

## Filling up with Sugar

By Yuten SAWANISHI

The vagina was the first part of her mother's body that turned to sugar – probably because it was the one organ for which her mother no longer had any use. Yukiko had never asked directly, but she had never sensed a male presence about her mother after her father had died early in Yukiko's first year of high school. Her mother must have passed through menopause long before now, too. The uterus and the dark channel that extended from it had quietly dried up and changed to sugar.

A vague and childish thought had crossed Yukiko's mind long ago, when she first learned that an illness existed in which the cells of the body turn to sugar: *Filling up with sugar – what a lovely way to die!* She imagined it must feel something like Hansel and Gretel's joy on discovering the gingerbread house combined with the witch's elation at the appearance of her long-awaited victims.

Yukiko once took a day off to meet her mother downtown. Ordinarily, her mother would visit one shop after another without a break, but that day she complained of an odd feeling in her lower abdomen, and the two had withdrawn to a cafe to rest.

Neither of them had realized at the time what changes were occurring deep inside her mother's body. But the illness was incurable, which meant that even if they had become aware of it at that stage, the most they could have done was face the impending threat of death that much earlier.

But six months after the shopping trip, Yukiko learned that it was her own mother being ravaged by the 'lovely' illness. She found herself unable to form an image in her mind on hearing the news, as if she were watching an out-of-focus movie. The doctor explained that the disease advanced slowly, beginning with such unused

parts of the body as the uterus or the ear canals. Only then did she picture her mother on their shopping day, and like a projectionist who rushes to correct the blurred image on the screen, she began to see it all with vivid clarity.

Yukiko decided to devote herself to caring for her mother, and submitted her resignation to the tourist bureau where she had worked as a temporary employee for seven years since graduating from community college. She did this out of neither sentiment nor self-sacrifice. She had recently failed the exam that would have made her a full-fledged staff member, and when she weighed her father's insurance money against the income she would receive if she remained in her job, the scales did not incline significantly in either direction. The insurance money was not enough to continue supporting her mother in her old age, but it was plenty to keep two women alive for two years or so. Her boss advised against making any sudden moves, but before Yukiko could decide whether or not to tell him about her mother's illness, he assured her that his reason for failing her had not been to prompt her resignation. Such crass considerations hardly weighed against the most important thing: knowing that her mother had perhaps two years to live. That took care of any lingering attachment she might have had for the job and made her glad she had not said anything about her mother.

Moving out of her apartment, Yukiko took a train from the city and transferred to the single-track electric line that brought her to the country town of her youth. She had not announced the time of her arrival, but her mother was there to greet her partway, wearing a black coat and standing against a utility pole, alone and still. After an uncertain interval between the time they spotted each other and the moment they were face-to-face, her mother embraced her with a firm 'Welcome home.' 'I'm glad to be back,' Yukiko responded, putting her arms around her mother gently as if drawing toward herself a delicate creation of spun sugar. The sour body odour she caught from her mother's neck was faintly sweet.

'What are you doing here, standing by the road like this?' Yukiko asked, less in hopes of an answer than to comfort her mother, as if to say, 'I'm here now. You won't be alone any more.'

'I wanted to welcome you,' her mother said without further explanation. Together, they began their slow walk home.

The house was shockingly neat. It felt hushed and empty, like a new house whose owners have not had time to buy all their furnishings. When Yukiko openly expressed surprise, her mother explained, almost apologetically, that she had been slowly getting rid of things while still able to move. The little house had been handed down, with repeated renovation, from her grandfather's time, and now it too seemed to be on the verge of taking its final breath. Gone were the amateur watercolours and the decorative cards autographed by favourite mystery writers. In their place on the walls hung family photographs that had always been kept in albums.

'The place seems more cheerful this way, don't you think?' her mother said, now with a touch of pride. 'Photos will be easier for you all to divide up later.'

