

## A Truth at a Dinner Exposes a Lie that Becomes a Tradition

It's one of those December days in Osaka where the wind and the ice fight for dominance over impending snow. Mrs. Hakuki shivers, pulling her jacket closer around her thin frame to preserve heat, the building's lobby is nearly as cold as the outside. She sprints to the elevator, hoping to catch it before the doors closes. It only takes a second for her heart to sink when she recognizes that the figure already occupying the space is Mrs. Katashi, a woman who doesn't take kindly to riding with others. To her surprise, a dainty gloved hand juts between the doors to keep them from closing.

"Konnichiwa," chimes the usually solemn Mrs. Katashi.

"Good afternoon to you too, thanks for holding the door." Replies Mrs. Hakuki, trying to contain her shock.

"Samui desu ne?" she adds, more of an observation than a question.

"Yes, it is cold." Mrs. Hakuki resounds, wrinkling her brow, confused why Mrs. Katashi is speaking Japanese when she prefers to show off her English skills.

Moments of awkward silence follow a hard press of number five by Mrs. Hakuki. Realizing that only one floor is lit, she presses number ten, too.

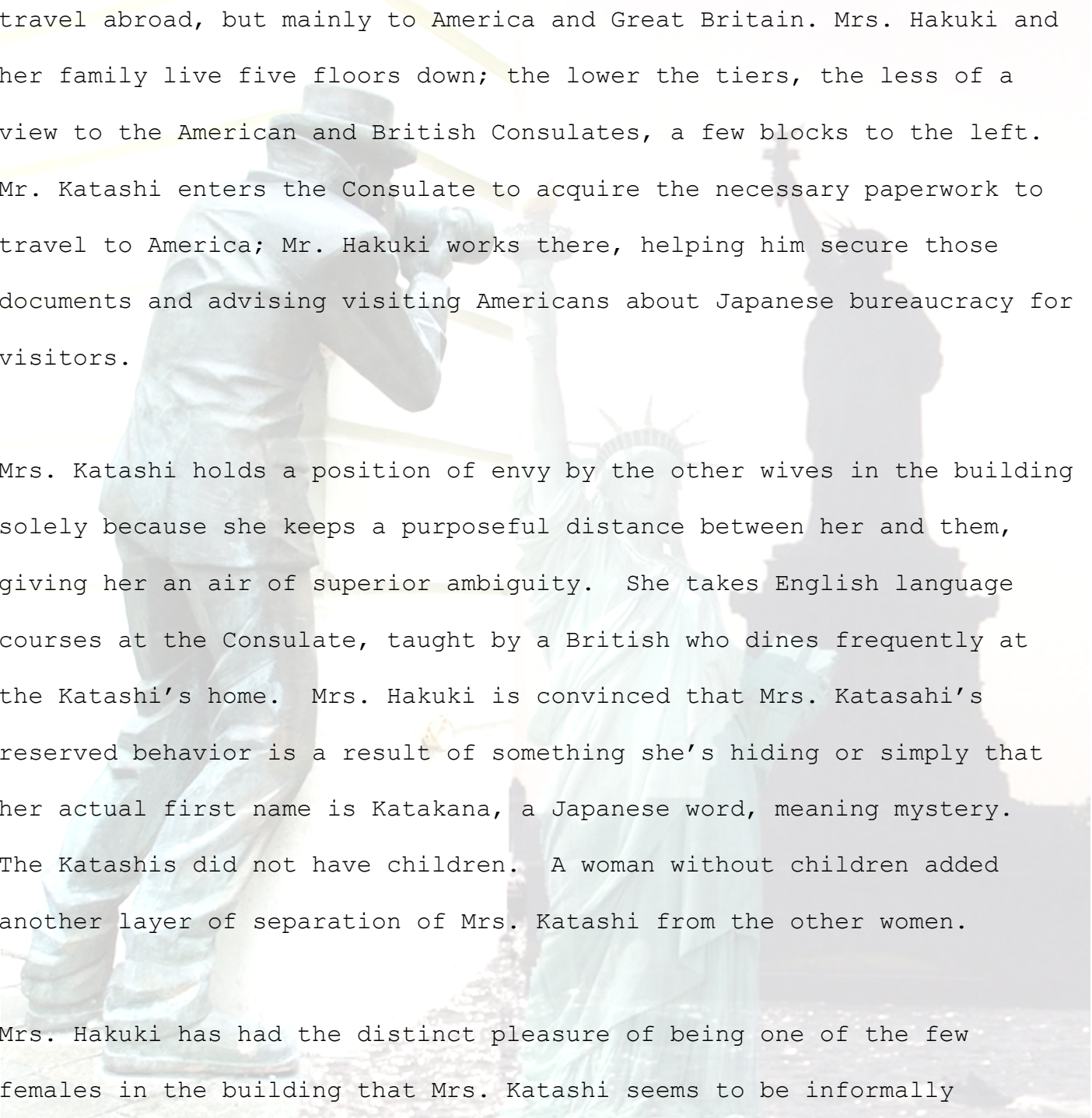
"Can you press nine, please?" Mrs. Katashi instructs Mrs. Hakuki, holding onto a batch of white envelopes tied with a thick, red ribbon.

