

DAZAI OSAMU (1909-1948)

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Translated by Ralph McCarthy



Tokyo presented a picture of effervescent gloom. Though I imagined as I traveled back to the city that something like this might serve as the first line of my next story, I found on my return that, as far as I could see, 'life in Tokyo' was the same as ever. I'd spent the previous year and three months at my childhood home in Tsugaru, returning with the wife and children in mid-November of this year, but when I got back it was as if we'd merely been away on a little trip of, say, two or three weeks.

'Tokyo after a prolonged absence seems neither better nor worse; the character of the city hasn't changed at all,' I wrote to someone back home. 'There are physical differences, of course, but on the metaphysical level the place is as always. It reminds one of the old saying: Only death can cure a fool. A little change wouldn't hurt; in fact, one even feels justified in expecting it.'

Not that I'd changed much myself. I spent a lot of time aimlessly walking the streets in a plain kimono and invernness.

In early December I entered a movie theater in the suburbs (perhaps the term 'moving picture house' would be more appropriate—it was an appealingly run-down little shack) and watched an American film. When I came out it was already six o'clock and the streets were covered with a smoky white evening mist, through which darkly clad people hurried about, already thoroughly caught up in the year-end bustle. No, life in Tokyo hadn't changed at all.

I went into a bookstore and bought a volume by a famous Jewish playwright. Stuffing the book in my pocket, I turned toward the entrance, and there, standing on her tiptoes and looking like a bird about to take flight, was a young woman who was staring at me.

Blessing or curse?

To meet up with a woman you once pursued but no longer feel

Merry Christmas

any affection for is the worst of misfortunes. And, in my case, most of the ladies I know fit that bill. Most? *All*, is more like it.

The one from Shinjuku? God, not that one... It could be, though.

'Kasai-san?'

The girl said my name in a voice no louder than a murmur, lowered her heels, and gave a short bow. She was wearing a green hat, with the ribbon tied below her chin, and a bright red raincoat. As I studied her she seemed to grow younger, until her face matched the image of a certain twelve or thirteen-year-old girl in my memory.

'Shizueko.'

A blessing.

'Let's get out of here. Or did you want to buy a magazine or something?'

'No. I came to look for a book called *Ariel*, but that's all right.'

We stepped out onto the crowded street.

'You've grown up. I didn't recognize you.'

That's Tokyo for you. This sort of thing happens.

I bought two ten-yen bags of peanuts from a street stall, put away my wallet, thought for a moment, then pulled out the wallet again and bought another bag. In the old days I'd always brought this girl a gift whenever I went to visit her mother.

Her mother was the same age as I. And she was one of the very few women from my past—no, make that the *only* one—whom, even now, I could have bumped into unexpectedly without becoming panic-stricken or nonplussed. Why? Well, she was of what they call 'aristocratic birth', she was lovely, and she was frail of health... but, no, such a set of criteria is merely vain and captious and hardly qualifies her as 'the only one'. She had divorced her tremendously wealthy husband, had suffered a downturn of fortunes, and lived in an apartment with her daughter, surviving on her modest assets. But, no. I haven't even a smidgen of interest in women's life histories, and in fact I have no idea why she parted with her wealthy husband or what exactly is meant by 'modest assets'. And if I were told, I'm sure I would promptly forget. Perhaps it's because I've been so consistently made a fool of by women, but I assume even the most pathetic female life story to be a pack of arbitrary lies and am no longer capable of shedding a single tear in response. In other words, such criteria as being well born, being beautiful, having fallen on

hard times—such romantic conditions as these have nothing to do with the reason I single her out as ‘the only one’.

The real reasons, four in number, are as follows. One: She was a stickler for cleanliness. Whenever she returned home after being out, she never failed to wash her hands and feet at the front door. I mentioned that she’d suffered a downturn of fortunes, but her tidy two-room apartment was always spic and span from one end to the other, and the kitchen and all the cooking and eating utensils, in particular, were spotless. Two: She wasn’t the least bit infatuated with me. There was no need to get into the chasm-like rut of the dreary war of the sexes that accompanies lust, none of the agitated, lecherous confusion of ‘Is she attracted to me? Or is it just my vanity speaking? Shall I feel her out? Or is it all in my mind?’ As far as I could tell, this woman was still in love with the husband she’d divorced, and deep in her heart she clung firmly to a sense of pride at having once been his wife. Three: She was sensitive to my moods and feelings. When everything in this world is getting me down, to the point that I feel I can’t bear it any longer, it’s no fun being told things like, ‘Well, you certainly seem to be prospering these days.’ Whenever I went to this woman’s apartment, we were always able to converse about topics that perfectly matched my immediate circumstances and state of mind. ‘It’s always been like that, in every age, hasn’t it?’ I remember her saying once. ‘If you tell the truth, they kill you. Saint John, Jesus Christ himself...and for John, of course, there was no resurrection...’ And she never once uttered a word about a single living Japanese writer. Four, and this is perhaps the most important of all the reasons: There was always an abundance of liquor at her apartment. I don’t think of myself as especially stingy, but at those depressing times when I find myself with outstanding bills at all the bars I know, my feet just naturally lead me to places where I can drink all I like for free. Even as the war dragged on, and liquor became harder and harder to come by in Japan, there was always something to drink at that person’s apartment. I would show up bearing some cheap gift for the daughter, then drink myself into a stupor before leaving.

