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Letter in a Cement Barrel

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Translated by Daniel Kobayashi-Better

Matsudo Yozou was emptying cement powder into the machine. His hair and the bottom of his nose were covered in gray from the cement, though the rest of him was not as bad. The concrete has thickened his nose hairs like the iron rods of reinforced concrete and he wanted to stick his finger in to clean the concrete from his nostrils, but had no time, as he had had to keep up with the pace of the mixer that would spew out ten cubic feet of concrete per minute.

Despite his concern for his nostrils, he did not clean his nose over the course of eleven hours—during which he had only two breaks, one for lunch and one at three o'clock, though at lunch he was too hungry and in his other break in the afternoon he was cleaning the mixer and eventually his hands could not touch his nose. His nose had hardened, looking like a work made of plaster of Paris.

Near the end of his shift, as his weary hands shifted a barrel of cement, a small wooden box emerged from it.

“What’s this?” he thought suspiciously, but he did not have the time to pay attention to such an object. He poured a measure of cement into a box with a shovel. After emptying the box into a tray, he went about emptying the next barrel.

“Wait—it isn’t normal for a box to come out of a cement barrel”

He picked up the small box and stuffed it into the front pocket of his apron. The box was surprisingly light.

“With the weight of this, it isn’t likely to have cash inside”

He soon had to empty the next barrel and scoop the next measurement of cement, with no further time to ponder.

The mixer eventually began to run empty. It was the end of the concrete shift.

Using the rubber hosepipe joined to the mixer, he quickly washed his face and hands. And with his lunchbox tied around his neck, he returned to his terraced shack, mainly thinking about having a stiff drink and eating. The

power station was about eight tenths done. Mount Ena, standing tall in the evening twilight, was covered in pure white snow. Yozou's sweaty body suddenly felt cold enough to freeze. Below the path he walked ran the Kiso river which roared, biting through the white foam.

"Tsk, I can't manage this! The wife is up the duff again. . ." As he thought of his swarming children, of the baby looking to be born in the cold, and of his old lady giving birth left right and centre, he sunk his shoulders.

"My daily wage is one yen ninety sen, and every day that gets eaten up as twenty pounds of rice at fifty sen for ten pounds, leaving ninety sen for clothes and shelter. . . Bloody hell! How am I gonna get a drink!"

At this point, he remembered the little box in the pocket of his apron. He wiped off the cement stuck to the box with the seat of his trousers.

There was nothing written on the box, though it was tightly nailed shut.

"This guy certainly wanted to make it look proper, nailing it shut and all."

He hit the box on a rock, but it would not break open. He wildly stamped on it, as if trying to stamp on the world itself.

When he picked up the box again, it revealed a small sheet of paper wrapped in a rag.

It had the following written on it:

I am a girl who sews cement bags for the N—— Cement Company. My lover's job was to put stones into the crusher. One morning on the seventh of October, when he was putting stones into the crusher, he got stuck in it along with the stones.

His fellow workers tried to help him out, but he sank below the stones as if he were drowning. Then, my lover was crushed against the stones and fell onto the conveyor belt looking like a thin red stone. The conveyor belt lead into the grinder. He was crushed there along with steel pellets into smaller and smaller pieces, giving a violent noise and an unearthly groan. He was heated in the kiln and admirably turned into cement.

His bones, his flesh, even his soul turned into powder. My lover's entire existence became cement. All that is left is this scrap of his work clothes. I am sewing the bag in which to put my lover.

My lover became cement. On the following day, I wrote this letter and slipped it into this barrel.

Are you a labourer? If you are a labourer, please take pity for me and reply.

I would like to know what the cement in this barrel was used for.

How many barrels of cement did my lover turn into? In how many places was he used? Are you a plasterer? Or perhaps a builder?

I would not tolerate to see my lover become the hallway of a theatre or the enclosure of a mansion. Though how would I be able to stop it? If you are a labourer, please do not use this cement for such things.

No, it is fine. Use it for anything at all. Wherever he may be buried, I am sure that my lover would do good things for that place. I do not mind at all. He is a man of reliable character; he would certainly do his best.

He was a kind man, a fine man. And he was a man to look up to, a man of character. He was still young. He had only turned twenty-six. I cannot describe how much he cared for me. And yet, instead of a dressing him in a burial shroud, I am dressing him in a cement bag! Instead of a coffin, he went into a rotary kiln.

How shall I bid him farewell? After all he is buried in the east and west, near and far.

If you are a labourer, please send me a reply. In return, I shall give you the scrap of my lover's work clothes. It's what I used to wrap this letter. The powdered stones and my lover's sweat are soaked into this cloth. How strongly he would embrace me wearing those work clothes that this scrap came from!

I beg of you: please inform me of the date on which the cement was used, the exact address, the type of place it was used and your name, if it is not too much trouble. Please take care of yourself too. Farewell.

Matsudo Yozou felt his children's racket ringing all around him.

Looking at the address written at the end of the letter, he drank the liquor poured in his bowl in one shot.

"I wanna get sloshed, I wanna just smash everything up!" he shouted.

"I won't have you getting sloshed and acting rowdily. What will you do about the children?" his wife asked.

He looked at his seventh child in his wife's large abdomen.

1925-12-04

Note:

Another English translation is available: Ivan Morris (trans.), 'Letter Found in a Cement Barrel' *Modern Japanese Stories: An Anthology*, Ivan Morris ed. (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing 1962) pp.204–210.