

A Bowl of Kake-soba

It was the 31st in December, or New Year's Eve. It happened in a soba restaurant 'Hokkaitei' in Sapporo, Hokkaido. For every soba restaurant, the last day of the year is the busiest and the most prosperous season.

At Hokkaitei, they were also extremely busy working from morning till night. However, after 10 o'clock in the evening, there were only a few customers left in the restaurant, and no more new customers came to Hokkaitei.

Thinking it was a good time, instead of the owner, a person who was truly kind but unsociable, the owner's wife, who was called 'Okami-san' by their regular customers, let their part-time workers go home with a full-house bonus, special money for a busy day, and some soba-noodles for their family.

The door was opened slowly when the soba restaurant was ready to close as the last customer left. A woman in a checkered half length coat which was out of season, and two children, one boy who was about 6 years old, and the other 10, wearing matching new sweat suits, entered the restaurant.

"Hello. May I help you?" the owner's wife said. The woman hesitantly said,

"Uh,...could we have...kake-soba (soba in hot broth with no topping)...a bowl of kake-soba...please?"

At her back, two children were anxiously looking up at their mother.

"Oh, well, okay. Come this way please."

She led them to the table nearest to the heating, and said to her husband at the counter out loudly.

"One kake!"

Glancing at the three people, he answered her,

"Okay, one kake!" and boiled one ball of raw saba and a half in a pan.

One ball of raw soba is for one serving. Without letting them notice, he finished boiling one and a half ball of soba for a serving bowl.

A few minutes later, three people at the table were putting their head together, and chatting over the bowl of soba. Their voices slightly reached the counter.

"Mm, it tastes good," said the older boy.

"Have some, Mom," said the little one, and held one piece of noodle to his mother's mouth.

After finishing it, they paid 150 yen for a bowl of soba, said, "Thank you very much. We enjoyed it," bowed and left.

The owner and his wife said unanimously,

"Thank you very much! Have a Happy New Year!"

They were busy as usual every day the following year, and soon the day of December 31st came around again.

It was a busier day than the one in the previous year. When the clock struck ten, and just when they were going to finish working, the door opened and a woman with two boys came in.

The owner's wife remembered the last customer of the previous year when she glanced at her



checkered half coat

"Uh,...could we have...kake-soba...a bowl of kake-soba...please?"

"Oh, well, okay. Come this way, please."

She led them to the same table they'd sat the previous year and said to the owner loudly.

"One kake!"

"Okay, one kake!" and relit the stove he'd just put out.

"Hey, how about making three servings for them as a discount?" she whispered into his ear.

"No. If I do that like that, they'll be concerned about it." he said, boiling one ball and a half of raw soba in the pan. Seeing it, the wife smiled and said,

"You are a good guy, even if you look sullen."

He said nothing as usual and served one and a half balls of soba in one serving bowl.

The two, standing on each side of the counter, overheard what the mother and her sons were saying over a bowl of soba at the table.

"Mm, tastes good," said one.

"Mom. We have been able to eat soba at Hokkaitei again," said the other.

"I hope we can have it next year," said the woman.

After finishing it, they paid 150 yen, and left.

"Thank you very much! Have a Happy New Year!" the owner and his wife said to them: the same greetings they repeated many times that day.

Their business had been going well the next year, too, and New Year's Eve came again. It was over half past nine in the evening, since around that time, they didn't talk with each other, but Hokkaitei's owner and his wife were both nervous and couldn't settle down.

When it was past 10 o'clock, the owner let his workers go home, and flipped over the price cards on the wall one by one which were raised in price just this summer: '200 yen for kake-soba' was quickly changed into 150 yen.

The 'Reserved' seat card had already been put on the second table by the wife.

It was 10:30 when the three---the mother and two boys---entered as if they had been waiting for the stream of customers to end. The older boy was in a junior high school's uniform, while the little one was in his brother's hand-me-down jumper; though it was a little larger for him. But the mother wore the same faded checkered half coat.

'Hello. May I help you?' the owner's wife smiled at them.

"Uh,...could we have...kake-soba...two bowls of kake-soba...please?"

"Ah, well, okay. Come this way, please."

She led them to the same second table, while subtly removing the 'Reserved' card. She said to her husband loudly.

"Two kake!"

"Okay ,two kake!" and put three balls of raw soba into the pan.

From the three people's cheerful laughing, they must have had a lively conversation over two servings of soba.

The wife exchanged glances with her husband and smiled when she heard their lively conversation. The owner nodded with a sullen face.

