

At a Funeral

Amid a heat wave in July just after the rainy season, my grandfather passed away.

At midnight, I arrived at the waiting room of the funeral parlor. On the dim, far side of the two-room *tatami*-floored hall, Grandpa was seen lying on a Japanese-style *futon* bed, and the white *futon* cover draped over his body loomed bluish white, gleamed by the lights on the altar. I did not yet feel like lifting the white cloth placed on his face. Leaving the sliding doors between the two rooms a little open, eventually my father and I fell asleep in the other room.

At noon the next day, an "encoffinement" rite was held as his relatives looked on. It is a ceremony made famous by the Japanese Oscar-winning movie "*Okuribito*" (*Departures*) where the body is cleansed, clothed and placed in the coffin. I had an errand to run and could not attend the ceremony, but was rather glad of this because I had not yet quite accepted Grandpa's death.

In the afternoon, my grandmother, who has begun to show slight symptoms of senile dementia, arrived in a wheelchair for the wake. Besides being a cheerful person in nature, she now seems not to feel any negative emotions. "My husband looked so handsome when I saw him dead! I almost fell in love with him again! I felt like kissing him."

What a wonderful "aged power!" Everybody around her flashed a bitter smile – it is very unusual especially for elders to express love with such straightforwardness in Japan.

To make me more surprised, I had never heard Grandma speak like this before, or even she was critical of him. Grandpa used to teach *kenbu* (sword dance) and *iai* (the art of drawing a sword). In his youth, he had apparently learned English when sailing in the southern seas. Some of his students were foreign, and he often traveled abroad to teach

and perform the martial arts. When the movie "*The Last Samurai*" was filmed in his hometown of Himeji, one of his foreign students cooperated in the sword-fighting scenes. He must have been happy spending his life doing what he loved. But apparently his family had a considerably hard time supporting him.

However, hearing Grandma speak well of him like that pushed me to open the small window on the coffin. Now I understood how she felt. Grandpa, touched up with a little makeup, looked beautiful, peaceful and tender ever, and seemed almost divine, perhaps thanks in part to the work of "*okuribito*" (encoffineer).

The next day, toward the end of the funeral, flowers were placed into the coffin as people bid their last goodbyes. After this, the coffin would be taken to the crematory, so this really was the last time to see his face. All the people encircling the coffin and placing flowers inside were sniffing. But Grandma, upon seeing him surrounded by flowers, was the sole person smiling, saying, "This is a paradise, isn't it? Good for you!"

My mother handed a sandersonia flower to Grandma, telling her: "This is the last flower to give him." But Grandma did not look particularly sad. Placing the flower on his chest, she brightly said, "It all went well, didn't it?" and then sat down again in her wheelchair. "Did the reality of the situation sink into Grandma?" – the moment I wondered this, she said, "Thank you so much!" in a most pleasant way, and bowed, bending her small frame from the waist up.

Her words of gratitude seemed to sum up the 65 years she had spent together with Grandpa. No one could say the words in the same tone she used. It was a good funeral.

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