

The New Year

By Kanoko Okamoto

It happened after Kanae Sato had received her end of the year bonus and was about to go home. All the male employees—excited and noisier than usual—had already left running from their fourth-floor office. Kanae and two of her coworkers, Akiko and Isoko, changed their clothes and walked into the hallway. There they saw a lone male employee lingering idly. They thought him a bit suspicious, and when Kanae took two or three steps towards the stairs, that man ran up to her and slapped her left cheek.

“Ah!” Kanae shouted. She stumbled backwards to her right. Akiko and Isoko simply stared, too startled by the suddenness of it all to react. The next instant, the man ran past them down the stairs, the bottom of his coat flapping behind him.

“Dojima-san! Wait!” Akiko remembered the man's name and yelled after him from the top of the stairs. Akiko and Isoko felt indignant that a man would treat a woman so roughly. They also felt they had to do something about this situation immediately. After glancing nervously at Kanae and seeing that she had not fallen over, and was simply standing there stunned with her hand pressed to her cheek, they ran down the stairs after Dojima. When the girls saw him all the way on the first floor, sliding down the handrail, they knew they had no hope of catching up. “Stupid, stupid!” they cursed and flustered, they returned to Kanae.

“Did he get away? It's fine. Tomorrow when he shows up, I'll talk to him with the manager. . . I can't let him get away with this,” Kanae said, her lips twitching with spite. Her left cheek was slightly red and swollen and glistened with tears.

“You should. There wasn't any reason for Dojima-san to do that to you, was there?”

Kanae and Akiko's eyes lit up, and they looked at each other searchingly when they heard Isoko's question. They were so visibly upset that even Isoko knew she'd asked something she shouldn't have. Kanae shot Isoko a foul look and said, “Of course not! It's just, remember last week the manager said not to talk so much with the male employees unless it's important? I just never talked to him. . .”

“What? Oh. If that's all, you should get him good. I'll do whatever I can to help.” Isoko spoke forcefully, as if to compensate for what she said earlier.

“If only the manager were here now. But he left just after noon,” said Akiko. She wanted to make sure he got a look at Kanae's left cheek while it was still swollen.

“Well, let's head home for the day and worry about this tomorrow. It's a bit out of the way, but I'll take the train home with you, Kanae-san,” Akiko said. Kanae and Akiko, who lived in Aoyama, headed towards Azabu.

The left half of Kanae's face had felt numb, but when she got on the train that numbness transformed into a migraine, and her left eye began spilling tears. Kanae couldn't look up, or even speak to Akiko.

Kanae was eating breakfast the next morning when Akiko showed up. She looked at Kanae's face and consoled her. “Good! There's not a scratch on you.” But Kanae was still unhappy.

“I felt so embarrassed last night! And my head hurt, so I didn't get much sleep.”

The two got on the train. Imagining herself facing Dojima in the manager's office and confronting him about yesterday brought Kanae's body to the verge of trembling. She looked out the window to calm herself down.

Isoko was waiting for Kanae at the office. She was in the stockroom, where the girls work, watching the men arrive. She had been waiting for Dojima.

“It's almost ten, but Dojima still hasn't shown up,” she told Kanae in a sharp, impatient tone.

“Well, the manager is here now, so you better go tell him what happened anyway. You'll be in

trouble if he leaves early,” Akiko warned. Kanae tried to calm herself down as much as possible and use her coworkers' information and warnings to plot her course of action. She wound up rushing straight for the manager's office and was surprised by what he had to say.

Last night Dojima had sent a resignation letter to the office by express mail. The manager showed Kanae the paper, which he still had on his desk. “I never thought he was that kind of guy. This is absolutely pathetic behavior. He just takes his bonus and quits! And this letter doesn't even have an address on it! It just says he's moving. No matter how you look at it, he's *running away*. You better do something about him hitting you, or you'll never feel better. Maybe I should sue him for you as punishment? I'm sure I can find out where he went if I just ask around.”

The manager leaned forward, surprised. He stared hard at Kanae's left cheek. The swelling had gone down, and it was glossy, porcelain white. “But he didn't even leave a mark.”

Kanae said, “Let me think about it,” and returned to the stockroom.

When she told Akiko and Isoko that Dojima had quit, Isoko kicked the floor and slammed the top of the table like a man would. “How disgusting is that? What should we do?”

