

Tokyo Monogatari

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This piece is intended as a sequel to my “The Spirit-Captives of Japan’s North Country” (SADLER 1987). In that essay, on Yanagita’s *Tōno Tales*, I had occasion to remark on the tabloid-like character of some of the stories. After finishing that study, I found myself speculating whether the reverse might also be true: that newspaper stories, especially of the more sensational kinds of crime and mayhem, have about them the character of folklore? Would they be, in a culture without newspapers, the makings of folk tales? Do the working journalist and the working folk memory, on some occasions, draw upon the same sort of raw material? This essay is the outcome of that speculation.

The clippings I invoke as evidence are from two decades ago—a sort of *illud tempus*, a dreamtime. There may be terms within them unfamiliar to the modern reader, or to outsiders to the ways of Japan; for them a glossary is provided at the end of the article.

Newspapers are pretty much the same the world over. We read them for their war news and their political gossip, for their cartoonists and their columnists. And they favor us with tales of scandal and mayhem and catastrophe. For the modern sophisticate, the journalist fills in for the (now sadly defunct) story teller. His wares are the stuff of folk narrative, done up for a numb army of commuters with time on their hands.

We won’t admit to buying the paper for its crime stories; but we do read them with care. Partly for practical reasons, I think. If there were three auto accidents last week at the intersection of Cat Moussam Street and Hardscrabble Road, we ought to know about it. Pick-pock-

ets at the County Fair? We'll be on our guard.

Beyond that, there is the fascination with the grotesque, the unseemly, the lunatic, and the hurtful. It is so remote from us, yet so close to us. We live orderly lives, but we know we are living on the boundary of disorder.

In a foreign land, how much closer the disorder seems. Perhaps because the corollary holds true: alien systems of order seem more orderly. Think of caste, or of Confucian etiquette. Then think how long you have taken the Infield Fly Rule for granted, and how exotic it is to a Pakistani.

I offer here my reflections on a year of crime news, reported in the Tokyo press, during 1965–1966. This is to be an unscientific discourse, based on materials drawn from five large scrapbooks of newspaper clippings collected during a year's residence in Tokyo. Whatever caught my fancy went into the scrapbook; I make no pretense of the methodological niceties.

What has stuck in my mind, in these long intervening years, is not the political news—not the debates in the Diet, not the speeches of Cabinet Ministers—nor the reports of typhoon and earthquake. All that seems quite commonplace, in retrospect. But not the crime news. That was special. That held clues, one felt, to the heart of Japan and its people.

Not so much, either, the crimes of passion—although even there the element of universal human turmoil and emotion takes on an especially Japanese flavor.

September eleventh: The owner of a Tokyo antique shop returned home at day's end to find his wife had returned. She had left him two weeks before. They had quarreled over her joining one of the so-called new religions. She brought with her a woman friend, perhaps from the sect, as a "divorce consultant." After an evening of bitter argument, the two women turned in; the husband went to the cellar and brought up a bucket of gasoline, and torched the house. All three died in the fire. Fifteen fire engines responded to the alarm.

October nineteenth: A forty-two year old Korean rag-picker was sentenced to prison for the theft, on July twenty-first, of two transistor radios. He said that his troubles began when he entered a bar near the Kokubunji station on the Chuo line, and the hostess whispered in his ear that he was the sort of man she would like to marry. He said that he fell in love with her then and there; saw her often; and spent lavish sums to make her happy—in all, about ¥50,000. She vanished, and he found himself without funds. Later, he heard that she was already married. He had fourteen previous convictions.

January thirty-first: A girl of seventeen who was an employee at a Turkish bath stabbed to death a bar hostess. The accused had run away from home at the age of fifteen and come to Tokyo to work in a series of coffee shops, and then Turkish baths. She and the bar girl had fought over an eighteen year old boy—a cook and waiter who had come to Tokyo from Shizuoka upon graduation from junior high school. He was known to have spent money freely, betting on horse races and bicycle races, and to have gone on sleeping pill binges with the girl, in local tea shops. The cause of the murder was listed as a love triangle.

