

## Cold Sake

by Joanne Quach

Emi hummed to an old Eagles mix tape as she placed her collection of smiling kokeshi dolls over the dusty imprint of Yoji's antique cars. She glanced around the half vacated unit. It was only a matter of time before they'd go their separate ways with Emi staying right where she was and Yoji moving back in with his parents. The tipping point was last weekend when the lack of ginger in the fridge resulted in Emi viciously tipping a wok load of Yoji's half finished stir fry into the sink. Yoji responded by storming off to his mother after he had accused her of being irrational. Irrational? Ha! Emi was convinced that she was no such thing. After all, what's stir fry without ginger? Warm vegetables?

So in the past week Emi had re-arranged the furniture in the living room, replaced the bed sheets and terminated a 3 month old foetus. She was sure that she had gone too far with the bed sheets, considering that some of them belonged to Yoji's mother. Oh well, if he really wanted them then he would've already taken them with him. The idiot would be here at 5 to pick up the rest of his trimming and glazing tools; the sheets could be returned then. In the meantime, she could finish with the kokeshi dolls.

It was definitely an overwhelming rush to be able to re-decorate to suit *her* tastes and cook without having to cater for Yoji's refusal to eat meat. Tofu and mushrooms. Mushrooms and tofu. Spinach. Leaves. Twigs. Branches. Not even fish, chicken, or eggs. Every bloody night. No wonder she was pissed off all the time. With a fridge full of tofu and fungus, choice does become non-existent. Poor Yoji had tried so hard to convert his carnivorous partner over into the more humane alternative of veganism. "Animals have feelings too," he'd argue, before placing a steaming plate of fried tofu in front of her. Ugh. The thought of forever existing on such empty food substitutes was infuriating. It was, therefore, not surprising that the day after Yoji left Emi had happily blended everything that was in their fridge. The thick green mush was subsequently thrown onto a canvas which was still drying on her balcony. Exploding vegan # 1. Mush on canvas. 18" x 24". Hmm. Might actually sell too.

Or better yet, she could trade it for some katsu-don (no miso soup please) at the little ramen joint downstairs which was run by the very loquacious Mr Nakayama. As a man heading into his eighties, Mr Nakayama (to the frustration of some of his staff) had no intention to retire as that meant being at home with his insufferable wife. He therefore insisted on maintaining a constant presence in his restaurant; supervising the chefs, managing the paper work and smoking behind the register. On his breaks, he'd chat to his regulars.

It wasn't long before Emi's visits to Nakayama Ramen became a ritual. At first, Mr Nakayama would watch Emi gorge herself on fried chicken and egg, evidently intrigued by her rapid eating. But after speaking to her, he became aware of her situation. She was seeing one of those vegan types. What a waste. There's only so much protein that mushrooms can provide, you know. Meat for vegetarians...ha! There is *no* substitute for meat.

Emi agreed.

On slow nights, the two of them would spend hours talking art, bad haircuts, and meat while Emi ate and Mr Nakayama smoked his way through a packet of cigarettes, waving his arms about in the midst of a spirited anti-vegan rant. Emi loved him. He was her saviour in an increasingly insufferable world of green and tofu. Unlike Yoji, Mr Nakayama knew exactly how Emi liked her chicken. That's right. Deep fried, layered with scrambled egg and *without* tofu.

Mmm.

Emi was getting hungry. She could smell the tanginess of soy-glazed crumbed chicken bubbling in the deep fryer downstairs. Unintentionally, she felt her plump stomach and for the first time since the procedure, the aborted foetus came to mind. Emi shuddered at the thought of where it could be now. There were too many possibilities, none of which were comforting. Yes, she did it out of spite. Yes, that was very selfish. No, she didn't think to tell him.

She'd have to do it in a few hours though.

She'd have to tell him that in the past week, she had impulsively murdered. Without his consent. But it was his fault. He had to go off to his mother.

She'd have to tell him that she had blended his dried mushrooms into an unmerciful pulp. Because she could. Because it was all they ate.