“So he'd planned this. He must have had some weird grudge against us and the company, and he hit you to make himself feel better,” Akiko said, sticking her twisted face toward Kanae.

While the others fumed with indignation, Kanae just dropped into her chair and let out a sigh. She was frustrated to find out that she would not be able to get him back easily. That frustration felt like a stiff iron rod stretching her chest so tight she struggled to breathe.

At lunch, Kanae only drank the tea Akiko poured her. She didn't even touch the bento she brought.

“What are you going to do about this?” Akiko asked, worried.

“I'm going to ask the people who worked next to him.” Kanae stood up weakly.

Most of the men at the colonial development company worked in the big office. The desks there were covered in account books, upon which were stacked mountains of complicated reports from all the returning ships. There were heaters in every corner, and all thirty-something men had taken off their jackets, rolled up their sleeves, and were busily inspecting all the accounts and reports for the year. Kanae cut between desks and headed towards where Dojima used to work. At the desk to the left of Dojima's sat Yamagishi, a young man who would often leave with Dojima.

“I heard that Dojima-san quit,” Kanae said.

“Oh, really. Then I guess it makes sense he's not here today. He's been saying he's gonna quit for a while now. He said there was an opening at a good electronics company in Shinagawa.”

Another man heard this and said, “What, really? That was a good call. He's a smart one. He always sees everything so clearly.”

“It's true. He said there's no future for a company that has to worry about going broke in times of peace, even if they're not just a pure munitions company like ours.” Yamagishi spoke so the other workers could hear him. He must have had some complaints about the job, too.

“Where'd he move to now?” Kanae asked outright.

Yamagishi made a confused face, stared at Kanae, and burst into laughter. “Oh, you want to know Dojima's address? You've gotta buy me a drink if you want that kind of information!”

“It's not like that. Aren't you close with him?”

Kanae wanted to know what their relationship was like before she said anything else.

“We're not close, but we've gone drinking together in Ginza. We just walked around having fun.”

“So don't you know where he went?”

“Where he went? This is getting strange. What happened?”

Kanae knew she had to explain what happened yesterday for Yamagishi to understand her intentions.

“Yamagishi-san, do you plan to stay friends with Dojima-san even though he left this

company? I can't tell you what happened unless you answer.”

“You're really persistent. We just drank and wandered around. Now that he's left, I won't be able to go out with him, will I? If I run into him in Ginza, maybe I'll say hi or something. That's about it.”

“In that case, I'll tell you. Yesterday, Dojima waited for me in the hallway and hit me. He hit me so hard I my head started spinning.”

Kanae stopped saying “Dojima-san.” She closed her eyes and pretended to hit herself with her right hand. When she opened her eyes again, they were filled with tears.

“What? He did that?”

Yamagishi and the employees around him stood up and surrounded Kanae. She explained that he hit her just because she didn't talk to him. Because Kanae was normally quiet, the other employees believed what she said and grew angry.

“Not only does he quit and go to some other company, but he hits a girl on the way out. He's stepping on all of our pride. I hate to say this in front of Yamagishi-kun, but we can't just let him get away with this.”

All the employees felt the same. Yamagishi panicked and said, “Quit joking around! I can't take this either. He's always in Ginza, so I'll go find him and sock him one for you,” he said, waving his fist in the air before everyone. But the other employees cut him off.

“That'll take too long. We should just go to his house and grab him!”

“That's why I want to find out where he went! The resignation letter the manager showed me didn't have an address on it,” Kanae explained.

“Oh! Well, he said he was going to work in Shinagawa, and that he'd move out there too, but I don't know his address. Don't worry, though. After ten all the bars and cafes in Ginza kick everyone out, right? If we go and spend two or three nights searching the alleys on the west side, we'll definitely catch him,” Yamagishi said with assurance.

“Really? Well then I guess I'll be hanging out in Ginza from now on. Don't tell anyone about this,” Kanae replied.

“Hey, don't forget about me. If that's what you want to do, I'll do what I can to help, too.”

At Yamagishi's words, the other employees cheered on Kanae Sato like she was a beautiful female samurai out for revenge.

“Yeah, we'll look out for him when we're in Ginza, too. Get him, Sato-san!”

It was the sort of Ginza night where the December winds pick up the thin dust covering the roads. The dust flies up from passing people's feet, and suddenly you find yourself covering your eyes and nose.

