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Daffodils　水上勉　「水仙」

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Daffodils

Minakami Tsutomu

Translated by Zeljko Cipris

This short story is set in Fukui Prefecture in 1947 during the US occupation

1

Daffodils that bloom along the Cape Echizen cliffs overlooking the Sea of Japan are wild. With their sword-shaped slender leaves and lovely white or yellow blossoms, these plants convey a sense of trim tidiness that makes them stand out among rare winter flowers and attracts many admirers. Perhaps because they are wild, these Echizen daffodils look tougher at a glance than their counterparts grown in city greenhouses. The green of their leaves too is a shade darker. Tough as they are – perhaps because they grow on windswept hills pounded by roaring waves – they look all the lovelier for being wild. Nowadays, when trains arrive at Takefu, Fukui, and other stations along the Hokuriku main line near Cape Echizen, so-called flower girls with pretty golden baskets stroll from window to window selling daffodils in small bunches, bulbs and all. They have recently made this wild flower the "regional flower" of Fukui Prefecture.

The flower girl called Kimiko who features in this story was born in the village of Tategami. The village forms a section of Shikaura, a town in a bay a mile or two from Cape Echizen, where cliffs follow the coast toward the city of Tsuruga. Back then, wild flowers were not yet so sought after. Kimiko died at seventeen, and had been selling daffodils since she was fourteen. Right after the war, when she lived, wild daffodils that grew back of Tategami were not yet famous enough to be sold at train stations. She would trim the flowers at home, wrap them in a straw mat, carry them to stores in Tsuruga or Takefu, and sell them to be used for New Year's offerings. Villages where the daffodils bloom face steep cliffs, so they possess very little arable land. Going up to the mountains to make charcoal was about the only sideline available to the farmers, and selling daffodils was the most common side work among the women. In the blossoming season, even during the war, lines of women could be seen crossing the long mountain paths of Echizen on foot, walking seven or eight miles to Takefu to sell daffodils.

The women ranged in age from girls of fourteen or fifteen to young wives of twenty-six or twenty-seven. In their splash-pattern cotton kimonos with red sashes holding up the sleeves, wearing wrist guards and leggings, they looked just like strolling medicine vendors from Echigo who are seen in cities like Tokyo. What was different was that the straw bundles they shouldered contained bunches of daffodils. Many of the women crossed the mountains carrying dozens of pounds of flowers on their backs.

Along the main road of Hokuriku where the shops of Tsuruga and Takefu are located, devout Buddhists are many and every home celebrates the New Year by making offerings to the Buddha. Not surprisingly, shopkeepers look forward to the arrival of the young women who come from the far side of the cape, carrying wild flowers for the floral offerings. In Takefu, along the Omotegawa River, there was a wholesale cutlery shop run by Murakami Tasuke where Kimiko had been selling daffodils since she was thirteen, and had made friends with the family. The Murakami proprietress enjoyed buying Kimiko's daffodils every year.

Although Kimiko was seventeen when she died, she had matured early and already at thirteen had a round, plump face that men found attractive. Her mouth, with its slightly pouting lower lip, also looked most winsome. Considering her too pretty for a flower girl, the Murakami proprietress greeted her arrival by pulling up a stool for her in a sunlit spot in front of the shop, and serving her tea.

"Thank you for coming such a long way! You must've got up real early this morning. What time do you leave Tatagemi?"

Glancing at Kimiko's dust-covered leggings, the proprietress pictured the girl walking alone from her distant hamlet along the lonely mountain paths.

"I get up at three," replied Kimiko, "then go up to the mountain with Pop to pick flowers. We get back down at five. I eat breakfast, get ready, and leave the village at six."

The proprietress gazed at the strikingly healthy face of this girl who had crossed some eight miles of mountain trails.

"Is the trail good all the way?"

"Well, I go along the sea from Shikaura to Komenoura, and when I get to Kono I start up the mountain. There're lots of cliffs along the sea, so some places are pretty dangerous. Sometimes when it's snowing, these really tall and scary waves wash right over the trail."