She'd have to tell him that she was sorry...

Was she sorry? She wasn't sure. No, no she had to be sorry.

After lunch.

\*\*\*

As expected, Yoji let himself in at 5 with a few bottles of sake and a greasy paper bag of pastries. Was he drunk? Emi pondered this as she sat on their leather couch in silence while Yoji shuffled around the kitchen, opening and shutting drawers.

"You didn't wait long to re-decorate did you? Where are the sake cups? They belong to my mother."

"Cupboard above the fridge. Next to my tea set."

"They're not here."

"For fuck's sake Yoji, I only have one tea set. Use your eyes."

Yoji ignored her. Eventually he found the sake cups sitting in the oven wrapped in newspaper. Since telling Emi that she was wrong usually led to things being thrown down the sink, Yoji didn't say anything. He simply walked over to her with a tray of neatly arranged azuma cakes, chopped celery sticks and 2 cups of sake. Emi watched as he sat down and offered her a full ceramic cup. It was white and cloudy. Yoji must have brewed this himself. She sniffed it curiously before pushing it back towards him.

"You know that I hate this stuff. It's cold and I don't drink. No one drinks this stuff anymore. And you know that I hate azuma. It's just bean paste and cookie dough."

Yoji shrugged. "The cakes aren't for you. The sake is though. I figured that it would make you more approachable."

"What about the celery?"

"Empty calories. You're getting fat."

Emi raised her pencilled eyebrow as Yoji gave an exasperated sigh. Did he know about her illicit visits to Nakayama Ramen?

"Just drink the damn sake so we can figure out what to do next."

"I'm surprised that you didn't bring your mother."

"Just drink it."

Emi was quite aware of how far she could push Yoji. At the rate that she was going, it would not be long before he'd up and leave again. She needed him to stay this time. With her nose pinched shut, she tossed the fermented rice water down her reluctant throat. The bitterness lingered on the back of her tongue which left her throat feeling sore and dry. She wanted to throw up. Maybe onto one of her blank canvases. Regurgitated Sake. 16" x 20". Instant success.

*Click. Clop.*

Emi's thoughts on potential artworks were interrupted by the sound of Yoji chewing on an azuma cake. She cringed. As the result of a once broken jaw, Yoji unintentionally clicked whenever he ate. *Click. Clop.* Why does he chew with his mouth open? Why? It only makes the clicking worse. *Click. Clop.* Ugh. It's the sound of a horse. Horses. Fucking horses.

Emi had been warned of horses.

Those born in the year of the horse are:

- Selfish
- Egotistical
- Quick to lose interest
- Childish
- Weak

Oh yes, weak. Idiot can hardly function without the constant supervision and meddling of his mother, Mrs Takahashi. Dear old Mrs Takahashi. Always quick to criticise. Always quick to stuff Yoji full of azuma. She was determined to find Yoji a wife who had some idea of

filial piety. Unlike the feisty and insolent Emi who has way too much fire in her belly. Fire does not make babies and one *must* make babies. Obedience, respect and modesty...now these are the qualities of a good wife and mother. As a good mother herself, Mrs Takahashi felt it was her duty to warn Yoji against free women like Emi. Usually in front of Emi, who had heard it all before.

“What about Mrs Sato’s daughter? She is a skilled calligrapher and writes to her sick grandmother in Nara every day.”

Or...

“What about Mrs Kobayashi’s daughter? She likes seaweed soup and everybody knows that that gives you nice skin.”

And of course, Emi’s all time favourite:

“Painting isn’t a real job. That Emiko must be a prostitute to make ends meet. Where do you find these girls, Yoji?”

Ha. What about Yoji with his fucking masters in ceramics? Ceramics. How is that any more of a real job than painting? Unfortunately, Mrs Takahashi would not listen to logical reasoning since she had long convinced herself that Yoji was going through a phase. “Better that he practice on a prostitute than on a respectful girl from a good family,” was her justification to anyone who asked about her son’s lack of spouse. Yoji never once defended Emi against his mother’s very vocal disapproval.

