

A Truce Wall
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I got very angry because Mr. Hayashi's dirty jacket was on my polished desk. It was the third time. My anger nearly exploded. I couldn't stand it anymore. I detested him like a cockroach. He was—I hate to mention this—my colleague at a high school. He taught Japanese and I taught math.

Mr. Hayashi was different from me in many respects. I believed in strictness and exactness. For me, "one plus one" must be two. Everything must be logical and based on rules and formulas. Mr. Hayashi, however, was too flexible and lenient. In my understanding, he thought that "one plus one" equaled two, or zero, or sometimes 100. What was important for him was not logic, but beautiful "humanity and passion."

Our desks in the teachers' room were in vivid contrast. My desk was always as clean and bright as a mirror. There was nothing on it except for a polished dark-brown box-style bookstand. When I left school in the evening, I closed its lid and locked it. Once locked, it looked like a treasure box, waxed and polished. When I came to school in the morning, I first cleaned the box and my desk with a wet cloth.

Mr. Hayashi's desk was messy with a lot of things mostly irrelevant to teaching Japanese: books and magazines, an empty cup noodle container, chopsticks, a toothpick holder, a soy sauce bottle, a towel, a bag of bananas, a Kleenex, and old newspapers.

I paid a lot of attention to my clothes. I wore suits and a tie, but he did not care what he wore or how he dressed.

Our physical constitutions were different, too. I was tall and slender. The only flaw with my appearance was that I had little up-slanting eyes like a fox. My nickname among my students was Fox, which I didn't like. Mr. Hayashi, on the other hand, was fat with extremely down-slanting eyes like a racoon. The students called him Raccoon, which I thought was the most suitable nickname for him.

The only thing we shared was our age. We were both 59 years old, only a year away from the retirement age of 60.

In April in 2010, when the new school year started, the teachers' seats were newly assigned. Since I was the A class homeroom teacher and Mr. Hayashi was the B class homeroom teacher, our desks happened to be next

to each other.

When new seats were announced, I heard some teachers talking about the catastrophe that would happen between us, but they appeared to be looking forward to it.

The crisis took place on a hot day in the middle of May. When I returned to my desk after the second period, I saw Mr. Hayashi's dirty jacket on my desk. I got irritated and looked for him, who happened to be sipping coffee at a tea-drinking corner in the teachers' room, chatting with a young woman teacher. I trotted to him and said:

"Mr. Hayashi, don't put your thing on my desk."

"What have I put?"

"Your jacket. Please remove it at once," I demanded, trying to control myself, partly because I thought I should behave like a gentleman in public and partly because I did not want to give the young woman teacher a bad impression of me.

"Oh, sorry, did I put it on your desk?" he said nonchalantly.

"Yes, You DID," my voice was harsh.

He followed me to my desk and removed his jacket, saying, "I'm sorry. I was absent-minded."

"Don't put it on my desk again," I said.

Three days later, the same thing happened. This time I was furious. I lost my gentlemanship and said sharply.

"Mr. Hayashi, I've told you not to put your jacket on my desk. How many times do I have to say the same thing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was absent-minded. I will try not to," he apologized. The neighboring teachers were watching us.

"Next time you put your jacket here, I will throw it into a trash box," I said resolutely.

"I'm sorry. I apologize," he said.

For about ten days Mr. Hayashi faithfully obeyed my warning. Two weeks later in the evening, I was scoring the math tests, when I heard Mr. Hayashi say, "Where have I put my jacket?" I knew where it was. It was in the trash box in the teachers' room. A young teacher standing nearby asked him what he was searching for.

"My jacket. I think I wore it this morning," Mr. Hayashi said.

"Isn't it in your locker?" the young teacher said.

"No, I never use it."

"I see," the young teacher said and turned to me. I was a bit nervous but pretended to be busily scoring the examination papers. Then, the young teacher whispered to Mr. Hayashi.

Mr. Hayashi walked toward the trash box at the corner of the teachers' room. Soon he said, "I've found it," and returned to his desk. I glanced at him. He was patting off the dust on his jacket. He came to me and said:

"How dare you throw my jacket in the trash box?"

I ignored Raccoon's words, but just kept scoring the tests.

Raccoon barked:

"Do you hear me?" he said slightly pushing my shoulder from behind.

"Don't touch me with your dirty hand," I said, looking at Raccoon hatefully.

"Dirty? My hand's dirty?"

"Yes. With numerous viruses," I said.

"You are humiliating me. Do you think you're clean?"

"At least, cleaner than you."

"Only your damn appearance is, but your heart is dirty and wretched. You've thrown my jacket."

"I have warned you, haven't I?"

"I know, but you've gone much too far. Are you qualified to be called a teacher?"

"That's what I want to say to you," I retorted. "You've ignored my warning. If you were a student, I would make you stand in the corridor."

"I am not a student. I AM a teacher," Raccoon said. I looked at him. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Are you worthy to be called a teacher?" I said.

"That's enough. Do you want me to hit you?"

"Hit me now, but we're in the teachers' room, you know."

I referred to the "Chushingura¹" story during the Edo era where Asano Naganori, who drew his sword from the scabbard in the palace, had to commit suicide by hara-kiri². I thought Raccoon knew the historical incident because he taught Japanese classics.

Raccoon's fist began to tremble. No teacher dared to stop the quarrel. The

¹ the title of a Kabuki drama based on the story of 47 men who took revenge for the death of their lord, the daimyo Asano Naganori, in 1702.

² Also called seppuku. Ceremonial suicide by ripping open the abdomen with a dagger or knife: formerly practiced in Japan by members of the warrior class when disgraced or sentenced to death

students who happened to be in the teachers' room were looking at us rather amusingly. If I said just one more offensive word to Raccoon, he would knock me down.

At the critical moment, the door of the teachers' room opened and the vice-principal rushed to us, screaming, "Stop! Stop!"

He took us to the principal's room, where he scolded us and discussed how to prevent further quarrel.

After a while, we were released and came back to the teachers' room. Soon Mr. Hayashi left school. I stayed and continued scoring the tests, when the school carpenter came to the teachers' room. He walked to my desk, and said:

"Excuse me, but please let me measure your desk."

"Oh, thank you," I said.

After measuring it, he left. I resumed scoring the math examinations. Soon, the carpenter entered the teachers' room again with a board and stood it between my desk and Mr. Hayashi's. It was 40 centimeters higher than our desks. It was the truce wall between our desks. That was the vice-principal's idea.

The wall stood till October when Mr. Hayashi died of heart attack. I found out later that he had had high blood pressure and was taking medicine that made his blood fluent and clean, but that day, he did not take the medicine because he had a dental appointment.

After Mr. Hayashi's funeral, the wall was removed. I missed him. I remembered how I was ready to fight with him whenever I left my house in the morning. I remembered my blood circulating vigorously whenever I saw the sight of Mr. Hayashi. He was the source of my power. He was my arch-rival. I lost my spirit of exuberance.

The autumn wind began to blow. When I was looking at the red leaves flying in the cold air through the window of the teachers' room, I found myself murmuring:

"Mr. Hayashi, you may put your jacket on my desk anytime you want. To tell the truth, I envied you for your humane and passionate character."

The End