks and other coffee shops.

I always had a feeling that he was a little disappointed by the fact none of his daughters were particularly beautiful. But it might be just my self-consciousness. However, I remember him saying, "Straighten your back!" or "Comb your hair". He had a particular taste in selecting our clothes. In my junior High, he took me to a dressmaker and special-ordered two sets of white blouses and dark

blue skirts. They were like the uniform used in public schools. My school didn't have a uniform. All my classmates were wearing various colorful clothes. Some girls even waved their hair. I had straight long hair, either pony-tailed or braided. I had to endure the uniform-like clothes, though they were well tailored. I don't think I particularly minded. I carried a big, heavy leather bag, which was handed down from my father. In fact, I was granted some special status among classmates with my appearance, and, then later, with my ability in mathematics. My classmates commented on my clothes and bag, sometimes in rather nasty ways, but I didn't suffer from that at all. I was naive in the crowd of sophisticated and rich kids. My father was an independent and an original person but without sophistication. I was not exposed to the normal life my classmates had. I was wild, innocent and free compared to them. One winter, my father brought me a beautiful wool coat in a fuchsia color. I was so proud wearing the coat over my white and dark blue outfit. I liked it. We walked 45 minutes from the station to the school, which was at the top of a small mountain. One morning, an older girl walked passed me saying, "The color of your coat was fashionable a few years ago". I said thank you. It took several years for me to understand what she meant. I didn't know there was something called "fashion" in clothing.

My Junior High and High School time was dark, perhaps the darkest time in my life. I thought I didn't belong in this school. It was not the sophistication or the wealth causing my feeling of unfittedness. I was comfortable with myself, but the self-righteousness and the elitist attitude of some students bothered me. In fact, I thought some teachers were self-righteous and elitist also.

It was a Christian school, and we had mass every morning. However, I have to say religion in Japan is looser and much more generous than the States. At my school, we had to take courses in religion, but it was a comparative approach. We learned about Buddhism, Islam, Jain, Hinduism, and Christianity etc. We discussed the human need to deal with something beyond our knowledge. In Japan, in general, we are born and could be taken to a Shinto shrine to pray, wed in church and die in Buddhism with no problem. Everybody believes there is something beyond us, but not believed in a strict way. But in my school, I thought some students felt superior because they were Christian. We had some activities to gather something to give to poor families. I hated to behave as a good person. I never became religious though I read numerous books about various religions. It might be my over-reaction.

One year I visited my family from the States, and I was shocked when I found out my father had become Catholic. He never gave me a satisfactory answer to my questions but he said he reunited with his friend from his youth who had become a priest. My father was

impressed by his way of life. I always believed my father was a pragmatic man, but I guess he had some longing for something more. I never knew that side of him. However, his religion was light-hearted, I believe. He went to mass, and whenever he got bored, he left. He said that the priest was always saying the same thing. There is no explanation or progress. He complained that the image of Christ on the cross was too brutal. None of my sisters become religious either. We talked about it one time when we had lunch together when I was visiting.

The only thing that saved me during my Junior and High School time was the school library. I discovered the wealth of fiction. Fiction is constructed, but from reality and often reveals more about reality than nonfiction. Even now, I strongly believe fiction tells me something more true than so-called documentary or history. I took out many hardcover books every week and read them at high-speed. I could read a book in a few days. Some I finished in a day. Modern Japanese novels and foreign novels in translation were my favorites to start with, but as I was introduced to Japanese classics, I enjoyed reading them with a dictionary in hand. I got into the habit of having a dictionary while reading; it served me well when I moved to the States.

When I moved to the United States, after a short time of longing for books in my mother tongue, I started to read in English. I realized, after a while, I was able to read more rapidly than many American friends. Though I don't believe I am talented in language, the necessity of reading made me get accustomed to the new language quickly. But I know my knowledge in the English language is unbalanced.

My father was not too happy about my tendency to bury myself in books. I studied and read under a cover in bed with a flashlight, after he scolded me to go to bed. He wanted me to be more physically active, and outgoing. But that was not to be the case. I wanted to read books and I wanted to be invisible. One time, he was talking about Tanizaki's "Key" to his guests in the guest room when I brought some tea to them. Of course, I found the book in my father's bookshelf and read it. Actually, I read just about every book in his bookcase, from "Lady Chatterley's Lover" to "Tobacco Road", although I now doubt how much I understood at that time. If he knew I have been reading those books, he might have had a fit.

Earlier, I was sent to a kindergarten in a temple every morning. It was rather a pre-school. I walked along a long fence to reach the entrance of the temple. I cannot remember whether I was with somebody or alone. But I can see a long white plaster fence in my memory. After dancing and singing, we took a nap under stacked benches before going home. The teachers stacked child size benches to make a pretend

house for us to sleep inside. So, when I got home, I was full of energy. I walked through the passage to the Bamboo Forest and spent rest of the afternoon there until somebody came to bring me home.

I have another photograph in which I am peeking out from a miniature house. We must have been in an amusement park of some sort. I look very happy smiling up at my father taking the photograph. I thought of the bench house where we slept in the kindergarten.

When I visited my friend in New York who has two small children, I was amazed how many toys they have in their small room. But when I mentioned this, the mother told me that her friends' children have much more. Compared to contemporary kids, my generation had only a few commercial toys. However, I remember my life then was full of things to do all the time. There were rivers full of creatures to catch, fields with strawberries, sugar cane and barley. I remember we made chewing gum from barley and whistles from grass.

Later, we moved to another house. Then, I started to go to school. I became busy and almost forgot about the Bamboo Forest. However, one day my father took me back to the old house. I don't know what was the occasion. I went around behind the house and I found my passage to the Bamboo Forest. My memory returned. I was excited to go back there. I ran down the passage and came into it.

I was so surprised that the Bamboo Forest I thought I remembered was actually just a bunch of bamboo trees, shaking together in the wind. But it was a forest with plenty of imagination in my early childhood.