But he stayed, didn’t he?

Ignoring Yoji’s increasingly messy consumption of azuma, Emi picked up a celery stick and examined it. “Bet it’ll make a good substitute for charcoal,” thought Emi as she poked it into a lit candle. Poke, poke, poke; the ends were starting to burn. Emi glanced around the flat for paper. Kitchen. TV. Bed sheets on couch, carelessly rolled into a cotton ball. Nothing. The bed sheets would do. Emi scribbled onto one of the sheets, leaving a faint grey streak. Mrs Takahashi already hated her anyway.

The clicking stopped.

Obviously sick of watching Emi waste food, Yoji had consumed about five azuma cakes and gone to sleep with his head tilted back against the couch. Annoyed, Emi marched over and slapped him awake.

“What?”

“You came to talk didn’t you? If you want to sleep then go home to your mother.”

Yoji sat up and eyed Emi as she glared at him. Nothing new there.

It wasn’t always like this though. A few years ago at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Emi was beautiful with her thick hair carelessly knotted around an old paintbrush. She used to smile even though her clothes were always stained with oil paints. A loose fitting t-shirt, dirty jeans and worn out sandals usually completed

her "starving artist" look. On hot days she didn't wear shoes. Yoji used to wait for her at Sinobazu Lake, south of campus, every afternoon. Emi would always arrive late, juggling her sketch books, art history texts and brush kit. Yoji would laugh at her flustered face as she apologised continuously.

She used to glow.

Yoji would watch her skim the surface of the lake with her bare feet as she recounted the events of her morning; not really listening but captivated all the same. Now he could barely look in her general direction without feeling irritated. The once knotted hair was now combed and parted – tied back in a high pony tail. The once enthusiastic smile was now an arrogant smirk – framed with thick red lips. On hot days, her bare feet would be tightly bound in a pair of black stilettos – evidently uncomfortable but apparently necessary. Oh yes, commercial success had definitely reshaped his starving artist. Commercial success had made her forget all those late afternoons spent kissing by the lake or the time that they skipped class to lose their virginities. Pity.

She was no longer *his* Emi.

"Well?" she demanded fiercely, "are we sorting things out or not?"

"You need more sake," retorted Yoji, as he filled the sake cups. "A toast to us, Emi. A toast to your success and a toast to my failure."

Lividly, Emi raised her cup in a mock toast and drank; her throat unexpectedly more willing this time. Yoji refilled the cups. "A toast to my mother and her wonderful cooking and her knack for being right about *everything*."

"Yes and a toast to her consistent nosiness."

"A toast to your antagonism."

"A toast to your arrogance."

"A toast to your quick temper."

"A toast to your frustrating clicky jaw," snapped a slightly pink cheeked Emi as she held out her empty cup for Yoji to top up.

\*\*\*

The sake had long run out and the sun had set hours ago. But that didn't stop Yoji and Emi from merrily toasting each other's quirks with empty ceramic cups.

"A toast to yourrrr nakkkked brrrrreasts."

"A toast...a toast..."

Emi stuttered as she struggled to stay awake.

"A toast to that faaat belly! Ouraa chiiilld!" slurred Yoji before tipping over. Emi almost dropped her cup. In an atypical moment of lucidity, she felt her bloated stomach lurch in remorse.

"It died Yoji..."

Yoji snored in response. She'd have to wait, knowing that the next time they spoke she'd be terribly hung over.

Emi sighed and walked over to Yoji. He reminded her of a sleeping child. *Their* child. Probably cold in the bottom of the hospital's medical waste bin. Emi wondered if Yoji ever told his mother about her pregnancy. Probably not. The pig had left crumbs all over the couch. But for once Emi didn't care. For the first time in months she felt something other than annoyance. She felt an urgency to feel warm and loved; not simply tolerated because he thought that she was still pregnant. Or maybe she was just drunk.

