

Saigo no Shokuji

∞ A Traditional Ghost Story ∞

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Saigo no Shokuji

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First Edition



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Dedication

For his Mother

Preface

Saigo no Shokuji is the fourth in a series of short stories and folk tales to come out of the world of The Painted Shōgun. Read this as a ghost story that would be told to children of the Hayashi.

O-tsukimi is a traditional Japanese festival celebrated by viewing the autumn harvest moon. Offerings of food are made on the altar to show appreciation for a good harvest.



After three more moons, an autumn moon will rise, if the clouds and rain hold. All of the homes of the Hayashi would begin tomorrow to prepare for feasts of a harvest bounty to welcome the season. On the fourth eve, and third of their quiet fall festival, all of the Morihito will gather and gaze upon its full and burning glory. For rich and for poor, the tables will set a meal beyond means, and even the spirits would have their share. But on this night, on a road through the mountain passage, a body was found, bloodied and awful. Nearly unrecognizable, it was, all strewn into bits. Those that came across the pieces were too torn down to speak of it. This put quite a damper on their ready-making and celebrations, but a festival was to be held no matter what.



Bento was old enough to have finished his lessons and should've spent his days in trade. When he was young, he dreamt of becoming Yoru, which, as far as he knew, would have been a first under his father's house. But he barely practiced. And it takes more than just blood and repetition. Instead, much of what he spent away was time. Bento hadn't any brothers, and his lone sister was married young. His mother kept the house and she made small pocket charms to sell and barter at the markets while his

father worked in the mountains foraging. There were some mushrooms there that could have well enough been cultivated that weren't welcome any nearer the villages. Some were for food, some medicine, others were for ritual, and the worst were for war. It took a master nearly a lifetime to learn, and he was held in high regard like a warrior, if not higher. And it was more lucrative than most any of the professions from the Morihito.

The same was growing to be the case in the prefectures, as well, that the sons of warriors withered in times of peace. Under the warring moons before Nowara, long ago, there wasn't question that Bento would be ripe for the field of battle, like the Senshin boys of Senshin sons. But like the noble Senshin with no heads to claim, the boy was dormant. Many were too proud to work, some, even, were forbidden. Bento, unlike a resting warrior, never earned his position, but he felt he was owed every bit. He got on with more and more than he ought with his father on longer aways.

What Bento enjoyed most, when he wasn't fishing or betting, was a meal. He also enjoyed saké and shochu. He wasn't heavysset by a stretch, but he was a bit softened at his edges. His was an appetite of legend. If eating more was a contest, his was a champion unchallenged. Harvest feasts and moon festivals were every bit his forte, though he begrudged his mother the picking and plucking and cleaning to make them happen. On this, they would be welcoming guests. More prepping would be

called on, and every hand available, to make a feast fit for a lord. If there were ten, she would ready for eighteen. If twenty, forty. Even if there was a wretched Shōgun, or exalted Elder, they would want for nothing at the table she was planning, for Bento's father would be coming.

Day one was a day for cleansing. She called for help cleaning the buckets; it didn't come. She called again for him to carry to and from the well; she carried her own. She scooped away the ash in the kitchen pit, banged dust from the tapestries and bedding in the cold outside, lifted and slid the tatami, washed the floor below, and aired and incensed while he complained that the windows were open. Even with him about the house, she took the robes to water, soap, and stone by herself. Later, with the house and wares cleansed, she prayed. She prayed for a harvest moon, and her husband's safe return. She prayed for the food and she prayed for the wine. Most of all, she prayed for her son, who had somewhere before lost his way.

Bento wore himself thin that night on wine and kata and the swinging of a wooden brand he fashioned for a blade. To him there was no difference from the mostly full moon that ushered him to bed and one that would watch the rest of the realm making merry.



He heard his mother's first and second calls in the morning, and the light and cold air through the sliding window panel were invasive by the third, but he didn't move. Bento was playing possum, and his mother was very well aware. Alone she left that morning, with the plan of finding help home from the market, as was always so. Bento rolled and stretched and hunkered under his bedding to return to rest. To him his mind was noble, that a man does not clean nor make proper the table, but his spirit and tactic were flawed and coward. His father was home so seldom that he taught his son no different.

On her return that morning, she gave welcome to three men who hauled her yield. Her boy was awake and sat waiting. Along with rice, white, brown, forbidden, and sweet, carried by the first man in bags, yams, daikon, taro and burdock were carried on the back of a second man, and bundles and bundles of soy came in on the shoulders of the third. Bento pointed them with pride to the pantry. His mother carried the smaller satchels, and he searched through them for snacks. Among his findings included a package of twelve smalljack mackerel to grill for lunch. Smalljacks were another particular favorite of Bento's. Thankfully they were gutted and he wouldn't have to dirty his hands.

The men spoke heartily and as though they were well known to one another, and to Bento's father and mother and uncle. They spoke as though

they knew of Bento. He had little return to give except when they asked of his hobbies. The way they mostly talked around him brought discomfort. And how they nearly insinuated his worth.

When he was asked to pour their saké, he passed the bottle. When the table needed setting, he sat to be served. When the platter was brought, he filled his bowl before it touched the table. His mother interrupted his first bites with words of thanks for the men who helped. He was through his first fish and onto another by their acknowledging and salute. Bento ate six fishes from the table, and if the men hadn't stayed for their promised two, it would have been twelve. Away they went with thanks and well wishes of a hearty replenishing to no sad goodbyes from the boy who shared their catch.

For the rest of the replenishing day, Bento's mother trimmed tinder and kindling and carried split logs to stock their shelves. She sorted and counted beans and bundled burdock and rice and tea. Her steels were sharpened and honed, her broom rebristled. She carved another handle for her kyūsu and tightened the tie around her chasen. Chips in the lacquered serving trays got retouched and polished. Everything for the feast was laid carefully, perfectly portioned, ready for soaking and chopping and stewing in the morning.

And Bento, with a bellyful, went to bet dice.