Kanae pulled the scarf wrapped around her neck out from her jacket, and tried to protect her eyes and nose from the dust, but she worried that if she passed Dojima in that instant, she'd miss him. She uncovered her face and looked busily to her left and right. Kanae got Akiko to come, too. They walked from Shimbashi to the main roads of Ginza and wound around to the back alleyways.

“After ten days, you kind of get sick of this place,” Kanae admitted, letting out a sigh of exhaustion.

Akiko, too, revealed what she'd been holding back. “Sometimes I get dizzy. We just keep looking at all the faces of these people walking by. And then my head just goes blank. When I go home and sleep and look up at the ceiling, I see them all again, and I feel like I'm going to puke.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“No, I think I'll get used to it soon.”

Kanae was quiet for a moment, observing the people they passed. “When I got hit, I felt so embarrassed, but now those feelings have started to fade. Going out and walking around Ginza, tiring ourselves out like this, it's started to feel pointless. It seems kind of stupid. Especially with what's happening now in China. And the people walking by, I just want them to keep going. I try not to look

at them, but then I worry. Was Dojima one of them? And I can't help but turn around and look. What did I do to deserve this?"

"Oh, no. You shouldn't let yourself feel that way."

"But just getting hit once on the cheek isn't such a big deal. And it seems unwomanly to try and get revenge like this."

"Well, if you really feel that way. . ."

"I do feel that way sometimes, but sometimes not. Everyone at work keeps asking me have you got him yet, have you got him yet?"

"Well then, I guess I'm not the biggest idiot here," Akiko said, making a depressed face. Then she saw a young man who looked like Dojima pass by her side. Startled, she turned to look in his direction, and the man stopped.

"What's with the face?" he asked, sneering. Akiko turned red and looked down at the ground, but the man wouldn't leave them alone. This wasn't the time for Kanae and Akiko to go looking for Dojima. The two walked quickly south down an alley in Ginza 7-chōme. When they got there, the taxi at the end of the lane started to move. Their eyes were drawn to the profile of the person riding in that cab. It must certainly have been Dojima. The two chased after the cab, their arms stretched in front of them like they were swimming, but all they could see through the back window was the passenger's felt hat.

After that, they spent the evening weaving through the streets of Ginza with no real hope of finding Dojima. The city was tense. People were in grim spirits because of the events in Nanking. Everyone was at the end of their wits, trying not to waste what was left of the year. They wanted to spend what time they still had as effectively as possible. Even the people just wandering the streets, and the youths drinking in back alleys seemed somewhat anxious. Kanae and Akiko, who were trying to cut through the crowd looking for Dojima were repelled both emotionally and physically by those people, and felt unduly tired.

"You could at least stay in one night at the end of the year and help out," both Kanae and Akiko's mothers had told them.

Kanae and Akiko realized they had yet to tell their mothers about what had happened. If they said they were out searching Ginza for Dojima to get revenge, their mothers would certainly try to stop them. But neither Kanae nor Akiko mentioned this to the other. Instead they said that since there were just four days left in the year, they should be patient and spend what was left of the year at home. They gave up on finding him this year, and busied themselves with preparations for the holidays. Next year we'll find him, and really give him what he deserves, they said. Their determination to get him back helped return them to good spirits.

When the new year finally came, Kanae waited for Akiko to come visit. On the night of the third, Akiko still hadn't come by. When Kanae finally realized she should be the one to go get Akiko, as she was the one out for revenge she laughed to herself.

Kanae and Akiko had always gone out to Ginza in matching work uniforms. They wore gray, western clothes and navy coats. They assumed it would be hard to move in kimono, and that would get in the way of catching Dojima. But since it was the new year, and Kanae was going to visit Akiko's home, which she'd only been to two or three times, she carefully did her make up, and put on a kimono with a pattern on the skirt. She hadn't worn that kimono much since she graduated two years ago. She picked an obi with a gold design and tied it high on her waist. Kanae was short of breath, both from wearing a kimono she wasn't used to, and from the strange sense of excitement she felt. After taking a break from searching Ginza and letting herself rest, she was hopeful about tonight's adventure. She put on a wool coat and left her home in Azabu. It was an oddly warm night for January.

When Kanae arrived at Akiko's home in Aoyama, Akiko quickly changed into kimono, and they got on a bus for Ginza.

