

Pink

A Short Story by Michiko Itatani ©

At the center of my universe, there was a goldfish, named "Pink". The small, faded red, modest looking fish. I was around eight. If I would have placed "Pink" in a group of goldfishes of the same kind, I doubt if I could have recognized her. I fed her, changed the water and paid attention to her wellbeing. Every week, I put a bowl of water outside in the sunlight to de-chlorinate. I did these responsibilities seriously and I was attached to her. Everyday, I talked to her about my day, and she told me stories. Now, I don't remember how I got "Pink". Perhaps, some other kids in the neighborhood gave her to me, or one of my sisters brought her home. I don't know now. I had a few favorite friends I hung out with after school. We did all kinds of things together. I haven't had any contact with them ever since school. Most of my past in Japan was cut away from my life after I moved to the U.S., except my family relationships.

My three sisters and I did many things together. It was not easy growing up with more talented sisters who are all close in age. But now, I feel truly lucky to have them, though at a long distance. In fact, it's the right distance. They are extremely supportive about my idiosyncratic life style as an artist. They all said, individually, I should keep doing what I am doing without worrying about the future. They think I am having their dream life and they want me to go all the way. Although I don't believe I would be happy being taken care of by my sisters, I am proud I have my sisters saying something like that.

There was a large residence next to my house. There was an old couple quietly living there. They were rather isolated, but kind when we met. We heard a rumor they were disputing with the old man's brothers over the vast land they inherited from the family. In fact, they were renting many fields to farmers to raise crops. The couple had a large, and very neat, vegetable garden in front of their house where they spent a lot of time tending cucumbers, eggplants, rape-blossoms, sweet peas. I still recognize plant leaves and flowers from that time. I spent considerable time looking down at their garden from my second floor window. I sometimes sneaked into the garden to examine the vegetable flowers and to catch insects and butterflies. After finding the incredible row of transparent butterfly eggs on the windowsill one day, I stopped catching them. Nobody could see the garden or their house from the street because they were behind a tall and thick hedge fence, which was always trimmed neatly. Only small children could have gone through that fence. We could also see their yard from our second floor windows. The couple didn't mind a bit; once the old man told me they had nothing to hide. They ignored me completely while they were working in the garden. Their house was

large traditional architecture. The second floor seemed not used regularly and the windows were covered by wooden sliding doors. In our house, we never closed our sliding doors except in times when we were expecting typhoons. Left of their large entrance room, stepping up from the stone flooring to a large stepping stone and onto the tatami floor, there was a tearoom. The room size was four and a half tatami mats with a Tokonoma where they always had some flowers from another part of their yard and a Kakejiku, a hanging scroll, on the wall. They changed the Kakejiku according to seasons and occasions that were usually too difficult for us to read. Occasionally, we were invited in and the old man told us what it said and meant. He made us sit in the Tea Ceremony manner, and gave us a cup of tea and a small sweet. There was a built-in Hibachi in the middle and an iron pan sat on it with boiling water. Although he was never unkind, he always looked indifferent and aloof. However, we knew he liked to serve tea for us and to lecture about his treasures. He wore a kimono and had a long white beard and he seemed to be from another world.

Early morning, everyday, a tofu vender stopped at their house. The wife, a small woman, came out with a bowl to his loaded bicycle to get two cakes of Kinugoshi, silky and soft tofu. She always wore a muddy colored, small patterned kimono and a white apron covering all her front. My mother stopped the tofu vender every now and then also. My mouth waters when I think about the fresh cool tofu with tuna peels and soy sauce, green onion and a pinch of ginger. They had that for every breakfast. A fish seller stopped at their house every day also to inform her what he had that day from the local fishermen. We were near the ocean. Many times, they bought some fish, shellfish or octopus. I believe they had been doing that for many years, before, during and after the war. A group of old houses in my neighborhood survived the war; therefore, the houses didn't get modernized as quickly as other parts of the town, so it was with their lives. This was a spot of land which existed in another dimension during the war. Of course, I didn't think about that until later.

There was a 12-foot high bamboo structure in front of his veranda in the back, over a small sitting place. In spring, violet wisteria flowers hung from the bamboo roof. There were woven vine chairs and a small table of the same material. In the broken shadows of wisteria, the old man spent some time reading the Asahi Newspaper in the morning. From there, there was a stone walkway leading to a small Japanese garden of rocks, pine trees and sand. There was also a small pond, in which some Koi lived. A huge ceramic frog sat next to the pond, also, a human size ceramic Tanuki, a dark-brown badger, with a white apron. They frightened us. I didn't have any knowledge of appreciating his residence. However, much later, after we moved to another location, and when I started to visit temples and shrines in Kyoto, I wondered what it might have been like living in his extraordinary house. When we visited my father's hometown, Kurashiki, we stayed in the house where my father was raised. The house was 300

years old, and enormous. In one of its many rooms, there hung a red palanquin, in which my great...grand mother came to marry my great...grand father. Twenty years after I moved to the U.S., I went back to Kyoto and stayed in Myoshin-ji, a Zen temple, for a month.

