Lynn Kutsukake, *The Translation of Love* (2016)

Ever since her sister had gone away, Fumi looked forward to the democracy lunches with a special, ravenous hunger. The American soldiers came to her school once a week with deliveries, and though she never knew what they would bring, it didn’t matter. She wanted it all, whatever it was. Sometimes it was powdered milk and soft white bread as fluffy as cake. Sometimes it was a delicious oily meat called Spam. Occasionally it was peanut butter, a sticky brown paste whose unusual flavor—somehow sweet and salty at the same time—was surprisingly addictive. The lunch supplements supplied by the Occupation forces reminded her of the kind of presents her older sister, Sumiko, used to bring in the days when she still came home. Fumi’s hunger was insatiable, and although she couldn’t have put it in so many words, some part of her sensed that her craving was inseparable from her longing for her sister’s return.

All the pupils knew that the lunches were to help them think clearer, think freer. To become creative and independent. On very rare occasions, hard-boiled eggs were distributed. Eggs were a special treat, high in protein, and while not strictly speaking an American food, they were said to make you democratic faster. They were Fumi’s favorite. Throughout the war and ever since the surrender, fresh eggs had been in extremely short supply in Tokyo, almost impossible to obtain except at great expense in the black market.

She knew today was an egg day because Akiko’s younger brother Masatomi had spotted the army jeep at the end of recess and a GI had given him one. From that moment on it was all Fumi could think of. Under her desk, out of Kondo Sensei’s sight, she cupped her hand in her lap and pretended she could already feel the weight of the egg in her palm. It was nature’s most perfect food, she’d decided, for what else came in its own self-contained package, a smooth thin shell that peeled off in sheets to uncover the slippery skin inside.

The eggs were especially coveted because the Americans never seemed to bring enough to go around. The other items—the milk, the bread, the peanut butter—could easily be stretched so that everyone got something, but an egg was an egg. The elementary grades were served first and inevitably there was a shortfall by the time the older pupils like Fumi, who was twelve and in the first year of middle school, had their turn. On the last egg day, despite jumping up as soon as class was dismissed, she had been pushed out of the way by two larger girls who were determined to beat her to the line. She vowed she wouldn’t make the same mistake again. Strategy was key. This time she planned to use her smaller size to her advantage, to slip between everyone’s legs, crawl on the floor until she was through the door, and then run down the hall to where the makeshift distribution table was set up.

So Fumi simply couldn’t understand why, today of all days, she had gotten stuck with looking after the repat girl.

The new girl had arrived shortly before noon. There was a sharp rap at the door and the principal, who was rarely seen outside the teachers’ office, stepped into the classroom. Everyone automatically stood up, bowed in his direction, and remained standing while he and Kondo Sensei conferred in low whispers. The principal was a short, stout man, not much taller than most of the girls in their all-girls class, and Fumi couldn’t help noticing that he stood on tiptoe when he was speaking into Kondo Sensei’s ear. After this brief consultation, the principal returned to the doorway and reentered, this time followed by a girl who hunched her shoulders like an old woman and hung her head so low no one could see her face. She looked miserable.

“This is your new student,” the principal said aloud. He was speaking to Kondo Sensei but now everyone could hear.

“I see.”

“Shimamura. Aya Shimamura.” He jerked his chin in the girl’s direction. “She’ll start today.”

“Yes, sir. But as the term has already started—”

“Please. Do your best.” The principal turned and walked away. It wasn’t clear to whom this last remark was addressed.

There was a moment of confusion, with some of the girls continuing to bow toward the empty doorway through which the principal had retreated. Kondo Sensei rapped his pointer on the side of his desk.

“Class, rise!” he said, even though everyone was still standing. “Let’s welcome our new classmate, Miss Aya Shimamura.”

They bowed formally, but not quite as low as had been required for the principal. After all, this was only another student.

“As of today, Miss Shimamura will be joining our class. We are very lucky.” He paused as if uncertain how to continue. “She is from America.”

This remark caused an almost electric charge to flow through the classroom.

“From America,” he repeated, his voice stronger. “As you are all aware, the mastery of English is one of the goals of our new middle-school curriculum, and I am sure that Miss Shimamura will be able to make many helpful contributions toward this end.”

He paused and looked from left to right until his eyes fell on the desk Fumi shared with Akiko in the center of the front row. Briskly he tapped his pointer on the side where Akiko sat.

“Right here. Miss Shimamura, you can sit at this desk. Fumi, it will be your responsibility to look after your new seatmate. Take care of her. Make sure she knows what to do.”

Fumi immediately sat up straight. What about Akiko, she wanted to protest. But Akiko had already gathered her books and Kondo Sensei was directing her to a desk at the back. No sooner had everyone gotten settled than a bell began ringing and Kondo Sensei looked at his watch. He sighed and set his pointer lengthwise across his desk.

“Very good. Class dismissed for lunch.”