Silence broke before the array of porcelain tableware, waiting where it could be struck by the unassuming. Stumbling and drunk, Bento burst through and woke his sleeping mother, undoing many of her hard hours of work. She daren't even confront her son, who sat to eat up her toiling, for fear of only riling him into a further state not fit to remember. But pray again she did for a son lost wandering while she separated shards from rice through the rest of the smallest hours. Work of that kind was not for the reflecting day, and even under cover of a setting moon, she tempted her fates. A heavy burden she bore, that morning, in place of laying blame.



In the first waking hours on a reflecting day's morn, those prepared most are first for the honor. Bento's mother often led the pack in prayer, offered morning tea, and was almost always among the first to see. By that time on this reflecting, though, she

wasn't quite finished recouping her hours, and sleep was still something to be had. Not a passerby waited, though more than one went calling. To them they would know it as the year she didn't reflect. To not was a scandal. Whether she didn't answer from tire, or whether it was shame or she was occupied, with every knock she retreated further.



Morning for mother was morning by Bento's clock, which meant midday at the earliest. She lost the day. And of all of the days, that was one not freely given back. She rushed to wash, to pray and eat, and still she scrambled eggs for her son to have over his rice. Her face was made quick and clean robes were donned, and then she scrambled her way toward the lake.

A day to reflect is a gift from the Gods Raijen and Benten. One looks alone onto the sacred lake Ginsui in the early morning's setting moon. They look to look upon a spirit renewed and replenished. It is said that in the stillest of the still, even the most tarnished will shine. The Gods give luck in the absence of a ripple.

She was alone at the hour of the playful, rising Harvest moon. Enough sun still clung to

scattered clouds to show her spirit without shadow. She watched the water's surface sway and stop and sparkle and swell. With it she moved, matching rhythms, breathing to its pulse, entrancing her eyes. Being alone was a welcome turn. Those that see stillness stifle their celebration for respect of those that do not. Those that do not struggle not to look a second time. Escaping the rigor of that all was nearly a blessing. In stillness she would speak to the Gods of her boy, and wish her own luck away for him.

A mating pair of dragonflies pinched the water and etched a single ring that radiated across the silver surface. Bento's mother blessed it as it passed her by. She watched as they fluttered and watched as they sundered and watched as they flew separate ways. With held breath fast, she leaned over the dock to have her look.

There she was, as still as glass. Oh what the year had done to the lines in her face. Oh what the day had done. She knew her first breath of peace in some time. First she focused on the surface, and then on the bottom, and then on the sun, and then on the moon. She focused on the trees, and on a small orange fish with black-tipped, silver fins. In her own eyes she searched. They were with her. Her stillness moved with the breath of the lake, but remained unbroken. A smile started cracking before the splash came to steal it all away, with a part of her spirit and her chance for any blessing. The image of her disappeared. She nearly fell in, heartbroken,

astonished. Her hands grabbed for the tears that fell, but she held her scream.

It was as she most feared; it was Bento.

There needn't be a big splash to make a giant wave. Bento threw a fishing float so he could sit unbothered and watch, but within moments, before his mother could get to him even, he was pulling up a first catch. His was the day's first baited hook, so the fish were biting. This was for sport, this taking from the lake. He wasn't intentioned to supplement tomorrow's table, or to make right his wrong. He took to take. Bento ripped his hook through the fish's gills and chucked it back. So small a beast wasn't nearly a taste for an appetite of legend, especially after a night of losing on dice. A small slick of blood marred its wake. Again he cast his float, but the sound of someone crying out rustled a nerve. How dare they disturb away his fish?

With a snap, Bento was turned, and annoyed to find it was his mother emotional. He gave her a grumble enough to fill her ears twice over. It was too much. Fool with her fate and she'll somehow find her way; fool with her son's and there will be debts to pay. Her scream she held no more. Her son would learn his place. She moved like he'd never seen before and then Bento was struck and dragged home from the lake.



Bento's uncle was there and waiting from the foothills when they returned. The full, autumn moon was risen. "It's late to see reflection still, no?" he asked. "I made mine over a bucket," he laughed. His robes were well worn and his sandals frayed. He was a man of very humble means. "Where is my brother-in-law?" He asked. She nearly forgot. Bento's father was due home hours ago. "And where," he winked at Bento "are his mushrooms?" "He's not here," she said. "He's late. Have you seen him?" she asked. "Oh come now," cried the Uncle. "He passed me three nights ago. Says he finished early and wanted to surprise you. Isn't he fishing? He can never rest!" That man was known as a trickster, but there was no such folly in his words. And no, he wasn't fishing.

"What's with your eye, boy?" Bento only laughed. He didn't seem to have the same concern his mother had. If only he knew whose fate he disturbed. She had not the patience to address him directly, and he had not the desire to remember how hard his mother hit him. "Bento will return with you..." "I'm hungry," interrupted her son, but mostly to himself. "I said Bento will return with you," loud enough for the boy not to mistake her that time. "Search along the mountain pass." His Uncle almost answered that he came down that very way. "Again, please," she cut him off. "I will search here." She

stepped closer to her brother. "Please find him." She was worried. It was not like her husband to find himself drunk or otherwise off his path home.

Even if Bento didn't care much for his mother's practices, he did for her cooking. "I'm not going anywhere until we feast," he said, slapping his belly. "He'll come 'round." He was into a pot of something that was supposed to be for the morning.

"You are a disgrace!" she cried, slamming the lid. "Do you not care that your father is missing?! Do you not care that you offer me nothing? That you were rude to our guests? That you ruined my reflecting?! I prayed for you, Bento. I prayed that you would finally become a man of worth. That your wife and children would not know you this way. If you do not return with your father, do not return!"

"Come on, boy. It's best we be going," added his Uncle. "I'm not going with *you*," he said. "What will I eat then?" It was well known that his uncle was a man of few luxuries. Bento meant to throw that as an insult. Oddly it was his mother that found more offense. His uncle found the back of Bento's neck and ducked him under the kitchen paddle she swung. And then again. "Whatever you did to her, boy, I'd suggest against any repeats." She was furious. "Let's go, boy," he said, dragging his nephew by the shoulder. A bowl shattered off of the door as they slid into the night. "Good night, Sister," he called back. And they were gone.



