

EDITED BY LEITH MORTON

**SEVEN
STORIES
OF
MODERN
JAPAN**

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Happiness

By Nakajima Atsushi

Translated by Sakuko Matsui

Long ago there lived on this island a man of the utmost wretchedness. Since the unnatural custom of counting one's age did not exist in these parts, it is not possible to say precisely how old he was, but this much at least was certain: he was not very young.

Because the hair on his head was not particularly frizzly, nor the tip of his nose *completely* flat, the ugly looks of this man had become the object of universal derision. What is more, his lips were thin, and in his complexion there was no splendid ebony-like lustre, and these things made his ugliness even more terrible. He was probably the poorest man on the island. "Udo-udo", things rather like our curved *magatama* stones, were the coinage and the treasure of the Palau district, but of course, this man possessed nothing of the sort.¹ Since he did not even have "udo-udo", he naturally had no wife, for one could only purchase a wife in the first place with "udo-udo". All by himself, he lived in a corner of the store-shed of the first elder of the island, working under him as his meanest servant. All the meanest tasks within the household were imposed upon this one man. On an island full of idlers, this man alone had no time to be idle.

In the morning he would rise even earlier than the morning birds chirping in the mango thickets and go fishing. There were times when a big octopus he had failed to spear with his *biskang* had fastened its suckers to his chest and belly so that his whole body

¹ *Magatama* were comma-shaped beads made of stone, used as jewellery in ancient Japan.

swelled up, or he had been chased by an enormous *tamakai* fish and had barely escaped with his life back into the canoe, or he had come near having his foot trapped by a giant clam about the size of a tub. In the afternoons, when everyone on the island drowsily took a nap in the shade of a tree or on a bamboo bed inside the house, this man alone would be as busy as a bee, cleaning the house, building a hut, gathering coconut honey, twisting palm ropes, thatching the roof or making furniture. His skin was always dripping with sweat, like a field-mouse after a rainstorm. Anything and everything except tending the taro fields — decreed since ancient times to be women's work — this man would drudge at by himself. At last, when the sun set in the western sea and the big bats flew about the tops of the massive breadfruit trees, he would be given scraps of *kukao* potatoes and the bony parts of fish, food more suitable for dogs and cats. After that he would lay his exhausted body down on the hard bamboo floor and sleep, or in Palau language "mo basu", that is to say, he would "become a stone".

His master, the first elder of this island, was one of the wealthiest men throughout the Palau district — from this island in the north down to Pelelieu Island in the far south. Half of the taro fields and two thirds of the palm forests on the island belonged to him. In the kitchen of his house, plates of the finest tortoise-shell were piled high to the ceiling. Since every day he sated himself on such delicacies as turtle fat, sucking-pigs roasted on hot pebbles, "mermaids' foetuses" and baby bats *en casserole*, he was as lined with fat and as pot-bellied as a pregnant sow. In his house was treasured the famous spear with a single thrust of which one of his ancestors was said to have killed the enemy leader when Kayangel Island was attacked in ancient times. The "udo-udo" in his coffers were as numerous as the eggs the hawk's-bill turtle spawns at one go on the beach. As for his Bakaru gem, the most precious of all the "udo-udo",

it possessed such virtue that even the saw-sharks leaping and darting beyond the reef would scatter and retreat in terror at a mere glimpse of it. The massive curved-roof meeting house, decorated with bat patterns, which now towered towards the heavens in the very centre of the island, the great scarlet war-canoe with its snake's head, a source of personal pride to every islander — the building of all these things had been due solely to the power and wealth of this great leader. The number of his wives, though officially one, could in fact be said to be limitless within the sphere permitted by the taboos regarding intercourse with close relatives.

The wretched, ugly-looking bachelor who was a servant of this great man of power, was of such mean social degree that he was not allowed to walk upright when passing in front of even the second, third or fourth elder, let alone the first elder, his immediate master. He was obliged, without fail, to creep by on his hands and knees. If an elder's boat should come up when he was out on the sea in his canoe, the man of low degree would have to jump from his canoe into the water. Such rudeness as saluting them from within the boat was absolutely impermissible. Once, chancing upon a situation of this sort, he was about to jump self-effacingly into the water, when he saw a shark. The elder's attendant, seeing him hesitate, grew angry and threw a stick at him, wounding him in his left eye. Since he had no choice, he jumped into the water where the shark was swimming. If the shark had been three or four feet longer, there is no doubt that he would not have got away with just three of his toes being bitten off.

Koror Island, the centre of civilization, situated far from this island to the south, had already been infected by bad diseases said to have been introduced by the white-skinned people. There were two of these diseases. One was the disgraceful complaint which thwarts the performance of the sacred, Heaven-sent mystery, and in Koror it was

called "man's disease" when a man suffered from it and "woman's disease" in the case of a woman. The other was an extremely subtle sickness, the symptoms of which were very difficult to recognize; the victim would develop a slight cough, his complexion would pale, he would grow physically tired, and he would waste away and die before you knew what had happened. Some victims would spit blood, but some wouldn't. The wretched man who is the principal subject of this story was apparently suffering from this disease. He had an incessant dry cough and grew more and more tired. He drank mashed *amiaka* sprout juice and a decoction of pandanus root, but they had no effect at all. His master noticed this, and thought it very fitting that his wretched manservant should contract such a wretched disease. So, the servant got even more jobs to do.

