

A Wonderful Memento

By Teruko Okura

There was a scientist who lived in the French countryside. He led a lonely, solitary life. Though he was near fifty, he remained single. He had no siblings, no friends, and his sole hobby was painting.

He started by painting still lifes, then moved on to portraits, exclusively painting young women. Strangely, all the models he hired vanished after their sessions with him and were never seen again by the agent who introduced them. At first, the agent didn't pay this any mind, but after five or six models failed to return, he began to think it a bit strange. He checked in on the scientist, but he found nothing particularly odd about him. Of course, the disappearances still bothered him, so he informed a detective acquaintance about what had happened. Soon after, the detective searched the scientist's home. Upon pulling the half-burnt firewood out from the scientist's stove, he found wrapped around it a handful of long hairs. Aside from that, he discovered no evidence of the women. After a thorough interrogation, however, the scientist confessed. He would make the models his, then liquefy their bodies to make medicines and paints. Their hair alone could not be dissolved, so he burned it. Perfectly calm, he told the detective, "Please, look at my paintings. Don't you find these colors truly marvelous? These paintings are not only portraits of these women. They are painted with their own, dissolved flesh. They make the most wonderful of mementos, don't they?"

They say that the Chinese make medicines out of human brains, and that some highly prized medicines from China are extracted from the human heart as well. I don't know what kind of medicine that French scientist made, but regardless, since the women's flesh had lost its shape entirely, this case must have been much harder to handle than those where people are dismembered or even cut to tiny pieces.

It was the night I heard this story from a friend. I was on the platform, waiting for the last train when a short, skinny woman with a bit of a hunch came toddling in my direction. Our faces happened to meet. I was caught off guard, and I believe she was surprised as well, for she stopped where she was and in quite a loud voice said, "What a coincidence." It was the wife of Iketani Shingo. I had not seen Iketani-san in at least ten years. We greeted each other, and then I asked, "Did you ever find out? What became of Iketani-san?"

A troubled look crossed her face. "It's already been ten years, you know. If he was going to return, he would have by now. I've given up. He must be dead somewhere." Tears welled in her eyes. "Right after he went missing, our dog—he loved that dog so much—also died. My mother-in-law died three years ago. Now I'm all alone."

Iketani Shingo-san was the younger cousin to the old *daimyo* of our province. He was kind, and his kindness led to him being taken advantage of by everyone around him and losing his wealth. When I knew him, his mother gave koto lessons, he taught Chinese classics, and his wife did piecework. According to rumors he really loved his wife, and though they were poor, from the outside they looked to have a happy, peaceful home. Exactly ten years ago, on a rainy, rainy night, Iketani-san said he was going to his uncle's in Eikawashimo to borrow money and never returned. When they looked for him at his uncle's, they were told Iketani-san had never come. Iketani-san had simply vanished.

They filed a search request, but nothing was ever found. His uncle was called in by the police repeatedly for questioning, and then he too went missing. Five days later the uncle was found dead in a river.

During the investigation it came to light that Iketani-san's wife used to be a prostitute in the Yoshiwara, and since they were struggled so hard to make ends meet, she received her husband's permission to become his uncle's mistress. With the death of the most valuable suspect, the case was never resolved, but everyone presumed that Iketani-san must have been killed by his uncle.

We'll never know whether he was killed, and in the end, his body never surfaced. He vanished like smoke into thin air.

After parting ways with his wife, I recalled again the story of the women turned into medicine. Could Iketani-san's body have been dissolved, I wondered as I boarded the train.

Translated from the Japanese by Kalau Almony
Subarashii kinenbin can be read in the Japanese [here at Aozora Bunko](#)