"I thought it was too early in the year to bother you. Besides, during the first week of the new year, everything in Ginza closes early, so not many people will be out drinking," Akiko explained.

“That's what I thought, too. I shouldn't drag you out for this sort of thing so early in the year. But it is new years time, and I wanted to walk around Ginza anyway, not just for that. That's why I wore a kimono. Let's just take a leisurely stroll tonight. Should we stop by Suehiro or Olympic and eat a thick steak?”

Since leaving her house, Kanae's mood had changed dramatically.

“Well, we could do that, too. Although there's something a little off about eating steak in kimono.”

“Ha ha ha,” the two laughed cheerfully.

Some shops on Ginza-Dori Avenue were already closed. There weren't as many people out as usual, so it was a nice night for a walk. None of the small stands that open in the evenings were out either, so one could even see the people on the opposite side of the street. Kanae and Akiko started walking from Owari-chō, and in the blink of an eye they came to the bridge in Ginza 7-chōme. It felt a bit anticlimactic.

“What shall we do? Should we cross the bridge to Kyobashi and go to Olympic? Or should we head west to the back alleys? We don't have to look for Dojima. We could hurry to Suehiro,” Kanae asked Akiko.

“Hmm. Doesn't it feel more natural to head west? It's like a habit.” The two had already started walking west before Akiko even finished speaking.

“Look, there! That's where we saw that man who looked like Dojima get into a cab.” Akiko pointed down to the end of the alley as she remembered the other night. Until then the two's faces had been placid, but suddenly they tensed up. They started heading back along an alley towards Owari-chō, and at some point their eyes began darting left and right, not letting anyone out of their sight. They walked on confidently.

When they arrived at the corner of the alley with Shiseido on it, a group of five drunk men, their shoulders in a row, exited a cafe. They turned around in front of Kanae and Akiko, bumping shoulders and stumbling, and started off.

“Hey! Isn't that Dojima? Second from the right,” Akiko asked hoarsely, grabbing Kanae's arm. Kanae had already set off after the men like she was after prey, dragging Akiko with her. Kanae was anxious. If only somehow the line of shoulders would break, and Dojima would be left on his own! She wanted to know if Dojima had noticed them and knew they were following. Strangely, even from behind it was obvious that he was keeping his face down. Kanae and Akiko tailed them closely for about two blocks. Then suddenly Dojima looked over his shoulder.

“Dojima-san! I have something to talk to you about. Wait a second,” Kanae said, grabbing his coat and pulling him back. Akiko grabbed his coat as well and pulled, bracing herself with her legs. Dojima panicked and turned back around, but the two women held him there with all their strength, and he couldn't get away. The line of five men bent into a V, with Dojima at the bottom.

“Isn't this something? Dojima-kun's such a lady killer.”

The remaining four men let go of each other and surrounded Kanae and Akiko in amazement.

“No, it's nothing. Excuse me for a second,” Dojima said. Kanae and Akiko were still holding on to his coat. He left his group and turned west down an alley. When they arrived at an empty spot next to what seemed to be a printing shop, Dojima stopped. Worried that he might escape, Kanae held firmly onto his coat. The harder she gripped, the more her old grudge welled up inside her. She felt *ferocious*.

“Why did you hit me? Do you just hit people for not talking to you? And waiting until you quit to do it! How cowardly!”

Kanae's eyes filled with tears and she couldn't see Dojima's face. Her pressing desire for revenge had started to melt away, and memories of the pathetic days she spent after getting hit welled up with those tears. “Really! It was so outrageous, we had to do something. Even the manager said to sue you. Yamagishi-san said he wouldn't allow this either! So, what are you going to do?”

Strangely, Dojima just stood there quietly. Akiko pressed on Kanae's shoulder and encouraged her to hit Dojima back. But Kanae who even as a student had never done more than argue with her friends, and had certainly never been in a fight, couldn't bring herself to hit this man now that she had the chance.

"How could you do that? How could you do that?" Kanae riled herself up by repeating those angry words. "Since you hit me, I'll hit you back. If I don't, I won't ever feel any better."

And finally, Kanae slapped the man's cheek. As soon as she hit him, she began to worry about how much his face must have twisted, and whether or not his nose started bleeding. She noticed his greasy sweat sticking to the palm of her hand. Kanae took a step back.