The daffodils that the girl carried along such daunting seaside paths cost even less than those bought in the town's flower shops. Of course, as these were wild flowers, maybe the price covered only their transportation.

Kimiko arrived in late December of every year. It was a season when the shops of Takefu were festooned with New Year's decorations. Omotegawa River flowed ice-cold through the town, and in the mornings tiny pillars of frost rose along its banks. The daffodils that the girl had carried, her breath forming puffs of white vapor, still bore a fragrance of the mountains. Black soil adhering to the flower bulbs was moist and gave off a scent of the sea.

2

On the morning of December twenty-fourth of that year, Kimiko climbed the mountain with her father Senkichi to pluck the daffodils, bulbs and all, wrap a day's worth with straw and walk back down to their home. That very morning, as they were eating breakfast, she exclaimed, "Pop, there're gunshots! I'm scared!"

Startled by his daughter's sudden words, the father raised his dim eyes and said, "Gunshots? Reckon it'll be some hunters."

"They're not hunters," replied Kimiko. "They're foreign soldiers."

By the time Kimiko left the village of Tategami in the early morning and walked along the seashore path, the sun rose above the wavelike ridges of the Nanjo mountains behind her. Even so, the path remained in the shadow and was dark. Within that darkness were parked several jeeps. Occupation army soldiers stationed in Tsuruga had come with shotguns to shoot wild ducks. The seashore around here is said to be the only coastal hunting ground for ducks in Japan. Because the country was still under occupation, no Japanese owned a gun. The most the local people could do was to coat rice stalks with birdlime, scatter them along the shore where ducks are likely to land, and grab the birds by hand. At some point, foreign soldiers started to hunt along the trail that Kimiko passed.

Some of the foreign soldiers' faces were white and some were black. To Kimiko, all their faces looked strange. It was not just the blue eyes. The downy hair covering their cheeks and the long black hair on the backs of their hands struck her as revolting.

Whenever Kimiko encountered these soldiers, she stepped off the seaside trail to pass them. Catching sight of her with the daffodils on her back, some of them smiled while others teased her with incomprehensible words, whistled, or pretended to block the narrow path. Yet once Kimiko passed them, her face bright red, they made no effort to follow her. Evidently it delighted them to have a little fun at the expense of the pretty girl they happened to come across on the lonely seaside path.

Kimiko, however, was terrified by their hunting guns. She remembered the day during the war when a fisherman from Tategami who was walking through the mountains wearing a straw raincoat was mistaken for a wild boar and shot. Ever since, it was said throughout the village that anyone mistaken for a wild boar risked getting shot. Kimiko worried that seen from a distance, the light-brown bundle of daffodils on her back might be taken for a wild boar.

"Don't be scared," her father had said, "Americans wouldn't make that kind of mistake. They're just aiming to get themselves some Japanese ducks to eat."

That day too, the father's face wore its customary expression as he watched his daughter leave the house with the daffodils on her back. Father, who had worked making charcoal, had that autumn injured himself in the mountains. His right leg had not recovered properly after surgery, forcing him to spend the whole winter idle. Accompanying his daughter to help her pluck daffodils was the most he could do. The money his daughter earned went to pay the yearend debts. And so, watching his daughter leave, he felt boundlessly grateful to her.

When the daughter reached a bend in the mountain path down by the shore, she briskly turned around to wave and smile toward her village home, as she always did. But the father did not see her smile. Behind the daughter rose a raging sea.

Tall waves surging in enormous billows were biting at the rocks.

3

Gazing at the face of the girl who had come to sell daffodils, the proprietress of the Murakami cutlery shop noticed that Kimiko looked oddly paler than she had in previous years, and that her eyelids seemed swollen.

"What's wrong, Kimiko? You're looking pale."

While a shop clerk was bringing out the tea, the woman scrutinized the seated flower girl and felt that something was out of place. Her clothing looked in disarray.

Normally, her wrist guards and leggings were fastened with severe tightness, and though her small hands were red and swollen with frostbite, Kimiko gave off a feeling of trim tidiness. But on this particular day, even the sash holding up her sleeves was not in place. Also, the knot of her obi somehow looked slovenly. The proprietress' eyes darkened.

