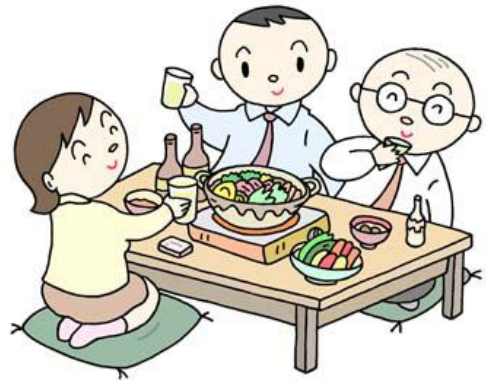


A Bowl of kake-soba(Part.2)

Another year had passed—

At Hokkaitei, they'd prepared the second table with a 'Reserved' card since 9 o'clock. But the mother and two boys didn't show up. The next year, and the year after that, they also kept the second table for the three but they didn't show up then, either.

The owner of Hokkaitei had it remodeled, and got new tables and chairs. But the old second table and chairs were left there. They were surrounded with the new ones.



"Why are the old table and chairs here?" some customers puzzled. The owner and his wife told them about the episode of 'a bowl of kake-soba' and added that keeping the old table had encouraged them, and that some day when the three customers came again, they wanted to have them sit at the table.

The story was spread around among their customers as a happy table. In fact the table was becoming popular: some girl-students came a long way to eat soba there; some young couple ordered after waiting for another customer to leave from that happy table.

On New Year's Eve some years after, the owner's friends, who had been associated with each other as if they had been their own family members, finished their work for the day and gathered one after another.

They had their annual event that they had kept for several years: to eat year-end-soba at Hokkaitei and visit the nearest shrine with all of their friends and families, listening to the watch-night-bell.

After 9:30, the fish store owner and his wife entered at first with a big plate of sashimi, then over thirty regulars, some with sake while others with side dishes, came over, and the atmosphere was livened up.

They all knew about the second table's episode, but never spoke out that the people expected wouldn't come again. Even so they didn't sit at the reserved table for New Year's Eve. They sat shoulder to shoulder in the narrow tatami-room space beside the table to let later comers join.

When it was after ten o'clock, the get together was enlivened: some were enjoying eating and drinking, helping the owner cook, and taking some thing from the fridge; some others were talking about a great year-end sale, and of going swimming in the sea, having a grandchild, and so on. Then the front door opened. All the people stopped talking, when some people looked at the front door.

Two young men in jackets with coats in their hands entered the soba restaurant. They all sighed and the lively atmosphere came back again. Just when the owner's wife apologetically tried to tell the new customers that all the seats had been occupied, a woman in kimono came in and stood between the two young men. All the people had their breath taking away and pricked up their ears.

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

The owner's wife changed color when she heard her voice.

The memory that she'd never forgotten — some ten years ago, the mother and her two sons showing up — came back in her mind.

She glanced between her husband whose eyes were wide open in a stare, and the three people who just entered.

“Ah.....well..... you.....you.....” she said confusingly.

One of the young men said to her.

“ We are the three people who came here on the last day of the year 14 years ago, and ordered a bowl of kake-soba for three of us — my mother, brother and I. We were encouraged with the bowl of kake-soba. Thanks to it, the three of us could cooperate to survive.

After that, we moved to Shiga Prefecture where my mother's parents had lived. I'd passed the National Examination for Medical Practitioners this year and have worked at the Kyoto University's affiliated hospital as a resident pediatrician, and next April, I will work at the Sapporo General Hospital. I came to Sapporo this time to meet people who I'll work with in the hospital for the first time, and visit my father's grave to tell him. I talked with my brother, who actually didn't become a soba restaurant owner, but works at a bank in Kyoto, about the most luxurious plan in our life..... to visit Hokkaitei with our mother on the night of the New Year's Eve and order three bowls of kake-soba.”

Tears welled up in the owner and his wife's eyes while they were nodding and listening to the young man.

Listening to him, a grocery store owner, who was eating soba at the table near the front door, swallowed, and stood up.

“Hey, you! Why are you hesitating? You've been waiting for the New Year's Eve ten-o'clock-reserved-seat customers for ten years. This is the moment. Lead them to the table!”

The owner's wife who'd been patting the grocery store owner on his shoulder, collected herself, and shouted,

“Hello! We've been waiting for you! Come this way, please. Hey, three kake to the second table!”

“Okay, three kake,” answered the owner with a sullen face which had been covered with tears.

Unexpectedly a shout and applause arose among the people in the soba restaurant.

