

## Koi Nobori (The Carp Flag)

Connie L. Sminkey

In the spring of his fourth year, Kazuma Takabara was taken to live with his grandparents in their house in eastern Kagoshima city. Mother had been taken away earlier somewhere to “rest”, and father’s job was too important and kept him too busy to fool around with a young boy.

Grandfather’s house sat right at the beginning of a large hill, back from the road and with a considerably large garden surrounding it. Like many elderly men his age, Grandfather found pleasure in gardening. All around the house and even down below on the public land that abruptly ended at a bus stop, a great variety of flowers grew in all seasons. Camellias and azaleas, violets and roses of various hues thrived under Grandfather Takabara’s touch. Morning had barely broken when the old man (his trousers tucked up and a large straw hat protecting his bald head from sunburn) set to pulling weeds or planting more seeds. A few hours later those waiting to catch the first bus would wonder at the old man’s energy.

“That old man sure is a wonder at growing things!” the bus passengers would say as they marvelled at the flowers. Perfect blooms they were, as good as you could find grown in a hothouse. It was no wonder that some of these blossoms were picked and then appeared in various and beautiful arrangements in the alcoves of homes all along the bus line.

Grandfather did not mind that his flowers were stolen. Some of them were grown on public land after all. It was a great source of pride to him that his flowers were so admired. He was good at growing things, with the exception, perhaps, of children. For Kazuma’s situation was a matter of concern and shame.

Father had only grunted when he and Kazuma got out of the car and his grandparents greeted them. Then Father all but shoved Kazuma at them. “Impossible for me,” was all Father said. Then he had gotten back into his new and shiny car and driven away. Kazuma had spent little time with his grandparents before. He shyly tugged at his orange T shirt and shorts. On his legs and arms purple bruises peeked out suspiciously. Would living here be better?

“Mother is tired,” was all that Kazuma had been told when mother was taken away. Indeed, she had looked so, with her eyes always red and swollen and her head hanging

limp in the manner only seen in a parent who had been up too many nights with the unspeakable worries of grown-ups. When Kazuma had tried to kiss her she barely smiled at him. Yes, it was right that Father send her away to rest, and he would be a good boy at Granny's, wouldn't he? So with a small suitcase of his clothes he was taken off to live at the garden house at the beginning of the hill.

"It can't be helped, I suppose", Grandmother sighed as she set a bowl of steaming noodles down for Kazuma to eat. When the boy went at it with the gusto of a child who has eaten only cold and easily dispensed food for some time, Grandmother felt a shame a woman of her years rarely feels. It was clear now that if the child was to get any care at all it was up to her to give it to him. With resignation, she watched her grandson gulp his meal.

The noodles were hot and tasty and Kazuma sucked up each thick white strand noisily. A whole bowl of hot *udon!* And Granny was sitting there with him while he ate, not lying in bed or locked in the bathroom like his mother was when he ate at home. Yes! It will be good living here at Grannys'.

Heaven is merciful and a child of four is seldom aware of anyone's but his own feelings, so the great consternation surrounding Kazuma's predicament was not known to him. He did not know why his mother was tired, only that it was better not to upset her. He did not know that his grandparents were less than prepared to receive such a young boy. He was certainly not aware that at four he had already reached the stage of childhood where he had irretrievably lost the cuteness and easy indulgence that accompanies babyhood. That his ears stuck out from under his fuzzy *bozu* shaved haircut was of small concern to him. That his endlessly runny nose and scraped knees made some adult sensibilities (like Father's) reel away with displeasure did not phase him. That these same adults around him no longer gave him little gifts of candy or pats on the head -- missing events and privileges still bestowed on those fortunate to hold on a little longer to their adorableness -- caused him only a vague sense of confusion.

For like most boys of four Kazuma was only concerned with sweets, toys found in the park, and television shows that featured bright blue cats with the power to fly through time and space. If he was not bored or hungry, if father was not angry, Kazuma was happy. Happy with that unclouded joy that is natural to only children and fools.

When Kazuma had bolted down the last of his noodles his grandmother sent him outside to play.

"We will soon see about entering you in kindergarten here. This morning all the children will be in school, but you could go to the park and sit on the swings there if you'd like. And who knows, there's a chance some child stayed home today. Children like to play sick sometimes, don't you?! I know your father did."

This bit of information about his father surprised Kazuma. It was hard to imagine his father as anything but serious or angry. The bruises on Kazuma's legs and arms were

testimony to how upset his father could become if asked to play once too often.

