

Adjudicator's Comments

This is a thought-provoking tale, which takes the Japanese cultural imperative of the separation of honne and tatamae (true feelings and an acceptable public façade) to its logical conclusion. The story is sensitively written with subtle touches, as when the police officer almost commits the crime of betraying his honne. This short story has the potential to become a gripping dystopian novel. We are left wanting to know more about how people manage to live in this society, where any public expression of emotion has become a crime.

HER FACE WAS EXPRESSIONLESS

A Short Fictional Story for the
Montgomeryshire Society Competition



NHS 3

Chapter One

HONNE

Six years ago, Japan established the Emotive Censorship Act 2029, mandating that every individual aged ten and above must suppress any form of emotion or expression under threat of legal punishment in a court of law.

I distinctly recall being eleven when it was publicly announced, which naturally triggered an immediate outbreak of emotional reactions across the entire country: from desperate rage to overwhelming depression, to name a few. A predictable response, as law enforcement were swiftly deployed and held no hesitation in making arrests, no matter how forceful. That marked the last time I'd ever seen a teenager or adult displaying any facial expression in the public sphere.

Since then, to call my community lifeless would've been an understatement. Many adults became Hikikomori—people who isolated at home for years at a time, withdrawing from all social contact—in a desperate attempt to remove themselves from society's prying eyes. The streets, once radiant with a positive aura of social cohesion, echoed with memories of what once was before the emotionless norm. Even within

our houses, most conversations were carefully articulated to be murky waters as opposed to shimmering lagoons in case the walls could report a single slip of the tongue to authorities.

However, there was always one flicker of internal hope throughout Japan—those under ten who still had the opportunity to emote. In my case, that little beacon of optimism manifested itself with my nine-year-old little sister, Keiko. Her name means “happy child”. Bittersweet, really.

“Machiko, what do Tatemaie and Honne mean?”

As I glanced over to Keiko seated beside me on the sofa, my heart sank a little at the sound of these terms as I knew they had the power to skew her innocence. “How did you... hear about them?”

“From Mrs Ōta in school.” She fiddled with the buttons on her school jumper. “I was gonna ask Mama, but I wanted to ask you instead because you’re cleverer.”

I felt my brows instinctively furrow, so I quickly blinked to force them to relax. “Don’t say that: Mama’s very clever.” I smiled faintly. “She’s smarter than both of us put together—”

“But she’s never happy, she’s gonna end up being a ‘Hikitomoki.’”

“It’s Hikikomori, and no she won’t.” I affirmed, a little more sternly than intended. It was true that

Mama remained as expressionless as possible even within the domestic sphere, but only because her paranoia of being watched outweighed any desire to showcase emotion.

“Can you tell me now?” She prodded impatiently after a brief pause of awkwardness, swinging her legs against the coffee table as her eyes brimmed with anticipation.

A defeated sigh bolted out of my lungs. “Well, Tatemaë is about how you... present yourself to the world, like a mask you put on when you go out. I guess that’s the easiest way to describe it.”

“Oh, so that’s why everyone who’s older is boring?” Her exclamation exposed the moment her brain connected the dots, her expression transforming from confusion to revelation instantaneously.

“Yeah,” I nodded at her swift yet direct remark. “Yeah, that’s why,” I added in a murmur, my voice wavering ever so slightly.

“So, they’re not *actually* boring, they’re just pretending to be?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t like that stuff. Mama doesn’t really smile or anything anymore because of those rules and her Tatemaë.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“And what’s Honne?”

“Umm, Honne means...” I lowered my voice to a mutter as my brain scrambled to come up with a definition, “umm, it’s something... not really spoken about a lot.”

“Why?” She asked in a voice laced with confusion and a desperate need for answers.

“Because... because it refers to your true feelings deep down past your Tatemaе. So, yeah, obviously it’s not spoken about because it’s seen as wrong.” I concluded as I leaned back against the sofa, although its cosiness failed to comfort my empathetic concern for Keiko during this difficult discussion.