Outside, the light snow, which had been falling a while before, let up, and the new January's wind was blowing to the Hokkaitei's noren(A noren is a split half-curtain hung over the entrance or under the eaves of a store, a restaurant or a Japanese-style pub. It serves as an advertisement since the name of the store or brand name is dyed on it.), which was lit by the light's reflection from the fresh snow. (2012.12.1 With Itaya)



(続) 一杯のかけ蕎麦

また一年が過ぎました・・・北海亭では、九時半を過ぎると、二番テーブルに「予約席」の札が置かれました。でもあの母親と二人の息子は現れませんでした。次の年も、その次の年も、三人のために二番テーブルを用意しましたが、三人は現れませんでした。北海亭は改装され、新しいテーブルとイスに入れ替わりましたが、古びた二番テーブルとイスは昔のままに、新しいものに囲まれるように置いてありました。



「何だって、こんなところに古いテーブルとイスが置いてあるんですか？」

と不思議がる客もいました。店主と女将（おかみ）は「一杯のかけ蕎麦」の由来（ゆらい）を語り、この古いテーブルでどんなに励まされたか、三人がいつの日かやって来たら、このテーブルに座ってもらうのだ、と付け加えました。

「幸せのテーブル」の話は口コミで広まっていきました。実際その評判のテーブルで蕎麦を食べようと遠い所からやって来た女子校生や、「幸せのテーブル」が空くのを待って注文し直す若いカップルもいました。

数年が過ぎたある大晦日、家族同様の付き合いの店主の友人たちが仕事を終えて、次から次へと集まって来ました。

彼らにとっては、この数年来続いている年中行事でした。北海亭で、除夜の鐘を聞きながら、年越し蕎麦を食べて、仲間とその家族全員で最寄りの神社に詣でるというものでした。

九時半を過ぎ、刺し身の大皿を持って入って来た魚屋夫婦を皮切りに、三十人以上の友人たちが酒やおつまみを持ってやって来ました。店内は一気に賑（にぎ）やかになりました。

「二番テーブル」のことは誰もが知っていましたが、あの三人が今年も来ていないことは口にしませんでした。「予約席」が空いていても、誰も座らず、テーブルのそばの狭い座敷に、肩を寄せ合って座り、後から来る人のために、スペースを作っておきました。

十時過ぎ、宴はたけなわになりました。飲んだり食べたりする人、店主の料理の手伝いをしたり、冷蔵庫から何かを取り出したりする人、年末大売り出しのこと、夏に海水浴に行ったこと、孫ができたことなどを話している人、など、など・・・その時、入り口の戸が開きました。みんな、話を止めました。入口に目を向ける人もいました。

ジャケット姿の二人の若者が、手にコートを持って、蕎麦屋に入って来ました。溜息とともに、宴の喧騒がもとに戻りました。女将が、「すみませんが満席なので・・・。」と二人に丁重にお断りしようとした時、着物姿の婦人が入ってきて二人の間に立ちました。みんな固唾（かたず）をのんで、耳をそばだてました。

「あの・・・かけ蕎麦・・・三つ・・・お願いできますか？」

女将は、その声を聞いてはっとしました。決して忘れられないあの記憶——十数年前店に来た、母親と二人の息子——が蘇りました。

女将の視線は、驚きのあまり、目を見開（みひら）いている夫と、今やって来たばかりの三人の間を、行ったり来たりしました。

「あっ・・・えーと・・・そちら・・・そちらさまは・・・」女将はとまどいながら言いました。

若者の一人が答えました。

「私たちは十四年前の大晦日に、ここで一杯のかけ蕎麦を三人で食べた母子（おやこ）です。一杯の

かけ蕎麦に勇気づけられ、おかげで、三人で何とか助け合いやって来ました。その後、母の実家の滋賀県に移りましたが、今年、私は医師国家試験に合格し、研修医として京都大学付属病院で働いています。そして来年の4月からは札幌総合病院で勤務することになっています。今回、病院関係者との最初の打ち合わせと、父親の墓前報告を兼ねて札幌に来ました。弟は、蕎麦屋さんにはなりませんでしたが、京都の銀行に勤めております。人生で最高の贅沢・・・大晦日に母と一緒に北海亭に行って、かけ蕎麦を三つ注文する、ということをも弟と計画しました。

若者の話を頷（うなづ）きながら聞く店主と女将の目には涙が溢（あふ）れてきました。

入口近くのテーブルで蕎麦を啜（すす）っていた八百屋のおやじさんは、蕎麦をゴクッと飲み込むと、立ち上がりました。

「よう、お二人さん！何をもたもたしているんだよ。十年間、大晦日の十時に来る予約席のお客を待っていたんだろついに来たんだよ。お客さんをテーブルに通しなよ！」
女将は、八百屋のおやじさんの肩を叩くと、気を落ち着けて、大きな声で言いました。



「いらっしやいませ！お待ちしておりました。こちらへどうぞ。二番テーブル、かけ三丁！」

「あいよ、かけ三丁！」

店主は、いつもの無愛想な顔を涙で濡らして答えました。

蕎麦屋では、突如として一斉に拍手と喝采が湧き起こりました。

外では、ちょっと前まで降っていた粉雪も止み、新雪に映える北海亭の暖簾（のれん）が元旦の風に揺れていました。(kudos)