

Lauren Rowse

Professor Miyake

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SILENCE

A short story based on the novel *Out* by Natsuo Kirino

Nobuki stared at her. How could she be so clueless? So self-absorbed? His face stung from her slap as he stomped away towards the bathroom. She would never know how much it hurt him. Yes, he acknowledged that elbowing the woman aside was probably the wrong way to treat his mother. But could he really consider her his mother anymore? No, of course not. Years had passed since she had abandoned him, since she had proven that she didn't care. Masako didn't seem to care about his father either, but then again, neither did he. At least he and Yoshiki shared a common ground; they were the only two who would ever understand how it felt to be left by Masako. Masako, who had promised to care for them and protect them, would only ever protect herself. She might still live in the same house, but she'd left their home long ago. Although he tried to keep her at as much distance as possible, he couldn't help noticing that something had changed recently. It wasn't as if she'd been behaving particularly strangely, she just looked at him differently. She looked at Yoshiki differently too. There was somehow more focus behind her eyes, more confusion. It was as though she was suddenly seeing them again, as if the barrier by which the three had been simultaneously distanced and stabilized had begun to crack. Ever since the morning she'd left unusually early for work, things had been different.

He'd been watching TV on the couch, some show about revamping old cars. It wasn't holding his attention, but at least it was mind numbing. The phone rang, and he heard Masako answer. More than that, her tone of voice indicated a genuine interest, something he hadn't heard in years. What was she saying? She was offering help, asking if anyone else had seen anything. Seen what? It didn't matter. That bitch could muster up some interest in the life of whoever was on the other line, but she couldn't find any interest in her own family. Nobuki clicked off the TV and pushed himself off the couch. With a quick glare in Masako's direction, he clambered up the stairs making as much noise as possible. She didn't notice. He sat down at his desk and lit a cigarette. "I'm leaving for work. Make sure you turn off the gas," he heard her yell up the stairs. It was earlier than usual, and she still had that tone in her voice... when was the last time he'd heard it?

Nobuki had been expelled his freshman year of high school. Some of the boys in the popular crowd had asked him to do them a little favor: just hang on to some tickets for them. He'd barely stuffed them in his pocket when a hand landed forcefully on his shoulder. He would always remember the unforgiving glare of the administrator as he was accused of trying to sell rave tickets at school. He'd tried to explain that he just found them and picked them up, but it didn't matter what he said. When he'd gotten home and tried to explain it to Masako and Yoshiki, they were quiet and looked at him as though they were ashamed. That's when he knew it had never mattered what he said—not at school, not at home. It didn't matter that the tickets weren't his, and it didn't matter whether or not his parents believed him. Masako's cold eyes had stared at him that night, and then they had stopped seeing him all together. If she wasn't willing to listen to him, why should he even bother to speak? He hadn't spoken a word to her or Yoshiki since that night. When he had stopped speaking, she'd stopped caring. She'd just let him vanish completely; as though she'd never cared that he'd ever been there. That's what stung the most.

Now she was standing in the kitchen and he could overhear her telling Yoshiki, "I give up, it's hopeless." Huh, newsflash. As if she hadn't given up years ago. Why did she bother telling Yoshiki anyway? Yoshiki probably cared about him less that she did—if that was

even possible—Yoshiki never even looked at him. But maybe that was better; it was better to be completely ignored than to receive only judgment. At any rate, he had to be at work in twenty. He slipped off his baggy shorts and pulled up his work pants. They were khaki and tattered, with some hard splotches of fabric where plaster had splattered on him. He liked these pants. They were trashed but functional, and proved to the world that he knew what it meant to do an honest day's work. Sure, it was only a part time job, but it was something. He earned his own money, and it got him out of the house. Hopefully he'd make enough one day to get out of here for good.

Nobuki stood in the hallway in front of Masako's door. He'd just gotten home from work, and apparently Masako hadn't heard the door: she was on the phone, speaking with intensity again. "It was a huge mess, but in the end we got it down to little pieces. The three of us divided up the bags and we'll dump them tomorrow morning. It's Thursday, and that's garbage day most places." What was she saying? Got what into little pieces? Nobuki had a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. "We used extra-strong bags, so I don't think we'll have any leaks," she said, combing her fingers through her hair. "We'll try to be as discreet as possible." He heard her set down the phone, and let out a sigh as she crumpled onto her bed. Nobuki backed away from the door as silently as possible; he had a feeling that was a conversation he wasn't supposed to hear. He quietly went back out the front door and stepped into the muggy heat of the late afternoon. He walked down to the convenience store, trying to sort through what he'd just heard. Ok, so something messy and leaking was in little pieces, three of them were involved, and they have to be discreet about throwing it away... Even in the heat, he shivered a bit before he dove into the air-conditioned comfort of the store.

