

A BEAUTIFUL FAREWELL TO MY JAPANESE MOTHER

On 15th January this year, I must rush to Japan to take part in a funeral. More than a thousand kilometers southwest of Tokyo in the province of Miyazaki, I take the train north along the Pacific coast to the small town Takanabe where I spent a year with the family Shirakawa back in 1979. My host mother Tamiko has suddenly died at the age of 92 and I'm on my way 'home'.

The landscape whizzes past: the dark blue sea, the archipelago, the palm trees waving in the light breeze and the green rice fields. Miyazaki is located at latitude with Morocco and is the least populated and in my eyes the most beautiful Japanese province. 'Dooi-naka', says the Japanese, which is similar in meaning to the Danish expression 'where the crows turn back'. The place is also called Japan's cradle. This was where the gods first descended to earth.

It is the second time that I participate in a Japanese funeral. My host father Shigeru died 3 years ago. I have my black suit in my hand luggage ready for a quick change for this evening the initial wake of the funeral ceremony for Okasan (mother) is held and mother has been kept cold so that the family's Danish son can make it home.

The family's Danish son One year as an exchange student where I studied at Takanabe High School turned out to be much more than a mere glimpse into a foreign culture. It's now been 36 years and I have had contact with the family ever since. I get off in the small town and am met by my sister Yuko and brother Shun. It's emotional. The family's youngest son has returned for one last goodbye.

We rush and change and dressed in black we enter the funeral hall where 200 guests are waiting for the ceremonies to start. A tiny old kimono-clad woman comes up bowing. Her back is bent from a hard life in the rice fields. Laa-su (Lars), she says. Welcome home. Tamiko would have loved that you came. She always talked about you. Do you remember me, we were neighbors back then in '79. You loved Japanese nashi pears. I remember her very well. She takes my hand and leads me to the open coffin. And there she lies. The woman who opened the door for me to her home so long ago. My Japanese mother. She is beautiful and I'm forever grateful to her.

I am now placed in hierarchical order as the family's youngest son after my sister Yuko and my brothers Koji and Shun. The Buddhist priest read sutras dressed in a garment made from brocade silk in green and red nuances with a splash of gold. Bells are rung and we offer incense. The heavily fragrant room is filled with enormous bouquets of flowers. Later everyone comes up to me to talk. There are aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, neighbors and old schoolmates. It is touching and inclusive.

And then we. We sit cross legged on tatami mats eating all sorts of local specialties. The open coffin is in the room near the low table where we eat. We drink sake and shochu and talk about Tamiko, the woman whose life was not always easy. My host father Shigeru was a soldier in the Japanese army during the invasion of China and shattered by the events. It took my mother years to get him out of the fogs of insanity when he finally returned home. Dad never really recovered but he was a gentle and warm person. He became a vet after mother got him back on his feet and in some strange way he became my real bonus-father/second father.

I remember one day when we were chopping bamboo shoots in a nearby bamboo forest at Yunomiya just outside Takanabe. The sun's rays flashed between the hissing leaves and dad told me that one should be happy with what one had and not always crave more. Maybe he talked about Japan's invasion of China, maybe it was just what a long life had taught him. But this motto I have made my own. My mother on the other hand was the pulse of the family. Always fun, sweet and bursting with humor.

At midnight, the women leave and we men, quite drunk, sleep next to the mother's body. Through out the night we get up to keep the incense at the altar burning. It must not go out.

The next ceremony continues with hundreds attending and now it is time for mother to be cremated. The coffin slides into the fire chamber and we are told to come back in 2 hours. I'm not quite prepared for the sight that greets me as we enter a small room where my mother's skeleton is lying in a steaming heap of ashes. The skeleton is fully visible from the slightly collapsed skull to the ribs and to the bones of the heels. The Buddhist priest invites us two and two together lift the bones from the heap into the urn. Suddenly I understand why it is always so that if you sit at a Japanese dinner table and two persons reach out while for the same bit of food then both rapidly remove their chopsticks as if they had been stricken by a lightning. That's because there is only one time when two people lift one thing with chopsticks and this is at

the funeral at the end of a person's life – and this is where we are now.

We finish off by putting the body's most important bone in the urn. It's the Adam's apple, which the Japanese call 'nodo-botoke' (the throat -Buddah) because the bone has the shape of a sitting Buddha. All the nearest from the oldest to the youngest girls of only 7 and 10 participate. When done, we take the urn home. We put it on the home altar where we burn incense and pray.

Japan is a truly warm and compassionate society. Learn the language, as I did and you get the key to a wonderful people whose strength is not just unity and sincerity but also humor. I have rarely laughed so much as I did in Japan. When I introduced my husband Kim years ago my Japanese family took it all in strides. As with my own Danish family they had of course sensed where things were heading long ago and for homosexuality is no problem had of course smelled a rat long ago and among them, there is no problem. Kim was accepted from the start by my sister Yuko who said that 'now you are my fourth brother'.

More than three decades ago Japan hit my heart with a hurricane's strength. I have always wondered how I could open myself and find it natural to love both a Danish and a Japanese family. But I could. And it's so beautiful.

Post script not published in Politiken: Yuko returned from Tokyo to Takanabe some years ago to take care of our ailing parents who are now sadly both dead. Yuko runs an English juku (cram school). Koji makes a life doing Chinese I-Ching horoscopes for companies and individuals. And Shun, whose acting career never really took off, runs a fantastic soul bar called Brown Sugar in Ebisu in Tokyo with great drinks and lush soul music played from a choice of thousands of vinyl albums. I myself became a film producer. I started off doing 10 years in the Danish shipping giant Maersk working 6 of those years in Tokyo and 2 in Manila. Then I got into the National Film School of Denmark and since 1997 I have been producing feature films with success. Kim and I became fathers to a small girl just 10 weeks ago that we have with a wonderful lesbian friend. Life is good.