The wretched servant, however, was a very wise man, so he did not regard his lot as particularly hard. He was thankful that his master, harsh as he was, did not yet forbid him to see, to hear or to breathe. He decided to be thankful for the fact that, no matter how many jobs were imposed on him, he was still exempted at least from tilling the taro fields, the sacred vocation of women. That he had jumped into the sea where there was a shark and lost three toes had the appearance of a misfortune, but he could still be grateful that the whole leg had not been bitten off. And even if he was suffering from the hacking cough of "the fatiguing disease", when he thought that there were some people who suffered at the same time from "man's disease", it meant that at least he had managed to escape from one disease. It was doubtlessly a fatal defect in his features that his hair was not frizzly like dry seaweed, but he knew someone whose scalp was completely hairless, like a desolate hill of brown clay. Certainly, it was a great shame that his nose was not flat like a frog trampled to death in a banana field, but there were two men with the "rotting disease" on a neighbouring island whose noses had dropped right off.

However, even for a man who understood as well as this the art of being contented, it was nevertheless better to have a slight illness than a severe one, more pleasant to take a nap in the shade of a tree than to be slave-driven in the open beneath the rays of the midday sun. Even this wretched man of wisdom upon occasion prayed to the gods: might the pain of his illness, or the hardship of his labour, either the one or the other, be just a little reduced. If this wish was not too excessively greedy, please....

The shrines at which he prayed and set offerings of taros were those of the Coconut Crab *Katasus* and the Earthworm *Uras*. Both of these gods were well known as powerful evil deities. Among the Palauan gods the good ones hardly ever received offerings, for people knew that even if they were neglected they would not bring down curses. On the other hand, the evil deities were always reverently worshipped and had offerings of food presented in plenty, because tidal waves, wild winds and epidemics were all attributed to their anger. Now, whether the powerful Coconut Crab and Earthworm deities had accepted the poor man's prayers or not, one night shortly after this he had a strange dream.

In his dream the wretched servant had somehow or other become the elder. He was sitting in the centre of the main house, in the seat where the head of the family should be. Everybody was readily obeying his orders. It seemed as if they were shaking with anxiety lest they should incur his displeasure. He had a wife. There were many maid-servants, too, busily engaged in preparing his meal. The table laid in front of him was piled high with pigs roasted whole, mangrove crabs boiled deep red and eggs of large sea turtles. He was surprised at this unexpected state of affairs. Even whilst dreaming he wondered if he was not dreaming. He could not help feeling a little uneasy.

Next morning when he awoke, he found himself lying as usual in a corner of the same old shed with its broken roof and crooked pillars. But, unusually for him, he had overslept, failing to notice the chirping of the morning birds, and he was given a painful beating by one of his master's people.

The next night he once more became the elder in his dream. This time he was not so surprised as on the previous night. His words of command to the servants, too, were far more imperiously spoken than the night before. As before, all sorts of tasty dishes were heaped on the table. His wife was a powerfully-built woman of beauty; and the new mat woven from pandanus leaves was pleasantly cool to sit upon and truly excellent. In the morning, however, he woke up in the same dirty shed as before. And all day long, as always, he was made to sweat and toil, and for food, he was given only scraps of *kukao* potatoes and the bony parts of fish.

On the next night, and the night after that and for every following night, the wretched servant turned in his dreams into the elder. He became more and more at home in his part. No longer as at first, did he make a shameful exhibition of voracity at the sight of the splendid food. He had frequent quarrels with his wife. It was already ages since he had discovered he could make advances to women other than his wife. Ordering the islanders about at will, he had them build boathouses and he performed religious ceremonies. At the sublimity of his appearance as he proceeded to the altar led by a *korong* or priest, all the islanders alike were lost in admiration and wondered if he were not the reincarnation of some ancient hero. Among the servants who attended him there was one who looked like the first elder, his master during the day. The man's apparent dread of him was almost ridiculous. Amused at this, he bade this first-elder-like servant do all the hardest jobs. He made him go fishing and collecting coconut honey. Once, on the pretext that the man's canoe was in the

way of his vessel, he forced him to jump into the sea where there was a shark swimming about. The sight of this wretched servant's agitation, perplexity and terror gave him great satisfaction.

No longer did the exhausting toil nor the cruel treatment of the daytime cause him to heave a sigh of despair. No longer was it necessary for him to address to himself words of philosophic resignation. For when he thought of the pleasure of night, the hardship of day was nothing. Exhausted though he was after the hard day's work, he wore the smile of one of the world's happiest men as he hurried to this tottering, shabby sleeping hut to dream dreams of glory and luxury. In fact, possibly as a result of the rich diet he enjoyed in his dreams, he had of late become noticeably fat. His colour had improved wonderfully and the hacking cough too had somehow cured itself. He was a picture of health and regained youth.

