

1999 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

OJIICHAN'S FUNERAL

By John Dewey Remy

"DeGraw Chôrô, I'm not going to sleep in here," Christiansen said in a loud whisper.

"Then sleep in the other room," I said. I was in no mood for this now. Let him sleep with my Aunts and my Grandma—my Obachan.

"You know what the Handbook says about companions sleeping in different rooms," he said. "Besides, they're women!" If they weren't just a few feet away, Christiansen would be shouting right now. At least the sliding paper and wood door gave us the illusion of privacy.

"It's her home, not mine—you tell her," I said.

"She's your grandmother."

"I am sleeping here," I said, clenching my fists. The muscles in my back tensed. "You do what you want."

I turned away from him but I could still sense his angry stare. Then I heard him slump down onto his futon. I took a couple of measured breaths, then turned to my grandpa.

"Goodnight, Ojiichan," I said as I looked down on my grandfather's sleeping face underneath the glass.

HE LOOKED PEACEFUL AND CALM, AND UNLIKE the animated man who had been my *Ojichan*, my Grampa. For a year, he had been my father. My parents had sent me to live with him in my mother's hometown of Sasebo in the sub-tropical island of Kyushu. Sasebo was only twenty miles away from Nagasaki, where the second atomic bomb had been dropped. I had been sent there to learn Japanese and so that my Grampa could have a son. He was charismatic enough to persuade the stubborn principal of Hachiman Elementary to let me into one of the fourth grade classes, even though I spoke little Japanese at the time. He yelled at me when I threw tantrums and laughed loudly when I shared childish jokes with him. Together, we bought fresh fish straight from the fishermen early every Sunday morning and cheered on Japanese pro-wrestlers on Sunday afternoons. With him, I was not the *gaijin*, the foreigner, or even *hafu*, a

half-Japanese. I was his grandson; I was his son.

I had felt no sorrow since I'd learned of his death less than two days ago. Instead I felt a strange lack of emotion. I did not even feel surprised that I was in Sasebo, hundreds of miles outside of the Japan Tokyo South mission, with my mission president's permission and blessing. It was the first time I had stood in my childhood home since I'd joined the Church as a teenager.

My grandmother had laid out futon for us in the small room of *tatami* mats that my Ojiichan and Christiansen and I were sharing tonight. Normally, two futon would be enough to fill up a six-tatami room, but somehow Obachan managed to squeeze the two of us in there and leave enough room for her husband and the stands for the incense, candles, flowers, white sheets and other Buddhist ornaments that surround the deceased during the *Otsuya*, which is to the Buddhist what a 'wake' is to a Christian. Obachan and my two aunts set up their futon in the neighboring room, although the four of us would be taking turns keeping vigil and replacing the dying incense and candles with freshly lit ones throughout the night.

I worked on a puzzle with my Aunt Tomoko for most of the night, trying to stay awake. Occasionally we would check to see if the smoking sticks of incense needed to be replaced. At 3:30 in the morning, my grandma hobbled into the room.

"Go to bed," she said. "Ojiichan can light his own incense!"

I crawled into my futon. I was deathly tired, but woke up once to see Obachan lighting new candles and incense. I felt sad for her for a moment, then sleep drowned out all thought and emotion.

THE NEXT DAY, we followed the hearse in my Uncle Hisao's minivan. He was always "Uncle" to me, although he had never married my Aunt Kazumi. When I was nine and living with my Ojiichan and Kazumi, I always wanted to go over to Hisao's house to play, but they always laughed and said that I really wouldn't like it there. Was it a mess, I asked? They carefully avoided my questions, and I assumed that there was something they were embarrassed to talk about. Maybe his apartment was covered with playmate calendars like the ones in his office. It wasn't until years later that they told me that he had a wife, children, and even grandchildren! Kazumi, his mistress, was on polite terms with his wife and even babysat the grandchildren on occasion. It wasn't until



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a few years after my Ojiichan's death that I learned that he, too, had had a mistress and an illegitimate child.

The vehicle my grandfather rode in was a typical Japanese hearse; it looked something like a polished black pickup truck with a large Chinese version of the Ark of the Covenant fitted into the back. This golden temple on wheels was covered with elaborate golden carvings of chrysanthemums, gates, sinuous dragons and menacing gods. I wondered how he felt to be riding in such luxury. There were no windows in the Ark, so he may as well have been riding in a large cardboard box, I suppose.

Christiansen continued to sulk next to me. He was probably still mad about last night.