Mrs. Hakuki hungers to find out why Mrs. Katashi would be getting off at a floor below hers, but senses it best to mind her own affairs.

"For you," Mrs. Katashi offers, pulling out one of the neatly stacked envelopes that looks like formal invitations. The red seal on the back gives it an air of royalty. "See you on 25 December," Mrs. Katashi whispers, as Mrs. Hakuki steps uneasily onto floor number five.

Mrs. Hakuki turns to thank Mrs. Katashi, but the door shuts with a thud, the kind that echoes when the rider has intentionally depressed the "close" button.

Mrs. Katashi's affable demeanor, the envelope and the thought of her on any other floor than her own sends Mrs. Hakuki flying into her home to tear open that square white envelope. But, she doesn't, she stands transfixed, watching the light on the panel arrest at number nine.



The Katashi family lives on the tenth floor, in apartment ten-eleven, described as the choice floor by the Hakuki's, and, everyone else below it. The tenth floor is occupied by Japanese businessmen who, not only travel abroad, but mainly to America and Great Britain. Mrs. Hakuki and her family live five floors down; the lower the tiers, the less of a view to the American and British Consulates, a few blocks to the left. Mr. Katashi enters the Consulate to acquire the necessary paperwork to travel to America; Mr. Hakuki works there, helping him secure those documents and advising visiting Americans about Japanese bureaucracy for visitors.

Mrs. Katashi holds a position of envy by the other wives in the building solely because she keeps a purposeful distance between her and them, giving her an air of superior ambiguity. She takes English language courses at the Consulate, taught by a British who dines frequently at the Katashi's home. Mrs. Hakuki is convinced that Mrs. Katashi's reserved behavior is a result of something she's hiding or simply that her actual first name is Katakana, a Japanese word, meaning mystery. The Katashis did not have children. A woman without children added another layer of separation of Mrs. Katashi from the other women.

Mrs. Hakuki has had the distinct pleasure of being one of the few females in the building that Mrs. Katashi seems to be informally cordial, meaning she would part her lips, ever so slightly and bow her head when Mrs. Hakuki happens to be in the lobby with her, at the same time. Often, Mrs. Katashi avoids the elevator if other residents are

present, preferring the stairs which she mumbled: "keeps me fit for all the meals with American businessmen."

Mrs. Hakuki's apartment door cracks, exposing four small eyes peering out to see who has gotten off the elevator - the children were expecting her half an hour ago.

"What is that?" Mao, her seven-year old daughter probes, pointing at her right hand.

"We open it and find out, is your father home?"

"Yes, he heated noodles for dinner."

All eyes are on the white object with its red seal. Careful not to destroy the seal, Mrs. Hakuki uses a butter knife to cautiously separate it from the paper:

"You are cordially invited to a special dinner on Twenty-five December 1973 at Seven PM - An American Festive Christmas Celebration - Exchange of Gifts - Special Western Dinner Served - The Katashis," is handwritten in the most elegant Haku letters.