Glancing around the aisles, nothing looked particularly appetizing. But then he saw them—Miyoshi Foods, Higashi Yamato Factory take-out meals. The only thing Masako ever did for them was prepare dinner, but look, even this little illustration of attention wasn't just for them. He could buy her meals packaged in plastic, prepared by routine without her

thinking of him at all—just like home. He picked up a box: “Lunch of Champions.” Smirking, he turned towards the counter and bought the box.

When he got home, he set the box on the counter, crashed on the couch and began flipping through channels. After a couple hours, Masako still hadn’t come out to start dinner. She must have been asleep: figures—she wasn’t even going to make dinner tonight. Figures, the day he goes out of his way to show that she’s useless to him is the day she doesn’t even try. Disgruntled, Nobuki picked up his box and sat down at the table. He opened his chopsticks and picked up a piece of the meat. A bit of sauce dripped onto the rice and he was reminded of the conversation he’d overheard—“I don’t think we’ll have any leaks…” He began to feel nauseous as he stared at the dripping brown strip hanging between his chopsticks. Just then he heard Masako’s door open, and he shoved the bite into his mouth. His face hardened and he tried to stare blankly straight ahead.

“Did you get anything for me?” she asked him. Yes, this was for her. He stared down at his food, but watching the sauce spread across the bottom of the box brought back the sickening feeling of a moment before. Now he wanted her to leave. He didn’t need her, couldn’t she see that? She’d given up the one thing she’d done to support him and then had the gall to ask if he’d taken it upon himself to start looking after her. But there was something more than that, something about her presence today that made his back stiffen and his teeth clench. “Is it good?” she asked. He set down his chopsticks, and stared forward again. The food was utterly unappetizing. She picked up the lid and read the cover. Maybe she’d get the joke, maybe she wouldn’t. It didn’t matter anymore.

She sat down at the table in front of him and stared at him. He couldn’t look at her; he’d rather go back to the gooey chunks of meat in the plastic in front of him. She had that look on her face: the one where it looked like she was trying to read him. He dug into his meal, and after a few minutes, she left. As soon as she was out of sight, he picked up his boxed lunch and threw it into the garbage.

There'd been a gruesome murder. Body parts had been found in plastic bags all over the city. Nobuki had seen it on all the news stations, and the story had been making headlines in the paper for a few days now. The wife of the victim worked with Masako, and now there was an officer questioning Masako on their living room couch. Nobuki was standing behind a doorway, listening in. Since he hadn't come down for breakfast that morning, she'd probably forgotten he was even home. She was talking about Wednesday, the day the victim had disappeared. That was also the day, Nobuki recalled, that Masako had changed: the day he'd overheard her talking on the phone with a tone of interest. Who had she been talking to? He closed his eyes and tried to remember back. He didn't remember overhearing a name. What if it was Yayoi? Then he remembered the more recent conversation: "It was a mess, but we got it down into little pieces... we used extra-strong bags, so I don't think we'll have any leaks." The words raced through his mind like an ignited fuse.

"Did you talk to Yamamoto-san that morning?" he heard the policeman ask.

"No, not after we said good-bye at the factory." As soon as the words had left her lips, the spark reached the bomb.

"Didn't she call that night?" Nobuki said, stepping out from behind the doorway as calmly as he was able. Masako's jaw dropped. The officer asked who he was, to which she responded, and then asked when Yayoi had called. Masako continued to stare at him. What was that glinting in her eyes? Shock? Anger? He wasn't sure, but it was only a moment until she regained her composure and spoke again.

"It's been a long time since I've heard him say anything." Blaming him again. He was sure now: Masako was involved in the murder, and Yayoi was no helpless widow either. He frowned at this disturbing realization and turned to leave. The officer called after him.

"Nothing!" yelled Nobuki, and he slammed the door behind him as he left the house. Out in the heat of the day, Nobuki stormed down the street. Was he angry? Frightened? He wasn't sure; he just knew he had to get away. He'd been walking for almost an hour when he finally stopped. He sat down on the curb of an unfamiliar street and put his head in his

hands. Masako had cut up a body. Just as she'd placed little slivers of meat in nicely plastic-wrapped containers to be shipped across the country, she had neatly wrapped slivers of man up in plastic bags and hid them all over the city. He felt sick, but once the nausea subsided he sat up. What did he do? Did he tell the police? What was that going to help, since the man was already dead? Besides, who would believe him?

Why would she do this?

Nobuki took a big breath and felt droplets of sweat beginning to roll down his forehead. He'd do nothing. He'd stay away from the woman as much as he could, and he'd say nothing. Just as she hadn't been a voice to proclaim his innocence, he wouldn't be the voice to proclaim her guilt. She got herself into this: let her get herself out, if she could. Confused and shaken, Nobuki began to walk home.