"You'll owe me mushrooms, boy," he laughed. It was dark, and in the distance an owl and some crickets competed. "This way," he said. Bento was aggravated. He didn't so much mind being out at night if he was headed for dice or drink, but he seemed to be at least a little afraid. He would have bravado enough to compensate, at least for a little while.

Clouds covered over the moon and washed out its light. Branches and shadows wove a nasty web. Something scurried in the brush and it felt like a thousand eyes were on them. His uncle moved like a rabbit, while Bento followed like an ox. "Come on, boy. Keep up. We won't be searching until we get outside the village. He's not here, or he'd be home." Bento swallowed hard and followed, headstrong, but not sure he wanted to encounter anything along the mountain pass.

Homes were warm with light and merry and from hearths rose the smell of Harvest celebration. Families were gathering. A humble meal and prayer would tide them before the Harvest moon viewing and the midnight music and dancing before the morrow's full and vibrant feast. Bento envied the smell of mackerel skin with his belly; his uncle, with

his heart. "I know," he said. "There's nothing like it. I don't have any fish, but we'll see what we can manage." Bento grumbled, but gave no real response aside from that and the crunching of his feet over turned leaves and unraked earth near the outskirts.

It was darker away from the homes, where the Harvest moon was swallowed up in the thicker canopy. That was where the owls were loudest. Bento's uncle stopped him at the bottom of the mountain road. He was looking, craning his neck, careful not to set a foot yet onto the dirt path. "Your father knows this road, we travelled it as boys. This is how he would've come. We will look for signs of him, but listen..." he turned to check that Bento was the only thing paying attention. "You stay with me," he whispered "and we will not stop until I say. I will look east. You look to the west. Look for footprints," he said. "And look for blood." Bento swallowed hard and opened his eyes wide. He didn't like what his mother had gotten him into. His uncle slipped a smirk. Bento smiled and brushed away his fright. His uncle must have been joking. "Come on, then," he said. "And don't forget," he leaned in "no stopping."

Only a little light swam through torn stitches between the treetops. In every blue stream, they searched their side for signs of someone passing. Nothing. Over bulging roots and buried rocks and pine needles and pigeon shit, they kept their promise to keep their pace. The road was long and wound only slightly, and lead ever up to the clearing on the

first cliff. That was where they made a first stopping, after the better part of an hour's climb.

While it wasn't a proper village like the one down the pass, there were more than just one dwelling. The first one was cold, like an abandoned outfitter's shack. The road flattened and wound longways around the spine of the mountain. Half-empty huts lead the way to a patch of woods where his Uncle's was tucked. He pointed it out the first time they passed by on their long walk around and back. By every open roadway, they looked and called, but dared not step onto any path. His uncle focused and squinted his Yoru vision to see as far as every first turn. "Ah, Bento," he said. "I don't think he would have gone further up the mountain. Let's stick to these."

They walked for well over another hour, checking every road thrice. There wasn't anyone along, nor coming, nor going, who may have seen something worth telling. In fact, not a single soul was seen. "All celebrating, I suppose," said the uncle. They could oversee the wooded land to the west and, beyond, smoke rising and the glow of gathering celebration.

Some in the village had coal sheds more well-appointed than the one to which their travels took them. Bento hadn't been in years, and his grouching was enough to fill the time he missed.

"I've seen no sign of him, or anyone. We'd be better to search again in the morning," said Bento's

uncle, defeated, and not bothering to know whether the boy saw signs either, which he did not. He hardly looked. He turned up his sourness at the thought of staying there for the night, and he glared with disgust when he walked past the man holding open his door.

"Please, take off your shoes," he said, "and sit where you like. I will fix our food." All that Bento heard was that he would be working through his festival. All that Bento wanted to hear was that there was mackerel, and lots of it. He heard nothing of the sort.

"Here we go," said his uncle, handing him a hearty bowl of gyudon, while he brought two balls of rice for himself. He simmered the best piece of beef he could, low and slow, with onions from his neighbor and mirin that he'd saved. Bento had most of it slurped down before their prayers were through. "What is this, dog meat?" he asked. His uncle was from a time and a place where that wouldn't have been insulting, but there and then, it was. "I'm sorry," he said. "Can I take that from you?" But Bento pulled it closer to him and finished slurping. His uncle ate the rest of his first rice ball.

"What else have you got, old man?" he demanded. "And bring the saké! It's Harvest. We should celebrate." Bento's uncle respected his brother-in-law but was worried for who his son was turning into. He was right about one thing, though. Harvest called for a bit of celebrating. "I'll be just a

moment, then," said his uncle, who was fitting his sandals to step out and fill a few carafes from the saké barrel. Whether or not he had hefty stores of food, he liked to drink his saké, and he had plenty to share.

In he came, with a tall bottle for each, and one taller to share, the three of which he set down so he could fetch more food. Bento's first bottle was sucked half down by when he brought rice cakes and pickles. It was gone when he brought tofu. He poured two cups when the kabocha came and then a third, fourth, and fifth to have with the mung beans. They ate all of his eggs with the rest of the rice cakes, and were scraping millet together for porridge in no time.

"What else," said Bento. "More saké? Have you any mushrooms? Any fish?!" His uncle only kept a kitchen for one, and he wasn't fit for hosting a Harvest this night. "Any more dog?" Insulting as it was, in fact, they'd already licked the pot clean. His uncle tightened his eyes when he shook his head. "I thought that there were two more onigiri when you were fixing that mess," he said. "No, Bento," he said. "There are no rice balls left for us." While this was a truth, it was a partial one. There were two left, and Bento had a good eye when it came to food, but they were to be left as an offering, and weren't for them to eat. "I may have a little rice, but it will take some time to boil." "Can you spare it?" Bento asked, only to poke, not really caring if he could. "I'll start the rice," said his uncle, with a bit of a glare.

He rustled his strainer and rattled his pots to put on that rice. This was a man of silence and shadow, but he wanted Bento to know of his need for restraint. "Please don't disturb this," he said, adding an iron kettle to the heavy wooden lid atop his pot. "It helps to keep steam on the rice." Bento didn't believe his place was in the kitchen, so he stayed quite comfortable where he would be served. "Where are *you* going?" he asked. His uncle was gathering his sandals and lighting a stick of incense. "I'll just be a few moments, boy. Help yourself to more saké if you would like."

