

Her Own Skin

By

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In my prior existence, I was human. My widower father sold carved seals, both wooden and the more expensive ivory chops that only the Samurai Lords could afford. I kept house for him in our small village close to the Edo highway. Although I walked the streets everyday, I never exchanged anything more than formal greetings with the other shopkeepers and girls my age. My life was a series of days I barely seemed to inhabit. Soon, my father and I stopped talking about “when I would be married.”

One early morning, nearing thirty years old, I looked in the mirror and discovered my face was gone. Instead of the usual formations of eyes, nose, and mouth, my face was a shell-smooth, pale blank. Trembling fingers confirmed an utter lack of features. I knew life couldn’t go on like this. Yet, I felt angry, like losing my face was a punishment. It was unfair to heap more troubles on the head of a girl who never did any harm.

I was unsure of where or how I had lost my face, but I was sure that I could no longer keep house for my father. I hoped he wouldn’t be too upset. Maybe he would be relieved that the burden of his unmarried daughter had disappeared.

Instead of stoking the fire under the rice pot or cutting daikon radish for father’s miso soup, I put on a warm cotton robe in a sensible shade of brown, tied it with my second best obi, and walked out of the shop’s front door. Over the sliding door, the hanging curtain noren printed with the characters of my family name fluttered in a morning breeze. The name felt like someone I knew long ago.

The wind brought the salty tang of the Pacific Ocean with it, reminding me how I lacked eyes to make salty tears. Could Noppera-bo cry? The question occupied me as I made my way out of town, unseen by early rising inhabitants. I stopped at the outskirts in front of a farmer’s small shrine to Inari-sama, the rice god, attended by foxes molded from baked clay. I decided to try crying, thinking that was what anyone else would do. I thought of my father and my old life. I thought of my former dark eyes, which I always considered my finest feature. I thought of the daughters I would never have. Nothing. I pushed a little, as if squatting in an outhouse, but despite my efforts, no moisture came. Any normal person would have been crying. I was ashamed. Was I really this cold? No wonder I lost my face.

What to do now? I had never paid attention to Noppera-bo stories before, but that’s what I had become. Really I’d only heard about them from the itinerant entertainers who set up on the street near the town teashop. I should have paid more attention. Was I supposed to hurt people like the oni, the demons? I didn’t feel particularly clever like a trickster fox spirit or shape-changing tanuki badger. In the stories, the Noppera-bo only appeared to scare the unwary traveler. I couldn’t

remember the stories telling about what the Noppera-bo would do in between appearances.

Something tightened in my chest. I hadn't done much as a seal-carver's daughter. I should try harder as a Noppera-bo. If this were my fate, then I had better get on with it. I decided to walk down the main road that lead away from my village. There would be people at the inn on the Edo highway. If one of the maids or travelers caught my eye, I could wait until dark and try to scare someone.

"Kyra," Ella said, "let's go back inside. I want to try the sauna."

The geezers at the far corner of the rotemburo nudged each other again at Ella's English. With her smooth black hair, dark brown eyes, and stubby nose, most people in Japan assumed she was Japanese. It always frustrated them when she didn't understand them.

"You're such a liar," Kyra said. "You hate saunas. They make you sick. You just don't want to hang around here with these guys. Do they really make you that uncomfortable?"

"Yes, they do," Ella said. "The clerk said all the locals go to bed early. We should have had the rotemburo to ourselves." Ella regretted coming with Kyra, but it was the first time anybody had invited Ella on a trip. She was too shy to travel around by herself, and it was a waste to be in Japan and not see more of the country where her mother was raised.

"Okay, Ella," said Kyra. "I'll take care of it." She swam over to the geezers. They were grouped in a little inlet formed by fake rock jutting into the water in front of a fake waterfall. Kyra climbed on one of the rocks, standing up in full nude glory, and screamed English obscenities at them.

The geezers sat for a moment in stunned silence, probably more in shock over the sight of fully naked Kyra than her crazy antics. One of them laughed, and soon the whole lot of them were clambering out of the water, waving goodbye and shaking their heads in wonder.

"Was that really necessary?" Ella said.