Yukiko recognized most of the photographs, but there were two less familiar ones in the bedroom: pictures from her parents' wedding. Both were in lovely white frames, the one on the left a group shot of the extended family, and the one on the right the bride and groom: she in pure white, and he in traditional *haori* and *hakama*. Yukiko's mother looked very happy, in contrast to the rather tense expression on her father's face. Yes, this was her father as she remembered him.

'We had our troubles, but this was the beginning of my happiness.'

Yukiko turned away from the pictures, not sure she could stand any more shy pronouncements from her mother. This had always been a Japanese bedroom, with futon spread on the matted floor at night, but now an electric reclining bed stood in the very centre of the room.

Her mother became confined to that bed, as she had feared, not long after Yukiko's arrival. Perhaps she had been willing herself to remain active until now and had finally reached her limits.

In this progressive illness, systemic saccharification syndrome, after the unused internal organs turn to sugar, the skin (more precisely, the dermis quickly followed by the epidermis) changes also. The cells can be clearly seen beneath the surface of fully transformed skin, and these cause the patient terrible pain whenever the skin happens to peel off or bump against objects. After a bath, especially, the sugar begins to melt, leaving white wounds open and exposed. Yukiko quickly gave up the idea of bathing her mother, resorting instead to gentle wipe-downs.

By the time the epidermis turns entirely to sugar, the saccharification process of the lower half of the body is complete. Most patients can only lie in bed, waiting for the approach of death. The one saving grace is that the disease affects the nerves as well, which alleviates the pain.

Yukiko might spend hours at her mother's side, but she could not suffer the pain in her mother's place or take on even a part of it for her. Here her mother was, losing one physical function after another and turning into sucrose, while Yukiko felt only frustration at her inability to touch her mother's suffering.

In Yukiko's presence, however, her mother did not complain. Had her own husband been the one in attendance, she might have been able to voice her pain more openly, but to Yukiko she said only, 'I'm so glad you're here for me.' Yukiko pretended not to notice the note of apology in her words.

Yukiko's two elder sisters rarely made sick calls, but her mother acted unconcerned. Both sisters lived in Tokyo suburbs, and both had their hands full with work, childcare and looking after their husbands. They had already left the family by the time their father died and Yukiko and her mother moved into their grandfather's little house. And so, the few times they came to visit, they would not linger in this place for which they evidenced little attachment. Besides, they had always been closer to their father than their mother. Nevertheless, on weekends, they would phone Yukiko to ask how their mother was doing.

Couldn't Yukiko put their mother into some facility that was not so hard to get to? they would ask, but Yukiko let these suggestions pass in silence. 'If you ever need

anything, just let me know. I've got a little something put away,' each sister would say in the same tone as if she had worked it out with the other one. It was more than Yukiko could bear; she would hang up without a word. Her sisters were like each other in every way – both had their mother's soft white skin and open features, her edgy speech patterns.

Their mother wanted to see her grandchildren, but the sisters never brought them, perhaps afraid that a child might accidentally injure her brittle sugar flesh or say something cruel. Only once after a visit did Yukiko catch her mother grumbling about the eldest sister's coldness.

Now and then Yukiko would find herself deep in thought as she studied her sleeping mother's face. What were those clear, youthful eyes of hers doing behind their still-lovely lids – chasing after the remnants of her memories? She raised a little prayer that her mother might – if only for a short time – fall under the spell of some beautiful recollection.

Often, too, she recalled the time between high school and her graduation from community college when she and her mother were the only two living in this house. Because her sisters had already left, and her mother held multiple part-time jobs, she always came home to an empty house. She still had vivid recollections of the gloomy chill of the place, its only light the few rays entering from the windows, and of how unsettled her feelings remained until she had gone from room to room pressing switches, ending with the round white lamp on the living room ceiling. This memory overlapped with another memory of the living room, which was where her mother would place calls to her sisters when she was worried about them in college: then Yukiko would often turn away and climb the stairs to her own unlit room.

