



Rice Dreams

This is another story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

I have been coming here to the countryside in August nearly every year since I moved to Japan, more than eight years ago. While here, I sit at the window of a second-floor room that overlooks the valley, and spend a few hours each morning working on one of my woodblocks. I'm not such a serious worker in the summer, and I spend a lot of time daydreaming, just looking out the window. Green-coated mountains provide the backcloth, and the river flows by off on the left side, with a scattered arm of the village visible behind it. On the main stage, front and centre, are the rice fields, an absolute sea of rice, extending out and off stage to my right. When I first came here, these fields were set out in a rough patchwork pattern, but a half-dozen years ago, there was a major consolidation, and they are now all long wide rectangles.

At the time of year that I am here, the harvest is well under way, and the miniature combines are chewing their way back and forth across each field. By the time I leave, this work is pretty much finished, the rice has been trucked away for processing and distribution, and nothing but the stubble is left in my view.

Every year I see this same scene, and only this scene. I only get to see the harvesting part of rice growing. I feel like somebody who keeps going to see the same movie time after time, but who always arrives at the theatre late, and sees only the final reel. I already know how it finishes, I want to see it start!

Of course I've seen photos and read descriptions of the other parts of the process, and have a basic idea of how it all works. Even in the part of Tokyo where I live, there are a few small rice fields, and one spring recently there was a rice-planting activity for the school kids, so they (and I!) could see this important part of Japanese culture. But what's missing for me, is the view of the process as a cycle ... from preparation, seeding and planting, through development, up to harvest, and then winnowing, polishing, etc., right up to the table.

Up in the mountains behind the summer workroom where I am writing this, is the old abandoned farm about which I have written before. Okunono. 'Farthest Fields'. Grandad's old farm. We have visited Okunono many times, and a couple of years ago spent the entire month of August 'roughing it' up there. And I mean roughing it. No electricity, no gas, no road for access. This is the place where the mother of my two daughters grew up, and at one point, she and I played around with the idea of taking off from Tokyo and moving up there for a while. I think for her, the motivation was to kind of get back to her 'roots', and take care of her family home, but for me, one attraction was the thought that I would finally be able to see, participate in, and understand the rice cycle. All the old farm equipment is still there, stored away in the old house; the river still flows by just as vigorously, and although the fields themselves are getting quite broken-down, they could still be repaired.

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I should make it clear that I understand very well what such a project would entail. Month upon month of back-breaking, dirty labour. I would not consider taking on such a life-style permanently, as I am quite comfortable with my modern conveniences, but wouldn't that be an adventure for a year! And then to eat the food that we had so carefully nurtured ... Don't laugh! I've never done that!

Alas, our divorce, and her move to Canada, put an end to such dreams, and to my connection with Okunono. But it hasn't put an end to my desire for such an experience. Perhaps in a few more years, when my big printmaking project is done, I will have the opportunity to try it. It's not something I would do alone, but if I happened to meet the right partner, someone who loved the countryside, and who knew the details of the process (because I sure don't), then perhaps I'd get my chance. I know there are lots of abandoned farms out there in Japan. How do you think I'd look with mud between my toes?

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