Not knowing in which direction the park might be, Kazuma sat waiting. How could he get there if Granny didn't take him herself? But Granny was old and her arthritis made it hard for her to move around and her ankles were often swollen. She just couldn't make the painful effort it would take to play with a small boy in the park.

"Well, let's forget the park then. Go help your grandfather now. Maybe he'll show you how to plant marigolds." And satisfied with this solution, she lumbered off to the kitchen to wash the noddle bowl.

The garden! How much better than an empty park! Gardens are a source of wonder for little boys of four, not so much for the flowers but because of the wonderful bugs that live on them. The bigger and uglier the bug the better it is, with the *okuwagata*, the huge hideous stag beetle being the best prize of all. Why they could fetch a hundred dollars or more at a Ginza department store from indulgent Tokyo parents. It is nothing for a child to stomp down an entire flowerbed in search of such a glorious bug.

Kazuma was on this path of destruction when his grandfather spotted him.

"Hey, Boy! What do you think you are doing? It takes an old man like me half a day to plant a bed like the one you just tore up! Go on now, get out of here. It's a nice day, so why don't you go to the park, hey?"

"Don't know where it is," Kazuma sniffed, stuffing a caterpillar into his shorts' pocket.

"Up the hill a bit. Shouldn't take a smart boy like you too long to find it. Go on now!" Then Grandfather turned his attention back to his marigolds.

If children are not too adept at asking directions, adults are equally poor at understanding the clear need for them. There were two hills to go up from where Kazuma's grandparents lived: the small one that led to a nearby park, and another that led up a very long incline on a large road heavy with traffic. As chance would have it, Kazuma chose the second.

It wasn't merely chance that attracted him this way. For flying high in the breeze on long poles propped in front of several houses at the top of the hill were beautiful *koi nobori*: the multicolored nylon carp flags that families with sons hang out during the months of April and early May. Kazuma lived in an apartment house, so he had only seen much smaller versions of these lovely flag-like carp, and his own family owned none. At one time the custom was that the father would buy these for their sons, but nowadays families with girls would buy them too. Kazuma had never seen such huge *koi* and he followed them like a beacon, staring up at them as he walked along the road, the cars whizzing alongside him. How he'd love to touch one of those carp!

Up, up, up, he climbed until he came to the base of a pole. This *koi* was set in front of a beautiful traditional wooden home, with an old-fashioned gate at the entrance. Kazuma unlatched the gate and went up to the pole. If he tried, maybe he could climb and just reach the tip of one of the *koi*, for usually there are three or four carp on a

pole, the carp increasing in size as they descended down the length of the pole. Kazuma jumped and pulled at the pole and it fell with a crash. From inside the house came a startled cry.

“Hey you there! What do you think you are doing? You’ve knocked down our carp!”

A middle-aged housewife emerged from inside the house, her hands still wet from washing dishes. Sunlight glinted in her eyeglasses, as she wiped her fingers on her pink apron.

Kazuma looked down at his feet.

“Who do you belong to anyway? A little boy should not be out here all alone. Where is your mother? Doesn’t she know better than to teach her son that it is rude to go barging into other people’s yards?”

Kazuma shook his head, and inched back towards the gate. While the woman cleaned off and resettled her carp flag he snuck away.

“You’ll grow up to be a delinquent at this rate!” The woman yelled at him from behind the gate. So Kazuma just ran on.

He was now very far from his grandparents’ home. Across the street was a junior high school. Adjacent to the school was a big open field. Maybe that is where the park is, thought Kazuma. He lurched across the road as the driver in the car just behind him braked and honked the horn.

“Hey, Boy! Watch where you are going, okay?” the college student in the car yelled out. The college student shook his shaggy-haired head, turned up the volume on the car stereo, and drove on.

Walking along the wire fence for a foot or two, Kazuma found an entrance and from there he walked towards the field. A few junior high school boys were playing soccer there, the yellow and green of their jerseys flashing in the sunlight.

“Hey, kid! Let’s see how you can kick!” one of them called out laughing. All the boys waved him over to where they were playing. For half an hour they let Kazuma pretend to kick the ball around with them.

Then they sat on the grass, smoking PEACE cigarettes one of them took from a pack.

“Want one, kid?” a dyed-blond boy with three earrings in his left ear said, offering Kazuma a cigarette.

“Come on, Hiroshi! He’s a little kid!” another of them complained, pushing the cigarette away from Kazuma. The boy with the cigarette shrugged and shoved it back into the pack. From the top of the hill across the bay on its little island Mount Sakurajima shone, its flanks elephantine and gray with volcanic ash.