"It worked, didn't it?" Kyra jumped back into the water, making a small tidal wave that washed over Ella's shoulders and chin. Her cheeks felt hot with more than just the steam rising off the water.

Ella sighed. She was envious of Kyra. It was so easy for her to play the foreigner card. Ella tried so hard to fit in, making tea in the morning with the other female teachers, staying late at her desk, and trying not to get into anyone's way. Kyra jumped around naked on rocks and never had to suffer tedious conversations in broken English with drunken male teachers.

Ella heard a soft, garbled sound. A murmur, perhaps. It came from behind the bamboo partition separating the women-only section of the hot springs from the co-ed rotemburo. She held her breath to listen again but only heard crickets chirping punctuated by an occasional gust of wind. Ella was used to nighttime with a more modern set of noises. Living in Tokyo meant she fell asleep to the lullaby of sirens, revving of engines, and her neighborhood's familial disputes. While she sometimes felt cranky about losing sleep, the noises also gave her a feeling of belonging. If only she could feel that way when she was awake, too.

Kyra was strangely quiet. The outside lights flickered and went out. Slowly all the voices from inside faded away. In the dim light visible from the windows, the steam rising off the water obscured Kyra, changing her head into one of the rock formations. Ella tilted her head to look for stars. The giant pine trees surrounding the resort formed a canopy over the rotemburo, letting only a few bright stars peek through.

When Ella looked down, a woman sat, facing away, on one of the bamboo stools near the washing station. Masked by the dark and steam, the woman filled a pail with water and poured it over her long hair. The splashing sounds were muted, far away.

“Kyra,” Ella said. “Let’s go inside now.” Ella’s voice felt loud and out of place, but Kyra made no sound or movement. Ella pushed up onto the edge of the rotemburo. The chill hair made her shiver. “I’m going.”

Kyra still didn’t acknowledge her. Ella made an exasperated sound and stood, reaching for her towel. Kyra could just sit here until she turned into a raisin. She could be so selfish sometimes. As Ella approached the other woman, she mumbled “excuse me” in Japanese. The woman didn’t turn around, give a little nod, or make any of the automatic gestures Japanese women made in these situations.

Opening the door to the bathhouse, Ella turned to give Kyra one last chance to come with her. It was then Ella caught a glimpse of the Japanese woman’s face. At first, Ella couldn’t understand what she was seeing. The woman’s face was smooth, white, and devoid of features. With strands of wet hair hanging over the surface where her face should have been, she looked like the corpse of a drowned woman.

Ella’s lungs squeezed for air, and she gave a strangled moan. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the loathsome sight. The faceless woman turned toward Ella, and Ella put her hands in front of her own face to block the horror. Heart pounding, Ella ran through the door, past the inside bath, and into the well-lit hallway of old men and women dressed in the resort’s blue yukata robes. They looked at her with annoyance and surprise.

Ella was a troublesome mouse. I knew when I first saw her visiting an abandoned farmer’s shrine near her school. I wanted to scratch those dark eyes of hers out of her face. I couldn’t wait to give her a good scare. Of all the girls I’d been stuck to over the years, she was the most hopeless. That one good scare at the hot water springs should have jolted Ella right out of her morose skin, or at least sent her running home. Going home always helped the confused ones. Ella was certainly confused. Even now, a whole year after the hot springs incident, I could feel it in Ella’s dreams at night as a restlessness that stayed, just under the surface, even in the daylight. I felt immersed in her restlessness like a too-hot bath. I watched Ella go to sushi restaurants and taste nothing of what passed her lips. Or sometimes Ella would watch TV and rub her arms over and over again if Western actors appeared on the screen, until her skin turned red as sunburn.

Ella stayed and stayed even now that her job was almost over and her foreign friends had gone home. What did she think she would find here? Unlike all the others I’d been with over the years, I was uncomfortable around her. I couldn’t summon up my usual rage. I felt only unreasonably annoyed. I wanted to kick her on to an airplane and out of Japan. Part of Ella was lost somewhere, maybe floating like a feather caught in currents of air and tossed in meaningless patterns, yet unable to drop to the ground.

Ella did not quite fit inside her own skin. I felt embarrassed for her, an emotion painfully tangled up in memories of myself before I became a Noppera-bo.