"Sons, I'd like to say thank you to both of you," the mother said.

"...Thank us? ...What for?" said the little one.

"To tell the truth, eight people were injured by the accident your late father had caused...I've paid them 50,000 yen every month that wasn't covered by the car insurance."

"I've known about it," said the older son. The owner and his wife couldn't move but just listened to them.

"The due date for the last payment is next March. But I paid all the debts today."

"Wow! You really did it, Mom?" said the older son again.

"Yes, I did. Jun has shopped and made supper every day, and you have delivered morning and evening newspapers. Thanks to both of you, I've been able to work without worrying about anything. They gave me a special allowance for my hard work. That's why I could finish paying all of our debt."

"Mom, Bravo! I'm very happy to hear that. But I'll keep making supper from now on," the little one said.

"I'll keep delivering newspapers, too. Jun, let's do our best!" the older one said.

"Thank you, thank you very much, guys!"

"Now I think it's time to uncover our secret. Jun and I have kept a secret from you. That's...do you remember the information from Jun's classroom teacher? It said there was a parents' visiting day on a Sunday in November...Jun's teacher handed him one more letter to you the same day---'Jun's essay was chosen among the ones in Hokkaido, and it will be sent to the National Essay Competition. So I'm planning to have Jun read his essay on parents' visiting day.---Jun hid the letter from you as he was afraid if you knew, you'd be absent from work. But Jun's friend told me about that, so...I went to his class that day instead of you."

"Oh...I see...and then?"

"The teacher said that she'd told all of her students to write an essay titled 'What do you want to be in the future?' and that Jun wrote 'A bowl of kake-soba' as his essay. Then she had him read his essay.

When I heard his title, I understood that he'd written about us at Hokkaitei. I thought in my mind why he'd written about such an embarrassing thing.

In the essay he wrote about our Dad who died in a traffic accident, and that it caused a large debt; Mom worked from morning till night; and I delivered newspapers...he read about all these things.

And then at night on December 31st, three of us ate one bowl of kake-soba... How delicious it was! One bowl of kake-soba for three people...but the owner and his wife said to us with a loud voice, 'Thank you very much. Have a happy New Year!' It sounded to him as if they were telling us 'Don't give in! Good luck! Manage to survive!'

Then Jun read it out loud that when he grew up, he would become a soba restaurant owner who could say to his customers with a loud voice, 'Good luck and a happy life!'"

The owner and his wife, who had been overhearing their conversation behind the counter, were crouching down and sharing both ends of a towel to wipe their tears.

"After Jun finished reading his essay, his teacher said, instead of Jun's mother, his brother is here. Let's ask him to give us some words."

"Well then, what did you do?"



"It was an unexpected request, so I couldn't speak a word at first, but... Boys and girls, Thank you for getting along with my brother Jun...he makes supper every day, so I'm afraid he gives you a lot of trouble because he has to return home in the middle of club activities. Just after he started reading his essay 'A bowl of kake-soba', I felt embarrassed.

But when I saw Jun holding his head high, and listened to him reading his essay loudly, I realized...the more embarrassing thing must be...the fact that a bowl of kake-soba was embarrassing my mind...

I have to remember our mother's courage to have ordered a bowl of kake-soba that day...Jun and I will cooperate to help our mother. And then I asked them, 'Will you keep having a good friendship with Jun?'"

They were eating their New-Year's Eve soba merrily: quietly they held their hands with each other; Laughing and patting each other's shoulders---totally different from previous years---paid 300 yen and bowed deeply, saying, "Thank you very much. We enjoyed it."

The owner and his wife said to the last guests of the year with loud voices

"Thank you very much. Have a Happy New Year!" (2011/12/01 With Itaya)

Original by Ryohei Kuri

一杯のかけ蕎麦

これは大晦日に、「北海亭」という札幌の、ある蕎麦屋で起こったお話です。どの蕎麦屋にとっても、一番の書き入れ時は、大晦日です。

ここ「北海亭」でも、朝から晩までてんでこ舞いの大忙し。それでも、夜十時を過ぎた頃から、客は二、三人に減り、新たに入ってくる客もいなくなりました。

女将（おかみ）は、頃合を見はからって、根は優しいが、むっつりした顔の主人に代わって、従業員に大晦日の「金一封」と「年越しそば」を持たせて帰しました。



最後の客が帰り、店じまいの準備をしていると、入り口の戸が静かに開いて、季節外れの格子柄のハーフコートを着た女性が、揃いの新しいトレーニングウェアを着た六歳と十歳位の子供を連れて入ってきました。

