



KITCHEN by Banana Yoshimoto

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# 1 KITCHEN

The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it's a kitchen, if it's a place where they make food, it's fine with me. Ideally it should be well broken in. Lots of tea towels, dry and immaculate. White tile catching the light (ting! ting!).

I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction - vegetable droppings all over the floor, so dirty your slippers turn black on the bottom. Strangely, it's better if this kind of kitchen is large. I lean up against the silver door of a towering, giant refrigerator stocked with enough food to get through a winter. When I raise my eyes from the oil-spattered *gas* burner and the rusty kitchen knife, outside the window stars are glittering, lonely.

Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's just a little nicer than being all alone.

When I'm dead worn out, in a reverie, I often think that when it comes time to die, I want to breathe my last in a kitchen. Whether it's *cold and* I'm all alone, or somebody's there and it's warm, I'll stare death fearlessly in the eye. If it's a kitchen, I'll think, "How good."

Before the Tanabe family took me in, I spent every night in the kitchen. After my grandmother died, I couldn't sleep. One morning at dawn I trundled out of my room in search of comfort and found that the one place I *could* sleep was beside the refrigerator.

My parents - my name is Mikage Sakurai - both died when they were young. After that my grandparents brought me up. I was going into junior high when my grandfather died. From then on, it was just my grandmother and me.

When my grandmother died the other day, I was taken by surprise. My family had steadily decreased one by one as the years went by, but when it suddenly dawned on me that I was all alone, everything before my eyes seemed false. The fact that time continued to pass in the usual way in this apartment where I grew up, even though now I was here all alone, amazed me. It was total science fiction. The blackness of the cosmos.

Three days after the funeral I was still in a daze. Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen. Wrapped in a blanket, like Linus, I slept. The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness. There, the long night came on in perfect peace, and morning came.

But... I just wanted to sleep under the stars.

I wanted to wake up in the morning light.

Aside from that, I just drifted, listless.

However! I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful.

I thought of the money my grandmother had left me - just enough. The place was too big, too expensive, for one person. I had to look for another apartment. There was no way around it. I thumbed through the listings, but when I saw so many places all the same lined up like that, it made my head swim. Moving takes a lot of time and

trouble. It takes energy.

I had no strength; my joints ached from sleeping in the kitchen day and night. When I realized how much effort moving would require - I'd have to pull myself together and go look at places. Move my stuff. Get a phone in-stalled - I lay around instead, sleeping, in despair. It was then that a miracle, a godsend, came calling one afternoon.

I remember it well.

*Dingdong.* Suddenly the doorbell rang.

It was a somewhat cloudy spring afternoon. I was intently involved in tying up old magazines with string while glancing at the apartment listings with half an eye but no interest, wondering how I was going to move. Flustered, looking like I'd just gotten out of bed, I ran out and without thinking undid the latch and opened the door. Thank god it wasn't a robber. There stood Yuichi Tanabe.

"Thank you for your help the other day," I said. He was a nice young man, a year younger than me, who had helped out a lot at the funeral. I think he'd said he went to the same university I did. I was taking time off.

"Not at all," he said. "Did you decide on a place to live yet?"

"Not even close." I smiled.

"I see."

"Would you like to come in for some tea?"

"No. I'm on my way somewhere and I'm kind of in a hurry." He grinned. "I just stopped by to ask you something. I was talking to my mother, and we were thinking you ought to come to our house for a while."

"Huh?" I said.

"In any case, why don't you come over tonight around seven? Here's the directions."

"Okay ..." I said vacantly, taking the slip of paper.

"All right, then, good. Mom and I are both looking forward to your coming." His smile was so bright as he stood in my doorway that I zoomed in for a closeup on his pupils. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I think I heard a spirit call my name.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be there."

Bad as it sounds, it was like I was possessed. His attitude was so totally "cool," though, I felt I could trust him. In the black gloom before my eyes (as it always is in cases of "bewitchment"), I saw a straight road leading from me to him. He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on me.

"Okay, see you later," he said, smiling, and left.

Before my grandmother's funeral I had barely known him. On the day itself, when Yuichi Tanabe showed up all of a sudden, I actually wondered if he had been her lover. His hands trembled as he lit the incense; his eyes were swollen from crying. When he saw my grandmother's picture on the altar, again his tears fell like rain. My first thought when I saw that was that my love for my own grandmother was nothing compared to this boy's, whoever he was. He looked that sad.