"What's wrong, Kimiko? You're looking odd today."

Kimiko blushed.

"It's nothing," she said, but quickly lowered her face.

After paying for the flowers, the proprietress continued to look at Kimiko's disorderly appearance, until it suddenly occurred to her that this girl had become a woman. It was an intuitive perception that would only strike an older woman. Once she realized it, the proprietress found herself unable to continue her conversation with Kimiko.

"Take care on your way back," said the proprietress.

Kimiko flashed a wry smile, swung the bundle of flowers onto her shoulders, and went off to the next customer.

The following day too Kimiko looked pale and vaguely downcast. Her limping father at once sensed a change in the girl. Ordinarily, after setting down her empty bundle on the earthen floor and washing her hands in the stream in front of the house, Kimiko cheerfully chatted about what her customers had told her, and about the villagers she met along the way. It puzzled Senkichi that she did none of that now.

Knowing his daughter would return home after dark, it was Senkichi's custom to limp about as he started a fire in the hearth and waited for her while fixing dinner. The house's roof – thatched with cedar bark and held down by flat stones – trembled constantly in the powerful gusts of wind from the sea. Beneath a bare and swaying five-candlepower bulb sat his hungry daughter, plying her chopsticks in a strangely dejected way.

“Kimi, is something wrong? You’re looking awful pale.”

“No, nothing,” Kimiko shook her head. “Nothing’s wrong, Pop.”

“It’s gotten chilly, so be sure you don’t catch cold or you won’t be able to go to town. Take good care of yourself, you hear?”

At a time like this, her widowed father immediately thought of the girl’s mother, who had died so young. She came to his mind both because Kimiko resembled her and because he thought he would not have to put her through this much trouble if her mother were still alive. Though his face looked downcast, he gazed with pleasure at his daughter and her good appetite: she was eating her third bowl of rice.

“American soldiers still coming to the beach with their guns?” he asked.

Kimiko’s chopsticks stood still for a moment, and she dropped a slice of pickled radish onto her plate.

“Yup,” she said.

“Is that right? They all come in their jeeps, do they?”

“Right, they park their jeeps on the ridge, hide behind rocks, and wait for the ducks.”

“Who goes to get the ducks they shoot?”

“Looks like they pay fishermen from Kono good money to go out on their boats.”

“No kidding?” Senkichi grimaced with regret. If only his leg were good, even he could do that much. “They really got colored soldiers too?”

“Yup,” replied Kimiko. At that moment, for some reason, she shivered.

Senkichi glanced at his daughter’s frightened face, but soon broke into a grin.

“I know you’re scared of those guns,” said Senkichi. “They’re just to shoot the ducks with, so don’t you worry about them.”

Kimiko’s chopsticks stayed motionless in midair. The look in her eyes suggested she was thinking about something else.

4

After the New Year, Kimiko’s face grew even paler. During New Year’s she rested from selling daffodils but with the arrival of the lunar New Year in February, she once again had to go to nearby towns to sell the flowers. This was because some of the townspeople were accustomed to celebrating the lunar New Year as the official New Year. In February the snow grew deep. Father and daughter had to trudge through a snowed-in valley to dig up the daffodils that grew on bare patches of ground in the shade of rocks. For Senkichi too, this took twice as long. To the back of the terraced hills so typical of the countryside between the cape and Tategami, rise craggy mountains swept by fierce winds. Blown by the northern gales, here the snow too quickly freezes. The daffodils hauled by Senkichi were few, but this conveniently allowed him to keep pace with Kimiko’s footsteps. The snow-covered path took them three times as long.

Amid the melting snows at the beginning of March, yellow daffodils were blossoming all over the terraced hills – a sure sign of spring. Mountain streams flowed giving off billows of vapor, and yellow-stained waters fell languidly to the sea.

On the morning of March twenty-second, Kimiko was about to set out from the village with a considerable load of yellow spring daffodils on her back, when she turned around toward Senkichi and asked, “Pop, you still got enough medicine?”