Yukiko took her mother out in a wheelchair from time to time. Following the doctor's advice, she had bent her mother's legs into a sitting position while they were still moveable, and waited for them to harden. She would wrap her mother in a blanket and carry her to the wheelchair, taking great care to prevent any shocks from cracking the saccharified skin. Her mother's body felt strangely light. The life

inside it had been gradually changing into sugar. 'You're so light,' Yukiko said. 'Like a little girl.' She immediately regretted the careless remark.

Yukiko handled her mother with a care that no one could imitate. Not even the prince who found Snow White asleep from her poison apple could have matched the gentle way she assisted her mother so as to prevent cracking.

She had to exercise great caution with the room's humidity. If the air became too dry, the surface of the sugar became easily cracked, and once that happened, the saccharified skin would never heal. The transparent surface layer, which had shown the crimson dermis beneath, changed to a milky white. Whenever she saw such an apparent impact wound on her mother's skin, Yukiko would blame herself for having caused irreparable damage, often remaining in an agitated state until well after she was under the covers of the futon beside her mother's bed. How could she have let such a thing happen?

Aside from brief shopping trips in the neighbourhood, Yukiko left the house only two days a month for meetings of a reading group. At first her sole reason for leaving her mother with a helper for the day was to collect medicine from a town two hours away by train, but the helper became concerned for Yukiko and suggested that, for a change of pace, she attend one of the hospital's caregiving workshops or support groups. Yukiko resisted at first, but when even her mother began pushing her to do it, she decided to ask for details at the hospital's reception desk. They gave her a sheet of paper with a calendar of events for caregivers.

Few items on the list caught her eye – most were things like diaper changing or simple massage – but there was one that did arouse her interest: a group that read books aloud. The listing in the little square on the calendar gave no information beyond a book's title and author and the location of the meetings, which were intended for those engaged in caring for victims of her mother's disease, plus the twice-monthly meetings coincided exactly with the days that Yukiko had to visit the hospital.

The reading group met on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month at 2:30 p.m. Meetings were scheduled to end at four o'clock, but attendees could leave early if necessary, and extension was also a possibility. The important thing was that participants derive some satisfaction from the meetings and that they regain some of their zest for life.

The gatherings were rather odd. Yukiko came to her first one with some misgivings, imagining that people would take turns reading aloud from the assigned book. Instead she found a number of armchairs arranged in a circle so that participants could hear each other clearly, and people listening quietly to the presenter. People did not have to read the entire book in advance. They could just read passages they happened to like, and if they didn't find any such passages, that was all right, too.

Each participant had his or her own way of reading the chosen passage aloud. Some read with powerful intonations that suggested they had practised the section repeatedly. Others would stumble over the pronunciation of certain characters; the members would encourage them and reward them with extra-loud applause at the end. Some read with resonant tones that told you the person must have been a drama club member in college, while others mumbled so badly in embarrassment that you couldn't tell what section they were reading. All briefly offered their impressions of the passages they had read before resuming their seats, and applause followed each presentation. Some chatting would begin after a reading, and when the remarks ran out, another person would read.

Books read at the meetings included such immediately relevant works as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, which traced the psychological changes of dying people, and Rebecca Brown's *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary*, which was based on the author's own experience as a caregiver, but also books with sugar or sweetness in the title such as Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*, Yoko Ogawa's *Sugar Time*, and Mari Mori's *Room of Sweet Nectar*.

Yukiko at first looked forward to the others' earnest readings, but gradually she too began to find pleasure in raising her own voice. Once she had chosen a passage,

she would read precisely that, neither more nor less. This gave her the same kind of pleasure as wiping her mother's hands, carefully, one finger at a time.

The book that Yukiko liked best was *An Invisible Sign of My Own* by Aimee Bender. It tells the story of Mona, who started 'to quit' things from the time her father fell ill when she was ten years old, but who now, at the age of twenty, is able to get something she truly wants for the first time in her life. The thing is an axe. Yukiko read the scene aloud to herself over and over.

'Will you look at this! I said out loud to the world. Just what I've always wanted!'

As if raising the sharp axe, Yukiko tightened her grip on the book as she read. It made her strangely calm whenever she did this. (She was also fond of a passage six pages later, but that one she could not bring herself to read aloud.)