"It IS a Christmas celebration," shouts Mao, smiling from ear to ear.

"They are going to have a Santa Claus who comes by reindeer,"  
Assures Sayuri, Mao's five-year old brother.

Mao and her brother, Sayuri, have heard stories about this western tradition from other children in the building and from looking through American magazines on their father's desk. They had, secretly, longed to celebrate the American holiday. As young children they want to experience the thrill of a white-haired, jolly man in a red suit bringing toys to their homes in the middle of the night, via reindeer like pictures of the children in the west.

"There are no reindeer in Japan", Mao chides her brother, each time he would stare at images in **Look Magazine** that her father brought home from his job at the Consulate.

"Shows what you know, reindeer can fly all the way from the North Pole, to America, and, Great Britain," protested Sayuri, tears welling in his eyes.

Their mother would separate the children and take away the magazine as punishment. She had asked her husband not to bring this publication into the home because it causes so much friction between the children who desire to emulate young ones in the states. Like most Japanese, the Hakuki's are secular people. Their ancestors had believed that all-natural phenomena, animals, and plants possessed kami, or divine power - a belief that came to be known as Shinto; it was established as an

official religion after Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to Japan from the Asian continent.

"We are secular, we must be careful, not to change who we are." Mr. Hakuki warns, realizing his words are unheard.

"To, today is 24 December, you off early from Consulate, we go shopping, get best gifts for the Katashi's."

"We get for the children, what can we give him that he won't have already?" Mr. Hakuki declares, glancing at his cheap suit pant.

Mr. Katashi had spent a considerable amount of time traveling to American, he was fond of telling other men in Osaka, and, the ones in his building, about a special American tradition: Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On his last trip to New York, Mr. Katashi had entered into a special business deal with a US company that he wanted to introduce to the people on his guest list, as well as, all of Japan. But mostly, Mr. Katashi wants to make a lot of money so he can buy a large house in the country, a sign of financial status; Becoming a millionaire would make him more acceptable to his father-in-law, a man, who when he learned of Hideri Katashi's desire to marry his daughter, feigned heart palpitations, in lieu of giving his approval.

"Did you give out the invitations?" Grills Mr. Katashi.

"Yes, I give all twenty-five," answer Mrs. Katashi, trying to hide her annoyance at her husband.

"It will be a prosperous party." Boasts Mr. Katashi, scanning a contract he had signed at an American headquarters in Kentucky, of all places.