A fat tiger cat was living with them. The cat had his own mind and never became friendly to us. But I watched him from the window of our house. He walked dignified, washed his face and front paws lovingly. Sometimes, he pretended to aim at catching something in the yard, but I never saw him catch anything. He was extremely well fed; perhaps as many heads of fishes as he wanted after the couple ate their meals. Now, when I see a cat while taking a walk in my Chicago neighborhood, I stop to watch it. I cannot have a cat in my house, because of my schedule. I am out of town a lot, and I don't think it is fair to the cat unless I have a large yard in which to leave him.

My sisters, my friends and I did all kinds of mischief to their house. There was a white marble name plate on a stone gatepost. The old man wrote his last name with sumi ink, with a little vinegar to prevent it from running in the rain. It would have stayed intact for a long time unless we were there to rub his name off. Which we did usually as soon as he finished his beautiful calligraphy, which I was, of course, unable to read. We were not tall enough to reach the calligraphy easily. It was a challenge physically and mentally. How many times we erased his name, I cannot remember. Every time, he came out and rewrote his name. One time, he told me he knew who did it, but I don't recall he was mad at us. We giggled with feelings of guilt and shame.

A big typhoon hit our area. My father was away to protect his business property. My mother and her four daughters were gathered together in the living room trembling. It was an unusually strong typhoon. The house shook every time a big gust blew. The intervals became shorter and shorter. Rain started too. It came to the point that we didn't feel safe. My young mother was more frightened than her daughters and decided to move to the neighbor's house for security, though it might not have been any safer actually. All of us put zabuton, a cushion, on our heads, ran together outside to their garden. We beat on their door. They took us in and we stayed until the next morning. Thinking back, we had really good neighbors.

My family was a little different from them. My father liked new things. He was sentimental and very romantic, but worldly realistic. He wanted his children to be accomplished with their dreams. He made me believe I could do anything I wanted to do. I still suffer from that. Once, he took my sister and me to some kind of technological fair. There were many new machines and types of equipment displayed there. He took us around and asked many questions to the engineers and demonstrators. One of them offered to make us a record, if we two

girls sang. We were dressed in special pink frilled dresses that day. I had a small black and white picture of us in one of the family albums until I threw away all the albums during my recent trip to Japan. Anyway, the two extremely shy girls refused to sing. My father was visibly disappointed.

My father didn't give up that easily. A little later, he bought a tape recorder and microphone. He and the four girls made the whole story of "Snow White" on tape. We had to play many roles. I became the narrator and played some other parts; the other sisters became Snow White, dwarfs, birds, animals etc. He became a prince, evil queen and something else also. He wrote the whole scenario. Beethoven's Symphony 5 was used for background music. When Snow White escaped into the forest, 5 blasted off and we made all kinds of noise to make rain, wind and thunder. My father loved all noisy and dramatic classical music, and had a collection. I wish I had kept that "Snow White" tape.

Looking out from the windows, especially toward my neighbor's garden, was one of my routine activities, as well as looking at and talking to "Pink". I did well at school and I wanted to be a zoologist. Those future plans changed literally a hundred times since. Now, I am not sure whether I like zoos any longer. Animals look quite sad in zoos. Although I love all kind of animals and enjoyed reading Yann Martel's Life of Pi and Haruki Murakami's Elephant Vanishes.

It was at least a three-kilometer walk to the school, of which buildings we could see from our second floor windows to the north. The buildings had red roofs. There were no buildings between our home and the school, just a landscape of rice fields which became strawberry fields in spring. We walked along a nameless small stream to the school. Walking to school in the morning was always done in a hurry. However, it usually took hours to come back home, because there was so much distraction. The small transparent stream showed us so many little creatures, fishes, crabs, eels etc. We tried to catch them sometimes, but in vain, since we didn't have any net with us. We had to use our cupped hands. We watched red dragonflies mating and Mizusumashi, water skippers hopping on the water surface. In strawberry season, in early May, we stepped into the field carefully and ate some ripe ones as a snack. Since farmers harvested the field in the morning, we had to really search for ripe ones. It was the task of one of us children to go to the farmers in the morning, who were gathering and boxing strawberries in the field, and buy a basketful of rejects. They were irregular or smaller, but ripe. They were sweet and tender. I haven't had strawberries that delicious ever since.