Then, mopping his face with a handkerchief, he said, "Let me help with something." After that, he helped me a lot.

Yuichi Tanabe ... I must have been quite confused if I took that long to remember when I'd heard grandmother mention his name.

He was the boy who worked part-time at my grandmother's favorite flower shop. I remembered hearing her say, any number of times, things like, "What a nice boy they have working there... . That Tanabe boy ... today, again ..." Grandmother loved cut flowers. Because the ones in our kitchen were not allowed to wilt, she'd go to the flower shop a couple of times a week. When I thought of that, I remembered him walking behind my grandmother, a large potted plant in his arms.

He was a long limped young man with pretty features. I didn't know anything more about him, but I might have seen him hard at work in the flower shop. Even after I got to know him a little I still had an impression of aloofness. No matter how nice his manner and expression, he seemed like a loner. I barely knew him, really.

It was raining that hazy spring night. A gentle, warm rain enveloped the neighborhood as I walked with directions in hand.

My apartment building and the one where the Tanabes lived were separated by Chuo Park. As I crossed through, I was inundated with the green smell of the night. I walked, sloshing down the shiny wet path that glittered with the colors of the rainbow.

To be frank, I was only going because they'd asked me. I didn't think about it beyond that. I looked up at the towering apartment building and thought, their apartment on the tenth floor is so high, the view must be beautiful at night... .

Getting off the elevator, I was alarmed by the sound of my own footsteps in the hall. I rang the bell, and abruptly, Yuichi opened the door. "Come in."

"Thanks." I stepped inside. The room was truly strange.

First thing, as I looked toward the kitchen, my gaze landed with a thud on the enormous sofa in the living room. Against the backdrop of the large kitchen with its shelves of pots and pans - no table, no carpet, just "it." Covered in beige fabric, it looked like something out of a commercial. An entire family could watch TV on it. A dog too big to keep in Japan could stretch out across it - sideways. It was really a marvelous sofa.

In front of the large window leading onto the terrace was a jungle of plants growing in bowls, planters, and all kinds of pots. Looking around, I saw that the whole house was filled with flowers; there were vases full of spring blooms everywhere.

"My mother says she'll get away from work soon. Take a look around if you'd like. Should I give you the tour? Or pick a room, then I'll know what kind of person you are," said Yuichi, making tea.

"What kind? I seated myself on the deep, comfy sofa.

"I mean, what you want to know about a house and the people who live there, their tastes. A lot of people would say you learn a lot from the toilet," he said, smiling, unconcerned. He had a very relaxed way of talking.

"The kitchen," I said.

"Well, here it is. Look at whatever you want."

While he made tea, I explored the kitchen. I took everything in: the good quality of the mat on the wood floor and of Yuichi's slippers; a practical minimum of well-worn kitchen things, precisely arranged. A Silverstone frying pan and a delightful German-made vegetable peeler - a peeler to make even the laziest grandmother enjoy slip, slipping those skins off.

Lit by a small fluorescent lamp, all kinds of plates silently awaited their turns; glasses sparkled. It was clear that in spite of the disorder everything was of the finest quality. There were things with special uses, like ... porcelain bowls, *gratin* dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins. Somehow it was all very satisfying. I even opened the small refrigerator (Yuichi said it was okay) - everything was neatly organized, nothing just "left."

I looked around, nodding and murmuring approvingly, "Mmm, mmm." It was a good kitchen. I fell in love with it at first sight.

I went back and sat on the sofa, and out came hot tea.

Usually, the first time I go to a house, face to face with people I barely know, I feel an immense loneliness. I saw myself reflected in the glass of the large terrace window while black gloom spread over the rain-hounded night panorama. I was tied by blood to no creature in this world. I could go anywhere, do anything. It was dizzying.

Suddenly, to see that the world was so large, the cosmos so black. The unbounded fascination of it, the unbounded loneliness... For the first time, these days, I was touching it with these hands, these eyes. I've been looking at the world half-blind, I thought.

"Why did you invite me here?" I asked.

"We thought you might be having a hard time," Yuichi said, peering kindly at me. "Your grandmother was always so sweet to me, and look at this house, we have all this room. Shouldn't you be moving?"

"Yes. Although the landlord's been nice enough to give me extra time."