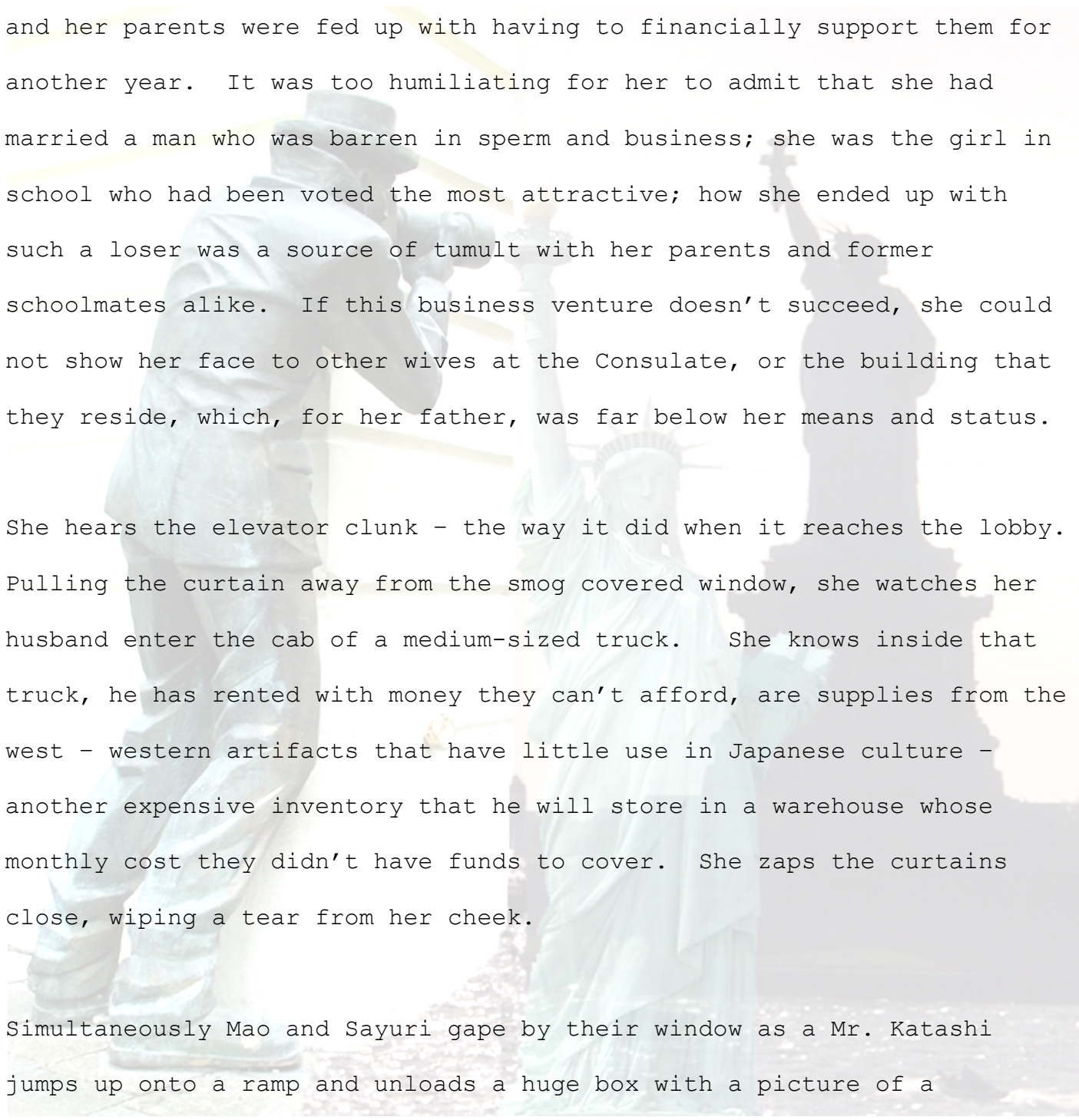
"I don't know, replies his wife, scratching the left side of her head, something she did when she was in vehement disagreement with her husband.

"I have to come up with good marketing scheme." He retorts, his beady eyes glinting behind blinking lids, made his round face appear more like a traffic light at the corner of the busiest street in Japan than peepers for viewing his surroundings.

"You mean marketing strategy, not scheme, right husband." Mrs. Katashi cautions, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yeah, that what I mean, American words, can get all mixed up sometimes." He looks down, then out the window, a habit he had, when he was being less than truthful.

"You remember we borrow from my parents, they want money back." His wife's voice quivers with worried shame.



Her husband was out the apartment door before she could continue the same argument they had had six times before; the one about his business failures from America. It seems he has too many to keep an exact count and her parents were fed up with having to financially support them for another year. It was too humiliating for her to admit that she had married a man who was barren in sperm and business; she was the girl in school who had been voted the most attractive; how she ended up with such a loser was a source of tumult with her parents and former schoolmates alike. If this business venture doesn't succeed, she could not show her face to other wives at the Consulate, or the building that they reside, which, for her father, was far below her means and status.

She hears the elevator clunk - the way it did when it reaches the lobby. Pulling the curtain away from the smog covered window, she watches her husband enter the cab of a medium-sized truck. She knows inside that truck, he has rented with money they can't afford, are supplies from the west - western artifacts that have little use in Japanese culture - another expensive inventory that he will store in a warehouse whose monthly cost they didn't have funds to cover. She zaps the curtains close, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Simultaneously Mao and Sayuri gape by their window as a Mr. Katashi jumps up onto a ramp and unloads a huge box with a picture of a Christmas tree on one side. The children have never seen such a colorful sight; their ebullience reflects youngsters experiencing the joys of an anticipation of a winter wonderland, for the first time.