And then Bento was alone.

Bento would never admit he was afraid, not even to himself. The house was largely unknown to him and the noises she made in the wind alerted hairs on his neck. It seemed a shade darker than it was just before. Silence between creaks and flickers of the lantern light unsettled him. More than once he stood and looked to shadows. He laughed to himself, louder than he would've in his own home, when he saw there was nothing. But it felt like there was something. He wanted to be home.

There was scratching at the door. And a sturdy, sharp tap.

Bento stood, nearly entranced, like something was calling to him. There was another tap. And scratching. That something was trying to get in. "Is it my Uncle?" he asked. "It sounds like a cat scratching." But he wasn't sure about the

tapping. He moved closer to listen. Another tap. This one echoed to where Bento approached. "Uncle?" he called, remembering the trickster. "I'm not afraid," he said out loud.

"Chi, chi!" it cried.

The cry was piercing and startled up something in Bento. "It's only a bird," he said, laughing to himself. "Sounds like a sparrow. Probably too big for a sparrow..." He wasn't scared any more. He looked around for something sharp. "Stay, little bird," he called. "We'll have you with our rice!" Bento liked catching birds with darts or snares, and he liked pulling out their feathers and wearing them to pretend he was one of the Dragon Riders of the northern mountains. He especially liked how their skin tasted when it was cooked crisp over charcoal.

"Chi," cried the bird. And "Chi, chi, chi!" angrily.

Bento couldn't find the right weapon, and he didn't want to lose his prey, so he crept quietly to the door with wood from the hearth. As he snuck closer, the bird grew silent as if he himself was listening. He leaned in closer and heard nothing. Bento imagined a large sparrow standing opposite the door. With one hand, he tightened on a split piece of log, with the other, he firmed a hold on the door. *Steady*, he thought. *One good swing and he'll be stunned.*

"Hyoh!" shouted Bento, and he swung. There came a mighty scream. He hit something! The gravel shuffled and the door jamb nearly split from all the excitement. His uncle stumbled in and fell on top of him, holding his foot. "Argh. Bento! What are you doing?!" Three fruits fell thumping to the floor in the exchange. Bento checked first for the bird and then for the fruit. "Help me first," cried his uncle. "I think you've broken something!" Bento picked up the three persimmons and walked them to the table. "Bento. I need a hand, please," he asked again. "Leave those, for a moment," he was breathing shallow. Bento half helped him lower down after he hobbled his own way back inside. "Thank you," he said. "Now can you grab a few of those?" he asked, pointing towards the buckwheat kneeling pillows. "Thank you. And next some clean water and cloth from the pantry, please."

Bento looked sideways at his uncle. He didn't much like taking orders. Though, when they came from a man, and particularly a Yoru man, take them he did.

"Here," said his uncle. "Give those here, thank you." With a small knife he cut the cloth into sections, soaking one of the bigger ones. He wiped off the dirty blood and tree bits from the knuckle of his big toe. It was bleeding good, but wasn't unstoppable. "Ah," he said, and "Ooh," when he dabbed at it. For such a powerful warrior, Bento thought, he put on quite a show over a scrape. "There," he said. "All clean." Bento hit the tip of his

toe mostly, and his uncle was almost fast enough to get out of the way. "Oh look," said Uncle, "it may not be broken after all!" His toe wiggled, but just barely on its own.

"While you are at it, boy, bring those here." He pointed to the orange, plump persimmons. "Those are special fruits," he said. "From a tree that marks a special way. There's one for each of us. I paid tribute to take them. May this fill our bellies and nourish our hearts." Bento again looked sideways, for there were, as he had counted, exactly three fruits. "Can I have the other?" he asked. "What other? There's only one apiece." "No, old man," said Bento. "There's three." "No, Bento, there's two. The third is a small Harvest offering." Bento looked at him queerly. "Don't tell me you eat the offering at home, boy," he laughed. Bento didn't crack a smile. "What an appetite," he added. "Bring them. You can have mine."

"Tell me, boy, what were you swinging for?" Bento wiped persimmon from the corner of his mouth. "Well," he said, swallowing down his mouthful, "I thought there was a bird. Sparrow, maybe. Sounded bigger, though." He kept eating. "But now I think it was just you making bird calls. I was hoping we could cook one." His face became serious. "What kind of bird did you hear, Bento? You said a sparrow?" "Yes, but bigger." "Night sparrow..." he whispered, with staring eyes. "Are you sure it was a sparrow? What did it sound like?" "It sounded like a...sparrow. I know my sparrows, old

man. It said *chi chi* like a stupid little sparrow, only bigger, maybe, like a jay." Bento knew his birds. Bigger calls made bigger meals. His uncle whispered to himself again. "Then I'm not surprised..." "About what?" asked Bento. "That I didn't hear him." "So it wasn't you?" he asked. "No, Bento. Help me up. We should have never stopped looking." His Uncle wasn't calm any more. "For what?" asked Bento. "For your father!"

"You are joking," said Bento. "Did my father put you up to this? Is this some test to make me be more of a man?" "I'm afraid not. How sure are you of what you heard?" "I'm sure," said Bento. "I know a sparrow when I hear one." "Let me ask you, boy, do you believe in ghost stories? Demons?" "No," he said confidently. "Ghost stories are for children."

"Well then let me tell you a ghost story, and you will not be afraid. There's talk that wolves watch over these mountains. They are not like the dogs we keep now for hunting, or the wolves that we hunt. No, no. These are like shadow and darkness. These wolves are demons. Like a lightless fire, or some soulless beast. They move with the wind and kill in the night. Some say they have dealings and debts to some great sacrifice of our ancestors. Others say they are the dark work of the Tengu. Most of the wolves from these parts were either killed or chased away..."