When we finally entered the funeral home, we found Ojiichan lying in his coffin and drowning in

ivory-white chrysanthemums, every one of them blossom side up. All you could see were his face and his hands, which were folded over his chest. He was completely out of place. He certainly would never have subjected himself to a flower bath while he was alive. More chrysanthemums in ornate vases surrounded his coffin. Incense was burning.

We all sat down, and a Buddhist priest, with flowing yellow and orange robes began chanting sutra in a deep, monotone voice. He sat in front of us in an intricately carved chair. At certain moments, he motioned to a young assistant, similarly dressed, who struck a gong almost half his size. The bass of the gong blended well with the priest's deep baritone. Obaachan was crying but kept her head up, facing the priest's back. I placed my hand on hers, and she gripped it tightly.

Did her religion offer her comfort? Would mine, I wondered.

After an eternity of chanting my grandfather into Buddhahood, it was time to light incense and say our final good-byes to the deceased before his entry into paradise. As I prepared to stand up, Christiansen leaned over and whispered, "DeGraw, you can't do that!"

"Huh?" I had forgotten that Christiansen was even around. "What are you talking about?"

"The burning of the incense is how you salute a Buddha. It's idol-worshipping!"

I thought about it for a second. For a moment, all of my missionary training, all of my religious zeal, hours of scripture study, prayer, and Sunday school bore down on me. He was right. I would be wrong to light that incense. I looked at Christiansen, who was waiting for my response. There was no doubt what he would do in my stead.

"I am Japanese," I said. "I will pay my respect to my Ojiichan."



KYLE ANDERSON

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I lit two sticks of incense and dropped them into the ceramic vessel prepared for them. I bowed my head and placed my palms flat against each other in the attitude of prayer.

I still felt a little guilty, and my salutation was half to my Father in Heaven and half for my newly enlightened grandfather. Did I want him to have a Buddhist or a Mormon/Christian salvation? In the end, I said in my mind, "I love you, Ojiichan. I'll miss you."

ON THE WAY to the crematorium, I thought about an experience I had had in the Missionary Training Center in Provo. Elder Vasquez, my MTC companion, and I were involved in a role-play in which we were the missionaries and our instructor, Hale Sensei, played our difficult seeker of truth. The character he played had concerns about doctrinal issues, which we had tried unsuccessfully to resolve. A bad feeling had grown in the room, and all of us were aware of it. Vasquez Chôrô, acting as the senior companion, had said to Hale Sensei in his clumsy Japanese, "Brother Tanaka, let's pray. We need the Spirit." We had knelt on the classroom floor and Vasquez had nodded to me. I folded my arms, closed my eyes, and emptied my mind. Then I pleaded with our Father in Heaven for his Spirit to help Tanaka-san resolve his concerns and to help him to feel the Spirit. The most amazing thing had happened: a quiet calm filled the room. I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and knew that the others had felt it too. Vasquez was excited and turned to Brother Tanaka/Hale Sensei and said, "The Spirit—Truth." He was reaching the limit of his Japanese language ability. I took over.

"Brother Tanaka," I said, "what you are feeling now is the Spirit of God. Father in Heaven speaks to us through his Spirit to help us to recognize the truth." Hale Sensei's eyes were

moist with tears. “Will you show your commitment to him by accepting baptism in the name of Jesus Christ?”

“*Hai*,” he said. Yes.

That was one of the most *real* lessons I taught throughout my whole mission experience. We had been acting, and we had known we were, but there was no denying the power of the experience. I mean, we were sincere, but the whole situation was a role-play. There was no Brother Tanaka, and he had no real concerns. If what was fake was real, then was the real thing fake? Was the Spirit an act, too? Perhaps Christiansen, the Buddhist priests, and I were all actors in some elaborate play, and God was the director. Who had the right script?

AT THE CREMATORIUM, we all said our last good-byes to Ojichan. This was particularly hard on my grandmother, who started crying. My aunts weren’t doing much better. I was glad that Mom wasn’t here to see this. The attendants placed Ojichan, his coffin and chrysanthemums into a large oven. They closed a huge steel door that looked more like it belonged in a nuclear power plant or on an airlock of some space battle cruiser. They bowed their heads and placed their palms together in a brief prayer, then left. Uncle Hisao took us to a waiting room. He told me that it would take two or three hours. I wandered outside, and Christiansen followed closely behind.

“I need to be alone for a bit, Christiansen Chôrô,” I said.

He hesitated for just a bit, then said, “All right.” He wasn’t even angry.

