

LUCID BEAUTY

Kenji fingered the dead mouse, pushing his index finger into its cold mouth, feeling its tiny teeth scrape against his skin. Its body was bloated and fat from the gases that had built up post mortem. A thin trail of slimy blood had oozed from its nose.

The boy wriggled his finger and watched the mouse's corpse jiggle along with his movement, like a puppet reacting to the nimble commands of a puppeteer. The young boy's eyes grew wide as he slid his finger further down the creature's throat, pulling a face at the strange sensation that met his finger tip.

This was the kind of thing that the doctor had done to daddy, Kenji thought, when daddy had had a bad cough and had been taken to the hospital. Mother had said that the doctor, Okinawa-san, had pushed a camera into daddy's throat so he could see what the bad thing was that was making daddy sick.

For that moment, Kenji imagined that he was in the middle of a large operating theatre, a heavy light hanging overhead casting everything with a brilliant sheen as Kenji worked on his patient. The pretty nurse next to him, dressed head to toe in white, her face covered with a mask, handed him a scalpel. Kenji traced the forefinger of his left hand across the mouse's stomach, imagining that his nail was splitting open the skin so that he could get to the goods inside. The finger of his right hand still protruded from the animal's mouth, as if Kenji were performing two operations at once, a master surgeon at work.

He moved his right finger back and forth within the mouse's mouth and giggled at the tickling sensation this caused. There was something confusing about watching his short, little finger move in and out of that little black hole, but at that moment, it felt to Kenji as the most natural thing in the world to do.

Doctor Kenji was back under the hot light again, his loyal nurse by his side. She looked a little like his sister, Noriko, he realised, except the nurse was much prettier and not so big as his older sibling, her breasts more pointed beneath her pristine uniform.

The patient on the table had changed this time. It had gone from an oversized mouse, and turned into the body of his elementary school teacher, Sensei Onou. Kenji could feel a trickle of perspiration as he realised who was now on the table and

felt a quick surge of panic as the responsibility of his teacher's life weighed down upon him. This was going to take all his skill.

He pressed down hard on the man's naked stomach; his hands flattened the bristling hairs there and searched for the lump he knew to be somewhere beneath the surface. He could not feel anything, so he pressed harder, his fingers digging deep into the soft flesh. There came a sudden popping sound and suddenly Kenji flew out of the theatre and was back at the side of the road with the little mouse.

He looked down to see the mouse's stomach slowly start to deflate as a stream of thick liquid seeped out of the creature's mouth, covering Kenji's finger in the sticky substance.

"Aagh," he growled and withdrew his finger with a small pop. He held it up to his face to examine it, staring at the yellow liquid that crawled over his flesh.

"Ah ah ah," he cried and started to wipe his finger in the dirt, trying desperately to cover the hideous yellow that he was sure would now stain his flesh for life.

Once he had suitably hidden it enough with dirt to dispel the last visible signs of yellow, Kenji turned back to the mouse, who still lay on the ground in the same position as before. He prodded its head with his middle finger and then jumped back a little, as if he expected the small creature to reach up and snap at him. But the mouse did not move. He prodded again, harder this time but the mouse still did not move. Finally, Kenji drew up all his courage and jabbed a finger straight into the animal's eye, feeling it squish beneath the pressure. But still the mouse remained dormant.

Kenji looked down at the little rodent, his face puzzled. He reached up and pushed back his yellow hat, wiping at his forehead, brushing away the damp sweat that had dripped down from his mop of black hair.

The boy bent down towards the animal, his head hovering above the hard ground as he tried to get close to it, his nose almost touching the long nose of the mouse, his eyes staring into the dead glassy balls in the creature's head.

Kenji looked into those eyes but could see nothing within their murky depths besides his own reflection. He saw his small, round face looking back up at him, his thin eyes focused, his dark hair matted to his head underneath the sun hat he was wearing. Something about seeing himself reflected in those dead eyes made him want to cry. It was scary seeing his image surrounded by all that black.