The medicine in question was the ichthyol ointment that she purchased at a drugstore in Takefu. Because Senkichi’s left knee joint had once again started to hurt, he had to keep applying to it strips of oil paper freshly spread with the black ointment. Senkichi stepped back into the house for a moment, checked the medicine box, and said, “Good thinking. Please buy some, would you?”

Kimiko nodded in assent, and started off down the sloping road. It was a windy day. Blowing up from the sea, the wind was not as cold as in midwinter, yet it was almost powerful enough to knock Senkichi over as he stood there seeing off his daughter.

Anxious that Kimiko with the load on her back was being pummeled by even stronger winds and might lose her footing, Senkichi stepped out to the edge of the rocks to gaze toward the coastal trail. Kimiko’s figure, reduced to a dot, could be seen hurrying in the direction of Tsuruga. Senkichi felt relieved. Not only had he worried over her paleness for some time now, it worried him that two or three days earlier Kimiko had thrown up, saying the food she had eaten did not agree with her. He both felt sorry about relying on his daughter’s earnings for so long, and sad about the stubborn pain in his knee joint.

It did not occur to Senkichi that he was seeing Kimiko – now smaller than a dot – for the last time. She had said she would buy the ichthyol at the Takefu drugstore, so he believed that if only she could sell her daffodils she would return by nightfall.

But on that day Kimiko did not return. It took Senkichi by surprise. The temple bell rang at six. Ordinarily, if he stepped out to the edge of the rocks around that time he would be sure to see Kimiko hurrying toward him along the white coastal trail. This time, however, Senkichi’s eyes could make out only the rough sea pounding repeatedly against the craggy shore, but no trace of Kimiko. On some days she was late so he did not get worried until about eight, but when she had still not returned at nine, his anxiety grew intense.

It made him all the more anxious that it had been such a windy day. If she missed her footing somewhere along the way and fell into the sea, the huge waves could easily swallow a girl who was shouldering a heavy load. In some places the trail was so low it almost touched the sea, in others it followed the edge of steep cliffs where one had to jump from one rock to the next. Thinking of that, he grew even more anxious.

When she did not return even at ten, Senkichi limped over to the house of his next door neighbor, Hayashi Saemon, and knocked on the door.

“Kimiko’s not back. I wonder what’s happened to her.”

A man past sixty, Hayashi Saemon was well acquainted with Kimiko's diligence and surprised to hear that she had not returned.

"Son, kindle a torch. You've got strong legs. Go out to the beach and take a look."

Knowing that Senkichi's leg was in no condition for a search along the nearby beach, Hayashi Saemon told his oldest son and daughter-in-law to run to the point of Tategami's small cape and have a look around. Senkichi and Hayashi Saemon stepped out to the edge of the rocks and watched two burning torches move off at a run. The night was dark. Waves chewed on rocks, sending up ash-colored spray, and the open sea was black as charcoal. Looking at that sea, Senkichi turned pale. A feeling suddenly struck him that Kimiko had been swallowed up by the sea.

"Kimi, Kimi, come back to me… Please, come back to me…"

Pressing his palms against each other, Senkichi dragged his crippled leg toward the darkness.

The two torches were coming back, having found nothing.

The shouts of Hayashi Saemon's son could barely be made out, shredded by the roar of the waves.

"She's not there, she's not there!"

5

Kimiko's body was discovered early next morning on a rough shoreline near the rock cliffs of Komenoura, where large black crags jut out of the water here and there. A Komenoura fisherman had taken his boat onto the now calm sea to haul up his octopus pots. Although the spot where Kimiko was found is close to the shore, the water is rather deep and so a great many octopus traps had been set all around. The fisherman had been poling his boat among the rocks. Below one of the large rocks there is a cave-like hole where the bluish purple water swirls in a whirlpool and is dreadfully deep. The fisherman glanced toward the corner of the rock, and what he saw took his breath away. The water's surface was covered with a fine carpet of flowers.

"What in the world!"