These four reasons, then, are my answer to the question of why that person was ‘the only one’. If someone were to reply to the effect that what I have just described is in fact one form of love, I would be able to do nothing but gaze back blankly and say, ‘Well,

maybe so.’ If all male-female friendships are a form of love, then perhaps this, too, was love, but I never underwent any sort of anguish in regard to this person, and neither of us was fond of histrionics or complications.

‘How’s your mother? Same as ever?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Not sick or anything?’

‘No.’

‘You’re still living with her, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is your place near here?’

‘But it’s a mess.’

‘No matter. Let’s go get your mother, drag her out to a restaurant, and do some serious drinking.’

‘All right.’

As we spoke, the girl seemed to grow less and less chipper. At the same time, though, with every step she took, she looked more and more grown-up to me. She was born when her mother was eighteen, and her mother, like me, was thirty-eight, which would make this girl...

My ego ballooned. It is possible, certainly, to be jealous of one’s own mother. I changed the subject.

‘*Ariel*?’

‘It’s really the strangest thing!’ Just as I’d planned, she now became quite animated. ‘Before, when I’d just entered girls’ school, you came to our apartment, it was summer, and you and mother were talking, and the word “*Ariel*” kept coming up, and I didn’t have any idea what it might mean, but for some reason I just couldn’t forget that word, and...’ Suddenly, as if she’d grown tired of her own chatter, her voice trailed off and she fell silent. After we’d walked a bit further, she said, ‘It’s the name of a book, isn’t it,’ and fell silent again.

My head swelled even more. That clinches it, I thought. The mother wasn’t in love with me, nor had I ever felt lust for her, but as for the daughter, well, I thought, you never know.

Her mother was a person who, reduced to poverty or not, could not live without delicious food, and even before the war against America and England began, she and her daughter had already evacuated to a place near Hiroshima where good food was plentiful. Shortly after the move I’d received a postcard from her, but I was

having my share of difficulties at the time and didn't feel much of a need to write back immediately to someone who was taking it easy in the country. Before I ever did get around to writing, my own circumstances had begun to change radically, and now it had been five years since I'd had any contact with them.

Tonight, seeing me after five years, completely unexpectedly, which would be more pleased—the mother or the daughter? I, for some reason, suspected that the girl's pleasure would prove to be deeper and purer than that of her mother. If so, it was necessary for me to make my own affiliation clear. It would not be possible to affiliate myself equally with both. Tonight I would betray the mother and join forces with the girl. It wouldn't matter if, for example, the mother were to scowl with disapproval. It couldn't be helped. It was love.

'When did you come back to Tokyo?'

'October of last year.'

'Right after the war ended, then. It figures. No way a selfish person like your mother could put up with living in the sticks any longer than she had to.'

If there was a rough edge to my voice as I badmouthed the mother, it was only to ingratiate myself with the daughter. Women—no, *people*—have a strong sense of rivalry with one another. Even parents and children.

The girl didn't smile, however. It appeared that to bring up the subject of her mother at all, whether in praise or derision, was taboo. I could only conclude that hers was a particularly bad case of jealousy.

'What great luck, running into you like this.' I changed the subject without missing a beat. 'It was as if we'd agreed to meet at the bookstore at a certain time.'

'I know,' she said, falling easily this time for a little sugary sentiment. I was on to something now.

'Watching a movie to kill the time, then going to that bookstore five minutes before we were to meet...'

'A movie?'

'Yeah, I like to see a film once in a while. This one was about a tightrope walker in the circus. It's interesting to see a performer portray a performer. It brings out the best in even a lousy actor, because he's a performer himself. The sadness of entertainers just oozes out of him, whether he realizes it or not.'

As a topic for conversation between lovers, you can't beat movies. They're perfect.

'I saw that movie, too.'

'Just at the moment the two of them meet, a wave comes rushing between them, and they're separated once more. That part was good. Things like that can happen in life, you know—some little mishap, and you never see each other again.'

Unless you can say treachery things like this without hesitation, you'll never make it as a young woman's lover.

'If I had left that bookstore a minute earlier, we might never have met again, or at least not for another ten years or so.' I was trying to make our chance meeting seem as romantic as possible.