I walked for a while until I could see the ocean waves striking the rocks far below. I felt the moist, salty breeze on my face. It was invigorating.

I looked down on an ocean of liquid sapphire with a million glittering facets. Kujukushima, the Ninety-Nine Islands, floated on the surface like so many bubbles of green velvet. The vegetation on each of the islands blended together to form one mass, so that each island looked like a rounded stone completely covered with dark moss. Thin strands of glaring sand separated the canopy of the islands from the sea. The bamboo forests on the hills in Sasebo are the color of jade, although it is early November. The island jungles off the coast here are always a thousand shades of emerald. Autumn’s colors, though rich, are signs of the winter that will inevitably follow. Kujukushima’s colors are that of an eternal summer. Their colors infuse me with energy and vigor.

As I mentally skipped from island to island towards the horizon, I noticed that they faded, in stages, into the mist. The more distant the island, the more it was hazy and hidden. It was hard to tell if the farthest shadows were islands or illusions. I sat down on the grass, let my thoughts wander, and stared out at the glittering ocean and at Kujukushima for a long, long, time.

A month or two ago, while approaching people in front of a busy train station, I had stopped a young “Jay Dub”—what we missionaries affectionately called members of our primary proselytizing competition: the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He had reminded me a lot of me—a fully Japanese version of me. About

my height and build, he had smiled as I approached. After introducing myself and talking for a while, I had asked him:

“How do you know that your Bible is the word of God? That your Church is the Lord’s kingdom?” Most Jay Dub’s will say that they have studied it in their Bible and will use logic and scriptural proof to support their arguments. I hadn’t been prepared for his answer.

“I prayed about it, and the Lord answered me,” he said. That’s what *we* tell *our* investigators—ask God with faith in Christ and he will reveal the truth through his Spirit.

“How did he answer you?” I asked with sincere curiosity.

“I felt a great peace in my heart. It was his Spirit speaking to me.” He waited a moment for a response. Then he looked at his watch and said, “Listen, I enjoyed our conversation, but I’m late for class. I’ve got to go now.” He hurried off, and I stood there, stunned.

Why had God told me that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was the only true Church and then told this Japanese guy the same thing about the Jehovah’s Witnesses?

I had had a Thai roommate during my freshman year of college who was a devout Buddhist and meditated regularly. He had been the most respectful and kind roommate I’ve known. While I was a fresh convert and preparing for my mission, we had had some interesting conversations about our respective religions. I remember asking him, “Do you ever have spiritual experiences?”

“Yes.” He then thought for a bit. “Sometimes, after I meditate, I am filled with an indescribable love for those around me, even those who have wronged me in some way. At other times, I feel a peace in my heart that is so strong that the tears flow uncontrollably down my face.”

MY THOUGHTS WERE interrupted by Christiansen, who was running up the hill towards me. “The cremation’s done,” he said between breaths. “They’re ready for you.”

I hurried back to the crematorium.

A large stainless steel tray the size of a coffin had been wheeled into a special private room on something like an operating table. My Obaachan and my two aunts were waiting for me, and two of them held long, colorful chopsticks in their hands. The handles were capped with metal. Tomoko held a blue and white urn in her hands about the size of a basketball. Christiansen did not enter the room, but stayed outside with Uncle Hisao. I looked down at the tray. Then I saw what was left of my Ojichan.

His bones were smaller than they should have been, and many of them had broken into several pieces. They looked like they had been soaked in bleach. There was ash everywhere. His skull had collapsed into its constituent bones. Not all of his bones would fit in the small urn, so we carefully selected a few to represent him.

“His jaw was such a strong feature,” my grandmother said, picking up his jawbone with her chopsticks as if it were a pickle or a piece of salted mackerel and handing it to Kazumi. Kazumi took it with her chopsticks and placed it in the urn. I

understood at last why it is considered very rude to accept food from someone else's chopsticks with your own. Passing something from one set of chopsticks to another is only done with the bones of a relative after cremation. Every morsel inadvertently passed this way by ignorant foreigners and young children must remind the Japanese of death. Obaachan handed me her chopsticks.

"It's your turn," she said. Almost cheerily. Perhaps the cremation was a form of closure.

I can't remember which bones I picked. Not that it mattered.

Christiansen didn't argue this time about where he was to sleep. Before turning out the light, I glanced up at the urn that now sat where my grandfather had slept the night before.