The astonished fisherman poled the boat closer and saw that the flowers were daffodils. Did a flower seller toss them into the water, straw bundle and all? The cords that had bound them together had been cut by the rough waves, and the daffodils floated on the water like a layer of embroidered cloth.

The fisherman had been looking at those scattered daffodils for a while, when his eyes suddenly lit up. He spotted a gray shape under the straw bundle.

"Is it a person?"

He feared it might be. Drawing still closer, he stepped up to the prow, crouched to take a look, and gasped.

A hand surfaced. The hand was white. It looked almost like a child's hand. Coming up from below the bundle of daffodils, the hand encircled the bundle as though embracing it. The fisherman prodded the bundle lightly with the tip of his pole. The hand moved along with the bundle. And as the bundle rebounded, it revealed what it had been hiding, and black hair suddenly floated up like spilled ink.

"It's a girl!"

The dumbfounded fisherman instantly leapt over the nearby rocks, ran up the shore, and reported the matter to the Shikaura police substation. The policeman at the substation was a round-shouldered man of over fifty who sported a clipped moustache. On hearing the fisherman's report, the policeman hurriedly forwarded the information to the town police station in Asahi, and followed the fisherman to the scene.

Sure enough, it was a girl. She was wearing a splash-pattern cotton jacket with a red sash. Her wrist guards and leggings were all in place. With the help of some young men from Komenoura, they carried her body to the beach.

"It's the Tategami girl," said one of them. He had often seen Kimiko passing through Komenoura on her way to Takefu.

"It's her for sure, the pale chubby girl. She's the girl who goes to sell daffodils."

The local policeman listened to the explanation, his lower jaw trembling.

"This here is a suicide," said some of the villagers. "She walked along here every day and knew this trail backwards and forwards; no way could she take a wrong step and fall in. She must've killed herself."

"No, hang on just a minute," said one of the young men. "Look what's happened to her flowers. I'd say she passed through here early yesterday morning. The wind was real strong. A whole lot of them occupation soldiers were here to shoot ducks."

"……"

The local policeman glared at him and asked,

"Did the occupation troops do something?"

"I don't know," replied the young man, raising his shoulders in a shrug.

In the nearby city of Tsuruga there had recently occurred an incident of mass rape in which occupation soldiers had violated a number of Japanese girls. It was also possible that when Kimiko chanced to pass the soldiers who had come to shoot ducks, they raped her. But there was no positive proof.

“Did you really see something?” demanded the policeman, as though scolding the youth.

“No, I just saw a lot of them driving jeeps, come to shoot ducks, that’s all.”

“Don’t be saying things if you got no hard proof,” said the policeman, raising his hand to his moustache. “Anyhow, go tell her pa.”

It was two hours later that Kimiko’s father, Kushida Senkichi, arrived at the scene, accompanied by Hayashi Saemon. When Senkichi, dragging his bad leg, struggled up to a gap in the rocks and caught sight of his daughter laid out on a rough straw mat, he turned pale as wax.

“Kimi, Kimi…”

Senkichi rushed up to his daughter’s body and bent down over it. Kimiko’s eyes were half open. Though her face still had a rosy tinge and looked alive, her body was cold as ice.

“Kimi, Kimi, why did this happen to you? Why’d you die, tell me!”

The crippled father broke into sobs. His daughter lay silent.

“Senkichi,” said the policeman. “Look at me. She was carrying the pack of daffodils on her back, and she fell into the sea. Your daughter must’ve slipped and fell in. Why, look at them daffodils, it’s like they’re blooming in the sea.”

The father raised his tear-stained face to look at the water among the rocks, and it was as the policeman had said. The bluish purple water was circling in a whirlpool over the deep dark cave, moving the flower-patterned layer round and round.

“There’s some that says… that she was raped and thrown in, but if that was so she wouldn’t have had the pack on her back. Your daughter was still carrying the pack, daffodils and all, right on her back.”

The policeman said it as though to convince him.

