



Unknown Dog of Nobody and Other Stories

(Original Title: Udon Kitsune-tsuki no)

by Haneko Takayama

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Five surreal and lovely stories. Debut novel by Akutagawa Prize winner.

Introduction and selling points:

This is the debut collected short stories of the author who won the 163rd Akutagawa Prize for Shuri no uma (The Horse from Shuri). The title story of 'Udon, Kitsune-tsuki no (Unknown Dog of Nobody)' awarded an honorable mention to the first Sogen SF Short Story Prize. Kazue Takanashi, a high school girl, found a mysterious creature that looked just like a dog. She brought it home wrapped in a towel, named it Udon, and decided to raise it with her two other sisters. As years passed, Udon had become a member of the Takanashi family, though no one really knew if it was really a dog or not. Other stories include 'Shiki zero rei zero Midorisou (No Deposit, No Key Money: Apartment Midori)', which depicts the strange daily lives of multilingual residents living in a ramshackle suburban apartment. A total of five stories offer a curious mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The short story collection Udon, Kitsune-tsuki no was nominated for the 36th Nihon SF Taisho Award.

Synopsis:

The tile story humorously depicts the lives of three sisters who raise a dog-like creature ('Udon, Kitsune-tsuki no: Unknown Dog of Nobody'). The funny daily lives of people living in a shabby apartment in the suburbs ('Shiki zero rei zero, Midorisou: No Deposit, No Key Money: Apartment Midori'). An unusual situation one day strikes the isolated island where a house of 15 sisters stands ('Haha no iru shima: Mother's Island'). A fantasy tale that transcends time, set in Aomori, the city of Nebuta Festival (a very glamorous festival in which huge lighted lanterns (Nebuta) are paraded around on floats) ('Ookina mono no kaeru basho: The Place Where the Giant Things Return'), ending with an essay ('Essay Ryo to iu na no boro no shojo').

Author:

Born in Toyama Prefecture in 1975. Graduated from Tama Art University. In 2010, Udon, Kitsune-tsuki no won an honorable mention in the 1st Sogen SF Short Story Prize. In 2014, Taiyo no soba no shima (The Island on the Side of the Sun) won the 2nd Fumiko Hayashi Literary Prize. In 2019, she was nominated for the 160th Akutagawa Prize for Ita basho (Where I Was), and the 161st Akutagawa Prize for Kamu gyazaa arauendo piipuru (Come Gather Around, People). In 2020, she won the 163rd Akutagawa Prize for Shuri no uma (The Horse from Shuri). Takayama's other works include Kurayami ni renzu (Lenses in the Dark) and many more.

Excerpt from "Udon Kitsune-tsuki no" (Unknown dog of nobody),

After the funeral dinner was over and the Buddhist monks had left, only the relatives remained in the house.

"Mom, how many more days will you be staying here?"

"Well, Dad took paid holidays until the weekend, so I guess we can stay here until Sunday, but ..."

"Do you have something to do?"

"No, nothing special, but about Udon,"

"Oh, Udon. You can leave it to us. We'll take care of him."

"But Kazue, you will go back to your apartment soon, and Yoko will be at work. I'm worried about him during the daytime I'm used to it by now, but I've come to realize that living things are troublesome. They don't do anything helpful, but they give me many problems for this and that.

Kazue lightly refuted her mother's sighing complaints.

"They may be useful in some way or other where we are not aware of."

"For what?"

"Ummm ... in case of earthquake or something? Predicting a global crisis, or something else?"

"Have you ever tried to run away somewhere even when Udon went wild like that?"

Kazue and Yoko thought for a moment, shook their heads in opposite directions at the same time, and then burst into laughter.

"Well, you're not really helpful, either."

“We are blood relatives. It’s the preservation of the species. But dogs are not on the verge of extinction.”

As Yoko said with pouty face, Yu-chan, who was listening beside them, interrupted as if she had just remembered something.

“Udon is that doggie? The one Kazu-chan picked up?”

Yu-chan is their cousin, five years older than Kazue. She is now pregnant with her second child.