May twentieth: An eighteen year old girl, who lived near Shibuya station and attended a high school in Ikebukuro, vanished one afternoon after saying goodbye to her friends at Ikebukuro station. She was found, six months later, living with a man in Shibuya, not far from her parents' home. She said that she had gotten off the train at Shibuya as usual, that day in November, and was standing by Hachikō's statue, when this man approached her, and lured her home with him. She said she had been doing his cooking and washing ever since. Asked why she did not notify her parents of her whereabouts, she made no reply. The man, a forty-four year old sightseeing guide, said that she reminded him of his ex-wife, and that he had intended to marry her. In Tōno, he would have been called a mountain man, and she would have been called *kamikakushi*; but this was Tokyo, so she was sent home, and he was arrested for kidnapping.

The characters in all these stories should be familiar to us: the spurned and resentful husband, the street people and runaways, gamblers and prostitutes, the exploiters and the exploited—often one and the same. The settings may be a little different—the hostess-run bar, the tea shop or coffee shop, the Turkish bath (we call them massage parlors); but the stories are not peculiar to Japan. Each story is of a type, yet each is individual.

Gangland crime is a different matter. It is collective. It is a business. It supplies people with needs the law does not recognize.

September twenty-first: The chief cook of the freighter Yamahime Maru was arrested on charges of smuggling forty-nine pistols into Japan from Vancouver, British Columbia.

September twenty-first: One hundred ranking members of the Matsuba gang assembled today at Hosho Temple to participate in a formal ceremony of dissolution. The head of the gang, Mr. Fujita Uichiro, said the gang had been destroyed by the current police campaign against gambling, extortion, and possession of firearms. The gang was also engaged in right-wing political activities, and had clashed

with leftist demonstrators against renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.

November twenty-eighth: Minami Imatoshi, former ranking member of the now disbanded Sumiyoshi gang, was shot leaving his home, by two gunmen of the Matsuba gang. It was reported that Minami and the Matsuba gang were engaged in a dispute over purchase rights to pachinko prizes.

December fifth: Nine gangsters were arrested near Kanda station for attempting to shake down hot dog vendors. Seven were members of the Kodama gang. They were demanding ¥20,000 a month in protection money. Police said that roughly one third of the hot dog stalls in Tokyo are now operated by gangsters.

December fifth: Three gangsters were arrested in Ueno Park for molesting hot dog vendors, in an effort to drive them out of the park. One of the gangsters reportedly plans to open a hot dog stand there himself.

December ninth: Police are investigating the case of a medical doctor who, upon request, amputated the little finger of the left hand of a thirty-six year old gang member who had offended a fellow gang member by stealing his girl. If he had not made amends, the doctor said, he would have been killed.

December twenty-third: Three former members of the Matsuba gang were arrested for attempting to fix a professional cycling race. One of the cyclists said they had tried to thrust ¥100,000 into his hand, but he refused the money, and notified authorities.

December twenty-ninth: Textile officials report concern over the growing number of factory girls who go home for the year-end festivities, and never return. Most are young and "too weak against men." Living the year round in factory dorms, they have no family life, and no contact with men. Many come from farming communities where their prospects for marriage are very poor. They are easily seduced by hoodlums hanging around the train stations, and put to work in bars and Turkish baths.

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Crimes of passion are accidental. They are unplanned, unintended. They simply erupt. Gang-sponsored crime, by contrast, is willful, and filled with intent. The gangster makes the things happen that he wants to happen. Yet how perfectly they dovetail. The gangsters are almost the managers of the Theatre of Crime. They hire the hall and bring on the scenery. They wait in the wings for the actors to

come on stage, and act out their little tragedies.

November ninth: A prominent citizen from Kyushu was in Tokyo on business. On Sunday night, his business completed, he took a cab to Asakusa, and entered the Kadoebi Turkish Bath, for a bit of relaxation. His attaché case contained an uncashed check for ¥630,000. When the Kyushu visitor left the Turkish bath, he recovered his clothes and the attaché case, but not the check. On Monday morning, three young men in their twenties were arrested at a branch bank in Chuo-ku, attempting to cash the check.

With that story, we pass out of the theatre for innocents prepared by organized crime, and into another, more specifically Japanese, theatre of crime. The first theatre specializes in tales of souls caught between rural boredom and urban tinsel; the second has its roots in ancient tradition, and its (perhaps equally ancient) perversion.