Days passed, and Nobuki avoided Masako as much as possible. No more eavesdropping, no more unnecessary contact, nothing. He didn't want to know anything else; he didn't want to know anything at all. The only time he saw her was at meals, and he had started skipping breakfast regularly and getting more take-out for lunch. Masako didn't seem to have noticed. So much the better. Now he was standing outside the front door, which Masako had chained shut. He felt like he was bathing in his own perspiration and jabbed his finger at the intercom buzzer. When Masako greeted him at the door he shoved past her, sprinting up the stairs. Safe in the confines of his room, he lit a cigarette. "You're on your own for dinner tonight," he heard Masako call. Fine. The less he had to see her, the better. He glared angrily out of the window as he watched her get into her car. As he watched her tiny figure yank open her car door, he began to think on the absurdity of his suspicions. Maybe he'd misheard her on the phone, or maybe she had been talking about meat products at the factory. Yes, the tiny woman may have been heartless, but Nobuki was pretty sure that even she couldn't have been involved with a murder so gruesome.

He had promised himself that he wouldn't listen to Masako any more, in any context. But when he heard her strike up a conversation with Yoshiki, curiosity overcame his

resolution. It was 8:00pm; she should have been getting ready for work. He walked silently up to the door of Yoshiki's room, and stood by the wall in the dark. They were talking about her night job, why she had left. Yoshiki didn't blame her for taking it, Nobuki knew that much—it had been the result of their distance, not the cause. But then she asked him a strange question. Would it surprise him if she left? Yoshiki said he'd worry, but he wouldn't look for her.

Left. The word hit him with a thud. He thought she'd left his life a long time ago, and he thought that leaving was what he'd wanted. But he'd wanted it for himself, not for her. As much as he resented her presence, he never imagined that she would actually just disappear. He knew she'd given up on him, but not with such finality. Masako walked out of the room. Yoshiki was rooted to the spot. "Were you listening?" she asked, but Nobuki averted his eyes. He couldn't look at her. "You may think you can escape everything unpleasant in life just by keeping your mouth shut," she snapped at him, "but it doesn't work that way." Escaped? He hadn't escaped anything. He'd never seen his silence as avoidance. In order to communicate with her, silence had seemed more useful than speech.

She told him she was leaving. Told him that he was grown up and could do what he wanted. Every word tore into him. She was done. She was leaving him for good and she didn't care what he thought. He felt himself begin to tremble as tears welled up in his eyes.

She turned away from him. "Thanks for nothing, bitch!" he screamed. She turned and opened her mouth as if to speak, but what else was there for her to say? He jerked away from her and charged upstairs. When he reached his room, he threw himself onto his bed and cried, harder than he had in years. He had never known such abandonment, a rejection so complete.

For the next several days, Nobuki hardly saw her, even in passing. Masako had stopped preparing meals, and he made a point of staying out of the house. The one indication of her presence he couldn't help but notice was the spotless quality of the bathroom. As the rest of the house gradually became less organized and as dust began to

accumulate on every surface, the bathroom remained exceptionally clean. “Maybe it’s where she chops up her bodies,” Nobuki often thought in a sick joke to himself. He was still resolute in his decision not to tell anyone about his previous suspicions, especially as, thinking back on it, they seemed less and less plausible. Though he was right about it being Yayoi who she had spoken to on the phone that morning... no. He wouldn’t ruminare on it—on her. She had cut him out of her life, and he was determined to cut her out of his thoughts. He glared down at his tattered work pants and grabbed a pack of cigarettes off his desk.

One day, she was gone. No clear warning, no note; Masako had simply disappeared just as she had threatened to do. She simply left for the night shift and never came back. Nobuki had just stared for a moment when Yoshiki told him that he didn’t think she would return, and then walked slowly back to up his room. He supposed things would go on as they had been—he and Yoshiki would go to work, get their own meals, and sleep in the same building. Nobuki stared at the cigarettes sitting on his desk. Though she never knew it, Masako was the reason Nobuki had picked up smoking. Yoshiki didn’t like it, but she’d done it anyway—in Nobuki’s mind, as her own private form of rebellion. She was strong, stronger than Yoshiki, and while Masako had always compared him to her husband, Nobuki wanted to be stronger than him too. He realized that now as he looked at the pack; it was a power struggle, not against Yoshiki, but against Masako. How much could he get away with before she cared? Maybe he’d pushed it too far, or maybe it had never mattered how much he pushed if she didn’t care enough to push back. Now Masako was gone, and with it, his defiance. She had moved on, and now it was time for him to move on too. He would leave the city, and go back to school somewhere else, anywhere else. For the first time that he could remember, Nobuki felt at peace. He brushed the pack of cigarettes into his trashcan and it hit the bottom with a satisfying thud. Today, he felt free.