Just about the time the poor, ugly, bachelor servant had started having these dreams, his master the wealthy great elder had likewise begun to have dreams of a peculiar nature. In his dreams, the reverend first elder became a wretched, poverty-stricken servant. Every conceivable task was imposed upon him — from fishing, coconut milk gathering, and palm rope twisting to breadfruit picking and canoe making. There were so many jobs, it seemed to him, that even a countless-handed centipede would have found it impossible to manage them all. The master who ordered him to do all these jobs was a fellow who, by day, should have been one of his lowest menials. And this man was terribly ill-natured and made an endless succession of unreasonable demands. He had been gripped by the suckers of a great octopus, his foot had been nipped by a giant clam, and his toes had been bitten off by a shark. As for his meals, they were nothing but potato scraps and fish bones. Every morning when he awoke on the luxurious mat in the centre of the main house, he was worn out by the all-night labour, and he felt a throbbing pain in

every joint. As, night after night, the first elder had these dreams, his body came gradually to lose its oily smoothness and his distended belly grew slowly hollow more and more. Indeed, no-one could help getting thin on a diet of potato scraps and fish bones. While the moon waxed and waned three times, the elder grew pitifully weak, and he even began to suffer from a distressing dry cough.

Finally, the elder got angry and summoned the servant to his presence. He had made up his mind to punish most severely this odious man who so tortured him in his dreams.

The servant who appeared in front of him, however, was not the emaciated, coughing, timidly trembling, faint-hearted wretch he had formerly known. In no time, it seemed, he had grown plump: his face glowed and he looked to be brimming with vigour and good health. Moreover, his whole demeanour radiated self-confidence, and, though his words were respectful enough, one had to admit he seemed hardly a likely person to be content to be at another's beck and call. At the mere sight of his relaxed smile, the elder was completely overwhelmed by a sense of the other's superiority. Even the dread he experienced at night of the oppressor of his dreams came vividly back and filled him with terror. A doubt flitted through his mind — which was the *more* real, his dream world or his daytime world? It was unimaginable that an emaciated creature like himself, continually coughing, should rebuke so magnificent a man.

In words of such politeness that even the speaker himself was surprised, the elder turned to his servant and enquired how he had recovered his health. The servant told him in great detail all about his dreams: how he was satiated with dainty food every night, how he enjoyed a life of pleasant ease and idleness waited upon by handmaids and menservants, and how he tasted the Elysian joys with a whole host of women.

When the servant finished his story, the elder was very surprised. What lay behind the remarkable similarity of the servant's and his own dreams? And, was the effect of nutrition gained in the dream world upon the body in the waking world really so drastic? There was now no room for doubt that the dream world was as real as, or possibly more real than, the world of the day. Suppressing his sense of shame, he told the servant about his nightly dreams: how he was forced to do laborious tasks every night, and how he had to be contented with nothing but potato scraps and fish bones.

The servant was not surprised in the slightest to hear all this. With an "I-had-expected-that" sort of expression and as if he had been told something he had already known, he nodded magnanimously, with a satisfied smile on his face. Indeed, his face shone with a supreme happiness, like the happiness of a well-fed sea-eel asleep in the mudflats at low-tide. Perhaps he knew now, without doubt, that dreams were more real than the world of day. With a long, deep-fetched sigh, the wretched wealthy master looked enviously into the poor, wise servant's face.

This is an old tale of Oruwangal Island, a place which no longer exists. One day, about eighty years ago, Oruwangal Island, with all its inhabitants, suddenly sank to the bottom of the sea. Since that time, they say, there has been no man in all Palau who has dreamt such happy dreams.

The Mummy

By Nakajima Atsushi

Translated by Sakuko Matsui

When the Persian King Cambyses, Son of Cyrus the Great and Cassendane, invaded Egypt, there was an officer called Pariscus in the troops under his command. His forefathers apparently came from the region of Bactria, far away to the east, and he himself had a particularly gloomy provincial air, having never grown accustomed to urban manners. There was something of the dreamer in him, and because of this he was always a butt for mockery in spite of his fairly high position.

About the time when the Persian Army had passed through Arabia and finally entered the land of Egypt, the strangeness in Pariscus' behaviour began to attract the attention of his colleagues and subordinates. Pariscus kept gazing at the unfamiliar scenery around him with a look of extreme bewilderment in his eyes, and would stand lost in thought, wearing an uneasy and worried expression. It was as if he was trying to recall something but just could not manage it, and he was obviously irritated. When Egyptian captives were brought into the camp, he happened to overhear some of them talking. With a strange look, he listened attentively for a while, and remarked to someone beside him that he felt as if he could understand the meaning of what they said. He could not himself speak the language, he said, but it seemed he could somehow understand their words. Pariscus sent one of his subordinates to ask if the captives were Egyptians (for the greater part of the Egyptian Army were mercenaries from Greece or elsewhere). He was told, in reply, that they were certainly Egyptians. He looked uneasy and fell into deep thought again. He had never before set foot in Egypt, nor had he been