"It is time yet?" Asked Sayuri, for the hundredth time the next evening.

"We go at seven; It's six O'clock - told you to learn how to tell time." Cajoles his sister.

Their parents have begun preparations for the big night - A dinner at the Katashi's is the social event of their lives. No one in the building had ever entered that apartment - rumors abound stated that it was furnished with British and American antiques, infused around a few Japanese pieces. It is one of the largest units in the complex - a man of Mr. Katash's status, it is alleged, throws a lot of dinner parties for important people, too fancy for any of them to have ever gotten invitations.

After the children are dressed in their finest clothes, the Hakuki's get on the elevator and press the elusive number above nine. It's five minutes to seven. The smell floating through the walls of the building, down from the top floor, is something their noses hasn't savored before.

Upon descent from the elevator, the sounds of "Jingle Bell, Jingle Bell Rock" waft from behind a door covered in red and white paper, decorated with a large, green circle in back of a large red bow. Each of the guests gawk at the decorations; staring open-mouth, in awe of the other

who has been selected for such an occasion by a most esteemed host - one who they hold in such distant deference.

Mrs. Hakuki's the first to raise her hand to knock lightly on the door - it squeaks wider without much effort on her part. She glimpses a big, beautiful tree with the most captivating lights, topped with a large gold star. It is this moment that she understands how enchantingly beautiful the holiday is for the people in America.

"Oh wow," gape Mao and Sayuri in unison.

Everyone set their meticulously wrapped gifts under the sparkling tree. The entire apartment seems like some kind of western fairytale to Mao, Sayuri and the forty-eight other children clamoring to get up close to the shiny, glistering tree with its colorful lights. A middle-aged housekeeper directs the children to an imposing space to the right of the entrance hall - complete with twirling lights and a smaller tree - a red-and white structure sit in the middle of this room.

"That is chimney, Santa Claus drop presents off already for children." Announces Mr. Katashi, who rarely talks to anyone younger than his own age of thirty-six.

Boxes of colorfully wrapped presents poke out of the structure. Twenty-five Small tables and fifty chairs were lined up along the wall.

"First, we must eat the traditional American Christmas dinner, the children eat in here, grownups out there." Mr. Katashi instructs, not looking directly at any of his guests.

"Then, we open - exchange - presents." He adds, dressed in a smoking jacket that made him look like a Japanese butler for the British man who was frequently seen leaving his apartment. The British expat, in fact, did have a Japanese butler who he insisted the man dress in a red plaid jacket, white shirt and white pants.

Mrs. Katashi let her husband take charge of the dinner - something that upset the balance of male and female roles in the eyes of their guests. Women were the ones in charge of the meal, unless it was a restaurant, especially Shushi restaurants, where there appear to be some kind of written law that all chefs are male.

It isn't long before Mrs. Mami Hakuki and her husband discover what the aroma they inhaled from the elevator is:

"Kentucky fried chicken, so good, you must lick your fingers," Mr. Katashi announces, setting down red and white buckets with pieces of golden meat in front of each couple.

"It what the people in America with lots of prosperity eat for this holiday." proposes Mr. Katashi, glancing at Mrs. Katashi, who tersely surveys the grease-stained container, maneuvering two

chopsticks to retrieve a large, golden, chicken breast, placing it on Mami's gold-rimmed porcelain dinnerplate.

Before Mrs. katashi finishes serving the adults, she becomes aware that her husband has disappeared. They are startled to hear:

"Kentucky Christmas, Kentucky Christmas, Happy, Happy." Shouts Mr. Katashi, dancing around in a red and white, Santa costume.

The kids love it. They aren't even sure who's behind the white beard, the red hat with the white fluffy ball, flopping back and forth. They can tell by the eyes that it was not the western image they have viewed in the magazine, but, then, if this is Japan, wouldn't Santa Claus be Japanese?