I noticed her pout slightly as the explanation crawled through her ears and nestled in her mind. “Mrs Ōta said it’s wrong too.”

“Did she? I’m surprised she’s going on about that stuff in—” I stopped myself from continuing as I comprehended what I was saying in the context of our muzzled society. “Well, guess they need to since you’re almost at that age now.”

That made her stop talking too, her legs ceasing their rhythmic kicking against the coffee table and dangling over the sofa’s edge. In any other circumstance, I’d kindly accept the quiet after the continuous banging, but I knew that her sudden

silence signalled something deeper brewing beneath her typically animated demeanour.

She was the one to break the stillness in the atmosphere. "I don't wanna turn ten soon. I wanna keep laughing and having fun with my friends." She mumbled with a tinge of pessimism, her gaze drifting to a distant point in the living room as she grappled with the inevitability of expression censorship that came with age.

"I know," I offered her a gentle smile, "but you can still show your Honne to me and Mama when we're at home. Plus, she can't help but smile sometimes when you've got yours beaming." I joked lightly while ruffling her hair, eliciting a chuckle.

"...Can I go out to play?" She asked in an eager tone. I guessed she wanted to take her mind off the whole Tatemaie and Honne subject, which didn't surprise me.

I quickly glanced out the window to assess the weather's mood. Somewhat grey and cloudy, but nothing dreadful. "Fine, just stay where I can see out the window, and make sure you come inside if you see an officer, okay?"

"Okay." She wasted no time darting out the door and racing down the slate path through the garden, her favourite teddy bear and constant companion, Yuuki, snugly tucked under her arm. The name, meaning

“bear”, reflected her simplicity from her younger years, although it was endearing that she’d chosen to keep it.

As time passed, I frequently stole a few glimpses out the window to see Keiko continuously toss Yuuki into the air, though whether she caught him varied with each throw. The crisp air evidently scrubbing against her skin produced a vivid pink hue on her cheeks and nose, but her constant laughter and chatter remained warm, as if to fill the desolate street with infectious liveliness.

I swear I looked away for a *moment*, only to hear muffled voices outside—a conversation between an adult and a child. Promptly straightening my back, I peered out to see a local police officer speaking to a nervous Keiko, clutching Yuuki like her life depended on it—a stark contrast from the cheerful scene just moments before.

An innate physical response made me sprint to the door, opting to slip on my slide-on shoes to avoid the unnecessary task of tying shoelaces as I lunged for the front door handle with a desperate grasp. Though, I had to consciously pause for a second to force a face devoid of emotion on my features. The last thing this situation needed was for me to get arrested. The door finally swung open, quickly followed by my heavy footsteps racing down the path as I approached Keiko and the officer.

“What’s going on?” I knew *exactly* what was going on, but I recognised I’d have to play dumb to prevent him from detecting my anxiety. Stepping forwards, I positioned myself slightly in front of Keiko to form a subtle boundary between them in an attempt to reduce her panic. “Is something wrong?”

“How old is she?” He questioned in the typical dull voice of mainstream society’s norm. Although describing his expression as enigmatic wouldn’t do it justice, I could make an educated guess that his Honne was agitated.

“She’s nine.” My voice remained monotonous, but my heart was screaming. I had to squeeze my eyes shut momentarily in an attempt to conquer the shakiness in my chest.

Watching him closely made me catch him briefly scrunch up his sleeve and take a discreet glimpse towards his watch. “Alright,” a sigh threatened to escape him, only stopped by the act’s illegality. “Just keep her under control, won’t be long ‘til she has to use Tatemaë.”

“I understand,” I muttered, though my eyes couldn’t help but dart towards Keiko in frequent bursts to silently reassure myself she was still there.

With a nod, the officer promptly excused himself, moulding into a silhouette as he disappeared down the street and left us standing in a rather ruffled state.

I remember thinking, *I want a country where she can laugh and cry whenever she wants without fear of oppression. I want her to know it's important to understand your Honne even if the law thinks it's taboo. I don't want her to be expressionless.*

"Come on, let's go back inside."

"...Okay."