「毎度、いらっしゃいませ。」

「あの・・・かけ蕎麦・・・一つだけ・・・お願いできますか？」

女の人のためらいながら言いました。後ろで二人の子供が不安そうにお母さんを見上げていました。

「あっ、えーと、いいですよ。どうぞ。」

女将は、三人をストーブに一番近いテーブルに案内すると、大きな声で厨房の夫に言いました。

「かけ一丁！」

三人をちらっと見て、

「あいよ、かけ一丁！」と答えて、夫は生そばひと玉半を鍋に入れました。生蕎麦ひと玉一人分。三人に気づかれないように、茹で上がったひと玉半を、丼に入れました。

数分後には、顔を寄せ合い、一杯のかけ蕎麦を食べている三人の話し声が、かすかに聞こえてきました。

「あー、おいしい！」兄がいました。

「お母さんも食べなよ。」弟は、そば一本を母親の口元に持っていきました。

「ごちそうさまでした。おいしかったです。」

三人は、食べ終わると、150円払い、お辞儀をして帰って行きました。

「ありがとうございました。よいお年を！」

店主と女将は、声を合わせて言いました。

連日繁盛の蕎麦屋に、再び大晦日がやってきました。昨年よりも忙しい大晦日になりました。時計が十時を打ち、店じまいをしようとしていると、入口が開き、子供を二人連れた女の人が入って来ました。

女将は、女の人の子供の格子柄のハーフコートを見て、去年の最後の客を思い出しました。

「あの・・・かけ蕎麦・・・一つだけ・・・お願いできますか？」

「あっ、いいですよ。どうぞこちらへ。」

女将は、去年三人が座ったテーブルに案内して、大きな声で夫に言いました

「かけ一丁！」

「あいよ、かけ一丁！」そして消したばかりのストーブに火を入れました。

「ねえ、お前さん、サービスして三人前出してやらない？」と妻は夫の耳元に囁きました。

「駄目だよ。そんなことしたら、かえって気を遣わせるじゃないか。」

「仏頂面（ぶっちゃょうづら）だけど、お前さんもいいところあるね。」

ひと玉半の生蕎麦を茹でている夫を見て、妻は微笑みました。

夫は、いつものように黙って、ひと玉半のかけ蕎麦を出してやりました。

二人がカウンターの内と外に立っていると、かけ蕎麦を食べながら話している親子の会話が聞こえてきました。

「おいしいよ。」と兄。

「お母さん、また北海亭でおそば食べられたね。」と弟。

「来年も食べられるといいわね。」

三人は、食べ終わり、150円払って帰って行きました。

店主と女将は、その日何度も繰り返した同じ言葉を、三人にも言いました。

「ありがとうございました。よいお年を！」

翌年も蕎麦屋は大繁盛し、また大晦日がめぐって来ました。九時半を過ぎた頃から、北海亭の店主と女将は口数が少なくなり、何となく落ち着かなくなりました。

十時を過ぎて、店主は従業員を帰らせると、この夏値上げした、壁にかかったお品書きを一枚一枚ひっくり返しました。かけそば200円はかけそば150円に換わりました。二番テーブルには、すでに「予約席」の札が置いてあります。

十時半。あの三人、母親と二人の息子が、客がいなくなるのを待っていたかのように入って来ました。兄は学生服、弟は兄からのお下がりなのでしょう。少しだぶだぶのジャンパーを着ていました。母親は相変わらず、あの色あせた格子柄のハーフコートでした。

「今晚は、いらっしゃいませ。」女将は三人に微笑みました。

「あの・・・かけ蕎麦・・・二つ・・・お願いできますか？」

「あっ、勿論、いいですよ。どうぞこちらへ。」

女将は、あの二番テーブルに案内すると、さりげなく「予約席」の札をはずしました。そして大きな声で夫に言いました。

「かけ二丁！」

「あいよ、かけ二丁！」鍋に生そば三玉が入りました。

かけ蕎麦二杯を囲んで、楽しそうな笑い声が聞こえてきました。三人の会話は弾んでいるのでしょう。女将は夫と視線を交わすとニコッとしました。店主は、相変わらずの無愛想な顔で頷（うなず）きました。