"If you don't eat your good, American chicken, you won't get good American presents." Mr. Katashi admonishes, in a sing song voice, wagging his left forefinger. "Santa knows when you are naughty or nice - you don't eat, he say that naughty, not nice."

Mrs. Katashi is so embarrassed by her husband that she can't lift her head. Her cheeks are flushed; her hands tremble behind a slow rage. She bows, then excuses herself.

Mr. Katashi manages to get the children to eat the strange American fare. The children delight in the messy food with the crispy fried

skin. The adults want to impress their hosts, so they follow the lead of their children.

"It's delicious." Offers Mr. Hakuki, looking around to view everyone else's opinion.

"We are the first to try this in Japan, I bet." Adds Mr. Hakuki, licking his fingers - watching the other couples shadow his movements. "This good, become tradition, like America." He completes his sentence to a sea of nods in agreement.

The guests desire to compliment Mrs. Katashi, but she's nowhere in sight. It is only Mrs. Hakuki who notices that Mrs. Katashi had been even more elusively estranged than usual. She keeps her mouth tightly shut. Deciding that something was amiss, Mami rises out of her seat, and, excuses herself to the bathroom. The door to the guest bathroom sits ajar, but Mami decides she would take a peek in the Katashi's bedroom instead; she stops in her tracks, a few feet from the doorway:

"How could you?" Mrs. Katashi demands of her husband with disgust.

"I kill them, the kids love it, the parents love it, we rich." Mr. Katashi resounds, stopping to sneak a peek of himself in the bathroom mirror.

"What you mean?" His wife gasps, staring straight into his face.

"I buy Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, I sell them as Christmas Party Barrels, all over Japan, we rich."

"The store in Osaka, you no sell one piece, my father say no more money for you." She blurts, spitting a small chicken bone at his suit.

"But, that before I find marketing scheme, I sell them as urisumasu ni wa Kentakki." Mr. Katashi declares, kissing his wife gently on her forehead - "These ones tell other ones, on and on."

Katakana Katashi glares Hideri Katashi squarely in the eyes, something she had not done for a few years:

"Oh, I see now, Kentucky for Christmas."

"Christmas Party Barrels - all over Japan - order them in advance, it become largest fast food chain in country, we rich." Mr. Katashi repeats.

Mrs. Hakuki back-pedals to the dining room, arriving some time before Katakana and Hideri Katashi's footsteps click-clack down the hallway toward the guests who have nearly finished their meal. Mr. Katashi holds a bottle of expensive champagne in his right hand; his wife sets down a silver tray with twenty-five crystal glasses:

"It American tradition, husband and wife drink in celebration from same glass - it Christmas," Mr. Katashi accentuates, looking at

Mrs. Katashi, who has a new found smile covering a face that hadn't seen a reverse scowl in a very long time.

Mrs. Katashi sets a twinkling glass in front of Mrs. Hakuki, bowing in such a way that insinuates she has suddenly discovered royalty among the lower class of her building. Mrs. Hakuki stiffens; she needs to leave but she knows the children would be disappointed. Sensing his wife's uneasiness, Mr. Hakuki whispers:

"I bet all other wives so envious."

Mrs. Hakuki's round white sockets with the small black balls sitting inches from her upturned mouth send daggers through Mr. Hakuki so deep, he moves his head backwards as if to avoid a blade. Without saying a word, Mami Hakuki rises, curtsies to the guests on all sides of her, then, gently takes Mrs. Katashi by the elbow, urging her back towards the master bedroom.

Once Mrs. Kakuki has secured the door she leans in close to Mrs. Katashi:

"My husband get franchise or I tell everyone your secret - this lie that about to be-come tradition."

Mrs. Hakuki picks up the red, Santa suit, lying on the sink, tossing it into Mrs. Katashi's shocked face, steeped in defeat. Mrs. Hakuki hums, in a low, sing song voice, making her exist:

"We rich, we rich."