Truthfully, I resented Ella. I wished I could go on to the next one so I wouldn't have to feel this way. Maybe it was the look in Ella's dark eyes, her best feature, or maybe I was tired. These days I constantly had the odor of butterbur blossoms around me, medicinal and bitter. I couldn't leave her alone in her five tatami apartment, rubbing herself raw. We were stuck with each other, for better or worse.

Ella watched the other women in the locker room out of the corner of her eye. Since she moved to Portland, she couldn't get over how blonde everyone was and how fleshy women seemed, tummies and breasts spilling over bras and jeans.

Her own petite body made her invisible in Japan, but here she fell back to feeling inadequate. Two Chinese ladies in the next row of lockers chattered away in Cantonese as they contorted under towels, putting on their swimsuits. The same pale skin, the same dark hair and eyes, the same flat chests as Ella, and yet with their permed hair and long, painted fingernails they made an island of belonging around themselves that excluded her. Ella looked down at her own chewed fingernails and sighed.

She would like a girlfriend to chat with in the gym locker. Being alone exposed you more. But all of the other female teachers at the language school seemed too busy. Standing at the coffee maker in the break room, Ella smiled and nodded at the right places when a teacher talked about her children's school antics or another complained about her boyfriend, but it felt fake. Ella's life felt like acting in a play where she didn't quite know the lines and her timing was off.

Ella was in no hurry to dress, and by the time she was in her clothes, a little girl was the only other person left in the dim room. Ella went to the toilet stalls, making sure not to accidentally meet the girl's eyes in the mirror as she passed. It was easier in these situations to keep to oneself.

When Ella exited the stall, her flush a jarring noise in the heavy silence of the locker room, the girl was carefully combing her long hair with a green comb. She straddled a bench, and bent over so her hair fell down over her face like a wet curtain.

Ella closed her jeans and went to stand in front of the mirror against the far wall. There were dark half-circles under her eyes. She scrounged her own comb out of her bag and started to coax the tangles out of her hair. Masami would be waiting at their apartment, watching a Seinfeld rerun for the hundredth time. He knew American sitcoms better than Ella, yet another thing that people remarked on when they found out he was Japanese and Ella was American. They would get an uncomfortable look in their eyes, as if her ignorance of the last three years of U.S. movies or TV was some unimaginable social gulf they didn't have the time or inclination to bridge.

Ella's hair finally lay sleek against her head. She put the comb back in the bag and turned around to go. That's when she saw the girl's shoulders shaking and noticed her arms were clasped tightly around herself. Curious, Ella took a few steps towards her and the door. Now she heard faint sobs coming from the girl.

"Are you okay?" Ella asked. She stepped nearer to the girl. "Is your mother waiting for you? Should I go get someone?" Ella felt hesitant to get any closer, unsure of how much she could do before transgressing some boundary of politeness or custom she'd lost sight of in her years abroad.

Without lifting her head, the girl spoke in a soft voice. “Maigo desu.” *I’m lost.*

Was she Japanese? “Daijyobu desu yo,” Ella reassured her. Then, “Shall we go up to the front desk?” Ella put a hesitant hand on the girl’s thin shoulder. The girl straightened and her hair fell away from her face.

It was the smooth ovoid of an egg, unmarred by any feature.

“Maigo desu. Kimi mo, watashi mo.”

The words echoed in Ella’s head as she backed out of the room, her mouth dry and her heart pounding. *Lost. Both of us, lost.*

I was pleased. Ella’s hometown was nice. I liked how the buildings had wide sidewalks and how Americans were loud and familiar, filling up silences I had always felt awkward in before. Ella evoked in me less resentment and more exasperated affection today, as if she were a wayward toddler. When I followed Ella down one of the sidewalks crowded with skater-boys, urban mamas, old ladies in furred collars, I could feel myself expanding, as if it were no longer forbidden to inhabit the nooks and crannies of myself long ago abandoned by a spinster daughter.

Last night, after the locker room haunting, Ella’d gone home to Masami in tears. She’d pulled out old yearbooks and photo albums. She finally fell asleep, her fingers still stroking her own, black and white face.