She made it a habit to read the assigned book while her mother was sleeping. If the television was on, she would lower the volume and pick up where she had left off. She and her mother had a tacit understanding that she would not turn the television off at such times. Sleep liberated her mother from the reality of her saccharification and gave her a moment's peace, but that moment had to end. Her mother had to wake and realize that her interrupted world was still there, unchanged. Television was good for masking this cruel moment of confusion. Television gently told them that her mother had not moved in her sleep, and it let them know, too, how much time had gone by. 'Awake?' Yukiko would ask when she heard the change in her mother's breathing, by which time she would have stashed the bookmarked volume beneath the foot of the bed out of her mother's view.

She would wipe the sweat that had oozed from her mother's saccharified skin in her sleep, daubing with enormous care to prevent the epidermis, which had now turned almost entirely to sugar, from cracking or from melting in the sweat and peeling off. She worked with unbroken attention, allowing not the slightest bit of dirt to escape the movement of her hands. It was almost as if she believed that, by so doing, she could restore her mother's skin to its original whiteness and lustre. Even after the job was done, Yukiko would continue staring at her mother's skin

until she was satisfied that she had missed nothing. She always made sure to use a towel with the cleanest possible texture lest the towel itself shed fibres that would adhere to the skin.

The other members of the reading group had family members who were either visiting the hospital regularly or had been admitted there.

The discussions were lively. All participants would be losing family members before long, and talking about it helped them to prepare for it emotionally. They were resigned to the fact that they could do nothing to postpone the deaths of their family members, but there was no telling exactly how or when any single loved one's death would arrive. The readings themselves often prompted discussions of death, more often with respect to characters in a book than anyone's actual family members.

Yukiko could not forget the story of a traffic accident told by one of the women participants. It had involved her husband's uncle, whose disease was well advanced. The family had gone to visit him and were strolling with him in his wheelchair when the one pushing the chair took his hands off at the top of a slope. It happened in an instant when everyone was looking away from the uncle. The tires smoothly and quickly traced the curve of the hill, plunging downward and flinging the uncle onto the road in the path of a car that happened along at that exact moment. The whole family watched, mesmerized, as the uncle's body was shattered from the impact. The pieces of sugar flesh soaked up the blood, turning the colour of death before their eyes, then quickly dissolved into the puddled blood to form a red mud patch on the road.

From that day onward, whenever she took her mother out for a walk, her hands would sweat on the wheelchair handles. Caught in the narrow space between a death that was sure to come soon and a death that could happen at any moment, Yukiko was determined to get a firm grip on her mother's life and not let go.

One time, someone talked about a human trafficker who bought and sold tiny children afflicted with the disease. No one responded well to the story, and for

several awkward minutes, the group almost seemed to be offering a silent prayer for the victimized children. Some members might even have been hearing the children's cries during the tense, wordless interval. There had never been anything like this before, but something very different occupied Yukiko's mind while it was happening. The previous night, she had found it impossible to resist a certain impulse that came over her as she lay on the floor beside her mother. She crept to the foot of the bed and gazed at her mother's toes, which she had just finished wiping. Fully transformed into sugar, the tips softly inhaled the moonlight spilling in through the pale green curtains, glowing faintly as if to hint at their presence in the darkness. All five toes were there where they had always been, beautifully aligned on each foot, from the rounded, drop-like big toe on the inside, down to the small toe on the outside. Unlike those of patients Yukiko had glimpsed in their hospital rooms, her mother's feet were not missing any parts. Neither had they taken on that milky opacity but instead wore the light with the dull sheen of a crystal.

After checking to be sure that her mother was asleep, Yukiko softly extended her tongue, over which spread the sensation of the foot's melting. Was it the sugar that made her tongue feel hot, or the perversion? She was dreamily recalling the sweet sensation when the topic seemed to swerve in a new direction and she found herself amid the readers' group once again.