「あのね、私、二人にお礼が言いたいよ。」

「・・・お礼？・・・何のこと？」弟が尋ねました。

「実はね、死んだお父さんが起こした交通事故で八人もの人が怪我したでしょう。・・・保険だけでは足りなくて、お母さんは毎月五万円ずつ返していたの。」

「知ってるよ。」兄が答えました。店主と女将は、身動きもせずじっと聴いていました。

「支払い期限は来年の三月だけど、今日全部払い終えたの。」

「わー、本当？お母さん。」兄が言いました。

「本当よ。淳は毎日買い物をして、夕ご飯を作ってくれてたわね。お兄ちゃんは朝刊と夕刊の新聞配達をしてくれてた。二人のおかげで、お母さんは何の心配もなく働くことができたのよ。ボーナスが出て、借金を全部返せたの。」

「お母さん、すごい！よかったね。でもこれからも僕が夕ご飯作るよ。」弟は言いました。

「僕も新聞配達続けるよ。淳、頑張ろうな！」

「ありがとう、ありがとね。本当に！」

「あのね、僕達、お母さんに秘密にしておいたことがあるんだ。淳と僕の二人の秘密・・・それはね・・・

淳の担任の先生からのお知らせ、覚えてる？11月の日曜日の授業参観の通知・・・あの日、淳は、もう一通お母さん宛の手紙を預かってきたんだ。・・・その手紙には、淳の作文が、北海道代表として全国作文コンクールに入選したこと、参観日にみんなの前で淳に、その作文を読んでもらうこと、などが書いてあったんだ。淳は、お母さんにわかると、仕事を休むだろう、と思って手紙を隠したんだ。でも、淳の友達が、そのことを僕に話してくれたもんだから・・・だから・・・僕がお母さんの代わりに授業参観に行ってきたの。」

「まあ・・・そう・・・それで？」

「先生は、『大きくなったらどんな仕事をしたいか』という作文を、クラスみんなに書かせたんだ。淳の作文の題は、『一杯のかけ蕎麦』。そこまで話すと、先生は、淳に作文を読ませたんだ。僕は『北海亭』のことだな、とピンときたけど、何であんな恥かしいことを書いたんだろう、と思った。淳は、お父さんが事故で死んだこと、借金が一杯あること、お母さんが朝から晩まで働いていること、僕が新聞配達をしていること・・・全部読み上げたよ。



それから、大晦日の夜、三人で一杯のかけ蕎麦を食べたこと・・・お蕎麦がおいしかったこと。三人で一杯のかけ蕎麦でも・・・お店の人は大きな声で、『ありがとうございます。よいお年を！』と言ってくれたこと。その声が、『負けるな！がんばれ！くじけるな！』と云ってのように聞こえたこと。

そして最後に、淳は大きな声で読んだんだ。・・・大きくなったら、お蕎麦屋さんになって、お客さんに、『頑張ってるね。お幸せに！』って大きな声で言ってあげたいんです。・・・ってね。」

蕎麦屋の店主と女将は、カウンターの後ろで聞いていましたが、しゃがみこみ、一本のタオルの両端を引き合い、涙をふいていました。

「淳が作文を読み終わると、先生が『淳君のお母さんの代わりにお兄さんが来ていますので、ちょっと話をしてもらいたと思います。』って言ったんだ。」

「まあ、それでどうしたの？」

「突然のことで、最初、何を言ったらいいかわからなかったけど、・・・皆さん・・・淳と仲良くしてくれてありがとう・・・淳は毎日、夕ご飯を作ってくれます。だから、クラブ活動の途中で家に帰らなくてはならないので、迷惑をかけていると思います。弟が『一杯のかけ蕎麦』を読み始めた時は、僕は恥ずかしく思いました。

でも、淳が作文を、堂々と大声で読んでいるのを聞いているうちに、一杯のかけ蕎麦を恥ずかしいと思う、僕の心の方が、もっと恥ずかしいことなんだって気づいたのです。・・・僕は、あの日、一杯のかけ蕎麦を注文した、お母さんの勇気を思いました。・・・淳と僕は仲良くしてお母さんを助けていきます。みんなも淳と仲良くして下さい、って言ったんだ。」

母と子は、楽しそうに年越し蕎麦を食べました。しみりとお互いの手を取り合ったり、笑いころげて肩をたたきあったり・・・前の年とは全く違った雰囲気でした。

「ごちそうさまでした。おいしかったです。」と言うと、300円払い、深々と頭を下げ出て行きました。

店主と女将は、その年最後の三人の客を、大きな声で送りだしました。

「ありがとうございました。よいお年を！」(Kudos)