"You gotta give it to him good. With interest, you know," Akiko said, trying to encourage Kanae. But Kanae didn't have the courage to hit Dojima again.

"Hey, hey, what are you all doing dragging Dojima into this corner?" The four men from before came to check on Dojima. Kanae darted off alone towards Sukiya-bashi. Akiko followed along, saying, "You should've hit him harder than that." She was disappointed. She had wanted Kanae to hit him for her, too, for all the days she spent suffering along with Kanae.

"But I don't want anything back from him. I can't leave him feeling like he owes me something. I feel better now, anyway. Now I can really thank you for all your help."

Kanae spoke politely and bowed her head. Akiko relaxed and said, "Congratulations."

"Oh, so are we going to get steaks? We should have a drink to celebrate, too. My treat."

The two headed to Suehiro.

Work started again on the 6th. Isoko heard from Akiko, and the male employees from Isoko that Kanae had gotten her revenge. This brought back all the employees' holiday spirit, and they gathered in the stockroom, shouting with joy.

"What's going on here?" scolded the manager angrily. He had arrived late, and after hearing what happened, he smiled, and went up to Kanae's desk. "You really carried through. How's the long-sought revenge?" He seemed pleased.

They all praised Kanae, but the happiness she felt the moment she slapped Dojima was long gone. Now everyone talking about her so enthusiastically made her feel like she was being mocked for being unladylike, and it made her uncomfortable.

When she left work and returned home, she spent the night in a daze. She had no reason for or interest in going out to Ginza. Of course, Akiko didn't come to invite her out either. It was still strangely warm out, and instead of snow there was a persistent drizzle. Kanae sat in the living room staring out through the rain at the camellia tree in the garden. She wondered about all those old stories of revenge. What were those characters' lives like after they got what they were after? Then she realized it was stupid of her to compare her paltry revenge to those sorts of people's.

On the tenth of January a letter for Kanae arrived at the office. A page brought it to her when she showed up. When Kanae saw written on the front of the letter, "From a certain man," she thought it quite strange, and upon opening it, she was surprised to find it was from Dojima.

I'm writing this letter in reply to everything that's happened between us. It's strange of me to say this, but I think everything has been set straight. That colonial development company is a sketchy business, and the fact that all we did was manage munitions helped me make up my mind to leave. But there was one thing at that I couldn't quite resolve just by quitting. I still didn't know what to do about my feelings for you. If I quit, I knew I wouldn't be able to see you much anymore. I was worried. I wanted to tell you how I felt, and hoped you felt the same. But I'm not the kind of man who can just tell a woman how he feels. And finally that day came, and we got our bonuses and I was going to quit. Still, I couldn't say anything. What would happen

if you turned me down when I told you how I felt? I'd be depressed, and you'd just forget me. Then I wondered what would happen if I started a fight. At least that way you'd hate me and it'd be a long time before you could forget about me. I thought maybe that would help heal my shattered feelings. I was at my limit, and all I could think were selfish thoughts. I hesitated and hesitated, then on that last day, I was finally in such a daze, I actually hit you. But I'm too much of a humanist, and I couldn't forgive myself for striking a woman, especially a beautiful woman who I loved. Bitter, evil feelings spread through my chest. I was so unhappy, I wanted to write you and apologize as soon as I could. But even if I did, I thought, that would just be another egotistical attempt to save myself, so I never wrote. Then the other day, when you found me in Ginza and hit me back, I thought you might have felt better, and I thought maybe I could finally tell you all the excuses I have and apologize for what I did. But I hesitated and my friends got in the way, so I couldn't even tell you this then. So now I have to explain it all in this letter. Please, I hope you will forgive me.

Kiyoshi Dojima

Kanae wondered if men could really feel so pressured and felt she might again be besieged by Dojima's unruly passions.

Kanae thought it was a bit cruel to end things with Dojima like this, having spent so much time first obsessing over his hand, then her own, and hitting each other. If they could only meet and explain themselves. . .

Kanae didn't show even Akiko the letter from Dojima. She returned home that night and then went out to Ginza by herself. The next night, and the night after that as well, she stayed in Ginza until just after ten, walking from Ginza's main roads to the back alleys twice. But Dojima never showed himself, and the true, cold winds of January finally swept through the streets.

Translated from the Japanese by Kalau Almony
Etsunen can be read in Japanese [here on Aozora Bunko](#)