November ninth: The head of a small corporation needed his *hanko* (his signature stamp) to complete a tax form, unlocked his top drawer, and found the little case containing the *hanko* missing. His first thought was of his accountant (who was also his brother), who often borrowed it to authorize orders and payments made by the firm. The brother assured him that he always returned it to its proper place in the desk. Ten days later the bank called and asked him when he was going to pay off his ¥800,000 promisory note. He rushed to the bank, and asked to see the note. Sure enough, it contained his *hanko* stamp, and was counter-signed by a friend of his plant manager. He explained that it was not his loan. The bank explained that it was. The manager denied any knowledge of the affair, but his friend confessed to stealing the stamp, and taking out the bank loan. All three went to the bank, and the bank manager heard the confession. He said that nonetheless the ¥800,000 was owed by the owner of the *hanko*, and demanded payment within twenty-four hours. The thief somehow managed to pay off the loan. The injured party threatened prosecution, but the bank said that since the loan had been paid in full and the man had said he was sorry, as far as they were concerned no crime had been committed, and the matter was dropped.

And so ends the Case of the Purloined Signature Stamp. Now consider the Case of the Unwanted Bather. And note the date; as the big holiday season approaches, Tokyo crime takes on a special character.

December twenty-fourth: A thirty-three year old construction worker from a little farming village outside Sendai was heading for his lodgings in Nishiarai-machi, Adachi-ku, around midnight, when he passed by an open door. Within the door he saw a very inviting tubful of steaming hot water. He went in, peeled off his clothes, scrubbed up,

and climbed into the tub. The lady of the house was awakened by the sounds of someone singing in her bathtub. She discovered a stranger in her tub, and ordered him out. He obligingly said he would leave as soon as he was a bit warmer, and continued with his song. She phoned for the police. He said that Tokyo is certainly an inhospitable town, and that no one in his town would have found cause for complaint. Back home, he said, a steaming bath is an open invitation to all and sundry.

January fourth, THE CASE OF THE PRODIGAL STEP-SON: The eighteen year old live-in employee of a milk store in Yokohama went to Tokyo (Tsurumi-ku) to pay his regard to his mother and step-father. They toasted each other with *sake*. The step-father then asked the boy why he was two days late with his New Year's greetings. The boy said he had other things he had to do first. The step-father took a kitchen knife and stabbed the boy to death.

January twenty-fifth, THE CASE OF THE LONESOME ARSONIST: A Tokyo construction worker was called home to his family farm in Oita. His thirteen year old son had attempted to set fire to the house. Police quoted the boy as saying: "I missed father so much. I set fire to my house because I thought maybe he would come home." The boy's sister is also away from home, working in Aichi-ken. His mother remains at home to work the farm. She extinguished the fire, which damaged two tatami mats.

November twenty-ninth, THE CASE OF THE YOKOHAMA PHANTOM: A twenty year old geisha found that sulphuric acid had been sprinkled on her finest holiday kimono as she was attending the third "Cock Fair" of the month at Ōtori Shrine. Police report that this is the sixty-seventh such attack by the "Acid Phantom"; the first occurred in March of 1964.

January fifth: Two plainclothesmen today observed a suspicious young man near the Yokohama station, who appeared to be following pretty girls dressed in bright, festive kimono. They arrested him when they saw him stain the kimono of a nineteen year old bank teller, and found in his pocket a whisky bottle filled with sulphuric acid. He is Yotsuya Fumio, 31, married, and father of a nine month old daughter. He is the second son of a farmer in Kohoku-ku, where he attended junior high school. He has been employed for the last ten years as a boilerman at the Dai-Ichi Carbon Company. Police believe he is the "Phantom Acid Sprayer" who has claimed seventy victims; but Mr. Yotsuya will confess to only three such incidents. Asked why he did it, he said it was because there were so many people who could not afford to buy such fancy clothes.

January sixteenth: Two young women in Chiba, returning from Coming of Age Day ceremonies, found that ink had been poured on their kimono. In Atami, two women reported finding their kimono sleeves slashed with a sharp knife or razor.