“Yes. He’s been with us for 15 years now.”

Mother responded as if she was fed up with the growth of her three daughters, the death of her grandparents, and so many other things, all rolled into one.

“Wow, it’s already been that long. No wonder Kazu-chan and Yo-chan have grown up. By the way, it’s amazing Udon-chan has lived so long.”

“Maybe because he’s a mixed breed.”

Sipping coffee next to the heater, Kazue murmured.

“We started keeping him because sis said he wouldn’t live long.”

Yoko said, laughing as she was scrolling through her phone. She showed an image on the phone to Yu-chan.

“This is Udon.”

“Oh, what a face. Is he mad?”

“He barks when I point the camera at him. He doesn’t like flashes. When he gets excited, he often twitches and goes wild, and sometimes he bubbles from his mouth.”

“Really? Because of sickness?”

“Well, we’re not sure. We took him to the vet once, didn't we, Mom?”

“Yes. We were surprised at first. We had him examined by a vet, and he told us that he might have a little bit of water in his brain or some kind of genetic problem ... but I don't think so.”

“Huh?”

Mother looked slowly around at the three puzzled faces and then continued earnestly.

“He’s never known his mother's warmth, so ... What's that called, PTSD? I think that kind of anxiety is exploding in him by fits and starts.”

As Mother finished, she nodded approvingly a few times. A moment later, the three around her started laughing at the same time. The serious look on Hidemi's face definitely had the expression of the girl with an owl on her shoulder at the entrance decades ago.

When Mother and her friends went to Jakarta to celebrate their graduation from a women's college in Kansai, she met Father who was enjoying his paid holidays there with his colleagues. They had hit it off, and Mother moved into his apartment in Tokyo with a suitcase straight from Narita Airport and gave birth to three daughters in quick succession.

Someone said that Mother did not consult her parents in Toyama when giving birth to her three daughters. It was probably because her blood type was Rh-negative, which was not a disease but somewhat rare, and she felt that her parents might object if she consulted them about having babies. When Mother first gave birth to Kazue, she had no problem, but in the cases of Misa and Yoko, she stayed in the hospital a little longer than other mothers. Even so, when she left the hospital, she came home proudly cradling her plump baby daughters in her arms. Now, when she watches TV dramas and encounters a scene in which the characters are debating whether or not to have a baby, she advises the actresses from this side of the TV screen while eating a family pack of Kit Kats,

“Why not go ahead and give birth?”

On a snowy day in Toyama, the sun seemed to set early. Neither Kazue nor Yoko could stay there very late, as they would be returning to Tokyo within that day.

“Thank you for everything, Aunt. We’re sorry we have to leave so soon. And, Misa really wanted to come, but,”

“No problem. I know Misa-chan is having a hard time with her husband's grandmother. Kazue-chan, you, too, must be so busy that you can't even take enough condolence leave.”

“Well, it depends on the time of year ...”

“I wish you both the best of luck. Your mother must be tired too, so please help her.”

“Yes, we will.”

“And, you two have to find a husband.”

“Ha-ha.”

Kazue and Yoko headed for the tram station carrying paper bags containing orizume lunch boxes, tea, and other things, that they were forced to take home.

It was snowing silently in the city of buildings and castles. Kazue spoke aloud, feeling a little gloomy.

“I wonder if the train is still running late.”

Yoko replied, scrolling through her phone.

“Yup, with all this snow.”

Putting your footprints on a thin, translucent layer of snow on the asphalt, you can immediately see the ground.

Suddenly Yoko stopped and said,

“Oh. Fox.”

“No way. Where?”

“No, no. It can't be here in a city like this.”

Indeed, no matter how snowy the city may be, there could be no foxes at the crossing in front of a station lined with office buildings like this.

Yoko continued.

“I just happened to remember the story Grandma told us. The story of a woman possessed by a fox.”

“Ah, there was such a story. I think I remember it a little.”

“Hey.”

“Huh?”

“Do you think Udon is possessed by a fox?”