When their coach showed up and asked “Who’s the kid?” they all laughed, rubbed Kazuma’s shaved head, and said he was their new mascot. The teacher did not think this was so funny. After he had sent the students in to shower, he leaned down to Kazuma and said, “Now what should we do with you, hmm?” For a second something

mischievous passed in the teacher's eyes, as if he were considering eating the boy.

Kazuma told the teacher his name and that he was looking for a park, and the upshot was that he soon was led into the school and taken to the principal's office. There he was given a glass of orange juice and told to sit in a brown leather chair. The room was cold, over-air-conditioned for the mild weather of April, and Kazuma shivered.

After about twenty minutes a police officer in a blue uniform and a big silver badge walked in the room with the principal.

"Come on now, you go with me," the police officer said. This was the first time Kazuma had seen a police car up close. It looked like a normal car but had a red light on the top and a black stripe painted down the side. On the side, black lettered in English it said POLICE.

The ride in the police car was exciting, and the police officer was kind when he asked Kazuma to show him where he lived. Grandfather was so surprised to see Kazuma get out of the police car! The old man bowed and apologized several times to the officer, and finally gave him several of his best roses to show how sorry he was to have caused so much trouble.

"You go inside the house now," he said to Kazuma quietly and he turned on the television to an educational kid's show. For the rest of the day Kazuma watched show after show until he fell asleep on the cushion in front of the TV.

The arguing in the entrance way woke him up. Kazuma recognized his father's sharp voice. Now he was in for it.

"You useless boy!" his father yelled as he entered the room. "I knew you would cause trouble!" He slapped Kazuma hard on his leg. It hurt so much and he was so afraid that Kazuma passed water, a little puddle forming around the cushion. But nobody seemed to notice that.

"What were you doing up there at the school?" his grandmother asked in a soft voice, clearly annoyed at her son for the way he handled his child. If she noticed the puddle she said nothing of it.

"The carp flags. I went to see the carp," Kazuma whimpered in a little voice, his eyes full of tears.

"He just went to see the carp, you see?" the old woman said to her son. "He didn't mean any harm. Why doesn't he have a carp of his own?"

For a moment Kazuma's father's face looked red, flustered, but then he quickly reached inside his wallet and pulled out three 10,000 *yen* bills. He threw the money down on the cushion next to Kazuma. One bill got the tip wet when it landed near the puddle.

"Here. Buy him a carp flag then. Just don't go bothering me anymore. And pay more attention that he doesn't get into any more trouble. You fool too much with your flowers anyway, old man." This last remark was shot at Kazuma's grandfather. The old

man opened his mouth to reply to his son, then thought better of it and kept quiet.

After father had left, Grandmother came over to Kazuma, who was still whimpering and wet.

"Now let's just get you out of these clothes, shall we?" she said gently "Tomorrow we'll get you properly enrolled in the kindergarten. There you'll have lots of kids to play with and have fun." She washed the boy and changed his clothes.

Later as Kazuma lay in his bedding, his grandfather came to him with a jar with two huge grasshoppers inside. There was some grass inside the jar and little holes were poked in the top of the lid to let in air.

"You can play with these tomorrow," Grandfather said after he showed the bugs to Kazuma and let him look at the two insects for a while. The little antennae on each bug twitched back and forth. The bugs didn't seem to mind being in the jar. Some creatures are so much better at adjusting to change than humans are.

"Now tell me," Grandfather said after he set the jar aside. "Just why did you go up that hill?"

"To see the carp, like I said," said Kazuma.

"Do you know what those carp mean?"

"No, I don't."

"They are a wish that the son of the house grow up strong and bold. That the boy grows into a good man." Grandfather smiled and patted his grandson's arm

"Did father have a carp flag?"

"No, he didn't. We were too poor back then." Grandfather looked away, his face slightly flushed.

"Oh," said Kazuma, and he rubbed his leg where his father had slapped him.

"But tomorrow we'll go buy you a good carp flag, one with really pretty streamers. How would that be?"

"I would like that."

"Good," Grandfather said, his face kind and ancient. "That's just what we'll do."

Kazuma smiled. It would be good living here with his grandparents. That night in his dreams he saw the carp flag, beautiful with all its colors, flying free and bold in the wind. In the dream, there were five carps on Kazuma's flag, one for his father, his mother, his grandparents and him. But the best and the biggest, bravest carp was for Kazuma himself down there at the bottom. Waving high in the air he flew, brave, strong, fluttering safely in the wind.

[Received November. 30, 1999]