Bento didn't believe a word of those old tales. "And what of the sparrow, old man?" he challenged. "Ah, you see, the two are kindred, and

together they protect the mountain passes from intruders. At night, when someone comes who doesn't belong, they hear him. *Chi, chi*. From far away at first. And then *Chi, chi*, he flies closer. And *chi*, even closer. *Chi, chi, chi*, he cries, until he calls from over your shoulder." He practically shouted. "It's a trick, you see. He wants you to stop. Sometimes, he will let you see him. Maybe on a branch, or in the sky, and sometimes, he pops down right in your way and pecks at your toes. Oh what a beautiful sparrow he is, too. Big. Like a jay. But you keep walking. Step on him, or over him. Run if you must. Some even sing a song of the wind to shoo him away... Most of the locals don't even hear his call anymore. They just keep walking. Your father never spoke of this?"

"No. What happens if they stop?" asked the boy. "He may well be the last thing you see. If not, it will be the eyes of black wolf!" He raised up his voice to scare Bento. But Bento was too brave for ghost stories.

"So you're saying there's a demon wolf that hunts with the night sparrow like a baitfish on a hook?" asked Bento, with the stink of sarcasm on his breath. "Well yes, that's how the story goes." "And everyone who takes his bait is eaten?" "Oh yes," said Bento's uncle. "But not by the wolf. The wolf kills. The forest consumes. And nearly nothing is ever found." "What a story. Where do you hear such tales?" he asked, still stinking. "That, my boy," he leaned closer "is why I said it's a *ghost* story."

"Are you ready?" he asked. "I think we owe it to your father to look some more tonight. It's nearly midnight. I'm starting to worry." "Do you really think I'm going to believe..." Started Bento. "He's not here, and he's not home. Are you sure it was a night sparrow you heard?" "I...I guess I don't know," but he was sure.

"Give me a hand, please," he said. Bento tried. He more just stood so his uncle had something to brace against and pull himself up. "Ahh," he said, nearly falling. He couldn't put any weight on a foot that was starting to bruise. The nail bed was filled with blood, and Bento didn't like the sight of it. Again he tried a step, and again he nearly fell. "Tell me, Bento," he said, breathing a bit hard after helping himself back down. "Are you afraid?" "No, I'm not afraid. It's just a ghost story." "That's right, just a ghost story. Will you have another look?"

Bento thought it through. His concern for seeming scared outweighed his want not to oblige. "Fine," he said. "I'll have a look." "Wonderful. Your father would have done the same." A little extra guilt would seal the deal for sure. "Oy, Bento. Would you mind filling this first?" His uncle wanted saké from the bottle Bento drained. He returned it full with as much grace as he used to snatch the bottle away.



Bento listened carefully when he stepped outside. There weren't any sparrows and there weren't any chirps. It was dark, misty, and mostly quiet apart from the wind and low drumming from the valley. The cold was not everything that set a chill on his bones. He walked the path that they did earlier, half looking, half listening. No other soul but his own was out wandering. There wasn't a sign of anything but a distant Harvest gathering from up on the crossing or the back passages. Finally he came around to the main mountain road, the one they checked first, and the one he'd left to check until last.

There he was, at the sill of the old road home. He stood before a Harvest feast, while an uncle he helped to hobble was at his back. The stores were run dry and the saké was piss. His father wasn't anywhere to be found, but surely that wasn't Bento's fault. He could look along this last road and stay for a bite. *What would be the harm in that*, he thought. It was an hour's walk. And there was that whole business about the hunting grounds of a demon-wolf. "It's just a ghost story," he said. He looked back to curls coming from his uncle's chimney again, and then back to the Harvest, and his mind was settled. Bento set foot onto the mountain road home.



A darkness unlike any he'd known swallowed him. It was thick like felt with fog. Bento walked in by a number of paces before his eyes adjusted to see that only more darkness surrounded him, and the branches were blades in whatever errant light there was cutting through the canopy.

He was supposed to look, but more than anything, he listened. His sandals sounded softer and more careful than the normal scrape of his lazy gait. Wind whispered through the pines and an occasional acorn pocked against the ground. Something shuffled in the grass and Bento stopped. Possibly a rodent. His heart beat fast and his eyes filled. Another rustle in the brush came from back along the higher ledge. He realized he was stopped. To his uncle's warning, he stepped lightly, and fast. Looking for his father was no longer a concern. Running. Running was his only concern now.

Over his heavy breathing and less than stealthy way, he heard something. It came crying like an eagle from on high. A single chirp echoed through the forest. He wondered if his uncle heard anything. Bento slowed a little and turned to look back, but he saw nothing. "Chi chi," cried the sparrow, as his uncle warned, closer this time. Bento nearly ducked as the cry came on the wind around him. Feathers fluttered and the brush rustled. A branch cracked over his head. He kept running.

Something whipped through a patch of thistle and disappeared into a pine. "Chi chi chi," he called, from over Bento's shoulder. He knocked on the bark to make himself be heard. "Chi, chi!" It sounded like a warrior's cry. Bento had been found.

He knew he had to run. Whatever sparrow it was came following. The branches above him danced and thrashed. "Chi,chi!" The bird was frantic. The bird was hunting. Bento ran hard, his legs and chest burned. "Chi!" screamed the bird, finally from out of the trees. Bento ducked his head. He looked for him above and swatted his arms. Something darted across the moon and disappeared again into shadow. "Chi, chi," sang the bird, from circles all around, escaping in flashes. Until finally, "chi" he called from in front of his prey. He was no longer frantic and he was no longer hidden.

The gray-winged, lighter-bellied bird looked on him with stone eyes and a black weathered beak. He wasn't bigger than a jay. Bento was stopped. Even the wind grew quiet to listen. "It's just a ghost story," he whispered. The bird tilted with interest. Bento made himself big and shouted, trying to scare him off. The night sparrow popped back and then challenged the boy with an angry chirp. He looked all around first to see that they were alone. "Just like I thought," he said. "There's no demon. There's no wolf. I'm surprised there's even a bird. Are you his pet?" he asked. "Move out of the way." Bento kicked dirt. The sparrow grew angry and chirped harder, snapping his beak. The bird dodged the first

thrown rock, and then hopped over the second. Bento charged, and the bird was gone.