Yoko's words remind Kazue of their grandmother and give her a short laugh. Grandma Hatsuno loved telling scary stories as if they were true. She told stories about goblins not only in Japan but also in faraway countries, and about brutal killers who had actually existed, which terrified her grandchildren including Kazue.

The story of fox-possession is no longer scary, but it was frightening to her grandchildren at that time, and for a while after they heard the stories, they were even frightened of the long, thin fox statues at the local Inari shrine.

“Aren't those possessed by a fox bad at dogs?”

“Oh, really? You remember that very well, sis.”

To a fox-possessed girl

Take her clothes off

Spread minced tuna fish on her body

Let the dog lick it off

Hence the fox will be scared and slip away from her body

“In the first place, even if Udon is possessed by a fox, there is no problem because he has lived such a long life.”

Kazue briskly swung back and forth the carrier bag, which was carefully wrapped in plastic to keep it from getting wet.

“Stop it, sis. Don’ let the food in the orizume lunch box lean to one side.”

Yoko pouted.

The snow in Toyama, falling like a fool from the white sky, is light as powder, which is quite different from that in Tokyo. When Kazue was looking up with her mouth open, snowflakes melted fleetingly on her tongue and disappeared.

What is the dull but bright whiteness in this sky?

As she looked at it, Kazue noticed something was flying in the whiteness. It was also white in itself so that she had to look closely to notice it. As she looked at it, she thought it looked like something she knew.

She thinks she saw it in a magazine or on TV before.

It was like a flat, square spaceship in old movies. It's just a square box, with no wings or no engine. The box is floating slowly across the white sky. The snow seemed to be falling from the bottom of the box. Its square and white body was scraped and scattered, turning into snow.

“It’s a Styrofoam box.”

After saying it aloud, Kazue looked around hurriedly. However, despite the fact that the crossing was not far from the station, no one but Kazue and Yoko were there. Yoko looks into her phone intently, not even noticing what Kazue was saying or what's in the air above her.

Kazue then turns her gaze back to the sky. Either it was getting closer or her eyes had gotten used to it, it seemed to be much larger than before, covering the sky. Slowly above Kazue's head, the Styrofoam spaceship floats on by like a whale looking up from the bottom of the water. And then, with the center of the bottom of the spaceship opening slightly on both sides, an artificial shiny black object begins to peek out from inside. The object seemed to be filled with fluid and was protruding from the open space as if it were bowing outward. Then the black object was torn, and out came capsule-like objects. Four of them came down.

She saw these egg-shaped capsules with flat bottoms flying slowly through the air without a parachute.

A closer look revealed something on the oval; capsule lids shaped like heads of animals or birds or something. As the capsules approached the ground, they proved to be just big enough to hold a person.

The capsules came down slowly, and when they landed on the snow without a sound, the lids of three of them slid open a little. The capsules themselves were beautifully curved and glossy, so they seemed to be made of metal or resin, but the sound of the lids sliding to the side was that of stone.

What emerged from the capsules were creatures like wild dogs, foxes, or such; however, while their heads are foxes, their bodies are human. Wearing cloth wrapped around their waists, in their right hands they hold thin metal wands that could be used as weapons, while in their left hands they hold similar cross-shaped objects with metal rings. All the three creatures looked the same. In fact, they might have been the same species. Surrounding the remaining unopened capsule, the three animals stare at it.

Seeing the three foxes standing in the snow in Toyama, Kazue thought they were just like us.

“Oh, now I see.”

At that moment, the snow floating around her became brighter than ever.

Kazue felt that she understood the reason why they had picked up Udon and raised him desperately.

A freshly born, blood-soaked, wriggling mass of foul-smelling flesh. The hair-raising fear that he might die. The crab and owl. Fostering, caring; the old dogs. Seizures during a walk. Escaped from the aquarium. We have raised many 'somethings' neither to eat nor force them to work. They are not humans; they are creatures that are not endangered. We fretted when they ate less; chased after them and caught them. It was the reason nobody had ever wondered about or had ever given it any serious thought.

It's likely that Udon is sound asleep at home by now.