Today I accompanied Ella to a café with steel beams in the ceiling and overstuffed couches arranged in little circles. Ella got a decaf latte and sat down to glance over someone’s leftover newspaper. I felt antsy as the sweet bitterness of Ella’s coffee settled over me.

Ella pulled out a novel in Japanese from her shoulder bag and began reading it, her brow wrinkling in concentration. I sighed and studied the dark circles that were a permanent fixture under Ella’s eyes. Ella’s nasal breathing and constant downward glances didn’t annoy me. I felt tenderness, like a sweet ache beneath my ribs. This poor girl; I’d been tied to her for so long now. When did I come to understand her every flinch and sigh? Would things have turned out differently if I’d had someone like Ella before? I couldn’t remember being able to read my father in this way.

A young stranger leaned across the sofa table behind Ella. “You can read that?” she asked Ella. Her sweatshirt had a local college name on it. Black, square-framed glasses perched on the end of a short, wide nose. She had dark eyes, with a trace of epicanthic fold, and thick hair cut short in a black brush that stood up from her head.

I winced. Ella usually had sarcastic replies ready for comments like that. It was her way of fending off the perils of social contact.

“Not really, I’m just pretending,” said Ella.

“I’m sorry, that sounded completely stupid,” said the woman. “It’s just that I’m in my second year of Japanese at school and I’m still in awe of anyone who knows more than ten kanji.”

Ella looked up at her in surprise.

“I’ve seen you here before, reading Japanese,” the woman added, almost stuttering. “I thought you might have some advice, or something. I mean it’s nice to talk to someone in the same boat.” The woman put a hand with chewed fingernails on the back of the couch.

Ella's looked at the girl's face, and then back down to her Japanese book. She picked a cuticle hanging from her thumb. What was this? Ella looked back up at the girl, eyes making contact for second. Did Ella see something in this girl? Something that kept her from being afraid?

I felt a familiar excitement and tension, the same feeling I'd had as a little girl when my father had called me over to unveil one of his finished carvings. For the first time since I'd become a Noppera-bo, I thought about how my father truly watched his daughter's face. I saw how he breathed a sigh of relief when I smiled at his creations. I had been as blind as Ella.

Ella's surprise turned into several beats of staring past the girl's shoulder. The girl blushed. She lifted her own mug in Ella's direction in a kind of farewell and turned to go. "Sorry," she mumbled.

No, no Ella. Don't leave it like this. I wanted to shake her, as if I could force her to stop building walls by breaking up her insides.

Ella sighed. She flushed red. She took a deep breath. A smile teased at the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah," said Ella in a whisper. "It's nice to talk to someone in the same boat." Now I was confused, because Ella was laughing, but her eyes were shiny with unshed tears.

"Okay," said Ella. And then again, louder, "Okay."

It was an answer to some internal question, but I felt the word like a blow to the sternum. It shook me, loosening things, pushing other things aside, revealing a hard, smooth place. I looked at Ella, poor, hopeless, dear Ella, who could laugh like that, a self-mocking, but forgiving laugh. And the hard place cracked. Inside was a murky slush of memories. I remembered ignoring the morning greeting of the next-door neighbor's son, flustered by his kindness. I remembered looking everywhere but at the customers' eyes as I added up their purchases. And I remembered not going to sit by my father's side as he lingered over his evening tea with a far away look in his eyes.

Inside me, something was melting. The melting feeling, not all that unpleasant, extended to my limbs, my skin wavering and swelling in odd places.

I saw Ella go after the young girl. The two women sat together and compared kanji dictionaries. Ella didn't make an excuse to leave. She stuttered and fidgeted, but she stayed, speaking to the girl, her dark eyes large with her own daring.

The conversation continued as I flowed and rippled with heat. Finally, I burned so brightly, I knew no more. This was strange. This was not how it had ended with the others. The heat grew more intense until I felt incandescent. The patina and burden of years burned away.

Somewhere, I heard Ella laughing.

And here, something emerged from the brightness. It was a face. It had fine, dark eyes, just like Ella's. I reached out and pulled it on like a mask. I reached up to touch the face, and my fingertips felt wetness. I was crying.