Fumi was halfway to the door when she heard her name.

“Miss Tanaka!”

The other girls rushed past her and stampeded out of the room.

“Sensei?”

“What are you doing? Come here. Did I not give you a special responsibility?” He tipped his head in Aya’s direction.

“But, Sensei, it’s an egg day.”

“Well, take her with you and help her get something.” He picked up a book from his desk and left.

The new girl was frozen in the same hunched posture she had assumed as soon as she sat down, her forehead within inches of resting on the desk. They were alone in the classroom.

“You heard the teacher. Come on!”

The girl did not move or give any indication that she heard or understood.

“Get up, let’s go! We have to hurry or we’ll miss out.” Fumi leaned over and put her mouth next to Aya’s ear. “What’s wrong with you? Are you deaf? Get up!”

Still the girl didn’t budge. Instead, she seemed to be trying to retract her head into her neck like a turtle. Something about that ridiculous action infuriated Fumi and she grabbed the sleeve of Aya’s blouse. “Get up!” Fumi tugged once, twice, and on the third tug the thin material tore right off at the shoulder. For the first time the girl came to life. She burst into tears and ran out of the room.

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“How’s your new friend?” Akiko’s laugh sounded a bit malicious.

“Yeah, the repat.” Tomoko snickered.

“How should I know?” Fumi muttered.

“My mother says the imin shouldn’t have come back. The immigrants eat all our food. There’s not enough to go around.” Tomoko spoke with authority.

“Stupid imin,” Fumi said. “She can’t even talk.”

“Do you think she knows Japanese?”

“She can’t even move, never mind talk.”

“Stupid. Baka.”

“Imin no baka.”

Fumi was beginning to feel a bit better. She’d debated running after Aya, but hunger led her to the distribution table, just in case something was left. As she expected, everything was gone. By the time she joined her classmates, they had finished eating and were gathered under the shade of the big oak tree in the far corner of the schoolyard. Her own lunch, minus the hard-boiled egg she had so looked forward to, had been a millet “rice ball,” which she’d had to eat very fast because she was late. She could still feel it stuck like a hard stone in the middle of her chest just below her breastbone. It hurt a bit when she laughed. Akiko and Tomoko were laughing, too, and didn’t seem to hold it against her that she had to sit next to the imin. The three girls joined hands to form a circle and swung their arms back and forth, higher and higher, acting as childishly as the elementary pupils with whom they shared the yard.

Just as Fumi was starting to get a bit light-headed, she felt Akiko and Tomoko let go of her hands and in the spot where they had been standing Kondo Sensei appeared. He stepped directly in front of Fumi and slapped her hard on the cheek with his open palm. Fumi felt the entire schoolyard go quiet and still. Her cheek burned. Although she’d been disciplined many times at school before, this was the first time by Kondo Sensei, the new teacher.

“What did you do to Aya Shimamura!” he shouted. His face was mottled purple right up to his receding hairline, and his thick glasses had slid to the end of his nose.

“She wouldn’t move.” Fumi began to cry.

“Is that any reason to tear her clothes! How am I going to explain this to the principal? I had to send her home. On her first day!”

There was an audible gasp from Akiko, Tomoko, and the other pupils who were nearby. “I didn’t mean to.” She could hardly get the words out between sobs. “She wouldn’t get up. I missed my egg.”

“Nobody cares about that.” Kondo Sensei turned to the other students. “What are you staring at? Go back to the classroom. Immediately! Go!”

The girls began running away before he had even finished talking.

“As for you, Fumi Tanaka, you stay here. Stand facing this tree and don’t move until I come back to get you. Do you understand?”

At that, he turned and marched back to the main entranceway, little puffs of dust rising behind his heels.

Fumi kept her head hung low for the rest of the afternoon just in case Kondo Sensei was looking out the window to check up on her. The sun was warm, flies buzzed around her head, and the sand in the schoolyard blew up into her eyes. Her cheek stung for a long time, a prickly tingle like millions of tiny pins. To distract herself, she tried pretending that each tingle was a grain of white rice, that she was being showered mercilessly with buckets of rice. But it didn’t really help. So instead she thought about how the shiny oval bald spot on the back of Kondo Sensei’s head looked just like an egg. This made her feel much better.

It was all the fault of the stupid new girl. Why had Fumi gotten stuck with her? Why hadn’t Aya been paired with Sanae? Skinny, ugly Sanae who might be the smartest in the class but who had bowed legs and unsightly blotches on her face. Or Tomoko who was the prettiest, no one could argue with that, but who had a stuck‑up nature. For that matter, why not Akiko? At least her father had a proper job. In her mind, Fumi went through the list of all the things she was not. Not the prettiest, not the most popular, not the best at sports, certainly not the one with money. She knew that to most people she was just an average ordinary girl. But her sister had always told her she was special, and whether it was true or not, Fumi missed hearing it. She missed Sumiko and wished she knew how to find her and make her come home.