隣のマキノさん

隣というのは本当は嘘で何軒か離れているし間に空き地もあるのだが、話 を簡単にするために隣ということにしておこう、マキノさんという人が住んで いることに気がついた。小柄で坊主頭で眼鏡を掛けた中年男性だが、そのよ うな中年女性だという噂もあるのだと先週出戻ってきた妹が教えてくれた。

マキノさんの庭にはいろいろと奇怪な植物が植わっているので、家の全 貌が見えたことはない。家族の人数もよくわからないのだが、幼い泣き声もし くは鳴き声が、街路まで響いている晩もあったから、同居している人間か動物 はいるのだ、鳴いているのがマキノさんでなければ。

マキノさんの庭と街路は有刺鉄線で隔てられ、立入厳禁と書かれた札 があちこちにぶら下げてある。鉄線の向こうのガジュマルの木陰に佇んでい るマキノさんを見つけた。挨拶をしたら、「入ってきたらあかんよ」と注意さ れた。

「入りません」

「入ったら地雷で吹っ飛ぶからね」

「庭に地雷埋めてるんですか」

「せやから立入厳禁」

「野良犬や酔っ払いが死にますよ。除去してください」

「大丈夫。たいがい交替で見張ってるから」

誰と交替するのだろうと疑問だったが、訊ねてはいけないことのような気 がしたので、「地雷、除去しましょうよ」と話を戻した。

マキノさんはやんわりと坊主頭を振って、「地雷除去してもうたら有刺鉄 線の意味がなくなるし」

「だから有刺鉄線も取っ払いましょう」

「そしたらどこに札をぶら下げんの」

「危険がないなら札も不要でしょう」

「札が不要になったら読んでるあんたも不要になるよ」

それは困ると納得しかけた。

「あ、入ってきたらあかんよ」とそのときマキノさんが、初めて僕の存在に 気づいたように云った。

交替しちゃったらしい。話を繰り返すのは面倒なので、頭を下げて通り過 ぎた。

My Neighbor Makino

Strictly speaking, he wasn't my neighbor. He lived a few houses away with empty lots between us. I became aware of his existence some time back. His name was Makino-san. He was a short, middle-aged, bespectacled man with a clean-shaven head, but according to my sister, who had left her husband and come back home the previous week, he was also rumored to be a middle-aged woman.

Various peculiar plants growing in his yard blocked the view of his house. I didn't even know how many people lived there, but some nights a baby's cry or a cat's meow reached the streets. So, someone, or something, lived there besides Makino-san, unless he was the one crying.

A barbed wire fence separated Makino-san's yard from the street, with several "Off Limits" signs hanging at random intervals. Makino-san rested in the shadow of a gajumaru tree. "Hello," I greeted him over the fence.

"Don't ever come in here. You hear?" he answered.

"No, I won't."

"If you come in, you'll be blown up by a mine."

"You have mines in your yard?" I asked.

"That's why it's off limits."

"Please get rid of them. You don't want to kill drunkards or stray dogs, do you?"

"Not to worry. We take turns keeping lookout."

I wondered whom he meant by "we," but I didn't want to intrude, so I stuck to the matter at hand. "Let's remove the mines, shall we?"

Makino-san shook his shaved head. "If there are no mines, the barbed wire won't mean a thing."

"So, let's remove the barbed wire too."

"Then where am I supposed to hang the signs?"

"If there's no danger, you won't need the signs, will you?"

"If I don't need them, I'll have no use for you either."

He almost convinced me he was right.

"Hey, you can't come in here." Makino-san sounded as if he hadn't noticed me before.

It seemed that he had switched places with someone else. As I didn't want to repeat the same story, I bowed and left.

翌日のマキノさんは、有刺鉄線のすぐ向こうにしゃがんで草むらを覗き 込んでいた。庭を歩き廻っていて地雷を踏みやしないかと心配になったが、 考えてみたら埋めたのはマキノさんなのだ。場所は覚えているに違いない。

「あのマキノさん」と、つい声をかけてしまった。「ゆうべ寝ながら思った んですが、有刺鉄線、庭全体じゃなくて地雷の周りだけを囲むようにしたらど うでしょう。安心して歩き廻れますよ」

マキノさんは人差指を立てた。「しっ、この人らに聞える」

僕も鉄線の向こうを覗き込んだが、草むらのなかになにがいるのか、僕の 位置からはどうにも見えない。

「虫ですか」

僕が小声で訊ねると、マキノさんも小声で、

「そうぴしゃりと云わはるけどね、きっとこの人らにもこの人らの※言い 分が」

「虫なんでしょう」

「いちがいなことばかり云ったあかん。社会との関わり合い方は人それ ぞれ!

