



Japan and the Koreas

CULTURE

The Talisman

This short story by Japanese writer Masao Yamakawa is actually a story within a story. The story's main character tells his own story to the reader. That character is a middle-class office worker named Sekiguchi Jirō. Through Sekiguchi's story, the writer is expressing his own views about Japan's urban culture and society.

It was late one night. . . . There were no more buses, and I took a taxi and got off at the main gate [of my apartment complex]. . . . There was a man in front of me. I had the feeling that I was looking at myself from behind. He had on the same felt hat, and he had the same package in his left hand. . . . It was a foggy night, and I wondered if I might be seeing my own shadow.

But it was no shadow. He walked on, the image of me, I thought—and he went into Wing E, where I lived. He went up the stairs I always go up. . . . He came to the third floor and knocked on the door to the right.

It was my apartment. And then I was even more startled. The door opened and he was taken in, like any tired husband home from work.

I climbed the stairs quietly. . . . I put my ear to the door. . . . He was not he. He was I myself.

. . . I'm not crazy. But I thought I was. I could hear her [his wife] saying "Jirō, Jirō," and laughing and telling me what my sister had said when she had come calling that day. And I could hear my own tired voice in between. She was off in the kitchen getting something to eat, and "I" seemed to be reading the newspaper. I did not know what to think. There was another "I," that was clear. And who, then, was this I, standing foolishly in the hall? Which was "I" and which was I. Where should I go? . . . I opened the door only because I could think of nothing else to do with the I that was myself.

"Who's there?" she said.

"I," I finally answered.

It was quite a scene. My wife came out screaming. She looked at the other "I," and screamed again, and threw herself on me. Her lips were moving and she began to cry. The other "I" came out. His face was white. His name was Kurose Jirō. . . .

Kurose was all apologies. When he handed me his name card I saw what the mistake had been. I lived in E-305, he in D-305. He had come into the wrong wing and gone up to my apartment.

My sister is named Kuniko. He was a civil engineer and he had a cousin named Kuniko. His [first] name was Jirō, so is mine. He lived alone with his wife. The coincidence was complete.

“I did think she seemed a little young. I’ve been married four years after all,” he said as he left. He said it as if he meant to flatter, but I was not up to being pleased. It weighed on my mind, the fact that until I opened the door, neither of them had noticed the mistake.

“But I went off to the kitchen, and he sprawled out with the newspaper the way you always do. It didn’t even occur to me that it wouldn’t be you.”

I reprimanded [criticized] her, and she looked timidly [nervously] around the room. “Not just the room. They must be exactly like us themselves. You saw how he thought I was his wife. It scares me.”

I was about to speak, but I did not. To mistake a person or a room—that made no difference. It happened all the time. What bothered me was that Kurose had mistaken our life for his own. . . . I began to wonder whether . . . we were like all those toy soldiers lined up on a department-store counter. Like standardized puppets. . . .

Kurose became for me the representative of all those numberless white-collar workers, all the apartment-house husbands, the toy soldiers, exactly like myself. The representative of all those numberless people who were “I.” . . . I resented him. He was not I. I was not one of them, those office workers so much like myself. I was *I*, I was most definitely not he. But where was the difference? Where was there positive evidence to establish the difference?

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Identify five coincidences that allow the incident that occurs in this story to take place.

2. What point is the author making when he has Sekiguchi observe that “Kurose had mistaken our life for his own”?

Activity

Imagine that you are Sekiguchi Jirō. Compose a poem, or song lyric to express your view of your everyday life.