February second: Two rural communities in Tochigi-ken elected this year to observe Coming of Age Day in ordinary clothing, as part of an effort to "simplify their living." Seven girls who appeared in elaborate kimono were accordingly turned away at the door. The father of one, a fifty-eight year old farmer, has protested to the Human Rights Protection Division of the Utsunomiya Justice Bureau. He and his wife argue that a girl has a right to look her best, and have her parents see her in her finery for this once-in-a-lifetime celebration. There had been crop damage in the area due to heavy hail storms.

The key, here, it would appear, is resentment. It is Mishima's plot all over again: the young monk who does not wish to be a monk, who does not wish to inherit his father's temple and his father's vocation as priest; who has heard all his life that the Temple of the Golden Pavilion is the most perfect, the most beautiful building in the world, torches it. To him it represents the world that has imprisoned him, and he sets about destroying it. It is the same with the man who, in 1957, entered the Louvre, and threw a rock at the *Mona Lisa*, or the unemployed shoe-maker who damaged Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in 1915, in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Indeed, it is the same with all art vandals, if not all vandals: they destroy what they do not understand. They destroy it because it excludes them—because it bespeaks a conspiracy of the comfortably well to do and well schooled to play games in public whose rules the common man, struggling for survival, decency, and a little simple recreation, cannot comprehend. Art is an impertinence, and beauty a reminder of one's inferiority. It fires resentment. It invites destruction. (See DORNBERG 1987)

All of which brings us to our final story, THE CASE OF THE DOCTORED SPONGE CAKE.

Cholera, typhus and typhoid are diseases common to mainland Asia, with a potential for epidemic. Japanese health authorities have zealously guarded their population against exposure. Identification of a single case serves to touch off a national alarm, and initiate a national search for the source of infection.

In July of 1965, two doctors at Mishima Hospital in Shizuoka fell ill, and were diagnosed as having contracted typhoid. The national alarm was sounded.

On September eighth, a family of eight in Gotemba contracted typhoid.

On December sixth, a family of six in Koyama, Shizuoka-ken, came down with typhoid.

From January nineteenth to the twenty fourth, five families, all neighbors in Koyama, were reported to have typhoid.

In March, a man and his wife in Odawara, and six doctors and nurses of the Katsuragi Hospital of Chiba University contracted the illness.

Medical detectives began to look for a connection between the Chiba cases and the Shizuoka cases. They were especially puzzled by the fact that some of the cases were not persons brought to the hospital, but hospital personnel. They succeeded in tracing the typhoid bacteria in the Chiba nurses' case to mandarin oranges that had been left in the nurses' locker room at the hospital. The epidemiological investigation had become a criminal investigation.

Investigators made other remarkable discoveries. In July of 1964, there were 130 cases of dysentery at the Shizuoka hospital, among staff and patients. They all had something in common. The patients had all been treated by a Dr. Suzuki Mitsuru, and had all been given bananas or slices of sponge cake by him—as had the doctors and nurses. Dr. Suzuki was from Koyama, and worked two days a week at the Mishima Hospital. The rest of his time was spent at the Katsuragi Hospital in Chiba, where he served as a research bacteriologist. He was, in fact, working on his doctoral dissertation on the epidemic spread of typhoid.

The Chiba-Shizuoka connection had been found, and all the rest fell into place. Dr. Suzuki was conducting his laboratory experiments outside the laboratory. He was feeding his friends and colleagues with sponge cake and a soft drink called Calps laced with typhoid bacteria, and then following the progress of the disease. The family of eight who had contracted the illness early on in September was the family of his aunt. The Koyama family of six was his uncle's family; and the five neighbor families who fell ill in Koyama in January were neighbors of his parents. The Odawara couple were his brother and sister-in-law.

Dr. Suzuki was arrested, and he told a strange story. His doctoral project had been approved by an eminent medical scholar at Chiba University; but before Suzuki could sit down with him and map out the project, the great man was awarded a Ford Foundation grant to conduct research at a famous American hospital, and left without leaving any instructions at all for poor Suzuki, except to say that he would be back in three years or so. Suzuki exercised his patience for a while, and then began dabbling on his own.