The silence had given way to a heated exchange of opinions regarding ways to memorialize the dead. One person was saying she had heard that some people wrap the corpse in silver foil and slowly roast it, afterwards letting the melted sugar harden and using the crystals as amulets.

Such injury to the dead was out of the question, someone immediately objected, but since cremation was no different in its inflicting injury on the corpse, that must not have been the point of the criticism. Which was the more direct confrontation with death – burying the corpse in the earth, or making it into crystals and carrying it around? And what was a funeral, anyhow – a service for the dead or a ceremony for the living? Some people delivered cogent, well-argued opinions, while others

tried to mow down their opponents' views with emotion. Their confusion appeared to Yukiko as evidence that they were not fully prepared to accept death.

'I gather you have decided how you will handle your loved one's memorial services,' a man named Kajiura said to Yukiko after the end of the meeting. He always wore a somewhat oversized blue jacket, and he apparently owned a delivery company. Yukiko knew his name and face because he was one of the very few men in the group. She was doubly surprised to be addressed – and by a man – but she smiled back without hesitation.

'No, what makes you think so?'

'Because you didn't say anything on the subject.'

'Well, that's true, but I wasn't the only one.'

'No, but you were the only one looking straight at every speaker.'

'...'

'I was hoping to hear what you had to say.'

'...'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry.'

Kajiura bowed deeply to Yukiko and hurried away. She liked his baggy shoulders, which seemed to go with his polite manner. She watched him shrink into the distance and disappear.

From then on, Yukiko made sure to take a place near Kajiura so as to avoid sitting opposite him, uneasy lest he see inside her again. She had not noticed before, but his style of reading was different from the others'. Not that it was especially polished, but the voice with which he carefully read the text aloud could make a very different impression depending on the place of the listener. She never felt drawn to him when he sat across from her, but at his side she became aware of soft

reverberations from his deep voice that seemed to caress her ears, and the closer she sat, the nicer the reverberations felt. This was the voice of a man who handled objects with care and delivered them reliably, she thought.

Before she knew it, the seat beside Kajiura had become reserved for her. He would speak to her in the natural course of things while they were putting the chairs away after meetings, and on several occasions he invited her for a chat at a nearby café. At such times they talked only about their impressions of the meeting or their family members' medical conditions or Kajiura's work, but never anything as involved as he had first broached to her.

One evening, a call came from him. He had made a delivery nearby, he said, and wondered if she might have time for a chat. Because she never left the house for anything but shopping and the reading group, she hesitated at first, and then asked him to wait for her at the station. There was still time before she had to prepare dinner, and her mother's condition was stable. When she announced that she would be stepping out for a moment, her mother gave her a questioning glance but only said, 'Don't be gone too long' with her usual smile.

She applied a touch of make-up to her face, but she had not bothered to fix her hair since morning, and now it refused to behave. Yukiko borrowed the white knit hat that her mother wore on their walks. She felt like a little girl excited to be going out to play while still somehow protected by her mother. Kajiura was waiting at the station, wearing his blue jacket. They drove to the Jazzlin Café near her old high school. The neighborhood was exactly as it had always been, and the café's owner was still going strong. Yukiko chattered cheerfully about her memories from high school, and Kajiura joined in with impressions of the neighborhood he had noticed along the way.

She was much later getting home than she had planned to be, and the surrounding area was pitch dark. The house felt cold inside. She must have forgotten to close the small kitchen window she had opened for ventilation. Her mother was probably asleep – the place was utterly still. As Yukiko pressed the switch creating a circle of light in the darkness, she ventured a soft 'I'm home' and heard a voice

calling her name. It was a strangled, trembling cry. She hurried down the hall, switching on lights as she went. When she turned on the bedroom light, she let out a scream. Her mother was swarming with ants, unable to shake them off.

Yukiko swept the ants from her mother's body and crushed them when they hit the floor. She worked with feverish urgency. She had been given repeated warnings about this in summer and had kept fierce guard against such an eventuality. But this was winter! There shouldn't be ants now! She smashed them with her fists, frantic, not caring that their crushed corpses were sticking to the straw floor mats. She went on crushing them one by one, as if by so doing she could be forgiven for having taken her eyes off her mother, or she could stop death from carrying her mother away bit by bit.