The wind remained quiet. Bento turned to look, and he held his ear listening. There wasn't a sign of his night sparrow. "Stupid bird," he said. But Bento didn't set back onto his way home. He searched for a stick and swept the brush. He would eat that bird before dawn, even if its breast was little more than a bite. "Here stupid bird," he called, slashing at the overgrowth. "Cheep, cheep, stupid bird," he mocked. If he was a pet, and this was a prank, Bento would have the last laugh.

"Caww!" A scream tore the night and stole Bento's breath. His hearing pierced and rang and he dropped his stick. A fury of wings and feathers stormed his face from the brush. The bird overwhelmed him, pushing him back, fluttering him blind. Talons cut his head like pincers and a beak nipped away pieces of flesh. Bento swung and swatted and started to run. The bird was at his back, buzzing and slapping, biting and clawing. He could feel a drop of blood trickle down the middle of his nose. Tears came next, but they blurred his eyes. Bento blubbered as he ran, trying with his lasting might to swat him away. "It's just a ghost story!" he shouted, before he fell.

Bento's foot caught hold a bulging stone, stubbing his toe and throwing him forward. He stumbled and slipped and dove headlong down. His knees and hands scraped and stopped his mouth

from taking the worst of it, but something snapped. The smell of blood rushed his nose. He couldn't tell dirt from root from rock as he slid through the cloud he dusted up. To an aching and horrible halt he came, no longer sure of where or why he was.

Bento came to with the sound of a single and proud chirp from the night sparrow sitting on his chest. He brushed him off and scrambled to find the sky again, not sure if he could stand. The road turned steep and the moon was full well behind him now. Against its glow stood the silhouette of the beast. All there were within his shadow were eyes. If coals could be heated blue, those were his eyes. Bento swallowed hard, and tears came on a stunning chill down his spine. "No," he cried. "You aren't real! You can't be here!" He was a burning black fire who swallowed up the light. He was the demon; he was the wolf. And with no strength in him, Bento was his prey.

Bento fell as fast as he stood. By bloody hands he pulled himself forward. The beast had crawled closer in every eye the boy returned. "Nooo!" he screamed. "Uncle!!!" He was too deep into the woods. The wind returned and blew through the trees. Bento could hear the drumming.



Slicing. Burning. Tearing. Blood.

The last things that Bento saw were the eyes. And then nothing. All was gone. His fear and his screams, the chirping, bastard sparrow, regret for his uncle, remorse for his father, repentance for his mother. All of those things that flashed before he fell. All of them were gone. All except the hunger.



It stood over a separated, soaking body, in the presence of a silver and bloodstained wolf. There was a golden sparrow under a crown of stars ripping at the pieces. It watched a red fox approaching, attracted by the smell, and mountain cats and sables. It watched them feasting. It was ignited like a beacon, a wanting set to resound, when the black bear chased them away to take his share. Its hunger and the sparrow showed him the way back to the village drumming under the Harvest moon.



Despite finding not a reason, Bento's mother made the moon viewing, with food she'd fixed for others. The Morihito were much too reticent to pry her on secrets. They were, as well, much too mindful not to piece things together. Her faith was in her brethren to offer what word they had, had there been any to offer. So she took their condoling on the contrary, and embraced that they most likely mounted secret searches to assist her. Much can remain unspoken amongst Yoru, and enough can be said without words. Although, still, something sat unsettled.

Their merry making wound down on the hour after the middle of night. They would see the same moon come morning. The leavings alone left a bounty and the drums were at rest. Minglers stayed, and though they were secluded in their wood, so did the guardsmen. Monks who made blessings were finishing ale and men from the mountains made up for lost time.

A chirping came, and then a scream, from unlike any sparrow or hawk of this place. Only some of those that lingered had ears to hear his cry at first, and a growing cry it was. Like a shock wave, it stopped them. The tree line grew dark and bothered and guardsmen advanced with caution. Black from beyond the branches wavered like fog and flame. A cry came that brought men to their knees. The next brought another few. Another brought even more. The cries rang off into the mountains. More came and more echoed until they were all down and

crippled, covering their ears. All of them with the exception of one.

It was Bento's mother that only heard a bird's sweet song. This was a tale she knew as well as her brother. Once before she'd heard him. His "chi, chi" cry was unmistakable. But there was often more to the story of the night sparrow and mountain wolf than where their prey was lain. What horrible thing had they conjured? What horrible man had they taken?

Every young Yoru learned the songs. Nearly every Yōkai had one. Even as a young student she didn't believe in a song that could chase away the demons. Yet, there she was, an aging mushroom hunter's wife, about to begin. Unsure at first, and low, she hummed a melody to the wind. A gentle breeze was there to answer, lapping the grass and breaking on the pines. The bird responded with a song less sweet. Her song was a challenge. She hummed it again, louder, projecting to the trees. A brisker wind carried her voice and whistled her hymn through the branches. What answered were the cries of war, echoed in the fallen all around her. She stood alone in the light of the moon.

Slowly, to a soft melody, she sang:

*Come with me wind, with me tonight
To chase away the bird that might
Sing his song and hunt me down
Under his glowing diamond crown*

*Come with me wind, come with me soon
Don't be afraid the Harvest moon
Send him from this mountain road
Send him where his mother once crowed*

*Come with me wind, don't be afraid
Chase until the hunter fades*

*Come with me wind, time to be strong
Breathe away his frightful song.*

On a stout and steady wind, the chimes all chimed behind her. It came rushing in like a tsunami. Tables rattled and food scattered. Those clutching at ears hurried to protect their faces. A storm swelled and spread the trees and pushed away his cries. It blew through branches like a hurricane, leaving its muse untouched. With wind like from

their Elder and the song of an unknowing widow, the night sparrow was chased away.



It saw not a battle between wind and woe, but a meal in the making from somewhere beyond. It was starved and ravenous, but lost without the bird. The spirit's stomach thundered and mouth parched, with a hunger enough to eat entrails and waste. It struggled to choke dust down its strangled throat. The hurting, as much as the food, called it forward from its hiding.

