

Shunbun-no-hi  
By Lesley L. Smith

When I noticed the calendar on the fridge said 'Autumnal Equinox', I teared up, thrust unwillingly into memories.

A year ago today, the doorbell rang just after Ava spilled her bowl of cereal all over her, complete with laughing and clapping.

"Honestly! Who could be at the door now?" I said.

I had to leave her sopping in the chair when I went to answer the door. "This better not be a salesman." My late-start morning was not turning out as relaxing as I'd anticipated. Thank goodness I'd already finished getting dressed for work.

When I opened the door, though, it was my mom. I suppressed a sigh. "Mom. It's so nice to see you." I opened the door wider and waved her in. "Please come in. To what do I owe this nice surprise?"

"Hello, Juri." She took tiny steps into the house. She seemed smaller and more bird-like every time I saw her. "I asked you to call me Haha," she said.

I didn't understand her new sudden love for tradition, but I managed not to frown as I closed the door behind her. "Yes, Haha. Sorry."

"Where's my cute little Ava?" she asked as she walked down the hall to the kitchen. Clearly, she thought she knew.

I followed her. "So, why are you here? Not that I'm not happy to see you."

She stopped abruptly in the kitchen doorway. "She's soaking wet." Mom turned and frowned at me.

Ava spotted her and started yelling "Sobo! Sobo!" and waving her hands in the air.

"Yes, that's right, Honey. Grandma's here, Sobo's here," Mom cooed. Had she ever used that tone with me?

"Oh, dear." I rushed over to Ava and lifted her out of her chair. "She must have spilled while I was answering the door. Maybe if you called ahead..." I knew I was grasping at straws, but I hated it when she dropped by unannounced. No doubt I'd be getting chastised for the dirty dishes on the counter any minute.

My mother's black eyes were as bright as ever as she fixed them on me. She always seemed to know when I was lying, but I wasn't going to crack this time.

"Uh, if you give me a few minutes to clean Ava up," I said, "I'll make some tea."

"Japanese tea, or American tea?" she asked.

"Japanese, of course," I said. I thought I still had some. I hoped.

A little while later, we were all settled around the kitchen table, me and Mom with our chalky traditional green tea and Ava with a banana and a cup of juice. Ava was having a grand time squishing banana between her fingers. I guessed she wasn't hungry any more.

"Ava, don't make a mess; you know better than that." I turned to my mother. "So, Mom, er, Haha, why are you here?" I glanced at the clock. "I have to go to work in a little while."

Mom picked up her cup and took a dainty sip, looking at me over the rim.

I knew that look. It meant she thought I should know why she was here. It wasn't her birthday, and it wasn't Mother's Day. It wasn't Ava's birthday. I peeked at the calendar on the refrigerator. It wasn't my birthday, or my husband's, or anyone else I could think of. And I knew it wasn't a holiday, because I was due at work in forty-five short minutes. The only thing today's square had in it was 'Autumnal Equinox'. "Okay. I give up."

She set her cup down carefully. "I'm surprised at you, Juri. Today is Shunbun-no-hi. Did you forget?"

I did forget. "Uh, of course not."

Her black eyes drilled into me.

"But, I'm sorry. I can't go with you to the cemetery today. I have to drop Ava off at daycare and go into work," I said. I didn't believe in all that stuff, anyway; it wasn't the way she raised me.

"But it's Shunbun-no-hi," she said forcefully but somehow without raising her voice. "Who will honor the ancestors, if not us? It's our duty to pay our respects to those on the other side of the river of death."

"Why is it so important all-of-a-sudden?" I asked. She was confusing me. We'd never celebrated Shunbun-no-hi before.

She looked down at the table. "It just is. The old ways are important. The ancestors need us."

I shook my head. Why was she talking like this? Who believed in spirits and rivers of death and whatever?

"It's important!" she slammed her hand onto the table.

I couldn't recall ever seeing her so worked up. "If I'd had some notice so I could get out of work, I would go since I can see it's important to you," I said. I paused. There had to be something else going on here. "Are you all right? Is there something going on with you?"

"I'm fine," she said, as she always did.

"Well, in that case," I stood up to put my cup in the sink, "no one's stopping you from going," I said.

Ava knocked her cup over, but luckily at this point it was empty.

"What about Ava?" Mom asked. "Can I take her with me? It's time she started to learn about her heritage."

I considered Ava; she resembled me. And a Japanese-American should have some idea of her heritage. "Sure, Mom. If you want." I was uneasy about teaching Ava a bunch of superstitions, but I relented.

Back in the present, Ava asked, "What's wrong, Mommy?" she had been concentrating on eating her oatmeal and not spilling any, and she was doing a good job.

"Nothing's wrong, Honey. Mommy just misses Sobo." Of course my mom wasn't fine--that's why she'd been so worked up. There was a reason she seemed to be wasting away last year--she was. I really wished she had told me. I wiped my eyes with my napkin.

"Today is Shunbun-no-hi," I said. "Do you know what that means, Ava?"

"Ohagi!" she said.

"Yes," I said. "It does mean sweet rice balls and it also means the cemetery. Do you want to come with me to honor our ancestors?" I still didn't believe in this stuff, but I knew it meant a lot to my mom. Correction: it had meant a lot.

"Yes! Sobo told me," Ava said. "We go visit them when they're across the river."

"That's right," I said.

"She asked me to visit her," Ava said.

My eyes overflowed. "Then that's what we'll do," I said, my voice husky. Having procured ohagi and white oriental lilies at the Japanese market, the two of us approached the graves. I was admiring the sturdy little Weeping Cherry Tree we'd planted last spring to commemorate Mom, er, Haha.

"Sobo!" Ava cried, dropping my hand and running ahead. She stopped in front of the graves.

I followed behind her, and sank down on the bench we'd placed under the tree. It had been beautiful in the spring, with the pink cherry blossoms hanging down.

"Sobo!" Ava said, pointing.

"Yes, Honey," I said. "This is where Sobo is now. Remember, we laid her to rest?"

"No," Ava said. "Look! There she is! I see her." Ava pointed at the gravestone. "She's waving at us. She's waving from across the river."

Wow. I didn't know Ava was so imaginative. "If she's waving, you better wave back," I said.

Ava waved her hand furiously. "And Sofu! I see Sofu, too!"

It was sweet Ava remembered her grandfather. He'd been gone almost two years. I didn't know she had such a good memory. "That's great, Honey."

"And another lady, an older lady holding Sobo's hand!" Ava said.

Who was she talking about? It couldn't be my grandmother.... Ava never met her great-grandmother.

"They're all waving at us!" Ava said.

Could it be? Was it possible?

Ava twisted around to look at me. "Why aren't you waving, Mommy? Wave back at them."

Ava seemed so sure. Was Haha right? Do passed souls dwell on the other side of the river?

The wind rustled the branches of the tree above, as if Haha was whispering to me of tradition, honor, and love.

"Haha?" I whispered.

The sweet scent of lilies transformed into that of cherry blossoms.

I waved.

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