Yet there was somebody whose face showed that the policeman’s explanation did not convince him. This was the youth who had said earlier that he saw occupation soldiers in the area. Though the policeman claimed that the girl had been shouldering the bundle of flowers, according to the fisherman who found her she only seemed to be holding it with one hand. The difference was rather subtle. For what reason would she have taken the bundle off her back? It would make sense once she had reached town, but it was strange that she would put down her bundle midway along a deserted trail.

“Sure enough, somebody did something rotten to her…”

As the young man’s doubts gradually spread among the villagers, many turned against the hasty policeman, and no conclusion was reached concerning Kimiko’s death. The policeman, however, wrote it up as an accidental death and dispatched the report to the local jurisdiction office.

It was a letter sent in by a young man from Komenoura that led to the Fukui prefectural police becoming involved with the case of the flower girl’s death. The prefectural police headquarters issued an order that before the funeral could take place the flower girl’s body be submitted to an official autopsy.

The local policeman was thrown into a panic. He had long since written up his report, and now that forensic officers were to reexamine the body, it depended entirely on their findings whether his on-the-spot judgment would turn out to have been a major blunder.

The autopsy was conducted as ordered. Three forensic doctors from the prefectural police headquarters appeared in Tategami village and curtained off a section of the Bodaiji Temple garden to which entry by the general public was strictly forbidden. Kimiko’s body, which had been temporarily placed in a coffin, was already showing purple spots here and there, and it now being early spring, was starting to decay. The doctors, wearing white masks, performed the operation with scrupulous care. As is common practice in cases of this sort, they first examined the girl’s genital area. One of the doctors blanched.

“Sir, did your daughter have a boyfriend?” asked the city doctor gently.

“I don’t know,” Senkichi shook his head. “She was not a loose girl. She wasn’t the sort of girl who’d have some fellow in secret.”

The doctor nodded. If that was so, the Komenoura youth’s assumption was probably correct. If occupation soldiers were on the scene that day, it was most likely they who raped her.

The father was asked to step outside the curtain.

“She’s pregnant, isn’t she… Let’s open her abdomen.”

Carefully making a cross-shaped incision in the lower abdomen, they extracted a swollen uterus.

The local police chief who was witnessing the autopsy now whispered some instructions to the local policeman, and stepped outside the curtain.

“Sure enough, Senkichi, your daughter’s body is clean. Nobody raped her. She slipped and fell into the sea that morning… The wind was strong that day.”

That is what the local police chief, taking the place of his subordinate, told Senkichi. Kushida Senkichi lowered his head and nodded.

This took place in the spring of 1947.

About the author

Minakami Tsutomu (水上 勉), March 8, 1919 - September 8, 2004), also known as Mizukami Tsutomu, was a popular and prolific Japanese

author of novels, detective stories, biographies, and plays. Many of his stories were made into movies.

Minakami was born in Wakasa, Fukui prefecture, to a poor family. Between the ages of 9 and 12, he was a novice in a Zen temple in Kyoto. Disillusioned by the conduct of the temple's chief priest, however, he left the temple in 1936.

Minakami entered Ritsumeikan University to study Japanese literature, but dropped out for financial reasons and because of bad health. In 1952 the autobiographical *Furaipan no uta* (Song of the Frying Pan), became a best-seller. In 1960, his story centering on Minamata disease, *Umi no kiba* (The Ocean's Fangs), started his career as a writer of detective stories on social themes.

His autobiographical *Gan no tera* (Temple of the Geese) won the Naoki Prize in 1961, and was adapted for film by Kawashima Yuzo (1962). He followed this in 1962 with Kiga kaikyo (Starvation Straits, 1962) which was made into a film under the same name by Tomu Uchida (A Fugitive from the Past, 1965), and *Kiri to kage* (Fog and Shadows, 1963), then novels dealing with women's concerns, including *Gobancho* Yugiri-ro (The Pavilion of the Evening Mist at Gobancho, 1963) and *Echizen takeningyo* (The Bamboo Dolls of Echizen, 1964). He won the 1975 Tanizaki Prize for his biography *Ikkyu* (一休). Minakami's story *Suisen* (Daffodils) was published in 1963.

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This translation is dedicated to Shane Satori and Ljubomir Ryu.

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