Not knowing that Yoji was dreaming about Mrs Kobayashi's seaweed soup-drinking daughter, Emi crawled onto Yoji, loosened her hair and slept.

\*\*\*

Yoji woke with a start, utterly confused and hung over. His head ached as the thick morning air began to clog his sinuses; the balcony door was left open last night. It was still dark and Emi was still asleep on top of him. Oh crap. Did they have sex? He checked to see if he was still wearing pants.

Emi's hair.

Emi's singlet.

Emi breathing gently,

Emi's shorts – well that's a good sign.

Pants?

Pants! Yes he was still wearing pants. Yoji thanked his ancestors. It was bad enough that she was pregnant. The last thing he needed was for her to accuse him of being a rapist. He had to admit that mother was right; Emi was not an appropriate match. Their relationship had become too volatile for his liking.

Emi stirred slightly on top of him. How did she end up on top anyway? How much did she drink? How much did *he* drink? Did he even drink? Hmm. Yoji made an awkward attempt to move her and with both his legs on the floorboards, he slid off the couch. Did he wake her? Better check.

"Emi?" he whispered.

No response. Perfect. He could go. Car keys. Need car keys.

Yoji felt around the coffee table. FUCK. He had knocked over the empty sake bottle which had shattered onto the floorboards. Ugh. So much for leaving. Better find a light switch and pick up the serrated ceramic fragments before someone accidentally stepped on them. Besides, it was too early to have to put up with one of Emi's nonsensical rants about how pedantic-ness equates to success, something about cleanliness and something along the lines of "Yoji use a paper towel not the sponge," etc., etc.



“Yoji?”

Great. She’s awake. Bracing himself for the usual outburst, Yoji felt quite unsettled when Emi, knotty haired and, exhausted, started to cry. Was he supposed to pat her sympathetically on the head? Or was he supposed to leave her alone? Even though the last option was definitely more appealing, there was something about her wrinkled clothes and bare feet that was too familiar to resist.

\*\*\*

Although Yoji had held her until the sun rose, Emi refused to speak to him until Nakayama Ramen downstairs opened at 10. “Yoji please be quiet,” she said in between blowing her nose on Mrs Takahashi’s sheets, “I’m severely hung over and I refuse to speak on an empty stomach.”

\*\*\*

Promptly at 10, Yoji and Emi went downstairs to Nakayama Ramen. This was a shock to Mr Nakayama who had never seen Emi come into his restaurant with company other than her sketch book. Sitting down at the table nearest to the door, Emi ordered her usual katsu-don whilst Yoji enquired about the lack of vegetarian dishes on the menu. The waiter, who had adopted Mr Nakayama’s anti-vegan leanings, laughed at Yoji and offered to bring him a bowl of cold seaweed. Offended, Yoji asked for a bowl of miso soup. He then scolded Emi for ordering chicken. Emi shrugged and reiterated her no speaking until she had eaten policy.

The waiter bought them tea in a small porcelain pot. Emi rudely poured tea for herself and pushed the pot towards Yoji who (with his inability to raise a single eyebrow) raised both his eyebrows at the gesture.

“So Emi...”

“No talking Yoji.”

“That’s all you did last night.”

“No talking,” repeated Emi as she turned her porcelain bowl upside down. “You know Yoji, nothing passes time better than playing drums with the bowls and chopsticks.”

By the the time food arrived, Yoji’s eyebrow was twitching uncontrollably from Emi’s bowl bashing. He welcomed the steaming bowl of soup until he noticed the suspicious white chunks floating on the murky surface. Immediately turned off eating, Yoji’s attention turned to the specks of rice being flicked onto the table by Emi’s chopsticks. Like Mr Nakayama before him, Yoji watched in astonishment as Emi devoured her fried chicken and egg.

“Your soup has gone cold,” observed Emi, conscious of being watched.

"It's got fish in it."

"You're so picky."

"It didn't bother you before."

Emi shrugged. "You got worse. And ugly."

Yoji sipped his tea. "I'm moving the rest of my things today." He then paused awkwardly as Emi picked at her teeth. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Why?"