It was after midnight by the time she finished crushing every single ant. She then set about picking off the little ant corpses that littered her mother's body and wiping the indentation that each had left behind. They were everywhere – in the grooves beside her nose, on her cheeks, the back of her neck, her upper arms, between her toes. Yukiko learned afterward at the hospital that these were a species of ant that had been introduced from Argentina which remained active in winter. How frightening it must have been to have thousands of ants crawling over her and to be able to do nothing with her immovable body but lie there and bear it! Her flowing tears had eroded little lines in the saccharified skin leading away from the outer corners of her eyes. Yukiko did all she could to prevent her tears from falling on her mother's body. 'I'm sorry, so sorry,' she said over and over as she worked.

Yukiko stopped attending the readers' group after that, returning straight from the hospital instead. Her mother soon lost her voice, and then all expression in her face. The endless tension of the days that followed was almost unbearable. Yukiko felt as if she were slowly moving through a dense fog, knowing all the while that a steep cliff lay before her yet having no choice but to keep moving toward it, feeling a chill of fear whenever her feet slipped or she bumped into a tree.

The day her mother's eyes ceased to open, Yukiko set about her morning duties on the assumption that her mother was still asleep. Even after she had finished a cup of fruit yogurt for breakfast and hung the laundry out to dry, there was still no sign her mother's eyes were going to open, and she finally realized that they would never open again. The doctor had told her that her mother's eyes would continue roaming through a pure white visual field for two or three days after the lids became sealed. The saccharified skin would then become moist, and when it began to dry again, that would indicate that her mother's life had ended. At some point in that interval, the disease reached the heart and the entire body would have changed to sugar. All Yukiko could do was pray that her mother would not suffer. She stayed by her side, holding her hand, never letting go.

When all water was gone from her mother's body and Yukiko had checked repeatedly to be sure that the disease had run its course, she telephoned Kajiura. He sounded concerned that she might have stopped attending the meetings because of him.

'Our next book will be Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping -*'

'My mother died,' Yukiko said, quietly but clearly.

'Oh. I'm -'

But before he could finish expressing his condolences, Yukiko said there was something she wanted him to bring her.

The day of the wake, the Shinkansen train schedule was thrown off by a major snowstorm, and her sisters arrived late. This time they brought their children and husbands to see their mother wrapped – quite literally, wrapped, legs and arms removed – in her white shroud. It was the perfect funeral garb for her, fully crystalized as she was now into white sugar. The two sisters held each other, shedding tears, to see their mother so totally transformed. The children seemed to understand that they should not be doing anything playful, but they peered into

the coffin with obvious fascination. The sisters' husbands were discussing the funeral arrangements. Kajiura was among the mourners.

'You must be hungry,' Yukiko said to the children, leading them into the kitchen. She moved aside the cardboard carton that Kajiura had brought, now empty and placed by the door, and she sat the children down at the table where she and her mother had always eaten dinner together. She slowly stirred the contents of the larger pot on the stove, revealing red azuki beans in the thick, black liquid and spreading a sweet aroma through the kitchen. Rice flour dumplings floated to the surface of the other pot as it boiled. She swished some dumplings through cold water to firm them up, dropped them into the first pot, stirred them once, and then served them, in the sweet azuki soup, to the children.

'Yum! Zenzai!' they cried.

Yukiko had made the zenzai for tonight's family dinner but she spooned some into a lacquer bowl for herself and sat down with the children. It suddenly occurred to her that she had not eaten anything since her mother died. The sweet aroma sent a painful spasm through her empty stomach. Her hands trembled as she lifted her bowl, but she knew she must not spill a drop of the precious liquid: her mother was dead now. The tears she had been holding back poured out of her. The rough skins of the azuki beans from Kajiura grazed her tongue as she tasted the warm sugar that was filling her stomach.

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