It was if the boy were looking at the shadow of death, still hanging, captured like a photograph in the animal's eye. Kenji wondered how the mouse had died, whether it had been violent or peaceful. He didn't look hurt, beside the liquid that had leaked from its mouth, its flesh and fur still whole. Maybe it had been natural causes, just like Grandma Rie. Mother had said that she had died peacefully in her sleep because she was old and Kenji wondered if it had been the same for the mouse.

He eyed the body curiously. It didn't look old; there was no grey in its fur anyway. Kenji wasn't totally sure how he was supposed to know if the mouse had been old or not, but he still didn't think so. It was a mystery and the very idea of it all made the boy's head start to hurt.

He was still on his hands and knees, the concrete digging into his skin, leaving its unique mark. Above him, the July sun beat down upon the boy, Kenji's body sweating beneath his heavy school uniform, his shorts acting as his own respite, as a slight breeze cooled the back of his legs.

Without knowing why, the boy began to stroke the thin fur across the rodent's stomach, using just one finger and making sure to stroke him the right way so as not to go against the direction of the fur. He felt sad, looking down at this little creature, this poor, small thing that looked too tiny to have had a soul. Surely there just wouldn't be room for one in such a miniscule body, compared with a human anyway.

Kenji was overtaken with the urge to put his finger back in the animal's mouth, but fought against it. It looked so sad, lying there on its side, its face turned up to the torturous sun, its skin already hard and beginning to get baked in the heat. Japanese summer was merciless and this thing didn't stand a chance.

Within an instant, Kenji's whole view of the creature changed. As sad as it looked, he now found it rather ugly. It was grotesque how something so natural and full of life could suddenly turn into rotting meat, left at the mercy of the sun. Everything about it the boy now found abhorrent. And not just the way the creature had altered after death. He moved in for a closer look and almost recoiled as he examined the little face with its long nose, beady eyes and thin whiskers that looked like fine needles that had been inserted into the rodent's face. Its small, harmless teeth, suddenly portrayed violence and Kenji found himself wondering how much blood had passed down the mouse's gullet, how many other living things it had devoured, chomping on their raw flesh, drinking down their blood. It was horrible to think of it in such a way but the boy couldn't help himself.

He glared at its long tail, sticking out from the back of its body like a wriggling worm, its pinkness having been discoloured by the rays of the sun. No, it looked more like a snake to him now, rather than a worm. The kind that you sometimes saw in the rice fields or up in the mountains near the shrines. Kenji could imagine the mouse's tail as a separate animal, perhaps detaching itself at night to go slithering off on its own, spreading its evil as it claimed more victims, perhaps bringing them back for the mouse to eat come morning.

But then the image changed and the mouse was just a mouse again, albeit a dead and smelly one. There was an odour emanating from the corpse that the boy had failed to notice up until now. But now that he had, he could not shake the stench from his nose. He wiped at his face with his hands, even sticking his fingers up his nose to try and free the smell from inside, but all to no avail. It was stuck to him as if it had soaked into his very skin and he wondered if he would ever be free from it.

“Kenji Kanawara!”

The teacher's voice echoed across the air, riding the shimmering waves like a surfer at high tide.

Immediately Kenji shot up to his feet, grazing his knees slightly with the quick movement.

“Come on, catch up.”

Kenji looked ahead and saw that the other school children were already far in front, most of them still marching off or skipping along, while a few had stayed back with the teacher, mostly so that they could stand and stare at Kenji, some laughing to one another, while the others simply stood looking stern and judgmental.

Kenji gave a quick nod and then raced forward, eager to catch up with his class. As he moved, his foot planted squarely in the middle of the mouse's body, squashing it flat instantly, its insides exploding out through the thin veil of skin that surrounded its stomach.

The boy felt the squishing sensation, but, with his eyes fixed firmly ahead on his teacher, his brain did not make the connection as to what had made that sound and so he raced on unperturbed, the white sole of his shoe now stained with a deep red that left little patters of colour on the sidewalk as he ran, a small trail of blood that led all the way back up to the school gates and beyond as he marched across the playground.

Word Count: 1805