"Well...because we're the parents of whatever you've got in there."

Emi who was still picking at her teeth, felt her stomach lurch.

"You mean katsu-don and last night's sake."

"No I mean the baby."

Figuring that she'd never have to see Yoji or his mother again, Emi searched her pockets for money. Leaving her share on the table she walked towards the door and stated flatly to an expectant Yoji, "The baby died last week."

\*\*\*

Emi hummed to an old Eagles mix tape as she stacked raw chicken into her freezer. A week had passed since she left Yoji cursing in Nakayama Ramen. He hadn't called nor returned to pick up the rest of his things. Emi wasn't bothered. She had shredded Mrs Takahashi's sheets, splattered them with red acrylic and pasted them onto a blank canvas. Death of a Once Potential In-Law. Conceit on canvas. 24" x 26".

Death of a once potential in-law... it was a definite relief. Never again would Emi have to put up with Mrs Takahashi's very vocal disapproval. Or the disgusting dried plum soup she served at her obligatory Friday night dinners. Never again would Emi have to put up with the infuriating clicking of Yoji's jaw or the greasy paper bags he used to leave around the kitchen. Or the crumbs on the couch.

Emi should have been pleased and she was...to a degree. But her stomach. It felt empty no matter how much she ate. She couldn't diminish the guilt that pursued her like the smell of Nakayama Ramen which had become a permanent fixture on her curtains.

\*\*\*

Emi's usual 10 hours sleep was interrupted at 6 in the morning by a persistent banging on her front door. Emi ignored it and to her surprise, it stopped.

Back to sleep.

Within minutes, Emi heard the banging again but more amplified than last time. It was on her bedroom door. Confused and slightly



nervous, Emi edged noiselessly out of bed and hastily opened the door to a suited Yoji holding a greasy paper bag. He did not look pleased to see her. "You didn't wait long to mutilate mother's sheets. Get dressed. We're going out."

"What? Now? Where are we going?"

"Outside."

"Yoji, I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm teaching a class today."

"Not anymore. I called in sick for you. Remind me to give you a doctor's certificate from Dr Yoji Takahashi later."

"Yoji!"

"No talking."

\*\*\*

Emi and Yoji sat on the train, awkwardly silent. Emi was getting a headache from the constant chit chat around her. It was only 8 in the morning and already, their train was filled with tourists. Emi hated tourists. She hated the fact that they bothered to travel all the way to Japan only to be served western food for breakfast. They had no idea.

Yoji on the other hand was fiddling with a paper bag wondering whether or not he should eat the warm pastry inside before it got cold. He decided to feed it to the birds once they got to Hase station. It wouldn't be long now.

\*\*\*

After a short walk from the train station, they were standing at the entrance of Hase-dera temple. The first lot of tourists were already filing in with their cameras and travel diaries. Emi, who had already been to Hase-dera temple as a child stomped her feet impatiently as they waited in line. Entry was 300 yen. Emi remembered when it used to be free.

Still confused as to why Yoji would drag her to temple, Emi followed him down the main walk way but instead of following the tourists towards the main building, Yoji turned left towards Jizo-do Hall.

Jizo-do Hall was empty with the exception of a tightly robed monk raking leaves. There were rows of what looked like stone children dressed in concrete robes. Some were adorned with cotton beanies while others had plastic bibs and flowers. Emi watched as Yoji picked a bare Jizo statue on the lowest concrete step.

She finally understood.

With tears in his eyes, Yoji reached into his coat pocket for a small cotton beanie that his mother had knitted for him as a child. He placed it onto the statue's head, adjusting it a few times before

standing up and gesturing for Emi's hand. She was touched. Yoji never cried.

In her mind, she could hear her Grandmother telling her that the little stone statues were actually spirits who prayed for the departed souls of little children and babies who had died. Emi shuddered. She took off her silk scarf and wrapped it carefully around the statue's neck.

"I'm so sorry..." Emi whispered regretfully to her empty stomach. And for once, she meant it.