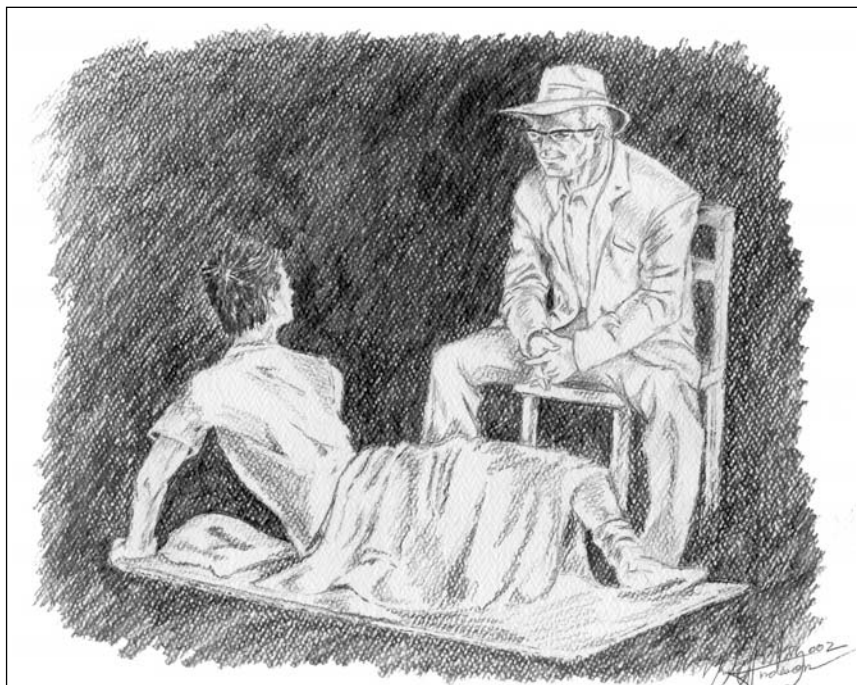
"Oyasumi, Ojiiichan," I mouthed. Good night.

I WOKE UP to see Ojiiichan sitting next to me. He was wearing his fedora and his black-rimmed glasses. His suit smelled of mothballs. "Ohayo," he said. Good morning.

"Ohayo, Ojiiichan," I said, sitting up and rubbing the fatigue from my eyes. "So what's it like on the other side?" What else do you say to a dead man?

He thought for a moment, took off his hat, then stared for a while at the mounds my feet made under the blanket. The silence was long, but comfortable, familiar. He wiped at the sparse gray stubble that covered his head. "I don't really know yet. I feel like I'm preparing for a long journey of some kind." Then he grinned. "You're a missionary—you tell me!"

I responded without hesitation. "Well, first you go to the spirit world, where you wait for the resurrection, and you'll be taught. . ." This wasn't right. He was dead—he should be telling me. But didn't I know? Hadn't the Spirit confirmed the truth to me? I had borne witness of these things a hundred times before—what was different this time?



"Ohayo, Ojiiichan," I said, sitting up and rubbing the fatigue from my eyes. "So what's it like on the other side?" What else do you say to a dead man?"

KYLE ANDERSON

"I don't know, either," I said.

He smiled. "It's a great mystery to all of us," he said. "The only way to know for certain is to go there ourselves." I watched his face. His eyes were focused on something beyond the walls of this little room. He was thinking, preparing for something. I could feel energy and power building up within him. This was the man who had led coal mining strikes long before I was born. This was the man who had survived for three days on the wreckage of his torpedoed ship with a foot-long gash in his thigh. This was the real Ojiiichan.

He turned to me again and continued.

"I was old, and I had the opportunity to experience much

in my life. I died quickly and painlessly. Your grandmother is well taken care of. I am ready for a new adventure." He stood up.

"I wish we could have had more time to talk. I'm sorry I was such a terrible letter-writer," I said. He was slowly moving away from me.

"Don't go, Ojiiichan," I pleaded.

"It's time. I've got to go, John-kun," he said. "You will have your chance, too." He lingered for a moment, but the force that drew him away was too powerful. Or perhaps the bond between us was not strong enough. He stared at me for a moment, eyes moist. Then he turned resolutely to face the unknown. As his body turned, I watched the wrinkles on his face smooth, then disappear altogether. Black, wavy hair pushed its way out from underneath his hat. His curved back straightened, and the unseen weight on his shoulders was removed. His glasses disappeared. Then he was gone.

I sat in the dark for a while, listening to Christiansen's rhythmic breathing. Then I crawled back into my futon and slept more soundly than I had in a long, long time. ☹



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