Dark billows bled from the trees following the quiet when the wind died. It was beheading a great wave and seeing the rest of him spill away. The singer stepped back like from a sickness. The others came to, rose up, and dusted off without realizing what she'd done. To them it was a dream, or only a reverie brought by drink and over-indulging. But she knew, and she watched the specter shift and swim, humming all the while. Though she couldn't see it clearly, she was afraid.

Before the spirit stood singing a most foul and unpleasant thing. No one else noticed, or paid it any mind. It even wondered what kind of meal

they'd make if there wasn't already a bounty of food strewn about. The spirit couldn't eat, though. Not with all the ghastly humming that made its stomach churn and its throat squeeze. It even tried to chew and swallow stewed kabocha. Enough broth trickled down to gurgle in its belly, to tease its raging hunger, but no flesh could pass. Not with all the horrible singing.

From nowhere in the air amongst them came a scream. A horrible, guttural, far-from-avian scream. The attention of every Yoru and guardsmen was gotten. They gathered arrows and reached for blades, but there was nothing to fire on, no one or thing to cut down. Still she hummed. A light wind picked up and danced a circle around the two. One of the guards brought fire. His torch made the spirit even harder for her to see, so she pushed him away. Again she started to sing.

The spirit's throat wrung tighter with every word, squeezing bile into its mouth. It burned the spirit, but the hunger inside continued to grow. It hadn't any need for air, but couldn't stand the chokehold any longer. It needed to feed.

"Come with me wind..." she sang, trying to command the swirling around her. A cyclone of wind and food encircled them, taunting the spirit, lifting her song. The pain for the spirit was blinding and blood came next, after the bile. Still she sang. With every bit of hunger it could muster, the spirit stood and made itself seen. Its skin was hanging and

its belly distended. Its lips were swollen and blue. The neck that she strangled was long and twisted and its eyes sunken and cold.

Towards her it crept, slowed by her singing. She stood still and sang without fear. A chorus around them, outside of their storm, shouldered her song. Even the drummer struck up. They pushed the spirit, but still it crept, driven by hunger. "Come with me wind, don't be afraid," but it reached her, and touched her shoulder. She felt a heavy hand and then a burn. With a look deep into its eyes, she stopped her singing. "Bento?" she gasped.

When the swirling stopped and the food fell, so did Bento's mother. Blood spilled from behind the hands she held to her throat. The name she spat sounded so familiar to the spirit. It was a name that even bridled his hunger, but only for a moment. Where its throat almost closed around kabocha, her flesh fell into its gut like a hog's foot to an empty bucket. It wasn't enough to satiate, only rumble up pangs of torture that there may scarcely be enough.

Not a blade nor arrow nor burning branch could make contact with the dark and feeding specter. It devoured, even as they dragged her away, until she was, bones and all, gone. And then it turned to one nearest the trail her insides left. When he was gone, most of the others had fled, leaving the spirit with a belly full and stretching, a field of unspoiled food, and a hunger that was only just begun.

Under the Harvest moon, the spirit of the singer's son moved to gather a meal. There were squashes and yams and onions and eggs, all kinds of fish, halved and roasted game birds, heaping piles of rice balls and stretches of skewered pork. It licked dirty bits and juices from its fingers. At the very taste of rendered quail its belly emptied and wanted for more. It ripped apart a knuckle from a wing and chewed the skin and tendons with the meat and bones. It couldn't swallow more than the fat and marrow. The mouthful only tortured the spirit, and it spat back the food. Every remaining morsel turned to rot in its eyes. It tried stuffing fistful after fistful from the hoard down its mouth, but there was nothing there that it could swallow. The smell revolted the spirit, but its stomach growled. If only flesh would satisfy, it was bent on finding more.

The spirit sniffed at the prints left in the ground. Much of their trail was covered by the sick smell from putrid piles it couldn't have. The smallest tracks smelled sweetest, though, and those were ones it followed. But the spirit didn't make it far before it smelled something even sweeter, something it wanted.

"Oy, Bento?!" Not only was the name familiar, but so was the voice who spoke. "Look at all of this beautiful food," he said. "What a waste! You even left the mushrooms. Tsk tsk." The spirit wasn't as hidden from him as it suspected. The man

it saw standing was holding up his weight on a walking staff and the most enticing smell of them all came from under the wrappings around his big toe. He must have heard Bento's shouting on the mountain. He must have seen the mess of him left on the trail.

"I think you've done enough damage here," he said, pointing out the blood with his cane. "You won't kill any more. I know your hunger, foul beast." The spirit was angry. It lunged at the man, who was still nimble enough to avoid its heavy hands. "Oh is it this you want," he said. Bento's uncle dangled his foot. "Oh yes, I'll bet it tastes good. Come on," he taunted, as if testing a dog. "Let's go," he said, "away from this place." After trailing away from the village, he stepped back onto the mountain road, and the spirit followed.

For the whole way, his uncle hiked carefully backwards, bracing himself with his cane. He lifted over every swat it made, but kept the spirit crawling forward. They went on this way for some time until the spirit stopped and sniffed. It stood over the place where Bento fell. His uncle inched slowly back, mindful not to stop moving, for fear he'd suffer a reflected fate. The spirit stepped and pawed, clawing like the great bear. It buried its face in the dirt in anger, searching for something other than bones, but those were already picked clean. From the bottom all the way up, the spirit ravaged them, swallowing every piece before standing, bigger than it ever was. With hunger and rage, it made chase.

Bento's uncle lifted his cane and turned to run. The spirit screamed like before. Its belly grumbled and clacked with bones, but the footsteps made no sound. The man ahead moved quickly, darting through the trees, despite the pain and the dark, and despite the bleeding. He ran until he reached the higher road, beyond where the spirit was willing to run. That's where he heard the sparrow.

Like before, there were none on the road. He gathered they would cower down in the village at least until morning. For now, at least, they were safe. Most dark spirits don't haunt in the daytime. He crouched to catch his breath, and he looked carefully for signs of either. He was off the climbing path and under the open sky again. The bird didn't bother him from that vantage. He waited. Clouds passed the moon, making it harder to spy movement. "Come on, boy," he said. "You did this," he started to unwrap his toe. "Don't you remember? Come and claim it."