The street became narrow and dark, and there were muddy spots as well, so we could no longer walk side by side. The girl walked in front and I followed with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my invernness.

'How much farther?' I asked. 'Half a *cho*? One *cho*?'

'Well, I never really know how far a *cho* is supposed to be.'

I, too, actually, am pretty hopeless when it comes to judging distances. But to show one's stupidity is taboo in love.

'Are we within a hundred meters?' I said with a cool, scientific air.

'Well...'

'Meters are easier to grasp, right? A hundred meters is half a *cho*,' I told her, but felt a bit uneasy about it. I did some calculating in my head and realized that a hundred meters was about one *cho*. But I didn't correct myself. Clownishness is taboo in love.

'Anyway, it's right over there.'

It was a terribly shabby, barrack-like apartment. We entered and walked down a dim hallway to the fifth or sixth door, where I saw the aristocratic family name: Jinba.

'Jinba-san!' I called through the closed door. I was sure I heard a reply. Then a shadow moved across the glass.

'Ha! She's home!'

The girl stood bolt upright, all the color went out of her face, and she twisted her lips in a grotesque way. Then, suddenly, she burst into tears.

Her mother had been killed during the air raids on Hiroshima, she told me. She also said that, in the delirium of her death throes, her mother had called out my name.

The girl had returned to Tokyo alone and was now working in the legal office of a Progressive Party Dietman, a relative on her mother's side.

She was going to tell me all this, but hadn't been able to get the words out, so she'd gone ahead and led me to the apartment, not knowing what else to do.

Now I realized why it was that she'd looked so downcast whenever I mentioned her mother. It wasn't jealousy, and it wasn't love.

We didn't go in the room, but headed back out to the busy area near the station.

Her mother had always loved broiled eel.

We ducked under the curtain of an eel stall.

'Yes, sir! What'll it be?'

We stood at the counter. There was one other customer, a gentleman sitting on the far side of the stall, drinking.

'Large servings? Or small ones?'

'Small ones. Three of them.'

'Yes, sir!' the young stallkeeper said in a hearty growl. He seemed a genuine 'old Tokyo' type.

As he vigorously fanned the coals in his clay stove, I said, 'Put them on three separate plates.'

'Yes, sir! And the third person? Coming afterwards?'

'There are three of us here now,' I said without smiling.

'H'm?'

'There's this person, and me, and standing between us there's a beautiful woman with a worried look on her face. Don't you see her?' I smiled a bit now.

I don't know what he made of this, but the young stallkeeper grinned, lifted a hand to his forehead, and said, 'I can't top that!'

'Do you have any of this?' I said, raising an imaginary cup to my lips with my left hand.

'The very finest there is! Well, not that good, I guess.'

'Three cups,' I said.

Three plates of eel were set out before us. We left the one in the middle alone, and began eating from the other two. Soon three brimming cups of sake arrived.

I drank mine down in a gulp.

'Let me help,' I said in a voice loud enough for only Shizueko to hear. I lifted her mother's cup and gulped it down, then took from

my pocket the three bags of peanuts I'd bought earlier. 'I'm going to drink a bit tonight. Stick with me. You can eat these while I'm drinking,' I said, still keeping my voice down.

Shizueko nodded, and neither of us spoke for some time.

As I silently drained four or five cups in a row, the gentleman on the other side began boisterously joking with the stallkeeper. His jokes were truly inane, amazingly inept, and absolutely devoid of wit, but they struck the gentleman himself as hilarious. The stallkeeper laughed courteously, but the gentleman was in stitches.

'... That's what he said, and of course that bowled me over, then he started singing, "Apples are so pretty, I know just how you feel..." Ha, ha, ha, ha! He's sharp, that fellow, I'll tell you, he said, "Tokyo Station is my home." That killed me, so I said, "My mistress lives in the Maru Building," and now it was his turn to be bowled over...'

He just kept rattling off his utterly unfunny jokes, and I found myself feeling more disgusted than ever with the hopeless lack of any concept of what constitutes a sense of humor that you witness wherever Japanese are drinking. However raucously the gentleman and the stallkeeper laughed, I didn't so much as crack a smile, but merely continued drinking and absently eying the year-end crowds that bustled past the stall.

The gentleman turned to see what I was looking at. After watching the flow of people for a while, he suddenly shouted 'Ha-ro-o! Me-ri-i ku-ri-su-ma-su!' at an American soldier who was walking down the street.

For some reason I burst out laughing this time.

The soldier scowled and shook his head as if to show how silly he thought the gentleman's jest, then strode off and disappeared.

'Shall we eat this, too?' I said, applying my chopsticks to the plate in the middle.

'Yes.'

'Half for you and half for me.'

Tokyo is still the same. It hasn't changed a bit.