When the story broke in the newspapers, Suzuki's former colleagues suddenly recalled all sorts of curious events. Between October 1960 and October 1962 Suzuki had worked at the Chuo Hospital in Chiba-ken. Nurses recalled that one day they came to work and found the main clock turned ahead two hours. They turned it back. Next morning, it was two hours fast again. This went on for several weeks. The repair man was sent for; he reported that there was nothing wrong with the clock. A favorite kettle repeatedly disappeared from the nurses' station, only to reappear in its proper place a few days later. Sometimes when his colleagues went for their evening bath, they found the water all but boiling, and the tap handle removed and left in the bottom of the tub; they went to bed cold and unbathed. Toilets were often plugged with newspapers. On occasion feces were found smeared on toilet walls and stall and door handles.

In his final confession, reported in the April sixteenth newspapers, he stated: "It is true that I wanted to see how a mass outbreak of disease would develop from the planted bacilli, but I spread the germs out of my deep antagonism to the seniority system which prevails in medical circles. In the research laboratory, I was placed at the bottom of the heap, and made to work alone on a number of research projects with no assistance whatever from my fellow researchers in the hospital. I was unhappy because the outcome of my research was announced not in my name but in the name of the laboratory. These incidents made me deeply antagonistic toward the seniority system in the medical world."

There was something of the trickster about Dr. Suzuki, but a certain meanness as well. Nurses looking for the missing kettle, or pondering the mischievous clock, felt they were being watched. In the watching lies the sadism. It is the same with the acid-sprinkling phantom: he torments, and he watches. He is torturer and voyeur, together.

At the same time, Suzuki is justifiably bitter. He feels that the work he and his young colleagues have done has made the reputation of their guiding professor. They have done the work, and he is off to New York to enjoy the rewards. And he has left them alone. Aloneness is a very special problem in Japan. The juvenile incendiary, you will recall, was protesting his abandonment by his father. In Japan, the family stays together. In shop or office, colleagues work together—and afterwards play together. The demented criminal is a loner, and not a loner by choice. From his solitude emerges his sadism.

Now I have told my story. It is quite a sad story. It is a story of individuals frustrated in their earnest efforts, frustrated in their loves, frustrated by the tightly drawn horizons of farm life and then by the narrow back alleyways of the city.

I take my title from Yanagita's famous collection of other stories and other lives, equally hemmed in and restrained—squeezed of spontaneity and personal freedom.

Are these Tokyo Tales the stuff of legends? Are they akin to memorates, which are the raw materials of folk narrative? Or does contact with printer's ink sap them of their promise? Are we to have no more Captain Kidds and Johnny Appleseeds and Bluebeards to tell of?

Or is the newspaper in truth the story teller for the larger town, the balladier of the new metropolis?

Do my clippings do more than record the peculiarities and commonplaces of a particular place in time? Do they convey the spirit of a people—both in sunlight and in shadow—as Yanagita's *Tōno monogatari* does I say they do. But to read the picture, you must read it as you would a photographic negative. You must fill in the dark places with light. The portrait is a reversed image: it must be turned inside out.

In disorder, we find the clue to order. Where the virus lives, however briefly and sensationally, the anti-body is invisibly in evidence. Derangement is counterpoint to order. It is the festival tarantella of a civilization taking a much-deserved vacation.

GLOSSARY

Coffee shop. Rendez-vous for lovers. There was one in Asakusa called the "Coffee and Snug."

Coming of Age Day. A national observance, celebrated on 15 January for those youths attaining the age of twenty, and thereby gaining full status as citizens of Japan.

Hachikō statue. Hachikō was a little dog who met his master every evening at the Shibuya train station (on the circle line). The man died, but Hachikō came every night to await his return, for ten years, until the dog died. Commuters then erected a statue to the faithful dog. It is a favorite meeting place for lovers, and others; "Meet me by Hachikō" is the equivalent of old New Yorkers saying, "Meet me by the clock." No one had to be told where the clock was.

Hanko. A short cylinder, usually of ivory or bone, with one's distinctive signature, usually in Chinese characters, carved into the flat

end, and accompanied by a small pad of vivid red ink. Used on all official documents. Has the force of a witnessed and notarized personal signature.

New Religions. Those religious movements that sprang up after the war "like mushrooms." They have roots going back in time, often to shamanism, but they are quite modern in their orientation toward propaganda and publication, and their interest in therapeutic work.

Pachinko. A compact, miniaturized pinball machine, made vertical, and using ball-bearing steel balls.

Turkish bath, or toruko. One of the newer settings for the world's oldest profession.

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