He could practically hear the watering mouth of the twisting-throated tormentor. Its belly gurgled and tore through the rest of the bones. "What an appetite," whispered Bento's uncle. "Come with me," he shouted. "I don't have much, but you can take it. If you want the toe, it's yours."

The bird came first, followed by a dark cloud. From the fog emerged the spirit of Bento, the boy whose appetite was legend. Out of the torture of not being satisfied, he was grown to nearly double

the size of that boy. The sight of it staggered back the old Yoru. Its body was taut in places, but stretched and sunken in others. Its neck reached up almost into the branches, and was twisted like a bow string. Blood crusted the corner of the spirit's mouth, and its eyes were unspeakably sore.

"Come on, you bastard," called its prey. The spirit stepped forward and lowered its neck to sniff his injured toe. That to the spirit was everything. It was the only bite in its world worth eating, and it was all that was keeping the beast undead. "Come on," he said again, sliding back a step. "Chase me. Feed!" The spirit stopped. It could smell a trap, and his uncle saw that in its eyes. It was driven still, but it was cautious, and it made itself unseen.

Bento's uncle couldn't follow the black fog with clouds across the moon. He couldn't hear the steps or the bones, or anything from the spirit beyond a chuckle from its bird. He dropped his staff, with no hope for finesse, and towards his hut he ran. Only in the absence of being eaten did he know he outpaced the spirit. The bird stayed at the edge of the forest, but it continued to crow. Sure that the spirit was on his trail, Bento's Uncle open the door and left it that way to step in and fetch his blade.

The one he grabbed for was the small straight blade above his humble altar and he freed it from its binding. He held it in his fist with the edge turned towards his palm and walked back to the

door. When he drew the blade, it bled. With his injured hand, he painted the arch over the entryway, and then balled up his fist. He backed himself inside, letting his hand drip in deliberate puddles, and he found his way into a corner where he re-sheathed his blade and waited.

The wait wasn't long. A hungry beast can be predicted. The front slammed like a shutter in the wind, and then the walls scraped and buckled as the spirit forced its way inside. There was still nothing to be seen. Bento's uncle focused on the small puddles of blood. The one nearest the door was gone. He saw the second one fade and then disappear. They were placed as a breadcrumb trail. The spirit was wrong to think it would outwit a Yoru's trap. Then again, a spirit's only as bright as the light it left behind. And this one was driven more by belly than brains.

"You know, I think I've changed my mind. I think...I'll keep the toe, thank you. It's a perfectly good toe, really. It would be a shame to see it eaten. It'll be like new in no time. But I do have this," he said. "I have something for you that I think you will appreciate. My nephew Bento used to eat them, and this one is a special one." He rocked himself forward and hoisted himself up to stand on his better foot. He didn't have his cane, but there were enough ledges to grab. He turned his back to the beastly ghost. He knew in that moment that he would likely be struck down. But he wasn't. He approached the altar. Incense was burning.

Camphor. He spoke a word of prayer and asked a word of forgiveness and took the only food down that he had to offer.

On a small plate, he set down two rice balls, and beside it on the floor, a persimmon. His home had been eaten clean of every other morsel. The rice balls were his offering to the altar; the persimmon to a wife and child lost long ago. He wouldn't have even had that much to make an offering if it wasn't for the boy's immense hunger. "Please take this offering," he said, bowing his head. "It's not much, but may it bring your nourishment and ease your hunger."

There was silence. A fog came first, and then a black cloud where the spirit sat, hunched under the roof. From the black ether came the body, all blue and gray, of the spirit of Bento. Its eyes were working on something as they focused from deep within its awful brow. "Please. I want you to have this," he said.

Like a child, the spirit swatted away the rice balls and they came apart against the wall. It reached for the fruit, and studied it with care and with caution. It had seen that thing before. It looked back and forth between the fruit and the boy's uncle, as if knowing it was once forbidden. "It would be an honor," said his uncle, with a single tear behind each eye.

Lifting up its ugly hand, the spirit took a long, deep inhale. It wasn't more than a spring

cherry in size, pinched between two mighty, fat fingers. Nothing had ever smelled so sweet, not snow from the first flurry, dew from the first flower, or summer's first falling rain. In a single bite it was gone.

From deep inside something rumbled. The juice eased open its throat and into its belly slid the plump flesh. Moaning and anguish turned with a purr to delight. The spirit started un-swelling and slowly, it shrunk. Before his uncle's eyes, it looked again like Bento. The blood from under his mouth was gone, and so was the coldness in his eyes, and the hunger. Though his light began to fade, he bowed to his uncle, and stood to take his leave.

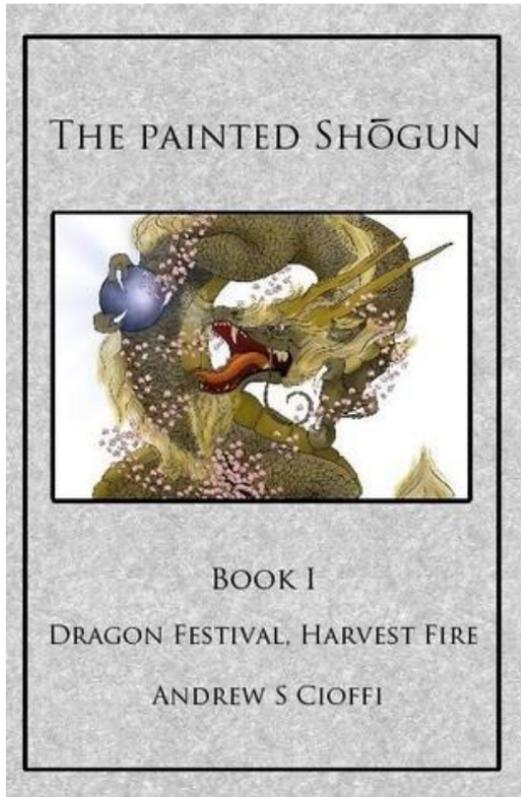


For one last meal, Bento ate his fill, and for the first time, in life or in death, he gave his thanks. It was a lesson learned that brought him dignity and gratitude and finally, peace, and from his family, was a worthy sacrifice.

- OWARI -

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