"So why not move in with us?" he said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

He struck just the right note, neither cold nor oppressively kind. It made me warm to him; my heart welled up to the point of tears. Just then, with the scratch of a key in the door, an incredibly beautiful woman came running in, all out of breath.

I was so stunned, I gaped. Though she didn't seem young, she was truly beautiful. From her outfit and dramatic makeup, which really wouldn't do for daytime, I understood that hers was night work.

Yuichi introduced me: "This is Mikage Sakurai."

"How do you do," she said in a slightly husky voice, still panting, with a smile. "I'm Yuichi's mother. My name is Eriko."

*This* was his mother? Dumbfounded, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Hair that rustled like silk to her shoulders; the deep sparkle of her long, narrow eyes; well-formed lips, a nose with a high, straight bridge - the whole of her gave off a marvelous light that seemed to vibrate with life force. She didn't look human. I had never seen anyone like her.

I was staring to the point of rudeness. "How do you do," I replied at last, smiling back at her.

"We're so pleased to have you here," she said to me warmly, and then, turning to Yuichi, "I'm sorry, Yuichi. I just can't get away tonight. I dashed out for a second saying that I was off to the bathroom. But I'll have plenty of time in the morning. I hope Mikage will agree to spend the night." She was in a rush and ran to the door, red dress flying.

“I’ll drive you,” said Yuichi.

“Sorry to put you to so much trouble,” I said.

“Not at all. Who ever would have thought the club would be so busy tonight? It’s me who should apologize. Well! See you in the morning!”

She ran out in her high heels, and Yuichi called back to me, “Wait here! Watch TV or something!” then ran after her, leaving me alone in a daze.

I felt certain that if you looked really closely you would see a few normal signs of age - crow’s feet, less-than-perfect teeth - some part of her that looked like a real human being. Still, she was stunning. She made me want to be with her again. There was a warm light, like her afterimage, softly glowing in my heart. That must be what they mean by “charm.” Like Helen Keller when she understood “water” for the first time, the word burst into reality for me, its living example before my eyes. It’s no exaggeration; the encounter was that overwhelming.

Yuichi returned, jingling the car keys. “If she could only get away for ten minutes, she should have just called,” he said, taking off his shoes in the entryway.

I stayed where I was on the sofa and answered “Mmm,” noncommittally.

“Mikage,” he said, “were you a little bit intimidated by my mother?”

“Yes,” I told him frankly. “I’ve never seen a woman that beautiful.”

“Yes. But ...” Smiling, he sat down on the floor right in front of me. “She’s had plastic surgery.”

“Oh?” I said, feigning nonchalance. “I wondered why she didn’t look anything like you.”

“And that’s not all. Guess what else - she’s a man.” He could barely contain his amusement.

This was too much. I just stared at him in wide-eyed silence. I expected any second he would say, “Just kidding.” Those tapered fingers, those mannerisms, the way she carried herself... I held my breath remembering that beautiful face; he, on the other hand, was enjoying this.

“Yes, but...” My mouth hung open. “You’ve been saying all along, ‘my mother’ this, and ‘my mother’ that...”

“Yes, but. Could *you* call someone who looked like that

‘Dad’?” he asked calmly. He has a point, I thought. An extremely good answer.

“What about the name Eriko?”

“It’s actually Yuji.” ; It was as though there were a haze in front of my eyes.

When I was finally ready to hear the story, I said, “So, who gave birth to you?”

“Eriko was a man a long time ago. He married very young. The person he married was my mother.”

“Wow ... I wonder what she was like.” I couldn’t imagine.

“I don’t remember her myself. She died when I was little. I have a picture, though. Want to see it?”

“Yes.” I nodded. Without getting up, he dragged his bag across the floor, then took an old photograph out of his wallet and handed it to me.

She was someone whose face told you nothing about her. Short hair, small eyes and nose. The impression was of a very odd woman of indeterminate age. When I didn’t say anything, Yuichi said, “She looks strange, doesn’t she?”



I smiled uncomfortably.

“As a child Eriko was taken in by her family. I don’t know why. They grew up together. Even as a man he was good-looking, and apparently he was very popular with women. Why he would marry such a strange ...”he said smiling, looking at the photo. “He must have been pretty attached to my mother. So much so he turned his back on the debt of gratitude he owed his foster parents and eloped with her.”

I nodded.