Later, when I was a little older, I discovered books and the library. After that, I spent most of my free time in the library until I

finished high school. I detested my high school days. But at age 8, my life was simple, safe and happy. A neighbor boy came to play with us often. He was in our age, but we knew he was extremely smart and he was going to be somebody in the future. He drew a diagram of female parts and explained everything to us. We were all impressed. But he couldn't play ball or jump rope with us. There was a neighbor girl I liked very much. But she was taking so many extracurricular lessons, ballet, painting and piano; she didn't have too much time with us. She wore pretty dresses with colorful flower patterns. In my family, girls had only white blouses and dark blue skirts, which were handed down in order of our ages, though we dressed up in Kimono or pink dresses around New Year's Day. My father believed in simplicity, and he designed our private uniforms and had a dressmaker sew them when we were in junior high. We stood out in the private school where we were not required to wear uniforms. A little later, my parents started to send us to take similar extracurricular lessons. I guess they wanted us to catch up. That caused me great pain. No matter what we would do, I was always at the bottom learning those things. I didn't realize there was some inequality in talent until then.

Later in the afternoon, we four girls usually spent some time looking out the large window facing east to the street. Across the street, there were some rice fields and some houses in the distance. Our house was at the edge of the development. We were waiting for my father's return. Usually it didn't happen when we were waiting. Yet we persisted and leaned out our heads looking south, the opposite direction of our school. Once in a while, we saw my father become visible, turning the corner to our street about a kilometer away to the south. We ran to meet him, all four of us. He carried a heavy leather bag with him that was handed down to me later and gave me a lot of trouble. At the end of grade school, I had too many books in this heavy bag. One of the boys in the class used to run back to his nearby home and bring out a bicycle and carried my bag to my home ahead of my return. We four girls tried to help my father by lifting up his bag from the back and the side. When he didn't show up, we watched another old couple passing by in front of our window. It seemed to us they were at least a hundred years old. They appeared from nowhere in the north and took a long time to come to our window and took another long time to disappear in the south. Actually, they went south to north in the morning and came back in the afternoon. They pulled a cart with them, in which they carried some tools and some harvest vegetables, greens and corn. They had a field to work in the daytime. We thought they had a perfect life together. A little later, the fields started to be sold and buildings started to appear to our north. By the time we changed our school to another one toward southwest, we couldn't see our original school buildings any longer from our window. The change was abrupt.

When my father came back from work and we finished supper, if it was

in summer, we took a long wooden bench and reclining chairs to the front of our house, on a stone bridge over the small stream. We burned mosquito coils, cooled off and watched stars. Sometimes groups of mosquitoes would make tall columns in the air and swallows flew around to eat them. After dark, a bunch of bats replaced the swallows. The rice fields were filled with water and the frogs became noisy. The Milky Way was over us and we counted shooting stars. Next to the stream, we had a small garden with some vegetables, sweet potatoes, eggplants and cucumbers. The garden was very modest compared to the next-door neighbor, but enough to make our supper rich. We made stories that one of us was an orphan and had to go back to an orphanage. We did a long ritual of saying goodbye. Actually, there was an orphanage three kilometers south of us across the railroad tracks. My mother sent us with packages to them. There was a shy and pretty young woman there and she was kind to us. We worshipped her.

All memories around that time were dull and sweet. I cannot recall any difficulties or worries. I was innocent and non-driven, and happy. The universe was running its course smoothly.

When I was much younger, I was sent to kindergarten at a nearby Zen Temple. It was a pre-school of some kind. A teacher gave each of us one roasted soybean. We were instructed to put it on our palm. She said "Look at it carefully, study its shape and color. Think about there being a life inside. Appreciate it." We did so. We did so for a long time before we were allowed to eat it. My mouth ached for the soybean's flavor. There was nothing more delicious than that, I thought. We had naptime there. We constructed a house structure with small children's benches. It made a place to sleep. We lined up zabuton underneath and slept some time before we were sent home. I don't remember anything else except the soybean and the nap. However, I believe my stable and pathetically optimistic attitude was cultivated during that time. Appreciate what we have and construct a comfortable place for ourselves.

One day, I came back from school and found "Pink" floating in the bowl. I never felt so powerless. I cannot remember anything around that incident, whether anybody was at home, whether I cried or was in panic. The bowl was next to the Christmas tree my father proudly decorated. I played the piano for a while.

Later in the evening, I told my family that "Pink" died. I told them I swallowed her. They became so noisy as if the end of the world was approaching. They all talked simultaneously. My mother looked horrified. Later, I was sent to a counselor. I have no recollection of anything else. However, it was the first time that I realized the world is not simple nor makes sense.