「虫だな」

ぱぱぱぱん、とそのとき、庭の奥のほうから栗が爆ぜるような音が聞え た。マキノさんは立ち上がり、「あっちさき踏んだね」と呟いて、羊歯の茂みの 向こうへと姿を消した。

地雷というのを僕はすっかり対人用の物騒なやつだと思い込んでいたの だが、どうやら虫か小動物を捕えるためのトラップのことらしい。有刺鉄線や 立入厳禁の札は、仕掛けを踏み荒らすなという意味なのだ。そうに違いない。

マキノさんは昆虫学者か動物学者ではなかろうかと、僕は考えてみた。 この鬱蒼とした庭自体、虫や動物をおびき寄せるためのトラップであり、実験 場なのではと。

程なくしてマキノさんはまた鉄線の傍に戻ってきた。眉をひそめがちに坊 主頭を振って、「タナカさんでした。いやもう無惨」

学術的見地からの感想とは思えない。それを伝えにわざわざ戻ってきた あたりも、どうも学者の態度ではない。

犠牲になったのはタナカさんのようだが、この界隈にタナカさんは数多 い。どのタナカさんかと訊ねても、僕の知らない特徴を並べられるだけのよう な気がしたので、黙っていた。人間のタナカさんとは限らない。黙って頭を下 げて、庭の前を離れた。

翌日のマキノさんの庭には、大きな犬の死骸が転がっていた。

毛艶を見るに、そう時間の経った死骸でもなさそうだが、このところのこ の暑さだ、腐敗の進みは急速らしく、集まった蠅が、うんうんうんうん、陽気に 羽音を合わせている。

The following day Makino-san stared into the grass in a crouched position on the other side of the barbed wire. I was worried he might step on a mine while he walked around the yard. But he probably remembered where the mines were because he was the one who buried them.

"Well, Makino-san," I called out in spite of myself. "It occurred to me while lying in bed last night, but why don't you place barbed wire around the mines? You wouldn't have to worry about stepping on them."

Makino-san put a finger to his lips. "Shhh. They'll hear you." I stared across to the other side of the barbed wire, but I couldn't see what was in the grass.

"Are they insects?" I asked in a whisper.

"You shouldn't be so blunt. You haven't heard their side of the story," Makino-san whispered back.

"They're insects, aren't they?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. Each person has their own way of interacting with society."

"I know they're bugs."

Then a noise came from the back of the yard, sounding like chestnuts popping in a fire.

Makino-san got up. "They stepped on it over there," he mumbled and disappeared behind the fern bushes.

I had assumed his mines were designed to blow up humans, but they might be traps for insects and small animals. The barbed wire and the off-limits signs were meant to keep people away from messing with those traps. I was sure of that.

Then it occurred to me that Makino-san was perhaps an entomologist or a zoologist. I began to think that shadowy yard itself was a trap and a testing site.

Soon Makino-san returned. He frowned and shook his shaved head. "It was Tanaka-san. What a mess."

That didn't sound like a scientific observation. If he were a scientist, he wouldn't have come back to tell me such a thing.

A Tanaka-san seemed to have fallen victim, but there were many families with that name in the neighborhood. I didn't ask him which one he meant because I had a feeling he might describe someone I didn't know. Perhaps it wasn't even human. I bowed in silence and left.

The following day a large dead dog lay sprawled in Makino-san's vard.

Judging from its fur, the dog hadn't been dead for long. But because of the recent heatwave, the carcass had decayed fast, attracting buzzing flies.

「ここやった」とマキノさんの声がして、風に揺らぐ白い花々の向こうにそ の顔が現れた。手に、赤や黄に彩色された細い竹筒を握っている。

「地雷でしょうか」

と僕が訊ねると、マキノさんは坊主頭を振って、

「ううん、吹き矢」彼は家のほうを振り返った。「吹く人、けっこういてるから」 まるで家人の仕業のように云って、マキノさんが握っているその筒はな んだ、それが吹き矢でしょうマキノさんと思ったが、吹かれては困るので黙っ ていた。

マキノさんは犬の死骸の傍らにしゃがんで、「脇腹に一発、喉笛に一発、見 事な腕前やわ。可哀相やけど、あんた組織に寝返ったりするからし

「それ犬ですよね?」

「シェパード入ってます。この歳で職探しも大変やろし、うちで飼《こ》う てやりますわ」そうマキノさんは意を語ると、犬の死骸を引きずり引きずり、 満開の曼陀羅華《まんだらげ》を踏み分けて蟬時雨《せみしぐれ》の向こうに 消えていった。

I heard Makino-san's voice say, "Here it is." Then he appeared behind white flowers swaying in the breeze. He held a thin bamboo tube painted red and yellow.

"Was it a mine?" I asked.

Makino-san shook his head. "No. It was a blowgun." Then he turned toward his house. "We've got someone who uses a blowgun."

He seemed to imply someone in his family did it. I wondered what he held in his hand. Wasn't that a blowgun, Makino-san? I thought. But I didn't say it aloud because I didn't want him to use it on me.

Makino-san crouched by the dead dog. "One shot in the flank. Another shot in the throat. Clearly the work of a marksman. Poor thing, you shouldn't have worked for the yakuza."

"Isn't it a dog?" I asked.

"Partly German Shepherd," Makino-san answered. "It must be difficult to find a job at this age, so I'll keep it as a pet." He dragged the dead dog, stepped on devil's trumpets in full bloom, and disappeared into the yard while cicadas chirped in steady unison.

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