“After my real mother died, Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked herself, ‘What do I want to do now?’ What she decided was, ‘Become a woman.’ She knew she’d never love anybody else. She says that before she became a woman she was very shy. Because she hates to do things halfway, she had everything ‘done,’ from her face to her whatever, and with the money she had left over she bought that nightclub. She raised me a woman alone, as it were.” He smiled.

“What an *amazing* life story!”

“She’s not dead yet,” said Yuichi.

Whether I could trust him or whether he still had something up his sleeve ... the more I found out about these people, the more I didn’t know what to expect.

But I trusted their kitchen. Even though they didn’t look alike, there were certain traits they shared. Their faces shone like Buddhas when they smiled. I like that, I thought.

“I’ll be out of here early in the morning, so just help yourself to whatever you want.”

A sleepy-looking Yuichi, his arms full of blankets, pillows, and pajamas for me, showed me how the shower worked and pointed out the towels.

Unable to think of much of anything after hearing such a (fantastic!) life story, I had watched a video with Yuichi. We had chatted about things like the flower shop and my grandmother, and time passed quickly. Now it was one in the morning. That sofa was delectable. It was so big, so soft, so deep, I felt that once I surrendered to it I’d never get up again.

“Your mother,” I said after a while. “I bet the first time she sat on this sofa in the furniture store, she just had to have it and bought it right then and there.”

“You got it,” he said. “As soon as she gets an idea in her head she does it, you know? I just stand back in amazement at her way of making things happen.”

“No kidding.”

“So that sofa is yours for the time being. It’s your bed. It’s great for us to be able to put it to good use.”

“Is it,” I ventured softly, “is it really okay for me to sleep here?”

“Sure,” he said, without a hint of hesitation.

“I’m very grateful.”

After the usual instructions on how to make myself at home, he said good night and went to his room.

I was sleepy, too.

Showering at someone else’s house, I thought about what was happening to me, and my exhaustion washed away under the hot water.

I put on the borrowed pajamas and, barefoot, went into the silent living room. I just had to go back for one more look at the kitchen. It was really a good kitchen.

Then I stumbled over to the sofa that was to be my bed for the night and turned out the lamp. Suspended in the dim light before the window overlooking the magnificent tenth-floor view, the plants breathed softly, resting. By now the rain had stopped, and the atmosphere, sparkling, replete with moisture, refracted the glittering night splendidly.

Wrapped in blankets, I thought how funny it was that tonight, too, here I was sleeping next to the kitchen. I smiled to myself. But this time I wasn't lonely. Maybe I had been waiting for this. Maybe all I had been hoping for was a bed in which to be able to stop thinking, just for a little while, about what happened before and what would happen in the future. I was too sad to be able to sleep in the same bed with anyone; that would only make the sadness worse. But here was a kitchen, some plants, someone sleeping in the next room, perfect quiet ... this was the best. This place was ... the best.

At peace, I slept.

I awoke to the sound of running water.

Morning had come, dazzling. I arose drowsily and went into the kitchen. There was "Eriko-san," her back turned to me. Her clothing was subdued compared to last night's, but as she turned to me with a cheery "Good morning!" her face, even more brilliantly animated, brought me to my senses. "Good morning," I answered. She opened the refrigerator, glanced inside, and looked at me with a troubled air.

"You know," she said, "I'm always hungry in the morning, even though I'm still sleepy. But there's nothing to eat in this house. Let's call for takeout. What would you like?"

I stood up. "Would you like me to make something?"

"Really?" she said, and then, doubtfully, "Do you think you can handle a knife, half-asleep?"

"No problem."

The entire apartment was filled with light, like a sun-room. I looked out at the sweet, endless blue of the sky; it was glorious.

In the joy of being in a kitchen I liked so well, my head cleared, and suddenly I remembered she was a man. I turned to look at her. Deja vu overwhelmed me like a flash flood.

The house smelled of wood. I felt an immense nostalgia, in that downpour of morning light; watching her pull a cushion onto the floor in that dusty living room and curl up to watch TV.

• • •

She attacked the food - cucumber salad and soupy rice with eggs - with gusto.

It was midday. From the building's garden we could hear the shouts of children playing in the springlike weather. The plants near the window, enveloped in the gentle sunlight, sparkled bright green; far off in the pale sky, thin clouds gently flowed, suspended. It was a warm, lazy afternoon.

I couldn't have dreamed of this yesterday morning, this scene of having breakfast at